Barbarian + Wizard = Heretic:

Evoking the Revolutionary Fantastic in Samuel R. Delany's Nevèrÿon

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Abstract

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This project reads through Samuel R. Delany's *Nevèrÿon* series as a means of conceptualizing a distinctly revolutionary fantastic. To begin, I establish the fantastic as a specific literary function and outline how it has been studied in relation to the genre of Fantasy. Further, I distinguish the revolutionary fantastic from the category of Radical Fantasy based on the former's resistance to categorizations that impose a definitive fictionality. Relying on the work of thinkers like José Muñoz and Gloria Anzaldúa, I propose the revolutionary fantastic as an affective, queer, and decolonial practice of making belief related to contemporary esoterism but more attuned to the political poetics of queer of color critique. Through Delany, I evoke the figure of the Barbarian as a queerly racialized anachronism emblematic of the revolutionary fantastic's deconstructive processes. With a specific focus on the Barbarian's enmeshment in a pastness distinct from the discipline of history, I position this figure as a model for temporal fugitivity that offers a broader revolutionary imaginary by way of fisting theory. In this reading of Delany, I also assemble the

crypt as a marginal zone from which the border between reality and unreality may be trespassed, speaking to the revolutionary potential of such trespassing and meditating on the tragic affect of its inevitable failure as a way of showcasing the reconstructive elements of the project's titular formula. The project closes with a reading of C. L. Clark's novel *The Unbroken*, where I demonstrate the applicability of the revolutionary fantastic as an approach to re-reading and re-writing our world(s).

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For Kai Kekuewa, the spirit who animates this work

I) Introduction: A Revolutionary Fantastic

What is Fantasy? On one level, of course, it is a game: a pure pretense with no ulterior motive whatever. It is one child saying to another child, "Let's be dragons," and then, they're dragons for an hour or two. It is escapism of the most admirable kind – the game played for the game's sake. On another level, it is still a game, but a game played for very high stakes. Seen thus, as art, not spontaneous play, its affinity is not with daydream, but with dream. It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational, but pararational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality. In Freud's terminology, it employs primary, not secondary thinking. It employs archetypes, which, as Jung warned us, are dangerous things. Dragons are more dangerous, and a good deal commoner, than bears. Fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is. It is a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe.

Ursula K. Le Guin/*The Language of the Night*

The fairies know that the earth will not tolerate the men much longer. The earth, scarred and gouged and stripped and bombed will deny life to the men in order to stop the men. The fairies have left the men's reality in order to destroy it by making a new one.

Larry Mitchell/*The Faggots & Their Friends between Revolutions*

I see a flash, if only briefly, that something other and better than this world already exists in potential.

Jordy Rosenberg/*Confessions of the Fox*

What is the fantastic? Generally speaking, I think it is what we often call "magic." By this I don't simply mean crystal work and unicorns. It is also something registered when we are compelled to breathlessly describe a night out as "magical." It is that efflorescent diffusion shrouding

psychedelic adventures. It's perceptible amidst the ethereal feelings of a new crush. The vibe of that particular building or natural spot. (You know the one.) In this sense the fantastic is a premonition that something vital has been accessed, but, paradoxically, that what has been glimpsed is impossible, or not really there. But of course it is, isn't it? What isn't real – call it delusion or ignorance or fancy or foolishness, madness or ecstasy – is often experienced as the most real and truthful thing there is. It is an aliveness, a catchall term for some tremendous quality of being that you just can't quite pin down, so unattached it seems from everyday reality. It is the rainbow connection. "Someday we'll find it" Kermit says, but of course, we won't. No doubt we would be disappointed if we did. Magic is most apparent in the twilight and the dawn. It is uncapturable. A generative yearning that consistently calls us to make manifest dream and soul. What Tolkien called "Faërie."[1]

This… fey euphoria has always seemed revolutionary to me. This is because, in the aftermath of the experience, my thoughts turn to the question – how can we make the world more like whatever Otherworld that was? This is not a question of how to re-experience exactly what transpired, for I sense its singularity is a crucial element of its effect. Nor is it a question of pure escape, adhering to the wisdom of the baker's wife in that, "If life were only moments, then you'd never know you had one."[2] No. Fundamentally, it is a question of *calling*. It is the question of *the Salamander Room*.[3]

the Salamander Room, written by Anne Mazer with illustrations by Steve Johnson, is a children's book that tells the story of a young child who, upon befriending a salamander in the forest, methodically invokes different aspects of the woods, eventually transforming his entire

[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Grafton, 1992), 15.
[2] Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods* (New York: Rilting Music, Inc., 1987), "Moments in the Woods."
[3] Anne Mazer, *the Salamander Room*, illus. Steve Johnson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

bedroom to better accommodate the salamander and make their relationship more sustainable. This seems right to me for two reasons. First, because it emphasizes the cultivation of, rather than emigration to, Faërie. Second, because it reveals relationality to be the channel by which that cultivation occurs. The calling at hand is a radical one – a revolt against reality itself where the aim is to make the world more unreal and, in doing so, dissolve the boundaries presently containing life.

In this revolutionary orientation to the fantastic, I find common ground with adrienne maree brown, who conceptualizes our collective "(r)evolutionary journey" as "science fictional behavior."[4] In one of her key texts, *Emergent Strategy*, she explains emergence as a generative way of engaging with the "wonder" induced by the "magic" that proliferates the world, one that "emphasizes critical connections" and that can be activated as a strategy to "intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."[5] Importantly, she grounds this revolutionary strategy in the work of Octavia Butler, an iconic author of science fiction known for her commitment to a "vison of a different place. A new place. A change from everything we have known."[6] In doing so, brown and her compatriots entangle the numinous, radical organizing, and speculative literature in a way I find correspondent to my experience as part of a collective where occultic spirituality, revolutionary praxis, and fantastic fiction often overlaps. The fundamental difference is generic and then only nearly. While the texts brown leans on "as political, sacred, and philosophical" are primarily Science Fiction, the ones I gravitate to would usually be categorized as Fantasy. Genre distinctions, particularly when

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[4] adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 7, 16.
[5] brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2-3.
[6] brown, *Emergent Strategy* ,17, 20-23; Tananarive Due, "The Only Lasting Truth: The Theme of Change in the Works of Octavia E. Butler," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (Chico: AK Press, 2015), 260.

it comes to speculative fiction, are notoriously ill defined, however, and brown cites a number of Fantasy authors and works as influential, many of whom are similarly recognized here. Still, this difference provides a useful point of departure.

My focus on literature here and the work that follows should not be taken to mean that I think the fantastic is limited to literature; I don't think that at all. My primary training, however, is in the study of literature and, despite my ceaseless straying, it is as good a place as any to begin thinking about a revolutionary fantastic. My hope is that this project will call something into being with enough shape and substance as to be appreciable to those in other fields and practices engaged in their own revolutionary evocations. I mean it to be an offering of a name for what they no doubt are already doing intuitively, to bring further intentionality and power to that seeking, that magic, that sumptuous desire for more than we are told is possible, realistic, or pragmatic.

The "Great Pumkin Antics" of Fantasy's Fantastic

In literary theory, the fantastic and Fantasy often appear interchangeable. For the purposes of this study, I make a distinction between the two, loosely conceived as means versus ends. Essentially, I treat the fantastic as a literary image or mode of writing in dialogue with reality and Fantasy as a form of text that results from a concentration and varying arrangement of the former that then goes on to inform how that fantastic is read.[7] Thus when Tolkien distinguishes "images of things … not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be there" from that

[7] See Samuel R. Delany essays "About 5,750 Words" and "Disch, II" in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (New York: Berkely Publishing Co., 1977) *and Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), respectively, for involved discussions on the "subjunctivity" involved in writing/reading the fantastic.

"which gives (or seems to give) these images 'the inner consistency of reality,'" we can interpret the former as the fantastic and the later as Fantasy.[8] Most of what has been written in relation to Fantasy can be understood similarly.

Distinguishing the fantastic and Fantasy in this way easily holds space for those that define Fantasy simply as a category of fiction containing fantastic images – folks like C. N. Manlove, C. S. Lewis, Robert H. Boyer, Kenneth J. Zahoriski, and Ann Swinfen – and those that merely add the requirement that such images be treated as convincingly real, like J. R. R. Tolkien (above) and his fellow fantasist Lin Carter.[9] More complexly constructed definitions fit comfortably as well, with fairly light adjustment. For instance, Tzvetan Todorov, one of the earliest academic theorists of the topic, construed the fantastic as genre in and of itself, separated from the marvelous (Fantasy) on the basis of how uncertain the reader is about what constitutes reality in the text.[10] Christine Brooke-Rose, however, makes the necessary correction in reevaluating the phenomenon Todorov is considering as, not a genre, but certain "evanescent elements" found in literature as a whole.[11] These more complicated theories of Fantasy usually owe their complexity to a treatment of the fantastic's modal qualities, studies like Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* and Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Of these, Rabkin's is an outlier, situating the fantastic more broadly as the perception that reality has

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[8] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 44-45.

[9] C. N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1975) 1; C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 50; ; Robert H. Boyer and Kenneth J. Zahorski, "Introduction" in *Fantasists on Fantasy: A Collection of Critical Reflections by Eighteen Masters of the Art* (Avon Books, 1984), 3; Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 2,5.; Lin Carter, *Imaginary Worlds* (Ballantine Books, 1973), 5-6.

[10] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1975) 3, 25, 31.

[11] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative & Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 63, 65.

be contradicted.[12] The more conventional description, and what I have attuned this work to, is akin to W. R. Irwin's, where the fantastic is "not only outside 'reality' but also in knowing contravention of 'reality.'"[13] This modal conceptualization of the fantastic allows for more detailed analyses of its literary functionality, most brilliantly exemplified by the work of scholars like Kathryn Hume, who approaches the fantastic as an impulse dichotomous with the mimetic, and Farah Mendlesohn, who attends to the ways in which the fantastic appears in a text and transforms it into a Fantasy.[14]

Brian Attebery, perhaps the most prolific thinker in the field, acknowledges the distinction I'm making here, but prefers to collapse mode and form into his iconic "fuzzy set" model of genre, where Fantasy is established around a diffusive center (in this case *The Lord of the Rings*) and enables a uniquely affective perception hailed as "wonder."[15] Canny readers will immediately recognize the underlying question this conception of genre ignores and how its absence reflects the seeming inability (myself included) to get off Tolkien's dick. Namely – who situates the center? This is the question Helen Young provokes in her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, where she offers a broader view of genre as a cultural network that includes "the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy."[16] This understanding of genre *cum* culture also serves to broaden Samuel R. Delany's and Joanna Russ'

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[12] Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4-5, 12.
[13] W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 8.
[14] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984), xii, 21; Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xii-xiv; Hume disavows identifying the fantastic (which she calls fantasy) as a mode, not wanting to isolate it from literature as a whole, but this seems unnecessary.
[15] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indianna University Press, 1992), 10-17.
[16] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 5.

characterization of Fantasy's subjunctivity, expanding the sphere of discursive influence shaping a reader's understanding of genre and consequent interpretation of the text's reality (Fantasy rendering a subjunctive of "could not have happened" compared to Science Fiction's "have not happened").[17]

It is the fantastic's dialogic relationship with the real that most interests me in terms of this project. Revolution (we'll work at a more thorough definition in a bit) indicates a significant shift on the level of governing structure. We can assume that that dominant structure is real. Which means that, if we accept that an essential quality of the fantastic is a disturbance of the real, then we must grant that the fantastic much have, at the very least, some revolutionary *potential*, in that it destabilizes the real allowing aforementioned dominant structures to exist. At first glance, Rosemary Jackson seems to get to the quick of it:

> The fantastic is predicated on the category of the 'real,' and it introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of 19th century realism: thus, the im-possible, the un-real, nameless, formless, shapeless, un-known, in-visible. What could be termed a 'bourgeois' category of the real is under attack.[18]

What she means here by "bourgeois category of the real" is the historically situated literary representation of reality in the form known as realism and she limits the fantastic's subversive potential to that realm alone. *Fantasy* is a phenomenal book, but it is fettered by Jackson's hesitation to concede the fantastic any *real* revolutionary effect on society.[19] It's a hesitation, I suspect, that stems from the fear that the impossible and invisible unknowns the fantastic brings

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[17] Delany, *Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, 32 and Joanna Russ, "The Subjunctivity of Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 15, no. 1 (1974), 22.
[18] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 26.
[19] Jackson, *Fantasy*, 14.

into relief represent, in literature, what *can only be* represented fictionally by definition and, outside the confines of literary genre, do not, in their assaults, discriminate between the bourgeois real and that real the Marxists cling to as "material." In other words, I believe the fantastic, as a literary mode, models a dialogue with reality operable beyond the bounds of that which is merely representational.

Nnedi Okorafor, a celebrated novelist whose books are inevitably categorized as speculative within an English-speaking context, explains that what is recognized as fantastic in her work does not simply appear as a matter of writerly choice, but rather springs organically from her experience of the world as a matter of course.[20] This "organic fantasy," as she names it, is a reflection of her American/Nigerian African-ness and personal world view. "Fantasy," she says, "is the most accurate way of describing reality;" a reality where everything is imbued with story.[21] "Animistic" is too crude a descriptor for such fathomless realms. Donald Morse speaks to something similar in his reading of 20th century Irish writers, noting the lack of firm divide between the visible real and invisible unreal in the, to borrow Young's term, genre-culture of the Irish Fantasy.[22] This "interpenetration," he argues, "of the invisible and the visible worlds," reflects a "double-mindedness," or supplemental "both/and" thinking, opposed to the dichotomous "either/or" thinking more predominant in the greater English-speaking world – a type of "two thinks at a time" allowing for a revolt against reality.[23] What Okorafor, Yeats, and myself have in common, is a *belief* in the fantastic. It is a rejection of the suspension of disbelief arguably required by fantastic fiction leaving an *insistence* on belief in its place. Refuting

[20] Nnedi Okorafor, "Organic Fantasy," *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009), 275-77.
[21] *ibid.*, 279.
[22] Donald Morse, "'Revolutionizing Reality': The Irish Fantastic," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8, no. 1 (29) (1997), 4.
[23] *ibid.*, 8, 11.

Jackson's assertion of the fantastic's inequivalence with revolting anarchist politics is the *Otherworlds Review*, anonymously written "for the benefit of discerning necromancers and starry-eyed insurgents the world over," which states: "this has always been the path of the anarchist: to engage with the world at the level of story, to weave with meaning itself, to actualize the miraculous."[24] In this declaration we can hear Faërie calling from the rainbow's end. Calling to create Otherworlds. Calling to cultivate salamander rooms. I've heard them calling my name. Have you?

From this position – pronounce it organic fantasy or double-mindedness or spiritual anarchism – the revolutionary fantastic can be considered a fantastic mode that rebels against Fantasy as a form imposing fictionality. This is where Todorov's importance reemerges, as it was he who initially defined the fantastic as reality's *uncertainty*.[25] But, rather than this uncertainty being limited to a specific textual or representational reality, the revolutionary fantastic insists on a rereading of both diegetic and non-diegetic realities, provoking a reconsideration of worldly boundaries. Now, if this all sounds a bit too woo-woo to you, you're in the right place. In their edited collection of essays on Antiquity's influence on Fantasy, classicists Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens strike right at the heart of the matter, arguing that, "the fantastic represents an even greater difference from the world at hand: not simply an empirical or epistemological difference, but a more complex and *profoundly metaphysical* one, in which the unreal becomes real and the impossible possible." (emphasis mine)[26] It is this claim – that Fantasy coaxes belief in the fantastic back out from primitive darkness – that lends itself to Marxists clutching their

[24] Anonymous, *the Otherwolds Review* (Seattle: Contagion Press, 2018), 133.
[25] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.
[26] Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds., *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), preface.

proverbial pearls in strained agitation at the "socio-pathological" mistake of yoking Science Fiction to * sharp intake of breath * *ideological opiate*.[27]

Darko Suvin, well regarded father of Science Fiction criticism, has few if any kind things to say of Fantasy in his magnum opus *Metamorphoses*. Identifying the various "sub-literary species" masquerading as proper Science Fiction, Suvin pops off with the following diatribe:

> A further step down into pseudo-sophistication – correlative, no doubt, to a marked decadence of cultural taste in bourgeois society and its literary markets – is the parasitism of Gothic, horror, and weird *fantasy* upon SF. Such fantasy is characterized, as I have said, by the irruption of an anti-cognitive world into the world of empirical cognition. One can understand some readers' panic flight from a science which produces nuclear bombs… from a reason which justifies class societies in mutual balances of terror… Maybe such readers ought to have an escapist enclave of sword-and-sorcery or Cthulhu cosmologies – I cannot say. But surely SF, built upon the premise that nature is neither a childishly wicked stepmother… nor inscrutably alien to man – surely SF cannot allow its contract with the reader to be contaminated by the Great Pumpkin antics of fantasy. Even more perniciously than is the case with the bland fairy tale structure, the black ectoplasms of fantasy stifle SF completely. Its time shrinks to the point-consciousness of horror, gloom, and doom, its daydreams turn into inchoate nightmare, and under the guise of cognition the ancient obscurantist enemy infiltrates its citadel. Fossilized fragments of reasoning are used to inculcate irrationality, and the social energy of readers is expended on Witches' Sabbaths instead of focusing it on the causes for our alienating, murderous,

[27] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 9.

> and stultifying existences: the power structures holding back the hominization of the sapiens, the true demonology of war and market breeding pride and prejudice. … SF has with different degrees of precision, but with unerring precision of orientation, focused on these power structures, on such demonology. It is at its worst, at its most alienated and alienating, when it honors the parasitism and vampirism of fantasy. (emphasis original)[28]

Phew! I'll give you a moment to smooth your hair back down. I cite this passage at such length because it's an absolute banger of a polemic but also because it pedestals the main critiques of Fantasy's fantastic from the quintessentially revolutionary perspective of Marxist thought. Very basically, from the Marxist position Fantasy is counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie decadence because 1) it's irrationally anti-cognitive; and 2) it mystifies the historical modes of production. The "Great Pumpkin antics" of supercilious magical belief stultifies any critical thought whatsoever. And, following from this first point, the real cause of human suffering – capitalist class structure – escapes notice as little Linus prays in the pumpkin patch for gifts instead of joining the local machinist union. These critiques rely, however, on the assumption of a stable reality to reflect and cognate on, as well as an equally stable, material history productive of that reality. What I find intriguing about Suvin's rhetoric is the way the various cults dedicated to Cthulhu or the Great Pumpkin haunt this reality and the "dominant literature of our civilization."[29] In Suvin's framework, Fantasy's fantastic is vampiric, parasitical, witchy, black, ectoplasmic – an *ancient enemy* stealthily penetrating the empire-cal safety of the citadel. There is a barbaric temporality lurking in the interstices of Suvin's speech that belies a slight

[28] *ibid.*, 23-24.
[29] *ibid.*, 11.

nervousness beneath all the artful bluster. It makes me wonder what value there may be in fighting the demonic forces of war and market with a little demonology of our own…

The Goetia Programme: Radicalizing the Fantastic

Despite doing little to combat the reputation Marxists have for sucking the fun out of everything, Suvin and his fellow travelers do alert us to some serious concerns anyone attempting to place the words "revolutionary" in front of "fantastic" must address. Fortunately, a small but growing body of literature has formed around the concept of "radical fantasy," also referred to as "political" or "progressive" fantasy. The concerns of this group predominantly follow the lines of critique outlined above in Suvin, at turns disputing the Great Pumpkin critique through a reconsideration of magic or the Witches Sabbat critique by either providing a counterexample of a Fantasy grounded in historical materialism or arguing the revolutionary potential of an explicit anti-historicism. At the nexus of these argumentative sworls is a question of the real.

Socialist scholar China Miéville, himself a celebrated fantasist whose Bas-Lag books are consistent touchstones of "Radical Fantasy," advocates for a different interpretation of Marx than his colleagues in that he does not think the categories of real and unreal should be considered completely separate. Instead, he argues that they should be considered entangled in a process of constant referentiality where reality is determined by constantly cross-referencing a not-real determined via one's conception of "possible, not-yet possible, and never possible." From this standpoint, Fantasy is "psychologically and aesthetically radical" in that it provides a space where the not-real is redefined, encouraging one to rethink "*potentialities in the real.*"[30] In a

[30] John Newsinger, "Fantasy and Revolution: An Interview with China Miéville," *International Socialism* 88 (Autumn 2000), https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/newsinger/2000/xx/mieville.htm.

book length study of Miéville's work (grouped alongside the *oeuvres* of Terry Pratchett and Phillip Pullman), Andrew Rayment works toward a thicker description of this type of thinking from a slightly different angle, emphasizing direct adjustment of the real by re-presenting, disrupting, and transforming it:

> {Pratchett, Pullman, and Miéville} displace elements of the 'real' world of our everyday social 'reality,' de-contextualise them, give them a non-real appearance (an appearance that is transformed or disrupted) and then throw it back at us as 'real being,' a Fantasy reality that is more real than 'reality' itself... This is how they make us question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, how they disturb our mental habits, the way that we do and think things, how they dissipate what is familiar and accepted, how they make us re-examine rules and institutions. In short, this is how they radically make us see again.[31]

Other theorists take this notion further, studying the ways in which Fantasy can marshal the fantastic towards a reconsideration of reality in general by modeling the various ways the categories of real and unreal condense and how they are endlessly mediated through subjective experience, a quality that has led those such as Lance Olsen to label Fantasy narratives inherently deconstructive.[32]

William Burling, who has, perhaps, gone the farthest in asserting a definite definition of what constitutes Radical Fantasy, installs *Perido Street Station*, the first of Miéville's Bas-Lag

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[31] Andrew Rayment, *Fantasy, Politics, Postmodernity: Pratchett, Pullman, Miéville and Stories of the Eye* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 21.
[32] Daniel Baker, "Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 3 (86) (2012), 446; Lance Olsen, *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987), 19.

books, as quintessential. He defines the subgenre thusly: "Radical Fantasy recognizes and represents the unimaginable totality of capitalism, rethinks the relationship and obligations of the individual to the social whole, and advocates for posthumanist subject identity as a challenge to currently hegemonic idealist, humanist assumptions."[33] Burling wastes no time in clarifying his commitment to the Marxist perspective, promising that *Perido*'s "crises are not idealist or metaphysical but material and dialectical."[34] In his estimation, Radical Fantasy does not so much deconstruct reality by re-representing it in impossible terms or modeling its various, contradictory manifestations so much as *make possible* representations of reality: "Radical Fantasy… counters the epistemological pathology of our era {apophenia} by offering a functional, imaginative "other world" model, for grasping the irrational totality of life under capital."[35] Combined with his prescription of a collective rather than individual protagonist and emphasis on "positive hybridity" in terms of character typology, Burling thus demonstrates how a "triumphantly unhistorical" yet still historically materialist Fantasy can be written.[36] However, as Daniel Baker has already pointed out in his article "Why We Need Dragons," *Perido* is limited in that, while it readily generates *awareness*, it does not offer *alternatives*.[37] In terms of Fantasy's subversive potential, this challenge most clearly emerges in Jackson's work and has remained embedded in the literature by those, like Olsen, who are too skittish to integrate the explicitly fantastic in their research, preferring the less disreputable works of Kafka and Pynchon. Burling is the most adamant from the Marxist school in refusing the ghettoization of Faërie, but still

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[33] William J. Burling, "Periodizing the Postmodern: China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* and the Dynamics of Radical Fantasy," *Extrapolation* 50, no. 2 (2009), 7-8, *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A206604586/AONE?u=wash_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=ff01b72f (Accessed 2 May 2022).
[34] *ibid.*, 3.
[35] *ibid.*, 5.
[36] *ibid.*, 4-5, 7.
[37] Baker, "Why We Need Dragons," 449.

limits the potential of the fantastic by reducing its legibility to a narrowly prescribed set of genre constraints.

From this early juncture, we can already discern a distinction between what has been proposed as radical fantasy and the revolutionary fantastic and why I cleave to the latter, for while radicalization (we could also say consciousness raising) is necessary for any revolutionary sentiment, revolution, for me, needs to entertain some sort of utopic quality. Else, it is merely insurrectionary. In other words, the revolutionary fantastic cannot be *solely* deconstructive. My thinking here follows Baker's closely:

> While it is pivotal that dominant ideology be "frozen" through a cognitive map and its "gaps" pried open, this primarily deconstructive approach is not progressive per se: it demystifies with the intent to remove, but does not instill a new subjectivity in the individual. It is primarily deconstructive rather than creative. … While it is an important step, if we consider Althusser's position that ideology mediates between reality and the individual subject, then demystification or deconstruction is somewhat sterile: a new subjectivity requires a degree of replacement, a form of re-imagining.[38]

Admirably, Baker just straight up refuses the traditional Marxist claim that Fantasy is inherently anti-cognitive and singles out Fredric Jameson to tussle with in particular. Choosing the latter's *Archaeologies of the Future* as the battleground, Baker cites the text positively, agreeing with Jameson that the utopian must be predicated on more than just the dissolution of the present's oppressive power systems, but rather, their replacement.[39] However, he outright rejects

[38] *ibid.*, 442.
[39] *ibid.*, 443; See also Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007).

Jameson's longstanding framing of Fantasy as vestigial anachronism, only critically useful when modeling the extinction of magical thinking and the disenchantment supposedly ushered through history's gates by the advent of modernism.[40] I stand by Baker in his refusal to acknowledge a distinction in the fantastic's functional ability to generatively disturb the real as a category solely based on the genre within it resides. "Whatever connotative qualifications are attached to the impossible are irrelevant: the impossible is always culturally illuminating."[41] This is not to suggest that Delany and Russ are wrong in pointing out a difference in the way the fantastic is read. Nor am I arguing that the particular effect of the fantastic is universal across various subjunctivities. But, as Baker pronounces: "if the reality of capitalist modernity is subjective, then fantasy's representation of the impossible can be something of critical value. Fantasy does not escape reality but *exposes, subverts, and creates it*." (emphasis mine)[42] While Burling has done well in demonstrating that a historically materialist Fantasy is possible, it is important to recognize that Fantasy does not *need* to be historically materialist to have critical or utopian potential.

Once this concern is set aside, one can begin to examine how the metaphysical and ahistorical fields of fantastic functionality can generate revolutionary potential. In Julia DaSilva's recent work on the subject, she cites Silvia Federici's reading of the world wide witch hunting phenomenon as demonstrative of the "very real, and radical, material power the notion of magic potentially contains," proclaiming: "Magic, on this view, is not simply an irrational realm that gradually falls away—it is a way of knowing that had to be violently suppressed in order for the

[40] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 67, 71. Jameson's argument here represents a longstanding sentiment of his traceable back to an early article on magic in Romance narratives. See Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 135–63.
[41] Baker, "Why We Need Dragons," 445.
[42] *ibid.*, 446.

rational irrationalities of global capitalism to come into dominance."[43] From this perspective, the Witches' Sabbat becomes a metaphor representative of the fantastical worldviews (which we could borrow from Okorafor to call Organic Fantasies) violently suppressed as part of the historical process of capitalism's ascendance as the world's governing economic and ideologic order. Suvin's Witches' Sabbat metaphor correctly indexes the fantastical fictionality of the witch imagined as member of an ancient cult of devil worshipers, but he and his disciples mistakenly foreclose the use of that figure in the fight against the "demonology of war and market."[44] Specifically: the use of that knowingly ahistorical figure to model an anachronistic disregard for contemporary paradigms separating real and unreal.

It is a testament to the vital power of Ursula K. Le Guin's magic that her work so often resists total foreclosure on the part of Fantasy's materialist critics. Based on her *Earthsea* work, Jameson is willing to concede that magic can figure "the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualisation of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present" and even map an "active and productive subjectivity in its non-alienated state."[45] DaSilva takes advantage of this opening to push toward an understanding of magic as "moments of radical possibility… in which the sedimented real is turned, opened, reactivated. The limits to extension that it created are scraped against or unraveled and transformed, and structural change becomes possible to imagine and desire."[46] In a truly inspired rendering of

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[43] Julia DaSilva, "Turning the Hinge: 'Radical Fantasy,' Magic, and Eco-phenomenology in N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* and Laurie Marks's *Fire Logic*," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 33, no. 2 (2022), 110; See also Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).
[44] See Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) and *Margot Adler, Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
[45] Fredric Jameson, "Radical Fantasy," *Historical Materialism* 10, no. 4 (2002), 278-9.
[46] DaSilva, "Turning the Hinge," 100.

historical processes inspired by N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series of Fantasy novels, DaSilva frames institutional power as sedimentary and magical acts as creative of "conceptual space within moments of crisis that uses the obscurities in our experience of the world around us against the power that might otherwise be able to weaponize them."[47] This is precisely the way in which I imagine some of the operability of the revolutionary fantastic. The notion of history's susceptibility to "reactivation" outside the parameters dictated by linear models of progression allows for the fantastical manipulation of what I will later call "pastness" as a key function of the revolutionary fantastic, as is the fantastic's capacity for what I call "fugitive mystification," whereby the mystification of material reality often employed to further oppress marginalized populations is used *against* forces of institutional power.

The Great Pumkin antics they get up to at ye' olde Witches' Sabbat that compel Suvin to reach for his pearls is a mode of magical thinking that is, as Le Guin warns in the epigraph to this chapter, quite dangerous. But when has revolution ever been safe? Even as Miéville carves out space for radical Fantasies, he is quick to foreground an emphatic suspension of disbelief: "I've written ghost stories – it doesn't mean for a minute I believe in ghosts. I'm writing a *story* that doesn't pretend to be a direct representation of the real world. Suspension of disbelief is crucial."[48] "Witches are safe!" he seems to say – and may even be useful in re-imagining what is possible! – but only so long as you don't empower them with an insistence of belief that transposes them outside the text to muss with reality proper. While going further than many Marxist critics in his allowance for the entanglement of the real and unreal, they remain as bounded categories. Their boundaries might shift in proximity to one another, but they do not

[47] *ibid.*, 98.
[48] Newsinger, "An Interview with China Miéville."

interpenetrate in the same way indicated by the hybrid experience of Organic Fantasy or Irish doublemindedness. Interestingly enough, Miéville does promote the "literalised fantastic" established by Tolkien as his "most truly radical and seminal moment."[49] Belief is exactly what is at stake. Having "no truck with the tedious symbolism which mars so much 'magic realism,'" Miéville recognizes that the radical potential of any Fantasy is equivalent to the degree in which the text believes in its own fantastic.[50] This is a nice gesture, one that helps open space for radical potential to be gleaned from the fantastic elements of Fantasies appropriately read as conservative due to the affirmative or consolatory form they take.[51] What dissatisfies, however, is the compulsion to impose a strict fictionality upon the fantastic, limiting its potential to subvert the reality of the non-textual world that, it must be remembered – moors hegemonic power in the mundane harbor of objectivity. The truly revolutionary power of the fantastic is its capacity to embolden us in an all-out revolt against the fragile reality of our present world by calling in an array of "outside" agitators to ally with us in summoning its replacement.

The Fey Revolutionaries of *Then* and *There*

Getting *Then* and *There* is both the utopian impulse that motivates radical action and the horizonal goal that sets revolution apart from insurrection. Then and There encapsulates at once the lost Garden of Eden, salamander rooms, and everything at the fabled end of the rainbow. It's through the wardrobe, where the wild things are, second star to the right and straight on till

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[49] China Miéville, "With One Bound We Are Free: Pulp, Fantasy and Revolution," *Crooked Timber*, January 11, 2005, https://crookedtimber.org/2005/01/11/with-one-bound-we-are-free-pulp-fantasy-and-revolution/.
[50] *ibid*.
[51] Baker uses "affirmative fantasy" to describe Fantasies where "self-sacrifice, xenophobia, and some form of nationalism" drive the plot and "The individual derives worth by "pulling his/her" weight, sublimating individuality in the name of liberty, freedom, or a nebulous "good." See Baker, "Why We Need Dragons," 439; "Consolatory Fantasy" is in reference to Tolkien's description of Fantasy as necessitating a happy ending. See Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 62.

morning. This desire for an Otherworld beyond the one in which we live instills a similar desire for an Elsewhen beyond the present moment. In other words, it is a desire fermented by disappointment with the *here* and *now*. The Otherworlds and Elsewhens conjured by this disappointment's consequential yearning for Then and There, especially when enticingly realized, can fuel this disappointment to the point that it bubbles over the container of Dream to manifest into radical action. The effectiveness of this radicality or insurrectional worrying of present reality is determined by how accurately the envisioned Otherworlds and Elsewhens in question model the production of the disappointment that sources them. Inaccurate models, whether naïve or malignly intentional, can absolutely function like the worst type of glamour, sublimating or misdirecting the frustrations of the unwary into apathetic numbness or disoriented madness. On this point I share the concerns of the materialists I have otherwise lambasted, but dispute the charge that the powers of the fantastic automatically lend themselves to this type of abuse in the context of Fantasy and credit the success of Radical Fantasies like Miéville's in demonstrating forms by which the fantastic can be deployed to this effect within the genre.[52] But this is only half the equation, for, as much as the meaningful transformation heralded in the call to revolutionary action demands destruction be wreaked upon present structures, that call must articulate a vision for what is to be built from said wreckage.

The viability or relevancy of this utopic vision is supposedly what sets Science Fiction apart – that its estrangement is cognitive (and therefore superior) by virtue of the threads connecting it (no matter how tentatively or fantastically!) to the material history of the present.

[52] There is undeniably a strand of mythopoeic fascism drawn from the well of Fantasy, but equally undeniable is the contemporary strand of techno-industrial fascism derived from Science Fiction. See Lyta Gold, "The Fake Nerd Boys of Silicon Valley," *Current Affairs*, July 7, 2020, https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2020/07/the-fake-nerd-boys-of-silicon-valley.

What Fantasy provides differently in its deployment of the fantastic beyond the real and, in the revolutionary sense, *against* the real, is a way of creating that is less fettered by the painful diminishment of that miserable history and all the epistemological structures operating on the mind's eye as a lid speculum to fix in place our horrified stare. The fantastic gifts us more than the may-be-possible. The just straight up not-possible enables a perception that can take us beyond the rules we know (magical thinking) and therefore beyond the pasts we know (ahistorical). To be clear, I am not advocating we abandon the victims embalmed in the mortar of this real and terrifying present but rather suggesting that by wrenching our gaze away from their dead bodies we might overcome the paralyzing effect of such looking and become more available to their ghosts. More than that, these alternative (in the supplemental sense) senses might also make us available to other spirits and realms of existence. But this cannot simply be a means of escape. Revolution is not a lateral leap but a movement of continuous return. It must be a journey *there and back again*.

