WEIRD DOMESTICITY: RECLAIMING THE SELF IN POST-1945 WEIRD FICTION BY WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

Weird fiction is an inherently difficult narrative mode to define, but in general the weird is an affective and aesthetic mode that narrates encounters with ecological or mystical entities that exceed direct human perception. Historical and theoretical explorations of the weird have long presumed that the weird became dormant during the period spanning from roughly 1940-1980. I argue that this presumed dearth indicates an inattention to weird texts written by women during this period, and that a reappraisal of texts that have been labelled “domestic fiction” reveals, rather than a dearth, an abundance of weird fiction that explores the interplay between the weird and the domestic. Using a material feminist lens, I develop a framework called weird domesticity, which takes heteropatriarchal blueprints for kinship as the starting point for estrangement. Domestic space during this period became a site in which both “deviant” forms of sexuality and the muck of messy materiality were foreclosed, and it was the archetypal figure of “the housewife” who was expected to keep the home free of more-than-human materialities. This dissertation explores the works of three writers—Barbara Comyns, Shirley Jackson, and Rachel Ingalls—whose narratives of weird domesticity explore the perspective of the housewife in order to reclaim modes of relationality and intimacy that press beyond the heteronormative strictures of “the home” and the bounded self.

For my mother and my grandmothers

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INTRODUCTION: A PLEASING HEIMLICHKEIT

The home is, among other things, an enclosure. It is a literal demarcation of that which is without and that which is within, that which is mine and that which is not. The notion of home offers a threshold, a passage from one state of being to another: a transition from exposure to protection, from alienation to belonging. It dangles the anticipation of this passage like an invitation and makes promises about safety and security. The dwelling-place of kin, the home is the place where walls and a roof give the illusion of security. In order to step inside this sort of home, one must make certain concessions about what sorts of others will be allowed to step inside, and what selves one must disallow in order to remain. Domestic space in the post-45 era privileged the clean over the dirty, the linear over the diffracted, the bounded over the permeable, the visible over the hidden, the individual over the collective. In a Western context, particularly since the 1950s, the home has become the container of the nuclear family. Emblematic of the 1950s is the image of the housewife: the smiling, always-coiffed woman who keeps an immaculate home, provides healthy, sumptuous meals for her husband and children, maintains a tidily trim figure, and does it all without complaint. In her 1975 essay "Wages against Housework," Silvia Federici reflects on a sentiment among young women in the postwar era that becoming a housewife is a "fate worse than death." It would seem that, despite the gleaming smiles plastered on the faces of housewives in advertisements for kitchen gadgets and cleaning products of the era, the actual material conditions of women in these roles often yielded deep dissatisfaction.

Federici's sentiment, specifically in its evocation of the weird phenomenon of "fate" and its seeming embrace of death, lies at the core of the novels of weird domesticity. Weird domesticity, I argue, is a key thematic focus of fiction written by women in the post-45 era.

Weird domesticity refers to a narrative mode that utilizes tropes traditionally attributed to a mode of writing known as weird fiction in order to sort out the relationships among gender, sexuality, more-than-human ecologies, and domestic space in an era during which the symbolic image of the housewife had solidified into an archetype of femininity that upheld repressive heteronormative and anthropocentric ideals.

In order to unpack the relationship between weird fiction and domesticity, I turn to a concept that has been both formative for typologies of weird fiction and that relies heavily on notions of "the home." Freud's concept of *unheimlich* has often been translated as "uncanny," but the translation more widely accepted by scholars of horror and the weird is "unhomely," or that which feels strange when it should feel familiar. In his seminal 1919 essay, Freud looks also at the etymology of *unheimlich*'s presumed opposite, *heimlich*, which he links to the familiar, the native, or that which belongs to the home or the family. Freud says that the *heimlich* can be found in the image of "a careful housewife, who knows how to make a pleasing Heimlichkeit (Häuslichkeit) out of the smallest means." Although he presents Heimlichkeit and Häuslichkeit as near-synonyms in this example, Heimlichkeit refers more to secrecy and deceit than it does to domesticity, leaving open the possibility of reading this image of a "careful housewife" as she who can be pleasant in her deception. How, though, could something potentially deceitful be "pleasing," and why is deceit implied as a synonym to domesticity? In addition to describing the comforts of home, Freud notes that *heimlich* can also refer to that which is kept secret or concealed, as in a "*heimlich* love affair," or as in the "*heimlich* art" of magic. These examples, particularly in the wake of the reference to the "careful" housewife, evoke heteropatriarchal anxieties around the feminized body and its resistance to domestic enclosure. A *heimlich* love affair carries a reminder of the uncontrollability of women's sexuality, of a sexual act that goes

beyond the boundaries of the home. The *heimlich* art, or magic, conjures connotations of witchcraft and the feminized body that is feared for its ability to enchant or seduce.

This project has developed out of an impulse to tug at the seams that have allowed *unheimlich* and *heimlich* to pretend they are opposites. In other words, this project examines the overlap between estrangement and domesticity. What happens when the home—that allegedly protected, enclosed space—is turned inside out, and weird phenomena suddenly find themselves somewhere they were not supposed to be? Who fears such intrusions, and who welcomes them with fascination? And what happens when it is the careful housewife, the keeper of the home, who is responsible for such weird irruptions? Such a person becomes fearsome, even monstrous, for the crime of desiring intimacy that exceeds the bounds not only of patriarchy and heteronormativity, but of humanness and the attendant Western ecological hierarchy that places the human at the top.

Typologies of Weird Fiction

Existing studies of 20th century weird fiction would lead one to conclude that the mode has, historically, rarely been taken up by women, and even more rarely has it been conceived of as a mode befitting novels that might otherwise be classified by publishers as "women's fiction" or "domestic fiction." However, a closer look at the characteristics of weird fiction warrants a closer look at places where the mode provides openings for writers to explore domestic spaces and the material and ecological relations that are filtered through those spaces. Weird fiction has characteristically proven difficult to taxonomize or typify, but Freud's essay on the *un/heimlich* has provided an enduring foundation for the study of narratives that could variously be described as horror, Gothic, supernatural, eerie, and weird, and much work has been done to navigate the relationships among these modes. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), H. P. Lovecraft

writes in a frequently quoted passage that "fear of the unknown" is a common theme across the weird, and that the "one test" for assessing a tale's "weirdness" is "whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim" (para 7). Contemporary theorists of the weird have continued to wrestle with the genre status of these narratives, and it has become widely accepted amongst weird scholars and readers alike to suggest that, unlike a proper genre, weird fiction is impossible to taxonomize absolutely. S.T. Joshi has said that the weird is not a genre, but rather is a "consequence of a worldview" (*The Weird Tale* 1). Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, who have compiled several popular anthologies of weird fiction, suggest that the weird "exists in the interstices," that "it can occupy different territories simultaneously," and that, finally, it invites readers to say, "I know it when I *feel* it" (*The Weird* xi, emphasis original). Despite some subtle differences, these definitions all agree that the weird is less a type than it is a way for narrative or other aesthetic modes of creation to provoke a sense or a feeling.

The landscape of weird fiction has been divided by scholars into two rough "periods," with the first coming to a close after the death of Lovecraft, and a new iteration of the mode emerging in the 1980s called the New Weird. Joshi's *The Weird Tale*, which looks closely at the weird fictions of Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Ambrose Bierce, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood, and Lovecraft, examines the period 1880-1940, and Joshi suggests that the mode effectively disappears during the "two generations after the death of Lovecraft," with only Shirley Jackson and Robert Aickman attaining "genuine eminence" during what he frames as a gap in weird fiction's history (Joshi 338). Similarly, Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy have offered a periodic division of the weird into the Old Weird of the Lovecraftian/pulp era

(roughly 1923-1938) and the New Weird (roughly 1980-present).[1] Noys and Murphy suggest that we can find the "origins" of the New Weird in the 1980s horror fiction of Thomas Ligotti and Clive Barker, and others see stirrings of the New Weird in the New Wave of science fiction popularized during the 1960s by writers like J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock. It has become common in such historical examinations to accept that the weird faded from view in the period between these so-called "old" and "new" eras, and that the new weird is akin to a "revival" of the old weird's preoccupying questions.

What proponents of this notion of a weird revival miss, though, is that weird fiction did not disappear in what have been perceived to be the lean years between Lovecraft and Ligotti, nor did it only rear its head in overtly fantastic, supernatural, or speculative works of New Wave science fiction. Alongside the horror, slipstream, and science fictional works that weird studies scholars argue have influenced seminal New Weird works, such as Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000),[2] another movement was taking place during the post-45, post-*Weird Tales* period. During the post-45 period, from roughly 1940-1980, a significant cadre of women writers examined the violent conditions of domesticity and heteropatriarchal conformity with malice—sometimes playfully subtle, sometimes wickedly exacting.

Historically speaking, weird fiction has typically featured a very particular kind of protagonist: a bookish intellectual whose research brings him face to face with the beings and phenomena that exist just outside the bounds of human perception. The vast majority of texts that have effectively become something like a weird "canon" are largely written by men. Despite this precedent, there have been a number of anthologies released in the past few decades, especially

[1] The term New Weird was coined in 2003 by M. John Harrison, who links the concept to the work of China Miéville.
[2] What the VanderMeers say is perhaps "the first commercially acceptable version of the New Weird."

since the late aughts, that collect and reclaim a tradition of "weird women." Such efforts include Eric Leif Davin's 2006 book, *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926-1965*, which does meticulous recovery work in attempting to identify and catalog all of the women who published in *Weird Tales*, among other pulps.[3] Other recovery work being done in this area include Gary Hoppenstand's edited collection of Francis Stevens's work. In the introduction to this collection, Hoppenstand asserts that Stevens, more so than even Lovecraft, was responsible for inaugurating a turn to "dark fantasy." He notes, too, that Lovecraft was very likely reading Stevens's fiction in *Weird Tales* and seems to have been influenced by the tropes she developed in her work. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer have compiled several enormous anthologies of weird fiction and adjacent narrative modes, including a phone book-sized tome called *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2010), which includes 110 entries from authors dabbling in the weird, a number of them written by women, and a slimmer volume dedicated to women writers called *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology* (2015). Even more recently, Lisa Kroger and Melanie Anderson published *Monster, She Wrote* (2019), a collection of brief biographical sketches and recommended reading lists of women writing weird and horror fiction. *Monster, She Wrote* has since turned into a series that Kroger and Anderson continue to edit with independent publisher Valancourt Books, which includes single-author works like Marjorie Bowen's *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories* (originally published in 1949) and Lisa Tuttle's *The Dead Hours of Night* (2021). Lisa Morton and Leslie Klinger have edited two volumes of *Weird Women: Classic Supernatural Fiction by Groundbreaking Female Writers*, one released in 2020 and the other in 2021.

[3] Davin's findings suggest that women represented roughly 17% of *Weird Tales*' prose contributors, and 40% of its poetry contributors. The former figure includes writers like C. L. Moore, Margaret St Clair, Dorothy Quick, and over 120 others.

These anthologies and sweeping surveys of weird fiction have worked to bring lesser-known women writers of the weird into view and have offered generative inspiration for the present project. This project seeks to contribute to this growing interest in woman-authored weird fictions by providing a close, critical examination of the aesthetic and narrative workings of weird domesticity. Critical work in weird studies still overwhelmingly prefers to explore texts written by men,[4] and while the aforementioned anthologies have done much work in collecting short fiction by numerous authors, they understandably leave out the novel. Moreover, the anthologies above have not yet filled the temporal gap between the old and new weird. I see this project addressing all three of these gaps: it provides a sustained critical examination of weird novels written by women in a period that has been largely ignored by weird scholars.

The central weirdness in the texts I examine lies in their depiction of matter's mutability from the vantage point of feminized subjects in domestic space. The novels blur the distinctions between the ecological and the mystical, leading to what I call an ecomystical sensibility. They center bodies that have been enclosed and/or disciplined because of their feminization and thus their perceived proximity to fate and organic life processes. This fearsome feminized body is often figured as witchlike, and emerges in different ways across the works of the three authors I examine in this project: a disfigured pariah who is scapegoated and blamed for an epidemic, or a young woman who suddenly gains the ability to levitate (as in the novels of Barbara Comyns); a girl who turns to tarot cards to cope with trauma, a "spinster" who has unique brushes with the paranormal, or a young girl who poisons her family (as in the narratives of Shirley Jackson); childless women who have nonreproductive sexual relationships with nonhuman familiars (as in

[4] Critical work currently being done in the field of weird fiction studies tends to focus on the "Weird Tales Three": Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard. For textual antecedents, most scholarly work will attribute Poe and, later, Machen, Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson with providing the raw materials for the mode's advancement.

the two Rachel Ingalls novels I discuss). These narratives of weird domesticity depict characters perceived to have a close proximity to the mystical and/or the nonhuman. This proximity ostracizes them, sometimes fatally so, and yet their fascination with the ecomystical often provides the only means of resisting incorporation into the heteropatriarchal order.

Putting the 'Wyrd' back in 'Weird'

Long before the weird was associated with tentacles and the great cosmic outside, it was closely connected with matters of fate and the almost always feminized deities or beings who act as the uncanny agents of fate on the earthly plane. Thus, in order to establish the relationship between the weird, gender, and domesticity, I return to the etymology of the word "weird" and its mythological valances. The literary figures most often associated with the word "weird" before it was retroactively applied to the likes of Machen, Blackwood, Dunsany, and Hodgson were witches with a preternatural relationship to fate: Shakespeare's Weird Sisters.[5] Alexandra Jeler has explored the mythological genealogy of the Weird Sisters, noting that the word "weird" comes from the Anglo-Saxon "wyrd," which was tied in Norse mythology to the Norns, the three goddesses in control of fate and destiny. The Norns have corollaries in the Roman Parcae and the Greek Moirai, more commonly known as the Fates. The Norns, Parcae, and Moirai all come in groups of three: one to represent the past, another to represent the present, and a third to represent the future. The Moirai are often depicted as three women at different stages of life: a young girl who spins the threads of fate, a middle-aged woman who measures these threads, and an aged crone who cuts the thread when a life ends. Such figures have been believed to harbor and transmit the universe's most inscrutable laws, serving as interlocutors of otherworldly

[5] As Jeler reminds us, the Weird Sisters are ambivalent figures: they appear material yet mystical; powerful yet desperate enough to be begging; sinister yet childish in their sing-song incantations; based in both the developing Christian views and the popular pagan lore of the day.

knowledge that exceeds human perception. Thus the notion of the "weird" has long been tied to witchlike figures who have evolved to become seen as wicked and grotesque for what Jeler calls their "inability to pertain to only one realm, reality or identity, eluding any attempts at a comprehensible definition" (Jeler 52). Weird studies, then, would do well to attend to the weird as an affective mode that deals with a fascination for the unknowability of one's own fate. Such unknowability blurs the distinction between the material and the mystical, the profane and the spiritual.

The weird, then, is a mode that has always been preoccupied with the ecomystical. The incomprehensibility of death and the difference between life and death have been identified by recent work in weird studies as primary preoccupations of the weird, leading some scholars to frame the mode as fundamentally ecological, and others to identify the weird narrative's relationship to mysticism, but such work has been surprisingly disinterested in gender. In the ecological vein, Dennis Denisoff and Anthony Camara have argued that Arthur Machen's early twentieth-century weird fictions are indicative of the era's vitalism-mechanism debates, in which biologists and philosophers alike grappled with questions of what differentiates dead matter from live matter. Denisoff, for example, has suggested that "the term 'weird' does not refer to a genre, but rather to a sense of anxiety or terror regarding an ecological force seemingly acting on indeterminate motivations with little or no concern for people" (187). Camara, in "Abominable Transformations: Becoming Fungus in Arthur Machen's *Hill of Dreams*," suggests that Machen's novella is "essentially" weird, that its weirdness "inheres in how it takes the mundane fact of organismic life and transforms it into a figuration of the starkest supernatural horror" (1617). The "mundane fact" Camara refers to is the contradiction of fungal life; that is, the confusion of whether fungi are alive or dead in their "undead animation" (Camara 17). Camara

argues that the undifferentiated fungal slime that Lucien Taylor fixates upon throughout Machen's semi-autobiographical novella appalls and fascinates Lucien because it shows him something of his own fate that he cannot otherwise apprehend through language or experience. The slime is in a state of being un/made, but it is not clear which direction it is moving toward. This conundrum both fascinates and repels Lucien because this substance resists categorization as either alive or dead. The central fear present of this sort of weird fiction stems from the confrontation of agents that exist beyond or outside of "scientific inquiry," these texts "speculat[e] about metaphysical forces that are recalcitrant to being directly or absolutely known, and that underlie scientifically intelligible phenomena and objects" (Camara 17). In other words, the moment of terror grows out of contact with ecological agents or phenomena that exceed the grasp of scientific observation. In *Weird Mysticism*, Brad Baumgartner defines his "weird mysticism" in relation to apophatic unknowing that we have received from the medieval mystical text, *Docta Ignorantia*:

> "As a literary mode, weird mysticism often utilizes the identifiable narrative technique of mystical auto-commentary, yet it can also be considered a genre of writing, or category of literary composition (i.e., the mystical text). But we will also posit that these limits might be overcome by focusing on how performing an "apophatic weird criticism" of this sort is a kind of mystical death in and of itself, wherein the apophatic critic annihilates herself via weird criticism." (Baumgartner 5)

It's good of Baumgartner to use the feminine pronoun here for his "apophatic critic" given his apparent disinterest in the category of women. His book largely ignores the ways in which the mystical origins of the weird have historically been feminized and how, as a result, such mystical

fervor has been used to discipline feminized bodies.[6] Such critical approaches to the weird have largely ignored gender, despite the gendered connotations of the weird's ecomystical anxieties.

Fears of the ecomystical often manifest in fears of what Barbara Creed has called the monstrous-feminine: the body that resists incorporation into, and threatens to upend, the patriarchal symbolic order. Explorations of patriarchal anxieties around the monstrous-feminine are many, and most notably for this project include Julia Kristeva's excavation of the abject maternal body, in which she argues that the feminized mother figure produces revulsion because she symbolically stands at the precipice of life and death, at the grotto where meaning and language collapse. Feminist theologian Catherine Keller has also demonstrated that fears of a primordial maternal body are as old as the oldest creation myths upon which Western scripture is built. She reminds us that Tiamat, the creator at the heart of the Babylonian creation epic the Enuma Elish, was depicted as a maternal, feminine figure, who has over time become figured as a monster: "The poet, breeding monsters, transmutes [Tiamat] into a symbol of pure evil—quite a demotion! The loving mother of reality is turned into the monster of the deep. Evil can now for the first time be identified with femininity" ("'Be this fish': a theology of creation out of chaos" 17). In *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Keller argues for a feminist, process-oriented re-reading of Genesis 1.2 that, rather than erasing, pays close attention to "the bottomless watery depths" out of which the universe emerges in the creation myth (5). For Keller, these depths are manifold, messy, and become a "dual symbol of denigrated marginality and of diffuse, metamorphic possibility." According to Keller, the dominant heuristic at work in reading creation is one of *creatio ex nihilio*, in which the universe is read as being created by the arranging hand

[6] It's further surprising that, given its commitment to the mystical and to the apophatic, Baumgartner's book does not once cite or reference feminist theologian Catherine Keller, who has written extensively on the mystical origins of the apophatic as well as current applications of the apophatic to our current moment of "global weirding" in these environmentally precarious times.

of a patriarchal god out of absolute nothing. She argues that this story might be re-read instead as *creatio ex profundis*, creation "out of the watery depths" (5). For Keller, these depths are manifold, messy, and distinctly feminine, distinctly Other. Rather than mapping a purely unilateral, singular source onto the creation story, Keller reads in Genesis the potential to locate a pluriform source of creation that is instead characterized by chaos, waste, darkness, and depths: "it is not a latent biblical logic but the polemic against 'heresy' that crystallized earlier narratives of beginning into the 'orthodox' doctrine of origin...this rhetorical extrusion draws its driving omnipotence from a drama of gender" (43-4). Keller cites "heresy" as the driving force behind the erasure of excesses that might be read in the Hebrew concept of *tehom*. Far from being the only inherent reading of creation available in the Old Testament, *creatio ex nihilio* was merely a way for orthodoxy to inoculate itself against alternate readings of *tehom* as "the maternal floods of primordial chaos" (v). As Keller writes, "The aggressive nihilation of the chaoid otherness took the form of exacerbated, even divinized, masculinities" (xvii).

Bodies that are associated with the feminine and the maternal have thus been framed as uncontrollable and dangerous because of their close relationship to the abyss, which has been read as a significant source of terror in weird fiction from a Lovecraftian perspective. Indeed, Lovecraft notes an appreciation for Hodgson's weird tales because of the way they depict "blasphemous hybrid anomalies from a hidden abyss below" (*Supernatural Horror in Literature*). Such fears, when read through the lens of the monstrous-feminine, emerge as distinctly masculine in provenance. If the abyss and its weird progeny are framed as feminine, how would the weird look from the perspective of the monstrous-feminine subject? To understand the weird as only, or even primarily, characterized by fear of more than human actors and forces excludes weird texts that are told from the perspective of the feminized other. In the

post-45 era, many of these monstrous-feminine subjects were circulating primarily within domestic space.

From representations in folk tales to modern horror cinema, the witch has been depicted as a woman who exists on the margins of society, who is sometimes sought out, but is most often feared and ostracized, for the secret knowledge she conceals and for her ability to exert control over the fate of another. The witch had long been associated with a notion of "the monstrousfeminine" before Barbara Creed coined the term in her 1993 book of the same name. In her third chapter, Creed traces the figure of the witch across quintessential films in horror cinema, from Dario Argento's *Suspiria*, to Brian de Palma's *Carrie*. Drawing on the work of Kristeva, Creed notes that in these films the

> "witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes, and storms." (76)

The witch represents an irresolvable contradiction between powerlessness and omnipotence. On the one hand, she is characterized with attributes that would, in a Western, Cartesian context, make her appear weak: she is seen as closer to the irrational, to nature and the animal body, rather than the allegedly detached, rational mind. Indeed, she is often narrativized in forms that appear frail or otherwise disempowered: as a young, barely pubescent girl in the case of Carrie, or as an aged crone, or even as a mother reveling in the murderous spawn of her monstrous

womb as in David Cronenberg's *The Brood*. However, this incompatibility with the rational and perceived proximity to nature are precisely those attributes that are the source of her power and the fear it produces. Thus, she is seen as a threat and must be expelled from society, blamed and persecuted for bringing misfortune—an unwanted fate—to those who spurn her.

The wickedness of the witch most often stems from a distrust of feminized bodies perceived to have unique control of, or insight into, the mystical workings of organic life processes. Caroline Merchant provides historical grounding for anxieties of the witch as monstrous-feminine in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, describing how developments in scientific methodologies during the Enlightenment led to marked changes in how Western society viewed the desire to control both the unruly natural world and the unruly feminized body. As Merchant writes, "The witch, symbol of the violence of nature, raised storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generation, and killed infants. Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled" (127). Silvia Federici similarly suggests that women, because of "their unique relation to the process of reproduction," have been "credited with a special understanding of the secrets of nature, presumably enabling them to procure life and death and discover the hidden property of things" (27). For Federici, this is not an essentialist reality but rather has emerged as a narrative that has allowed patriarchal hegemons to assert control over the processes of reproduction in order to pave the way for capitalism to emerge. The disciplining of the feminized body in domestic space in the post-1945 era has its roots in the witch hunts that emerged at what Federici calls the "crossroads of a cluster of social processes that paved the way for the rise of modern capitalism" (*Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* 12). The rise of modern capitalism was helped along by the emergence of private property. Federici offers the following description of the witch:

> "In the witch the authorities simultaneously punished the attack on private property, social insubordination, the propagation of magical beliefs, which presumed the presence of powers they could not control, and the deviation from the sexual norm that now placed sexual behavior and procreation under the rule of the state." (20)

Federici reminds us that the emergence of private lands during the feudal period gave way to capitalism had significant implications for women and feminized people living in a state of financial or social precarity. The formation of the state and its proxy, the nuclear family, and the attendant expulsion of people framed as witches from both structures resulted in the isolation of women from one another. Federici discusses the etymological history of the word "gossip," a word that today refers to the idle, usually malicious talk that nosy people (most often women) swap with one another. However, the word gossip once referred simply to the people with whom one would share an intimate bond—the people with whom one would gossip. As Federici articulates, women who would gather together to talk and do household tasks in a communal setting would refer to one another as each other's "gossip." Eventually, such gatherings of women outside the bounds of the nuclear family would be regarded with suspicion, and their chatter began to be framed at best as idle, at worst as malicious scheming of those who might be witches.

Studies of the weird as a mode have been more interested in the ways in which ecological or mystical unknowability elicits negative affects like fear or revulsion, but these affects are often fundamentally heteropatriarchal and Eurocentric. The weird is also capable of producing affects like fascination or wonder. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher productively returns to the *unheimlich* as a way of reframing the uniqueness of weird fiction and argues that the weird provokes fascination, rather than anxiety or terror, when confronting "that which lies beyond

standard perception, cognition and experience" (8). The weird, he argues, is interested in the strange, rather than the terrifying. This emphasis on fascination over fear opens up space in weird studies to consider the weird's ability to elicit a broader range of affective responses than it is often afforded. The protagonists in the novels of weird domesticity I examine in this project have distinct relationships with fate and death. Previously denied autonomy over their fates within an enclosed domestic environment, they often fantasize about the mutability of the material self: they seek out or welcome encounters with weird entities and they often fantasize about death, that eventual fate of all living things. The fascination with death occurs not because they want to see an end to the "self"—rather, they have a completely different conception of "selfhood." Their conception of selfhood is more capacious and fluid than the blueprint provided to them by a deeply individualistic, heteropatriarchal social order. Death, in weird domesticity, is never about the erasure of an enclosed thing we might call the self; rather, it is about transitioning from one material state of being to another, thus suggesting a belief that enclosures, both physical and ideological, cannot contain a self that is always already in progress, unenclosable.

If witches are closely, even fundamentally, related to the weird, where are the weird stories told from the perspectives of those who have been labeled thus? And how does an encounter with the strange look from the vantage point of a witch, rather than her accuser? That writers of weird domesticity have been overlooked is, at least in part, the result of un- or underexplored foundations. In 1926, the same year Lovecraft wrote *The Call of Cthulhu,* Sylvia Townsend Warner published her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, an odd, playful book about a spinster named Laura Willowes who escapes the confines of familial responsibilities and dependencies, declares herself to be a witch, and takes up with Satan. Witchcraft is framed, by the end of the novel, as a calling that can grant a woman control over her own destiny—freedom from domestic

enclosure. What would it mean to revisit *Lolly Willowes* as a foundational work of weird fiction? In Laura Willowes, Warner realizes a protagonist who is overlooked throughout the history of the weird and establishes a clear precedent for the proliferation of woman-authored weird fictions I identify in the post-45 era. Warner explores the tension between domestic enclosure and women's liberation through the discursive figure of the witch. Laura is a 47-yearold spinster who, after walking out of her brother's paternalistic care, sets out in search of a new life for herself. She finds happiness in long walks, foraging for herbs, and brewing up strange concoctions until she meets Satan in the woods and begins identifying herself more explicitly as a witch. Ultimately, she is self-possessed enough by the end of the novel to deliver a five-page speech to Satan himself about why women are more in need of witchcraft than warlocks:

> "That's why we become witches: to show our scorn of pretending life's a safe business, to satisfy our own passion for adventure… One doesn't become a witch to run round being harmful, or to run round being helpful either, a district visitor on a broomstick. It's to escape all that—to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others, charitable refuse of their thoughts, so many ounces of stale bread of life a day, the workhouse dietary is scientifically calculated to support life." (215)

Laura's monologue is a rallying cry for weird domesticity, particularly in the "scorn" she feels about "pretending life's a safe business." In many ways, the home has been framed as an impenetrable fortress that can protect its inhabitants against the strange or the unknowable. Because Laura is seen as incapable of living anterior to the paternalistic care of either a husband or a male relative, she is forced to live with her brother and his family. Moreover, she is expected to essentially work as a housekeeper for them. When she finally decides to move out on her own, her rejection of the "safety" promised by this arrangement ultimately affords her the life of her

own that she craves. Framing Warner's book as an early exemplar of weird domesticity leads me to identify a proliferation, rather than a dearth, of weird fiction in the post-45 era. Such narratives frame unknowable agencies as nonthreatening, or as co-conspirators in working against heteropatriarchal capitalist systems from within domestic space.

Defining Weird Domesticity

This project explores how women writers in the post-45 era have worked with the weird to reimagine the possibilities of domestic space by turning to the ecomystical. These fictions debunk the notion that practices of homemaking are themselves inherently oppressive. Instead, they provide scenarios in which women choose to operate within some altered version of domestic space, but do so in ways that radically reimagine the relationship of the self to the material world and to the family. To suggest, as many second wave feminists did, that women could work toward liberation by moving out of the home and into the workforce is to reaffirm the logic of capital. Instead, the women writing domestic weird fictions imagine alternative worlds in which the conditions of homemaking can be reclaimed from heteropatriarchal blueprints while still foregrounding things like caring for the nonhuman, the modestly mundane rituals of growing one's own food, finding peace in solitude, playing with fortune telling cards. Weird domesticity foregrounds the witch—the feminized outsider who sees through the veil to another way of being. They have, either by choice or by circumstance, been forced to exist on the margins of the nuclear family and move toward alternative ways of being by forging alternative familial arrangements, connecting with nonhuman kin, or even fantasizing about their own deaths.

The Female Gothic is a useful touchstone for weird domesticity, but where the Female Gothic finds the "entrapment of domestic space" to be the central cause of terror, weird domesticity reclaims the home rather than disavowing it. Scholars have frequently discussed how

the weird and the Gothic share much of the same genetic makeup. Jonathan Newell, for example, has described the weird as a "tumour of sorts growing out of the gothic—composed of the same tissues but unfamiliar, alien yet not-entirely-so, at once part of its progenitor and curiously foreign to it" (4). The horror in weird domesticity is not inherent to the home or to the reproductive labor that sustains it, but rather to the ways in which feminized bodies are alienated from this work, the ways in which their efforts to pursue the sensorial experience of tending to their own lives is made spectral. Domestic weird fictions depict domesticity as contingent upon a series of transcorporeal interchanges between humans and the more than human world, foregrounding the body and its tessellations with other materials, and often emphasize the role that homemaking plays in reclaiming the self. These texts did not seem particularly radical at a time when the mainstream second wave feminist movement was telling women that they needed to escape the home and seek out careers of their own. Some protagonists in narratives of weird domesticity are denied a wage for such care work, and they become forced to support themselves in increasingly absurd and tragic means.

Weird domesticity marries Nina Baym's definition of domestic fiction with contemporary conceptions of the weird. Baym writes that within the scope of domestic fiction, "domestic tasks are arduous and monotonous; family members oppress and abuse each other; social interchanges are alternately insipid or malicious" (26-7). Baym's understanding of domestic fiction hinges on the fact that "domestic setting and domestic description do not imply domestic idyll" (27). In my framing of weird domesticity, the parameters of domestic fiction intersect with the central questions that concern weird fiction. Thematically, the weird narrative typically fixates on the limits of human perception and the metaphysical. Coming face to face with those limits can be horrifying, transcendent, and sometimes comical—often all of these. From a formal perspective,

what best characterizes the weird is its resistance to taxonomy. When I speak of weird domesticity, I am referring to those generically slippery narratives in which the boundaries of the human are pushed beyond recognition in encounters with the everyday in ways that disrupt patriarchy and heteronormativity. Domestic space—despite being framed in popular discourse of the atomic age as a refuge against the strange—is framed in weird domesticity as a space where violent estrangement occurs when we attempt to *deny* entry to the strange and uncanny. Weird domesticity inverts the horrors of estrangement, revealing the violence of banality, of the "real," and reveling instead in the dissolution of boundaries and dispensing with fantasies of domestic conformity and safety. These writers demonstrate how fiction about domesticity must be understood as a site within which to critique the capitalist relations that structure domestic space and the patriarchal image of the nuclear family. In other words, tales of weird domesticity must be read for their critiques of a set of social relations—including wage relations—that have led to the alienation of women from other women and from the more-than-human world. As part of this work, the material conditions of the authors themselves are important to the aims of this project. To the extent possible, I have attempted to situate the texts I examine alongside their authors and the conditions of domesticity under which they each wrote. It quite literally matters that Shirley Jackson was a mother, or that Barbara Comyns struggled with money for much of her life.

Material Feminism and the Unbounded Self

The intersection between gender and Western patriarchal fears of uncontrollable nature—and the ways those anxieties manifest in the figure of the witch—provides the historical grounding for weird domesticity. My theoretical grounding for weird domesticity relies on what has been called the material turn in feminist theory, which has worked to return critique to the body as a site of relationality and resistance. Material feminism aims to push back against the retreat from the

body and materiality that they argue characterized postmodern feminism, instead finding that the linguistic and cultural realms exist alongside and within the material, and advocating a return to the body and its interconnectedness with the more than human world. This return to the material in feminist thinking has foregrounded the agencies and acting-power of the more-than-human world. Nature, from a material feminist perspective, can no longer be thought of as an inert, ahistorical backdrop against which humans act. Instead, material feminists see "nature" as a collection of innumerable agents, human and nonhuman, that are always striving, collaborating, and becoming within and through one another in ways that cannot be predetermined or manipulated.

Material feminism, at its core, is primarily interested in critiquing the material conditions of patriarchy—which relies on heteronormativity and anthropocentrism—that place limitations on gender expression, sexuality, and ecological relationships. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, in their paradigm-shifting collection *Material Feminisms* (2008), argue that "attending to materiality erases the commonsensical boundaries between human and nature, body and environment, mind and matter. In short, taking matter seriously entails nothing less than a thorough rethinking of the fundamental categories of Western culture" (17). This material turn of the late aughts builds on earlier work of feminist science studies and ecofeminists, particularly the work of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and Val Plumwood. Rachel Carson, too, should be credited in this lineage for her approach to science writing that advocated for viewing ecosystems holistically.[7] Haraway and Barad specifically have both contributed to deconstructing the fantasy of the detached observer. Haraway famously returned the body to the act of observation by

[7] Before *Silent Spring* catapulted her into the public eye, her earlier book, *The Sea Around Us*, was highly acclaimed for its discussion of how ocean ecosystems are interconnected. Carson, tellingly, was characterized as a witch by her detractors in the wake of her publication of the more polemical and cautionary *Silent Spring*.

pointing out that the belief in a detached gaze was merely the "God trick" of masculinist science, and that the erasure of the observer in the act of observation only serves to bolster an image of whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and Eurocentricity as the ideal observer. Barad similarly argues that the act of observation is never neutral or detached, but rather always makes a "cut" that determines what is being included and excluded in the act of observing, and always reveals the ways in which the observer affects and is affected by the observer. Barad's ideas have been influential to a number of fields, including feminist theory, science and technology studies, and philosophy. Barad, inspired by what she calls the "philosophy-physics" of Niels Bohr, argues that phenomena never precede their relations. Barad argues that their notion of agential realism has value in literary studies.

Donna Haraway has argued for her understanding of sympoiesis, a collaborative makingwith, asking, "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social?" (*Staying With the Trouble* 30). When these ideas of the human "no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledges, if they ever did," she seems to be underscoring the necessity of celebrating the potential of negative knowledge, rather than balking in the face of it (30). Sympoiesis, Haraway, says, yields "generative joy, terror, and collective thinking" (31). These efforts have paved the way for more recent work in material feminism, including Stacy Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality, and Jane Bennett's vibrant matter. Alaimo has theorized what she calls a transcorporeal understanding of human-nonhuman interchanges, arguing that the human experience must be framed as an "opening out unto the larger material world." In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett traces the vibrating effectivity of nonhuman materialities across diverse happenings, from massively

distributed power grid failures to micro, intimate acts of eating and digestion. Bennett argues that it is both possible and necessary to consider "nonhuman materialities as bona fide participants rather than as recalcitrant objects, social constructs, or instrumentalities" (62). Within this material feminist framework, I consider the ways in which narratives of weird domesticity stage such subjects as mystical materiality, nonhuman agency, and nonreproductive futurity.

Dana Frost and Samantha Coole, in the introduction to *New Materialisms*, offer a provocation: "Matter becomes, rather than matter is" (10). The notion of becoming-with is essential to material feminist thought, which interestingly connects with the etymology of the weird. In her thorough excavation of the etymological origins of the word "weird," Jeler finds that in its original Anglo-Saxon and Norse contexts, the weird and "fate" have been connected both with notions of "becoming" and with "being bound," as with a rope. There is an odd tension between these two valences: on the one hand, there is constriction and inescapability, but on the other there is transformation and fluxity. This tension between "becoming" and "being bound" mirrors the tension between death as, on the one hand, a fate that is inescapable and, on the other hand, as a process in which matter must always transition from one state to another. The ontological impulse in material feminism to consider relationality as a precondition for the self opens up space for the mystical.

Mystical Matter and Apophatic Unknowing

Karen Barad historicizes mid-century developments in quantum physics made by Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg in order to suggest that matter itself is weird. For Barad, it was Bohr whose theories are sounder, despite the comparatively greater prevalence of Heisenberg persisting in popular imaginaries. The divide between the two, Barad says, is a matter of epistemology vs. ontology illustrated by their incompatible theories of the role the observer plays in scientific

observation. Heisenberg's uncertainty theory presented a problem of epistemology, arguing that certain atomic properties were inaccessible because of the particular method of observation being used–quantities remain uncertain because the apparatus was insufficiently equipped to apprehend them, or because the observer caused a disturbance. For Bohr, on the other hand, the issue was not about methodological inadequacies or disturbances, but rather about ontological indeterminacies. It was impossible, in his estimation, to say for certain that the atomic properties in question actually exist at all.

In troubling a presumed dichotomy between nature and culture, or between the biological and the social, material feminists have opened up space to consider the relationship of the human to the indeterminacies of the more than human. The methodologies of material feminism, in other words, afford a consideration of the ecomystical. Barad's work, in particular, has proven generative for scholars of mysticism, like Catherine Keller. In the introduction to *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein set forth the volume's primary aims: to offer "a variety of perspectives on the agency of matter," to "bring these perspectives to bear on a range of theologies," and, finally, to consider how "material theologies might. . . unsettle the racist, colonial, and ecocidal legacies of their materiaphobic counterparts" (7). Keller lays the groundwork for what she calls an apophatic materialism, reminding us of the "ancient mystical apophasis, the 'unsaying' that characterizes negative theology." Keller, in *Cloud of the Impossible*, finds much purchase in Baradian intra-action, and puts it to work in articulating what she calls her "apophatically entangled theology." Keller anticipates the seemingly inherent contradiction between apophasis as a kind of centrifugal concept, and entangled relationality as a centripetal one. By worrying the metaphorical caesura between what she calls the cloud of apophasis and the crowd of entanglement, Keller makes her

case for a theology that accounts for the "the tangled planetarity of human and nonhuman bodies" that "in their unsettling togetherness will exceed our capacities ever altogether to know or manage them. In their *unspeakable excesses* they press for new possibilities of flourishing" (5, emphasis added). Keller, like Barad, reminds us that "we know nothing beyond our relations" (3). Mystical materialism offers a new ethic of interspecies intimacy and kinship. In order to chart an underexplored trajectory for the weird, I take the genre's fundamental reliance on apophatic knowledge and read it anew through a material feminist lens. The recent material turn(s) in both feminist and ecological thought provides a lens through which to resituate the matter/spirit question in a twentieth-century context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the moniker "weird" is often used to help indicate how little humans actually know about more-than-human phenomena–including and especially organisms and organic processes. Long central to the genre identity of the weird are encounters with the unknowable, the unnameable, and the unthinkable, as confronted in cosmic or ancient otherworlds very far from our own. I argue that the writers I examine in this project adopt an apophatic attitude toward the intimate materialities of their domestic environments and are keenly interested in the deconstruction of the boundary between household and organic matter, between inside and outside worlds, between human and nonhuman.

Despite the unsaying inherent to apophatic observation, it would be a mistake to think of apophasis as subtractive whereas scientific knowledge is additive. The negations that comprise one's interaction with an apophatic phenomenon can stack up wildly, madly, especially in weird fictions in which the protagonist becomes overwhelmed by the sheer volume of unknowable quantities. Historically, apophasis has been used as a heuristic for unpacking metaphysical

mysteries. The word conjures up a host of religious connotations, drawing as it does from seminal works of Christian mysticism like *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Docta Ignorantia*. These mystics developed an apophatic theology (or a negative theology), an approach that asserts God can only be described through negation. However, recent turns in new materialist thought have opened up the possibility of applying a heuristic resembling apophatic theology to questions of materiality. Keller is a key interlocutor here, as her concept of apophatic materialism reminds us that "it is never just 'God' that comes unsaid. For there seems to be something hard to say, something that constantly comes unsaid, about matter itself–something revealed by the quantum phenomena" (*Cloud of the Impossible* 123). Matter, it turns out, behaves as strangely as God and ghosts.

Barbara Comyns and the Numinous

My first chapter explores two of the English writer Barbara Comyns's novels in order to establish the connection between weird domesticity and the perceived threat the unruly feminized body presents to heteropatriarchal sovereignty. Comyns, a writer who was virtually forgotten by the mid-90s, has been seeing a resurgence that will only continue to grow with the addition of a rich biography of her life that was released in March of 2024 by Gothic scholar Avril Horner.[8] Some novels, like *The Skin Chairs,* are unfortunately still out of print.[9] Comyns's novels *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1953) and *The Vet's Daughter* (1959) unflinchingly depict the violent consequences caused by heteropatriarchal fears of unexplainable or uncontrollable material phenomena. I argue that feminized bodies are framed within her work as being simultaneously more profane and more mystical because of their perceived proximity to the nonhuman and the "nonrational." As Silvia Federici has written, "Poverty and sexual

[8] The publication of Horner's 2024 biography of Comyns marks a watershed moment for Comyns scholars and readers.
[9] *The Skin Chairs* has been called a Gothic masterpiece by Horner, but has been out of print since the 1990s.

transgression were common elements in the lives of many women condemned as witches" (2). Comyns's fiction is extremely interested in the body and the natural world within which it is embedded, and it is also interested in the economic plight of women who are severely inhibited by materially precarious circumstances. Comyns demonstrates in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* a keen awareness of the limitations and inaccuracies of the myth that a contained life is "safe." Characters do not simply have the luxury of leaving the unnamed Warwickshire village, even when offered "legitimate" means for doing so (as in a marriage proposal from a man of means, for example). Leaving is out of the question, and is perhaps even less of an option, when it becomes clear that there is something poisoning the villagers from within, driving them to madness, to slitting their own throats and jumping off of bridges. In *The Vet's Daughter*, unruly matter takes the form of the gravity-defying body of teenage Alice Rowlands, which incites a frenzied stampede that tramples her to death. Comyns depicts extreme physical overwhelm and violent outbursts as a response to contact with bodies and agencies that disrupt the heteropatriarchal conception of the bounded individual.