All the impossible, perilous realms that exist fully outside the onerous reality of the here and now as both the source and result of magic can be collectively signed as Faërie – the "realm or state in which fairies have their being" that, according to Tolkien, also contains *us* "when we are enchanted."[53] Now, it's commonly known that there is something a little queer about fairies. It is exactly this *fey* aspect of the fantastic that I attach to José Muñoz' description of "feeling utopia."[54] It is a type of queerness that shimmers around the fantastic and alerts us to those pathways leading beyond the here and now toward the Then and There. It is in, perhaps, one of

[53] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 14-15.
[54] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

these fantastic realms that we could overhear the famous fantasist and queer theorist speak in concert…

> Tolkien: Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible.
>
> Muñoz: We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.
>
> T: The magic of Faërie is not an end in itself, its virtue lies in its operations…
>
> M: Queerness is a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing…
>
> T: … among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires.
>
> M: Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring…
>
> T: One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time.
>
> M: …that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.
>
> T: Another is to hold communion with other living things.
>
> M: The field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity.[55]

Muñoz' conception of utopia as an impulse born from queer dissatisfaction with the "prison house" that is the here and now, is a useful point of entry for thinking about a type of utopian fantastic specific to Fantasy. The depiction of queerness as an indeterminant ideality "distilled from the past" to imagine a utopic futurity resonates with an equivalently uncertain fantastic

[55] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 15 and 17; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1 and 20.

beyond real time and space, but identifiable as having happened "a long time ago." [56] Similar too is the insistent belief in Otherworlds and their interplay with the one we know:

> We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for this minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. (emphasis original)[57]

This is where Faërie begins…

The hole in the ground. The wardrobe. The mirror. The forest. The train platform. That the portals to Faërie are immanent in the mundane would not surprise Muñoz, certain as he is that "both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness."[58] Both Muñoz and Miéville suggest a link between this immanence and that of the numinous found in radical religious movements.[59] Understood in this way, queerness and the fantastic resemble the gnostic Pleroma or "realm of fullness" that exists all around us but to which access is curtailed by institutions of power threatened by the utopic flashes it provokes. Miéville commends one of his interlocutors in identifying the kinship between the revolution he renders in *Iron Council*, the third of his Bas-Lag books, and the "critical-fantastic" of fellow author M. John Harrison, who writes the fantastic as both immanent and "just-out-of-reach." This particular utopic affect is similar to Muñoz' "never-quite-here" queerness and helps articulate the

[56] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
[57] *ibid.*, 1.
[58] *ibid.*, 1.
[59] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 185-89; Miéville, "With One Bound We Are Free," fn 11.

revolutionary fantastic as a fetish of "the moment of choice when everything seems possible."[60] At the "heart of fantasy," says Miéville, is the "idea that we can somehow transform ourselves completely, and make everything alright. But in the moment that we reach out for what we desire, what is going to change us, it slips away."[61] The relevance of the numinous to the formula I am expressing here (that the queer is the fantastic is the utopic affect/vision of revolution) is its unrepresentability and the awe or ecstasy that signals its presence. Muñoz names it "astonishment" that which "helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place." adrienne maree brown identifies it as "wonder" in her organizing work. And Tolkien calls it "Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world."[62] These affects are all flavors of Otherwordly experience which are definitionally beyond our mundane capacity to describe. Hence, as Miéville points out, the necessity of "ecstatic rituals, attempts to synaesthetically imply the unimpliable" or "extraordinary violent-joyful reconfigurations of language to make it do something new."[63]

I describe this utopic sensation using the term *affect* (turning away slightly from Muñoz in doing so) partially in effort to preserve the evanescent quality of both the revolutionary and the fantastic as never quite graspable, as well as to avoid any enervating engagement with the sprawling temple hierarchies of what "counts" as "truly" revolutionary. Affect is often conflated with feeling and emotion or the experience of either, but, in my use of the term, I want to highlight the internal vibrations that escape description, which Brian Massumi usefully conceptualizes as *intensity*:

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[60] Miéville, "With One Bound We Are Free," fn 11.
[61] *ibid.*, fn 11.
[62] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5; brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 3; Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 62.
[63] Miéville, "With One Bound We Are Free," fn 11.

> Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonation and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static—temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends…[64]

The distinction Massumi makes here between affect and feeling is that the former, limitless and unknown, is interpreted into the latter, recognized and ordered, so as to make sense of the experience.[65] For this project we can articulate affect as sensations (intensity) experienced as an assemblage of engagement with things not yet known (there is a negative description at work here, in that what is felt as indescribable relies on a pre-extant structure of what *can* be described). Imminence becomes key here in addition to immanence. The sense that something is transforming – either collectively or personally – that a different world is emerging; the uncanny awareness of a distinct presence or that a particular moment or location is pregnant with potential – these are the type of affects I want to attach to the revolutionary fantastic. My own ideological ideas regarding what is *truly* revolutionary, that which provides the mindset and environment

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[64] Brian Massumi, "The Politics of Systems and Environments," *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (Autumn 1995), 86.
[65] Critics like Ruth Leys have challenged this distinction on the basis that it positions affect as autonomic, unconscious, or otherwise beyond meaning, mere physiological responses that are then slotted into the conscious mind's symbolic system and given meaning. I share Leys' hesitation to view aspects of feeling as pre-meaning but want to recognize the value of experiences that slip beyond dominant orders of meaning. But, in line with Leys, the events, objects, experiences, actions, ect. that might trigger affect are subjective and socially constructed and the failure or resistance to recognize that affect within dominant orders of meaning – to name them "revolutionary" – is going to be similarly constructed. See Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011), 435-8, 469.

leading me to being affected, are idiosyncratic and will inform this work, but I don't want to limit the revolutionary fantastic to that niche standpoint. Nor do I want to spend the time trying to articulate the overwhelming breadth of experiences, collaborators, and ideas – my full discursive map – that I would be tempted to include in crafting such a definition. My only gesture towards it is to say that I sense the revolutionary as a serene heat that blossoms across my chest, experienced in the moments of belief that I am precisely when and where I belong, existing, impossibly, in a realm of life beyond this world of death.

The ecstatic rituals of affective production – indiscriminate as to the form they take – are the means by which magic is drawn from the mundane. As are the "violent-joyful reconfigurations of language" we might recognize as Fantasy. It is helpful, then, to think of Fantasy literature in the way that Deleuze and Guattari conceive all art to function: as "compounds of sensations." Rather than objects that reflect some sort of objective truth or reality, art, in their formulation, functions as a composition of various "vibrations" that pull us into being.[66] Contemporary parlance has already ingested this concept through the expression of "vibes." Of a conversation or personality, one might claim the vibes to be "off" or, as I favor, "rancid." What's being commented on is not the feeling itself, but the collective sensations without an easily identifiable source that is producing said feeling. Much like any given situation, a work of art – a novel – is a collection of vibes, but one intentionally composed in a particular fashion in the hopes of producing various feeling(s). Fantasy, as the clearest purveyor of the fantastic vibes associated with the queerly utopic or immanently numinous, becomes the obvious home for evoking the impossible Then and There revolution is meant to usher into

[66] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 168-9.

existence. Miéville speaks to this in consideration of his own work and the problems of representing revolution in general. He maintains that revolution is a "necessary horizon" that is fundamentally unrepresentable as successful. This is because, if revolution ever fully succeeded, the resulting world would, definitionally, be fully transformed and, therefore, impossible to imagine before actually arriving Then and There. Fantasy, as a reconfiguration of the real (and therefore the impossible), allows him to "embed" revolution as "permanently immanent" using "literalised metaphors that do not however subordinate their literalism to their metaphoricism" (the fantastic).[67]

Thus, while it may be true that the disappointment with the world as it is that initiates the search for a utopic Then and There is most generative when conceived through an adequately material historical consciousness, the Then and There itself can only ever be diminished by rendering it as a mere extrapolation of the here and now. (This might be why Science Fiction is so much better known for its dystopias, which stick to extending our disappointments with the here and now into the future.) To properly sneak a glimpse at the fundamentally unknowable utopia on the other side of revolution, one must learn to be fey – impossible, irrational, *enchanted*. This questing - this feeling *out for* – utopia that announces its imminency through the affective intensities associated with the fantastic and numinous, must be insurrectionary within *and against* the real. From the *Otherworlds review*: "Through every broken window, a portal to the Otherworlds is opened, through which the Dead return to the earth, through which wild and inhuman spirits enter through which the Gods make manifest Their blessings."[68] To revolt merely in honor of the dead leaves them inert in the ground where Empire buried them; WE MUST

[67] Miéville, "With One Bound We Are Free."
[68] Anonymous, *the Otherworlds Review*, 20.

REVOLT WITH THEM! It is not enough to merely acknowledge the lands Empire settled. WE MUST REVOLT WITH THEM! To do anything but is to accept the borders drawn by Empire between the transcendental and the material and leave ourselves separated from those fey revolutionaries on the Otherside. The revolutionary fantastic is the mechanism by which we may lay siege to this to this illusory wall and dissolve the boundaries between the real and unreal separating us from the neverending forest of Faërie and all the fathomless realms beyond. Above is not as below until we enact it as so.

Gambling with the Dark Side of the Moon

In a published dialogue with queer feminist scholar Lisa Duggan on the subject of hope and hopelessness, Muñoz describes feeling revolutionary as "feeling that our current situation is not enough, that something is indeed missing and we cannot live without it," which, he goes on to say, "opens up the space to imagine a collective escape, an exodus, a 'going-off script' together."[69] It is this very sentiment that magic evokes and may literalize through the revolutionary fantastic. James Gifford, whose book *A Modernist Fantasy* is, perhaps, the most significant meditation on the radical fantastic to date, conceptualizes magic in almost the exact same way: "Magic as disappointment with the world as it is, is also magic as a radical seed for transformative action."[70] In *A Modernist Fantasy*, Gifford commits to extended critique of the predominantly materialist analysis of Fantasy that naturalizes Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as its center and, as a result, overemphasizes the flaws of "commercial Fantasy" (the main stream of texts directly influenced by Tolkien) as endemic to the whole. He argues that the critical

[69] Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009), 278.
[70] James Gifford, *A Modernist Fantasy: Modernism, Anarchism, & the Radical Fantastic* (Victoria: ELS Editions, 2018), 4.

paradigms of 20th century literary criticism – Marxism and Modernism – obscure a significant relationship between Fantasy and anarchism that can be recovered by attending to the way systems of domination appear in indisputably canonical works of the genre often overlooked in the wake of Tolkien's dominance. Magic in particular is the fantastic object Gifford elects to evaluate for radical potential due to its representational ties to both power and subjectivity.[71]

The affiliation Gifford observes between magic and anarchism is not simply an eccentricity of Fantasy literature's wild historiography. As the contemporary anarchist thinker Areïon writes: the "revolution of everyday life is what every anarchist dreams of, and what insurrectionary anarchists try to put into action imminently. Another word for this is magic."[72] From the other direction, practical magician Phil Hine would seem to agree (although with a slightly more muted politics): "Magic is about change… All acts of personal/collective liberation are magical acts… Through magic we may come to explore the possibilities of freedom."[73] For Gifford this connection is dependent on a conceptualization of magic as a "manifestation of the interiority of subjectivity" rather than as an external force necessitating domination to control.[74] He admits that this emphasis on an inward turn makes his conceptualization available to Marxist accusations of bourgeoise individualism, but wants to open interpretive space for a magic that "calls to a form of subjectivity given to self-possession and, like the ouroboros, self-reflexivity," that enables practitioners to "see magic as a manifestation of the desire for change, a will choice or self-cognizant wish that precedes but expresses the same impulse that drives change."[75] From

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[71] *ibid.*, 1-7, 14-15, 29, 68-9.
[72] Areïon, *Warlike, Howling, Pure* (Seattle: Contagion Press, 2024) 31. See also Erica Lagalisse, *Occult Features of Anarchism: With Attention to the Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019).
[73] Phil Hine, *Condensed Chaos: An Introduction to Chaos Magic* (Tempe: The Original Falcon Press, 2010), 11.
[74] Gifford, *A Modernist Fantasy*, 87-88.
[75] *ibid.*, 88, 92.

the preceding section, magic can be understood as a means of becoming and being fey, recognizing the utopic Then and There as immanent *in one's self*. Rather than obsessing over the ways historical forces determine possibility and speculating as to what might be possible in consideration of those forces, magic, as a fantastic mode of creation and belief, allows for revolutionary ideation *independent* of those historically determining forces. This is not to say that utopic design should evacuate all consideration of material history. That would be impossible. *Which is exactly why the fantastic is so valuable a resource*. Only by mechanism of the fantastic can a revolutionary break with the historically determined reality of the here and now be realized and made to be believable.

In her beautiful book *A Walk through the Forest of Souls*, trans tarotist and Fantasy author Rachel Pollack introduces a version of one of the Egyptian myths related to Thoth, where he helps Nut, goddess of the Night Sky, give birth to a new pantheon of gods. Nut, who becomes pregnant after an illegitimate affair with the god of Earth, Geb, is forbidden by Ra, her husband, from giving birth on any day, of any month of the year. Thoth successfully assists Nut by gambling with the moon and strategically winning small amounts of time (1/72nd of each day), ultimately leaving the game with five more days to add to the year. These nascent days are not subject to Ra's original command and thus Nut is able to use them to usher in a new era of divinity. Pollack proposes this tale as a model for fantastic liberation – "new things emerge… when we break the rules and allow ourselves to become pregnant" – that parallels the initiatory mysticism of occultic anarchism: "Anarchy is primordial chaos, infinite potential, *the force of creation-destruction,* a leap into the unknown." (emphasis mine)[76] Pollack contrasts this myth

[76] Rachel Pollack, *A Walk through the Forest of Souls: A Tarot Journey to Spiritual Awakening* (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 2023), 23-24; Areïon, *Warlike, Howling, Pure*, 119; This articulation of anarchy also connects to the initiatory leap into infinite potentiality mythologized in articulations of the Tarot's major arcana as "The

with that of Osiris' execution at the hands of his brother Set, the latter of whom measures Osiris so precisely that he is able to construct an inescapable coffin to suffocate his sibling with. In doing so she argues for a mode of reading based on aleatory divination systems (such as the Tarot) that opens spaces of possibility against the overdetermination of meaning often associated with writing.[77] In other words, she proposes a method of reading functionally similar to the revolutionary fantastic, whereby previously determined measurements of the real are reshuffled to crack open wider realms of potentiality. The way Pollack describes the consequences of reading this way echo Gifford's language around magic as representative of self-possession and self-reflexivity: "Tarot readings can help free us from our conditioning and past patterns. This allows us to become more conscious creators of our life's reality."[78] This fantastic mode of reading is a means of revolutionizing our relationship with words and images in general. Much like Miéville's numinous revolutionary, Pollack observes divine potentiality as immanent in language itself, and, like Muñoz' queer utopia, as accessible through the affective "wonder" generated by creative play, allowing us "to take a step outside the ordinary flow of events and return with knowledge and insights."[79] The way of getting Then and There has been revealed by the god of magicians; to do so *we must gamble with the moon*.

"Magic appeals to those with a great deal of hubris and a fertile imagination coupled with a strong suspicion that both reality and the human condition have a game-like quality."[80] This pronouncement comes from Peter Carroll another practicing magician and one of the founders of Chaos Magic, a contemporary school of occult thought adapted to better reflect recent theoretical

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Fool's Journey;" See Rachel Pollack, *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom: A Tarot Journey to Self-Awareness* (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 2019), 24-29.
[77] Pollack, *A Walk through the Forest of Souls*, 27-34.
[78] *ibid.*, 63.
[79] *ibid.*, 101-2.
[80] Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Kaos: Chaos Magic for the Pandaemonaeon* (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 2023), 62.

developments such as quantum mechanics and post-structuralism. In essence, it is the organic extension of what Pollack conceptualizes as "gambling with the moon" in the wake of Jacques Derrida's iconic incantation: "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*."[81] For, if there is no accessible reality outside of language (words, images, discourse), then *all reality is reading* and, therefore, subject to the semiotic manipulation that is gambling with the moon. Interestingly enough, both Miéville and Carroll rely on the evocation "sleight of mind." The former uses this phrase to describe the imaginative process spurred by the fantastic because, as he claims, you're not *really* redefining the impossible (fantasy's predicates are *definitionally* impossible) but you *pretend* that you are." (emphasis original)[82] Carroll on the other hand discusses sleight of mind as part of a practical methodology that *is* meant to redefine the impossible: "in chaos magic, beliefs are not seen as ends in themselves, but as tools for creating desired effects."[83] Bringing us back to an earlier formulation of mine: where Miéville warily asserts a suspension of disbelief in relation to the fantastic, Carroll voices a countervailing *insistence on belief*. It's worth repeating then: the revolutionary fantastic is a fantastic that, while predominantly recognized within Fantasy in the form of literary representation, escapes the bounds of that containing fictionality to make itself available to an insurrectionary chaos directed at the governing reality binding us in obeisance to oppressive structures of power built atop institutionalized systems of meaning. Where the fantastic indicates the possibility of meaning's destabilization, the *revolutionary* fantastic, directed by a queer utopic affect oriented toward impossible ends, generates means of potential meaning making.

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[81] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158.
[82] Newsinger, "An Interview with China Miéville."
[83] Carroll, *Liber Kaos*, 61, 71-81.

I do not want to give any indication that the revolutionary embedded in the queer radicality of the fantastic function is by any means an automatic result of its use. As Carrol warns, the determinism essential to the materialist construction of reality conflicts with the subjective experience of freedom, foreclosing a sense of life beyond individual consciousness and prompting a "frantic appetite for sensation, identification and more or less disposable irrational beliefs. Anything that will make the self seem less insubstantial."[84] Modes of the fantastic and/or magical thinking are readily captured and contained by the rational materialism that undergirds capitalist logic systems. Gifford remarks on these consequences as they appear in commercial Fantasy from the 1980s onward as strangling the politics injected into the genre by the likes of Le Guin, Delany, and Michael Moorcock and leaving previous anarchistic magiks in only trace amounts. The leftward political implementation of Fantasy arguably expands, but in the form of identity politics, sexual liberation, and "found family" modes of kinship (*à la* the Dungeons & Dragons adventuring party), all quickly subsumed into the "normalizing capitalist relations of production and consumption" of contemporary neoliberalism. [85] Even the radical evolution in form prioritizing the interiority of the subject was quickly co-opted (and now has become one of the most mind numbingly blasé aspects of the genre).

Gifford's near exclusive emphasis on magic as representative of anti-authoritarian subjectivity neglects the arguably more vital strand of revolutionary consciousness that emphasizes collectivity as being antithetical to capitalist relations dependent on the alienation and exploitation of its subjects. While Gifford makes certain to get in front of any disappointing omissions when concluding his study (and does mention gender and sexuality as potential points

[84] *ibid.*, 48.
[85] Gifford, *A Modernist Fantasy*, 254.

of supplementary intersection), the absence of any substantial consideration of race is startling, especially when subjectivity is situated as a contested site of conscription into and resistance against systems of domination. All apologies to Carrol and Pollack (especially Pollack, who does, admittedly, mount an honorable call to love's transformative relationality), but their instrumentalization of the fantastic reflect the limitations of Gifford's text and are just as easily appropriated by libertarian individualists, especially today's left leaning Coachella variety, who are fascinated with the self-representational rhetoric and aesthetics of radical ideology and who conflate liberation of self with liberation of all. Essentially, while I appreciate the movement Gifford makes away from overly deterministic models of revolutionary analysis, the positioning of magic as an explicitly "liberatory" unreality that calls to a subject's self-*possession* opens up his formulation of a radical fantastic to more than potential co-optation by consolatory genre formations, but risks unraveling his entire positioning of magic as a radical fantastic *at all*.[86] That the politics of liberation – founded on ideas of personal freedom, human rights, self-propriety – are products of the racialized exploitation that is capitalism's condition of possibility and replicate the same logics of obliteration and abuse is not a fringe theory, but a prominently regarded basis for revolutionary consciousness.[87] It may seem contradictory to at once position

[86] *ibid.*, 73, 76-7.

[87] For an introduction to racial capitalism, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); For critiques of liberal liberationist politics see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, and Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). For analyses of racialized subjectivity as a contestable site of resistance to systems of domination, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

myself against the claim that any revolutionary fantastic must be grounded in historical materialism yet also claim that it must be grounded in a differently deterministic consciousness, but let me be clear: to unwittingly reproduce the repressive logics of one world in another is not revolution, but naïve colonization. If the revolutionary fantastic is a never-ending *means* toward a generatively impossible end (as opposed to a necessarily possible end), the means of getting there do matter and can only be weakened by the imaginative technologies intrinsic to **racial** capitalism.

In *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas explains how darkness is the engine that drives the various mechanics of the fantastic. Darkness signifies all that is unknown beyond established boundaries, which in Fantasy is "personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized" as monstrous.[88] Specifically, Thomas describes this darkness as "the root cause of hesitation, ambivalence, and the uncanny" in works of Fantasy whose "present-absence" interrupts transcendent systems of order to then be violently discorporated into a lingering haunt.[89] Tolkien-esque consolatory Fantasies and their more recognizably liberal derivatives (a category in which I would include not only the oft criticized male power fantasies but the equally pat gender and/or sexually affirming subgenres of romantasy or cozy Fantasy) are conservatively sublimating and repressively desublimating in turn because, as Thomas points out, they are *white* Fantasies in the way they are structured around the dark Other as fantastic object/image and the dark fantastic as a mode of magical thinking.[90] In these Fantasies, elements

[88] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 19-22.
[89] *ibid.*, 23, 26-7.
[90] See Jackson, Fantasy for explicit critiques of how Fantasy (or "fairy story" in her formulation) can sublimate subversive desire and Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) for the concept of desublimation which I attach here to a deradicalized "identity politics." For an examination of said politics, see Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

of familiar reality are elevated through the fantastic to become transcendentally unreal – mythically divine, in other words. This is all fun stuff when we're talking about horses and trees (Tolkien called this "renewal") but becomes altogether different when what is being renewed are systems of domination.[91] Racialized enslavement, for example. J. K. Rowling's fantastical race of idyllically docile domestic slaves are not much more than mammy dolls magically renewed to make the white supremacist idea of the happy slave transcend the real to the level of mythic order. Our dear, sweet Dobby exists to mythologize the liberal idea of individual liberation as the truth that combats the first, but which, in actuality, just launders its horrors. For, if personal freedom is indeed possible *for those individuals who truly want it*, then those still enslaved must *like* where they are. The threat to this transcendental Order – the dark Other – acts as a destabilizing force, one that both provides the necessary function of shaking up that Order (allowing the protagonist/reader and social institutions to confront the scary unknown) in order to yield limited change (inevitably for the better, a.k.a. – growth) while also stabilizing it when the State or its heroic stand ins violently execute them. Even in death, however, the dark Other remains as a non-corporeal entity, both as the omnipresent threat necessitating a state of anticipatory violence on the part of the "good guys," and as a haunting trace of the blood price required to maintain the illuminated truths that make Order real. What makes Rowling's work such a good example of Thomas' ideas is that it demonstrates the way affirmative Fantasy, even when conceived and/or received as progressive (and let's not pretend it wasn't, still isn't, or that radically different compared to most other contemporary Fantasies whose authors haven't quixotically shit the bed in a rapidly shrinking region of public opinion), are Fantasies structured by a fear of too much change, too many unknowns, and all that could be potentially hidden in the

[91] Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 52-55.

dark. Voldemort did not revolt against the powers that be because he was a wizard nazi; he was characterized as a wizard nazi because only the *quintessentially evil* would revolt against the *natural order* of things as they are.[92] In other words, his white supremacy is only evil because its revolutionary. Whereas the white supremacy of Hogwarts is good, or rather, magically doesn't exist, because it cannot within the en(chant)ment that is liberal freedom and its conceptual symbiote slavery.

Thomas calls for an emancipated fantastic, one that strives against conventional tendency to naturalize postcolonial logic when working with the fantastic. At the same time, she expresses a disbelief that the fantastic can even exist without the dark Other that is the source of its power.[93] We must recognize the impossibility of any means with its origins in the here and now to be fully rid of its impressions. We can, however, still strive toward a Then and There where it could be. How? *In Keeping it Unreal*, academic fantasist Darieck Scott suggests that this is the wrong question.

> I want to think of how fantasy engages and yet sidesteps the "real" problem that we think it poorly addresses, how it offers a solution for a problem that isn't the accurately perceived problem really but is the answer to another query altogether: This must be a query that the fantasy itself, or the fantastic itself, *brings about* by deciding on an answer to it: the question/problem addressed does not precede the fantasy- as- solution- and-answer, but the fantasy creates or fashions the question out of its sidestepped engagement

[92] This argument that Voldemort's evil is merely a transient sign for the radical transformation of society is only bolstered by Rowling's eventual use of the Death Eaters (Voldemort's followers) as a metaphor for trans activists. See Emlyn Travis, "J.K. Rowling addresses controversial transgender remarks: 'Fans were grateful that I'd said what I said'" *Entertainment Weekly*, March 14, 2023, https://ew.com/celebrity/jk-rowling-addresses-transgender-women-comments-witch-trials-podcast/.
[93] Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, 28-29.

> with the "real," out of its fiat- like shattering of the real into pieces, as it were, that the fantasy recasts into other uses.[94]

A revolutionary fantastic must assume the impossible as already given. If we Fantasize a different world where the question is how to bring an emancipated fantastic into this realm or better yet, what should we prepare for in anticipation of that journey, such a path may become visible. Or even – how would we relate to one another through an emancipated fantastic? In the answer could be the solution to the question of how such a fantastic is possible after all. The Fantasy of Then and There conjured by Muñoz. The instruments of magic proffered by Pollack and Caroll. All the fantastic functions of literature discussed by the assembled scholars and writers introduced so far. These are the tools with which worlds are built. Reality is just the condensation of the collective consciousnesses that inhabit them. In this regard, the potential Scott and I see for the fantastic is similar – a mode of living by world making, with nothing other than the total transformation of being as the goal.[95] This revolutionary fantastic requires more than just gambling with the moon but inviting all the unknown darkness of its far side into the game. To do anything less is to meet the gods but propose penny stakes. Worse still – acquiring the power to transmute reality but choosing to be a cop for the real; a slave catcher in Omelas.

In her posthumously published work *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Gloria Anzaldúa offers an abundance of corrective assistance with the problems of co-optation and deradicalizing consolation that peril the usefulness of Gifford's formulation of magical subjectivity and its instrumentalization in popular occultic texts. With respect to Muñoz, she is in no uncertain terms the most essential theorist to my conceptualization

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[94] Darieck Scott, *Keeping It Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 39.
[95] *ibid.*, 39.

of the revolutionary fantastic as a theory straddling the border of literary critique and organizational practice. Her work should be read directly for the breadth of its rich and fertile enchantments, so I mean to keep my comments here as brief as I can, focusing attention to the features most relevant to the discussion at hand. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* was one of Anzaldúa's lifelong projects. She died before it was complete and the published version accessible to us is one edited by Analouise Keating, one of Anzaldúa's "writing comrades." In it she outlines the Coyolxāuhqui Imperative, a method of making meaning from wounds, and celebrates the imagination as a spiritual-intellectual-political force with which to do so. In this text, language is considered as more than just a representational veil over the Real, or the net by which we are captured into a Symbolic Order dominated by the powers of Empire. Instead, language is brought to life, animated from some dead thing into something fantastical and awe inducing. From Anzaldúa's perspective words *are* magical, imbued with the potential to *shift* reality (not just our perception of reality).[96] They are *alive* and with them as allies we can reconstruct reality in revolutionary ways. Fundamental to this means of knowing and being is an emphasis on interdependent relationality (*nos/otras*) and *nepantla*, a dimension of being in-between that recontextualizes the painful lostness of crossing the borders separating different worlds of meaning into a space of transition that enables those committed to the task greater abilities with which to transform the worlds they travel through.

In Anzaldúa's cosmology, hegemonic reality refracts into a scattered universe of different worlds, nominally sharing the same space, but grounded in distinct perceptual contexts. This universe is then refracted even further, bubbling into a chaotic cluster of fathomless realms

[96] Analouise Keating, "Editor's Introduction," in *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, ed. Analouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), xxxi.

beyond the mundane here and now but also shot throughout it. Art – in all its forms, but here most notably as writing (and reading) – is a means of making sense of this kaleidoscopic maelstrom, a semiotic mapping of the firmament enabled by our imagination. The space in between these clashing worlds and realms, *nepantla*, the unknown darkness of infinite possibility, is an abyss of alienating dislocation. It is this transition that animates transformation, a disorienting nowhere when one has ceased to be one thing but not yet become another. It is a plane of creation (literally dark materials), but also one of pain, often manifesting in the wake of traumas that forcibly disintegrate the viability of a familiar reality. In terms of Fantasy, *nepantla* is the dark fantastic that, in affirmative Fantasies, is demonically incarnated as various dark Others and can figure as the loss of control, the gamble, of stepping outside a closed system.[97] This disorientation is a near constant state of being for *mestizas*, who are forced to exist in the liminal margins that orogenize alongside border creation and can easily become a source of fear, apathy, and violence, especially for non-*mestizas* used to extremely solid and stable realities policed by the State, capital, and other structures of whiteness.

> In *nepantla* we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of *cruz calles*, junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating people and surroundings and others to the creation of a new world. *Nepantleras* such as *artistas/activistas* help us mediate these transitions, help us make the crossings, and guide us through the transformation process…[98]

Pinging off of Thomas, the revolutionary fantastic should not be a practice of emancipating the dark Other from the fantastic but rather emancipating the fantastic from Fantasy's structures of

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[97] Pollack, *A Walk through the Forest of Souls*, 24.
[98] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. Analouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.

whiteness.[99] Anzaldúa even sketches out a way to begin: "Decolonizing reality consists of unlearning consensual 'reality,'" using the imagination to "interrupt or suspend the conscious 'I' that reminds you of your history and your beliefs" (and therefore tie you the reality and behavior of the here and now), and then, most importantly: "*cultivate a pretend reality and act as though you're already in that pretend reality*." (emphasis mine)[100] I emphasis this last point because it coincides with the distinction I have previously used to distinguish the radical from the revolutionary fantastic as a matter of *making* belief.[101] Of further importance, Anzaldúa makes clear that the point at which the pretended reality becomes the real one is not the end of the process. The newly created world only exists temporarily, that now made belief simply becoming the seed reality of the next revolution.

In some versions of Nut and Thoth's story, Thoth gambles with the other gods *as* the moon, achieving the same ends. He is the god of magicians and a particular type of knowing encompassed as the visible side of the moon. Paired with Coyolxāuhqui, who Anzaldúa stages as the goddess of *chamanas* and *curanderas*, we can envision another way of knowing, more nearly a sensing, that signifies the disturbing absence/presence of that unknown that is the dark side of moon. Coyolxāuhqui's gamble ends differently than Nut and Thoth's, however. She leads her 400 siblings in open rebellion against her mother Coatlicue and the impending imperial regime her brother Huitzilopochtli is destined to inflict upon the world. She does not survive the attempt. The revolution fails and Coyolxāuhqui is dismembered, her body later cast down into the night.

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[99] Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, 29. The role Anzaldúa introduces as the *nepantlera* can easily be imagined within the archetypical regime of Fantasy as a new type of wizardry where, rather than guiding self and others in the banishment or execution of symbolic darkness, they insist on working with it toward a new world rather than nostalgic preservation of the present one.

[100] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, 44.

[101] I should note here that I am using belief here to indicate a choice made in relation to uncertainty as opposed to faith, which, in comparison, would indicate a lack of choice in relation to certainty.

For Anzaldúa she represents the violent fragmentation experienced when traveling between worlds, especially those states of *nepantla* experienced as part of being wounded. The goddess, who draws herself back together to become the moon, represents the successful healing that takes place on the other side, a reconstruction of self into something new. The Coyolxāuhqui imperative, Anzaldúa says, "is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing."[102] If we take Thoth to represent the intentional misreading of reality that opens doors to the impossible and Coyolxāuhqui as both the definitional failure of that impossible and the nevertheless meaningful transformations that result, then together we have a mythos of the revolutionary fantastic.

From Coyolxāuhqui we can also take the following as a lunar paradigm of the revolutionary fantastic: rewriting reality is a gamble and, like with any game of chance, you will inevitably *lose* far more often than you win. "To bring into being something that does not yet exist in the world, a sacrifice will be required."[103] In this somber declaration, Anzaldúa is, as in most things, correct. An emancipated Fantasy – towards which any revolutionary fantastic *must* aim – will not render the dark fantastic as racialized Other, but darkness cannot be extracted from the fantastic without destroying its revolutionary functionality, for from that primordial void crawls the chaos of all potential change. I began this chapter with that pleasurably euphoric fantastic that enchants us away from this world, but the fantastic is also the feral rapture that instructs us in the world's devastation. The dreadful helplessness of being lost in the woods. The madness of riverside reckonings. The yielding maw of lonely caves. The dark fantastic is what laps around the blood in the cut and that which permeates abandoned things. It is where the wild

[102] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, 20.
[103] *ibid.*, 97.

things are and is everything hypnotic in a flame. It is this darkness that the *nepantla* must traverse and through which the revolutionary fantastic functions. It is a fantastic *that costs*.

Anzaldúa reminds us that world making must be a collective practice. She conceives of this interdependent relationality as (*nos/otras*), a way of being "insider/outsider, internal/external exile" that blurs the boundaries between self and others, us and them. This "new tribalism" is a way of "working together to create new 'stories' of identity and culture, to envision diverse futures."[104] Combined with the explicit directive to decolonize reality and the Coyolxāuhqui imperative, this last pronouncement establishes a set of guiding principles that can help activate the revolutionary potential of the fantastic as a mode of art and social transformation. These principles inform the charters by which hearth keepers gather and guide the lamp lighters to their wandering. The stories they tell out of the wounds of their making reflect the vision of Coyolxāuhqui. Eyes of light in the darkness.

If there is anything left to say on the shape and spirit of the revolutionary fantastic as part of its introduction let it be the two essential elements in its evocation. The first is enough imagination to believe in other worlds. The second is the courage it takes to live them.

To Begin, Nevèrÿon

Samuel R. Delany exceeds the capacity of any casual classification. Like many of the thinkers summoned here, he could be described as both a writer and scholar of speculative fiction. But there is perhaps no other so fantastically chimeric and elusive in style and skill that they may wholly disintegrate the boundaries between fantasy and theory. Nowhere is this expertise on greater display than it is in Nevèrÿon. Nevèrÿon (pronounced Ne-VER-y-on) is explored across

[104] *ibid.*, 75, 79, 85.

a quartet of books made up of from a jumbled combination of short stories, novellas, appendices, and one full novel. It mirrors its author's resistance to easy classification (even Jameson notably admitted defeat).[105] Most basically, the series is a deconstruction of the "Sword & Sorcery" subgenre of Fantasy, attendant to all that subgenre's assertions regarding civilization, gender, desire, violence, history, etc., but its reach is far grander and mycelial, deftly making broad claims about the entwined formations of language, power, and subjectivity from highly specific vantage points related to its mytho-historical enstagement.

Threading its way through the entire set of narratives is an abolitionist revolution led by Gorgik, a Spartacus type remix of the barbarian hero conventional to Sword & Sorcery texts since the subgenre's ostensible founding through Robert E. Howard's Conan stories. The series circles this figure, literally beginning and ending with the same (but not quite) tale of his initial enslavement, but also chronicles an arc from the point of his capture as a child to the point at which he is a much older man, reflecting on his transition from revolutionary leader to an administrator of State. In alignment with Burling's requirement of radical Fantasy to have a collective protagonist, Gorgik consistently fades in and out of focus, only one perspective amidst a constantly shifting set of characters and narrative voices that make up an unruly assembly of scholars, thieves, aristocrats, mummers, merchants, warriors, wizards, laborers, and even the author himself.

I initially chose Nevèrÿon as a focus for this project because it features most, if not all, of the elements others have described as being consistent to radical Fantasy, while also recognizably implementing the revolutionary fantastic based on the parameters I have discussed

[105] Peep the back cover of any of the current Wesleyan editions.

thus far. It has the added benefit of literally being about revolution. However, as I proceeded my descent into the layers of Delany's textual machinery, I quickly became overwhelmed by an ever increasing sense of intricacy. I got lost in Nevèrÿon. But, by virtue of a sort of ecstatic madness (inspired by the books themselves or imminent deadlines, I couldn't say), I realized that Delany could be read as not just implementing a revolutionary fantastic to write Nevèrÿon, but that Nevèrÿon could be read as *narrative representing* the revolutionary fantastic's implementation. This should not have been as much of a revelation as it felt at the time. Nevèrÿon has been read in a number of ways, including by Delany himself, both as part of the original works themselves and in other, external essays. Kathleen Spencer, an early commentator, explains Nevèrÿon as a narrative Delany uses to model the process of constructing and interpreting cultural models.[106] Spencer observes that Delany succeeds in this modeling by consistently subverting readers' expectations of verisimilitude, pulling away from many conventional uses of fantastic, while simultaneously highlighting the very fantasticality of fiction itself – as well as engaging in Derridean concepts of reversal, supplementation, and dissemination as part of an overall effort to blur the borders separating literary criticism from its subject.[107] This explicit engagement with Derrida (and many, many others by count) ultimately yields a series of tales that *deconstruct themselves*. As a genre of narrative, Fantasy is especially well suited for this work because of its definitionally heavy reliance on the fantastic, which, at the level of literary function, emphasizes the unreality of language as merely the extrapolated signification of reality, that, being the only means of conceiving reality, ultimately emphasizes the very unreality of reality itself.