Shirley Jackson: The Housewife Writer

My second chapter explores the fiction and the authorial persona of Shirley Jackson who, unlike the other two writers I look at in this project, attained critical acclaim and a broad readership while she was still writing. Throughout her career, Jackson's identity as a mother and housewife was kept separate from her identity as a writer. The male critics who favorably reviewed her work were not interested in the books she wrote about herself or her experiences keeping house. On the other hand, she drew scorn from the feminist movement of the era for being a "housewife writer" (Friedan). This is something of a Catch-22: her personal writing marked her, in the eyes of some male critics, as overly focused on what they perceived to be feminine concerns, but this

"feminine" work was judged to be anti-feminist by the likes of Friedan. Although Jackson earned widespread acclaim for her writing during her life, the criticism that flared up when she tried to write more directly about domesticity is perhaps indicative of why other women writing about domesticity in a weird mode went unread.

I explore Jackson's fictional worlds, where matter is never mute nor easily apprehended as a finite, discrete quantity. Quite the contrary: the physical objects in her work resonate with potency, and such more-than-human vibrancy exceeds her characters' ability to fully comprehend. Thus, apophatic knowing–or perhaps unknowing–is a key theme in her work. Unlike the metaphysical apophasis present in the supernatural horrors of the Lovecraftian weird tradition, though, it is *matter*, the literal stuff of life, that transcends human ways of meaningmaking. In her fiction and her memoirs alike, Jackson weirds the domestic by establishing material rituals as a means of destabilizing accepted notions of domesticity in the atomic age. Domestic space, for Jackson, becomes at once more capacious, less bounded, more mutable and feral than popular narratives of the day allowed for. Her fiction moves us beyond the atomic age discourse around domesticity and returns us to the queer matter that grows and creeps and oozes through the door frames and open windows of the houses that populate her works. This project argues for a material feminist reading of weird domesticity in order to expand the boundaries of the weird and to chart an alternative trajectory for its proliferation. Such a reading, I hope, will begin to demonstrate that the weird did not disappear during the atomic age, but rather was taken up by a number of transatlantic women writers and ultimately flourished in narratives of domesticity.

Rachel Ingalls and Seducing the Nonhuman

My final chapter examines two novels by Rachel Ingalls, *Mrs. Caliban* (1982) and *Binstead's Safari* (1983), that both depict transspecies romances as a means of critiquing the sterility of heteropatriarchal domestic enclosure. Ingalls's fiction critiques the fantasy of safety within domestic space and the nuclear family by juxtaposing the traumas that occur within a heteronormative marriage alongside the abundantly pleasurable relationships her housewife characters experience with more-than-human others. *Mrs. Caliban* follows Dorothy, a lonely, grieving housewife, who meets a 6'7" frogman freshly absconded from his imprisonment at the Jefferson Institute for Oceanographic Research. Larry has escaped his sterile aquatic cage only to find himself in Dorothy's domestic one: her kitchen, the quintessential ecosystem where heteropatriarchal, middle-class values can be reproduced and transmitted. Despite the media branding Larry a dangerous killer, Dorothy offers him refuge, and in their mutual understanding the two begin an affair that Ingalls relates in her lean, pithy prose. In *Binstead's Safari*, Millie Binstead travels alongside her philandering husband to Africa, where she strikes up a mysticalsexual relationship with a being who has the appearance of a man but has the ability to shapeshift into a hulking lion. Ingalls emphasizes transspecies intimacy as an essential means of pleasurably interfacing with the material world. She complicates the mandate of reproductive futurism, denouncing a notion of husbandry as a means of mastery and enclosure. In reading weird domesticity in Ingalls's novels, I lean on Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality. Ingalls erodes the fantasy that the home is a reliable bulwark against the uncanny and the unthinkable, suggesting that Dorothy and Millie Binstead's "homes"—far from being a refuge against otherness— become instead spaces where trauma occurs when the more-than-human is denied entry.

In many ways, weird domesticity serves as a necessary counter-balance to the heretofore hegemonic weird narratives that focus primarily on the cosmic outside. It re-grounds the weird in the thick, murky materiality of lived experience, probing the unthinkable by examining intimate encounters with the seemingly banal, the hyper-local, and is necessarily entwined with folkways and fairytales. The protagonists of weird domesticity are typically women who are othered within a domestic setting. They are ostracized, oppressed, and/or victimized, and seek to reassert control over their fates by turning to ritual practice, the companionship of non-human others (or familiars), the earthy alchemy of plants and fungi. They have none of the usual anxieties of facing estrangement through contact with the uncanny—instead, they seek to bring the uncanny inside of an already hostile domestic sphere, collapsing the boundaries that would separate the two worlds. Domestic space was a key site of conformity in post-45 culture in particular—a place where heteropatriarchal, middle-class values could be reproduced and transmitted. Weird domesticity erodes the fantasy of the home as a reliable bulwark against the uncanny, the unthinkable, ultimately forcing us to reconsider which world—the hyper-normal or the totally estranged—is the more frightening after all.

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CHAPTER ONE: DISGUST AND THE NUMINOUS: RECKONING WITH SOVEREIGN POWER IN BARBARA COMYNS'S DOMESTIC WEIRD

"Each human is a heterogeneous compound of vibrant matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated."

—Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010)

In the introduction to her fourth novel, *The Vet's Daughter*, Barbara Comyns manages to condense the events that shaped her life, and her career as a writer, into a brief autobiographical sketch. She covers a lot of terrain in just a few pages, but two central themes emerge: the first is the economic precarity Comyns experienced throughout her life, and the second is how she managed to continue writing in spite of it. The awareness of money, or a lack of it, began at a formative time during Comyns' childhood. She describes being removed from school as a girl due to "money difficulties." She goes on to list all of the various odd jobs and fleeting sources of income that she relied upon throughout her life, first as a young woman supporting herself, and then as a single mother to two young children who had their own school fees that needed paying. Comyns notes the "pathetic salary" she earned working for a small advertising company, the "very poor" wage she earned working as an artist's model, and how she eventually "became a business woman out of desperation" in order to support herself and her children. She ran a garage where she refurbished and sold old, "unusual" cars, she bought and sold antique furniture and pianos, she bred poodles and sold the puppies, and she rented out a flat in London in order to make ends meet. "All this time," she says, "I was writing."

As early as 1945, Comyns had begun sketching out ideas for what would become *The Vet's Daughter*, but she did not publish the novel until 1959.[10] The introduction seems to be a way for her to tell the reader something about herself, to establish how her own life experiences shaped her work as a fiction writer. She seems to want to provide some explanation for how her fiction came to be, and to make it plain to the reader that her life experiences, especially her repeated brushes with poverty, profoundly impacted what she chose to write about in her novels—scarcity is a theme that she returns to repeatedly in her fiction. Her work as an artist's model, and the abysmal wage she earned from it while trying to provide for her children, can be seen in the character of Sophia Fairclough in *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*; her experiences running a garage and selling old cars manifest in *The Juniper Tree*'s Bella Winter.

Comyns wrote about places and experiences she knew intimately. Born in Warwickshire in 1907, she was raised on the banks of the Avon (which also happens to provide the setting for *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*). She grew up with six siblings, raised by a tempestuous father and a sickly mother with whom she did not share a close relationship. When she was young, her education consisted of a rotating cast of governesses who never stayed very long and who themselves had "very few qualifications to teach." Her family was constantly vacillating between financial security and poverty, and as a result Comyns never received a formal education when she was young. She was taught by governesses who'd had little training in languages themselves. Indeed, this lack of formal education was something that Comyns's publishers would fetishize and exploit in order to amplify her persona as a naive, rustic writer. Comyns would sometimes have spelling errors in her work, beginning with her debut novel, the

[10] In the introduction to the novel, she says that she got the idea for *The Vet's Daughter* while on her honeymoon that year and jotted down a few notes. She wouldn't return to those notes until after she had written and published *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* in 1954.

loosely autobiographical *Sisters by a River*, and publishers not only kept these errors in the final copy, but they would even add more mistakes to further a certain image of Comyns as a novelty—a rustic, pure talent.

Comyns's fiction, on one level, appears to be firmly planted in the soil of social realism. Her novels often focus on young women in precarious economic circumstances who live sheltered, isolated lives. Their poverty and its effects are depicted matter-of-factly, and they are usually hyper-self conscious of their lack of worldly experience. Various Comyns protagonists, including Sophia Fairclough, Alice Rowlands (*The Vet's Daughter*) and Emma Willoweed (*Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*), describe themselves as "ignorant," "inexperienced," or "naive."[11] As Emma Willoweed assures her younger sister, Hattie, "Oh, no…we don't know how to behave and are dreadfully ignorant" (182). Lacking financial autonomy, the young women in Comyns's novels are often passed around between some combination of beastly fathers, scheming rakes, and/or well-intentioned but ineffectual suitors. Some of them have ended up becoming mothers and are explicitly ambivalent about how their social status has been made even more precarious by having to take care of a child on their own.[12] Her fiction is often concerned with the material, economic conditions of poor young women who must either secure a marriage to ensure their financial safety, or they must create streams of income for themselves by inventing them on the wing. Within this seemingly naturalistic framework, weird things happen in Comyns's novels: madness takes hold of an entire town; people incinerate their outcast neighbors; a young woman levitates out of her bed in the middle of the night; a man is haunted by the figure of the wife he euthanized.

[11] Such emphasis on this self-awareness seems to be a sly nod to the publishers who would keep the spelling errors in her manuscripts.

[12] Indeed, these novels are full of "bad" mothers. In *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, Sophia's baby almost freezes to death after the two are evicted and forced to roam the freezing streets with nowhere to go.

Not much has been written about Comyns, whose work has been largely forgotten since the reprints of her novels issued by Virago in the 1980s. Some novels, like *The Skin Chairs*, are unfortunately still out of print. Avril Horner is one of the few scholars who has explored Comyns's work extensively, and has situated Comyns within the female gothic tradition. Horner has argued that the spectrality that drives *The Vet's Daughter* distinguishes Comyns's Gothic approach from magical realism because the Gothic frames spectrality as sinister, while magical realism frames it as a cause for celebration. She suggests that Comyns's work was perhaps ignored by feminist critics of her day because her "combination of realism, the Gothic, and magical realism might well have been perceived as resulting in a rather fey, whimsical treatment of the oppression of women—a subject considered deadly serious by second wave feminism" (Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic Tradition 99).

It seems that this "fey, whimsical" approach, while perhaps repelling contemporary readers and critics, is beginning to attract the interest of modern readers. Comyns was published in the U.S. for the first time by New York Review Books, who has since reissued several of her major works, beginning with *The Vet's Daughter* in 2003. St. Louis-based independent publisher, Dorothy, a publishing project, published the first American edition of *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* in 2010. NYRB took 12 years to release another Comyns novel, *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* in 2015, and their most recent release was *The Juniper Tree* in 2018. Given this uptick in American editions of her work, it seems there are readers who are receptive to the way in which she blends the macabre and the whimsical to make a social critique about the violent conditions of domestic life.

Comyns and the Weird

In texts like *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* and *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns catalogs traumatic, even grisly events without sentimentality, offering them up to the reader as mere happenstance. If characters in her narratives feel intense pain, grief, rage, or horror, they rarely show it and her narrators, whether she's working in the first or third person, certainly never dwell on it. She depicts death, violence, and abuse alongside moments of levity, and her work is always in dialogue with the unexplainable; that is to say, her work is always in dialogue with the weird. Comyns is an early exemplar of the domestic weird in that her fictions do not depict brushes with the weird as terrifying; rather, they merely *happen*, and her characters take them mostly in stride. Comyns is a key pioneer of the domestic weird, particularly in her use of surreal and supernatural tropes is both sinister and, if not outright celebratory, comically absurd. Comyns's fiction is preoccupied with exchanges across and among bodies, both human and nonhuman, as well as other kinds of matter: food and household objects, minerals and mold. However, her fiction goes beyond merely prefiguring theories of new materialism or material feminism. For Comyns, there is a distinctly mystical dimension to the ways in which these material interchanges come together and fluctuate and how such transcendent transcorporeal relationships destabilize a patriarchal system that seeks to violently discipline feminized bodies.

This chapter examines the first two of Comyns's novels that fall within what Horner has called Comyns's "Gothic quartet": *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* and *The Vet's Daughter*. These novels operate in a weird mode by staging encounters between the patriarchal sovereign and the feminized body in order to destabilize the bounded self and chip away at the very foundations of sovereign power. These bodies, despite their exploitation and subjugation,

possess the power to nauseate or overwhelm by forcing onlookers to countenance the mutability of the material, and the always close proximity of life and death.

In *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, Comyns takes ecological relationships with the material world, typically viewed as static, unchanging, ascertainable through empirical study, and pushes them through disgust and into the realm of the numinous. The nonhuman animals and ecological forces that press in upon the town play a significant role in advancing the plot, from peacocks to fungi to buzzing insects. What makes Comyns's menageries remarkable is that they make space to consider the acting power of materialities that are not granted agency in a hierarchical, Western sense of the term. The landscape in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* teems with ecological actors that go beyond the human, exemplifying Comyns's broad understanding of agency and the inherent reciprocity among agents within an ecological web. The cast of characters in the novel express a wide range of reactions to this interconnected backdrop. For many, the tapestry of nonhuman agents within which they are embedded becomes a source of anxiety, as it points to the instability and precarity of the bounded human subject. When the mysterious, deadly illness begins to sweep through the town, many become desperate to find a scapegoat, someone who can be eliminated so that rational order can be reclaimed. The immolation of Old Toby is depicted as a witch hunt: Comyns creates in Toby an example of how disgust and the numinous can precipitate violence against bodies that cannot or will not be incorporated into the patriarchal order.

In *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns demonstrates that materiality is both an economic and an ecological prospect, and that mystical awe, derived from contact with the numinous, can be a dangerous affect to provoke. Circumscribed and enclosed, Alice Rowlands and her mother are hampered by their inability to work outside of the home and earn a wage, all the while needing to

work doggedly inside the home, supporting their abusive patriarch. Alice's mother is a whisper of a woman who, despite her seeming immateriality in life, is an indispensable component of the household. When she becomes bedridden and is effectively euthanized by her sadistic veterinarian husband, the effects of her absence are felt in the housework that is no longer getting done, and she seems to return to haunt her husband and intimidate him in death as she was never able to do in life. When Alice inexplicably gains the ability to levitate in the wake of her mother's death and a sexual assault, she delights in this secret ability. However, when her father learns of it, he attempts to force Alice into a demonstration that he hopes to profit from, ultimately leading to Alice being trampled to death by onlookers who experience a fanatical awe when they witness what they seem to perceive as the work of the devil.

While disgust is a permutation of the weird that pertains more to the mode's ecological preoccupations, experiences with the numinous operate in a similar manner but instead highlight the weird's mystifying impulse. Across the two Comyns novels I examine in this chapter, disgust and the numinous are shown to parallel one another in the way they are leveraged against an economically or socially precarious character. If such characters are detestable or frightening for the ways in which they seem to transcend the boundaries of the Western patriarchal subject, they are deemed sacrificial and are violently removed from the social order. Contact with the disgusting or the numinous dissolves the patriarchal subject and thus provokes its retribution. People whose subjectivity has already been challenged by the patriarchal status quo have a different relationship to the disgusting and the numinous, because their own sense of self has already been disallowed. Both of the Comyns novels I discuss in this chapter prominently feature a character who fits the witch trope, and both are feared for what are perceived to be their malevolent, uncanny powers that defy rational explanation, and both are executed brutally. The

bodies that are framed as disgusting and/or numinous are open to violence and are framed as sacrificial: their executioners believe their annihilation will restore the rational, patriarchal symbolic order.

Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead

Something is poisoning the villagers in Comyns's 1954 novel *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*. An unseen agent is setting their stomachs aflame with unbearable pains and driving them to madness, to slitting their own throats and jumping off of bridges. The novel was infamous when it was originally published and was initially banned in Ireland for reasons that are not entirely clear, though likely stemming from the shocking, even disgusting, depictions of madness, suicide, and violence. The novel follows a series of mysterious, gruesome deaths that occur over the course of a few weeks in a seemingly quiet rural community in Warwickshire. Bearing witness to all of this is the Willoweed family, led by its squawking, witchlike matriarch, Grandmother Willoweed. She lords over her lands and the members of her household, including her hapless son, Ebin and his three children: Emma, Hattie, and Dennis. For all its brutality, the narrative opens like a bucolic fairy tale. In the wake of a great flood, the village's animals seem to be thriving: ducks are "quacking their approval" at "the wonderful new world that had come in the night" as they swim through the Willoweeds' drawing room while the family scrambles to save their possessions. This whimsical opening quickly turns sinister, though, as we begin to see the real carnage that the flood has brought about: a squealing pig with its throat slashed flails in the tide, drowned peacocks float in the garden, and the hens trapped in their shed have started committing suicide. These images foreshadow the wave of madness and death that will sweep through the town, leading to the deaths of several townspeople and the murderous paranoia of the rest.

Like most Comyns novels, mystifying, gruesome events are set against a realist narrative backdrop, giving an overall impression of something like a macabre comedy of manners. Interspersed with the series of seemingly inexplicable, horrifying deaths are the trials and tribulations of the Willoweed children and Norah and Eunice, the two sisters who cook and clean for the Willoweed family. Both sisters are in search of a romantic match who might offer them a means of escaping from their exacting mistress. Comyns's style is to vacillate between relating the banal (Eunice's flirtations with the young haymaker, Joe Lott, for example) and the sinister (the baker's wife drops dead on top of a cat, "squishing" its eye out of the socket). In the midst of the weird events of the novel, there is an underlying pragmatism: despite the many deaths that occur, the characters who make it to the end are bearing up almost as if nothing so far out of the ordinary had transpired.

Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead, as is characteristic of Comyns's work, weaves together the horrifying and the comical. It is unique within Comyns's oeuvre, though, because it follows an ensemble cast of characters rather than a single primary protagonist. While the novel does feature several young women navigating the trials and tribulations of courtship and material security, it also emphasizes the ways in which men and boys who do not perform their roles within the patriarchal order are feminized and are thus believed to be dispensable and even, in the case of Old Toby, responsible for insidiously poisoning his neighbors. Toby, the baker's assistant, is the sacred man who is singled out for his otherness and blamed for poisoning the loaves of rye bread the villagers have been hungrily consuming. His face was disfigured when he was a young man by an accident with quick lye, and he is depicted as a grotesque figure who lives in a remote cottage apart from his neighbors. Toby is disruptive to the patriarchal image of masculinity, and indeed he is even hired by the baker because his appearance has desexualized

him: “[Toby] guessed that one of the reasons that the baker had chosen him as an assistant was that there was little risk of his attracting his wife; but he was glad enough of this as he was terrified of women” (64). Because his appearance has effectively emasculated him, Toby seems incapable of cuckolding the baker, and therefore is viewed as nonthreatening; at the same time, though, he is believed to be responsible for poisoning his neighbors. It is no coincidence that they believe him capable of wielding poison, often viewed as the feminized weapon of choice. The villagers eventually embark on a literal witch-hunt to eradicate Toby, forming a mob that burns his house to the ground with him inside of it. As the natural world presses in upon the bodies of the townspeople, they feverishly search for someone they can hold responsible for the epidemic that is claiming the lives of their neighbors and creeping ever closer, and violently attempt to reinstate “rational” order and the symbolic order of the patriarchal subject.

Sticky Air and Strange Menageries

While the paranoia over the cause of the sickness whips the townspeople into a frenzy, Comyns subtly reminds the reader on nearly every page that the townspeople never were bounded subjects, protected and separate from their lifeworld, in control of their own fates. I read the novel through the lens of what Jane Bennett has called “distributive agency,” a way of conceiving of agency as not solely belonging to the realm of the human, or even to any single individual actor. Instead, she frames agency as a shared, co-created event that occurs when organisms and other material actors come into contact with or permeate one another. Bennett, along with other material feminist thinkers, views this contingent, mutating set of relations as fundamentally ecological. Ecology, in this context, can be understood as “the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” (4). She positions humans on a “less vertical plane,” disrupting a Western conception of agency as hierarchical, a schema that has historically

positioned humans at the top and "brute matter" at the bottom, with nonhuman animals, fungi, vegetation, bacteria, and other kinds of critters positioned somewhere in between. The way Comyns describes the natural elements of the town repeatedly reaffirms the ways in which the natural world physically presses in upon the characters, suggesting that the environment in this novel is not an inert backdrop against which one might be able to live an isolated, "safe" life. The river, the air, and the nonhuman critters who share these spaces all have a powerful presence in the narrative. The very atmosphere of the village is pulsing with life, as though it is not merely an empty space, but has physical substance to it. There is, first, the "constant hum of insects" that suffuses the air (44). A hum is a sound with a distinct physicality—it suggests the presence of vibrating bodies; of motion. The use of the word here indicates a fullness of atmosphere caused by countless miniscule beings that, though they may not be readily seen with the naked eye, fill the space with a constant, visceral presence. Even the air itself is described as having a tactility to it. Ebin, Grandmother Willoweed's sulky heir-apparent, is described in the narrative as "walk[ing] under a sticky yellow sky" (69), and Grandmother Willoweed later is described as feeling "miserably sticky" (82). The sky and air have a material presence, a thickness, something of the tactile: this stickiness can literally be felt upon the skin.

The river, too, represents a significant locus of agency in the novel. It is both a place of refuge and a place of death—several characters drown in the river, another cuts his own throat right next to it, and it provides a means of transporting characters to one another's funerals. For some, like Ebin Willoweed, the river is a reminder of his own shortcomings: "He stood looking down at the river, which had returned to its banks but was flowing very fast and full. In some way the river flowing with such purpose and determination depressed Willoweed. He felt humiliated and a failure in everything he undertook" (18). Ebin, formerly a gossip columnist who

was forced to resign in disgrace, relies upon his mother for financial security for himself and his three children. In this moment of jealousy, he even kicks at the bridge, as though this will in some way inflict pain on the river that has the audacity to outshine him so boldly. His jealousy over the river, and his physical urge to kick out at it, indicates his own awareness of the rushing water's physicality and agency. Conversely, Ebin's oldest daughter, Emma, finds comfort in being near the river. She and her siblings venture to the riverbank when they are in need of a moment alone, or if they wish to engage in any of their imaginative childhood games.

The world of *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* also provides some brushes with the near-fantastic. Sitting on the riverbank, looking out at the water, Emma sees things that seem impossible, like a strange buzzing insect that is "as large as a lemon" (22). The presence of this insect is a subtle reminder to the reader that the world of this village is not completely "normal." Emma's awareness that this weird being is out of place, its existence seemingly impossible, only serves to lend credibility to her observation. She knows that if she were to tell anyone about what she saw, "they wouldn't believe her," so instead of telling the truth she sticks with what sounds reasonable, telling them it "must have been a buzzing bird" (22). These flights of fancy instill in her a "dreamy" sense as she looks out at the "shining" river. From her perspective, the river is not a thing to be reviled and envied, as her father does, but rather it appears to her as dreamlike, almost enchanted (22).

The river is not the only place where strange occurrences happen. There is a ruin in the town that seems to be a portal for strange, portentous events to take place. Ebin takes his children there, though they are all wary of walking through the village as the madness spreads, and his fearful son, Dennis, whom Ebin is constantly berating for being a "cissy" is afraid of "some enormous flying beetles" he sees, which had "started a mad and dreadful dance round a may

tree" (103). Large insects are not inherently supernatural, particularly when they are seen through the eyes of children, but Comyns describes them acting in ways that indicate a strange agency. Interestingly, Comyns inverts the subjectivity of the human and the insect. The townspeople attending a funeral for one of their neighbors who has been claimed by the epidemic are described earlier as "bloated, sleepy flies at the end of the season" (56). The insects dance and hum, and the townspeople themselves appear insectlike. The effect of such descriptions serves to destabilize and disorient the distinction between human and insect life in the narrative. The environment in the novel insists upon its own presence; it literally presses in upon the villagers, complicating the distinction between human and the more-than-human. The townspeople correlate this sense of transcorporeality with the sickness after the deaths of the first few afflicted neighbors, evidenced by the early assertion that the "weather" is causing them to be "balmy."

Sick in Stomach, Sick in Mind

The epidemic that steals through the town over the course of the novel collapses the distinction between inner and outer worlds, between mind and body. The effect the "illness" has on the townspeople seems to attack not only one's capacity for reason, but also their ability to keep their food down. The first deaths occur when the miller inexplicably drowns himself in the river, followed closely by the butcher, who kills himself in even more gruesome fashion: he is described as acting like a madman, talking to himself and staggering around "as if attacking an invisible enemy," before slicing his own throat into a "smile" (71). Ebin Willoweed recalls that, before this psychotic break, the butcher "had been seriously ill with some internal trouble" (70). After these first few suicides, the townspeople grow uneasy, with one man worrying over his own symptoms, conflating his unsettling dreams with gastrointestinal pains: "I had terrible dreams myself last night … and the pains in my stomach have been cruel!" (73). The baker's

wife is the next to go—she drops dead in the middle of the road after shrieking about intense stomach pains and then seizing wildly. Two children who become sick were first plagued by "stomach trouble," and "when they had almost recovered, their brains became affected" (79). Ebin's young son Dennis eventually becomes afflicted, and he too describes feeling as though his "stomach is on fire" before seeing visions of "dreadful animals and strange fires" (136). Physical ailments and psychosis become indistinguishable as more people become sick and exhibit the strange combination of mental and digestive symptoms. The villagers alternately describe the illness as an "epidemic" and also as "mass hysteria," as though there is no difference, or as though they aren't sure which one is more accurate. There is a pattern that emerges almost as soon as the illness does in which the townspeople correlate trouble in the stomach with trouble in the brain.

Although Toby is falsely persecuted for poisoning the bread by making it "filthy," the bread is, in fact, to blame for sickening the villagers. The baker's grains have been colonized by ergot, which explains both the mystery of the bizarre symptoms and their transmission. Comyns's use of ergot is a notable choice of pathogen for a few reasons: as an eating event, the poisoning underscores the permeability of the body; as a fungus, ergot further complicates the dichotomy of life and death; and because of its cultural history, ergot has been connected to religious hysteria and witch hunting. First, because the poisoning occurs through the act of eating, the proximity of the nonhuman in the novel is reinforced. Material feminists have identified eating as one of the most obvious actions a transcorporeal subject takes, with Stacy Alaimo reminding us that "eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh" (*Bodily Natures* 12). Jane Bennett, too, applies her concept of vital materiality to food, "treat[ing] food as conative bodies vying alongside and within an other complex body (a person's 'own' body)"

(39). Food becomes, in Bennett's estimation, an actant, rather than a passive object to be assimilated into one's biological makeup.

Secondly, as a fungus, ergot conjures up all manner of unusual connotations that weird fiction writers have been keen to explore. The kind of ontological slippages that are modeled in the fungal world have long been fodder for weird fiction writers precisely because there is a kind of cognitive dissonance that occurs when attempting to comprehend the seemingly basic question of what, exactly, a fungus *is*. Not quite a plant and not quite an animal, fungi confound the dichotomy between life and death as they appear at sites of decomposition to feast on decaying matter. There are a number of fungal species, ergot included, whose transcorporeal relationships with other species are parasitic, and lead to horrifying bodily transformations.[13] Ergot, a specific type of fungus that can grow and proliferate in grains, including rye, when the growing conditions are damp, can lead to ergotism which is also sometimes referred to as St. Anthony's Fire. Ergotism can lead to symptoms like the villagers in Comyns's novel experience: intense stomach pains and even hallucinations.[14] Ergotism has, as a result, been associated with mass religious fervor. A number of articles have been written that attempt to discern whether mass ergot poisoning played a role in the Salem witch trials and other witch hunts.[15] Whether or not ergotism was actually to blame for the horrors of the Salem witch hunts, Comyns invokes the

[13] *Ophiocordyceps* is a striking example of this, with its ability to hijack the nervous systems of carpenter ants in rainforest ecosystems. It is an entomopathogen that has garnered such recent headlines as "Cordyceps: Attack of the Killer Fungi," or "How the Zombie Fungus Takes Over Ants' Bodies to Control Their Minds." The ants that come into contact with *cordyceps* ultimately lose control over their motor functions, and are forced to leave their nests and venture to the forest floor in search of temperatures that allow the survival and propagation of the fungal parasite.
[14] In 1938, a Swiss doctor isolated a compound from ergot which he would eventually use to formulate the drug commonly known as LSD.
[15] Such accounts have pointed to a number of circumstantial elements of the Salem witch trials that might be explained by ergot poisoning, including the fact that the year of 1691 in Salem seemed to have optimal growing conditions for ergot, and that the descriptions of the behavior of the accusers seem to mirror the symptoms of convulsive ergotism. Two articles published in *Science* in 1976 fell on both sides of the debate, with the first advancing the author's case for connecting ergotism with the brutality of the witch trials, and the second pointing out the circumstantial nature of these claims.

historical figure of the witch and her persecution. In paying homage to the speculation around the relationship between ergot and the witch hunts, she uses the witch hunt as a way of narrativizing the extreme violence inflicted upon the feminized body in times when the patriarchal subject's dominance comes under threat.

A Witch-Hunt in Warwickshire

As concern over the transmissibility of the illness begins to grow, the townspeople search for answers. The "sultry" weather emerges as the first possibility, indicating the impulse to first identify something in their environment as the culprit. A "boil water" warning is issued in the papers (78). When the water is cleared of wrongdoing, they turn their attention to the bread (101). Very little is known about the transmissibility of the disease, but there is amongst the villagers a strong sense that something in the air, water, or food is to blame. These initial fears indicate an understanding of the instability of the bounded human subject, and anxieties over a toxic environment able to breach the boundaries of the body. Stacy Alaimo has laid the groundwork for an analysis of the ways in which narratives have attempted to depict the porosity of the human form, and the related susceptibility of the human to toxic agents in their environment. Alaimo introduces her notion of transcorporeality in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Transcorporeality advances a view of the self as always in progress and has emphasized the inherent permeability of the human form. Transcorporeality refers to transgressions and instabilities of bodily boundaries, also implying a view of "Nature" not as a backdrop, but as a teeming amalgam of human and nonhuman entities.

The conflation between the ways in which one's environment collapses the mental and the digestive is suggestive of disgust, an affective register that, like the weird, relies on an uneasy

mixture of repulsion and attraction.[16] Disgust is inextricably linked to the body and, more specifically, to the body's digestive function. Its initial entrance into the body indicates a tasting, a preliminary mastication, before giving way to either relief through emesis or to an uncomfortable, perhaps dangerous, incorporation into the body. As an affective mode of aversion, bodily disgust has come to imply an uncomfortable spatial closeness, and an emetic impulse to remove the disgusting object or experience from being in close proximity to the body. Eugenie Brinkema, in *The Forms of the Affects*, characterizes disgust as a "spatial operator, delimiting zones of proximity that are discomforting versus acceptable, drawing lines in the thick muck. It is the forsaken outside that is nevertheless immediate and too close, a threatening proximity from which one recoils, but never with sufficient spacing, an exteriority without distance" (131). As Eugenie Brinkema helpfully glosses in *The Forms of the Affects*, disgust has been theorized as an affect that does not belong in conversations of aesthetics because the notion of disgust is incompatible with "good taste."[17] The Neo-classical roots of disgust as a spatial metaphor become the opening through which Winfried Menninghaus approaches his historical account of disgust. In the introduction to *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Menninghaus argues that the "eighteenth century's foundation of modern aesthetics can be described negatively as a foundation based on prohibition of what is disgusting" (7). This

[16] Disgust has been theorized since at least the 18th century as a negative affective response, and thus as incompatible with aesthetics, or "good taste." In his introduction to *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmunde Burke speaks of "taste" as both a bodily sensation and an (anti-)aesthetic judgment. "Good taste" becomes that which is "palatable," and "bad taste" is encountered in experiences of the disgusting. Disgust, which comes from the Latin for bad (*dis*-) and taste (*gustus*), is thus inextricably linked to the body and, more specifically, to the body's digestive functions. Its initial entrance into the body indicates a tasting, a preliminary mastication, before giving way to either relief through emesis or to an uncomfortable, perhaps dangerously toxic, digestion. As an affective mode of aversion, bodily disgust implies, for aestheticians like Burke, an uncomfortable spatial closeness, and an emetic impulse to remove the disgusting object or experience from being in close proximity to the body.

[17] Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry* is perhaps most notably picked up in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In the third critique, *Ekel* is theorized as the ultimate limit of the aesthetic. Disgust—an affective response that has been positioned as completely exterior to aesthetics—is thus situated in direct opposition to "good taste."

assertion underscores the trend in eighteenth century thought of setting disgust and the aesthetic in complete opposition to one another.[18] In its ongoing orientation toward eventual rot and decay, organic material uncomfortably blurs the boundaries between life and death—it is a sharp reminder that the human body is itself comprised of organic material, subject to the same forces of decomposition. It is for this reason that Kolnai and Menninghaus position the rotting human corpse as the figure of disgust *par excellence*. A decaying corpse can no longer pretend to hold onto any sort of interiority, or separation from the outside world, and reminds its onlookers of their own fate. This historical-theoretical configuration of disgust and aesthetics, a categorization of "good" and "bad" taste, would assume that the emetic impulse, the reflex to remove that which is disgusting from the body, assumes a kind of bodily interiority—whatever unsavory visitor finds its way inside, is inside; it has erased any level of proximity between it and the body, and must be forcibly removed. The digestive connotations of disgust, however, suggest that whatever enters the body and exits again, through either end of the digestive tract, was never inside to begin with.[19]

In *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*, Heather Houser argues that a central concern of late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S. fiction is to offer "conceptual and material dissolutions of the body-environment boundary through sickness and thus alter[]

[18] Also of note is earlier work of German philosopher Aurel Kolnai. Kolnai's *On Disgust* is foundational to the philosophy of disgust as a phenomenological event, which he argues is always a response to interaction with organic material.

[19] In his book-length study of the Rabelaisian carnival—*Rabelais and his World*—Bakhtin discusses the development of folk culture and folk carnival humor in Renaissance literature primarily through degradation and grotesque realism. For Bakhtin, degradation has specific locomotive and spatial implications of a bodily lowering that evokes a feeling of renewal or rejuvenation. By coming down to earth, a subject might be swallowed up in order to "bring forth something more and better" (21). Degradation is also necessarily "concern[ed]…with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" (24). Bakhtin argues that the openings of the human body prevent it from ever becoming a closed entity. Thus, earthly renewal is a process constantly in flux, as the outside is always already passing through the interior in a constant ebb and flow: the digestive tract allows the world external to the body to pass directly through it, from one end to another, without becoming a part of the body.

environmental perception and politics" (3). Houser argues that disgust forces the human subject to consider its own embeddedness in its lifeworld, because it "offers a seemingly destructive response to the realization that we are vulnerable to that which surrounds us," and that such awareness "threatens … the ontological status of the person feeling disgust" (152).[20] Like Alaimo, Houser explores the ways in which disgust destabilizes and reframes the human as neither finite or impermeable, but rather as perpetually open to outside forces and agencies, whether chemical, biological, or supernatural.

Scholars of the weird have argued that provoking disgust is central to the aesthetic mode of the weird, and that disgust in the weird is connected to the ways in which humans interface with the nonhuman world. Jonathan Newell, for example, writes that the weird is interested in the "subject-dissolving power of disgust" (5). When Comyns deploys disgust, she limns the ways in which close encounters with death and the supernatural threaten the bounded subject, the patriarchal subject *par excellence*, since death and the supernatural, in the patriarchal symbolic order, are framed as being closer to nature and closer to the feminine. The townspeople are confronted by the limits of the knowable. They are forced to confront that which cannot be explained, and they become overfull with their confrontation of encounters that threaten their conception of the human subject. Self-annihilation physically plays out in the sick bodies of the afflicted townspeople. Their stomachs want to empty themselves of their contents, and for several of them, the sensations are so intense that they take their own lives. This unbearable level of sensory overwhelm seems, on the surface, as though it could only be the product of a

[20] Houser argues that "The patently spatial yet fluid qualities of disgust are key to how this affect channels the individual outside of the self and toward reciprocal social and ethical involvement" (152). In her reading of the fiction she discusses, the ethical and moral mobilization of the reader is a primary function of disgust.

pathogen or other environmental toxin. However, the "subject-dissolving" power of disgust is catalyzed by one other source in the novel: the scarred face of Old Toby, the baker's assistant.

Both the illness and the appearance of Toby provoke disgust; both the pathogen and the old man cause sensory overwhelm that manifests as nausea and irrationality, and force the villagers to consider the inevitable deterioration of their own subjectivity. When Eunice, one of the Willoweeds' maids, enters the bakery and sees Toby for the first time, she is overcome by what seems to be a combination of the heat and the old man's appearance: "It was a sultry afternoon, and the smell of baking and then the sight of poor Old Toby's red eyes and scarred face suddenly sickened her. She felt her upper lip become damp and a great noise of rushing, like a thousand pigeons' wings, came in her ears" (65). Eunice's episode seems oddly prescient, because almost immediately after, a boy runs into the bakery and announces the first casualty of the epidemic: the miller has "gone mad and drowned himself" (65). This immediate correlation between Eunice's disgusted response to seeing Toby and the origin of the epidemic suggests that Comyns is framing disgust for the other as akin to a sickness. Despite being described as "most hideous," Toby emerges as a sympathetic figure to the reader. The omniscient narrator slips into Toby's perspective and recounts his previous job at a hotel in the city, where he was treated cruelly and asked whether he had "used his face as a poker," and despite such abuses, he comes immediately to Eunice's aid when she nearly faints at the sight of him (64). The scarring on Toby's face serves as a permanent physical reminder that he has been burned. In other words, one cannot look upon his face, that portal to witnessing and being witnessed, without being forced to reckon with the permeability and finitude of the human form.

Toby unwittingly provokes in his neighbors a choice for dealing with their feelings of disgust towards him: eradicating him or accepting the instability of their own subjectivity. A

violent contingent of them chooses the former. In their frenzied search for a scapegoat, for someone they can hold responsible for the wave of madness and disease sweeping through the town, the villagers burn Toby's house down with him inside of it. His charred and mangled body is found frozen in his final act of attempting to crawl out of the burning building. It is no coincidence that Toby's murder resembles a witch-hunt: like many witches persecuted during the witch hunts, there is a physical manifestation of otherness inscribed upon his body. There is a desire in the town to punish the unexplainable; that is to say, there is a desire to find some agent to punish for events that seem to have no identifiable agent. The literal burning of Toby, the already-burned man, is an attempt to force materiality to play by the "rules." In attempting to kill the agent "responsible" for poisoning the town, the villagers' only recourse is to use fire to, as completely as possible, physically remove any trace of Toby from the town.

The impunity with which the townspeople annihilate Toby raises questions about Toby's biopolitical status in the eyes of his neighbors. Political philosophers such as Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault have variously defined sovereignty as the ability to decide upon the state of exception, or the ability to "decide life and death," and Giorgio Agamben extends this work in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, articulating the concept of *homo sacer* out of what he calls a "limit concept of the Roman social order." *Homo sacer* is the man against whom everyone else is permitted to exercise sovereign power; in other words, the man who can be killed with impunity, who exists "outside both human and divine law" (73). The sacred man occupies a space of bare life, in which their body is not protected by the social order and, in fact, preserves the social order by providing a shared understanding of who is considered *homo sacer*.

Silvia Federici has added an essential feminist perspective on biopower in *Caliban and the Witch*, suggesting that Foucault's work in the biopolitical "has ignored the process of

reproduction, has collapsed female and male histories into an undifferentiated whole, and has been so disinterested in the 'disciplining' of women that it never mentions one of the most monstruous [sic] attacks on the body perpetrated in the modern era: the witch-hunt" (8). Federici argues that "disciplining the body" was a precondition for capitalist accumulation and, more specifically, that the disciplining of the feminized body was carried out through witch hunts. In the case of Toby, Comyns draws out the connection between the disciplining of the feminized body and disgust.

The witch-hunt style execution of Toby is seen mostly through the perspective of Emma Willoweed, who stumbles upon a group of angry townspeople gathered around Toby's cottage. They believe he has poisoned the bread; the miller's son is there to avenge his father's death. He describes Toby's bread as "filthy," and Toby himself as a "scabby old monster" (109). Toby's perceived lack of cleanliness contributes to the overall picture of him as an embodiment of the sacred man. Agamben explores the ambivalence of the word "sacred" as it relates to *homo sacer*, finding that the Latin *sacer* has a double meaning, and can designate the "holy or accursed, depending on the circumstances," and "the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying" (Fowler, Ernout-Meillet qtd. in Agamben 79). Toby has been marked for sacrifice, and those that have marked him are depicted as monstrous. As Emma witnesses the increasingly frenzied crowd beginning to break the windows of the cottage, she hears shouting and "other most disturbing sounds like some great malevolent animal snorting and grunting," and she smells "a stench of evilness and sweating, angry bodies" (109). One man's "terrible" face has "loose lips snarling and saliva pouring down his chin" (110). The descriptions of the neighbors who have gathered to carry out this witch hunt are described in animalistic terms, but they are also "malevolent," "evil," and "angry." In their

orientation toward Toby, they have reduced him to the status of bare life; however, in their quest to dehumanize him, they themselves have become monstrous.

As Emma attempts to leave the appalling scene, she sees something moving near the back of the burning cottage. When she realizes what she is looking at, the final horror of this moment is brought to completion:

> "One hand was over her mouth as if to stop the scream and the other was pointing at something crawling on the ground, and as they came nearer it became still and they recognised it as something human. As they bent over the still form, there was a sickening smell of burnt flesh and smouldering cloth still burning. The fierce changing light revealed Old Toby's charred corpse more terrible than he had ever been in life, and, although the doctor bent over him in compassion, most of the onlookers staggered away half fainting and some uncontrollably vomiting." (112)

Again there is the recurrence of physical overwhelm, literalized through the act of vomiting, when the onlookers are confronted with the image of Toby. In this instance, it is his corpse, rather than his scarred face, that causes these "uncontrollable" reactions. The corpse has been identified as a symbolic object that provokes an intense affective response precisely because it confounds the dichotomy of life/death, of inner/outer worlds. Freud closely associates the corpse with the uncanny, and Julia Kristeva identifies the corpse as a purveyor of abjection. Aurel Kolnai has argued that disgust is an affect that is always oriented toward death and decay, and that the human corpse is the quintessential figuration of disgust.[21] The villagers' reaction to

[21] Kolnai's work is foundational to the philosophy of disgust as a phenomenological event, which he argues is always a response to interacting with organic material, which he argues uncomfortably blurs the boundaries between life and death. It is for this reason that Kolnai positions the rotting human corpse as the figure of disgust *par excellence*. A decaying corpse can no longer pretend to hold onto any sort of interiority, or separation from the outside world, and reminds its onlookers of their own fate.