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[106] Kathleen L. Spencer, "Nevèrÿon Deconstructed: Samuel R. Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon* and the "Modular Calculus,"" in *Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany*, edited by James Sallis (Jackson: University Pres of Mississippi, 1996), 131.
[107] Spencer, "Nevèrÿon Deconstructed," 141-5 and 153-6.

To a lesser and greater degree, Delany comments on the two constitutive elements of Fantasy we have concentrated on thus far – magic and ahistoricism – as specifically apparent in Sword & Sorcery. He names his initial foray into Nevèrÿon "a Child's Garden of Semiotics," interpreting it as an exploration of the different ways a subject is constituted through their enmeshments in various systems of meaning and semiology remains the series' animus through the final book.[108] Compared with most other Fantasies, magic functions quite uniquely in these books, but, in that it is bound up in systems of meaning making, more nearly represents Gifford's previously discussed view of its impact on subjectivity and Anzaldúa's epistemologies of imagination.[109] In Delany's view, one of the things that makes Sword & Sorcery distinct as a subgenre is that it emphasizes the fragmented nature of societal transition; "it is precisely between the social fragments' grating edges that the sorcery will be found."[110] Keeping an Anzaldúan cosmology in mind, Delany indicates that magic happens within *nepantla.* The specific image of grating fragments should also call to mind DaSilva's formulation of radical magic as reactivation of sedimentary forces. Referencing Jemisin's *Broken Earth* books (in which the State is known as the Fulcrum), she writes: "The center of magical practice and the center of the possibility of historical change are one and the same."[111] As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, magic appears similarly in Nevèrÿon, erupting alongside historical hypocenters as another source of power to be contested over by various characters.

Nevèrÿon's ambiguously prehistoric past is more typical of the subgenre, an extreme extension of Fantasy's conventional dislocation out of recorded history and helpful in answering

[108] Samuel R. Delany, *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 357-8.
[109] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, 2-3.
[110] Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, 200.
[111] DaSilva, "Turning the Hinge," 100.

the question of why this fantastic temporality is such a defining aspect of the genre as a whole. The pseudo-nonfictional appendix in the first book reveals several potential translations of Nevèrÿon as "across never," "across when," "a distant once", "far never," and "far when."[112] All of which lend themselves to being understood as an impossibly distant time that already hasn't happened, a sense of pastness that I understand to be a type of fantastic. Delany's metafictional attachment of his books to a "real world" archeological discovery buoys his general conceit that history is to the past as language is to reality: a magic trick. By virtue of Nevèrÿon's intentional anachronism we are offered examination of technological innovations, philosophical developments, and social upheavals as historically disparate as the invention of writing and the emergence of market capitalism. It's a wonderful demonstration of Delany's subjunctivity concept, for, when these societal transitions are transposed from the genre of History to the genre of Fantasy, their aura of inevitability and immutability are dispelled and their fulcrum points, the critical junctures at which an *insistence on belief* was required, are made visible. The revolutionary applicability of this scrying should be clear. For what is a social construct like race, but something unreal granted the privileges of reality, all the latter's force and impact, through nothing more than an *insistence on belief*. Understood this way, whiteness is recognizable as an egregore, inspiring the revolutionary occultist's precept: "that which is birthed through sorcery can and must be killed by the same means."[113] Nevèrÿon exemplifies a refusal to disentangle the fantastic from the material of reality or myth from the machinery of ideology. It interrogates the processes of social organization and historical narrative for the spellcraft implicated in their installation. What it offers this theorization of the revolutionary fantastic is a representative

[112] Samuel R. Delany, *Tales of* Nevèrÿon (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 254.
[113] Areïon, *Warlike, Howling, Pure*, 81.

model of its instrumentalization for those insurgents willing to wield sorcery against the Damoclean sword of Empire.

2) Barbarian Pastness – The Fantasy of Wrecking History's Hole

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?

William Morris/*The Earthly Paradise*

They don't use the word "archives" here. The closest translation for archives is: "stretches." By which they mean stretches of time, but also stretches of space. And they don't just mean space as a place; they mean space as a practice: the way we make space in our own bodies.

Jordy Rosenberg/*Confessions of the Fox*

Yet the black (w)hole, which itself also lives in what one's eyes cannot meet or see, in that which you sense but never fully establish, alerts us to the possibility of play and rupture in projects of freedom – an invaluable realization and resource for queer-of-color lives and futures.

Carlos Ulises Decena/*Circuits of the Sacred*

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning/*Andrea del Sarto*

Glancing back toward Suvin's "ancient obscurantist enemy" we must recognize that there is something fundamentally disquieting about the fantastic and, once Thomas' dark fantastic has

been considered, it is no surprise that Suvin should go on to describe this enemy as black, for it is exactly that obscuring unknowability and raucous potentiality of darkness that has been cast as outside the well-lit walls of civilization and inscribed upon the flesh of those dispossessed in its construction. Jackson goes out of her way to ensure that the fantastic's introduction of "dark areas" and things "completely other and unseen" is not misconstrued as a "barbarism" or urging "a lapse into the pre-linguistic or pre-cultural," but rather should be understood as (quoting Bersani) "an authentically civilizing scepticism."[114] Suvin and Jackson's discomfort with Fantasy's general ahistoricism goes beyond Marxist critique here, revealing a fear of the primordial and atavistic. It is a fear of a past uncontained by history and all that could be chaotically crawling out there beyond the archive's sight or, worse perhaps, in the spaces between each trembling word of written record. In this chapter, I articulate pastness as a fantastic in and of itself and go on to consider its revolutionary uses. I use the Barbarian as the figural archetype of this fantastic pastness and consider Delany's characterizations of this figure as exemplary. The Barbarian is a figure used in both rhetoric and literature to represent ahistoricism, a being against history as opposed to being a part of it. The Barbarian is also often figured anachronistically, queerly racialized as outside and against time as it is normatively experienced. Rather than working to assimilate the Barbarian into the archive of racial uplift or straighten them out in alignment with the present timeline, I consider how Delany's Barbarian kinks these supposedly liberating impulses and propose a different way of navigating the queer black void produced in the wake of history's civilizing rupture, reimagining it as an opening to play, feel, and be-cum the revolutionary fantastic.

[114] Jackson, *Fantasy*, 176-9.

The Barbarian is a figure of desire, a desire to being – to be in history – borne by the very evacuation of being consequent of the category labeled civilization's creation and constant imposition. The wall built to separate the civilized and the barbaric inspires the desire to break through it to the inside as well as the desire to break out of it, the latter instilled in those imprisoned within the wall, who feel as though they have lost a whole host of experiences deemed to belong outside. History, the gate by which temporality is corralled, organizes the channels by which subjects might enter civilization or be expelled from it. The figure of the Barbarian is proleptic in its anticipation of civilization. We know, for we are taught to know, that the Barbarian means either death or assimilation. The Barbarian, in the first case, is the absence of civilization, destined to die so that the latter may flourish (yet never so thoroughly obliterated as to cease to threaten its existence). In the second case, which we could consider death by another name only barely hidden beneath its contemporary mask, the Barbarian is merely the *pre*-civilized, awaiting the salvation of Order and Continuity, which, we are told, is the only way to life. Either figuration, as we know them, assumes the imminence of civilization.[115]

One might question why then, if the Barbarian is such a disruptive, antagonistic figure, that he figures so readily in conservative fantasies. But, given due consideration, this phenomenon is not surprising. For who desires more to be a part in the maintenance of history than its architects? And who is most insecure about their position on one side of a boundary than those who guard it? The Barbarian is what gives the walls of civilization and gates of history their power, their *raison d'etre*. The celebrated refrain of contemporary conservatives, quoted from one of the post-apocalyptic novels of G. Michael Hopf, is indicative: "Hard times create

[115] Michael Moorcock highlights this trajectory of the Barbarian figure in *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*, (Austin: Monkey Brain, Inc., 2004), 83.

strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. And, weak men create hard times." "Strong men" is, of course, our Barbarian figure, indigenous to "hard" (read: barbaric) times. The fantasy of the post-apocalypse (or, we might add, the mythical Revolution commonly invoked in Leftist circles) is not, presumably, inspired from a lust for hardship, but rather indicative of the barbarous desire to be "free" from the overdetermining weight of history, the prison of so called civilization.[116] It is an anarchistic or libertine impulse responsive to the intuitive knowledge that we are collectively bound by a matrix of state, corporate, and social power, regardless of whatever ideologically driven assemblage is chosen to be scapegoated in response. In the conservative sublimation of this impulse, the Barbarian exhausts his uncivilized desires in the process of "creating good times," either sacrificing his life for the cause or assimilating into modern domesticity.

In Fantasy, the Barbian is most commonly found within the subgenre of Sword & Sorcery, where Robert E. Howard's Conan (the Barbarian) is still largely considered to be its progenitor.[117] Sword & Sorcery is exactly what it says on the tin and, taxonomically troubled only by so called Heroic or Epic Fantasy (if, indeed, there can be said to be any difference other than mere length) is what most people tend to think of *as* Fantasy.[118] You have some swords (signifying both a medievalism and a tendency toward action) and some sorcery (signifying a

[116] Carl Freedman references this utopian impulse when adding some Blochian nuance to his Marxist critique of Tolkienian Fantasy; See Carl Freedman, "A Note on Marxism and Fantasy," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 10, no. 4 (2002), 264.
[117] Other important texts in the elaboration of the Barbarian as a fantastic archetype would be Fritz Lieber's stories about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, as well as John Jakes' *Brak the Barbarian* series.
[118] Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James offer a helpful distinction between sword & sorcery fantasies and *quest* fantasies, remarking specifically on the length of the latter as being symptomatic of an arcing narrative structure built toward a clear end, rather than the episodic former. *A Short History of Fantasy* (Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2012), 119; Young, however, clearly demonstrates how interrelated they are (she uses the term "High" fantasy rather than "Heroic" or "Epic) in terms of the genre's assumed whiteness; Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 41.

healthy dose of the fantastic, often exoticized and/or feminized in some form). Important to the way I am framing Sword & Sorcery here is a factor in favor of distinguishing it from Heroic or Epic Fantasy: that the sword and sorcery of the subgenre's title index a binary constitutive of its form. In the dialogue between Michael Moorcock and Fritz Lieber that led to the subgenre's naming, Moorcock emphasized a fundamental conflict between the natural prowess of the protagonist and the super-natural power of the villains he fought.[119] The most explicitly fantastic in this case is Thomas' Dark Other that must be triumphed over by Hopf's "good men" in the barbaric ages preceding civilization. This triumph over darkness is the condition of possibility for those civilized "good times."

The Barbarian usually suffers the accusation of being quintessentially adolescent. The stories he normally features in are remarked on as being for boys or men who have "failed to launch," as it were. The time of the Barbarian is the "sowing your oats" era of normative masculine development or, on a different scale, the development of Western civilization. The "Hyperborean Age" of Howard's Conan stories is a fantastical pastness, one that, yes, never was, but, at the same time, definitely *was*, in that, if it could be, would *have been*; past tense. In other words, the Barbarian, at least in terms of Sword & Sorcery, is always *a priori*. An antecedent. A forgotten ancestor from equally forgotten age. Lost… in time and space. His post-apocalyptic cousin, your Thundarr or Mad Max, are figured similarly but, just as fundamentally, subsequent to civilization, lashed tightly to a particular mythic cycle: Hard times and strong men…

[119] John Clute and John Grant, Eds., The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (London: Orbit, April 1999), 927; Some readers might argue that Moorcock's own Elric series, commonly catalogued within the S&S genre, disturbs this definition, as the titular hero wields sorcerous powers of his own. To wit my reply: one – Moorcock's work should be considered as a distinct evolution of the subgenre (a new wave if you will) away from the definitional referent represented by Howard's Conan; two – the sorcery Elric wields is repetitively construed as degenerative, one of several such signifiers, the most iconic, of course, being his albinism.

The loss of the Barbarian, the loss of that mythic epoch he roamed, is painful. There is danger and strife to be sure, but encoded in the very fabric of reality is a simple equation: simple work for simple pleasure. But mostly it is a fantasy of agency, one that highlights its absence. This absence fuels the desire to be Barbarian. It is a desire for an open-ended pastness. If history is what hurts – a wound – then the past is the rupture it circumferences – a hole. One that paradoxically also surrounds it.[120] The Barbarian is figured as populating that hole. An exertion that, like most he is know for, ends exactly as we expect: an expulsion of fluid. As civilization's mirror image, however, this expulsion's yields are reversed. The Barbarian never has children, no matter how many of his adventures end in buxom company. No. He begets civilization, endlessly spilling its required seed: blood. Strong men and good times…

What if we fantasized differently? What if, instead of filling that sense of lost power with another tired phallic symbol, we made a fist and touched time, fucked with time, a little differently? What if we gave time such a good time history had a prolapse? Weakened the walls of civilization maintaining that dispossessing void until the boundaries of inside fell outside? Strong men and good times amiright? Coming … back to earth for a moment. Let's situate what I might be getting at here: a Barbarian configuration that, rather than serving as a prerequisite to contemporary civilization, falls out of history.

Delany carves this revolutionary fantastic into relief through his Nevèrÿon series, where the figure of the Barbarian resists easy categorization, operating, often simultaneously, on a literal, metaphorical, temporal, and metatextual level. Most often, the term "barbarian" is used to describe tribal foreigners from lands south of Nevèrÿon proper. Delany usually describes them

[120] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 17.

with stereotypically white characteristics, such as pale skin and blonde hair, but coyly resists the typical practice in Fantasy to replicate or expand on racial essentialism.[121] He makes it a point to note similarly phenotypic characters from different geographic locations that are not considered barbarians.[122] Those described as barbarians are also described as speaking a barbarian language, alluding to the term's origin in ancient Greek as a word used to denote foreigners as those that did not speak the language or simply denigrate those that didn't speak it very well. Delany, however, does not simply employ this ancient Greek utilization of the term whole cloth, as the series includes many direct references to other languages spoken in Nevèrÿon that are not classified as "barbarian." Delany even goes as far to comment specifically on the common understanding of the word's origin as being related to the way foreign languages sounded to the Greeks as repetitive nonsense, cheekily critiquing the theory's assertion of a speaker's subjective sense of superiority.[123] Ultimately, Delany inserts the barbarian as a specific category of Otherness that is foreign, tribal, and marginal, while also maintaining that such categories are subjective, constructed, and porous. The Barbarian signifies foreignness, a type of non-citizen, but does not include all foreigners and changes overtime. Barbarians are also closely associated with the institution of slavery and are generally assumed to be of an itinerant working class within Nevèrÿon, leading many scholars to interpret the books with respect to black slave narratives as a literary genre, but again Delany disallows the reification of any totalizing system of signification. Gorgik being neither a barbarian nor pale skinned, but still enslaved, is the predominant example. This allows us to encounter the Barbarian as a marginalized, outsider

[121] See Young for an excellent overview of this in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 1-63.
[122] The character of Wild Ini, for example, who we might logically assume comes from the group described, but hails from the far North; Delany, *Tales*, 5.
[123] Samuel R. Delany, *Neveryóna* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 287.

figure but, unlike many affirmingly identitarian narratives, does not reinforce these oppressive categorizations/identifications by inscribing them into the world as immutable, essential realities.

Delany thoroughly emphasizes the subjectively relational ascription of barbarity through encounters with the character Raven that unfold throughout the series. A masked warrior hailing from the inverted patriarchy of the Western Crevasse, Raven consistently has barbarianism imposed on her by men whom she makes insecure.[124] The process of this perceptual imposition is made explicit by one of the men she engages with in the series: "Her accent, he began to hear, was not the slurred elisions and apocopations that, as he moved further and further south, became the barbarian tongue. Apparently, he {a young smuggler} had been imposing barbaric expectations on an accent that, as he listened to it, began to distinguish itself on his ear."[125] Raven calls out this assumption later, when the young smuggler, having been rescued by the wandering warrior and her friends, criticizes their decision to avoid killing his would-be murderer. "Do you think that we are barbarians that we go around killing any man on the road we see? That's not how civilized women act," Raven says, deploying the oppositional binary civilized/barbaric to chide the young smuggler.[126] These two examples demonstrate Delany's understanding of the Barbarian as fundamentally figured as outside the walls of sociality, even as the specificities of any given society differ or, as is the case between Nevèrÿon and the Western Crevasse, are completely opposite. The structure of power organized through "civilization" – AND its necessary summoning of the Barbarian – is largely similar, regardless of the demographic responsible for manning the gates. It is important to note here as well that, while we can see that the label of barbarian escapes the literal, Delany is also careful to assert that such

[124] For example, see Delany, *Tales*, 181.
[125] Delany, *Flight,* 62-63.
[126] Delany, *Flight*, 90.

metaphorical figure is still bound to a locable material inscription. While Raven might appear to the Nevèrÿon everyman as Barbarian – her patriarchal womanhood categorically outside the bounds of and a threat to his civilization – it is in relation to a recognizable body (primarily geographic, secondarily phenotypic): the southerner.[127] It is in these ways – the barbarian as a specific person from a group in conflict with the expansion/stabilization of the speaker's group (civilization) and the barbarian as a type of person related, by varying degrees, to that aforementioned group by virtue of their lack of virtue, determined by the ways in which they fail to align with the organizational norms of the speaker's society that concretize its structures of power – that Delany sets the stage to deconstruct the Sword & Sorcery genre's figuration of the Barbarian and what allows us to use his work as a means of conceiving a sense of the past that is distinct from the strictly historical, a distinction with ramifications for how the entire genre of Fantasy may be understood.

Never Growing Up: The Barbarian as a Permanent Primitive

Pastness is the temporal vibe that animates Sword & Sorcery as part of the genre of Fantasy as a whole.[128] This allows for a generative environment where whatever happens in such fantastical visions of the past (that may have something to do with the present) doesn't filter through recognizable events.[129] It is a past without history, we might say, as well as a force and energy. It is the raw, gaping emptiness from which must be circumscribed the boundaries of ordered

[127] I use the seemingly paradoxical "patriarchal womanhood" here to suggest that, following Spencer, Raven is a mirrored image of patriarchy used to highlight and deconstruct that sexist system. Essentially, I do not think "matriarchy" is an accurate description of the inverted patriarchy Raven represents, as the former is an entirely different system, not a mirrored patriarchy; See Spencer, "Nevèrÿon Deconstructed," 149-51.
[128] As Brian Attebery says: "It is precisely because the Middle Ages are gone beyond recovery that they may be harnessed by the fantastic imagination." See "The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 4, no. 1 (13) (1991): 7–28.
[129] Samuel R. Delany, *Silent Interviews : On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics : A Collection of Written Interviews* (NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 47.

civilization. Its depths invite and exude a particular pressure – a known unknown – that both threatens and constitutes those walls that indicate civilization. The desire to plumb those depths, to plunge into that transitional frontier, represents, as Sontag is quoted as saying in *Nevèrÿona*'s initial epigraph, a "lust for an eccentric past {that} is colonialist, but also driven by sensitivity to modern suffering," an "attraction," she continues, that "is the very unknowability of the past, particularly a past that is non-white, and therefore even more unknowable."[130]

The Barbarian I have worked to configure here is bound up in queer and racialized notions of time, where the racially caricatured primitive is queerly temporalized in an aura of non locable *pastness*. Methods of queering time and a consideration of blackness' historical unrepresentability are fundamental to drawing this figure and recognizing its revolutionary potential. Queer time, which denaturalizes present social reality, easily hooks up with Fantasy, where the stability of reality is already being questioned and, with Thomas' conceptualization of the dark fantastic, we have already come to understand blackness as undergirding the fantastic's core functionality. The figure of the Barbarian leans into the denaturalization and disruption of normative reality, emphasizing the erotic, affective, and collectivizing potential of pastness and can be recovered as a refusal of the conservative impulse displayed in stereotypical Fantasy works that use this disruption of reality as a means of sublimating radical desires for something unimaginably different through the ritualized conquering of the fantastic and transcendentalizing liberal/rationalist thought forms.

In the preface to *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman remarks on the relationship between "queer time" and the genres of pastness that constitute much of what would eventually be

[130] Susan Sontag, "Approaching Artaud," *The New Yorker*, May 19, 1973 quoted in Delany, *Neveryóna*, ix.

categorized as pulp fiction – sea stories *à la* Treasure Island, the Western's frontier, and war stories in general, saying: "… these dreams may be dreams of an escape from history, but they also give access to an alternative history." She denotes these dreams as "moments of extreme bodily sensation," dependent on the penetration and death of the supposedly inviolable masculine form.[131] As a subgenre, Sword & Sorcery is a close cousin of Adventure stories, if not a subgenre itself. Robert Howard began his career authoring just such stories before adding Conan to his repertoire and the latter can easily be read as only existing a hairsbreadth farther along the line of historical to fantastical from the cowboys, pirates, and soldiers that made up his pulp hero brethren. Rather than giving access to an alternative history, however, the explicitly fantastic function of Sword & Sorcery allows for an alternative *to* history altogether. This pastness, as I call it, aids a different form of queer temporality than the "post-ness" Freeman speaks to. While similar in being "more than the infinite play of meaning," as well as a remobilization of archaic debris as "signs that things have been and could be otherwise," my naïve hope is that it can aim for *more*, not less, than the "total transformation of culture" in its relative unboundness from history proper.[132]

> "The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future."
>
> – Sadiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

[131] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xi.
[132] While texts and their authors inevitably enter a chronology through publication date, pastness and the fantastic in general are inherently transtemporal, existing across never; *ibid.*, xiv and xvi.

Writing on the limits of history in representing the pasts of enslaved black women, Sadiya Hartman remarks on the necessity of "critical fabulation" as a guiding method in imagining "what cannot be verified."[133] Because blackness is constituted as part of an essential Other, fundamentally outside civilization, and thus civilization's framework – History – those racialized by a paradigm of whiteness are, like the Barbarian, unreal, barred from subjectivity and rendered as merely objective words that figure them as already dead or dying in the chronicle of civilization's ongoing construction.[134] Hartman attempts to tell this "impossible story" and "amplify the impossibility of its telling" by rearranging the archive "to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened," but simultaneously emphasizes its inevitable failure, citing the incommensurability of such "insurgent" accounts within history as a governing discipline and the replication of that discipline's order of violence by further instrumentalizing these women as a useful "lesson for our future."[135] While Hartman's concept of critical fabulation accomplishes much, the state of the State's memories (the archives) are left merely disrupted, rather than effectively transformed. The barbaric Other depicted in the archives cannot be rescued. She can only be found outside History's memory - the temporal interval "between the no longer and the not yet" that Hartman describes as "the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom" – a Once and Future Jubilee.[136]

The fantastic's broader estranging function has the potential to exceed the limits Hartman notes in her remarks on critical fabulation, offering not just an alternative version of history, but

[133] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008),11-13.
[134] *ibid.*, 3, 9.
[135] *ibid.*, 11,13-14.
[136] *ibid.*, 14.

an alternative *to* history itself. Critically, this potential is only realizable if the Fantasy constructed from it avoids reinscribing the genre's "habits of Whiteness."[137] As Young demonstrates:

> Fantasy habitually constructs the Self through Whiteness and Otherness through an array of racist stereotypes, particularly but not exclusively those associated with Blackness. The Middle Ages are, anachronistically, considered White space in the popular imagination, and the realms of Gritty Fantasy – such as Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire and Bioware's Dragon Age franchise – which claim to represent the medieval period as it really was, reflect this. The imagined worlds are dominated by Whiteness, imagined as a (never-extant) pre-race utopia…[138]

Young's analysis aligns with my own on the ways a never-extant (or "neverwhen") pastness undergirds utopian imaginings. Crucially, Young points out how Fantasy's radical potential is often contained through a re-centering of white subjectivity. The "Once and Future" utopia of conservative Fantasy—like the myths of an indefatigable American South or Tolkien's Middle-earth—is structured around the habits of a (straight) white temporality.

Framing *Lord of the Rings* and *Conan the Barbarian* as the progenitors of this Eurocentric racial structuring, Young details their inherent white supremacy, philological renderings of race, and promotion of an ethnonational form of medievalism.[139] Against this backdrop, she cites Delany as a voice of disruption.[140] But Delany is responsible for more than just disrupting conservative Fantasy's insistence on a white supremacist fantastic. Nevèrÿon's

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[137] Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 11, 41, 46-47.
[138] *ibid.*, 11-12.
[139] *ibid.*, 15-35.
[140] *ibid.*, 11.

unflinching queerness also disrupts a variety of heteronormative assumptions often rearticulated through Fantasy. This positions Delany as moving slightly against the grain in terms of canonized African American literature, which often downplays queerness as threatening to "mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility."[141] In *Listening to the Archives*, Matt Richardson takes seriously Hartman's commendation of the role fiction (she points to Octavia Butler's *Kindred*) can play in slipping away from the constraints of the archive, citing a selection of intentionally anachronistic works of black lesbian fiction as key:

> The desire {for queers} to be recognized as part of Black memory is antithetical to the Black desire to be considered "civilized," and nonpathological (normative). One way to resolve this impasse is to represent the queer as normal as possible—as homonormative and transnormative. Another strategy is to remind Black people that Black culture and history are already imbued with queerness.[142]

Archives were not built to contain such reminders, however, for, even as the desire to become "civilized" is, in some ways, fulfilled in emulating History's process of remembrance, queerness itself is semiotically structured under the domain of the "primitive."

Like the Barbarian, the Homosexual is draped in a mantle of exotic archaicity. "The notion of homosexuality as 'archaic' emerges from the invention of modern sexual identity by sexological theories that borrowed not only their rhetoric but also their fundamental logic from scientific racism."[143] The texts that make up Richardson's alternate archive "insist on interfering

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[141] Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 4.
[142] *ibid.*, 6.
[143] Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), ix-x.

in the familiar heterosexual and normatively gendered story of the past, creating anachronism by centering queers who 'don't belong' in the historical narratives as they are currently known."[144] The Black Queer ancestor is an unimaginable figure in mainstream diasporic memory. That she does not exist is a fiction of domination, an effect of trauma that has made her illegible even in alternative archives. To speak of her, one must be creative and seize the means of archival production while pointing to her absence in written history and in memory. Black lesbian writing, then, is a practice of historical commentary, a trespass against demands of evidence, finding recourse and voice through the creation of imaginative counternarratives and embodied practices.[145]

Delany's Barbarian, read here as a figure of the revolutionary fantastic, is both queer and racialized, indexing the entwined queer and racial temporality that constructs the Barbarian as simultaneously Past and Other. Yet rather than simply seizing the means of archival production to point out the erasure of black queerness, Delany works to dismantle that means altogether, favoring instead an ahistorical fugitivity. Richardson claims to "underscore fiction and imagination's ability to assert *potential* into systems of knowledge" (emphasis original's), but his project limits that potential by reconstructing an archival system designed to mark and control the State's memory of its subjects.[146] (Who was, and when were they, considered barbarians rather than citizens?) In doing so, Richardson inadvertently reveals a means by which History's disciplinary violence might stretch into the realm of the imaginary. In her detailing of Fantasy's structural whiteness, Young notes the shared inspiration Tolkien and Howard drew from Tacitus and Anglo-Saxonism: both depict a "positive barbarian," who, when white, rejuvenates failing

[144] Richardson, *Black Memory*, 12-13.
[145] *ibid.*, 14.
[146] *ibid.*, 15.

civilizations precisely because of his proximity to the "negative" barbarianism projected onto racialized Others.[147] This figure – the White Barbarian – anticipates later formations of multiculturalism, wherein the controlled infusion of difference acts as an inoculation against the greater destabilization unchecked difference might provoke. Although Richardson positions his work as "cracking open the walls" of the institutional archive of black memory by emphasizing the irresolvability of blackness within a semiotic system founded on black nonhumanity, he underestimates the current moment's systems of power. These systems, marked by a strategic flexibility, have proven capable of absorbing and weaponizing blackness and queerness to extend their own longevity.[148] From this perspective, Richardson's subjects—who are, as he rightly notes, still Othered and barbarous—are nevertheless positioned to relinquish that Otherness as part of the progressive project of civilization's advancement.

What Hartman and Richardson make clear is that blackness and queerness resist being archived. This similarity is part of the analogous relationship shared between these two categories of difference. It is important to note, as Valerie Rohy does, that this relationship is a "discursive artifact." In other words, it is not a natural or self-evident one, but a rhetorical "engine of sameness" that "retroactively creates the similarities it purports to observe, defining race in terms of sexuality much as sexuality is defined by race."[149] Rohy recognizes the temporal dimension of this analogy as anachronism, a word inundated with synonyms you'll find scattered throughout this work – primitive, immature, atavistic, backwards, savage, uncivilized and, of course, *barbarian*. As pointed out throughout this project, blackness and queerness are representative of temporally aberrant forces, at times noted as "indeterminate," "irresolvable,"

[147] Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 22-23, 26.
[148] Richardson, *Black Memory*, 4-5.
[149] Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others*, 2-3.

"disjointed," or "impossible." In my formulation, the Barbarian registers these forces, at once existing outside civilization's historically organized boundaries as well as being constitutive of those boundaries (to have an inside you need an outside) and thereby takes on a cyclical eternality, existing both before and after the present. Rohy describes anachronism's relationship to "straight time" (akin to Freeman's "chrononormativity") in a similar way: "… the fantasy of straight time assailed by racial or sexual atavism actually produces the linear temporality that it takes as primary, the order that *has been disrupted*, that *will have been disrupted*, by a perverse backwardness."[150] "Time," Rohy remarks, is a trope and anachronism a figure."[151] That figure is the Barbarian.

What makes the Barbarian such a compelling figure to bear the mantle of anachronism is the way in which they literalize the anachronism's fundamental quality of impossibility. As Rohy remarks, "… anachronism has a contradictory ontology, structured by *the prohibition of the impossible*: it cannot exist, but it must also be prevented, punished, or expelled."[152] This makes the connection between anachronism and a rhetorically sutured blackness and queerness all the more apparent. If we understand blackness as pre-ontological and queerness as inexplicably horizonal, they are similarly impossible. This is why Hartman and Richardson are forced to turn to the fictional to even attempt to render black/queer subjects within archival history. Hartman, however, recognizes that this attempt, while generative, is ultimately just as impossible. Paradoxically, what enables Delany to successfully write about blackness and queerness is creating a world in which blackness and queerness do not exist. Rather than fictionalize impossible subjects in effort to register them within the archival history of our (the readers)

[150] *ibid.*, xv.
[151] *ibid.*, xiv.
[152] *ibid.*, xiv.

world, Delany constructs an impossible, where the impossibility of those subjects disappears, folded into the fantastical figure of the Barbarian. Importantly, this is not a move of historical counterfactualism. Nevèrÿon is not an alternative history where a question of "What if white people were treated by black people like black people are treated by white people?" is speculated on in order to, through the literary function of estrangement, prompt the reader to reexamine their perception of their own surroundings. This – pastness – is an alternative to history, where the reader is prompted to question their assumptions regarding reality itself.

The Barbarian in particular is an apt figure for this work because of the way pastness is usually contained as a constitutive element of straight time. "Get thee behind me Satan!" Jesus' famous rebuke of Peter's spiritual immaturity is exemplary of this containment. By positioning the Barbarian as always already past, he is safely neutered as a threat. Any potential threat can be similarly neutered regardless of ideological standpoint. Muslim immigrants being just as easily cast back into Hell's pit as rural conservatives. Responding to the question as to why a mutual acquaintance of ours no longer espoused Libertarian views, one of my partners quipped "they made friends." The insinuation, of course, being that, as they grew up, so did their beliefs. I mention this to demonstrate just how omnipresent this particular rhetoric of straight time is. It can just as easily be flipped to accommodate a conservative position, as demonstrated by the aphorism "If you're not a Democrat when you're young, you have no heart; if you're not a Republican when you're old, you have no brain." These rhetorical moves diminish the criticized subject by asserting that the latter's present state of mind is merely a point in time that, if the criticized subject is healthy and normal, they will inevitably grow past as part of their natural development. Nevèrÿon, like Conan's Hyperborea is prehistorical because the barbarian's role in history is similarly proleptic. Prehistory or, in my terms, pastness, functions fantastically, by

providing a temporal space for the realities of world and self to be invented and then consecrated by the State as knowledge. Rohy speaks to this function as it appears in Freud as recapitulation theory, whereby the healthy adult psyche forms itself through the declaration "Get thee behind me Child!" analogous to the healthy civilization that has declared "Get thee behind me Savage!"[153] Freud's primitive (the Barbarian) represents this prehistory in the present, but prehistory, being definitionally beyond writing, beyond, as it were, representation, is impossible. It (and the Barbarians that figure it) are fantastic. Ultimately, they are just semiotic opportunities.

The "primitive" (prehistorical) temporality of conservative Fantasy enables a certain fugitivity from the yoke that is History. But, in its whiteness and straightness, fails to do so, for it is through these structures that History re-encodes itself. Fantasizing the white, heterosexual Barbarian in the form of a civilization rejuvenating Cimmerian, Rohirrim, Anglo-Saxon, or Viking traps you in a compulsively repetitive dream cycle. Or, as Rohy says, "… an unconscious reenactment of the process through which white, heteronormative culture incessantly forgets and reenacts the trauma of its encounters with alterity."[154] The oxymoronic figure of the White Barbarian is an intentional forgetting, a perverse form of escapism where one utilizes as a means of escape the very thing producing what one wishes to be free of. It is the very expulsion of that which is black and queer from Eden that marks the end of Man's golden age. Such a utopia cannot be reforged by the unwitting emulation of that original sin.

It is no coincidence that Sword and Sorcery, like the pulp adventure tales Freeman refers to, is demeaned as childish, even by some of the genre's paragons. Michael Moorcock, for instance, remarks that, "Savages and naïve barbarians often substitute for actual children" and

[153] *ibid.*, 7-14.
[154] *ibid.*, 13.

are, "emotionally pre-pubescent."[155] Even L. Sprague de Camp, responsible for the revitalization and preservation of Conan as a character, framed Howard as "uncomfortable with love as the small boy who, viewing a Western, is loudly disgusted when the hero kisses the heroine instead of his horse," going on to quote a 1946 *New York Times* review of Howard's stories as projecting "the immature fantasy of a split mind and logically pave the way to schizophrenia."[156] Both Fantasy author/critics perpetuate the racially charged, queerphobic analogy of anachronism Rohy propounds. The Barbarian becomes a metaphor for, not only the racialized concept of the savage, but the regressive, sexually immature boy. Recalling Leslie Fiedler's classic work of American literary criticism – *Love and Death in the American Novel* – Rohy explains how anachronism structures Fiedler's thesis that an interracial homoeroticism wends its way through the 19th century American canon. Essentially, she argues that Fiedler relies on a specific fantasy of a prehistoric, barbaric pastness of undividuated sexuality (Death) that progresses into a civilized heterosexuality (Love), but, paradoxically ("good times create bad men), falls into a regressive, primitive homosexuality.[157]

The paradox suggests one way in which white heteronormativty is sustained by the temporal involutions it ascribes to others. It is not that the homo is "really" primary, supplanting the hetero, but that the very notion of the primary is a fantasy, fleshed out by the figures that best serve each narrative contingency. If queer boyishness only follows straight maturity by preceding it, this anachronism functions in the reverse: the wholesome adult heterosexuality that Fiedler views as de facto lost or compromised in American fiction is actually a retroactive projection

[155] Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, 85.
[156] L. Sprague De Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976),164 and fn 35, p 297.
[157] Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others*, 14-20.

from the "later" vantage point of infantile perversity." This "primary" functions fantastically as pastness. Pastness, which is never "real" in the empirical or historical sense since it precedes current structures of knowability, is the semiotic frontier the Barbarian roams, an infinitely pliable field indicative of primordial regression. In Fiedler's work "It is heterosexuality whose idyllic order must have been displaced by a fall into perversion – whether gothic morbidity or interracial homosexuality – and nostalgically invested with a longing possible only in the absence of its object."[158]

The lost Eden of a "Great America" is an idyll conjured by the slogan "Make America Great *Again*," every bit as fantastic a realm as Camelot or Numenor and similarly dreamed of as heteronormative white ethnostates destroyed by the incestuously queer Morgoth or black spirit of Sauron respectively. This attachment to a fantastic pastness earns these sloganeers the epithet of barbarianism themselves. The very use of the fantastic is demeaned as infantile. In the progressive liberal imaginary, pastness is only useful as it is being packed away along with all other childish things. Interracial homosexuality? This is the future Liberals want! The *reformed* barbarian is the signature of historical progress. The barbarian that, now grown up into a proper bourgeoisie subject of the consuming managerial class, can be entered into the archive. This is not the barbarian as omnipresent threat, which must be eradicated or expelled, but a disenchanted barbarian that, having foresworn allegiance to those rowdy old gods, may be properly assimilated into secular materialism. This reformation is the signal of progress and deterrent to any utopian projects in its emphasis that utopia is already in process in the present. Critically –

[158] *ibid.*, 19.

the mark of the Barbarian must remain, for *something of the fantastic must remain to be dispelled*.