Toby's "charred corpse" parallels Eunice's initial reaction when she first looks upon Toby's face—there is intense nausea and near-fainting. Eunice's reaction to him, particularly when juxtaposed against the similar reactions people have to seeing his corpse, indicates that Toby occupied a death-in-life status in the eyes of his neighbors. The witch-hunt in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* identifies Toby, the baker's assistant, as the "sacred" man. Through the character of Toby, Comyns indicates the relationship between the social designation of the witch and the form of political nonsubjectivity called *homo sacer*. Toby, effectively feminized in his disfigurement, is thus perceived as being closer to death and is singled out as sacrificial.

The Vet's Daughter

There is, alongside the matter-of-fact acceptance of how things are, a barely-contained longing for a different sort of life in Comyns's novels. This longing usually includes fantasies of a marriage to someone kind and handsome who has the means to extricate a woman from her miserable domestic situation and poverty. Freedom might appear in the form of an uninspiring suitor who is tolerable mostly because he is kinder than a sadistic father, or in the form of a young man whose interest emerges as nothing more than a passing curiosity. In some ways, dreams of marriage as a means of escape are just noise—such scenarios might seem, to a young woman, like her most likely route to freedom, but it is the freedom itself that she primarily seeks. These illusions of freedom appear to the 17-year-old narrator of *The Vet's Daughter*, Alice Rowlands, who frequently retreats into daydreams to feel some semblance of escape:

> "Sometimes the life I was living seemed so hopeless and sad I would try to imagine I was in another world. Then all the dreary brown things in the kitchen would turn into great exotic flowers and I'd be in a kind of jungle, and, when the parrot called from his lavatory prison, he wasn't the parrot, but a great white peacock crying out. I would see

enormous leaves almost black against a blazing sky, and the sun shining between them like golden swords; and I could hold out my hands for warmth." (44)

These vivid daydreams provide a brief brush with freedom for Alice and foreshadow a means of more literal, bodily escape: after a traumatic attempted-rape, she develops the ability to levitate. A sense of enclosure is a key feature of the domestic weird. Comyns, like Shirley Jackson and Rachel Ingalls, is interested in the boundaries that contain women and the ways in which those boundaries can be remapped or escaped entirely.

The domestic weird as a whole has a very particular relationship to materiality: first, because it exposes the ways in which economic relations between men and women, and within the nuclear family more specifically, result in the enclosure of women; and second, because the domestic weird, as a narrative mode, is interested in how ecological relationships are affected by, and always press in upon and destabilize, this enclosure. The traditional perspectives of economic materiality and ecological materiality are inverted in narratives of the domestic weird. Economic conditions, which in a Western context have been so insidiously baked into the fabric of social relations that they appear invisible, unchangeable, are brought to the surface in these texts, are made more "real" so that we might more readily point out their flaws, their contingencies, finding them, finally, to be absurd. In *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns uses the weird to offer commentary on the absurdity and the horror that patriarchal, capitalist social relations visit upon feminized bodies within and outside of domestic space.

The novel is told in the first person from Alice's perspective. The reader thus gets a clear sense of how she views herself in relation to her parents, her home, and her social standing. Alice lives with her father (whose veterinary office is attached to the home), her sickly mother, and a rotating cast of animals in a dark, dank house on a dark, dank street in Battersea. Alice's family

is fairly poor, and their dingy neighborhood is juxtaposed against wealthier neighborhoods that she conversely describes as "rich and safe." The narrative opens with Alice explaining matter-offactly to the reader that, had her frail mother been a dog, her father "would have destroyed her" (3).[22] Euan Rowlands is often tasked with "destroying" animals, and will sell them off to the vivisectionist for a few shillings whenever he can. Alice, on the other hand, reads antivivisectionist literature and will do things like save a woodlouse from the fireplace— though she has "no fondness for woodlice… . It was a pity to let it burn" (65). Euan has bedecked the family home in animal body parts and pelts so that no matter where Alice looks, she sees either the Great Dane-skin rug sitting before the hearth, the monkey skull adorning the mantel, or a horse's hoof propping open the door to her father's veterinary surgery. It should, given these macabre home furnishings and her father's cruel tendencies, be unsurprising that Alice will endure a series of traumas over the course of the novel's slim 133 pages. Her mother scurries around the dark, miserable house until she becomes ill and is seemingly euthanized by her husband. When he installs his mistress in Alice's mother's place, the woman attempts to foist Alice off upon a porter who later violently attempts to rape her. She is courted throughout the novel by Mr. Peebles, an assistant to her father, who convinces Alice to go live with his paranoid mother in a small cottage off the coast, but the old woman is agoraphobic, depressed, and eventually commits suicide on Alice's watch. Throughout all of this, Alice has very little say in what happens to her, passed around between her father and potential suitor.

In what seems like a development designed to keep Alice safe, she develops the gravity-defying ability to levitate, which, when kept to the privacy of her own room, becomes a source of secret pride and autonomy. However, when discovered by her father, her ability is leveraged for

[22] Alice's family dynamics resemble, if much more horrifically, Comyns's own relationships with her mother and father, as described in her introduction to the novel.

profit against her will, and causes an awe-induced panic amongst a crowd of onlookers. Her father attempts to install her on Clapham Common as some kind of sideshow act that he hopes he can profit by, but Alice is trampled to death by the frenzied onlookers who are horrified by what they see. As Avril Horner has pointed out, this final revelation—that Alice has been telling her story from beyond the grave—gives the entire novel a spectral framework.[23] Through the characters of Alice and her mother in *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns extends the ambivalence toward death that she touches on in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*. Both Alice and her mother fantasize about and indeed even welcome death as a means of escaping enclosure in life, suggesting that their understanding of their own subjectivity transcends a bounded physical form that can be violently disciplined by the sovereign patriarch.

Spectrality and Domestic Labor

Through the characters of Alice and her unnamed, long-suffering mother, Comyns stages the simultaneous erasure and violent disciplining of the feminized body within domestic space. Alice's mother, a housewife, is literally a specter in her own home, so oppressive and threatening is the presence of her husband. In other words, the presence of Euan in the house causes Alice's mother to actively attempt to minimize her own:

> "There would be my mother scurrying about, always keeping close to the wall…she would dart about with brushes and brooms and later with jugs of steaming water for Father's room—and his breakfast, too. Kippers and eggs and crisp, curly bacon would disappear upstairs; but we had cold, damp bread and jam in the kitchen." (5)

Though she attempts to minimize her physical body as much as possible whenever her husband is at home, the traces of her presence are suggested in the work she does in order to keep the

[23] Comyns provides a model for other domestic weird tales, like Elspeth Barker's *O Caledonia* (1991), that tell the story of a young woman protagonist who is already dead before the story begins.

household running. Somebody was responsible for sweeping up the dust from the corners of the house, after all, and for taking the breakfast plate upstairs and clearing it away again. Against this backdrop of the seemingly disembodied, unacknowledged domestic labor that Alice's mother performs, the procurement of money is tethered to the uneasy relationship between life and death in this novel. Euan's hatred for his wife stems from his bitterness over the size of her dowry, and despite his vicious treatment of her, he maintains that he, significantly, "never stinted her," by which he means that he provided a place for her to live as well as a small stipend to take care of her basic needs (71). Comyns literalizes the ability of money to resurrect when Alice describes the process by which her father would refill her mother's empty purse: "Each Monday morning he would ask for her purse. I would hand it to him, all black and thin and worn. He would put in four sovereigns and four half-crowns, and the purse would come alive again" (15). The addition of tangible money to the purse is a matter of life and death—the purse is literally figured here as coming back to life when money is added to it, reinforcing the relationship between the sovereign's control over life and the sovereign's control over the purse strings.

In *The Vet's Daughter*, the bodies of women are exploited for their reproductive labor in the home and, in Alice's case, for supernatural abilities she will be forced to display publicly. It does not matter, Comyns seems to be saying, where on this spectrum of mundane to mystical such bodily labor falls—it will be caught up in the machinations of capitalism and patriarchy. Euan Rowlands, the novel's synecdochal stand-in for sovereign violence, exploits his wife's labor in the home, and similarly feels no compunction about forcing his daughter to use her body to bewitch a crowd of people so that he can, he hopes, turn a profit. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes that the power to make decisions about who lives and who dies does not begin with the emergence of the sovereign, but rather with the unconditional authority of the patriarch over his

domos. However, gender cannot be separated out from the ways in which patriarchal sovereignty plays out in *The Vet's Daughter*. Euan, the titular veterinarian, acts as a synecdoche for sovereign patriarchal violence in the novel—it is within his power as head of his household to enact bodily harm on his wife and daughter if they perform their housework poorly, or for no reason at all. Federici crucially reminds us in *Caliban and the Witch* that "male-centered systems of exploitation have attempted to discipline and appropriate the female body" and "that women's bodies have been the main targets, the privileged sites, for the deployment of power-techniques and power-relations" (15). In the novel, the fear of this exploitation is stronger even than the fear of death. Though she is perhaps unafraid of death, Alice's mother constantly fears her husband's power to inflict violence on her—even when she is doubled over with internal pain, she continues to overwork her sick body. As her condition worsens, her moans can be heard echoing throughout the house. In a move that destabilizes the solidity of her physical form, Comyns suggests that her presence permeates the domestic space even though she is physically confined to her bedroom. As her health fails and her vitality wanes, she seems to have more of a felt presence in the home than she did when she was able to move through it.

Alice inherits her mother's fear of bodily discipline, and notes that because she "didn't look after Father as well as Mother used to," she becomes increasingly abused by her father. When she burns the bacon or makes the coffee too weak, her father hits her, and he nearly strangles her in a fit of rage because she "ironed a shirt badly" (15). Alice's dreams are filled with the "small cries and groans" of "women in pain" seemingly stemming from the lurking fear that she has forgotten to complete some task for her father. Even in sleep, alone in her room, her unconscious mind associates women in pain with unfinished (and always uncompensated) housework.

Although it is difficult for Alice and her mother to have much of a relationship beyond their shared responsibilities in the household, we will come to see that Alice is influenced by her mother's dreamy disposition and her fascination with death. Alice's view of her mother is mostly characterized by pity and anxiety over her frailty, but when her father is out of the house she enjoys those rare moments in which her mother speaks freely of the wilder country of her childhood. The vast lakes and waterfalls she describes suggest a spirit of freedom and adventure, and are sharply juxtaposed by the cramped, fearful life she leads within her marital home. As her health wanes and she is confined to her bed for longer periods of time, she delivers an uncharacteristically long-winded monologue to Alice in her desperation to tell her story while she still can.[24] Her monologue extends over five pages, and she flits back and forth between memories of her childhood and of the early days of her marriage. She tells Alice of a kind young postman whom she loved but wasn't allowed to marry; about how Euan kicked her in the face shortly after they were married; about how he had an affair with another woman. In a striking moment near the end of this speech, she again recounts idyllic, tranquil details from her childhood, but mixed in with images of the "heather covered" hills is the image of a child she found drowned in the lake: "once I saw a little child floating on the surface [of the mere]. She was dead, but *I wasn't afraid* because she looked so pure floating there, with her eyes open and her blue pinafore gently moving" (24, emphasis added). Alice's mother talks about this macabre image as though it were just another placid detail in her memories of this tranquil place, suggesting that, while she is lying on her own death bed, she hopes to finally know some measure of peace in the repose of death.

[24] This scene parallels one I will discuss in Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman*, in which Natalie Waite's normally reticent mother bends Natalie's ear about the perils of domesticity and marriage.

The close proximity of Alice's mother to death seems to be the only state of being she can occupy that garners her husband's fear, rather than vice versa. Just as the villagers are overwhelmed by disgust when they look upon Toby in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, Euan is "frightened of [his wife's] illness" (15). Later, she haunts the house after her death, which becomes clear when speaks to her as though she's standing right next to him. He starts out talking to Alice, but by the end of the diatribe he is addressing his wife's ghost, suggesting that in this moment she exists in a liminal space between life and death. As Alice observes: "His voice fell and his eyes weren't looking at me anymore. He was talking to someone else" (71). The reality of Alice's mother's spectral presence here reaffirms what the patriarchal sovereign fears: that feminized bodies, with a closer relationship to fate and materiality, are somehow closer to the mystery of life and death. As Barbara Creed writes in her chapter on the film *Carrie*, the monstrous-feminine, as portrayed in the ideology of horror film, "draws attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death" (83). Silvia Federici, too, underscores the fear that women charged with witchcraft instilled in patriarchal authority. Euan scathingly recounts his wife's "deceit and sickly ways," and says he "always loathed the sight of [her] and [her] finicky daughter," suggesting that he could have perhaps detested her less had she produced a son (71). Federici aligns the fear of the feminized body with the desire to implement "male/institutional control" over such bodies, since women's sexuality and reproductive labor "has historically represented a social danger, a threat to the discipline of work, a power over others, and an obstacle to the maintenance of social hierarchies and class relations" (30). Women accused of being witches, she notes, were frequently accused of either infanticide or "an inherent hostility to the reproduction of life" (30).

The character of Euan embodies this fear of the witch, or Creed's monstrous-feminine, finding his wife's physical frailty to be repulsive and even horrifying, while simultaneously resenting her "failure" to control the reproductive act and provide him with a son in whom he could hope to reproduce his own sovereign power.

Gravity-Defying Resistance

As is characteristic of Comyns's work, the framework of the novel is like a macabre comedy of manners—the realist narrative is shot through with weird irruptions. However, the weird is framed differently depending on who is witnessing it. Where Alice (and her mother before her) views things like fate, death, and the supernatural with wonder and fascination, the sovereign patriarch looks at them with entitlement, terror, and/or disgust. Comyns adds a seemingly minor detail at a crucial moment in the novel to underscore the different ways that young girls perceive witchcraft or the supernatural compared with Alice's father and, later, her would-be suitor. When Alice's only friend, Lucy, is visiting, the two play with a "fortune-telling tape-measure." They "laugh a lot over it," and measure their waists and wrists to receive such prophecies as "Next year," "He loves you," and "You will be surprised." The mystery of fate, for these young girls, is a source of play, rather than something to be feared. This childlike, unserious approach to the weird immediately, and significantly, precedes the moment in which we learn that Euan poisons his wife to speed along her death. While Alice and Lucy imagine their fates playfully, Euan takes his wife's fate into his own hands. Comyns seems to be subtly suggesting that Alice is disciplined for playing her girlish games dealing with matters of fate, as her father determines to enact deadly control over her mother's. This juxtaposition will recur more explicitly with Alice's newfound ability to levitate.

After being sexually assaulted, Alice unexpectedly starts to experience occasional nighttime levitations, or what she refers to as floating. Lying in bed the night after she has been attacked, she slowly feels herself begin to lift into the air, higher and higher as she nears the ceiling. Horner has read this phenomenon as, in part, a metaphor for the dissociation victims of assault experience when faced with extreme trauma. She experiences this several more times before, eventually, she is able to control her levitating body and can direct herself around the room—essentially, she has developed the ability to fly. Her nighttime flights become a fact, a reality that Alice does not question, and they even become a source of pride:

> "I remembered how I'd floated up to the ceiling and broken the gas mantle…Perhaps it was something that often happened to people but was never mentioned, like piles? [hemorrhoids]—I'd seen an advertisement 'Why suffer in silence?'—but they were rude things, most likely, and *floating would be rather nice when one became used to it*." (87, emphasis added)

Despite the somewhat humorous comparison Alice draws between levitating and suffering from "piles," she feels hopeful about her newfound ability. Again, there is a sharp distinction between the ways in which women view weird phenomena—innocuous, curious, pleasant—and the way such phenomena horrify men in this novel. Alice hopes to get some answers about her secret ability, and she ventures to ask Mrs. Peebles whether she has ever heard of a person who suddenly gains the ability to float around the room. The woman seems nonplussed: "Yes, levitation, I expect you mean. It used to be quite common, I believe, at one time, but I can't remember when" (103). Her reaction gives Alice some insight into her ability: "It was quite plain that some people floated—not everyone, about as many as were left-handed, perhaps—but it was peculiar and not a thing to boast about, just something to keep to yourself and practise when no

one was about" (104). Floating, in Alice's estimation, is as intimately embarrassing as hemorrhoids and as commonplace as being left-handed. Her belief in this regard might be read in part as evidence of her youth and lack of experience in the world, but it is perhaps more importantly evidence that she does not fear or despise her body or the unusual ways it defies natural laws.

Religious Awe and the Numinous

In *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns stages the ways in which encounters with the supernatural can disrupt the patriarchal order by eliciting affective responses that trigger overwhelm and irrationality and manifest as animality and/or religious awe. Alice shows just one other person her ability to float before accidentally revealing it to her father: Nicholas, a young man she is hoping will court her. Her encounters with Nicholas, whom she finds to be a more romantic prospect than Mr. Peebles, cause her to feel self-conscious about her ignorance and lack of worldly experience. She prizes her unique ability to float, and after she sees Nicholas driving around town with a sophisticated-looking woman, she wants to show him that she "can do things others can't do" (112). Her hopes are dashed, for when she begins to levitate, despite feeling "light and free" herself, Nicholas is aghast: "I heard him say in a scared and awful whisper, 'Christ! Stop it, stop it, I say!'...His face looked white and dreadful, with an expression almost as if he thought me vile and infamous" (112). His reaction is one of awe (his voice drops to a whisper, he utters a religious exclamation) and disgust (his face goes white, he expression indicates that he finds her "vile"). When he sees Alice float, Euan is even more intensely overcome, perhaps especially so because her flotation allows her to escape his physical abuse. When Alice is forced to return to his house, Euan begins to strike her in a drunken fury when she suddenly floats out of his reach, almost as though her body is instinctively protecting her from

further harm. When she looks down, she sees him bowed over in a picture of religious awe: "There was Father kneeling on the floor, almost as if he were praying. His eyes had rolled back so far that they were all white, with no pupils showing, and he was drooling at the mouth" (119). There are several distinct parallels between this scene in *The Vet's Daughter* and the ways villagers react to Toby in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*. Alice's gravity-defying ability induces in her father a frenzied hysteria and animalistic attributes: rolling eyes and dripping saliva. In displaying her ability, Alice is able to bring her larger-than-life father literally to his knees. She notes, not without some pride, that "Father wasn't fierce any more, just a buckled-up old man" (119). Her transcendence of matter in this scene literally puts her body out of reach of patriarchal violence and ownership.

The fact that Alice's levitations are her own before her father exploits them underscores Comyns's depiction of how detrimental it is for a young woman to not have control over her own source of material autonomy, especially when that source is as intimate as her own flesh and blood. Once he has recovered from the overwhelming sight of Alice's body defying the rational order of natural law, though, Euan begins immediately scheming for ways he can profit by it. Even when this weird thing starts happening to Alice, her father, always obsessed with finding more ways to make money, believes that by forcing her to do a public demonstration of her ability on the Clapham Commons, she will somehow become a source of income and even fame for him. It is significant that the narrative builds toward an encounter on the Clapham Commons. The erasure of the commons in the transition from feudalism to capitalism has been identified by Federici as inextricably linked to the devaluation of women's social-economic status and the disciplining of the feminized body in the witch hunts. In the novel's harrowing final scene, Alice is taken forcibly to the commons, tellingly dressed as a bride, and fed on "sherry beaten up with

eggs and milk," with the expectation that she must strengthen her slight body to produce value for her father. The commons become a space of chaos and violence in the final scene—a crowd begins to press in upon her, drawing together "like when drops of water seem to magnetise each other and draw together" (131). This image collapses the dichotomy between nature and culture, giving the impression that a marvel of matter creates a shared sense of fascination that is not only a social phenomenon, but a biological one as well. Before she lifts off the ground, she notes that "Someone was bending down to help me and I could have saved myself, but Father's terrible face was before me, and I made a frantic effort simply to escape the horror of my father" (131). When she is finally exhausted and no longer able to sustain her height, she returns to the ground and is promptly trampled in the rapturous panic of the frenzied onlookers:

> "I stayed quite still up there, and there was a dreadful silence. All those people—it was *as if they were dead*, so still they were, and I could hear a whizzing bee. The silence only lasted an instant, then a great roar came, and screams and cries—*animal noises*. I looked below and there they were, not animals but hundreds of milling people. Some were shouting and pointing upwards at me, and others were *on their knees, praying*. A few were running away, not straight but in circles" (131-2, emphases added).