As the fantastical representation of pastness, the Barbarian exists to be cast behind and thus demonstrate the forward momentum of progressive time. The danger, as is true with the fantastic more generally, is that the Barbarian is a means of accessing alternative times and places. A *Back* Then and There. As Rohy declares: "it is not just that time stops *for the other* but that the other – the 'primitive,' savage, or homosexual – wields the power to stop time for all the world."[159] The Barbarian, like all loci of desire, is *contagious*. What Delany imparts through Nevèrÿon is a challenge – Well… why not stop time for all the world? Rather than bow to that fear and attempt to enter history, what if we jumped into the gap? What if we played pretend or rather what if we *made belief*? Tripped the light fantastic and played the game of the impossible?

"There! There be dragons!": The Barbarian Across Never

While History, as a discipline, orders the past, pastness, as I use it here, signifies the far less concrete blurring of the here and now into a *Back Then and There*. It is ahistorical, aspecific, and anachronistic. Elements of the historical past all jumbled together. "There! There be dragons!" says Delany.[160] To appreciate the Barbarian is to appreciate his place outside the confines of civilization. To be outside such walls is to be beyond the temporal rhythm they arrange as well. In the wilderness, time does not exist. At least, not the type of time we are usually immersed in from within. This latter time can, according to the theorist Elizabeth Freeman, be understood as chrononormativity. Essentially, she argues that normal time, or, in other words, the predominant

[159] Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others*, x.
[160] Delany, *Silent Interviews*, 47.

experience of time, flows in alignment with the needs of capitalist production. In conceptualizing this "chrononormativity," Freeman notes how other temporal registers, such as the feminized domestic or leisure time and premodern time – both figured as eternal or timeless – constitute chrononormative time. They are what the chrononormative experience is compared to, or referenced against, in order to exist. Together, these notions (that the current, predominant experience of time assumes a prior temporality and that time is experienced differently depending on how in synch you are with society's standard experience of time) help illustrate a Barbarian temporality.

Carolyn Dinshaw articulates the "queer historical impulse" as one that seeks to make connections between what was "left out" in constructions of the past and what is left out in our constructions of the present.[161] Like Freeman's erotohistoriography, Dinshaw describes this impulse as both affective and embodying desire (queers "touching" history).[162] Further, she emphasizes the consequence of such impulse – the extension of useful resources for building queer subjectivity and community.[163] W. Andrew Shepard identifies a similar impulse away from linear, progressive notions of time in Afrospeculative works, one he credits the Akan people of Western Africa for calling *Sankofa*, literally meaning: to go back and get it.[164] Shepard sees this principle operating in two forms within afrospeculative works, the second of which he describes as: "reclaiming elements of the past which have been forgotten or overlooked." In regards to Nevèrÿon, we might remix this as *imagining* elements of the past which have been forgotten or

[161] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.
[162] *ibid.*, 2-3, 21.
[163] *ibid.*, 1, 12-14.
[164] W. Andrew Shephard, "'Temples for Tomorrow': African American Speculative Fiction and Historical Narrative," ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2019, 2-3.

overlooked, but still deployed to the same end of "constructing a 'usable past.'"[165] As Rosenberg and Rusert say in their article on the subject:

> Like the best of fantasy, *Nevèrÿon* convenes topographies that are both impossibly far and uncannily close. This spatiotemporal parallax is key to the genre and is made explicit in the notion of a "far when," denoting not a faraway land, or a long-ago time, but a unique reconfiguration of space-time itself. We are invited, that is, into the Sword & Sorcery chronotope… a cataract of *indeterminate* temporal expanse. In this, *Nevèrÿon* simply testifies to the central proposition of Sword & Sorcery: its world can never converge with our own, no matter how minutely we trace it, and even as it appears to correspond to "the" or "our" past. Its temporal distance is thus both absolute and proximate — or, we might say, a matter of figural cohabitation (emphasis mine).[166]

Like Rosenberg and Rusert, Dinshaw relies on indeterminacy as a key word. Queer history is not, she explains, indeterminant due to the opacity of the past, but because the *meaning* of "sex" is indeterminate across time.[167] Robert Fox picks up on this too. For Delany, he says, "the past is magical… as well as functional."[168] Because both the literary fantastic and history only exist through writing, both are completely subject to the semiotic determination of that act and can be compelled by the very indeterminacy that that magic operates through. When understood through a lens of power, the linguistic conjurations that are history and other fantastic things become a

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[165] Shepard, Temples, v, 3.
[166] Jordana Rosenberg and Britt Rusert, "Framing Finance: Rebellion, Dispossession, and the Geopolitics of Enclosure in Samuel Delany's *Nevèrÿon* Series," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 118 (2014): 64–91, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2349104, 76.
[167] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 11- 12.
[168] Robert Elliot Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 109.

type of light that "illuminates what is obscure."[169] "Here there be dragons!" becomes a means of assigning meaning to what is unknown *as well as assigning* the signifier of unknowability. As Fox points out, the inability or refusal of Europeans to properly "hold the light" up to African reality led to the assertion that Africa and its inhabitants were *essentially* unknowable.[170] Off the map (where dragons live) or outside civilization (where barbarians live).

The reputation History, as a discipline, and Fantasy, as a genre, have for being fundamentally conservative is not an indication of their limited functionality, but rather an indication of their tremendous power. Like all easily accessible and volatile technologies, the State and other hegemonic enterprises excessively police their use. History becomes foundational in ordering our collective experience of time, while Fantasy is often utilized to sublimate our collective experience of the fantastic. Contemporary concern over Fantasy's "realism" exemplifies the intersection of these impulses. Consider George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Martin strongly contrasts his work with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* primarily on the basis of "historical realism." In line with criticism of Tolkien's work as "atavistically utopian," Martin and his fans express a desire for Fantasy that more closely resembles the "real world."[171] Like Historical Fiction, this replicates the effect of "estrangement" Suvin overzealously delimits to Science Fiction, where the function of its respective historical and fantastic elements are meant to create a generative distance between the reader and the themes of the work in question relevant to the reader's world. Of course, a consequence of this framing is that it reinforces the idea that there exists an objectively real past for Martin to work off of (as well as an objectively

[169] *ibid.*, 110.
[170] *ibid.*, 110.
[171] Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 6-8; Also see Eric S. Rabkin, "Atavism and Utopia," *Alternative Futures* 1, no. 1 (1978): 71–82.

real present from which to be estranged). As Shiloh Carroll notes, "… it also implies that his narrative choices and character arcs are based not on his own viewpoint and understanding of history or humanity, but on an external, inevitable truth that validates his treatment of women, people of color, and those with non-normative sexualities."[172] We might also add to this list the notion that the poor and downtrodden are forever constrained to that role (minus the occasional meritocratic leap), that hegemonic power never ends, only shifts faces, and that it is impossible to be both predominantly kind and predominantly safe. Ironically, in his disdain for Tolkien's Victorian nostalgia for a romanticized medieval past, Martin expresses his own nostalgia for that era's obsessive objectivity, where the medieval past is a retrievable reality and humanity can be understood with universal narratives.

To be clear, Tolkien's work is not above criticism; it is excruciatingly limited in its resources for revolutionary ideation.[173] But, it is Martin's leveraging of that criticism to elevate his own work as "more realistic" that is at issue here. For, if anything, Martin's work is more conservative than Tolkien's. Rather than simply replicating the racism of colonial Liberalism or assumption of authoritarian power structures as mythopoeic universals, Martin laboriously details them and, stretching further than Tolkien, asserts them to be inevitable realities, both today and projected backwards historically. Granted, a key difference is that Tolkien idealizes these structures, whereas Martin ostensibly criticizes them in his lascivious depiction of their horrors. Martin's reach for "historical realism" is a way to contain the radical potential of the fantastic, utilizing History as way to discipline the provocative unknown of Fantasy's attachment

[172] Carroll, *Medievalism*, 19.
[173] Moorcock famously lambasted *The Lord of the Rings*' insouciant middle-class conservatism in his essay "Epic Pooh." See *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, 126-129; See also Jackson, *Fantasy,* 153-156 for similar accusations of repression.

to a fantastical pastness. The presence of dragons explodes the bounds of what is real and therefore what is possible. By subsuming those dragons (only ridable by those of Targaryen blood) into "historically realistic" power structures, any revolutionary (im)possibility they promise is curtailed. This is different than what Tolkien does, for Tolkien does not deploy a positivist historical objectivism in his work to dispel an arresting sense of pastness. Quite the opposite. While both Tolkien and Martin share a similar aesthetic medievalism (taverns and castles, ect.), Middle Earth is meant to be prehistoric. It is more similar, then, to Delany's Nevèrÿon, which, similarly, showcases an abundance of anachronistic medievalist bric-a-brac despite being situated as ancient.[174]

That the disdain for Tolkien's fantasy world should be described as "atavistic" should come as no surprise, for, despite the way its fans and own creator have burdened it in excessive, temporally binding lore, it is situated outside time. "Across never," as it were. Martin's Westeros, by contrast, fits neatly into a historically disciplined temporal order, clearly situated on a rung of "known" historical progress. Martin's medievalism thus falls into stereotypical "Barbaric Age" tropes, where the medieval ages are contrasted negatively with the present as a time of less evolved morals, governmental systems, gender politics, and sexual liberation.[175] "Barbarian" here registers proleptically. A necessary precursor to more "civilized" times. The frustration directed toward Tolkien then is not simply the naiveite of his fantasy of a "clean" past where Galadriel never has to violently dispel non-elves from Lothlorien to retain its ethnic purity, but that it is out of accepted temporal order. It is an unlocable past where the barbarians (orcs) are dispelled rather than assimilated. This, of course, means they are still out there, which was

[174] Carroll, *Medievalism*, 6.
[175] See Kevin L. Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) for his description of the "barbaric Age" referenced in Carroll, *Medievalism*, 20.

precisely Tolkien's most general point regarding Chaos and Evil. To remix: Evil creates good men. Good men create good times. Good times create evil men. And, evil men create evil times.

Rendering time according to this mythic cyclicity is predominantly denigrated as primitive and backwards by those beating the drum of liberal progressivism, for the latter requires barbarism to not simply be the outside, but pastness itself. In other words – always already behind. The "barbaric" South of the United States' "civilized" coastal imaginary is construed as not reaaaaally part of the United States, but actually outside it, a lost world of atavistic cultural ideology (this pops up as the "saw off Florida" and "Cascadian secession" fantasies routinely memed in liberal/progressive spaces). Nostalgia for a utopic golden age that never existed ("beyond never" one might say) is held up as evidence of this atavism. "Make America Great Again" is, like Tolkien's monarchial ethnonationalism, a deeply harmful fantasy, but, unlike Martin and other liberal/progressive leaders' subtle insistence that we already live in the best of all possible worlds ("just give that moral arc a few more years!"), it is a fantasy that – like, I argue, most literary Fantasy – engages a fantastic pastness rather than a mimetic history in pursuit of utopic futures.

Delany comments on this in *Nevèrÿona*, when Pryn, the novel's young, mountain girl protagonist, finds herself in the "barbaric South" of that world. The Earl Jue-Grutn (last of the "barbarian princes") and the enslaved population under his control are collectively regarded as atavistic relative to the capital, albeit by different dimensions. Southern barbarity is directly tied to its being a "world without history;" as Jue-Grutn explains: "… when the past is disorganized, the present is … well, as you see it: all barbaric splendor – and misery."[176] The disorganized

[176] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 315.

temporality – pastness – that Jue-Grutn refers to allows him and his family to cloak themselves – and their power – with the literal stuff of legend. It is an opening for the fantastic to flourish, enchanting the "more civilized" Northerners with an exotic splendor and ensorcelling the disempowered populace into accepting the misery of their condition. Jue-Grutn's power as a "magician" is basically semiotic manipulation. The "engine" of myth he maintains (despite doubting its efficacy and distancing himself from the "older breed" – read: atavistic – of true believers his father represented) through various legends of Southern power – Lord Aldamir, Queen Olin, the sunken city of Nevèrÿona, and the great dragon Gauine – was built to restore the Golden Age of the South, when it, rather than the North, was the center of power.[177] The functionality of these representatives of the fantastic is greased into greater operability by the malleability of a disorganized pastness, as opposed to the more rigid constraints of historical discipline, where they lose a great deal of their power due to the constraints of knowability.

The fantastical pastness of conservative mythmaking is considered barbarous by virtue of its cyclical and idealistic orientation to time. It is considered in contrast to the liberal positivist orientation of time, which is teleologically progressive. The narrative we could categorize as "the South will rise again" relies on a nowhen past whose unreality holds open a space of indefinite meaning making. The fantastic functionality of this mythic temporality resists discipline. It is beyond the reach of History, unrecoverably present in the past (illogically regardless of where along a linear timeline it is attached to) as having happened, as well as impossibly present in the future as *will* have happened. If Science Fiction is primarily speculative *extrapolation* (if we imagine x is true, then y *must* follow), Fantasy is speculative *desire* (we wish x *had been* true, so x could be true). It is a Once and Future time that disrupts the oppressive chrononormativity of

[177] *ibid.*, 309.

capitalist realism that overdetermines, Historically, that there is only one singular past: the one that led to now, a now that similarly restricts us to a singular future that must lead from that now. Pastness' fantastic temporality unchains the future from objective constraints, emphasizing the inherent unknowability of all times beyond the present moment and radically expanding the possibilities of the future.

"Anything" is supposedly possible in the future. Its unknowability is constructed in contrast to the presumed knowability of the past. However, the radical possibility of true unknowability (where impossibility does not exist since nothing is technically impossible when anything is possible) IS actually delimited by a linear/progressive notion of time where the past is knowable to some degree in its teleological relation to the assumedly definitive knowledge of the present, because that means only what can conceivably be related to what is supposedly known now is actually possible in the future. Thus "anything is possible in the future" becomes "anything that can be conceivably extrapolated from now is possible in the future." The future is not entirely unknowable when inextricably linked to a supposedly knowable present. Granted, true unknowability is inaccessible in any practical sense as simply contemplating the unknown inevitably occurs through a semiotic field of known meaning. However, the fantastic operates magically through the displacement and potential transformation of that meaning and, if unrestricted by linear model of time, can shift far more radically. This barbaric disregard for civilized ordering of time along a singular line pointing in a singular direction is a function of the fantastic. Its unruliness, of which cyclicity is only one form, liberates pastness even from being overdetermined as belonging behind, allowing for such forward and sideways pastnesses as Terry Brook's *Shannara Chronicles*, Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Sun*, Tasmyn Muir's *Locked Tomb* series or *Star Wars*. The *past*ness function of the fantastic has greater revolutionary potential than

any sort of futureness function because the past is the site of discipline for both conceptions of time, past and future. The future is already linked to radical possibility but, as noted above, the radical potential of that possibility is suppressed by a Historical construction of past knowability. Thus, only by destabilizing the temporal ordering and knowability of the past is the future actually transformed. The barbarian, a figure signifying the temporal transition from disorder to order, unknown to known, savage to civilized, functions as a liberator from the oppressive ordering of knowledge and civilization, despite being a means of constituting those same regimes by existing outside them.

From the perspective of the "civilized," the cyclical temporality of the conservative imaginary – what Mendlesohn might call restoration and Tolkien recovery – is "barbaric" in its insistence and celebration of transitional periods of disorder ("barbaric splendor and misery") as necessary to a healthy, "natural" order.[178] The desire to return to a "Barbaric Age" exemplified in Mad Max style apocalyptic fantasies or millenarian MAGA rhetoric focused on the "Big One," are contemporary forms of an old yearning for a savage frontier as a source of renewal. What separates this form of cyclical temporality from the seasonal temporality of many indigenous forms of cyclical temporalities (though both are still considered "primitive" from the "civilized" perspective) is the former's addition of moral ordering, where, rather than featuring morally neutral seasons of change, there is a good/bad, light/dark binary that elevates one age over the other. The inherent racism of this ideological matrix positions the radical conservative (assumed white) as desirous of disorder as a means to more savagely exert power over marginalized populations and any marginalized folks similarly desirous as naively ignorant to the ways in which they would be further exploited and more vulnerable to said power and violence. Racial

[178] Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, 3; Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 52-55.

hierarchy and its attendant violences are assumed, immutable truths, always extant, that are merely intensified or dulled as one slides their gaze back and forth along the linear scale of historical time.

At first glance, *Neveryóna* seems to replicate the "civilized" understanding of barbarism. Jue-Grutn's power in the barbarian South relies on a malleably mythic past, all glory and splendor, reinforced by the similar belief/attachment to that past found among the laboring and enslaved populace beneath him despite the violence and misery they endure as part of that fantastic vision. "I suspect it's a kind of madness: the madness that makes one repeat whatever one is trained to repeat."[179] This one of the Jue-Grutns says in reference to aforementioned oppressed laboring classes who, it is suggested, do not rebelliously seize the means of production because they do not properly remember the past. The petite bourgeoisie that employ these laborers do not properly remember the past either. Neither remember that it was Jue-Grutn's soldiers that fostered the conditions by which the means of production were installed and rebellion quelled. The laborers are conditioned to believe that the absence of Jue-Grutn's army (abject tyranny) and chains (abject slavery) mean they are free, while those still enslaved believe they are inextricably a part of the mystical fabric that is the South (abject subjectivity, ie non individual).[180] From a liberal or Marxist perspective (positivist and materialist respectively), the mystifying ambiguity of a fantastically barbaric pastness delimits the consciousness of the oppressed classes, preventing (on the liberal end) the enslaved from waking up to the freedom of an individual's ability to identify and choose their own destiny and (on the Marxist end) the working class from waking up to the liberation that is recognizing how one's individual identity

[179] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 314.
[180] See Delany, *Neveryóna*, 314 and 252-3; My reading of the laborers here is pretty directly pulled from Delany's text, compared to that of the enslaved, which is a bit more extrapolative.

and choices are determined by material conditions. The past must be disciplined, then, into the usable form that is History, freeing ("civilizing") the people from the dark, mystifying plane where the Barbarian lurks.

Delany critiques this knowledge that is historical organization as being just another magical operation in and of itself: disenchantment. The expulsion or eradication of the Barbarian and the disciplining of pastness are parts of the creation of a magical boundary meant to separate Faërie from the human world, unreal from real, unknown from known, infinite possibility (impossibility) from finite possibility, magical from mundane, backward from forward, outside from inside, dark from light, death from life, Other from self, ect. ect. So we've been told… and some choose to listen. But I know they're wrong… wait and see… These components of the spell called the Rainbow Connection (indicative of its own form of Once and Future temporality) are part of eternal mosaic speaking to the hubris present in all declarations of inviolability when speaking of boundaries, which really only exist to realize a crossing.

This magical boundary consigns revolutionary destruction-cum-transformation as permanently behind us. The mystifying realm of the Barbarian is permanently outside time. Quoting Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (who quotes Novalis), Delany uses the following as part of a chapter epigraph in *Neveryóna*: "… the succession of generations leaves the sphere of pure cyclic nature and becomes oriented to events, to the succession of powers. Irreversible time is now the time of those who rule, and dynasties are its first measure. Writing is its weapon. … 'Writings are the thoughts of the State; archives its memory.'"[181] History *is* writing. The disciplining of the past is accomplished through writing. The Barbarian, a figure of

[181] *ibid.*, 267.

sword *and* sorcery, undisciplined violence and undisciplined magic, becomes a fantastical, purely imaginary figure because, ultimately, he is nothing *but* words. The Barbarian is kept from writing. If he wrote he wouldn't be a barbarian would he? Legibility is determined by the State. The aforementioned epigraph continues on: "With writing there appears a consciousness which is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living: an *impersonal memory*, the memory of the administration of society" (italics Debord's). So, let's sort this out. The Barbarian is a figure representative of pastness. Pastness is the primordial unknown from which emerges the known by a process of writing called History. History is a knowledge that orders time. This temporal order straightens time out, delineating a clear before and now. Before becomes "pre-" and now becomes "civilization." Civilization is maintained by the State (those who rule). The State maintains civilization by determining what writing belongs to the now and what writing belongs to the before. The former is called History and the rest is thrown out as un-known, past, barbaric.

The question of disenchantment is less about whether magic is real or not and more about who gets to plot the boundary between the two. In *Neveryóna*, the imperial Court of Eagles distinguishes itself from the feudal Dragon Clan through History. They have it and the Jue-Grutns don't. Thus they are progressive and the Jue-Grutns aren't. They are civilized. The Jue-Grutns? Barbaric. The Eagle is real, recorded, written. The Dragon, meanwhile, becomes fantastic. Importantly, the families of rulers symbolized by the eagle and the dragon *are the same family*. While superficially engaged in conflict throughout the series, there is little, ontologically, to separate one from the other. The Eagle and Dragon are less comparative metaphors for a progressive, modernizing civilization and regressive, atavistic barbarism than they are, together, a metonymic shift in the representation of power. The declared transformation of Dragon into

Eagle is not the real magic, however, but a trick, the showy misdirection that obscures the real transformation that has occurred: the Dragon is no longer there. The assertion of the civilized/barbaric binary, enacted through the dramatic, on-stage costume change of Nevèrÿon's rulership, *makes the fantastic disappear.*

The magic box, the construct or threshold by which this disappearance is instrumentalized, is time. Real things go in. An incantation is delivered (History). And whatever it was disappears, transformed from known to unknown. Now, merely a myth. A fairy tale. Importantly, this does not mean destroying *belief* in the thing. The engine of the fantastic must keep running. Neveryóna, the utopian golden age city that is Avalon, Atlantis, New Jerusalem, ect., must still exist *somewhere*, just not *now*. In other words, it is somewhen, or as Delany describes it: across never. This space beyond time must be accessible only through dream or reverie. It must stay an impossibility. To actually try and *make belief*, to treat impossibility as possible, even as an experiment, a testing of the assumed boundaries between real and unreal in order to learn, for oneself, the definition of possible, is to become Barbarian, the figure made to signify atavism in boundless form, at once child, primitive, and idiot. Genuine engagement with the fantastic as it is most commonly found in the Fantasy genre (as a form of pastness) consequently kidnaps the participant beyond time as well, to be exiled outside civilization's temporal gates. Bad children willfully escaping the reality they don't like to go play at being king of the wild things. They'll come back when they're hungry… And they must come back. If they do not, they must be killed. Starved or poisoned. This latter tact is the one taken by the Jue-Grutns in their final estimation of Pryn, for the explicit fantastic of that barbarian South beyond the mists of time still imbues the imperial North with much of its power. This power is manifested, as all power must be, as a function of the fantastic. That there is ruler and ruled, that

there *must* be such a hierarchy, is a fantasy. That this fantasy of power has not been consigned to the past but merely changed shape is a secret that should not be exposed. To truly submit, as a matter of make believe, rather than simple rhetoric, that this president or that CEO is a king, to name a member of the Court of Eagles as member of the Dragon Clan, is to be un-civilized, diminished as a silly child, naïve primitive, or plain idiot. Tyranny is PAST. Democracy is NOW. Unless, of course, you are the ~~king~~ State. In which case, you can make believe that a president is a king, requiring, as all anachronisms do, to be put back in place. Namely, bombed back to the Stone Age or to Kingdom Come, across never, beyond time – where we are told they belong.

Relics become important in this arrangement, reminders – fetishes – of the past that pluck at the uncanny, ill remembered (obscured) connection between the royal and the bourgeoisie while reassuringly propounding upon a definitive distance. The unwavering fascination with Britain's crown family is an emblematic phenomenon, while carceral slavery works much the same from the angle of the laboring, disproportionately racialized classes, a threatening reminder of a relationship between ruler and ruled, but one, again, (supposedly) a relic of the ancient past. Emulating the boundaries between the real and the fantastic, civilized and barbarian, also becomes important. Delany showcases this in *Neveryóna* through the increasingly instability of barbarianism as a separating line, where characters in the text are consistently shown to be anxiously determining if they are slipping outside civilization's borders, often aggressively establishing those borders against those they have power over. Much of the traditional Marxist critique of Fantasy stems from the assumption that the pastness' fantastic functionality is indeed contained to dream, inevitably sublimatory, and that mythic engines like the Jue-Grutn's are entirely secured by the ruling class. A radical fantastic only becomes possible as a speculative extension of historical materialist critique (as in Suvin's estranging science fiction) or as a means

to destabilize the essentialization of meaning through metonymic displacement (Jackson). This disposition towards the fantastic, while available to radical movement, limits revolution to exactly that metonymic displacement of power exemplified in the bourgeoise and nationalist "revolutions" of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries that, ultimately, preserve basic structures of rulership through the State. Revolutionary movements only succeed in remasking power if they do not recognize that it is the concept of authority itself is destroyed/transformed. While theoretically Marxist revolution promises a collapse of hierarchical rulership through the dictatorship of the proletariat, in effect the limited imaginary of the radical fantastic serves only to reinscribe statist structures of power, preserving, for one, its monopoly on the real.

At the end of *Neveryóna*, Pryn, having successfully escaped the Jue-Grutns' attempt to poison her, vandalizes several systems of repression. These include falsifying written records to obscure local labor's "time theft," emancipating Bruka (an enslaved woman), and affirming Bruka's belief in a magic creature ruling Nevèrÿon but telling her that it's a vulture rather than an eagle. As Fox states: "… the appropriation of writing by the forces of the imagination becomes commensurately more significant and by definition political, for writing is then either a critique (explicit or implicit) of the State or an alternative to it through the creation of fictional worlds."[182] Rather than attempting to claim the monopoly on the real by capturing State power and entering the timeline of succession, Pryn recognizes her power to manipulate the real as autonomous from State dominion. Importantly, Pryn recognizes that power as *manifestable revolutionary practice*. This is not the solipsistic independence of the neoliberal imaginary, where individual reality is safely contained by the insipid call to mindful nonjudgement that effectively locks away any meaningful fantastic behind the inviolable boundaries of self (MY

[182] Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers*, 110.

magic, MY lore, MY journey, MY opinion; we agree to disagree), but a form of reality shaping that transverses individual consciousness and becomes collective solidarity. The power of language and writing in comparison to simple thought is that the former two reverberate beyond the self. The fantastic, it could be said, requires a boundary to cross if meaning is to be affected and any revolutionary force is lost when it is constrained to a playground sandbox, the boundaries of which align to those of capitalist realism. Fox's "forces of the imagination," when sat next to Debord's writing as State consciousness, indicates a barbarian transversal of the boundary between real and unreal, Historical and pastness. When freeing Bruka, Pryn cites the mythic cycle Jue-Grutn uses to maintain power. Invoking Queen Olin's *madness* as part of her spontaneous acts of revolutionary insurgency demonstrates an embrace of a fantastic barbarism as part of her assault on the structures of State power from outside the real, the historical, and the civilized. Where Earl Jue-Grutn once expressed relief in the assumption that Pryn, in her anxiousness to know how his fantastic engine *worked*, was interested in its operation from a standpoint within the semiotic system of liberal order, Pryn, in her recuperative engagement with the mythic cycle of Queen Olin, realizes the Earl's fear of her operating within a different (Barbarian) semiotic system, structured by a different sense of time, which here I name pastness.

The barbaric embrace of this Once and Future somewhen, while offering access to the fantastic functionality the modern State seeks to reserve for itself, is not revolutionary in itself. The Barbaric calls for the South to rise again—a transtemporal return to a fantastical (open-ended) Confederacy or Neveryóna—while radical in their desire to restore the world to a state outside the contemporary boundaries of the capitalist real, do not transform power structures. Instead, they seek to eternalize rulership in a static cycle of renewal. When Pryn frees Bruka, Bruka reveals that she had long ago unlocked the iron collar around her neck that signified her

enslavement. It was not the collar itself that enslaved her, but her misrecognition of her own authority to manipulate it. She had removed it privately, because the collar was uncomfortable to sleep in, but did not extend that act beyond the personal to renegotiate herself socially—an allegory for the neoliberal privatization of fantastic authority, made safe within the boundaries of State reality. Bruka's mythological reimagining of the Eagle that symbolizes the Northern state—made possible by her Barbarian disruption of the empirical real—creates space for Pryn to intervene fantastically. Pryn reworks the Eagle's meaning, shifting it from a symbol of liberation to one of scavenging, though the effect of this shift on Bruka remains ambiguous. This past authority over the access, manipulation, and manifestation of the fantastic—such as the historical black reinscription of Exodus' mythological pastness—is a powerful assault on the State's presumed right to organize time and possibility according to its own impersonal consciousness. Yet it does not automatically lead to revolutionary ends. It is the means that matters. If Pryn forced Bruka's world into alignment with hers, it would merely reproduce the State's authority to colonize and occupy all reality.

The utopic fantasy of cyclical time is one of a utopia that already was, that must be returned to through a necessary barbaric darkness that reminds us, through an enforced yearning, of the goodness of that perfect day. It is a static cycle, repetitious rather than revolutionary. The utopic fantasy of progressive, linear time is one that already is, for the barbaric darkness is always past, already conquered. All the pieces for a perfect world already exist and the end of history is so close as to be palpable, either through the final extermination of all final traces of those barbaric relics suspicious of global capitalism or by replacing the mask of the State one last time with the face of the proletariat. Rather than simply transmute the ancient iron of a collar into the modern iron of a wage or gild it gold with the magic of myth, the fantastic revolutionary

transforms, not just the collar, but the system of meaning that informs it. Across never, Outside the city of civilized time, there is no end but an eternal becoming. This eternal becoming, however, is not dictated by diurnal moral truth, where one becomes good by virtue of dawn's promise. The revolutionary fantastic of the Barbarian lays siege against the boundaries of reality, turning towards an impossible past to get to an impossible future, never reaching either, a renewal, not of utopia, but utopia's meaning. Outside civilization's boundaries, the collar is freed from the organization of History. Its meaning becomes unstuck. It is not a signifier of slavery (relic of the past) or a signifier of sexual perversion (construed as an unhealthy attachment to the past), as in the modern city, but an ongoing negotiation of meaning. It is not wholly unattached from the city's semiotic system, but rather than a metonymic displacement of meaning from one form to another, meaning is transformed through a rearrangement of the semiotic system itself, creating a link where one did not exist, expanding the possibility of meaning. The collar, when worn by the Barbarian becomes its own semiotic circuit, unbound by a linear progression of meaning and, importantly, is able to be taken on and off, used as a disguise, stage prop, or accessory as the Barbarian crosses, naively or not, through multiple systems of meaning, while also being imbued with meaning by the specific Barbarian collective, clan, or cult that surround it. As Freeman writes: "These artists see any sign as an amalgam of the incommensurate: of dominant uses in the present, of obsolete meanings sensible only as a kind of radiation from the past, of new potential, and, more simply, of different points in time as meanings accrue and are shed."[183] The inherent fugitivity of the Barbarian comes from this existence outside civilization's system of meaning. He is impossible to know as he is impossibility and unknowingness itself. The Barbarian uses the mystifying essentialization dictated by rulership to his own advantage.

[183] Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvii.

Whatever assumptions of meaning made by the city may affect him but do not necessarily govern him. The savvy Barbarian, if aware of civilization's system of meaning, can thereby remain fugitive from the State, recognizing the collar as a prop. The power of pastness is the meanings it makes available.

Fisting History: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Anal Stage

This section comes from my own bit of play. When reading up on theories of queer history and temporality in preparation for this project, I would consistently misread prolepses as prolapses. Out of this consistent slippage came the question – what would it mean to prolapse history? Prolapse is essentially the falling out of a body part, most commonly associated with excessive anal fist play within gay male culture. Freeman briefly links fisting to Dinshaw's queer "touch across time" temporality, offering up the fist as a reverse image of Freud's toothache (what she calls, "hurt that histories").[184] The gaping, painful orifice of the past that must be filled to be healed (whole) becomes, instead, an inviting, pleasurable opening to, yes, be similarly filled, but by an appendage capacious in its capacity to hold, receive, and be touched and held in return. In this way fisting can be understood as a metaphor for a revolutionary engagement with the past that embraces the dark fantastic of the Barbarian figure as generative rather than problematic.

Gorgik, the revolutionary abolitionist that fades in and out of narrative focus across Delany's Nevèrÿon books, appears as your typical Sword & Sorcery hero. He's brawny, unrepentant, naked, and sexually motivated. The covers for the original books (though

[184] *ibid.*, 12, 114.

unpleasantly whitewashed) feature all the standard signifiers of the Barbarian: wild and chiseled, clad only in a loincloth, sword in hand. The cover for the second book, *Neveryóna*, is perhaps the most indicative of the series, emphasizing the kinky eroticism barely submerged as subtext in the classic iconography of the figure. Here Gorgik stands facing the churning waters of the sea, more svelte, perhaps, than we might expect. He holds a formidable cutlass in one hand. Again, slenderer than we might expect when thinking of the gargantuan broadsword or great axe commonly associated with Conan and company. A smaller more intimate dagger thrust into his belt rests gently, portentously, on his exposed butt cheeks, the chain mail thong not leaving much to the imagination. And of course, he wears a metal collar, representative of his role as the Liberator, a key figure in the ongoing slave revolt that takes place across the entire series, as well as his explicit kinkiness, inextricably tied up with the revolution he leads. It is by way of this cheeky subversion of S&S – accomplished through the condensation of its S&M elements - that Delany allows us to conceive of a Barbarian figure distinct from the conservative wet dream that is Robert Howard's Conan. As I have already said, the Barbarian is, ultimately a desire, specifically a temporal one. But in Gorgik, we find a figure that disrupts history rather than confirms it, embraces the fantastic instead of slaying it. Rather than filling the past by fixing history, Delany fulfills our desire for pastness by reaching in and turning it inside out.

Delany engages us in this scene leaning on two significant strands of pastness: slavery and the AIDS epidemic. This should not be hard to conceptualize for the contemporary reader. Trauma is the byword of self-explanation. The pain endured in our past is fixed into a narrative (a History) that constructs our present, our way of being, acting in the here and now. Much therapeutic practice (or whatever passes for it on TikTok and consequent discourse) emphasizes the redeployment of this pain as part of new master narrative of the self. This is called healing.

Your unhelpful clinginess in relationships is because of how your parents showed you love as a child. You are named "Anxious Attached." This creation of a History and identity then allows you to excuse your less than desirable actions, perhaps forgive yourself, and hopefully – hopefully! – plot different ways of acting in the future. On a collective scale, history may operate in the same way. Benjamin's famous Angel of History, caught by the winds of progress, is propelled ever forward, but is permanently caught in the act of looking backwards at the endless horrors produced in the wake of time's raging course. The corrective offered in traditionalist Marxist theory is a consciousness of these horrors, the understanding of collective trauma. By which, we can at the very least explain what is happening now, but hopefully – hopefully! – plot a better course for the future.

Freeman offers a slightly different formulation that she calls *erotohistoriography*. This method of engaging the past "does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid," further, "it uses the body as a tool to effect figure, or perform that encounter."[185] Freeman offers this erotic relation to history as one that sutures "contemporary affective theory… to the model of jouissance…" essentially describing a particular way of communing with the past that is embodied, self-dissolving, and unknowable.[186] Erotohistorigraphy ultimately works as a "mode of reparative criticism" that acknowledges how a queer sense of pastness opens a way to being "haunted by bliss" (rather than just trauma) useful in working against the manufactured deprivations of our current age.[187] In the final chapter of her book, she specifically outlines how the temporal disruptions of BDSM offer a different form of engagement or encounter with the trauma of the past. Specifically, she

[185] *ibid.*, 95.
[186] *ibid.*, 104.
[187] *ibid.*, 120.

explains the potential of sadomasochistic sex as an instrument of erotohistoriography, one that disrupts and denaturalizes participants' sense of time by blurring the temporal distinctions between modern and premodern ways of being in a way that refuses "capitalist imperatives," particularly as they relate to racialized slavery.[188]

How Delany includes scenes of BDSM in the Nevèrÿon series has been discussed by a number of different scholars of his work, though only substantively by two. Lewis Call argues these scenes represent a "kinky poststructuralist anarchism," the freedom it manifests "defined here as the power to create context, the right to signify freely."[189] Contrasting Arlene Kiezer's reading of Gorgik's kinkiness as being a method of processing the trauma of his enslavement (where his alleged abandonment of the practice is interpreted as an indicator of his return to wholeness), Call (who recognizes that it is not Gorgik's campaign against slavery that disturbs hegemonic powers as much as it is his magical intervention on the plane of the sign) claims that Delany's articulation of BDSM in Nevèrÿona deconstructs the liberal symbolic order of consent to power as something "deeply embodied without fixed or stable identities."[190] What is largely left to the side in both Freeman's theorization (which focuses more on the medium of film and painting) and most of the scholars cited above, is the way in which the fantastic, a revolutionary fantastic, contributes to the wrecking of history's hole.

It is this fascination with holes, the desire to hold and be held by them, that I wish to examine here. This fascination indicates a particular attachment to the anachronism so closely associated with blackness, queerness, and their fantastical figuration – the Barbarian. If we

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[188] *ibid.*, 138.
[189] Lewis Call, "Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany," in *Anarchism and Sexuality : Ethics, Relationships and Power* edited by, J. Heckert and R. Cleminson (London: Routledge, 2011), 148.
[190] Call, "Structures of Desire," 135 and 148.

consider pastness the lacuna of history, its holes, or, more accurately, the obverse – the vast void of unknowingness to which history illuminates as pinpricking stars do the ever-expanding emptiness of space – we can read the Barbarian, as Delany does, recuperatively. In this expanse of the past, Delany's Barbian is not an explorer, blinkered by the belief that something lies at desire's end, but a wanderer who recognizes desire itself as a manifestation of some unknowable thing. Not all wanderers are lost, Tolkien reminds us. To which we might reply – yes, but some are. And they want to be.

"Holes are full of potential. We can only imagine what was in them before they were emptied out, why they became nothing instead of something… Holes leave space for projecting both forwards and backwards in time."[191] History, the institutional memory that forms the boundaries of civilization, constitutes a great many holes, each one indicative of the more whole hole that constitutes history. History, the known, emerges from the past, the unknown, but never sufficiently fills in the whole of the past. It is full of holes that leakily indicate this greater unknowingness, channels through and into history's borders to insulate those civilizations nestled within. The Barbarian is the figure that represents this absence brimming with potential. They are the child, perceived at once as anachronistic excess and a future not yet full/filled. They are that regressive queer stuck at the anal stage of development, ambivalently seeking to both retain and expel. The blackness that must be articulated as nothing for fear that it is some/Thing. The Barbarian is both out there (all around us) and in here (repressed within us).

Visual artist William Pope.L circles around the paradoxical, multidimensional qualities of holes in his small art book *Hole Theory*. Here, much like Richardson, he identifies his own

[191] Kim Biel, "In Pursuit of the Hole," *Aeon*, https://aeon.co/essays/the-history-of-holes-tells-a-story-of-power-and-potential.

blackness with the blackness of the hole: "I do not picture the hole/I am the hole."[192] However, rather than attempting to fill this hole (we might say wound when speaking of the archive), Pope.L suggests that it in in fact within the realm of the hole that one best navigates it:

I have a suspicion

That picturing the hole

Would make my work *(less lonely)*

+ More aesthetically pleasing. *(maybe not)*

another suspicion,

Equal to the first

Closer to my gut:

The bigger pleasure

Is not before the nose

It is *inside* plain sight.

The successful negotiation

Of holes (or should I say hole?)

Is dependent on maintaining

A healthy respect

For what cannot be seen.

[192] Pope.L, "Hole Theory: Parts: Four & Five," in Maine College of Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, and Mark Bessire, *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 78.

A Voodoo of nothingness. (italics represent author's handwritten annotations)[193]

Despite recognizing that rendering the hole (also himself) visible would allow for greater assimilation into society, Pope.L recommends invisibility instead, going as far to say that this ocular fugitivity is, in fact, the more pleasurable pathworking. A final reference to Voodoo attached to this disappearance emphasizes the holiness of this void and complicates the earlier mention of loneliness. Voodoo specifically being a form of ancestor worship. "The magic," the pastry chain Voodoo Donuts crassly reminds us, "is in the hole."

In a different stanza, Pope.L writes:

De Leeuw did not see himself
As a collaborator in his seeing.
He thought he was by
Himself in his seeing.

(Seeing as a prison of individualism where how one sees creates a moat around one.)[194]

The De Leeuw mentioned here was one of Pope.L's art teachers, whose theory of holes centered on his own subjective and highly visible creation of them through a process of splattering black paint on everything. Pope.L's response is that this highly individualized rendering of the hole depends on that Enlightenment divinity known as Genius, which isolates the individual from the whole of the hole. If we imagine this in terms of time, De Leeuw becomes the Enlightened Genius of Western thought, splattering blackness (pastness) halfhazardly about as an act of creation, rendering the picture of civilization through the arrangement of this blackness

[193] *ibid.*, 79.
[194] *ibid.*, 78.

(Barbarianism), making something out of nothings in such a fashion as to demand a border or frame (History) around said creation that separates inside from the outside. It is the discipline of History, the memory of the State, that renders civilization as visible. It is the moat that imprisons the viewer and mystifies the source of his creation as within himself, paradoxically obscuring his own collaboration in building the moat as he immediately takes ownership of it. In truth, this barrier that is objective sight is not simply the frame or container that elevates his messy declarations of blackness to the site of creation, but the *actual site of the creation itself*. For it is the frame that separates the empty nothingness of the canvas from the empty nothingness of its surroundings and in its placement, transmutes black somethingness into holes of nothingness. Similarly, it is archival History that frames the White canvas of civilization, visible as something only due to that frame which transmutes black markings into holes of nothingness.

At this point, we find ourselves once again confronted with the burdensome trope that closely associates history with woundedness, where the terrifying unknowability of the past is rendered as a hole that *must be filled* in pursuit of wholeness. But wholeness, we must understand, only comes into being by virtue of the holes poked into it. The structure of history is a honeycomb of memory: there is no remembering without forgetting.[195] Freeman, shifts us away from being horrified by the recognition of the loss embedded in remembering towards erotic fascination. Pope.L says that hole theory, "could only come from someone/ Who lacks something/ As a political condition."[196] When analogized as anachronistic, queerness and blackness become the animating forces of the holes that constitute reality, the holy spirits of wholeness.

[195] Carol Jacobs, "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust," *MLN* 86, no. 6 (1971): 910–32, doi:10.2307/2907451.
[196] Pope.L, "Hole Theory," 83.

There is a temptation to heal these wounds – fill the holes – by inserting ourselves into the past. This could be what we call fucking history. Certainly, this does feel good and is worth doing simply for that fact alone. But, as gleaned through Hartman, this fucking around with history is ultimately limited. It does not do away with the fundamental lack of a hole recognized as a wound. This is not to say there is no value in an approach like Richardson's. There is pleasurable subversion in imagining ways of penetrating the past that disregard the institutional rules governing reality. The power of an archival strap on, as it were, is undeniable. But, turning to Pope.L again: "I could insist that the foundation/Of Hole Theory is the imagination./Again using the no-hole example./But I do not believe this./The foundation of Hole Theory/Is social action."[197] What I take from this in terms of the project at hand, is that it is simply not enough to ONLY fuck around with history. This – as Freeman observes – phallo centric approach is centered on the hole as woeful lack. The nothingness that is pastness fosters the desire to fill it with something. This need to insert History into the past, is a heteronormative approach to desire itself, where desire is something to be mastered, controlled, known, ful-FILLED. Pope.L again: "What I mean by having/Something is the fantasy/That having is possessing {and}/That possessing is knowing."[198] To "have" the past, in the erotic, desiring sense, is to know the past. To, in other words, do History. This doing is an action, but not a social one in the context I have created here. Neither is merely – imagining – an alternative action that is more social – an attempt to heal the wound. No, what Pope.L prescribes is an act of what Anzaldúa would call *nepantla*: "{I am interested in holes because I have been wounded by absence. Marked by this trauma, I have a choice: either be ruled by circumstance or BE circumstance and tap the energy

[197] *ibid.*, 84.
[198] *ibid.*, 83.

of predicament, make it my pet, my posey, my theory – no remorsey.}"[199] Similarly, we can either be ruled by the woundings of History or we can become those wounds. Imagining a less painful historical fantasy is still imagining pain. Instead, we can declare with PopeL., "LACK IS WHERE IT'S AT" and reach into the gap, the "conduit, the 'means to,' the space, the intersection, the occasion, the opportunity" that is the past.[200] We can, in other words, become Barbarian. We can fist history.

In Peter Rehberg's short piece calling for a theory of fisting, he states the need to move beyond the antisocial emphasis on death Bersani attached to the hole in the latter's infamous essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?." [201] In it he offers a range of potential descriptors – "destructive (as opposed to rhythmic), line of flight, disorientation, unreason, unintelligibility" – in tune with some of the ways Freeman articulates the queer temporal tempo of other kinky practices. Key here is the negation of the phallus, which, like Freeman's sticky fingers, moves the emphasis away from the merely penetrative, towards a "hugging" or "caressing" "from the inside."[202] Jarred Martin takes up Rehberg's call in a flurry of articles theorizing a variety of different avenues for thinking through fisting.[203] Throughout this work, Martin leans on this concept of a negated phallocentrism that allows for a type of "counter sexuality" that deconstructs the notion

[199] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark,* 87-91; Pope.L, "Hole Theory," 83.
[200] Pope.L, "Hole Theory," 80 and 84.
[201] Peter Rehberg, "Fisting," *Differences* 34, no. 1 (2023), 123.
[202] *ibid.*, 124.
[203] Jarred H. Martin, "Fisting Intimacy: The Sexual Scripting of Intimacy in Gay Men's Anal Fisting," *Psychology and Sexuality* 14, no. 2 (2023): 416–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2022.2148119; Jarred H. Martin, "No Cock Needed: Exploring the Hapto-Erotic Assemblage of Fist-Play in Gay Men's Anal Fisting," *Journal of Homosexuality* 71, no. 13 (2024): 2974–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2275299; Jarred H. Martin, "A Queer(Er) Temporality: A Posthumanist Analysis of the Performative Agencies of Time with/in Gay Men's Anal Fisting," *Sexualities* 25, no. 4 (2022): 406–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720967648; Jarred H. Martin, "Fisting Subjectivity: Narratives of Sexual Subjectivity Among Gay Fist-Fuckers," *The Journal of Sex Research* 62, no. 3 (2025): 398–410, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2024.2339521.

of a sex act itself.[204] Against the common misperception of fisting as a form of rough, dangerous, or X-treme form of sex, an "erotic kinetics of intimacy" that allows for the "discursive rescripting/redrawing of bodily boundaries" is discussed.[205] Here what is emphasized (based on interviews with a sample of fisting community members) is the affective, temporal, and even metaphysical aspects of the practice. While both Freeman and Dinshaw have noted the erotic tactility and affective register of queer temporality, Martin's recharacterization of the anus as a "portal of erotic ingression" that, through the act of fisting, is transformed from the simple receptacle the phallic paradigm demands it to be into a space that actively yearns, is especially helpful in its combining of the notion of ingression, which catalogues both physical intrusion and metaphysical becoming, with the notion of the hole as an active force/participant in the erotic event, effectively linking Pope.L and Anzaldúa's theories of the hole/wound ("You don't heal the wound; the wound heals you.")[206]

There is subtle but overwhelmingly important difference in emphasis when it comes to filling a hole versus feeling one. The same is true when it comes to healing a wound. The axis of this difference is an orientation to lack. Desire is an orientation to lack, an orientation that seeks fulfillment. But this does not fix what is lacking; it merely displaces it. It is fundamentally metonymic. Fulfillment. Healing. These are mere metonyms of wholeness. Fucking this person, fulfilling that desire – that will make me whole. Fucking around with history, healing the wounds that it creates – that will make us whole. But no; of course not. Whole/healed implies the presence of lack. Desire demands a hole and history, as explained above, demands a wound. The metaphoric, by contrast, is an alternate mode of relationality, where you feel the hole/wound and,

[204] Martin, "Fisting Intimacy," 26.
[205] *ibid.*, 23.
[206] Martin, "A Queer(Er) Temporality," 14; Martin, "No Cock Needed," 12; Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark,* 89.

in doing so, become it – transfusing meaning between it and you. This "deep intimacy" is a key to the way fisting is described as counter sexual. Rather than a penis going into a hole, where there is a clear distinction between top and bottom, penetrator and penetrated, there is instead a "merging of bodies."[207] Essentially, the hole touches back, a touching that is received by the touching hand. The indeterminable conclusion to this eroticism further troubles the filler/receptacle, subject/object binary of the phallocentric paradigm where the top's orgasm signals conclusion even if it does not necessarily end the sex immediately. Time, like the hole, has a greater stretchiness, pulling partners into a system of mutual affectivity that upends normative positions of power.[208] Pope.L and Anzaldúa's calls to become the hole and/or wound, are indicative of the transformative relationality of fisting. The metaphoric relationship between subject and hole sidesteps the perverse logic of filling holes we are meant to occupy as graves. It is fun, yes, but we must do more – we must allow them to be portals.

This metaphoric move does not deny the reality of the hole, but neither does it attempt to simply displace or plug it up. It is an act of becoming. Specifically, when attached to the past, it is the act of becoming Barbarian, an unruly step into anachronism rather than a disavowal of it. This particular form of stepping backwards or flashing back is an assault on the paradigmatic hierarchy of knowledge that situates the ocular as predominant ("Seeing is believing"). Rather than the past being wrangled into sight to provide narrative serving context, this anal-epsis is "guided by blindness," as Pope.L would say: "Blind folk cannot see/Yet they have {the} courage/To move about in the world/Bumping into things,/Narrowly missing things,/Trying to get things done/In the face of what might seem,/To a sighted-person,/An obvious life-limiting

[207] Martin, "Fisting Intimacy," 22.
[208] Martin, "A Queer(Er) Temporality," 15.

lack…"[209] This site of "blindness" or ignorance is a fantastic place, one of unknowingness or, as Delany would have it, "agnosis" that, in concert with a sublime or metaphysical astonishment, abolishes the distinctions between "culture and nature" to produce "magical" a/effects.[210] Its exploration, absented of civilization's ocular regime that already knows what it sees, must be navigated haptically by just "feeling around."

This notion of just "feeling around" is emphasized in Martin's work, who picks up E. Hayward's concept of "tentacular visuality" to describe the way fisting "entails a feeling-with/in, sensing-with/in, and playing-with/in one's playmate," suggestive, he argues, "that the thinking of how to play with a partner does not necessarily occur before the feeling and doing of play [211] This focus on play also offers a useful link to the Barbaric and comes up consistently in Martin's work as part of his subjects' insistence on fisting as a form of countersexuality.[212] As mentioned earlier, the figure of the Barbarian is often entangled in concepts of the child (those little savages!). We see this in the condemnations of Conan and Howard himself, as well as his imitators and readers, as immature and regressive. The barbarian characters in most contemporary Fantasy media (*Vox Machina*'s Grog comes to mind) are usually depicted as childlike in their impulses, allowing exaggeratedly simplistic feelings and urges to explicitly govern their actions. The racialized naivety of non-white peoples and the narratives of arrested development or "Peter Pan"/ "Dorian Grey" syndromes among queers (particularly homosexual men) encoded into the Barbarian's anachronism. We could extend Martin's fisting theory to include a number of other "unfocused" forms of erotic play – tantric, psychedelic, primal, pup,

[209] Pope.L, "Hole Theory," 85.
[210] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 271.
[211] Martin, "No Cock Needed," 17.
[212] Martin, "Fisting Intimacy," 426-7; Martin, "No Cock Needed," 10.

ect. – that, sans penetration, are often perceived as not really being sex because of their shifts in focus away from reproductive (Historical) performance toward very embodied forms of temporal, spiritual, or affective play.

"Play," in this case, is so threatening because it is transtemporal. It is not a game in that it does not have a predetermined beginning or end. It must be "felt out" with/in the belief making itself in affective relation to ones playmates, rather than in accordance with the reproductive dictates of chrononormativity and History's policing of enshrined power relations. The Child *à la* Barbarian is so worrisome because they exist in the wildness of not yet made belief, uncanny reminders of adult *à la* Civilization's made-up-ness – that what is known must be taught, and that what is seen must first be told. We think it's funny when a child looks at a flock of random birds and confidently declares "Look at all those chickens!" because we are confident in our knowledge that they are, in fact, not chickens. We laugh because we recognize a hole in the not yet whole human that assures us of our own wholeness. Of course, our own whole has holes, but, just as we can be assured that the hole of the not yet whole child will eventually be filled, we know that our own holes could just as easily be filled should what holes the whole of civilization deems necessary to fill to be whole change. Heh, heh…right?

"Hole theory does not belong/ to those who can see. **It belongs/to those who can imagine**. … {It} is guided/By a lack to be with/The world and in so being – Be right with the world."[213] The Barbarian is the representation of the hole that is pastness. That which is meant to be seen in order to be assimilated and/or buried as a means of filling. The child of History meant to proleptically figure the prophetic progress of a reproductive futurism. A nostalgic reminder of

[213] PopeL., "Hole Theory," 86.

that fantastic pastness where belief was still being made, where nothing was impossible. Potentiality to be affectionately tolerated – in its proper place being seen not heard – and inevitably tamed into reality. Savage! Degenerate! Children! That is what we call those that cling to the indeterminacy of the past, those who cannot or will not decide on a proper history, those that continue to *make belief.*

Make believe, like Pope.L's Hole Theory, or the fantastic in general, relies on irrational, negative knowledge creation. It is, as Slavoj Zizek points out, antithetical to both liberal and conservative faction – "Both liberal-skeptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge."[214] Make believe is not faith, nor is it empirical, for both are forms of knowing. Make believe is a type of anti-knowing. It is just "feeling around." Rather than seeing the truth, it feels around for it. The Barbarian, as an imaginary, make believe figure, is thus representative of irrational, negative force. Resistant to the ocular regime of History, where the written (seen) record is all that is codified into power's memory, the Barbarian figures as pastness, also agnosis – beyond sight and knowledge. He is a ripe figure, therefore, for grafting all sorts of knowledges impermissible within the liberal/skeptic's historio-emperical framework onto (and thus the Barbarian is figured into the service of all sorts of gender and race essentialisms, as well as mythic cycles of order/disorder, ect.). But the Barbarian can also slip past history *into* the indeterminate realm of the past to feel things out. This seemingly penetrative act becomes one of ingress when the whole fist is used, where the fist is indicative of an embodied, playful affect, that *eliminates preconceived*

[214] Slavoj Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. & Norton Company, 2007), 117.

boundaries of Self and Other by allowing the force of the past to enact itself upon the Barbarian as much as the Barbarian enacts theirself upon the past in an indefinite and indeterminable mode of becoming.

We might think of Saint Thomas in this instance. While theological debate alternates between criticism of Thomas' lack of faith or approval of empirical verification, Thomas thrusting his hand into Jesus' side wound can also be read as a feeling around for truth. The wound or hole of the past threatens the supposedly inviolable boundaries between Self and Other, now and then, the distinctions between them failing when experientially/imaginatively felt. Thomas does not simply penetrate Christ's hole, but is transformed by it. Rather than consuming the body of Christ, the body of Christ consumes Thomas. The trauma and revelation of Jesus' martyrdom is not subjected to a mere witnessing that must later be straightened out through chronological record. It is felt out, out of sight. Here the crucifixion is not known but revealed to be unknowable. Far from evidencing "what really happened," this portal of pastness merely allows access to the slippery insides of a divine being. The daunting vastness of this impossible realm renders the strategic boundaries of time and Self obsolete and arbitrary. Confronted with this fantastic plane, Thomas, enjoined with/in Jesus, reinscribe the world with new meaning. They make belief. And, in the more archaic use of the word that indicates a transcendence into heaven, achieve *anal*epsis.

The fantastic's function here is lubricative, a mechanism made necessary when lack of knowledge requires reaching (or stretching) out to make belief. As Dinesh Wadiwel remarks in his postulation of the Lubricative Ethic, lubrication is what "makes possible what otherwise would be impossible," particularly when navigating beyond imagined boundaries. Fisting, he goes on," is an example of how the body, mind and meaning of the erotic act can be altered

through a well-lubricated facilitative practice."[215] The embodied mantel of the fantastical Barbarian figure acts "as a delta of facilitative gestures and assemblies" that allow ingress into the past and accompanying worlds.[216] Importantly, the Barbarian is not the only fantastic function at work in this particular operation, the hole of the past functioning similarly to how Wadiwel articulates the sphincter:

> The sphincter emulates the operation of a fluid lubricant, both easing the movements of those objects with which it moves in touch relations while opening the possibility of that which would not otherwise be possible. The dilations of the sphincter, in concert with the operation of other lubricative devices, make possible and pleasurable an act which would otherwise only be painful and/or violent.[217]

The figure of the Barbarian fisting the (w)hole of the past is thus a compounded fantastic, revolutionary in the *relationality* between a fantastically rendered subject/object or self/other. The fantasy of the barbarian, conservatively deployed within fascistic and/or progressive regimes of knowledge to valorize or dismiss integral unknowns respectively, can be deconstructed into a variety of fantastic functions and reassembled into a dissidentificatory mechanism of lubrication by which one may facilitate a radically different relationship with the past than is allowable through History. This relationship is not between a passive hole that must be filled by the knowing subject. It is not a fantasy of self-insertion that structurally requires others to be rendered to varying degrees, as non-player characters. Rather, by playing with the boundaries of the possible (whether your fisting/becoming the hole, fingering/feeling a wound, jumping

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[215] Dinesh Wadiwel, "Sex and the Lubricative Ethic," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, edited by Noreen Giffney, and Michael O'Rourke (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=476310, 4.
[216] *ibid.*, 10.
[217] *ibid.*, 6-7.

through the mirror, slipping into anal-epsis), "Touch must take precedence over vision."[218] And because touching is reciprocal, this fantastic engagement opens up the possibility of the past touching back, indelibly leaving traces. Like silicone – it's never coming out of the sheets.

This submission to mutuality, subverting knowledges and relationships of domination based on the power of occupational sight and its arresting gaze with its greater allowance for the frightening vulnerability that comes with "feeling it out," encourages what Wadiwel calls the "ethics of lubrication," where the hole itself "represents a way of thinking about how we encounter others and operates as an invitation to future pleasures and an ongoing project of training and cultivating ourselves to grapple more delicately with others, to dialogue more intensively." Continuing on: "the most seductive aspect of a lubricative ethic is the invitation into the unknown, the possibility of a leap into a clouded infinity of potentiality. This step forward into the dark points to the potentially vast, possibly dangerous, yet also perhaps pleasurable expanse that may be opened through the well-oiled, lubricative gesture."[219] This gesture can be read in the world broadly, a reorientation of the ancient uncanny into a fantastic enchantment. The vampiric gaze or fey smile of lover. The sublime sheen of starlight. Ecstatic beats among a glistening crowd. That aforementioned rainbow connection. Those moments and spaces that become unmoored from the muffling blanket of straight time where the tendrils of that abyssal Other loosen around you enough to imagine differently… if you have the courage to *make* belief.

Aside from its emphasis on collaboration and intersubjectivity, the revolutionary aspect of the pastness' fantastic is tied to social action. "The imagination is the handmaiden/Of social action./Social action gives the imagination/A reason to get up in the morning," writes Pope.L.[220]

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[218] *ibid.*, 10.
[219] *ibid.*, 11.
[220] Pope.L 84.

It is not just about the intermingling of being that ushers new forms of self. It is not just about the inside of pastness. It is also what falls out of the hole. Prolapse, in other words. The fantastic interplay between the Barbarian figure and the void of the past can, given enough time and vigor, so thoroughly massage the boundary established by History's power (or is it Power's history?) as to collapse distinctions between inside and outside. The hole of the past is the postern gate into/out of Civilization and its citizens – Self and Man. This fantastic condensation or excess – that which spills past temporal boundaries to obliterate them – disturbs the known by bringing to sight that which is normally hidden in a reckoning upon the real.

Irretrievability is core to the revolutionary fantastic and why it is separate from functions of the fantastic found in Science Fiction. That lostness or hole is where we can imagine a genuinely revolutionary (different) future. A site, not of reform or evolution, but structural difference. A (w)hole realm of new meaning. We must imagine ways to revisit/recreate the past; ways of getting Back Then and There. While certainly some Science Fiction might be brought to light, it seems to me that reinforcing our current reality assumes that what has happened had to happen, assimilating it into the linear progress of time. Not necessarily bad as long as it remains critical. But it is metonymic, desirous, rather than metaphorical – loving, impossible.; Science Fiction (and Fantasy like Martin's) can be "radical," but I don't think they can be revolutionary, as they leave governing epistemological structures in place. When understood as a function of the revolutionary fantastic, the Barbarian attachment to pastness ultimately becomes a reorientation toward the primordial. The uncanny affective transtions from horror to awe. Rather than view that which crawls from the (w)hole of pastness as necessitating the ordering instruction of History, one can embrace the protean as transformational opportunity.

The courage and imagination necessary to commit to this engagement of the revolutionary fantastic come from a reorientation towards lack. Not all who wander are lost, but all who wonder must be. For it is astonishment in the face of lack, rather than, or, at least, in addition to, the fear of it, that so relentlessly compels us to desire, and which distinguishes that endless repetition called desire from the revolutionary transformation of love. It is the Barbarian that roams the infinite transitions of Once and Future realms to disturb the frightened and suspicious citizens of that city named Known, a figure that is always demonic and legion. Only they revel in the love that dare not know its name, for to know, to know for certain at least, what/where/how it is possible, is to put a finite container around a fathomless realm.

3) Besieging the Gates of Reality – A Cryptic Wizardry and Draconic Heresy

… the raising of the dead, that is in fact the real triumph of disorder.

Frieda Grafe/*Suddeutsche Zeitung*

There is no utopia of the Damned save the one we will make ourselves, and we will make it…

Jordy Rosenberg/*Confessions of the Fox*

The result of it all was a vast development of rebels, outcasts, and all the discontented, who adopted witchcraft or sorcery for a religion, and wizards as their priests.

C. G. Leland/*Aradia*

Fantasy itself is heretical. It denies what everybody knows to be the truth. And, if you're lucky, the untruth shall make you free.

Brian Attebery/*The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy*

This chapter is bookended by two readings: one of Gorgik, the lionized Liberator of Nevèrÿon's enslaved population, and the other of Noyeed, Gorgik's lover and right-hand man. Between

these, I offer a reading of the cultic "Calling of the Amnewor" scene from *Flight from Nevèrÿon*, the third book in the series. Through these readings, I examine how Delany instrumentalizes the general concept developed in the previous chapter—Barbarian pastness as a renegotiation of History's hole—to different effects. In the first reading, the Self emerges as reality's first line of defense and therefore the first site of our siege. In the second—which forms the core of this chapter and is divided into several parts—the crypt serves as the marginal zone where all operations of the revolutionary fantastic take place. Here I consider the Dead, the Mad, and the Dying, and their collective trespass of reality's borders in defiance of Master and State. It is also where I develop the titular equation, Barbarian + Wizard = Heretic, as a theorem of the revolutionary fantastic. The final reading closes the chapter with a meditation on the affective tragedy of revolutionary movement and the ceaseless reconstruction of the real as a practice.

The queer temporality of a Once and Future mindset includes an affective relationality and a willingness to believe that what is already dead—whether held within the past or marked as past by dominant systems of meaning—can be resurrected in new forms through the fantastic's functionality. The revolutionary fantastic emphasizes this potential for renewal. In this way, the signifiers of revolution, whether entombed in History or lost in the fathomless past, can be magically summoned. This extends to the Self, which becomes the channel through which the revolutionary fantastic—as an animus beyond the literary realm—is accessed. The Self thus acts as a central locus of revolutionary activity, where the fantastic's reality-warping powers are embodied in the breakdown of the supposedly fixed reality of the Self. In other words, the practice of the revolutionary fantastic—the work of shattering boundaries between the real and the unreal—begins with the dissolution of self. This siege draws immense strength from a sense

of pastness, using its fantastic function to slip the bonds of historical interpellation and resist the internalization of linearity and progression as mechanisms of stabilization.

No Nameless Gods, No Master's Narrative: Ending the Tyranny of Self

The revolution Gorgik leads as "the Liberator" throughout the Nevèrÿon series is abolitionist. His large-scale slave rebellion against the imperial state serves as the series' background plot, highlighting the more foregrounded development of various characters' psycho(sexual) selves. It is here, in the descriptions of constant self-reinterpretation and expansion, that we come to understand how the personal revolution fuels the political one. Throughout the series, Delany insinuates that the bonds of slavery are much more than just its physical chains and that far more than what is recognized as slavery enslaves, particularly in the case of its institutional architects and overseers. Power enslaves us. The map we use to navigate power enslaves us. Reality enslaves us. And, finally, our very conception of Self enslaves us. That we construct ourselves (and our dependent realities) by way of a dichotomy – free vs. enslaved – is to have allowed – granted permission! – to slavery as a truth, affirming its reality and mapping power accordingly. It is not effective to simply deny slavery its malevolent reality. Nor does it work to banish it with the wand of History (the flaw here being the belief that history is behind us rather than around us). Semiotic manipulation is the magic of Nevèrÿon, which Jeffrey Tucker, in his readings of the series, deems an appropriate means of intervention considering:

> The naturalization of social signs is a metaphysical and essentializing process, which accounts in part for Foucault's use of "sorcery" to describe the bond between words and

things and Marx's identification of "magic and necromancy" as the agent that seeks to link exchange value to use value in the commodity.[221]

Racialized slavery is a manifestation of interlocking ideas (race, capital, commodity, nation, the human, ect.) that are wholly metaphysical in terms of their inception, the excruciatingly violent reality of which is merely the condensation that forms when accepting such concepts as real. Its horrors, like so many others, must be grappled with as if they are real, for, of course, they are. But what also must be remembered is the process by which such horrors become real: signification. It is only by intervening in *that* process, magically, that said horrors can be disrupted to the point of actual destruction.

The revolution that takes place across Delany's series is methodically undermined by various actors. It is observed that Gorgik's rebellion is only possible because of the growing cultural distaste of slavery in the more powerful northern region of Kolhari (especially as the wage labor of an ascendent capitalist economy becomes a more popular means of labor extraction) and the Empress' official position against it. Gorgik's acceptance of the Empress' invitation to exchange his sword for a seat on her council at the midpoint of the series literalizes the controversial assimilation of radical movements into the halls of power. This strategy is effective for Gorgik in that, eventually, slavery is abolished; but this success, while recognized as important, is also recognized as limited. In the final book of the series, *The Bridge of Lost Desire*, Gorgik emphasizes the recontextualization of the slave collar as the site of revolution over the almost entirely "off screen" events of the slave rebellion and political maneuvering that *technically* abolished slavery. As Gorgik tells it (and what is a sentiment Delany has reinforced

[221] Jeffrey Allen Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 133.

over and over again since the first book), the abolition of slavery as a particular legal institution does not abolish the ideological constructs and epistemological structures that manifested as slavery. As Madame Keyne, a wealthy merchant character, points out to us in *Neveryóna*, the wages she pays her barbarian employees are forged from the recycled metal of the slave collars those workers believe they have dodged. Again, it is worth repeating that Delany makes sure to have Gorgik explicitly observe that the forced embodiment of enslavement is totalizing such that that condition must be shorn as a precondition to greater consciousness. He simply wishes to remind us that abolition is an exorcism that must be prosecuted magically as well as materially.

The slave collar functions in the texts as a demonstration of this technique of the revolutionary fantastic. The final story in *Tales of Nevèrÿon* ("The Tale of Dragons and Dreamers") establishes the malleability of the collar's meaning. Toward the end of the tale, Gorgik and his barbarian lover stumble upon a couple of the other characters who have stories in the collection and who immediately observe that the pair disrupt conventional expectations, remarking that, while they are forced to assume that Gorgik is the slave because he is the one actually wearing a slave collar, they would have normally assumed Small Sarg, who is from the barbarian south, to be the enslaved one. Gorgik explains that:

> We are both free men. For the boy the collar is symbolic – of our mutual affection, our mutual protection. For myself, it is sexual – a necessary part in the pattern that allows both action and orgasm to manifest themselves within the single circle of desire. For neither of us is its meaning social, save that it shocks, offends, or deceives. [222]

[222] Delany, *Tales*, 237.

Their interlocutors – the Red Sonja analogue Raven and her friend Norema – are skeptical, observing the contradiction of claiming freedom with a slave collar around your neck. "We are avengers who fight the institution of slavery wherever we find it," Small Sarg rejoins, "in whatever way we can, and for both of us {the collar} is symbolic of our time in servitude and our bond to all men and women still so bound."[223] The two women are sheepish; the slaves Gorgik and Sarg have just freed from a nearby castle had been the same ones serving them the night before as guests. Though they are quick to express their own distaste for the institution, they acknowledge that they have only resisted it actively when they themselves were in danger or, one time, when a chain gang they encountered had been exclusively made up of women.

The implication is that, while Raven and Norema express support for abolition, and can even be moved to actively fight for it, they experience difficulty in imagining the collar as meaning anything but a restriction of their own, individual freedom. Conceptually, of course, they realize that slavery is a structure larger than just themselves, but they can only actually envision it as a collar around their own necks. Thus, they only actively resist it when it threatens them or others they see as themselves. Where Gorgik and Sarg differ is the revolutionary transmutation they perform upon the collar, which becomes a band of solidarity, a ringing reminder of their commitment to liberation, and, for Gorgik, an opening of pleasure. Importantly, this maneuver does not require them to forget the predominant meaning of the collar. Quite the opposite, as their inscriptions are made in reference to that dominant meaning. They also use the collar to disrupt, subvert, and sneak through spaces where they can rely on the collar being

[223] *ibid.*, 238.

understood in a singular way. In *Neveryóna*, for instance, Pryn uses the collar to mask her escape from the Jue-Grutns.