The onlookers respond to Alice's ability in nearly the same way that Euan did: they turn either to prayer or become reduced to animalistic behavior. In a scene that even more closely parallels the execution of Toby in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, there is a collapsing of the religious and the profane, the spiritual and the biological, in these moments where onlookers are viscerally overwhelmed by contact with the numinous. In this disquieting climax of *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns literalizes and rebukes the centuries-old fear of poor women in precarious social positions. Alice has been unable or unwilling to capitulate to the patriarchal symbolic order—she

avoids a convenient marriage with Mr. Peebles, she shirks her responsibilities as caretaker to the elderly Mrs. Peebles, she attempts to delight in her own body's supernatural abilities without allowing these to be leveraged for capitalist accumulation— and so she must be, according to her father, wicked and uniquely capable of convening with otherworldly forces. Comyns emphasizes in this scene the ways in which the financially precarious feminized body is disciplined and subject to violence. There is a cruel irony, Comyns seems to suggest, in the fact that the ability to transcend the body's limitations can save a feminized body from the horrors of patriarchy while simultaneously precipitating that body's annihilation.

Despite the harrowing end Alice is brought to, Comyns affords her a privilege in death that she never was given in life: the ability to tell her own—and her mother's—story. Despite the fact that she has "died" in the narrative, her disembodied voice has been speaking her story into being all along. Indeed, when the mob has pressed in around her for good, she makes it extremely clear that she is not afraid of the prospect of dying on Clapham Common: "I simply thought, 'This is it; this is how one dies.' Rosa had ceased to scream, and for the first time in my life *I was not afraid*" (133, emphasis added). It is striking that the phrase Alice uses to describe her feeling toward her own impending death is exactly the same as the one her mother used when describing how she felt when she encountered the dead child floating in the lake by her childhood home. Euan is once again made physically ill after experiencing contact with a death that he did not intend to cause. He survives the stampede but is described in the newspaper report that closes out the novel as having been "seriously ill since witnessing the occurrence" (133). Just as he was when his wife was ill, Euan is confronted with death and is accordingly overwhelmed and enfeebled in ways that are uncharacteristic of him. On the other hand, there is a sharp distinction between the fearlessness Alice and her mother each feel when confronted by

death, which is so unlike the terror they feel when confronted by the disciplining of their bodies at the hands of the patriarchal sovereign. The patriarchal subject has been conditioned to understand death as the end of a self that is bounded, non-transcorporeal, which is to say an end to the ego and its ability to dominate. In domestic weird fictions, death becomes a possible escape. Death becomes, for Alice and her mother, almost wondrous. Death, for them, is merely a move from one painful state of being into one that is perhaps more restful and thus it fascinates and invites rather than repels.

Conclusion

In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson writes about the role of the weird, as a literary and artistic mode, in transmitting cultural beliefs about the supernatural. Before the Renaissance, she says, this transmission most often occurred in religious texts and worship. However, in our "secular society," Nelson argues that narratives of the weird and fantastic have "supplanted scripture and direct revelation, [and] we turn to works of the imagination to learn how our living desire to believe in a transcendent reality has survived outside our conscious awareness" (viii). As scientific rationality has become the primary epistemological framework for describing metaphysical phenomena under patriarchal Western hegemony, discussions of the supernatural have become disenchanted, ridiculed, and disciplined. Thus, such wonderings about the world that exists beyond human perception have found refuge in the realm of the fantastic and the weird. For Nelson, these narratives typically characterize the supernatural as "grotesque and demonic, not benign and angelic" (viii). The weird in Comyns's fiction—and in the other domestic weird fictions I explore in this project—is simultaneously ecological and mystical. That is to say, the weird in these texts underscores incomprehensible material interchanges among

agential bodies and their surroundings, and blurs the line between life and death in ways that elicit a range of powerful affective responses, both positive and negative.

Writers of the domestic weird take enclosure as the fundamental problem their protagonists face; in other words, they are concerned with the alienation of humans from the material world. This fantasy of isolation and boundedness is an essential condition to the continuance of patriarchal, capitalist hegemony. Comyns's narratives push readers through disgust to arrive at the numinous, emphasizing the inability of the patriarchal order to sustain affects of bodily overwhelm that point to the inherent nonsingularity of the human form. Comyns uses the witch hunt in these two novels to stage the violence done to the feminized body as a way of dealing with experiences of the disgusting and the numinous that threaten the patriarchal subject's sense of sovereignty. Contact with the disgusting and the numinous cause the patriarchal subject significant anxiety about its own unassailability, and the witch hunt emerges as a way for them to reassert dominance by disciplining the feminized body, which is perceived to have unique control over life and death or the boundaries of the material self.

The poisoned bread in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* becomes a catalyzing event that allows a latent disgust for Toby, the feminized and thus sacrificial other, to be borne out to violent ends. Under Jane Bennett's matrix, "thing-power" is defined as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). The poisoned bread, like Toby's scarred face, underscores the permeability of the human form and its orientation toward eventual death and decay. And yet, unlike the bread, Toby's body reminds onlookers of their own fates, and it is determined that he must be punished. Similarly, Alice's body becomes an example of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, invoking the historical image of women persecuted as witches for their perceived ability to control the means of reproduction,

which are both biological and mystifying. The crowd looks at her and ostensibly sees the work of the devil or some other dangerously supernatural entity coursing through her, giving her the ability to defy the material constraints of the human body.

In all its becomingness, the matter of life is unpredictable. This lends it a mystical dimension, as feminist theologian Catherine Keller has pointed out. Keller, in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, lays the groundwork for what she calls an apophatic materialism, reminding us of the "ancient mystical apophasis, the 'unsaying' that characterizes negative theology" (123). Within this negative or apophatic framework of mystical unknowing, she reminds us that "it is never just 'God' that comes unsaid. For there seems to be something hard to say, something that constantly comes unsaid, about matter itself" (123). Comyns's fiction exemplifies the ways in which the weird can be deployed to limn a sort of mystical materialism. Encounters with the weird emerge in her fiction as a means of disrupting the impunity with which the patriarchal sovereign can authorize the disciplining of feminized bodies.

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CHAPTER TWO: WEIRD MATTER, EERIE SPACES IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S NARRATIVE WORLDS

Critics have often had a difficult time separating Shirley Jackson's authorial persona from her persona as a housewife and mother. The polarized reception to her memoir, *Life Among the Savages* (1953), indicates the inability of critics to grapple with the distinction between Jackson's two selves: the masterful literary witch and the housewife. When "The Lottery" appeared in a 1948 edition of *The New Yorker*, Jackson established herself as an edgy new voice in fiction, a woman who was unafraid of writing brutal, macabre tales. So when Farrar, Straus and Young published *Savages*—a funny, comparatively light-hearted memoir about parenting and domestic life—the book's reception was one of mixed confusion. Jackson's readers were by turns dismayed and pleased to encounter a work they perceived to be completely out of character for the author of "The Lottery." Some, like the critic Sterling North, dismissed it as "ephemeral fluff," far beneath Jackson's talents as a prose stylist (qtd. in Franklin 322). Margaret Farrar, on the other hand, wrote that the book was "completely delightful and entertaining reading—not Shirley on a broomstick at all" (qtd. in Franklin 320). Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, lumps Jackson into her understanding of the New Housewife, suggesting that when Jackson writes about housekeeping or parenting, she is somehow undermining her identity as a successful writer. Jackson's identity as a writer cannot be parceled out into the macabre vs. the domestic, the witch vs. the housewife–her work embodies both simultaneously. Jackson's multiple selves are reflected in the infinite possibilities that the women in her novels contain.

In the opening pages *Life Among the Savages*, Jackson muses on how it feels to dwell in a home surrounded by all manner of everyday objects. She gives weight to the physical materials that hold her and her children in relation to one another, to themselves, to the rhythms of their

days. In Jackson's home, what she calls the "paraphernalia" of domestic life could include everything from plastic sandwich bags, to stacks and stacks of books (a vast collection numbering in the thousands), to celluloid toys with tiny wheels that were perpetually falling off, lying in wait for unsuspecting bare feet. She refers to this collectivity of things as "the complexities of civilization with which we surround ourselves" (2). She does not explicitly unpack the "we" to which she refers here, but she is clearly limning a particular kind of domestic zeitgeist in which she intimately includes herself. She differentiates those familiar with this lifestyle from others who are not, those who seem to her to live "without children and without books, going on soundlessly in an apartment hotel where they do the cleaning for you and send up your meals and all you have to do is lie on a couch" (2). She is positioning herself as a part of a specific milieu here–a white, middle-class America of the 1950s—distinguishable in large part by its particular relation to, and consumption of, material objects. She aligns herself with others–and she almost certainly is thinking of other women, particularly housewives—who live in a home for which they are responsible, with other people for whom they are responsible.

Jackson both bemoans and relishes the seemingly banal household ephemera she uses as the raw materials for the everyday rituals in which she was constantly engaging. *Life Among the Savages* is remarkable in that it often reads more like an auto-ethnography than a memoir: it is, in many sections, a self-conscious study of Jackson's own relationship to household matter. In this anthropology of herself, Jackson draws conclusions about the culture of housewifeliness from artifacts that *she* produced. In one passage, she fishes scraps of paper from the pockets of a coat not worn since the beginning of the season, scraps containing grocery lists and hastily scrawled chores. These become artifacts worth examining. The use of shorthand, abbreviations, etc. are all perfectly legible to her, even if they are inscrutable to her husband, who "sniffed and said if he managed his filing cabinet the way I managed my shopping…" as he ostensibly trails off into

disdain (75). “Women,” she says, “but especially housewives, tend to think in lists” (74). Though these lists provide some order to the constantly onrushing demands of domestic upkeep, Jackson demonstrates how fluid these lists necessarily are, and how such lists usually only make sense to their authors. What she is describing, here and throughout the rest of the book, is what she sees as the tendency of women, whether consciously or not, to innovate and customize domestic matters to their own needs. Jackson details, in her memoirs and letters, a very particular type of relationship with household artifacts, both organic and inorganic–from toadstools to plastic racing cars–and this relationship would prove to be an essential thread woven throughout her fictional narratives. Accordingly, things have real power in her novels and stories; objects vibrate with conative resonance. Watches, books, mushrooms, cups, tarot cards: these things not only signify, they act and persist of their own accord. Moreover, they provide the physical materials for her characters to engage in ritual practices, to swerve away from prescribed gender roles of the era and recast objects as co-conspirators in reasserting one’s autonomy.

Jackson’s demonstrated interest in objects and the material world seems to conflict with the frequent categorization of her fiction as “purely psychological.” Critics often frame her as a writer who was primarily interested in plumbing the depths of the human psyche. Such analyses laud what they see as her intense focus on an enclosed interiority of the unsettled mind and the inner demons it contains. These “demons,” though, are almost always framed as nonmaterial, or not “real.” Though her fiction has frequently been discussed as psychological horror, I argue that there is a latent ambivalence in her narratives toward the severance of the mind from the body. She is perhaps interested in “demons in the mind,” but to suggest that these demons are not also of the body is to suggest a dichotomy between the psychological and the material that her fiction is constantly working to problematize. Touching, feeling, smelling, tasting—far more than thinking, or even speaking—are of gravest importance to the women in her narratives. If her

fiction sometimes seems to elide the body, it is because her protagonists ache to reclaim theirs. Jackson emphasizes the physicality of the relationship between the bodies of her protagonists and the material world around them. By taking the acting-power of the material world seriously, Jackson's protagonists reject the heteropatriarchal hierarchy that has served to disempower or traumatize them.

The protagonists of the three novels I examine in this chapter are variously figured as aberrant, strange, "spooky," and even dangerous. Jackson's fiction is full of lonely women who have made very few meaningful connections with other people: their "spookiness" contributes to fraught relationships with parents or siblings and leads to a hard time making friends. Strange, unexplainable things happen to or around them, and their unique proximity to these phenomena serve to alienate them from the heteropatriarchal power structures of the institutions within which they are embedded. Their estrangement from other people follows from an inability or unwillingness to participate in heteronormative modes of relationality. Some of these protagonists struggle to connect with mothers who chose paths of marriage and domesticity that appear unhappy or even horrifying, and others chafe against the girls their age who aspire to the same heteropatriarchal domestic ideal. These unruly women either revile or are deeply ambivalent about the thought of marriage and the social enclosure of housewifeliness. However, the refusal to be assimilated into the respectable mainstream of middle-class 1950s America is, in Jackson's work, always in tension with a yearning for connection. Her protagonists positively thrum with a desire for closeness with other people, nonhuman animals, the material world, and with their own bodies. The types of connections they desire, though, are disallowed by the repressive, individualistic society in which they find themselves. When faced with the choice between compliance or isolation, they reject both and instead pursue connections that require the radical and sometimes deadly dissolution of the heteropatriarchal conceptions of the self.

An attention to materiality and entanglement is instructive for tracing the importance of touching and relating in understanding the self in Jackson's narratives. Intimacy with the material self and/or the more-than-human underpins a rejection of the heteropatriarchal family unit that was so oppressively foisted on young women in 1950s America. Jackson's protagonists seek physical touch—both with themselves and with the other—as a way of reconnecting with the self. I explore Jackson's queering of materiality across three of her major works: *Hangsaman* (1951), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959); and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). The protagonists in the novels I discuss in this chapter, rather than attempting to reclaim agency by disavowing the material world, instead demonstrate a willingness to believe in the power of objects to become co-conspirators. A seemingly absurd inversion happens: just as the women in her novels feel no control over their destinies, bound as they are by received ideas of how to perform domesticity and womanhood, they demonstrate heightened creativity and agency by remaking worlds in tandem with the supposedly inert objects around them. Denied full social agency in their own right, they creatively use the "stuff" around them to grab hold of their lives and make changes, often drastic or even deadly. In the process, the agency of both actants, human and nonhuman, becomes elevated in collaboration with one another. Jackson's protagonists engage with matter earnestly, seeing that the material world around them is always unfolding and infolding, revealing itself to be more than merely a collection of inert, passive objects.

The "spookiness" that characterizes relationality in Jackson's narratives evokes the "spookiness" of quantum entanglement. In quantum physics, the mysterious matter of entanglement refers to two particles that, when entangled, somehow manage to respond to each other's movements almost simultaneously, virtually moving as one even when they are separated by potentially thousands of lightyears. This phenomenon has no explanation in classical physics;

it is a model of unthinkable intimacy that Einstein has famously called "spooky action-at-adistance." Quantum entanglement is at its core about unexplainable, irrational connection. It is spooky, yes, and it is also *weird*. When two particles nowhere near one another respond to changes in the other, their fates become inextricably and confoundingly linked. Karen Barad is a philosopher-physicist who writes at the intersection of quantum physics, posthumanism, and queer theory. Throughout their oeuvre, Barad has explored quantum events and phenomena and, through these explorations, reveals the instability of the foundations upon which Western ontologies of the individual are built. Barad extends, through their notion of agential realism, theories of identity formation and pursues a posthuman understanding of performativity that takes matter seriously. When Natalie Waite arrives at college in the novel *Hangsaman* (1951), it doesn't take long for the other girls to nickname her "Spooky." The nickname refers to the fact that she spends a lot of her time alone, avoiding "normal" social interactions with her peers, and probably also to her macabre choice of conversation topics when she does interact with others. Despite what reads as an outward indifference, though, Natalie is a deeply feeling girl who is often overcome by her desire to connect with others and with the many possible alternative identities she contains. I take this spooky connection as a serendipitous spark that demands Jackson be read through a Baradian lens. Reading Natalie's "spookiness" through the lens of entanglement allows us to identify her spookiness as a desire for queer intimacy rather than as a desire for isolation.

Natalie is not the only protagonist in Jackson's novels to imagine other selves percolating within and through her—Eleanor Vance in *The Haunting of Hill House* and Merricat Blackwood in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* both contain many selves that bubble up within them and clamor for attention, sometimes loudly and all at once. These other selves inform the ways in which they relate to the world around them, and the ways in which they move through,

alongside, and within others. I emphatically avoid referring to these other selves as imagined or imaginary, because to treat them as mere imagination would be to accept their immateriality, conceding them to the realm of the symbolic or representational and ignoring their material potency. I read these through the Baradian notion of spacetimemattering, which refers to matter's propensity toward "iterative reconfigurings…traces of what might yet (have) happen(ed)" (168). Barad also refers to the spookiness of quantum entanglement as what results from an "identity undone by a discontinuity at the heart of matter itself" (*Diffracting Diffraction* 180). Reading Natalie's, Eleanor's, and Merricat's troubled conceptions of who they are (and who they might be) through the lens of quantum entanglement and spacetimemattering opens up space to consider the ways in which Jackson's fiction explodes heteropatriarchal ontologies of the self. What she offers in its place is an understanding of a self that emerges and mutates through a constantly evolving set of possible more-than-human relations that exceeds empirical explanation.

Hangsaman and Intimacy with Multiple Selves

Hangsaman, Jackson's second novel, is often described as a deeply interior book. This assessment is largely tied to the reading of 17-year-old Natalie Waite, with her vivid, imaginative daydreams and her obsessive, often paranoid thoughts and anxieties, as an introspective, antisocial girl. Ruth Franklin, for example, refers to *Hangsaman* as Jackson's "most autobiographical novel" and describes Natalie as a "quirky and sensitive" character who "lives mostly in her own mind" (43). It is true that Natalie has a rich inner world in which she conjures alternate selves that take her out of her oppressive domestic life. Natalie's mother is a depressed housewife with whom Natalie has a difficult time connecting; indeed, she seems to be viscerally repelled by connecting with her mother. Her father is a pompous writer whose oversized ego

looms large in Natalie's conception of herself. Her family home is, fittingly, the first physical space in which her actions are subject to the rule of heteropatriarchal authority. The novel follows Natalie's life at home before she leaves for college, her struggles through her first term, and an intimate relationship with a strange classmate, Tony, who many readers see as an invention of Natalie's fragmented mind in the wake of a sexual assault she endures at the hands of her father's colleague at a dinner party before she leaves for college. Franklin describes the novel as chronicling Natalie's "psychic disintegration" in the wake of the sexual assault. To be sure, the assault absolutely traumatizes Natalie. However, to suggest that all of the other selves that Natalie conjures exist purely "in her own mind," with no bearing on the material world around her, is to sever the mind from the body. *Hangsaman* narrativizes the ways in which objects and the material world can be reclaimed and used to reclaim one's sense of agency, and how touching (the non/human other, the self, all other possible selves) is a stabilizing act in the wake of sexual violence.

The distinction between the mind and the body is, from the first, quite muddy for Natalie. Though she is prone to vivid "daydreams" in which she has full conversations with "invented" characters, her embodied self is never cast out of these visions. In one striking early scene in the novel, Natalie, seemingly lost in thought, can still literally feel in her body a connection to the material. Lying on her back in the garden, she imagines that she is running through the mountains. Though she has not moved from her parents' front lawn, she is certain of the feeling of her feet skimming through the grass: "Her feet brushed the ground—*she could feel it, she could feel it*—her hair fell soundlessly behind, her long legs arched, and the breath came cold in her throat" (24, emphasis added). The narrator makes emphatically clear that, despite being a "daydream," Natalie is experiencing this moment of proximity in her body, repeating the phrase in the appositive construction "she could feel it, she could feel it." As it evolves, the feeling she

conjures indicates a desire to connect—physically, emotionally, even spiritually—with the feminine. She sees in her vision mountains that are "full-bosomed and rich," and in a moment of intimacy, "Natalie, her mouth against the grass and her eyes tearful from looking into the sun, took the mountains to herself and whispered 'Sister, sister.' 'Sister, sister," she said, and the mountains stirred, and answered" (24). This poetic scene borders on the surreal in its depiction of an intense, almost pained desire for physical closeness between Natalie and the mountains-askin. The surreality serves to blur the "actual" events of the narrative with the daydream by interspersing felt sensory details, like the cold breath passing through Natalie's throat, her mouth on the grass, the bright sun drawing tears to her eyes. She can feel it, she insists: not once, but twice. These moments depict Natalie's attempts to connect herself to a more-than-human world that allows her to fantasize about finding feminine kin, a sister, in the swell of the mountains.

Natalie does not always meet her other selves with tenderness, and sometimes feels her way toward a more intense form of transformation. In moments when she is confronted with the horrors of domestic enclosure, she conjures an alternative future in which she is consumed by fire rather than following in her mother's footsteps. Throughout the narrative Natalie's mother seems to teeter just short of a full-blown meltdown. Natalie considers the very real possibility of what her life might look like in another 17 years were she to emulate her mother, married and "senselessly afflicted with children of her own," but she pushes the thought away "by her usual method—imagining the sweet sharp sensation of being burned alive" (10). Tending to the future by producing children, the mandate of heteropatriarchy, feels to Natalie like a disease—an "affliction." The imagery of being burned alive evokes obvious images of witches burned for their alleged crimes at the stake, but for Natalie the horror of this fate is startlingly inverted. Rather than framing this immolation as a punishment for her deviance from social norms, she holds onto the "sweet sharp sensation" of flames consuming her body.

Jackson is known for reflecting feelings of women of the era who rejected the role of the housewife as it developed in postwar commodification of domestic life. Natalie is, to use Silvia Federici's words, "afraid of identifying even for a second with the housewife" (18). She believes that disavowing her mother, the novel's stand-in for the housewife, is not a way out of the capitalist, heteropatriarchal division of labor she fears. During the pivotal dinner party scene during the novel's opening section, Natalie finds her mother in bed. Mrs. Waite is overcome—perhaps with exhaustion from preparing for the event, or perhaps from her resigned bitterness at seeing her husband carrying on with his arm around the waist of a young woman in their own backyard—and, seemingly for the first time, tells Natalie what she really thinks about her marriage and her role as a housewife. It's a poignant moment, as she pleads with Natalie to see her: "This is the only life I've *got*—do you understand?" (34). She rambles feverishly, taking advantage of this sudden burst of rage to finally explain to Natalie that no matter how well one performs domesticity, they will never have real autonomy: "You keep thinking that what you've got hold of is power, just because you *feel right in yourself*," (34-5, emphasis added). Mrs. Waite suggests that the feeling of being at home, or "right," in oneself, is completely subject to the crushing demands of heteropatriarchal domestic enclosure. She can't get through to Natalie at this moment, and claims that if she were dead, maybe then her daughter would listen. Both Natalie and her mother seem to associate the promise of death with the end of domestic enclosure, a sentiment that is shared later in the novel by the young wife of Natalie's professor, Mrs. Langdon, who explicitly wishes herself dead multiple times. Jackson emphasizes the fantasy of death as a way of feeling the body released from its circumscribed compliance with heteropatriarchal homemaking.

Throughout the novel, Natalie seeks to love herself intimately despite the suggestion by men in the novel that she must disdain the parts of herself that do not uphold heteronormative

gender roles. Natalie's sexual assault is framed as a punishment for her ability to seek out alternative forms of intimacy and transformation, and it violently disrupts her relationship with her body by literally perverting her understanding of how one can touch and be touched. During a party her father throws at the family home, Natalie finds herself lured away from the rest of the guests by a strange man. The man, ostensibly a colleague of her father's, seems irritated by Natalie's quick wit and keen intellect, and moments before the assault is suggested, he demands that she humble herself by explaining "what you thought was so wonderful about yourself" (43). The implication is that this attacker knowingly weaponizes sexual violence against Natalie precisely to make her hate herself.[25] The narrative elides the assault, but the moments leading up to it anticipate a moment of contact that is so horrifying it is literally sickens Natalie: "'Oh my dear God sweet Christ,' Natalie thought, so sickened she nearly said it aloud, 'is he going to *touch* me?" (43, emphasis original). This moment brings up in Natalie a feeling of physical revulsion—a feeling that churns one's stomach and brings bile into the throat—because the touch that is suggested here is so violent, and so jarringly opposed to the earlier tenderness with which she touches herself or even the "sweet sharp sensation" she feels-imagines of being consumed by flames.

Natalie's assault exacerbates the latent feeling of not being at home in her own body, the lurking fear that her body is not her own. She comes to recognize that the spaces she has relied on to develop her sense of self—her family's home, her dorm room at college—are governed by heteropatriarchal strictures that disallow her bodily safety and sovereignty. She visits home only once after going away to school, and struggles to connect with her family, struggles to explain

[25] Even girls her age, her peers at college, attempt to use sexuality and the body as a way of shaming and disciplining the new girls who arrive on campus. After the assault, Natalie leaves for college and, during her first week, is dragged out of her bed in the middle of the night along with the other new arrivals. The new girls are forced to "tell a dirty joke," and to say whether they are virgins. Natalie refuses to participate and is deemed "no fun"—certainly a precursor to the nickname "Spooky."

why she is failing so spectacularly to fit in with the other girls and succeed in her studies. The moment the bus pulls away, though, she becomes acutely aware of her body, and the importance of its every texture and process:

> "What was important in this moment was the quick control of muscles all up and down her leg, bent now, but potentially straight, the narrow solidity of her fingers, bare and still wet with the rain, the unity that began with her eyes and forehead and tied to her back and into her legs again, all of it bound together into a provocative whole that could be only barely contained within the skin and sense of Natalie Waite, individual." (167)

Natalie has struggled to reconcile the profound disruption to her sense of bodily sovereignty and has likely been reminded of the attack when she returns to the place where it occurred, yet as she leaves, she manages to think—with something approaching real tenderness—of her muscles, her fingers, her face and legs. She indicates the glimmer of a realization that she is something more than what can be "contained within the skin and sense of Natalie Waite, individual." The notion of "unity," of being "whole," is merely "provocative." This passage gestures earnestly toward a view of the self as a collection of material processes and phenomena, and becomes a mechanism for healing. In these moments she leaves open the possibility for contact with the other.

After being continually thwarted in her attempts to touch and be touched, Natalie's overflowing desire for intimacy manifests in the character of the "girl" Tony, an embodiment of Natalie's other selves, with whom she forges a queer kinship. In Natalie's encounters near the end of the novel with Tony we might read a queer intimacy that underscores the power of touching as a way of reclaiming the self through relationality. Tony is usually read as merely a figment of Natalie's imagination, as though that means she is "not real." Franklin reaffirms the usual reading of Tony as "not a real character," but rather as a "creation of Natalie's fragmented psyche" (63). She notes that Jackson, presumably as a way to refute a reading of Natalie and

Tony as lesbians, wrote that Tony is "not a he or a she but the demon in the mind" (qtd. in Franklin 63). Jackson was reportedly alarmed to see *Hangsaman* described as a "lesbian novel" in Jeannette H. Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956). According to Franklin, "Jackson was vehemently opposed to the idea that her fiction might have a lesbian subtext—perhaps *too* vehemently opposed, considering how often figures who may be understood as lesbian appear in her fiction" (Franklin 440). Franklin seems to cite Jackson's remarks here for two reasons: first, to demonstrate that, despite the intimacy between the two, Jackson wanted to make it clear that the relationship between Tony and Natalie is not romantic; and second, to reaffirm that Tony is a representation of Jackson's interest in psychological turmoil. Franklin moves on from the discussion of Tony's gender rather quickly to discussing what she seems to frame as the separate subject of Jackson's interest in the "inner demon." I argue that the gender of Tony, and the nature of the relationship between Natalie and Tony, is inseparable from unsettled conversations around Tony's materiality. Rather than asking whether Tony is "real," whatever that might mean, we should be asking instead what it means that Natalie is able to touch and feel a supposedly immaterial imaginary that is conjured out of her own self.

Natalie's relationship with the real-imaginary figure of Tony exceeds binary heterosexist language premised on articulable distinctions between man and woman, self and other, imaginary and material. Instead, their relationship can be read through the scenes in which they literally come into contact with one another. A Baradian lens makes space to explore the capaciousness with which Jackson's fiction understands relationality as queer, and the pain of having the potential for intimacy curtailed by heteropatriarchal enclosure of the self. We already know that Natalie is hyperaware and hypersensitive of feelings within her own body. With the emergence of the character Tony, Jackson provides a moment in which Natalie continues finding new ways to relate materially to herself and to her world. If Tony is *of* Natalie—not merely a figment of her

imagination but a creation with its own physicality that acts diffractively *through* Natalie—then the touching that occurs between the two amounts to a self-touching in the way that Barad describes it: "an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self" (Barad, On Touching, 213). Tony, entangled with Natalie, becomes the first friend with whom Natalie develops a meaningful connection: Tony chases away the other girls while the two hide away inside a basement dorm room; they read to one another; they both adopt other personas and playact scenes with one another. Natalie, moments before falling asleep "alongside" Tony, becomes again extremely cognizant of her own body, and the sensations she experiences: "Effortlessly, Natalie found herself falling asleep, warm and happy. She was agreeably aware of the slow relaxations of her hands, her feet, her face, and felt the lines beside her mouth smooth out and her face fall into nothing more than a covering of bone; she thought vaguely that at this moment she must look as she would when dead" (180). She displays physical signs that her body feels safe in this moment: she is "warm," she experiences "slow relaxations," lines on her face become "smooth." She then abruptly imagines that this posture of safety is reflective of death, again emphasizing the association between death and an escape from the violence of enclosure.

Natalie and Tony's relationship is one of unfathomable intimacy—the proximity between the two is *almost* nonexistent. They are able to sleep "alongside" one another, suggesting that Tony is somehow lying next to Natalie, rather than being lodged somewhere within her. They do everything "together," and seem to anticipate one another's movements, just like two entangled particles:

> "They got out of the bed together, enjoying the quietness of the morning when everyone was asleep, and enjoying, too, the feeling of being together without fear. They did not speak much, but moved as though speech were not necessary…Together, warning one another not to laugh, they went down the hall full of the sounds of sleep from rooms on

> either side, into the showers, where they bathed together, washing one another's backs and trying to splash without sound" (181).

The suggestion that they can only be "together without fear" when they are alone indicates subversive queer desires and the awareness of the ways their intimacy might be disallowed if they were to be seen together. This scene, too, echoes back to the "daydream" about the mountains and reemphasizes Natalie's desire to establish radical intimacy with herself *and* with another woman. The difference between these two is erased by the realization that Tony is both a way for Natalie to show herself care through touch, and a way for Natalie to feel as though she is caring for another body. Barad reminds us that "Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: talk about a queer intimacy!" (Barad, On Touching, 213). When touching and being touched by Tony, Natalie is touching an other at virtually the exact same time as she is touching herself. This embodied, relational both/and allows Natalie to work toward some measure of healing her severed relationship with herself. She spends a lot of time in the novel reflecting on feelings of her own selfhood and possible unreality, imagining herself as a composite image constructed from the perspectives of others, the place that she might hold (however small) in someone else's life. Her use of "not real" in these moments of reflection seem to mean "not who I think I am." Sometimes this thought "comforts" her, other times it unsettles her: "Suppose, actually, she were *not* Natalie Waite, college girl, daughter to Arnold Waite, a creature of deep lovely destiny; suppose she were someone else?" (150). She feels-imagines different selves throughout the novel that contain infinite possibilities for who she is and who she might be. She imagines numerous alter egos: she is Waitalie Nat or Naitalie Wat, she is a prisoner in a psychiatric institute, an old woman nearing death, a child with tonsilitis, a woman with 12 children, or even simply a man (150). Her infinite

possibilities for herself are in her mind, *and* they are material: they take up space, they alter and affect the sensory experiences Natalie has while inhabiting them.

The narrative constantly underscores Natalie's affinity for touching things as a way of feeling reassured when her sense of self starts to feel diffuse. Near the end of the novel, after a visit home for Thanksgiving, she thinks about how she her experiences away from home have shaped her: "She had come home on Wednesday night, bringing with her a certain sense of romance, as one who could bring heartbreaking stories of haunted lands, who had seen and heard and touched and known the improbable, the unbelievable…who had seen and heard and touched and known more than might ever be found at home" (161). We see the emotional overwhelm caused by her ambivalence toward the realness of all of her selves when she reflects on her tendencies to feel-imagine them earlier in the novel:

> "Sometimes, with a vast aching heartbreak, the great, badly contained intentions of creation, the poignant searching longings of adolescence overwhelmed her, and shocked by her own capacity for creation, she held herself tight and unyielding, crying out silently something that might only be phrased as, 'Let me take, let me create.'" (23)

It is significant that at the moment she is overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite potential of her own creativity, she turns inward and physically grabs onto herself tightly. She does not shy away from this overwhelm and seems to be speaking to herself when she asks for permission to "take" and "create." As Barad reminds us, "the infinite plethora of alterities given by the play of quantum in/determinacies are constitutive inclusions in a radical un/doing of identity" (On Touching 214). Natalie is overwhelmed by the mystery of the ways in which the imagined is entangled with the material, but ultimately is bolstered by the possibilities this entanglement holds. She is afraid at the "solidity" of the thought that, despite her feeling-imaginings, she is no more than a single self. She worries that she is "no more than Natalie Waite," but immediately

questions the truth of that thought. “Yet then—” she thinks, “why, if this were true,” does her sensorial experience of her other selves feel so “sharp”? Natalie demands we read the foregrounding of her body, in all its fractured intimacy and in all the past and future selves it contains, as essential to her conception of self.

The Haunting of Hill House

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson extends her exploration of the relationship between mind and matter by narrativizing the possibilities of infinite relationality in both the novel’s protagonist, Eleanor Vance, and the house itself. *The Haunting of Hill House* has been, like *Hangsaman*, frequently read as a novel that is primarily about psychological distress and terror. The weird phenomena that occur in the novel are often explained as manifestations of the mental turmoil of Eleanor or are framed as uniquely affecting Eleanor because she is the character who enters Hill House in the most distressed mental state. She seems to be uniquely targeted by the house as the recipient of most of the supernatural acts, which at times terrifies her and at other times thrills her. Like Natalie Waite, Eleanor is a bit “spooky.” Unmarried at age thirty-four, Eleanor has spent the majority of her life caring for an ailing mother and cannot “remember ever being truly happy in her adult life” (6). After her mother dies, she is one of a small group of people invited to Hill House to investigate long standing rumors of paranormal activity, and she jumps at the chance to find her place in the world beyond the enclosed life she led as her mother’s caretaker. The infamously wicked house seems to prey almost immediately on the group’s insecurities and paranoias, especially Eleanor’s. Throughout the novel, Eleanor yearns for connection with other people, and specifically looks for closeness with Theodora, one of the other participants. The pseudoscientific ways in which Dr. Montague attempts to investigate the weird agencies of Hill House provide a template for how agencies and relationships that resist heteropatriarchal conformity are viewed as aberrant and are subject to scrutiny and a desire to be

solved. In its resistance to such methods of observation, the house becomes a space within which unspeakable agencies are layered together thickly, where the past and present flow through one another with visceral results.

Matter has always behaved weirdly in Eleanor's presence, marking her as a participant in spooky entanglements. Dr. Montague singles her out for participation in his study because as a child Eleanor was at the center of an inexplicable material phenomenon. Those who would read *Hill House* as purely a "psychological" horror seem to forget this incident from Eleanor's childhood, in which showers of rocks literally rained down on her family home: "when she was twelve years old and her sister was eighteen, and their father had been dead for not quite a month, showers of stones had fallen on their house, without any warning or any indication of purpose or reason, dropping from the ceilings, rolling loudly down the walls, breaking windows and pattering maddeningly on the roof." (6) There could perhaps be an explanation for the phenomenon of the three-day rock storm, some meteorological reason why these rocks plummeted from the sky onto the Vance family home for three days, a reason that would fit within a rational epistemological framework. But neither Eleanor, nor her sister, nor her mother, nor any of the neighbors who witnessed the event, nor we the readers, ever hear about it. There is clear evidence that the rocks are as solid as any physical object can be—they break windows, their contact with the roof makes audible sounds. And yet their behavior exceeds understanding and explanation. Eleanor is thus marked by her proximity to spooky matter, a moment that will define her queer relationship to materiality that she will not re-turn to until she arrives at Hill House.

It has become almost a cliche to say that houses play a central role in Jackson's work. There is something of a default setting amongst her readership to say, for example, that Hill House is "a character" in the novel. The house, after all, has a "face" that "seemed awake, with a

watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice" (32). It is limiting, though, to gloss her depiction of domestic spaces merely as figurative reflections of a character's inner world or psychological state. The spaces are material, are *real*, but they also have a vitality of their own pulsing through them, irreducible to metaphor or representationalism. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues for a de-hierarchized understanding of the agency of things. Rather than understanding human behavior as more creative or intelligent, less reflexive and biologically-driven than nonhuman expressions of agency, she resituates the human as merely one kind of actor within a broader assemblage of change drivers, environment shapers. Bennett says that it is both possible and necessary to consider "nonhuman materialities as bona fide participants rather than as recalcitrant objects, social constructs, or instrumentalities" (62). Within this matrix, the boundaries between discrete objects become fuzzy as they reemerge as a collective happening–as a verb rather than as a set of nouns. To dwell in the world as a human, in a material feminist framework, is to defy the ossifying tendency of ontological hierarchies that place Western man at the top, and objects at the bottom. The material turn in feminist thought has emphasized the ways in which meaning and matter collide: meaning becomes more physical, embodied, tangible; matter becomes less stable, fixed, knowable. Hill House becomes a *phenomenon* that comprises human and more-than-human agents. The house emerges as more than merely another discrete character in the novel, but as a collaborator in a larger entanglement of bodies and energies that, together, become something wholly new. In such an ontology, interactions and interfaces among and across discrete bodies are a precondition for existence, not a byproduct of things coming into being in isolation from one another. More simply put, that things *are* at all is the result of their being in relation *to* other things.

Hill House becomes a place where empiricism and the mystical collide in unsettling ways. The weird events that transpire there ultimately cannot be explained or apprehended

through scientific observation, much to Montague's chagrin, nor can they be explained away as metaphysical mysteries. He believes the house "has a reputation for insistent hospitality" (63), and later he suggests the house is acting with strategic intent: "Doesn't it begin to seem that the *intention* is, somehow, to separate us?" (128, emphasis added). The doors in Hill House seem determined to stay closed, which the guests learn when they try in vain to keep interior doors open so that they can more easily navigate the labyrinthine house. Eleanor, too, characterizes the house not only as acting with intent, but also with having the patience to wait for the most opportune moments to act. Some try to explain the draft away as a structural deficiency in the house, but Eleanor is the first one to suggest that the phenomenon they are experiencing is something much more intentional: "'It doesn't seem like an *impartial* cold,' Eleanor said, awkward because she was not quite sure what she meant. 'I felt it as *deliberate*, as though something wanted to give me an unpleasant shock'" (114, emphasis original). Eleanor and the others are repeatedly running up against the limitations of language when they try to describe the way the house makes them feel, the way the house seems to act and express a will of its own. They often struggle to find words that can properly convey to the others what exactly they are perceiving or experiencing in the house, or are forced to rely on generalities like "something" or "it." The fundamental inexpressibility of Hill House's acting power pushes the group into the domain of the apophatic.

Montague, despite his scholarly training, opens up space for the mystical unknowing of the apophatic. He is acutely aware of the prejudice against supernatural investigations that circulates within his academic communities. Montague seeks to establish his reputation in the scholarly community by validating his hunch that "honestly haunted" houses exist (4). Hill House's short-lived tenants never indicate fear as the reason for their early departures. There is always some "rational" explanation: the house is damp (it isn't), they have business dealings that

call them away unexpectedly, etc. Beyond these cursory explanations, no one is ever keen to discuss their brief tenure at the house in more detail, either because they are unwilling or, perhaps, because they cannot find words to adequately convey how the house affected them, how being there made them *feel*. Montague is apparently not the only one who has attempted to find an explanation for this inexplicable turnover:

> "'There are popular theories, however, which discount the eerie, the mysterious; there are people who will tell you that the disturbances I am calling 'psychic' are actually the result of subterranean waters, or electric currents, or hallucinations caused by polluted air; atmospheric pressure, sun spots, earth tremors all have their advocates among the skeptical. People,' the doctor said sadly, 'are always so anxious to get things out into the open where they can put a name to them, even a meaningless name, so long as it has something of a scientific ring.'" (66)

Despite his training and his title, Dr. Montague has no interest in turning the bright, all-seeing light of scientific rationality upon that which exceeds language. Unlike those who would give a name to phenomena that resist naming, Montague refuses to see that as his project. In an exchange that again underscores his willingness to engage with the apophatic, Theodora asks Montague, "what's *here*? What really frightens people so?" To which our good doctor replies, "I will not put a name to what has no name… I don't know" (69). There is, in fact, *something* there—he is simply unable to name it. As strange events continue to plague the occupants of Hill House, Dr. Montague is no closer to answering any of these questions. He is grappling between the scientific, rational leanings afforded by his training and the "menace of the supernatural," as though these are the only two frameworks that could explain the happenings in the house: "Not one of us, even after last night, can say the word 'ghost' without a little involuntary smile. No, the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have

abandoned our protective armor of superstition and have no substitute defense. Not one of us thinks rationally that what ran through the garden last night was a ghost, and yet there was certainly *something* going on in Hill House last night, and the mind's instinctive refuge–self-doubt–is eliminated. We cannot say 'It was my imagination,' because three other people were there too.'" (132, emphasis original) Montague lays out here the central irreconcilability with which the group is faced. He suggests that the group rationally knows that ghosts cannot possibly exist. However, they all collectively experienced "*something*" that seemed supernatural in Hill House. What they experienced was not explainable within a scientific matrix, but because they can all corroborate one another's experience of the event, they cannot say it was a product of anyone's imagination. Montague thus relies on an apophatic description of the strange events they experienced as a group. He is not able to affirm positively what the experience is—he does not have the language for it. However, he can say what it was *not*: it was not a "ghost" (or at least what "modern minds" would think of as a ghost), nor was it merely anyone's "imagination." All he is left with to say is that it was "something." Eleanor, like Montague, is discomfited by the idea of naming that which should not be named, or that which has a name so inaccessible to human language that we dare not try to translate it into our own tongue.

The group falls into the language of unknowing when they attempt to describe these strange phenomena. Feminist theologian and scholar of mysticism, Catherine Keller, makes the case for what she calls an "apophatic materiality" that builds on the work Barad has done to articulate the ontological indeterminacies of the material world. Keller, in articulating a mystical understanding of the material, suggests that "the very intensity of our *mindful* relation to matter renders received language for it inadequate" (124). What makes Hill House such an uncanny enigma is that the status of its very materiality cannot be ascertained through language or representation. When Theodora asks "what's *here*," the seeming simplicity of her question,

"what's here," is met with Montague's apophatic unsaying. Barad presents a challenge to "the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things," in favor of a "performative account [that] insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being" (133). Barad, in their discussion of the physicist Niels Bohr, explains how quantum physics have shown how phenomena will often only behave in certain ways because an observer has intervened, not because that behavior would have occurred independently of observation. The observer becomes part of the very phenomena they have sought to examine. Eleanor takes an almost quantum view of the materials inside of Hill House and their ability to act of their own accord, in ways that they can't perceive because to observe would be to alter that which is being observed, when she notices that "Nothing in this house moves…until you look away, and then you just catch something from the corner of your eye" (104). This is a familiar trope in the weird or supernatural horror genre, and it resonates with theories of observation in the natural sciences.