Arlene Keizer reads the *Nevèrÿon* series as within the black literary tradition of slave narrative, but distinct in its emphasis on "imaginative transformation and psychological recovery, rather than the inscription of trauma."[224] She, however, focuses much more heavily on the latter, positioning Gorgik's engagement in BDSM as exemplifying Freud's "remembering, repeating, and working through" method of psychological healing. She goes further than Tucker does in his remarks on Gorgik's semiotic manipulation of the slave collar from a signifier of oppression to one of liberation, arguing that, in the final book of the series, Delany asserts a further step to freedom: "the liberty to experience desire without the shadow of coercion."[225] While Keizer's article is brilliant, I find her claim of a possible transcendence beyond coercion to be overstated. Or rather, I want to offer a reading from a moderately different angle. Kiezer reads two encounters Gorgik has with men offering kinky sex where the sex does not happen as indicative of an evolved awareness that his experiences being enslaved have shaped his sexual desires, where his decisions to not act upon these desires indicate "authentic" liberation from the evils of that institution. I agree with Keizer that Gorgik achieves the "formlessness of freedom," but want to push back on the idea that this achievement is the result of an "elimination of the residue of bondage from his sexual practices."[226] Firstly, this conclusion does not fully align with the text. With the barbarian youth Urdog, it is Urdog's fear of being witnessed engaging in perversion that halts their sex. With Feyev, Delany emphasizes something he describes as being "outside desire's

[224] Arlene R. Keizer, "'Obsidian Mine': The Psychic Aftermath of Slavery," *American Literary History* 24, no. 4 (2012), 688.
[225] *ibid.*, 692.
[226] *ibid.*, 697.

pause" as the reason that sex does not occur. In neither case does Gorgik give any explicit indication that he has "conquered the substance of his sexual neurosis" or been convinced of BDSM's "futility." [227] Keizer's focus on trauma and healing is possible (obviously) but requires lifting these refusals from the broader context of the story itself and the overall series, both of which are heavily representative of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Bookending the "Game of Time and Pain" (Gorgik's main story in *Bridge*) is an argument between three local women regarding a neighboring castle ruin and whether or not it is inhabited. Gorgik has chosen to bed down in the castle on the way to a state function and, being observed by one of the women, incites the debate. The castle and its debatable emptiness calls the reader to remember Lord Aldamir's castle, the site ("other scene"), at once, of the Other, the Name of the Father, and the Mythic Father, from which the symbolic realm is constituted. This castle is also a site of signification. In this case, however, it is the empty space held open for the little other of Self and Desire to be constructed. The "self," the ego, the "I" are all made up. They do not actually exist, but, rather, are constructed in relation to the imagined "Other" that is everything conceived to be "not us" (society and the world in general). This conception of everything that is not us is overdetermined influenced by the predominant authority imagined ruling over everything that is not us – the Father/Lord Aldamir, who, like the Self, does not actually exist in anything but name. Empty castles, in other words.

Keizer aptly recognizes the confessional story Gorgik relays to the wandering barbarian youth bedding down in the same castle as a form of psychoanalytic practice; a non-institutional one representative of the way queer subjects, largely ostracized by mainstream practices when

[227] *ibid.*, 696-7.

the story was published, often had to rely on each other as therapeutic interlocutors. Where she reads this psychoanalysis as Freudian, however, it is much more readily identifiable as Lacanian. Gorgik's progression beyond the immediate pleasure kinky sex offers him is not simply a moment of healing past trauma, but a further wounding. The freedom Gorgik experiences is not a wholeness, but a *fracturing*. Having returned as an older man to the obsidian mine that served as the site of his enslavement as a youth, Gorgik reexperiences the moment he, as a slave, witnessed a noble using a slave collar for erotic pleasure, when Feyev, one of the last slaves exploited at the mine (whom Gorgik had ceremonially freed earlier that morning to symbolize the end of the institution in Nevèrÿon), propositions him. This, Gorgik explains to Urdog, allowed him to recognize his initial encounter with the collar as an erotic, rather than simply oppressive, object for what it was:

> I had looked into a mirror, recognized that mirror for what it was, and seized the image within it for my use. Now, at a sudden turn of chance, in need of an image to seize, I'd glimpsed that what I'd thought were mirrors and images and an "I" looking into and at them were really displaced, synthetic, formed of intersecting images in still other mirrors I'd never noticed before – mirrors whose angle, tactility, and location, because there were so many of them, because they were visible only through what was reflected of them in other mirrors, I couldn't hope to determine (much less locate a coherent pattern in which to place them), much less determine which, if any, were real and which were merely the intersections of other reflections.[228]

[228] Samuel R. Delany, *The Bridge of Lost Desire* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1987), 99-100.

Gorgik's initial encounter with the nobleman masturbating with the collar on allowed him to realize his own oppression and one of its key pillars. Thus, replicating that freedom (the "image" in the quote above) became a feature of his identity (what we might call his "core self"). However, his later, similar encounter with Feyev forced him to realize that this "core self" – and the very process by which it emerged – were actual illusory reflections formed from an incomprehensively impenetrable complex of mirrors. Gorgik's position "outside desire" can be read as a form of *jouissance*, that state beyond pleasure sometimes considered to be the suffering of the Real. In other words, Gorgik's "pain" in these moments with Urdog and Feyev is the bewildering shatter of the supposedly unified Self breaking into potentially endless pieces.

Where Gorgik senses the Self in response to this revelation is in the contradictory gaps and inconsistent responses to a similarly contradictory and inconsistent world. It is this confrontation with the Real-ity of Self (that there is not a self) where, parallel to the Real-ity of the mundane world, one can recognize the Self as fiction and fantastically remake the rulez of that realm. This is the Barbarian's most tumultuous border, where, if wizardry is to be employed, will make one a Heretic against the very laws of oneself. To lay siege in this realm requires a wandering into the wilderness of the variegated self, purposefully seeking the hole/wound/cut of the marginal unknown within *one's self* and leaping in. The loss of desire experienced by Gorgik can be construed as the loss of a lack, exchanged for the being a lack. Or said differently, a loss of desire not from it's temporary fulfillment accessed by crossing the bridge of lost desire (shuttling between pursuit of something lacking through the Other and the frustrating return to lack), but by jumping off the bridge. It is time and pain that displace Gorgik outside of the repetitions of desire, specifically outside the clarity created by the interpellation of the dominant system of meaning. Even when oppression is clear, this clarity is often just another interpellative

chain – you are still constituting yourself in reaction to dominant power paradigms and are thus still controlled by them through them or in relation to them. The shattering of the looking glass of the Self is what allows for a greater fugitivity, though it makes cutting yourself easy. The failure to become or truly possess the object of desire (disillusionment) is wounding.

The title of the collection, *The Bridge of Lost Desire*, comes from a recurring location in the series: a bridge in the capital city of Kolhari where a vast variety of sex workers ply their wares. Rather than framing this site as a place where desire is fulfilled or satisfied, Delany prompts us to think of it instead as the place where desire is lost. Just as the loss of desire forms a kind of bridge—emphasized, as a cruising ground, as a space of endless back-and-forth movement, or a bridge to nowhere, like an abandoned castle—wounds too can become bridges. These we call scars. Rather than emphasizing healing as an end point, as Keizer does, I emphasize wounding (falling apart)and then healing (being reassembled) as a revolutionary process, a cyclical movement to be entered into rather than something to be avoided. Losing oneself in these gaps of self-knowing becomes a sought-after experience: a bridge from one version of self to another. In contrast to healing as a goal of stable being, the desire here is not to be whole, but to be continually cut, for it is in the cut that Delany locates the "self." This self does not, in fact, exist in any stable sense; it is a fantasy realm that, when reclaimed (like the ruins from which Gorgik narrates), can displace the absent father Lord Adamir. It is a Self built on the awareness that selfhood is an illusion—a series of fathomless, infinite mirrors, as Gorgik describes. The castle of the Self, like the fantastic, floats in the sky. To be free is not to pretend at an independent self, but to recognize that the self, and thus one's world and perception, is an endless rearrangement of reflections, always in relation to surrounding forces. In other words, the "reality" of the Self depends entirely on where you are looking. You choose where to look, how

deeply, and for how long. The only errors are to close your eyes—or to become trapped staring into a single mirror forever.

Pain is the pathway off the bridge of lost desire—not through disillusionment, but by becoming the illusionist. I do not mean this as a call to control or master the Self, but rather to recognize mastery as simply another illusion, resting alongside the Self. This is not a rejection of the bridge of pleasure, nor an attempt to “heal” from it, but an invitation to recognize the mirror of Self as entire worlds of bridges: impossible to map, yet endlessly explorable for those foolish—or wise—enough to let go of the Self as an immutable construct and to leap into the cut, the wound, as a chance to journey farther rather than circle back to the same shore. Revolution, after all, is a return—but a return carrying a fragment of the old Self into a new place. Ultimately, Keizer misreads what he calls healing; it is better understood as reinscription. Trauma is rupture, and to "heal" from it is not to exile it into the realm of nightmare and fantasy, where it can lurk and strike anew. It is to remake it: to re-understand the wound as an opportunity for difference, to respeak the body and its sensuality, to find a pathway into new being, rather than to seek refuge in some imagined wholeness that supposedly existed before the Self’s breaking.

Through the fantastic, we conjure new systems of meaning. The fantastic, understood as a function, clarifies its own work by drawing attention to its overt play. What is revolutionary is that this movement can be repeated endlessly: the obliteration or death of one constellation of fantastically constructed meanings—recognized as magical—is no longer soul-shattering, because from the remnants another can always be reforged. An infinite series of meanings arise, holding the subject together not by fleeing the death of the Self's world, but by dancing atop the desolate void of the Real and casting illusions into it. The desire to be a “whole” thing, a fixed

entity, is ultimately a fear of life itself—a fear of the Real. Ironically, to know, to stabilize, to stop moving, is to become inert; it is to die, to sacrifice the unknowable vastness of being for the comfort of a singular, imaginary image.

They are not Dead Who can Eternally Lie, and with Queer Aeons even Death may Die

The third book of Delany's Nevèrÿon is the series' most experimental. Written during the height of the AIDS crisis the bulk of the book consists of a lengthy "appendix" that blends Delany's experience of the crisis with a similar plague inflicting Nevèrÿon's capitol Kolhari.[229] When I say "blend" here, it is difficult to overstate how thoroughly. Organized as numbered segments, this "Tale of Plagues and Carnivals" switches between the fictional and "non-fictional" with dizzying consistency. Eventually the boundaries between the two worlds become so blurred as to cease functioning, an intentional effect Delany emphasizes multiple times. The story ends with Noyeed, Gorgik's lover and revolutionary compatriot, meeting Delany himself. This story is preceded by two others held in *Flight from Nevèrÿon*– "The Tale of Fog and Granite" and "The Mummer's Tale." Both muddle the boundaries that surround meaning and where the authority that establishes it is located. This sets the stage well for "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals'" engagement with the fear and chaos of disease (an affect of dis-ease, as Delany points out) as a means of deconstructing the boundaries of reality itself.[230] The AIDS crisis, the magnitude of it, unbalances Delany to such a degree that he falls into the narrative, even as the narrative escapes

[229] It is worth noting that the original 1985 edition of the text differs from subsequent editions in that it emphasizes the marginal character of the story in a way later editions obscure by dropping "Appendix" from the story's title. For a detailed discussion of this difference, see Matthew Cheney, *Modernist Crisis and the Pedagogy of Form: Woolf, Delany, and Coetzee at the Limits of Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 92-98.
[230] Delany, *Flight*, 176.

its own assumed containment in the realm of the fantastic. Here Delany's discomfort with his own authority and power as a storyteller becomes most visible, emerging as an extended conflict with his own creations, the boundaries between himself, his interlocutors, and his own proxies pulsating in and out of sight in a way that imbues the entire text with a visceral, entangling magic.

The pivotal vortex of the story stirs from an underground gathering of some of Kolhari's most marginalized characters that takes place during a carnival produced in celebration of Gorgik the Liberator's arrival to the city (signaling an end to the ongoing slave rebellion) and as a distraction from the ongoing plague. Brought together by a "barbarian wizard," they gather as a cult to perform/witness the "The Calling of the Amnewor," a ritual summoning of an ancient, incomprehensibly alien god as Lovecraftian as they come. The scene is thick with potential interpretations, infused with the text's overall undecidability. A preceding section, one that provides the story's most cohesive narrative, is useful in reading the scene. This subplot focuses on a character unsubtly identified as "the Master," a noble scholar of Kolhari, and his attempt at mapping a history of the barbarian inventor Belham.

Belham is a figure that is referenced throughout the series but never rendered as a character. He is credited with many of the major "civilizing" innovations of the age, but Delany consistently undermines these claims through the more realized presence of Venn, who actually is a character (iconically rendered in her story "The Tale of Old Venn," from the first book). While only traces of her presence exist in the Master narrative of Belham's history, any reader reading the books in order has experienced her directly and knows that (according to Venn) the two were frequent collaborators and that at least some of Belham's inventions were actually hers. So, as the Master sets off to begin his "Great Work" establishing a definitive record of Belham's

life, the reader is already aware that the very inspiration for the work comes from a flawed perspective. The next forty-three some odd pages where the Master recounts his experience does not simply affirm this point, but suggests that our notion of perspective itself is flawed or, at the very least, that it emerges from not-knowing rather than knowing.

The Master starts his project with a detailed map marking all the places in Nevèrÿon connected to the legend of Belham. From this map, the Master crafts a route he presumes Belham must have traveled by – from his birth to his death – based on an obvious (to the Master) logic. The Master expects that revisions will be necessary as both known and unknown gaps in his knowledge are encountered and filled but is so confident in the beautifully ordered model he has constructed that he dismisses any notion that such revisions will be anything but miniscule. Things immediately go awry and soon the entire quest has transformed from a noble, scholarly endeavor well supplied with manpower and accompanying resources into a rag tag triumvirate consisting solely of the Master, a yokel soldier, and a one-legged barbarian outcast picked up along the way. The Master's authority is altered literally along two axes symbolically linked. When the journey began and he commanded an entire caravan, his position as Nevèrÿon royalty was immediately obvious. But, as one among three, it is much more ambiguous. Similarly, the authority of the map disintegrates into "incompleteness and imprecision superimposed on inaccuracy and error."[231] The Master wonders if he even has any authority left at all, or if the map, as a representational fetish for the quest itself, has usurped him. If indeed he still retains any, he thinks it is due to his ability to reconjure the mantle of his position whenever the band chances upon a castle and thus secure for them all the benefits of his then recognized position.[232]

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[231] *ibid.*, 293.
[232] *ibid.*, 290-91, 300.

What the Master is discovering are the limits of his power in the margins of transition. The wildness of the proverbial open road reshuffles the known order of things, which only reasserts itself when at the gates of civilization (here fittingly militarized in the form of the medieval castle). The map's authority (as well as his own) becomes "a mess… the stability of the object only fixed the chaos that had come upon it."[233] In other words: the original system has little use as model of what it is meant to represent; the only thing it effectively models is the attempted ordering of disorder.[234] This vaguely paradoxical suggestion rears up again and again in different forms as the Master's journey comes to a close. I brought up Venn earlier in this section as a type of trace that haunts the Master('s) narrative of Belham's exploits. The indeterminacy of her presence is commented on in an illuminating way by the Master in this section of *Flight*. As the group is speculating on who Venn might be to Belham, the one-legged barbarian Arly suggests the possibility that she might actually be a peer to Belham. This is received as joke by his two companions, which is deeply ironic given what the reader knows of Venn if they have read the original book. Later contemplating the matter, however, the Master realizes – "{he} simply didn't know. And in such a situation, the joking logic of a one-legged barbarian counts no less, certainly, than the considered reason of a Nevèrÿon prince."[235] Thus it is the past, which signs the ceaseless death of the present, and with it, knowingness, that levels the structures of power and the knowing authority they are built upon. Further, this pastness is explicitly not bound to a symbiotic antiquity. While ancientness makes the fantastic functionality

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[233] *ibid.*, 292.

[234] It is worth noting, however, that Delany himself asserts that *Neveryóna* and the "Tale of Old Venn" from *Tales* critique these propositions (ironically, it must be said, in a book so concerned with deconstructing author-ity). Power flows according to its own memory of itself and, as practically worthless as the Master's initial mapping of time and space vis-à-vis Belham is, it is important to avoid discounting either the systems of power that grant him the ability to map reality at all, or the ways in which his misguided efforts still hold reality shaping power. See *Flight*, 359.

[235] *ibid.*, 294.

of the past easier to acknowledge, the past is never far. As the Master realizes – if he asked his companions to recall details regarding the very hour they were collectively existing in, their accuracy would be unlikely. With uncanny prescience, Delany leans on Muñoz'formulation of queerness' utopian temporality, rearticulating the "here and now" of the gang's present as "there and then," (using, I might add, the queerly gesturing parenthetical).[236] It is in this scene in particular that the Master realizes his own nakedness. His ordering narrative, his power, and his authority are revealed to be insubstantial within the wildness of the past ("the hard peaks, the tangled forests, and the glaring deserts of my own ignorance").[237] Or at the very least, they are no more valuable than the *equally fantastical* jests of the marginal, the disabled, the racialized, or… barbaric.

Heaping more irony and paradox onto things, the Master also realizes that this breakdown of order is not a consequence of being off the map but rather is an *inevitable consequence of the mapping itself*. Earlier in the sequence, having finally arrived at one of the three villages Belham was meant to have been born in, the Master is dismayed to be told that almost every village in the barbarian South claims to have been this place of legend. More than that, many of the villages that exist have not existed long enough to even make sense historically as Belham's birthplace. The reason being? Colonial violence. As explained to the Master, most of the South was completely decimated by imperial troops and after them, wearing such similar armor as to be virtually indistinguishable (*wink wink), came the slavers, who, while not killing the populace en masse, still effectively depopulated the region. The result, an elder barbarian explains, is that the village the Master's company stands in is fairly recent construction, built by villagers

[236] *ibid.*, 299. See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 71 for his reading of the parenthetical as queer gesture.
[237] Delany, *Flight*, 300.

displaced by the aforementioned violence. In other words: the wilderness of ignorance that denies the Master his desired ontological certainty is itself a consequence of his own historicizing regime of knowledge. The barbarian populace's ability to construct the fantastic legend that has so thoroughly enchanted the Master is enabled by virtue of existing within the historical wound caused and consecrated by the very power enshrouding the Master himself. Now, having arrived to fill the hole he is culpable in creating, he finds himself powerless to do so, his very power substantiated by that hole's uncompromising mystery.

Camping along the edge of the map that, for all intents and purposes, *is* Nevèrÿon, the failure, really the impossibility, of his quest, inspires the Master to flee Nevèrÿon altogether.

> I felt as if I might also be face to face with something new, something in no way involved with Belham, something not called Nevèrÿon, something wondrous I might see or feel if only I was free, of them, of it. For here was also the possibility of leaving behind all the tangles of humanity and history Nevèrÿon herself seemed to have made hopelessly problematic in these last months…[238]

So driven, the Master blithely wanders (Delany says *transgresses*) the boundary ("all but inarticulable") between known and unknown.[239] Here (there?) – neverwhere – we encounter the Amnewor for the first time. Delany deploys all the techniques of effective horror writing. The Amnewor remains entirely unseen, a monstrous force, more than an actual monster. It is *felt* as large, *sensed* as dead, *fled* from as inevitable. The Master's final line in this lengthy section – "Monsters are real" – could readily be taken up as: Monsters are *the* Real.[240] Delany never tries

[238] *ibid.*, 300.
[239] *ibid.*, 302.
[240] *ibid.*, 305.

to hide the shadow Lacan casts over his writing in the Nevèrÿon series.[241] Although this most explicitly presents itself in terms of desire and language, the Lovecraftian shape, or, more accurately, Lovecraftian *lack* of a shape, of the Amnewor inspires contemplation of the fantastic's functional ability to represent the unrepresentable and the way Delany activates that function in relation to the marginal. Exactly which Lovecraftian gods most closely replicate symptomatic encounters with the Real and debate regarding the necessity of bringing Zizek's more expansive taxonomy of the Real to bear, is not worth wading into here.[242] Suffice to say that the Amnewor is "not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the fissure within the symbolic network itself. The Real as the monstrous Thing behind the veil of appearances… the ultimate lure."[243] While in the Master's narrative it is found at the border of what is known, his narrative bleeds into a scene that takes place at the very center of Nevèrÿon where a barbaric cult calls to the monstrous god in response to the deprivations of plague.

Jason Haslam reads the Calling of the Amnewor as a collective moment of mutual support in the face of death that operates as a source of energy for the type of queer utopian impulse Muñoz theorizes in *Cruising Utopia*. In attempt to more thoroughly reconcile Muñoz' project with Lee Edelman's queering of the death drive in *No Future* (the two projects are often held in contrast; a comparison Munoz himself only haphazardly disavows), Haslam uses the "Tale of Plagues and Carnivals" to argue that "utopian future is only available as a vision at the

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[241] *ibid.*, 359.
[242] See David Cal. Clements, "Cosmic Psychoanalysis: Lovecraft, Lacan, and Limits," ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1999; David Peak and Matt Rosen, "Horror of the Real: H.P. Lovecraft' s Old Ones and Contemporary Speculative Philosophy," in *Diseases of the Head* (Punctum Books, 2020); Mariangela Ugarelli Risi, "Into the Sightless Vortex of the Unimaginable. Nyarlathotep or the Trajectory of the Lovecraftian Signifier," *Brumal : Revista de Investigación Sobre Lo Fantástico/ Research Journal on the Fantastic* 10, no. 2 (2022): 211–30.
[243] Zizek, *Lacan*, 72.

edge of the death drive's excess."[244] While I largely agree with Haslam's conclusions, I read the Calling of the Amnewor as something much more complex than a simple intermingling of utopian hope and destructive desire. As noted by the barbarian wizard/priest that leads the Call, the Amnewor is a god of "edges, borders, and boundaries."[245] We are primed to imagine these words as lines or walls, but they can also be gaps or chasms. Absence, in other words. More accurately, we could say space – something that is nothing. The Amnewor stalks this space, encountered "as you tried to get from here to there, all at once too intensely aware of what the separation between them meant."[246] This space, we are told, is *distinction*. Importantly, distinction is not difference. Where difference is merely observational, distinction implies an evaluation – an ordering of difference. That I've never seen the bones of a dragon in the same way I've seen the bones of a dinosaur is a matter of difference. Categorizing that difference in terms of which is "real" and which is not, however, is a matter of distinction. It is in this way that different desires, or phenotypes, or even means of distinguishing reality versus fantasy become the distinction between barbarian and civilized. But there is no perfectly straight edge or totally impervious border. No boundary exists without some secret door, disguised crack, or hidden tunnel. *Boundaries are they themselves fissures*! At the very moment of erection, when here and there, now and then are separated, *a between emerges*. All that defies separation – anything from the living dead to love – feels the call of Amnewor and slides toward that incomprehensible crack, heralding with glimpse and gesture the abyssal Real.

[244] Jason Haslam, "Samuel R. Delany, Lou Reed, and Utopia's Queer End," *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017), 262.
[245] Delany, *Flight*, 323.
[246] *ibid.*, 323.

While the edge that most often comes to mind when imagining the marginal is one spatially opposite to the center, this thought form relies on an assumption of wholeness, or rather, holelessness. When we understand the whole to be constituted from the hole (that which forms the horizonal boundary at the periphery of the hole and thus renders it visible) can appear anywhere, including the center. This centering of the marginal is the stage upon which Delany sets the Calling of the Amnewor scene. The ritual takes place in an underground chamber beneath Kolhari's oldest neighborhood, which the wizard conducting the ritual claims to be one of the city's "most secret centers."[247] This is not the first time the chamber appears in the series. In *Neveryóna*, it features as a rallying point for Gorgik's revolutionaries and, earlier in *Flight*, the protagonist of "The Tale of Fog and Granite" has a transformative sexual encounter a top the barbarian throne that serves as the room's central feature. In Delany's articulation, the past offers an opening to fugitive escape from which the fantastic may be wielded for revolutionary purpose. This cryptic (buried/hidden) space serves as a gathering point to venerate the cult-ivation of a cult-ure extant at the margins of civilization. The Amnewor is more than and less than death. She is decay – the fraying, dying excess cut off from civilization to produce its form. She is the Barbarian god, ancient and violent. The putrescent flesh decomposing around every wound. She is no less terrifying to those gathered in her name than she is to the Master, but the former, forced to share the edge with her, may treat her as familiar and, with respect, engage her to their own designs.

The wizard opens the ritual with the following invocation:

[247] *ibid.*, 251.

> "Failure signs our beginning," the Wizard began in the dark, "for where else can we start, save from weakness, fear, and a crushing incapacity before a purity so rich it sometimes seduces us into thinking our own consciousness is at one with it? Failure will sign our end. Our first step into the darkness here is a realization of that failure – if only the failure to remember what must be remembered if civilization is to persist, our failure to forget what must be forgotten if, personally, we are to endure in it.[248]

The Wizard (who is also a barbarian) first acknowledges the position of those gathered as marginal. It is the way they have collectively been marked (for diverse reasons) as having failed to be civilized that precludes them from having unfettered access to the commons above and the power it privileges that initially prompts the cultists' curiosity about the Amnewor. The predominant vector of this marked failure is the disease ravaging Kolhari's male homosexual population. Those directly affected and their allies make up the majority of those gathered. But Delany also emphasizes the gathering's working-class background as well, paying special attention to the way an older barbarian servant woman (an analogue of the black cleaning lady employed by his family growing up) is drawn to the Calling. Regardless, the Master supplies the reader with the overall sign for those gathered: "uncivilized," a pejorative distinction made between his purely academically interested self and the primitive barbarianism of the cultists that he doubles down on with the self-aggrandizing critique of their magical practice, "I frequently know more about them than the benighted jungle bunny hopping up and down performing them."[249] It is this type of will to truth behind the Master's narrative that the cultists of Amnewor must fail to internalize as part of the process of forgetting and remembering against History. Thus

[248] *ibid.*, 320.
[249] *ibid.*, 272.

the Calling of the Amnewor happens in a forgotten place in the city's "historic" district. "Historic" here doing the work of codifying the de-centering that occurred in the past. The cultists fail to forget that the center of power is no longer there and thus fail to remember the civilizing narrative that that transference was inevitable.

The revolutionary underground that serves as the meeting point for abolitionary rebels and Amneworian cultists acts as a temporal wormhole, its aura of pastness a condition of fantastic functionality that bends time out of joint and allows the two marginal activities to interface with one another. In both scenes that take place around the underthrone, literal excavations are taking place. In *Flight*, it is the detritus left over from a scene in *Neveryóna* that is unburied and selectively reburied in preparation for the Amnewor ritual. The Wizard explains the process to Pryn, how the cultists initially unburied a mass grave (which "wouldn't do") before following "fable" to unearth the corpse of a barbarian prince ("quite a portent") to serve as witness/fetish for the proceedings.[250] This corpse, which the Wizard informs Pryn is "ancient," is known to both Pryn and the reader as the body of Small Sarg, Gorgik's young, barbarian lover from the first book, who tries and fails, to assassinate him in the second. From this position, the aura of power animating the ritual, some of the source of its magic, comes not from the objective truth we associate with the authorial narrative, *but its mystification*.

Whether the flower crowned Wizard (which feels very strongly to me to be a model of Delany himself) is engaging this mystification intentionally or not is unclear, but that hardly seems to matter as indeterminacy – the failure to know – is what makes space for the fantastic. Continuing his casting, the Wizard illuminates the corpse's purpose: "… imbued not with life but

[250] *ibid.*, 251-2.

with meaning by what passes in positive glory over our heads: the Liberator who is subsumed on this day of Carnival by the true seat of power – which is not here." The prince and his compatriots in death are the buried remains of a counter revolution against Gorgik. In *Neveryóna*, Sarg accuses Gorgik of being a tyrant in the making, promising abolition only because of a degenerate desire to more freely engage in sadomasochistic sex.[251] Gorgik later admits that he intentionally abandoned Sarg when the latter's wildness began to threaten the overall success of the revolution. This wildness, he theorizes, emerged as consequence of the very semiotic slipperiness the hole of the collar represents. Where the meaning of the collar transitioned from oppression to sexual desire for Gorgik, it became a type of antisocial freedom for Sarg, who began to use it to act out recklessly, putting himself and his compatriots in needless danger. Any criticism from Gorgik was interpreted from an absolutist anti-authoritarian perspective as attempts to enslave Sarg under a different system of oppression, a perspective Gorgik found hard to refute given their difference in age and racialization (Gorgik being much older and Sarg being epidermically inscribed as a barbarian). Sympathetically, however, Gorgik remarks that, in the moments when he thought Sarg would successfully kill him, he "saw all the dangers of such asocial freedom descending upon me – and they were indeed as terrifying and as paralyzing as the first and sudden discovery in one's own body of lusts which have no name."[252] Jumping across time to the Calling of the Amnewor, the Wizard seems to validate Gorgik, "Was {Sarg's corpse} righter in life than the master it fell before? Not likely, in the larger scheme. But it lived once; and, dead, lingers beneath our unholy torches."[253] What is at hand here is a description of another translocation of power. Gorgik, whose power was marginal when

[251] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 67.
[252] *ibid.*, 173-8.
[253] Delany, *Flight*, 320.

operating from the subterranean hall, is purportedly assimilating into the central power that operates from the Court of Eagles. The meaning of Sarg's death will therefore be conjured downward, along established channels of relative power, and any meanings Sarg magically worked into the collar will be more than likely dispersed by that specific pressure. The Wizard, operating from the underthrone Gorgik has vacated, nevertheless affirms this hierarchical displacement of meaning as better for the world in general. He still leaves room, however, for the arcane potential left behind in the wake of that violent displacement.

Wizards live by the slogan "we make the rulez!" meaning that, once the nature of reality is understood – ie: that what we call reality is actually just fantasy acting as a ward against the incomprehensible abyss of the Real – then all meaning is manipulable to the degree of belief. The Barbarian wizard is sensitive to this truth due to their proximity to the margins and/or heretical in their attunement to the marginal over the hegemonically proper power installed in civilization's center. No distinction, however, even when established from the margins, can be crafted sans boundary and the excess, slippage, betwixtedness that comes into being as a result. But it is from this failure that the wizard operates, the magical function of the fantastic occurring out of this manufactured indeterminacy and the uncertainty it creates. Boundaries are not inviolable defenses (as conceived of from the center), but useful outlines of the contradictions that signal points of potential transition. Delany's Wizard is aware that distinguishing author-ity does not come solely from the Court of Eagles, but from the revolutionary leader at the border between central and marginal, as well as from the paradoxical center of the margins, where the underthrone sits. Even as the narrative of the Master critiques its own authority, so does the narrative of the not-Master, who, not dissimilar to Delany himself, still authors a meaning

generating model of reality.[254] The difference is not in the disavowal of authority implicit in self-critique (which, within contemporary paradigm of liberal positivism – "the scientific method corrects itself" – only enshrines its own authority as objective best), but in an alternative relationship to the Real and the fantastic.

In traditional Fantasy forms like Sword & Sorcery, the titular terms are most often oppositional. The masculine material of a solid weapon wielded by the brawny arm set against the feminine decadence of esoterica cast from ungraspable shadow. In Nevèrÿon the sorcery is less flamboyant, but Delany still corrals this underlying contest into his dramatic commentary on the subject. The Master represents an updated form of heroic masculine power: less brawn more brains. His motivation to slay the fantastic monsters animated by the Amnewor aligns with older heroes of the genre, even if he uses his intellect in place of a sword.[255] He recognizes the limitations of this work – that ignorance is unconquerable due to the mystifications of time – but most explicitly attaches this mystification to the fallibility of the marginal. While he acknowledges his own culpability in the breakdown of knowledge and its formation of monsters, he situates himself as a defender against that breakdown, contrasted with the marginalized. The Wizard, by comparison, works with those mystifications, treating the Amnewor and her monstrous children as a source of magic. The form this magic takes in this particular instance recalls more infamous signs of wizardry – necromancy and demonic consultation. The freakish subversion embedded in both practices relate to their otherworldly method of knowledge production. They threaten the power and authority of the Master in their disruption of normative knowledge production, where information flows from the center, rather than the dark beyond

[254] *ibid.*, 273.
[255] Though it is worth noting that in classical versions of the fantastical Tarot, the suit of swords is closely associated with intellectual prowess. For example, see Pollack, *Seventy-Eight Degrees*, 153-4.

outside the bounds of reality or past the border of death. The aphorism “dead men tell no tales” is a sentiment relied on by the State and other institutions of established power for their own stability and perseverance. For the Wizard and his Barbaric cult, these distortions source power and authority, even as the ambiguity and instability positively embraced erode the same.

If the fantastic operates magically through the indeterminacy of meaning here realized as the past, the revolutionary fantastic can be distinguished further in its completion of movement from the general fantastic, through the radical, and back to the general. We could then label these segments of movement respectively as wizardry, barbaric wizardry, and heretical wizardry. The first form is the broadest and primarily operates in alignment with the Lacanian Other. Its most predominant feature is its own invisibility, a disavowal of the fantastic most consistently promoted by the Imperial Wizards that maintain the supremacy of what we can easily recognize as White Magic. It’s what we see practiced in Nevèrÿon by characters like Madame Keyne and Earl Jue-Grutn. The second form, recognizable as Black Magic (a), operates through encounters with the Real. Most readily accessible as a result of being inscribed magically as Barbarian, barbarian wizardry is a magic of the margins, where the vestigial and emergent elements produced through the symbolically ordering (mostly white) Other inspires the prosecution of counter meanings. The tag barbarian here signs the teleological analogy of barbarianism, where the alternate realities generated through marginalized meaning making are obliterated or assimilated into the overarching Symbolic Order. The characters Gorgik and Sarg are instructive here. Finally, there is the revolutionary fantastic or heretical wizardry, what we might recognize as Black Magic (b). This is the magic of the Dark Other. It stems from the same disordering generated by barbarian wizardry, but rather than returning from the wild, becomes the wild, realizing that the wilderness is only inconceivable chaos according to the episteme of civilization

and that, from the paraontological position that is the Woods, there exists a different (not distinct) order of things. Rather than forgetting the Real (filling the hole/healing the wound through reestablishment of paradigmatic Fantasy), the Real fills/heals you. The result, potentially, is a chimera of past meaning and, in embracing the indeterminacy of the Real, all future meanings. A Once and Future creature that is both fool and master. This is the barbarian Wizard, heresiarch of the Amnewor.

The cult of the Amnewor differs from what we have seen before in that it resuscitates an "ancient" (read: mystified) order of meaning, a modular calculus of the margins that may be installed past the insurrectionary limits of the solely barbaric. Rather than working against or into hegemonic meaning through alteration or metonymic displacement, it works within, interstitial and underground, not just in relation to civilization's overarching order, but from the ceaselessly shifting redefinitions of meaning exploding in the wake of that order's battle against the barbarian threat. The Wizard exemplifies this practice as he affirms the narrative of Gorgik's soon-to-be sanctioned revolution that, in part solidifies the violent negation of Sarg's while simultaneously collecting Sarg's remnants to reanimate, recognizing that it is from this trace/excess that Gorgik was able to transmute the collar from an oppressive symbol into a liberatory one in the first place, even as that liberatory consecration drifts toward and is presumably subsumed into the centered institution of meaning that necessitated that once unsanctioned revolution in the first place. This is the revolutionary nature of the fantastic made most explicitly manifest. As what was once unreal becomes real and, therefore, reconfigures the boundaries of reality and its margins, different revolutionary potentials reveal themselves as unreality shifts alongside reality. To venerate this potential as a Dark Other worthy of

revolutionary cause, a set of instructions, or grimoire, is helpful. We can title it: The Sepulchral Palimpsest.

The Sepulcher Palimpsest and the Madness of Princes

Self-evident in the wizard's slogan "we make the rulez" is that it still emphasizes rules, even if signed differ*a*ntly though the z. Neither Gorgik nor the Wizard suggest that the Amnewor or the gaping void at the center of the collar – abscess and absence respectively – that allow for the fantastic is safe. Magic has always been a volatile source of power. This is why Gorgik is so sympathetic to Sarg's self-destruction. He connects the incomprehensible madness of an anarchic (in its worst, hyper individualized sense) antisociality to the incomprehensible horror of namelessly "deviant" desire.[256] Once it is realized that "natural" is just a magic word, a veil thrown over the impenetrable mesh of influences that prompt what we do, say, think, or feel and that it is merely one possibility out of a potentially infinite set, any set, or the dissolution of the veil itself and consequences thereof, may take hold. As the Wizard says of the Amnewor, it is "the absolute outside which, you are sure though you have never seen her, controls you unto life and death…"[257] "Natural," "normal," "I" – these are all illusions thrown up in front of desire in an attempt to know. For, if such things as a natural world, a normal standard, or an authentic self exist, they can be known and one can be secure that, even if, they insist, control is not intended, *some* degree of influence is at least possible. The margins of existence – and those that embody the margin of their own volition or, as is much more often, are forced to – are closest to that absolute outside and likely to have more than a passing familiarity with the Amnewor. The enduring legacy of H. P. Lovecraft is his encapsulation of the horror induced when encountering

[256] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 177-78.
[257] Delany, *Flight*, 325.

reality as a dream and realizing that that reality is governed, not by any knowable forces, but by that which is incomprehensibly alien and unknowable. His deserved infamy is bound to the way he grotesquely, if accurately, positioned those monstrous Things adjacent to the marginalized Dark Other. The truth in Lovecraft is that, whether glimpsed through the prisms of power, desire, narrative, other, or self, the monstrous, alien gods whose unknowable dreams make up our world, when seen, strike with madness, betrayal, and despair.

Gorgik offhandedly brings up Sarg's youth as one reason for the latter's eventual hatred of him but is the particular valence of that hatred that I want to attend to here. Speaking of the empty collar he says, "If such a sign can shift so easily from oppression to desire, it can shift in other ways – toward power, perhaps, and aggression, toward the bitterness of misjudged freedoms by one who must work outside the civil structure."[258] It is easy to forget that Sarg, though a barbarian, was also a prince. So too was the character of the Master, before trading his castle for a school. There is something there then, in the way that the fantastic, the magic of which can just as easily channel queer desire as it can aggressive power, is wielded in the shape of one or the other. The tale of a different despairing prince is enlightening here. In Ursula K. Le Guin's book *The Farthest Shore*, the third entry in her deservedly celebrated Earthsea series, the prince Arren confesses his betrayal and abandonment of his companion, the wizard Sparrowhawk, in the following way: "I thought your wizardry was gone – no, that it had never been. That you {Sparrowhawk} had tricked me." Le Guin then contextualizes his despair, writing: It was because he knew in his heart that reality was empty: without life or warmth or color or sound: without meaning. All this lovely play of form and light and color on the sea and

[258] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 177.

in the eyes of men, was no more than that: a playing of illusions on the shallow void.[259] It is the farthest shore, the edge of the map, the margins of what we know to be reality, that the Amnewor stalks. As mentioned earlier, this does not necessarily indicate an edge opposite the center. Just as often, the marginal fraying the delicate construction of our comforting realities is only a few blocks downtown or next to us in bed. Sparrowhawk casts back:

> "There is no safety and there is no end. The word must be heard in silence; there must be darkness to see the stars. The dance is always danced above the hollow place, above the terrible abyss."

There is no safety. There is no end. Damn… I suppose it is reasonable to call for a sanity check. But remember, it is successfully knowing what you are seeing that, wickedly enough, is what is likelier to drive you mad, where failing to know allows you to keep going.[260]

The prince, because they are a prince, identifies more strongly with the system of meaning that enshrines their power and consequential comfort within that regime and is, therefore, more aware and consequently disturbed by an encounter with the Real. In the reality constructed by the imperial regime – Dragon or Eagle; it is all the same – that is maintained by a sublimated or carefully contained White magic, the prince is everything. Power-full. Comfort-able. Meaning-full. To look down and realize that it is all a dream… That your power is all made up. That YOU are all made up. Everything about you and your world, from your entitlement to a certain position within it to your most hidden, secret desires, is so much make believe (and here the civilized are struck by the possibly even more terrifying realization that they are just as much

[259] Ursula K. Le Guin, The Farthest Shore (New York: Bantam, 1972), 120-121.
[260] This is in reference to the role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu*, where, upon confronting the unspeakable horror of true reality and losing sanity, it is the characters that *fail* to fully grasp what they have encountered that avoid going insane.

the backwards, primitive barbarian naively playing pretend as the savage they have kept beyond the gates) results in unsustainably bitter despondency. The results that appear in the texts marshalled here (and which, unfortunately, I have witnessed in my own life) are twofold and are both a type of retreat to power. One is the antisocial madness demonstrated by the princes Sarg and Arren. Reeling from a perceived lack of power, the princes turn to violence that manifests respectively as direct aggression or apathetic neglect. The distinctive wizard – a barbaric/heretical practitioner of Black magic – is often a primary target for the abuse of this deranged nihilism. Gorgik and Sparrowhawk are resented and eventually betrayed by the princes in their company because of the responsibility they share in bringing the princes into the fraught margins of unnamable desire and discomfort, and because their ability/willingness to manipulate the make believe reality that gives meaning to world and self seems deceptive rather than wonderous in the anti-illumination of the void apparent.

Alternatively, or sequentially, is the route the Master chooses in Delany's books: a retreat back to the centering normativity of imperial civilization, safely and comfortably warded by White magic. We could also call this the Lothlorien or courtly approach. It is largely unavailable for those like Sarg, who are inevitably barbarians first and princes second. For those fortunate enough to have access to the civilized center, however, a little jaunt through the savage lands or stint as a revolutionary *guerilla* can be refashioned into an attractive cosmopolitanism. The ironic refrain throughout the initial (and final) "Tale of Gorgik" that is echoed in *Flight* as an address to Pryn, is that she and Gorgik are so *civilized* due to their lengthy roster of adventures and consequential ease holding multiple systems or models of meaning. They are, in the catachresistic contemporary parlance, *intersectional*. There, as well as here, is a self-congratulatory arrogance in the awareness of or, even better, sensitivity to, *diversity*. But there is

a difference – no, I'll say distinction – between the acknowledgement (or even acceptance!) of diversity and *being* distinguishable. The former, when aligned with the hegemonic norm, implicitly affirms a civilized center in relation to a barbaric margin. It is only the *supremely* civilized cosmopolitan that hails the atavistic primitives ("Hey kids!"), insists to themselves their own virtuous open mindedness ("I love what you're doing), but nevertheless emphasizes the distinct barbarity of whoever or whatever is happening ("It's not for me of course"), and finally asserts the necessity of their approval based on the uneven power dynamic between their normative centrality and the relative radicality of the marginal ("but, I totally support you guys").

The abjection of old gods and Black magic on the part of princes is directly related to the way they destabilize the imperial power of centrality that the latter enjoy. The barbarian, particularly the heretical barbarian wizard, threatens that power. Not because they are intersectional, which, having to do with points of intersection, i.e. commonality, gravitates in favor of paradigmatic power, but because they are interstitial, which, having to do with points of intervention, disrupt commonality, opening more space for what might exist between established structures of power. The interstitial, like most of what is barbarically holey, is not mutually exclusive to the intersectional and I read Gorgik and Pryn working in both realms. What wards them and the Heresiarch of the Amnewor from going mad when using the Black magic so anathematic to civilization's princes is a willingness to create and believe in alternative systems of meaning designated by the imperial order of things as unreal/impossible. Gorgik elaborates on this when diagnosing Sarg's descent into isolated individualism, remarking that he had meanings available to him the latter did not, which allowed for his greater stability.[261] Some of the rulez guiding the conjuration of these meanings are revealed in the ritual Calling of the Amnewor,

[261] Delany, *Neveryóna*, 177.

which I have chosen to collect here as a conceptual grimoire bearing the title of *The Sepulchral Palimpsest*. The three most evident of these rulez are: the use of the past as a protective fetish; the refusal to look straight; and relying on the child as *daimon* guide.

Over the course of the ritual, the barbarian Wizard or Heresiarch of the Amnewor as I call him here, narrates both the summoning of the Amnewor and Sarg's skeletal corpse rising from the dead. Guided by a little girl in shamanistic costume, the skeleton walks past two banners painted to symbolize both empire and desolation, then along the perimeter of the gathered crowd. As the undead figure passes the cultists, it attempts to penetrate the boundary they represent and join with the Amnewor, which paces excitedly behind them. The cultists are emphatically instructed not to let the walking corpse move beyond them and, multiple times, not to look behind them at the Amnewor. The narrative journey of the ritual ends when the child disappears –potentially past the distracted crowd and into the maw of the Amnewor – and the Heresiarch points out that the skeleton they've all been watching move around never actually left its throne. Or did it? It is the ambiguity of the contradiction between what we imagined to have happened and what *had* to have happened that the Wizard indicates is both a source of hope and failure at once.

The prince's corpse works as more than just "a symbol of our own mortality." As the Wizard instructs, it is both a vessel with which to answer the Amnewor's call and a mirror that allows one to respond more safely. The Amnewor, representative of the decomposition of meaning into the fertile void of everything, calls to the dead body to pass into the absolute obsoletion of the past. Sarg's existence will not have ceased to exist. The impact he had on the world will still be a part of that incomprehensibly vast maelstrom of the Real world that creates, animates, and drives us as conscious beings, even if it is beyond the ken of that consciousness to

know that force or its specific influence in any genuine way. But Sarg himself, whatever or whoever he was beyond the simple linguistic signs by which we fantasize knowing something of him – barbarian, Barbarian, prince, slave, revolutionary, assassin, young, mad, lover, whole, hole, , – will be nothing, indistinguishable from everything.

It is in moments of dis-ease, perhaps, that we come to terms with the idea that we too will cease. That we will become void. Dis(-)ease reminds us that we are not whole. Whether it be the physical ravages of plague upon our body or the acute discomfort experienced when confronting our own psyche's startling multiplicity, we are reminded of the self's dissolution – Death. Death of course, classically speaking, is just another word for transformation or, as I will emphasize here, *transition*, specifically from one system of meaning to another. The Amnewor, decay, lurks between the transition from one state to another. Perhaps more simply than STIs and shadow selves, the Amnewor is familiar to us as the anxiety of intimacy. "…can't we recognize one monster here, common to us all, prowling the border between one and another, or even between us and a land more different still from ours?"[262] What the Wizard indexes here is what we could call the "lost in translation" effect. When it comes to how we understand ourselves and the building blocks of meaning that structure that understanding – our "lore" – a terror can grip us at the thought of sharing, for to do so risks an encounter with the Amnewor. Some degree of meaning will be lost along the journey between here and there, the two different realms of meaning making that is self and an-other. Some degree of self will be irrevocably lost in this transition. It is just another reason why Love and Death are so entangled.

[262] Delany, *Flight*, 323.

If we approach the *Sepulcher Palimpsest* as a version of the *Maleficus Maleficarum* – a collection of tactics for slaying monsters used by the practitioners of White Magic – the steps for interacting with the Amnewor would be much the same. Rather than confronting the Amnewor and the transitionary realm of Death it guards directly, you would rely on the dead, whom we could call the negated, entombing them as a fetish. All dis-ease with one's own death, unknowable desires, and the very concept of nothing (that is the excess of everything) is projected onto the dead, who, already being dead, cannot be harmed by the Amnewor (which is Dying). Who you are, your meaning, is thus similarly warded. If the dead are everything unknown, if they are, effectively, meaning-less, then, by virtue of not being dead, you are effectively meaning-more (i.e. full) and take on the quality of being known. This, ironically, gives the dead quite a bit of power, for they become imbued with all the fathomless realms of potential meaning excluded from the one certain category of meaning indexed at the present. The dead, of course, also have the nasty habit of leaving behind bodies. These remains, the excess of death, endure to remind us of the dead and everything you've buried. Dis-ease becomes the affective signal to carry out the second step of Banishing the Amnewor – the refusal to look. The untold masses of dead, harborers of disease, are carried outside the walls of the city. If a particular dead body is more useful as a symbol, the graveyard is employed. The latter is still a realm of dis-ease, however, so walls are built around it. But it should remembered that, traditionally speaking, the purpose of the cemetery wall is not to keep living beings out, but to keep the dead safe within. In this way it too, like the city's walls, works as History – a boundary safeguarding the stable meaning of civilization from the unruly excess of the past. Finally, the child guide who, under the sign of White Magic, is less *daimon* than they are demonic. The possessed child (a major archetype in genres of horror) is so often used as a vehicle of dis-ease

because it is the inner child that takes you to all the unfixed realms of being within yourself that must be exorcised to become a properly healthy (dis-ease free) subject. The purified child is the one innocent of any excessive meaning, a stable, historicized past that stabilizes self-knowledge in the present.

The relation between these two spells (the Calling/Banishing of the Amnewor) is identifiable when the barbarian Wizard says:

> we have called {the Amnewor}, to serve us now – though by this displacement to the center she has not so much changed her nature; for no matter how Nevèrÿon expands, even as it reaches out to encompass death and the stars, she'll still prowl and linger along its rim.[263]

Essentially: while the border realm of the Amnewor is predominantly perceived as the edge of the Master's map (present regardless of how expansive that map becomes), the barbaric cult of the Amnewor folds that map, bringing the edges of the inward to overlay the map's center. This serves the cult, not only by centering the map's margins, but by covering up the inscription of those margins, opening space for a cartography of the underside to be revealed. One could also imagine Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, closed, its seldom realized exterior depicting creation in the making – a realm of infinite potential – absolving the more famous side its taxonomic distinctions. Regardless, this displacement brings the Amnewor's gift of unraveling to the point from which all meaning is meant to emanate: civilization's capital. Not, however, from the Court of Eagles, but the crypt beneath it, where the skeletons are buried.

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[263] *ibid.*, 323.

Civilization's Last Midnight; Or, the Barbaric Witching Hour

The corpses produced by civilization, all the remnant excess produced in the establishment of its structuring fables, haunt its citizens. The dead, however, cannot be killed again. Just as they are immune to the Amnewor's withering touch, so too are they invulnerable to the violence of mad princes. The lingering dis-ease still felt in response to all the unbearable desires and unknowable things projected on to them as a species of the past cannot be attached to civilization or the self. Civilization and its citizens must be *past* all that. It has to be something else, or someone else, an other, *outside* the gates. They must have invaded, snuck their way *inside*. Tricked us! Made themselves invisible. Like a virus. A disease. Barbarian is just another word, a distinction of disorder, the outsider inside, the past imposing on the present. The Amnewor is called she because she designates distinction. Like in William Pope.L's poem, the nothing of the hole is blackness. We must not forget that Delany wrote the Calling of the Amnewor during the AIDs crisis. The disease then known as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. At the last midnight, the moment when the Real intervenes into the fantastically curated fable of civilization, someone must be blamed for the dis-ease of that confrontation. The accused are almost always those that exist closest in proximity to the edge: the marginalized, those close to the Amnewor, in graveyard ghettos, outside the city, down South, beyond the map's border, along the farthest shore. These Barbarians, who hail from the "brutish, uncivilized place" where "every other old hovel one comes across houses a witch or a wizard; not to mention the occasional mad priest" are made into necromancers and, in order for the civilized and their princes to feel safe, must also be made into bodies, more skeletons for the crypt that is their home and their destiny.[264]

[264] Delany, *Tales*, 39.

The Barbarian, whether witch, wizard, or mad priest, revolts against this signification from *within signification itself* – the fathomless realms of the fantastic. Remember that the stability of meaning, while fantastically produced, pushes that fantastic away from itself. A "true" center, a "real" self, though fantasy, relies on the fiction of that truth's self-evidency. Any incommensurability, alternative, excess, or fragility of meaning (which the declaration of truth produces itself in the very process of being declared) must be made "impossible" if stable order of meaning is to be relied upon. The imperial system of meaning only allows for a fantastic that disavows itself through an insistence that reality is the only real or one that works to maintain its supremacy. White (supremacist) Magic, is thus invisible or conservative, reenchanting civilization's self-aggrandizing fables or the illusion of a coherent self (the latter we can recognize in the proliferation of self-securing mysticisms that enshrine the individual, usually to the benefit of racial capitalism).[265] The fantastic is dependent, however, upon figures such as the Barbarian to represent the Dark Other that, as Thomas aptly points out, its functionality is derived from.[266] The truths of civilization and self are empowered by consistent interface with darkness' chaotic unknown as affirmation of what is already "known" or as the site from which secret knowledge is pulled from. The success of such operations depend on any such knowledge's ability to be integrated into the larger established order. A lack of definitive truth or unfit knowledge signals the monstrous – failure to be right with the civilized world. This is to say nothing of all that is unnamable. The Black (girl) Magic counter to this is a willingness to work with dis-ease, the monsters, and the dead.

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[265] See Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005) for an exemplary overview of this phenomenon.
[266] Thomas, *Dark Fantastic*, 28-29 (though all of Chapter 1 is relevant here).

When working with the Lacanian Real, Zizek commonly turns to the concept of anamorphosis.[267] There is little to be gained from gazing constantly into the void of the Real, if one could even conceivably do so. It is by conceptual definition incomprehensible, merely a presence that indicates an absence. Like an anamorphic image, it must be viewed askant for any meaning to become clear. The Barbarian, as a marginal figure, cannot escape the margins through temporal or spatial movement in the "real" world, for that world was created, in part, through their inscription, by various means, as marginal. Wherever they move, their very existence signifies the margins. The Master cannot easily inhabit, however, the holes and wounds of their own narratives – their boundaries of distinction. They become not only a means of escape, but an opening to revolution – the game of time and pain.

From this fugitive position within the crypt, it is civilized "life" that threatens to kill us. The world it has entombed as dis-ease and death, by contrast, is lively. Here, through the Calling of the Amnewor, the dead are animated. To stare into the empty gaze of Death is to be reminded that you, the Barbarian, are *also the walking dead*. The crypt you stand in, according to the order of Civilization, is where the already dead of the past belong. The skulls so often depicted as your icon are not simply a symbol of your deadliness, but your dead-lyness. More than a sign of your threat to Civilization, it is a sign of the execution order to be administered against you. The paradox of the living corpse acts as a talisman for those that embody similar contradiction. As this indeterminate thing is led around the circle of gathered cultists, the first banner unfurls above it. On it is an image so poorly painted that is impossible to tell whether it is a dragon or an eagle. Our champion defeats this "representation of the enemy" by refusing to look at it. On the second banner is a wasteland, meant to represent "the whole range of human desolations can endure, at

[267] Zizek, *Lacan*, 68-71; Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 86.

least a moment, before they die." This the skeleton defeats merely by appearing in front of its emptiness, "for all his death and desecration, an irreducibly social trace."[268] The fantastically animated dead thing, the past, allows us to work with the abyssal nothing that we dance atop of without falling prey to a hysterical nihilism. The past and its dead things becomes a pathway around the interpellation of imperial symbolic order and also allows us hope of meaningful existence against the backdrop of desolation that imperial order heaps upon the marginalized. By holding onto the traces of meaning that remain despite Civilization's system of meaning we are able to have hope for ourselves – that we too can escape that tyrannical ruler.

At the end of its walk, the skeleton attempts to escape the bounds of the circle. This, the Wizard warns, would be disaster. His reasoning is worth quoting in full:

> That he fails (again, and again, and again) to transgress the boundary you represent, between the possible and the probable, the imprecise and the precise, the dying and the dead, the surmised and the certain, that (once more) he does not join with the absolute outside, which, though you have never seen her, controls you unto life and death, means, somehow, at the High Court, the Liberator may, at least in part, succeed; that our champion may not have been thoroughly subsumed by the power that called *him* back from the border.[269]

The "absolute outside" from inside the hole is the system of meaning established as Civilization. For the Barbarian it a different form of death – cessation of present meaning that comes, not from the unknown where all meaning is possible, but cessation of any meaning other than being already dead. The archetypical Death, a figure as fantastical as the Barbian, is, as Zizek points

[268] Delany, *Flight*, 324.
[269] *ibid.*, 325.

out, one of the anamorphic images one can visualize when confronting the Real – a manifestation of our fears and desires surrounding it that denotes its presence in an approachable disguise.[270] In the Banishing of the Amnewor, Death is entombed. The inevitable future – our full cessation of being – is shackled to the past, exiled to the Barbaric margins. For the archetypical Prince, Death – transition from one state to another – invokes madness, for it prophecies a loss of power. For the barbarian forced to exist at the margins, Death instead can invoke hope, for it prophecies exactly that type of transition. When fantastically rendered, Death is animate. In its mystery and fundamental incomprehensibility, it symbolizes potential. Death, like the Amnewor, does not visit the already dead. By refusing to let it past them, the cultists of the Amnewor prevent Death, who calls the Amnewor, from rejoining her and thus letting Sarg's corpse fall back into being just the dead body it is according to the more mundane reality of the normal world. This not only allows them, as fellow already dead bodies, to be more, but also allows room to imagine that Gorgik's abolitionist revolution will remain more than the dead thing it seems likely to become as it is assimilated into the empire's History and entombed there – inert.

There are two refusals to look expressed in the Calling of the Amnewor. The first is the refusal of the animated dead to look at the ambiguous smear of State/patriarchial power represented by the eagle/dragon. The second is the exhortation repeatedly made to the cultists not to look at the "barely believable monster" behind them. This can be read fairly easily as a refusal of the enlivened corpse to be interpellated by the reigning symbolic order, which, denying the possibility of its existence, would cause it to fall apart if acknowledged (think of how Calvin's tiger Hobbes can only be a stuffed animal when Calvin's parents are around). Similarly, if the marginalized folks turn to look at the Amnewor the Wizard narrates into existence straight on,

[270] Zizek, *Lacan*, 70.

they will make "a positive distinction that will lose you all hope with the return of what we call the real."[271] The qualifying "what we call" injects an ambiguity into what's referenced here as "the real" giving space to discuss more than one real. On one level, it is the same real refused by the barbarian prince's skeleton, the Empir(e)-ical reality or consensus reality cultivated by the Court of Eagles and its paternalistic shadow Earl Jue-Grutn casts in the shape of a dragon. For the majority of those gathered for the ritual, this real only makes space for them to be the marginalized already dead. Looking straight on at that reality – the consensus that they have already failed to be a-life – is to lose all hope in wake of their own loss of meaning.[272] At a different level, it also concerns *the* Real in that, wandering after Zizek, nothing meaningful can be wrought from its meaninglessness without looking at it from a certain angle, which I suggest here means not looking at all, but rather, as Pope.L exhorts, *imagining*.

I have already put forward the claim that much of what connects the fantastic and the Barbarian is the atavism of make believe, which, by way of the Child, asserts a queer and racialized immaturity and wild primitiveness. It comes as no surprise then that the barbarian Wizard cum priest leading the Calling of the Amnewor relies on a child as a guiding spirit. Lest we forget the aforementioned associations, the child, a fat little girl, bears a face paint mask, carries a staff topped with a skull, and has a bright orange cape (a gift from Pheron, a homosexual weaver dying of the plague). It is her mask, we are told, her innocence and health, that protect her from the Amnewor's gaze.[273] She is the one that actually leads the ritual. The Wizard only narrates. She functions somewhat counter to the Amnewor and opposite to the

[271] Delany, *Flight*, 323.
[272] See Fred Moten, "Refuse, Refuge, Refrain" in *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) for a different, but relevant and more thickly descriptive, mediation of this phenomenon.
[273] Delany, *Flight*, 322.

animated dead. She is potential full, as much a force of indeterminacy as the Amnewor that, though attached to the potential destroying violence of distinction rent by boundary, still heralds the transitive potential of a crossing and the decay fraying the edges of Symbolic Order. A compatriot to the walking corpse in its resistance to the Amnewor, she also joins it in embodying the past. For, as much as Death and the Child are figures of the future, they are also figures of the past. In the world of the Eagle and the Dragon, the world of princes, both Death and the Child are meant to be entombed. Above ground, the Child is a vessel for the dead. It must be straightened out – exorcised – of a potential to be anything other than a historical route to the present, singularly true, self, just as the Barbarian must be teleologically straightened out within the linear progression of history to lead to the assumedly inevitable Civilization of the present. The Child and the Barbarian are similarly the sacrificial host/body for the future of Self/Civilization, an assimilatory vessel through which the Self/Civilization of the present can colonize the future. The Child, Barbarian, and Death are the source of so much fear (and thus the victims of so much violence and curtailed autonomy), because of their capacity to threaten the stability of known Order/Self-Identity and symptomatic lust for immortality.

The Wizard entreats the child as a guiding *daimon* – a spirit extant somewhere between the incomprehensible divine and knowable material world – because of her naïvely natalistic willingness to make belief. The little girl is able to take the skeleton's hand easily because she has not foreclosed the possibility of the dead's animation, nor does she need to worry about seeing through the Amnewor to the hope obliterating coffin that is destiny (already measured out by what we call the "real"), the inertia of which is the deadness her very presence displaces when it comes to prince Sarg's corpse. It is the very casualness of this make believe that appears demonic within that aboveground system of meaning, for it signs all the horrifying possibilities

of what could be, the vast unknown of infinite meaning and desire that make the known Self seem oppressively small in comparison when not controlled/buried by the subject/Civilization. The past, all that is entombed or exiled to the margins in History, is the fantastic plane of necromantic Black Magic whereby the Barbarian, Wizard, Child, and Death consort with ghosts and demons to prophesize Civilization's last midnight – a heretic temporality and disturbance of power's promise we call the witching hour. For, to know it only as the Calling of the Amnewor is to suggest that she is the only god hailed by the agony of princes or casting of shades.

Heretics of the Fathomless Realms

There is a difference between the barbaric impulse to wreck the fables of History and disturb the fantasies of Civilization's citizenry and the use of the fantastic to construct one's own. This is the difference between the radical or purely insurrectionary fantastic and what I aim to sus out with the revolutionary fantastic. There is a disruptive or displacing power indexed in the former that, when, paradoxically, yoked alongside a constructive or replacing telos becomes something else. What I deem revolutionary. The deconstructive Barbarian in conjunction with the constructive Wizard transforms into something reconstructive.[274] The name for which I have already alluded to in occasionally calling the barbarian Wizard leading the cult of the Amnewor a heresiarch – the leader or founder of a heretical sect – but we can speak of the figure more archetypically as just the Heretic.

One of the mysteries the Heresiarch of the Amnewor gestures toward is the reinterpretation of the relative power between the elder god and her cultists, "For haven't we all

[274] I think too that it is worth thinking beyond an emphasis on transformation to make room for such mantles to exist alongside, in between, and over top one another.

suspected, all along, that human beings are sometimes more god like than the gods; certainly their deaths are more absolute than the death of any god, named or unnamed we've ever storied."[275] The claim here reiterates a longstanding truth of contemporary occult practice, traceable to Carl Jung. Humans live in excess of meaning, while beings such as the Amnewor belong wholly to it. Pointedly, the Amnewor lurks at the edge of boundaries (which paradoxically signify transitivity in the establishment of something to cross); not between whatever a boundary separates. Realms of meaning, in this case. The Amnewor appears in Nevèrÿon and, based on the Heresiarch's narration, theoretically appears in Delany's New York circa 1983 as well. She can symbolically appear, as I have compelled her to do on these pages, as a glimpse at the Lacanian Real, but only as an anamorphic veil allowing us to consider the effects of that Real, it being, by definition, unrepresentable within any symbolic order. She can only appear within systems of meaning. It is our ability to escape meaning, even if only experientially (for describing the experience requires contracting it into the symbolic order we exist in) that gives humanity this distinctive power. Rather than it being our mortality, in the cliched sense, that separates us from the divine, it is our meaninglessness.

The materialist knows no other gods but themselves, each reigning over their individual subdomains of the Symbolic Order that they jealously cultivate. The transcendentalist knows no other God but their own, which reigns over their individual subdomain of the Symbolic Order that they vengefully guard.[276] The Barbarian, by contrast runs amuck among these gods and their various systems of knowing (including the West's favored not-god Empiricism) and, perhaps, chooses to believe one or two, but does so from a marginal perspective, made aware from that

[275] Delany, *Flight*, 323.
[276] I borrow this particular materialist/transcendentalist paradigm from Carrol, *Liber Kaos*, 43-49.

position that all meaning is an optical illusion.[277] Wizardry begins with a curiosity as to how malleable reality – just a simple system of meaning within the Symbolic Order – might really be. The answer, of course, is very. The use of the fantastic function – the purview of all artists, theorists, and wizards – to introduce new constellations of signifiers into the starry seas of meaning is not heretical in and of itself. It is the barbaric desecration of what is considered – must be considered! – inviolable and holy in order for the natal charts of those who rule to continue to affirm the correctness of their heavenly mandate that makes wizardry heretical. In other words – the attempt to utilize the fantastic to not only destabilize systems of meaning that benefit the powerful but also conjuring up ones that mean otherwise. It is the Heretic that wields the revolutionary fantastic.

Exiled to the edges of reality, the Barbarian/Wizard/Heretic exists at the margins, the threshold of the crypt, sign and signifier of the boundary's separating wound. The feeble black hope reverberating through the Calling of the Amnewor is the directive of another god – Coyolxāuhqui, who, through Anzaldúa, exhorts us to remember that the crypt is a path. The very distinction rending boundary that tears worlds apart, that tears us apart, opens a void, a black hole – a gate. At the edge of Nevèrÿon, the Master, having pursued the barbarian legend of Belham and "fought it and hacked at it, and cut it apart, and pulled it to pieces, and finally, had tossed away its disparate limbs…," seeks "what ever (sic) had sought and sucked and gathered and contorted all the fragmentary "facts," and finds the Amnewor. The Master is horrified. It is a horror fueled by feeling the presence of the Amnewor and imagining himself. He is not wrong, for it the imperial regime of meaning making that he, no matter the self-satisfied disavowal of his

[277] There is a kinship here to the way the anarchist's mask can fantastically function as an embodiment of the monstrously marginalized inspired to insurrectionary practice and make belief. See "Masks" in *the Otherwolds Review*.

diadem, draws power from that mapped the borders of the wound, around the hole of which the Amnewor inevitably congeals. But this force that draws together all the inconsistent and contradictory traces and fragments of meaning remanent in the wake of the Eagle's imperial slaughter is not simply the decaying maw of the Amnewor, but the fissure of the incomprehensible void itself. The haunting presence of the dis-(re)membered Coyolxāuhqui, pulling herself together, weaving together that bridge of scars that will cross the border of the wound with meaning.

The indeterminacy of the in-between, *nepantla*, allows us fugitive refuge from the fixity of Set's entombing measurement. It is the space of potential that exists between words, between the disparate ways in which even the same word can be written and read. Reading and interpretation create their own voids. As do the relation between Self and Other, now and then, reality and fiction, mundane and fantastic. These chasms are the transitive lines of flight from one mode of being to another, the quicksilver routes by which meaning transforms. Too often they are exploited, distances cracked wider to hamper the construction of communication and alliance that may lead to a threat against the structures of racial capitalism. *Nepantla* is a place of dying, where worlds and their systems of meaning radically shift and crumble. It is a place from which, with enough courage and imagination, new worlds may emerge and new meanings may be shaped. Transformation – communion with the gods – ecstatic and pleasurable as it may be, is incommensurately traumatic and painful. It is this aspect of the equation that Delany focuses on in *Flight*.

Noyeed, Gorgik's more long-term barbarian lover and revolutionary lieutenant, is, in many ways, his symbolic inverse. Where Gorgik is heroically situated in the semiotic fields of the text, Noyeed is abjectified. Gorgik is large, strong, able and more traditionally romantic in his

role as the melancholic revolutionary, his troubled contemplation of his own actions prompting a readerly sympathy that bolsters affinity for his otherwise self-assured actions. Noyeed, by contrast, is small and weaselly. His is a gruesome visage, one-eyed and luridly foul in his manners and physicality. Delany spends a lot of time discussing how the two figures flow in and out of one another, not just in terms of their sexual relationship, but as revolutionary signifiers. They consistently swap places in order to confuse their enemies as to who actually leads the revolution as Liberator, which also has the effect of alerting the reader to the malleability of the revolutionary signifier.[278] When the revolution goes on long enough to successfully pressure the Court of Eagles to invite Gorgik into official parley, Noyeed leaves the movement. The entanglement of heroism and abjection unknots as the revolution is legitimized. The transitivity embedded in trans-formation's prefix solidifies into the more stable structure indexed at its base. In other words, as the abolition of Nevèrÿon's slave population becomes realized, its heroic elements are integrated into the center, while its excesses and abjectivity – all the unruly potential that cannot easily be conscripted into the service of the State's self-stabilizing historical narrative – are flung back out to the barbaric margins.

Noyeed attends the Calling of the Amnewor and, heeding the Heresiarch's catechism that the indeterminant reality of the animated skeleton and the Amnewor are what gives hope more than their definitive reality, steals a dragon and flies out of the world of Nevèrÿon altogether. It is this moment that takes the radical proposition of the text to its most extreme conclusion. If the fantastic can functionally manipulate the difference of meaning that exists in the gaps created by

[278] Lewis Call emphasizes the importance of the floating signifier to revolutionary movement in "*V for Vendetta* and a Floating Signifier Called Guy," in *Drawing the Past, Volume Two: Comics and the Historical Imagination in the World*, edited by Dorian L. Alexander, Michael Goodrum, and Philip Smith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022).

distinction on the level of the word or even the constellation of words that map systems of meaning, why not between the structures of meaning that distinguish real and unreal? This is, ultimately, what Delany is striving to demonstrate in *Flight*, where the structure itself collapses into intermingled snippets of text from the "real" world the reader supposedly shares with the author and the fantasy world of Nevèrÿon. Cheny describes this use of dragon flight as "unsettling fictionality," a use of the fantastic at the level of form that disrupts the reader's assumptions about the text's distance from reality, prompting their reevaluation of how they themselves come to know what reality really is.[279]

It is not simply the form that literature takes that allows this, but, as Cheny centers in the title of his book *Modernist* Crisis, the rupturing force of trauma requires it. *Flight from Nevèrÿon* is an AIDS novel. It is a response to the use of "plague" as a metaphor for the virus and its attendant metaphor of "plague victim" as a similarly viral imposition of meaning onto the queer populace intentionally abandoned as dis-ease inducing figures already dead. More than that, it is a struggle against the dominant system of meaning making itself, which constantly assimilates any "better," more radical meaning made from AIDS into itself to sustain its own structures of power.[280] The radical strength of the novel, according to Cheny, is the way in which it sets up parallel systems of meaning. The metaphor of "plague" operates similarly, but not exactly the way it does in the less fantastical world of 1980s New York. The constant intersection of these two worlds pushes the reader to "consider, cross, and subvert" a set of increasingly porous boundaries and recognize a whole other system of meaning that emerges *between* the two worlds in the process.[281] The revolutionary valence of the fantastic is not then firmly situated in a "better

[279] Cheny, *Modernist Crisis*, 33.
[280] *ibid.*, 99-100.
[281] *ibid.*, 100-01.

world" comparative to mundane reality, but more likely present in the tension created in the gap between them. Gorgik's revolution, his successful rewriting of the reality of the collar from laboring oppression to sexual liberation, is limited in that the dominant system of meaning can integrate this new meaning into itself (and arguably already has by the time Gorgik is ascendant, the enslaved labor signified by the collar already having been transferred away and more accurately signified by the iron currency of wages) to its own benefit.

Noyeed's flight from Nevèrÿon represents the necessary collapse, not just of the dominant real, but the radical fantasy meant to replace it. In the 10th anniversary edition of Jose Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia*, its editors contemplate the Once and Future temporality of queer grief – "the simultaneity of grieving those we have loved and lost, alongside mourning for a queerness and the forms of queer life that we have not yet known and are still yet to lose" – as they consider what it means to engage with Muñoz' work past his death.[282] The work they are referring to is a lecture once given by Muñoz that they revised into an essay to include in the anniversary edition: "Hope in the Face of Heartbreak." In it, Muñoz connects the heartbreak of romantic love to the incommensurability of radical critique and the reality of political activism. Rather than argue against the admitted excessiveness of "fantasy" and "willful unknowing" as political practices, Muñoz suggests that the real problem is the expectation of equivalence. In other words, the problem is not dreaming big, but the expectation that passionate belief in that dream will result in an outcome commiserate with that intensity of belief.[283] Our loved ones, the fantastic worlds we create together, our dreams, the communities "we hope to form invincible bonds with, disappoint us, but that is all the more reason to understand the nature of the

[282] Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong'o, and Ann Pellegrini, "Forward" to *Cruising Utopia*, xi.
[283] Jose Muñoz, "Hope in the Face of Heartbreak," in *Cruising Utopia*, 208, 213.

incommensurability that structures our being-with, and in doing so, we can begin to understand all the things we can learn once the fantasy of equivalence is put to bed. We can practice *an indispensable excessive reach*" (italics mine).[284] It is this hope against failure that allows Noyeed to wrangle the fantastic icon of the dragon and fly from Nevèrÿon.

This flight itself is marked by impossibility and woundedness. The dragons of fabled Ellamon are only really capable of gliding. They are not supposed to be able to fly between towns much less across reality itself. But Noyeed is himself excess and impossibility, "I've never been a man to believe in limits, borders, boundaries. I've lived beyond them all my life…"[285] This excess is not the only thing that motivates him, but rather a tragic disappointment. Noyeed weeps and curses as he struggles with the dragon to escape the incommensurate failure of the revolution to yield a place for him and the failure of his lover to safeguard him. Through this wound Noyeed makes his flight into a new world of meaning. A tear is tear is it not? Now, how did you read that? Did you pronounce the sanguine or saline first? Do you see now the chasm that can exist even within what appears to be the same word? Furthermore, why order them the way you did? Whatever your answer, it is doubtful. An answer can't be seen or known, for it comes from the very chasm of meaning hidden in the word.

Noyeed only has one eye. The other is a pit, a hole. This absence of sight marks the presence of what once was, however, and gives us a sense of seeing without seeing, a knowledge that isn't knowing. It is perhaps what Pope.L was indicating when he mentioned a "voodoo of nothingness." Noyeed's no-eye (also no-I) gestures toward a gnosis of the wound. It is his willingness to believe

[284] Muñoz, "Heartbreak," in *Cruising Utopia*, 213.
[285] Delany, *Flight*, 349.

in Gorgik and the revolution, to love them, and in the face of failure, amidst the weeping and cursing, still believe in excess of the possible, that is fantastic. Revolution *is* fantastic.

It is this incommensurate failure of love, the wounds it itself creates just as often as the wounds of an oppressive system that makes and exiles the figure of the Barbarian, that Muñoz believes can generate advantageous lines of escape; a type of queer virtuosity.[286] By the strictures of straight time the marginal have always already failed. The disease of AIDS becomes an easy metaphor for the dis-ease felt within straight society for this failure. Queers become the sign of all indeterminacy, for all inevitable failures and fissures produced through the Symbolic. It is a metaphor that Bersani ratifies in his commendation of that metaphor as representative of an antisocial queer desire, later provocatively extended by Edelman when he lashed queerness to the death drive.[287] In Nevèrÿon, the indeterminacy of this death and failure is also its aberrant temporality. It models the fantastic generativity of pastness, its potentiality against straight time and the chrononormative, emphasizing the disruption to time *as a semiotic system* arranged through History. It is the willingness to drive the dragon forward, a refusal to give up on what lies beyond, that is the revolutionary fantastic, for revolution is itself fantastic. It is a conspiracy with death and the void, the failure and wounds of each. And, just as it must be felt into, it must be felt through. It is not to never know, but to not *always* know. It is important to recognize that Noyeed does not simply fly into a void, but rather a new system of meaning. Just as importantly, we must recognize that that new system of meaning is not necessarily better. It's just different.

Maybe literature can't be radical by itself. It also requires the radical reader to take up the pieces of a conservative genre Delany has done the work of deconstructing and reconstruct it into

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[286] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 173.
[287] Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? : And Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

something else. What you then use it for, *who* you use it for, is what makes it revolutionary or not. The revolutionary fantastic might, like Noyeed attempts to do, emerge from what escapes literature. The fantastic, as a literary function, may, therefore only be able to function literarily. The revolutionary excess of that function is the invasion of the fantastic into the mundane world, the world that is not just meaning, but alive with more than meaning. The gods remolded. An operation that cannot be accomplished without the human power to glimpse and move through zones beyond meaning. It may come down to a mode of reading, of believing fantastically. Carrying the Barbarian or the Wizard out of the text. Shielding them from the Amnewor as only we are able. More so than this willingness to make believe, the revolutionary fantastic is a willingness to believe across never. The capacity to be disappointed again and again. A willingness to experience realms of meaning brought into existence through love broken, inevitably, again and again and again, but still choosing to rebuild the model, inevitably changed in the encounter with death. Learning to love again, a slightly different permutation, or hell even quite a different permutation, knowing that what you fall in love with, *who* you fall in love with, is always already lost.

The revolutionary fantastic is not then any certain thing or prescriptive way of being. It is not a specific goal or person or activity. It is not a specific fantastic figure or text or ideology or icon or symbol. It is a response to failure, the use of the fantastic function not to transcend meaning into a more stable structure, not to contain the instability of meaning into a safe form. It is not even the use of the fantastic to tear down the veil that stabilizes meaning, oppressive or liberatory. It is the use of the fantastic to build sets, stages for radical being, make believing they are real even as they are torn down, even if you must tear them down yourself. It is a ceaseless reconstruction, a cyclical dance atop the void, climbing into death's carriage every time it passes,

a forever lostness, a never ending story, performed beneath wayward stars until the inevitable dawn of enchantment's breaking, remembering all that was once and all that will be until the witching hour returns. It is a commitment to re-enchanting, rewriting, and renewing reality. It is an acceptance of wounds to be healed into scars to be wounded again, till the scars are so dense they seem to make up new flesh, a new world on to which failure can be remapped through further tears and tears.

4) Conclusion: A Magic of the Lost

Faerie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. And overbold I may be accounted, for though I have been a lover of fairy-stories since I learned to read, and have at times thought about them, I have not studied them professionally. I have been hardly more than a wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the land, full of wonder but not of information.

J. R. R. Tolkien/*Tree and Leaf*

The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended.

George MacDonald/*The Fantastic Imagination*

You don't find a life. You have to make one, with the people around you and the causes you put your strength into.

C. L. Clark/*The Unbroken*

Dear Reader, if you are you – the one I edited this for, the one I stole this for – and if you cry a certain kinds of tears – the ones I told you about, remember? – you will find your way to us.

You will not need a map.

Jordy Rosenberg/*Confessions of the Fox*

Magic of the Lost, a series of books written by C. L. Clark, provides a starting point for conceptualizing the revolutionary fantastic. Starting point? I wrote that when the following reading made up the introduction to this project and decided to leave it unchanged even as it has

found its way into the conclusion to highlight another example of that Once and Future temporality that mars History's boundedness. And have I not been saying that from a revolutionary perspective beginning is just a re-inscription of ending? The series focuses on two characters – Touraine, a colonial conscript from the Arabic coded colony of Qazāl, and Luca, princess of the European coded nation of Balladaire. Together they represent the colonial relationship that serves as the series' animating tension. The first book, *The Unbroken*, begins with the characters' arrival in the Qazāli colony, where Touraine rescues the princess from an assassination attempt orchestrated by an anticolonial resistance group. Grateful, Luca integrates Touraine into her retinue, enlisting the latter's help in reforming management of the colony. Their attempt ultimately fails. Negotiations between the Balladaire colonists and the Qazāli resistant movement (with Touraine acting as a go between that literalizes her position as a forcibly assimilated colonial subject) break down, resulting in a violent revolutionary uprising. It is in this final reading that I wish to demonstrate a broader applicability of the revolutionary fantastic as an analytical opening, as well as provide a few final remarks on its dimensions.

The Qazāli revolutionaries win in the end. But what distinguishes *The Unbroken* from other fantasy revolutions featuring decolonial themes, is that Luca, representational of the reformist minded colonizer, comes to the understanding that the solution to the problem was always the simplest one: the Balladairans could just leave. And at the conclusion of the novel, rather than continue a devastating war of occupation to the bitter end, that's exactly what they do. They just leave. That colonialism is violent, that violence is necessary to disrupt it, that that violence denigrates both the oppressed and the oppressed, these are consistent themes in the recent spate of decolonial fantasy novels. Seth Dickinson's *Masquerade* and Kacen *Callender's Islands of Blood and Storm* in particular. Violence is both inevitable *and* inextricable in these

other novels. What Clark highlights in *The Unbroken*, however, is that the power to avoid or end colonial violence is always a *choice*, one that is made by the colonial oppressor. Writing this in the midst of ~~the escalating discourse surrounding Israel's devastating response to Hamas' most recent attack~~ the Western world's collaboration in Israel's ongoing genocide within Gaza, brings this aspect of the novel into harsh relief. Colonialism is a constant decision of occupation. Clark skillfully articulates this point by mapping this imbalance of power onto Touraine and Luca. Counter to Western liberal understandings of queerness as essentially liberatory, Clark narrates the failure of their romantic relationship as an insurmountable consequence of the inherent balance of power between colonizer and colonial subject. In trying to love Touraine, Luca realizes the only way to maintain a relationship free of suspicion is to grant Touraine sovereignty, not as a citizen of Balladaire, but as an autonomous Qazāli. This choice, it should be made clear, occurs in tandem with Luca's recognition that Balladaire has lost. Clark forecloses any interpretation that denies Qazāli agency in claiming their own independence. What is important about this pivotal moment – the moment that, simultaneously, the Qazāli become sovereign and Luca recognizes that sovereignty – is that it occurs as magic is finally revealed to exist.

Magic's function in *The Unbroken* is relatively unique in the contemporary "second world" fantasy landscape. Until the very end, its existence is uncertain, both for the reader and the protagonists. Clark positions magic as central to the colonial dichotomy in her book. The practice or belief in magic considered "uncivilized" by the colonizing force. Balladaire has destroyed any trace of it within its own history and harshly curtails anything deemed too "religious" within colonized Qazāl. Nevertheless, magic plays a significant role in both protagonists' storylines. For Touraine it plays out as a rediscovery of her native culture. Two of

the revolutionary leaders she negotiates with on Luca's behalf are priests. Their insistence that magic as an aspect of decolonial struggle propels the tension between Touraine's colonial conditioning and her feeling she lost something vital to life when conscripted. For Luca, who in this first book is portrayed as a progressive reformist, magic is a potential asset for her empire. It is part of the price her society has paid to become "civilized," but also something valuable and worth rediscovering. For both characters, however, regardless of their hope and faith, it is not until the very end of the novel that magic is explicitly revealed, precisely as the moment revolution is achieved in the text.[288] Magic destroys two of the remaining opponents to decolonization, transforms the third (Luca, importantly the only one of the three open to its existence), and resuscitates Touraine, who, in a scene laden with symbolism, is brought back to life through this supreme affirmation of Qazāli identity after being killed by the Balladairan military.

The fantastic in The Unbroken is not merely a flashy tool of colonial or revolutionary violence, but the revolution itself. This is distinct from other Fantasies, such as Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series. In *The Final Empire* (the first book in the *Mistborn* series), there is a fantastic revolution, but the fantastic elements of that revolution are not *revolutionary in their narrative function*. Allomancy (the magic manipulation of metal featured in Sanderson's work) could easily be replaced in the text by most any old form of uncanny weapons mastery or technological invention with little change to the plot. *The Unbroken*, by contrast, features a truly revolutionary fantastic. I'll return to this comparison later. For now, I want to focus on how Clark realizes this revolutionary fantastic in her work.

[288] Touraine begins to believe in its existence once she joins the revolution in earnest, but the healing of her initial wounds, Niwai's uncanny link to animals, and Aranen's minor demonstration for Luca referenced prior to this moment don't happen "on-screen."

A common complaint of the book is that the characters lack rationality.

> "I would expect a soldier to be a little more level-headed and actually maybe think a decision through for half a second, but with Touraine, basically every decision she makes is on a whim. … pretty much all of the characters … seem to forgoe{sic} any logic when making most of their decisions. … {Luca} has this habit of making decisions seemingly out of nowhere and with painfully little forethought put into any of them."[289]

> "Touraine, who is supposed to be the best, the highest ranking of all her soldiers, and instead is an absolute mess. I don't think she did anything right the whole book except for one choice near the end. It was so frustrating to read about such a useless character."[290]

> "{Touraine's} initial strong and simple motivation quickly became muddled and contradictory."[291]

These are just a sampling of the hundreds of similar one-to-two-star reviews on Goodreads. For these readers, the narrative fails because the characters consistently make decisions with no discernible logic or ideological motivation. Instead, Touraine and Luca consistently move the plot forward in ways that contradict their stated goals. Their movements are non-linear, surprising, and usually counterproductive. As the above readers point out, Touraine and Luca fail more often than not, rendering them both useless, their actions seemingly futile. Nevertheless,

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[289] Amanda, review of *The Unbroken* by C. L. Clark (Goodreads, April 15, 2021), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3946132682.
[290] Lex Kent, review of *The Unbroken* by C. L. Clark (Goodreads, March 27, 2021), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3517239102.
[291] Kathrine, review of *The Unbroken* by C. L. Clark (Goodreads, April 20, 2021), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3942512883.

revolution occurs. That it does is not a narrative failure, but a narrative choice. One that models revolutionary movement's affective engine.

The most significant example of Touraine's irrational decision making occurs midway through the book, when, seemingly out of nowhere, she betrays both Luca and the revolutionary movement. Superseding her legal authority, Luca agrees to trade weapons to the rebel Qazāli in exchange for their help in her pursuit of magic. Touraine, in a sudden moment of indecision, informs General Cantic (her commander and the ranking military authority in the colony) about the deal. This decision, rather than obscuring her motivations, helps clarify them. Throughout the text, Touraine expresses her attachment to her fellow Sands (the other conscripted Qazāli she leads on behalf of Balladaire). These feelings of loyalty are complicated as she develops romantic feelings for Luca and uncovers filial connections to the insurrectionist leader Jaghotai, her mother. At a pivotal moment, however, she betrays both Luca and the rebels in order to protect the Sands, worried that they will be the first line of defense against an armed and therefore much more dangerous insurrectionary force if negotiations between Luca and the rebels fail. It's a somewhat nonsensical move that occurs seemingly out of nowhere. Clark provides little to no foreshadowing for the event. That it happened at all is obscured in a confusingly nonlinear chronological sequence, Clark switching rapidly back and forth from past to present with scarce signaling, and a lack of dialog. Much to ire of some readers, Touraine's decision results in the very endangerment of the Sands that she was trying to avoid. Rather than simply capture the weapons meant for the rebels, Cantic uses their existence as an excuse to act on her ideological opposition to Luca's reformist program, using the Sands to violently suppress radicals throughout the Qazāli colony. This suppression triggers open revolt and begins the revolution in earnest.

If you're having trouble following the plot as I've recounted it so far, you're not alone. *The Unbroken* resists easy summarization. Its sequencing of events is messy and meandering. As one reader notes:

> "… there was no real "plot" to speak of, since what we could be calling "plot" was more like a gooey mass, not really doing anything for 50% of the book … and then just spreading in all kinds of random directions, driven by the myriad of pointless drama caused by the illogical decisions of every single idiot in this book. Some directions just become dead ends, never to be spoken of again, never getting resolved."[292]

This rendering of revolution – incoherent – contrasts with the much more popular *Mistborn: Final Empire*. In the latter, the revolution that takes place is explicitly ideological and determinedly linear. The protagonists identify as revolutionaries. Revolution is clearly and unwaveringly stated as their goal and formally rationalized. After the required dollop of self-sacrifice is made by our heroes, the revolution succeeds and society advances. Here every step toward revolution is purposeful, rather than random. It is a revolution motivated by clear reason, instead of confused and contradictory passions. There are no dead ends or false starts in Sanderson's work. There is only the relentless drive towards a final empire, an end to history, a war to prevent all future wars. Everything is resolved. There is no failure, only necessary sacrifice.

I'm suspicious of claims to revolution that leave nothing to the imagination. Can revolution happen if what is to emerge is already known? As I think I've made clear: no. Whatever new thing comes of a true transformation cannot be fully known when transformation

[292]Slagathor, review of *The Unbroken* by C. L. Clark (Goodreads, April 14, 2021), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3867032474.

begins. Revolution is reaching beyond the world we know. What it looks like is unknowable. All we can know when moving toward a different world is that we are moving away from the current one. Where that movement leads, if indeed it moves us anywhere at all, is uncertain, and it is uncertainty – *nepantla* – that allows the fantastic to function. Clark recognizes this in her writing, blending revolution and magic together in a way that makes them inseparable.

Similar to the plot, Clark's depiction of magic in The Unbroken is ambiguous, another source of reader complaints.

> "The magic system in the book is ridiculously vague and shallow. There are no names for it, no limitations clearly defined, no rules or regulations. Nothing was talked about WHO specifically could do the magic (as the magics seem like they are tied to regions and/or regional belief systems, it seemed weird that it wasn't specific on WHO had access to wield it -does everyone have access to it). … There is so much potential here, but you barely get the tiniest sip to sate your need to know. Pretty please elaborate on your magic systems! Tell me the parameters, define in solid ways who has access to it, give me a NAME, tell me its limitations, its costs, its importance to the actual culture."[293]

By leaving magic so ill-defined Clark bucks the contemporary trend in mainstream Fantasy literature to treat magic as an imaginary science. In *Final Empire* for example, Allomancy is taught to the reader in a series of didactic lessons given to the protagonist. It is systematized in a way that answers all the questions the above reader wanted from Clark that Clark denied. As

[293] Michelle, review of *The Unbroken* by C. L. Clark (Goodreads, March 19, 2021), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3701843406.

mentioned earlier, magic is not even revealed to exist until the book's finale. It is genuine magic. Liminal. Ineffable. *Fantastic*.

For both Touraine and Luca, magic lingers at their perception's edge, drawing them through the story like a will-o'-wisp. For Luca, the healing magic the Qazāli are rumored to possess promises a way to prevent the return of a plague that took her parents and threatens the future of her kingdom. For Touraine, it is synonymous with her lost Qazāli identity. As they both engage with indigenous Qazāli culture in pursuit of these conscious goals, Clark keeps magic out of reach, forcing characters and reader into a place of uncertainty. What are the rules of this world? What is the potential of this world? Clark refuses clarity. We, the reader, KNOW (hope) that magic exists, that revolution is possible, but, unlike Sanderson's world, there is no authoritative instructor, no ideological treatise, that tells us how to access it. We must simply move, hopefully in the right direction, animated by the belief that something different is possible.

This is not to say that directionless equals aimlessness, however. Movement and animation are consequence of some sort of force, what I have I linked to the queer utopian impulse described by Muñoz. Similarly, the absence of authority does not mean a lack of guidance. In *The Unbroken*, the revolutionary fantastic emerges from a spiritual context. The Qazāli are defined as uncivilized by virtue of their religiosity and it is this religiosity that opens pathways to magical practice.[294] Touraine and Luca, drawn to the potential of magic, nevertheless struggle with the context its embedded in due to their colonial conditioning. Luca in particular anxiously resists disturbing colonial taxonomy by disavowing the possibility of introducing magic back into Balladairan society without separating it from faith in a god. Her

[294] C. L. Clark, *The Unbroken* (New York: Orbit, 2021), 25.

approach to learning magic – a scholarly exploration of history and literature – preserves the affective distance provided via institutionalized objectivity she thinks will allow her to remain civilized even in pursuit of the taboo. Doubt in this schema is introduced early on – "… if the magic came from religion, was religion as uncivilized as they had been taught?" – but Clark quickly reminds us that, while God's death may have been highly exaggerated, they were, as Nietzsche observed, murdered: "Luca knew that fear in {Touraine's} eyes. … The fear that someone would suspect you of thinking there was something greater in the world than logic and humanity."[295] Religion in Balladaire did not simply wither away, turned vestigial in the development of "their science," it was banned in order to "build an empire."[296] As the Brigani revolutionary leader and Shālan priestess and revolutionary leader Djasha observes in the book, Balladairan colonization and the violent enforcement of Enlightenment principles go hand in hand. By weaving together magic and religion and setting it an oppositional position to liberal humanism, Clark works against the trend to sublimate the fantastic into the positivist world view promoted through Western imperialism and insists that decolonial revolution requires an alternative epistemology to be successful – a revolutionary fantastic.

Rather than the masculine figure of the wizard/magician Mendelsohn cites as central to many Fantasy texts insistent on universalist truths, Clark provides the figure of the high priestess, archetypical herald of unconscious wisdoms. The revolutionary leaders – Djasha, Aranen, and Jaghotai – are guides rather than authorities and invite Touraine, Luca, and the reader into mystery rather than mastery. In the beginning of the book, they encourage Touraine and Luca to engage with Qazāli culture as a starting point to their negotiations. Dancing, drunkenness, and

[295] *ibid.*, 166, 169.
[296] *ibid.*, 166.

fire are central to the scene, where Luca in particular is drawn into a moment of irrationality that insists on passionate abandon above structural thought as a form of connection beyond the political. When violent upheaval begins, Luca resorts back to colonial methods of extraction in her pursuit of magic, while Touraine, quickly having been forgiven for her floundering betrayal, is brought into Qazāli community. It's here, as she falls fully into relationship with her lost heritage, that she hesitantly explores the religious tenants of Shāl and the magic immanent within herself and the world.

It would be easy to get drawn into a detailed analysis of these three characters, rich and intriguing as they are when understood as a multifaceted representation of the fantastical feminine archetypes traditionally reproduced in the figures of the High Priestess and Empress. For brevity's sake, movement towards the revolutionary fantastic as presented in the text can be described generally in three ways. In contrast to the history and political philosophy utilized by Luca, which is passed down through traditional channels of patriarchal legacy (the memory of her father communicated via a male mentor figure) or institutionalized scholarship, the history and philosophy communicated to Touraine is a fluid, contradictory set of truths. The basics of Shālan history and religion are debated even as they are being presented. We get the sense that magic's use, like Djasha, Aranen, and Jaghotai's contrasting interpretations of history and religion, are *up to the user to decide*. What so frustrates the above reader, the missing parameters or systemization of reality, is fundamental to the movement of the revolutionary fantastic. Clark does not provide Touraine with a clear ideological path forward, but a multiplicity of openings.

Aranen, the only formal Shālan priestess, guides Touraine toward a spiritual mutuality. Her discussion of magic with Touraine takes place while they feed and heal the Qazāli living in the Shālan Grand Temple, centering community care as the setting for spiritual/magical practice.

This *need* for others, in contrast to their *use* as narrative objects, animates the revolutionary drive of all the women in the novel. When Touraine asks her mentors why they fight, their answers are relational. Aranen movement is driven by her love for Djasha, her wife. Jaghotai is driven by the conscription of her daughter (Touraine). Touraine ultimately moves toward revolution because of her love of the Sands, eventually recognizing none of them will ever truly win sovereignty despite the colonial promise that citizenship can be won with blood. Luca's final release of her imperial ambition happens through her love of Touraine. Importantly, these are all *living* relationships. Only Djasha is characterized in the traditional sense – a hero motivated by the loss of a relationship – and her motivation of vengeance, the objectification of a person-as-corpse, is written as tragic. The reward of the revolutionary fantastic is not the "friends we made along the way." Those friends – and lovers and mothers and adopted siblings – *are* the way.

These multiple winding ways are revealed in the text less as rushes of power, but instead as *overwhelming feeling*. Another word for this sentiment would be ecstasy, which recognizes a link between affective excess and the mystical (fantastic). Clark describes Niwai's fantastic relationship to animals in exactly these terms. ("Touraine could see the ecstasy in Niwai's eyes as they used their magic. It made her shudder.")[297] She relies on it again to describe Touraine and her fellow Sand Aimee's initial reaction walking into the Shālan Grand Temple.[298] Consistently connected to this rapture or enchantment is fear. Touraine "shudders" in reaction to Niwai's ecstasy. When Touraine finally uses magic at the end of novel to "unknit," rather than heal, one of her colonial antagonists, the gory spectacle leaves Luca and other witnesses in panicky horror. Aranen also uses magic for the first time on page, simultaneously unknitting the Ballardian

[297] *ibid.*, 324.
[298] *ibid.*, 340.

general tasked with quelling the revolution and healing herself in midst of being shot. It is an awe of Touraine and Aranen that Luca finally surrenders and orders an end to the Ballardian occupation. Just as Touraine sacrifices her self-as-citizen earned through assimilation into empire, passing through death to become something new, Luca sacrifices her future empire. Luca, humbled before the fantastic, offers her life to Aranen:

> Aranen pressed a hand against her check. Luca leaned into, eyes closed. She yielded.
>
> Heat, or maybe light, or maybe none of that but something rolled through Luca's body. It coiled inside her chest, sliding between her lungs, slipping into the gaps of her intestines. It itched, a fierce tingling that made her want to rip herself apart. It shot up and down her legs, bouncing, heedless of the pain it caused her. At her heart, it felt like a caress, like a fist wrapped around her life, thinking to squeeze.[299]

This is the most direct articulation of magic articulated in the book. A visceral, uncomfortable bodily sensation. Luca walks away. Aranen spares her. She is not changed like Touraine or Aranen, whose eyes have transformed to the color of gold. But she has been touched.

We can recognize Clark as being a priestess herself as we continue to contemplate the revolutionary fantastic as affective, relational, and immanent. We can note through her work on *The Magic of the Lost* how the revolutionary fantastic resists a singular, authoritative orientation. Indeed, it might even hold contradictory meanings dependent on the distinct movements of its practitioners at any given time or place. What lies beyond us remains beyond us, even as we stretch toward it. Such movement requires the development of unconscious senses meekly described only in the wake of the encounters they attune to, and such encounters can only be

[299] *ibid.*, 471.

described through mystic language or felt in the body. Those around us, across the chasm of mystery that is the other, serve as wind and ballast both, carrying us to the maw of transformation. It is here amidst gods and monsters that other worlds emerge, and we develop the ability to explore them. What must be left on the altar and what should be carried back down the mountain is debatable. There is no clear answer as to what even occurred. The revolutionary fantastic continues to hum. To hear it, all one must do is imagine a way to tune in.

This is no easy thing, however, and both Delany and Anzaldúa vacillate constantly between expressing the joy and the pain of it. Both celebrate the potential of reading and writing in e/invoking a revolutionary fantastic. Delany imagines it as something akin to riding dragons while Anzaldúa ritualizes it as a form of shamanistic spirit journeying. Both articulate a version of the cycle of hope and disappointment described by Muñoz. The dragon always falls back to earth, even if it is in a different world than the one the rider took off from and the shaman must always be torn to pieces before re-membering a different reality. The power of the fantastic is its ability to break open the meaning of the wor(l)d and all its attendant realities. Clark reminds us that we cannot remove ourselves from the consequences of doing so. The revolutionary fantastic does not function to reassert or rejuvenate the norm, as is often the use of the fantastic. It is our wor(l)ds that are broken in the process of remaking. It is not a function with which one uses to operate *on* the world, but a mode of transformation one uses as a way of being with the world. This is not a function limited to literature, but rather a function revealed by literature.

The fantastic's value to revolutionary movement is undeniable, but one that much be couched in terms of its predominant use in maintaining the here and now. We have been taught to fear *nepantla*. The darkness of the fantastic – its discomfort and danger – is most commonly positioned as a disturbance or disquiet that must be defeated or repressed on the self's journey

toward the fantasy of wholeness. This change without transformation is a corrupt capture of the fantastic in service to the egregores of empire. To engage the revolutionary fantastic is to turn away from knowing safety towards a difficult journey without the security of the happy ending, promised by familiar story forms and narrative ideologies of individualized liberation. It is a turn away from current systems of knowing. Blowing apart reality and throwing yourself into the breach is a confusing, dangerous, and often alienating process. It is messy, contradictory, and exhausting. It is *a magic of the lost*.

In discussing M. John Harrison's work, Miéville describes facets of revolutionary vision in relation to the fantastic and points out how "inspiration" is often improperly conflated with the consolation and comfort Fantasy readers often want:

> "There are readers who dis particular books on the basis that they are 'depressing,' that they are not 'inspirational' … have misunderstood inspiration. It has become a blind for introspective, middlebrow terror. This is 'inspiration' as a late-modern variant of the church homily, in which Everything Happens For The Best has become Everything Happens For A Reason, and exhortations to Be True To God are replaced, or more likely joined, by the vapid and destructively useless Be True To Yourself. *What is meant by 'inspiration,' here, is comfort.* (emphasis mine)[300]

More than that, he notes the punishing truth of pursuing the Then and There: that reality will always get there first.[301] Whenever we manage to open a portal to another world, our own rushes in. Escape is a colonial fantasy. There is no way to exile what has been from ourselves or the

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[300] China Miéville, "The Limits of Vision(aries): or *M. John Harrison Returns to London and it is Spring*," *in Things That Never Happened* by M. John Harrison, ed. China Miéville (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2003), 1-2.
[301] *Ibid.*, 6-7.

worlds we may glimpse beyond, for even that glimpse is made with eyes taught only to see the here and now.

Miéville is rightly suspicious of the consolatory and affirmational trends in Fantasy fiction, but what I find often missing from his work is hope, not in the realm of characterization perhaps, but as a world building practice. Muñoz grounds his work in hope as both a critical affect and methodology, the latter being described as a "backward glance that enacts a future vision."[302] It may be hard to imagine Clark's *Magic of the Lost* as utopic or particularly hopeful, but this is due to the way, as Miéville points out, that inspiration has been insidiously conflated with the self-serving and comfortable. *The Unbroken* is a story where the daughter of colonial empire walks away from her own power, not as a result of some great moment of personal-national moral clarity that ultimately serves to reinforce colonial relationality, but as the beginning of quest to *undo the conceits of Western civilization itself*. It's also a world where homosexuality is not a desire understood through a history of abjection. It is in glancing backwards at this impossible pastness that models methods of enacting a queer Then and There in the here and now. This model does not provide definitive direction. It does not project clarity of vision. It is not grounded in a material analysis analogous to the real in a way that may be extrapolated into the future. The revolutionary movement it allows for is not entirely cognitive, rational, secular, pragmatic, or even, at times, possible. It is simply necessary.

Concretizing utopic impulse requires some degree of cynicism. This becomes especially necessary when playing with reality, where escape is a great temptation. Rather than attempting to deny or defer Fantasy's liability as an escapist literature (and let's not pretend a little easy

[302] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

escape every now and again isn't helpfully sustaining), those forms should be identified and their limitations critiqued. Cozy Fantasies like *Legends and Lattes* do not produce actionable hope. They are fantasies that are entirely built around the absence of systemic strife. In other words, they make hope *meaningless*. They precondition niceness as an organic fact of nature. Its absence is not a reality but a corruption of the way the world *is*. This limits rather than expands what is possible because it removes the one's agency to affect change *on the world*. They instead reify a polite, preschool system of ethics, that naturalizes a deradicalizing liberal worldview that conflates peace with justice. It is a fantasy of not having to *do anything* for a better world to exist, beside be nice. These are Plushlight Fantasies. In coining this term, I use plush in acknowledgement of the form's inherent softness, but also to connect that softness to the sumptuous luxury of consumer affect, where comfort is synonymous with success, individual independence, and moral goodness. They are not the radical salve or deconstruction of the much criticized Grimdark Fantasy, but rather its similarly pacifying mirror. Mark Fisher makes a good argument as to how grimdark cultural products like Frank Miller's Batman are emblematic of what he calls capitalist realism, where dystopia is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism.[303] It is a literature of loss, but where that loss is martyred into a totalizing reality. Plushlight fantasy is similarly emblematic of that reflexive impotence. Neither it nor the Grimdark Fantasy have any need for hope; failure is precluded in the former and omnipresent in the latter.

Plushlight Fantasy resists failure and promises a lack of disappointment. The danger of disbelieving disappointment and elevating comfort to an objective good is that any radical movement is curtailed in the avoidance of the former and any revolutionary action (which guarantees discomfort) is villainized as intentionally evil or naively cultic. The Then and There

[303] Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative? (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 1-11.

we seek is impossible. Our hands will be bloody from breaking through mirrors and splitting the backs of wardrobes ourselves. Our stomachs cramped from longs bouts of lostness in the woods. Our foreheads bruised from our mad attempts to break through the literal walls that cage us. It will never be enough. And it will never be safe.

Revolutionary Fantasy like *The Unbroken* expects disappointment but pushes forward anyway. This cynical hope counters the trope of the hopeful as inherently naïve or toxically positive. It is a hope that allows space for fun, wonder, even frivolity, while also recognizing that terror, pettiness, anger, misery, and stoicism are also lived experiences, ones not fundamentally oppositional to hope, but often its symbiotes. Anzaldúa's Coyolxāuhqui Imperative is a command to hope. Not from grand heights, but from the bottom of the Tower in the aftermath of dismemberment. It is a hope cultivated not out of simple disappointment, but a blood drenched hope that emerges from the pain of violent disfigurement and shock of catastrophic loss.

Revolution is a lot of breaking up and breaking down. The disorientation Touraine and Luca experience throughout *The Unbroken* is the chaotic experience Anzaldúa describes as being "lost between stories."[304] Such lostness is the effect of worlds crashing into each other – a loss of all that once was in the hope of all that may come. Magic requires this dissolution of reality, the end of a familiar world without any true knowledge of what will appear in its place. You don't know what you are doing or where you are going because you cannot know. Yes, that is scary. And when what you imagined fails. When what you believed in fails. When the here and now catches up with you. This is when it is easy to fall into fear. What Anzaldúa calls *desconocimiento*. These moments are when that innocent, wild, dreaming creature within you

[304] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 132.

screams loudest. How can they be expected to go on, when all they are is easy love and storybook chances? Their pain is the pain of being impossible. The impulse to blame is a reflexive reaction. You blame yourself. You blame others. You ascribe the pain and hurt of failure to one of your own dismembered parts – picking up an eye or a hand or even your heart – and you scream at it "You! You are the cause of this!" But this is an impulse of the worlds you left behind, and impulse of the here and now. It is an impulse that stems from thinking we can know ourselves or the worlds we live in so absolutely that we can effectively amputate. Contain. Protect. Isolate. CONTROL. It is in these moments that Anzaldúa insists that we must choose another way of knowing: *conociemento*, which she also describes as love.

How deeply ironic it is to declare we must choose to love in periods of lostness, for is not love just another way of being lost? You don't know exactly what you're doing or where you are going. You only know that the world of the here and now is intolerable, and that something else must take its place, for it is not a world that sustains love. And that then is the secret, for love is, ultimately, the willingness to be lost with someone. To be lost for someone. To be lost in finding someone. Failure no longer matters. Ending no longer matters. Hurting no longer matters. Knowing no longer matters.

This knowing unknowingness is vital to seeking Then and There. The revolutionary fantastic relies on a sleight of mind to circumvent reality. To trespass beyond the border of what is possible. It is only through uncertain movement that we might find what we don't know we're looking for. Indeterminacy allows space for joy alongside constant disappointment. When one Fantasy ends, even in complete disaster, another story takes its place. When you end, you pull yourself and a new world back together. Lostness is not aimless nor nihilistic. Lostness requires the hope of eventually not being lost. It is also a *willingness to be found*. Belief in the impossible

that is the Then and There beyond revolution's horizonal promise cannot be sustained alone. It, like the hearth fire, requires others to sustain it for those beyond its warmth as a promise to their return. We take turns being lost. It is the belief of others, both in others and others in you, that allows us to be lost instead of dead. Revolution, like magic or love, is sustained relationally. It is a call and response. Hope and belief. "Who said that every wish would be heard and answered/When wished on the morning star?/Somebody thought of that, and someone believed it/Look what it's done so far."[305] So, we pick up our tombstone, not with any expectation of escaping its destiny, but in a refusal to be buried here or buried now. It is not a hope to avoid the bitter epigraphs inscribed upon our flesh, our desire, or our land, but a hope for the joy of what stories we might make up along the way and the love of those willing to believe in them. The only true failure is the abandonment of love, to surrender creation in exchange for comfort.

There is a small, dreaming creature within all of us that still believes in magic, that is willing, despite all the wounds it has wandered into, to fall in love, that calls us to make belief in those spaces emptied of it, the one that worships the old gods, that lives where the wild things are, in salamander rooms, across the never of fathomless realms, where it whispers of revolt, nestled amidst the poetry of all other such creatures – hymns detailing their collective belief. Together they sing the revolutionary fantastic…

What's so amazing that keeps us stargazing?
And what do we think we might see?
Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection,
The lovers, the dreamers, and me.

[305] Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher, "Rainbow Connection," performed by Jim Henson, *The Muppet Movie*, Atlantic Records, 1979, accessed April 23, 2025, Spotify.

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