Hill House emerges as capable of enabling queer refashionings of the self because it is a void in the way that it has seemingly given birth to itself. It has arisen out of what Barad, following from Susan Stryker, has called a "fecund nothingness" (393). The idea of a "fecund nothingness" collapses distinctions between void and excess, and mirrors Keller's rereading of the creation story in which she counters the sterile, patriarchal version of creation, *creatio ex nihilio*, by returning to *creatio ex profundis*, creation out of the chaos. When Eleanor first sets eyes on the house, she is struck by the sense that it somehow emerged autochthonously: "This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity" (32). She senses the significance of Hill House's aberrance and its riotous, perhaps even perversely joyful act of

throwing back its head in a resolute posture of resistance to "humanity," and the queer possibilities is presents cause her to feel the weirdness of its origins in her body, which manifests as an "atavistic turn in the pit of her stomach" (32). The word "atavistic" here connotes a moment of dis-ease as the house gives the impression of a seemingly impossible queer origin. This sense of primordial overwhelm settles into Eleanor's stomach; it finds a place inside of her body. There is a "turn" in the "pit" of her stomach: she feels the weird ancestry of Hill House in the deepest part of herself in a moment of connection between her body and the house. This feeling of primordial overwhelm comes over Eleanor again later, when she first approaches the tower with the library and is "overwhelmed with the cold air of mold and earth which rushed at her" (97). She smells mold and earth, and thinks suddenly but clearly of her mother, but is made speechless and can't verbalize what she wanted to say about her mother—again, when confronted by Hill House's queerness, language is rendered insufficient and even completely unavailable. The earlier "atavistic turn" she felt in her stomach upon seeing Hill House re-turns as she considers her own origins. Hill House is thus introduced as a place where the "rules" of nature and creation are suspended, confounding and overwhelming heteronormative notions of ancestry and the creation of kin.

What does all of this mystical-material unsaying have to do with Eleanor's subjectivity and desires for queer intimacy? Like Natalie Waite, Eleanor is often described as containing many possible selves that exist within her all at once. As she leaves her old life behind in the car that was "half hers," the places she encounters on her journey to Hill House bring her into contact with some of these other selves. She grounds these other possible versions of herself in the material world, in the objects that become ritual partners with which she might create new ways of being in the world. One place she encounters in particular, a small cottage that she will think back to several times after arriving at Hill House, has an especially profound effect on her.

The change in verb tense that happens in this passage indicates the solidity of this vision as it takes hold of her:

> "I could live there all alone, she thought, slowing the car to look down the winding garden path to the small blue front door with, perfectly, a white cat on the step. No one would ever find me there, either, behind all those roses, and just to make sure I would plant oleanders by the road. I will light a fire in the cool evenings and toast apples at my own hearth. I will raise white cats and sew white curtains for the windows and sometimes come out of my door to go to the store to buy cinnamon and tea and thread. People will come to me to have their fortunes told, and I will brew love potions for sad maidens." (21)

The change in verb tense is telling here, as she goes from thinking in the conditional "could" and "would," to the concreteness of future certainty, listing all of the things she "will" do. Whether or not she returns to this cottage within the linear course of the narrative, she can re-turn to this possible self whenever she wants. Significantly, this idealized self that she harbors within her behaves like a witch, using her unique insights into fate and materiality to help others relate to their own futures. This future self is concealed, hidden in a cozy *Heimlichkeit* all her own, and she can play with matters of fate unmolested by the demands of heteropatriarchy.

Matter, reality, and relationality blur confusedly together for Eleanor once she arrives at Hill House. She has to remind herself more than once that Hill House is actually "real," and not just a dream she's having. She thinks once, "I can't believe that it's real, and we're here," and then again, "Eleanor, wondering if she were really here at all, and not dreaming of Hill House from some safe spot impossibly remote, looked slowly and carefully around the room, telling herself that this was real, these things existed, from the tiles around the fireplace to the marble cupid; there people were going to be her friends" (55-6). The spookiness of entanglement haunts

this passage. She considers the possibility that she is somehow connected with Hill House in her mind, dreaming of it from some "impossibly remote" distance, and to counter the strangeness of such a possibility, she notes the objects she sees around her and almost simultaneously fantasizes about making friends with the other house guests. For Eleanor, her sense of self and the "real" hinges on relating to the material world and to other people. Later, after being regaled by Dr. Montague of the "evil" the house has wrought on past inhabitants, Eleanor describes, in bodily terms, feeling surprisingly at home in herself: "what a complete and separate thing I am, she thought, going from my red toes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me…I am holding a brandy glass which is mine because I am here and I am using it and I have a place in this room. I have red shoes and tomorrow I will wake up and I will still be here" (78). Eleanor Vance, as with Natalie Waite, experiences an intimate appreciation for her own body as part of her process of learning to pursue entanglements with others.

Touch becomes essential as she anchors her own reality through an acknowledgment of the objects she is touching. Emily Naser-Hall provides a much-needed addition to the discussion around *The Haunting of Hill House* in which she reads Eleanor's character through her tactile ambivalence, arguing that Jackson uses touch in the novel as an event that allows Eleanor to interface with the erotic, to move from "normativity to deviance, repression to expression" (36). Naser-Hall attends to the ways in which tactility is emphasized in Hill House as a way for Eleanor to interface with the erotic. Her reading stops short of calling this touching queer—applying a Baradian framework allows a simultaneously more capacious and more precise understanding of Eleanor's fragmented intimacies. She feels ambivalence about physical contact with Hill House itself, and with Theodora. *Hangsaman*, Natalie notes that it is only when she and Tony are alone that they can "be together without fear." Eleanor and Theodora behave under similar anxieties, clearly desiring if not intimacy at least a warm familiarity with the other, but

recoil just as quickly when there is a chance their affection to touch one another might be perceived or acknowledged. Theodora one moment touches Eleanor's face, brushing her "cheek with one finger," then "quickly" scampers away from her, only for Eleanor to "catch at her hand" moments later. The rapid back and forth of catch and release, touch and recoil, gives a reluctant rhythm to Eleanor and Theodora's nascent care and desire to connect with one another.

Hill House contains a rage of its own that can be read as a response to its inhabitants' attempts to impose heteropatriarchal kinship structures within its walls. The house is, from its queerly autochthonous origins out of a fecund nothingness, a space within which such repression is always ill-fated. The party uncovers a didactic mandate that the original owner of the house wrote for his daughter, which provides a basis for why the house might turn against its misogynous creator and resist his wishes to indoctrinate women into the disciplined roles of virtuous wife and daughter. A clearer picture of Crain as the quintessential patriarch comes into focus: he builds his ostentatious house on the hill, intending to create a domain set apart from the rest of the world, a place over which he imagines he has total authority, his wife and daughters subject to his instruction to "hold apart from this world, that its lusts and ingratitudes corrupt thee not" (160). He specifically imagines the house as a way of keeping the Crain women from exploring intimacies that would diverge from the domestic idyll of heteropatriarchy, warning of the "lusts" that might await them. In very fire-and-brimstone fashion, Crain warns his daughter against sin and establishes himself as the "author" of her being and the "guardian" of her virtue. This desire to repress and control "deviant" forms of intimacy—in other words, any form of intimacy that deviates from the mandate of heteropatriarchal reproduction—directly conflicts with the queer emergence of the house that was always going to refuse to contain an overflowing excess of relationality.

This central tension at the heart of Hill House's existence, between its refusal to "concede anything to humanity" and the purpose its "creator" intended for it, forces us to ask what is truly horrifying in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Is it malevolent forces or is it the denial of queer agency? Montague claims that the house does not seem to like letting people get away—but it may be possible that the house is actually providing its own form (albeit sinister) of liberation. Luke is set to inherit the house, and though he is not a blood relative of Hugh Crain, he has already admitted that he aspires to follow in his footsteps, finding a woman to "make herself responsible" for him and his affairs. Theodora, for all her petty jealousies, can see that he seems to be angling to pull Eleanor into these schemes. The house, just as it did with all three Mrs. Crains, would rather see her dead than meet such a fate. Eleanor is singled out by the house, which seems unable or unwilling to let women assume domestic duties prescribed by heteropatriachal normality. If the void is a place where the laws of nature, especially those laws invented by man and presented as the natural order of things, like gender roles, can be suspended, Hill House may well be called a void. The house gives Eleanor permission to simultaneously hold space for all of the possible selves she contains, but she is overwhelmed by the collision of these potentialities and the heteropatriarchal social order that, outside the bounds of Hill House, refuses their existence.

The novel's final line seems to contradict the narrative's emphasis on the queer material entanglements of bodies and more-than-human agencies. After Eleanor has been overcome with a feeling of alienation from the others in the house, she drives her car into the large tree at the end of the drive, seemingly killing herself. The other characters go their separate ways, and the novel ends by reminding the reader that whatever walks at Hill House "walks alone." However, in light of the agency with which the house itself is imbued throughout the novel, this line should be read with some discernment. The house has already proven itself to be an agential presence.

Indeed, Eleanor at one point describes it as a body in its own right that has consumed her. So it would follow that anyone who walks at Hill House can never absolutely walk alone, because the presence of the house will press in upon them. In reading the house as a void from the Baradian perspective, the house both relates and recedes: "particles no longer take their place in the void; rather, they are constitutively entangled with it. As for the void, it is no longer vacuous. It is a living, breathing indeterminacy of non/being" (Barad, On Touching, 210). The last line reinforces the central and irresolvable tension not only of Hill House the relations it engenders, but of the incomprehensibility at the heart of what Barad calls spacetimemattering—the collapse of the spatial, temporal, and material.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

The relationship between the past, present, and future is fraught for the Blackwood family at the heart of Jackson's final novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Even the novel's title implies a temporal impossibility—what would it mean to have "always" lived in a place? What implications does such an opening out into an infinite past have for what is now and what is still to come? The novel complicates the completeness and finitude of the buried past, as the novel's narrator, 18-year-old Merricat Blackwood, incinerates the prescribed reproductive mandate defined by the heteropatriarchal mainstream. Merricat lives in her family's ancestral manor with her beloved elder sister, Constance, and their Uncle Julian—the only surviving members of a poisoning incident that claimed the lives of the sisters' parents, brother, and aunt. Merricat, in her desire to radically reimagine kinship structures, murders her entire family except for her uncle (an accidental oversight) and Constance, though Constance stood trial for the crime and most of the villagers still grow uneasy in her presence. Rather than perpetuating the cycle of marriages and inheritance that was prescribed to them, Merricat is determined that she and Constance will

live in the Blackwood house alone according to her own set of rules. Merricat's obsession with the power of the material world, including her own body, to conjure alternate pasts and futures lies at the heart of her desire to exist in a space of sisterly nonreproductive intimacy.

Merricat views objects as being charged with real potency, and she uses them to conduct ritual work that can help protect her from the power structures from which she wants to be excluded. Merricat grants acting-power to materiality that comes from her own body, believing such capable of becoming protective talismans that counteract the open hatred the townspeople have for her, as well as the cruelty with which her late parents seemingly treated her. To counter the townspeople's intense, visceral hatred, Merricat develops an intimacy with objects and the nonhuman that becomes a bulwark against intensely negative sentiment toward the Blackwood family, and also as a way of connecting with herself and others. Merricat inherits her mother's obsession with retaining an impassable boundary between the Blackwood home and the outside world. Merricat believes the Blackwood residence is held together by ritual acts she performs in concert with everyday objects. She meticulously polices the boundaries of the property and enlists the help of objects that she strips of their original purpose and reinvents for her own magical purposes. This obsession is fundamentally about relationality—it is a way for Merricat to draw a distinction between who she will consent to being in relation with, and who she will not. To her, these objects and the powers they hold are to be taken very seriously and provide her a means of relating that is not premised on abuse or loathing.

Merricat has developed an uncanny intimacy with the lands surrounding the house: "no one knew its secret ways but me" (19). She positions herself here as both the land's wayfinder and its intimate confidante: "secret ways" here alludes to its hidden paths, its veiled routes, but "secret ways" might also be read as its habits, its untold predilections. Her rituals are her ways of working to build relationality and intimacy with the material. She plants scattered extensions of

herself—sometimes actual matter from her own body—into the dirt all around their property. In this way she indicates a desire to distribute herself through space, almost suggesting that she can protect herself and her sister by being in multiple places at once. She believes that this dispersal of her bodily matter combined with precious objects will both strengthen and enchant the land, keeping her and Constance protected: "All our land was enriched with my treasures buried in it, thickly inhabited just below the surface with my marbles and teeth and my colored stones, all perhaps turned to jewels by now, held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us" (41). These objects, placed within or alongside nature, guard the family against perceived threats, and in return the land is "enriched" by the "thick" layers of Merricat's treasures, some of them even coming from her own body. The way she describes this subterranean "web" of talismans is almost suggestive of mycelium: the hydraulic, weblike root structures of fungal networks that allow fungi to be in relation with one another and to the trees with whom they share nutrients.[26] She recognizes this sharing of matter as mutually beneficial, describing her talismans as "enriching" the land.

Merricat further dissolves the binary between human and nonhuman worlds when she materializes language itself by literally eating words, allowing them to dissolve inside her body. When she settles on "three powerful words, words of strong protection," she traces one in the jam on her toast and then immediately eats it, another she whispers into a glass before filling it with water and drinking it down. Mel Chen, in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, traces a linguistic history for the notion of "animacy," showing that it has developed as a fundamental concept structuring hierarchies of life in Western thought. The nearer the "bottom" of the animacy hierarchy someone/thing is, the more oriented it necessarily is to

[26] Mycologists and ecologists have recently been fascinated with mycelial networks and the model of radical relationality and collaborative thriving that they offer. See Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021).

death, to non-life, to objectification. Chen's emphasis on linguistics is not a recapitulation of language in a strictly representational sense. Instead, she wants to refute "strong linguistic determinist theories" that equate language with mere thought, and to meditate on language's materiality, on language as a "corporeal, sensual, embodied act" (53). For Merricat, this embodiment is obvious. Moreover, the embodiment of language is, for her, the process by which words (and objects) become transcendent, or magical, and capable of protection. She takes the words, inscribes them or utters them so they exist outside of her own thoughts, and reincorporates them into her own physical body by either eating or drinking them. In order for these words to take on any protective powers, she seems to believe, she has to strip them of their representationalism and manifest them in the physical world. More than that, she needs to bring them inside of her body through the act of eating.

This fascination Merricat has with the power of eating to make words matter manifests in her obsession with the ways that transcorporeal exchanges can unsettle the bounded self. The surviving Blackwoods share this obsession with the ways in which the self is closely connected with the body and particularly the stomach. Merricat and even her Uncle Julian fixate on the act of eating, which always necessitates an eating away of the object being consumed, regardless of which position the human subject occupies. In the novel's opening pages, Merricat fantasizes about the world beyond the Blackwood house being "eaten away" by rot: "I always thought about rot when I came toward the row of stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village" (6). She takes comfort in fantasizing about the transformative power of decay to unmake structures that threaten her ability to maintain an alternative family structure in which she and Constance can be left alone. When the village children sing their cruel singsong rhymes about the Blackwood sisters, Merricat imagines a future in which they and their words are consumed by fire: "Their tongues will burn, I

thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their throats will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires" (17). Merricat imagines here a visceral, bodily punishment for harmful language.[27] Julian, possibly in an effort to unsettle guests who have come to visit Constance, notes that his niece "can tell you of the most unlikely perils—garden plants more deadly than snakes and simple herbs that slash like knives through the lining of your belly" (30). When she tries to change the subject, suggesting Julian's remarks are in poor taste, he responds by asking if she's ever tasted arsenic. Later, Merricat will goad her scheming cousin Charles by describing, in detail, the way the body responds to consuming poisonous mushrooms, *Amanita phalloides*: "The first symptoms do not appear until seven to twelve hours after eating, in some cases not before twenty-four or even forty hours. The symptoms begin with violent stomach pains, cold sweat, vomiting—" (72). Charles is not amused, but the mildmannered Constance finds Merricat's macabre ramblings funny. For the inhabitants of the Blackwood house, there is an obsession, even a humor to the ways in which substances can be consumed and enact bodily transformations and dissolutions of subjectivity.

The sisters' cousin Charles represents the intrusion of the heteropatriarchal order and its tendency to treat material objects, rather than as agential co-conspirators, as passive tools for accumulating wealth. Merricat scoffs at his obsession with valuable objects and buries the gold coins and fancy watches he covets, pulling them into her own rituals. Charles has come to the Blackwood estate because he hopes to marry Constance and lay claim to the Blackwood fortune. He attempts to insinuate himself into Constance's good graces, increasingly infuriated that Merricat seems to treat her family's valuables with what he perceives to be a lack of care. Where he sees the gold wristwatch, the expensive scarf, the silver dollars, etc. as objects that have no

[27] It is fitting that the final co-conspirator Merricat enlists in banishing Charles once and for all is fire, a phenomenon that blurs the lines between matter and energy.

inherent value of their own outside of their equivalent worth in money, Merricat believes with complete credulity in the power of these objects to act of their own accord. The collection of atoms we refer to as a gold wristwatch is no longer reduced to its function as a teller of time, nor is it reduced to its value as a piece of gold. Instead, Merricat breaks it so that it no longer can tell time and wholly re-imagines it as a talisman to ward off its would-be wearer.

The susceptibility of matter to forging intimate bonds with the matter of the human body is not always a positive phenomenon for Merricat. She laments that "eliminating Charles from everything he had touched was almost impossible" (87). This statement conjures up all manner of possibilities for what Charles has left throughout the house: his dead skin cells, nail clippings, hair, beads of sweat. The thought of such traces unsettles Merricat and threatens to disrupt the isolation and safety she craves for herself and Constance. Her solution to scrubbing out the stain of Charles is to layer her own material changes over top of the ones he has enacted on her environment in an almost ritual manner. As she does with most of her daily routines, she rectifies Charles's presence in the house by following a set of rules that she seems to pull out of thin air, but that she believes in fervently. She pours water all over her father's bed, where Charles has been sleeping; scatters leaves and sticks and glass and stone throughout the room in strategic locations; shatters the mirror over the dresser; rips down the curtains from the large windows facing the driveway she wants him to take far away from the Blackwood property. Just as words and magical processes become more embodied from Merricat's perspective, the people who vex her become more disembodied, more spectral or decayed. Merricat initially insists that Charles's appearance had been a dream, then more firmly that he is "a ghost that could be driven away," (61) and later that he is "a ghost and a demon" (92). In this way, she demonstrates an inverted sense of the animacy hierarchy, in which the novel's stand-in for heteropatriarchal conformity is

reduced to spectrality, to ineffectual disembodiment, and nonhuman actors like plants, mushrooms, and inert objects are elevated to the level of queer, agentive kin.

The surviving inhabitants of the Blackwood house live in many different worlds and realities at once. Uncle Julian, in particular, is constantly flitting in between the realities he inhabits. He is attempting to write an account of the Blackwood family murders, but even with the help of his journal entries and the newspaper clippings he saved, he still inhabits alternate realities, some in which Merricat is dead: "My niece Mary Katherine has been a long time dead…My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage of neglect" (93). When Charles attempts to counter him by gesturing toward the Merricat sitting next to him, he seems to be the only one who refuses to accept the world Julian inhabits in that moment. Merricat is thrilled at Charles's being "unable to grasp his fingers tightly around anything he saw or heard," describing it as a "joyful sight, to see the first twistings and turnings of the demon caught," and she says she is "very proud of Uncle Julian" (94). Merricat can perhaps understand Julian's ability to hold multiple potential realities, this collision of spacetimematter, because she has similar proclivities. The summerhouse is a crucial site of temporal indeterminacy in the novel. It becomes a place where possible futures collide and diffract through Merricat's imagination. Inside the summerhouse, she relives scenes from family dinners that either never happened or are, perhaps, still happening, and will continue to happen, over and over again. In these other lives, Merricat's family tells her they love her, they praise her, they dote on her and, most importantly, they pledge that she will never be punished (95). Barad's description of the two slit experiment becomes instructive here. describes the irreconcilable indeterminacy at the heart of the two slit experiment: all of the possible selves a particle might inhabit when it moves in the void: "it is possible to not merely change what it will have done after the fact but to change who/what it will have been, that is, its very ontology (wave or particle)!" (Barad, Diffracting Diffraction, 281).

Merricat, throughout the novel, imagines whimsical scenarios in which she and Constance live "on the moon," with rubies in their hair. The moon represents the ideal space within which to enact a complete break with the earthbound, the representational realm of the human, a space governed by a completely different set of natural laws that defy human experience. She dreams of living on the moon with Constance, imagining that she and her winged horse could fly Constance "to the moon and back" (22). Ultimately, after the dust settles and the villagers have finished their ransacking of the burned-out Blackwood house, the house is, in Merricat's estimation, transformed into the moon. She tells Constance, "I told you that you would like it on the moon" (145). On the "moon," the sisters are no longer subject to any of the rules governing the heteropatriarchal social order. In a finally decisive, near-taboo rejection of the reproductive mandate at the heart of heteropatriarchy, Merricat muses aloud about the limits of her newfound power. When children run up to the door to test their mettle against the rumors of the wicked ladies that live inside the ruined manor, they warn each other that the ladies will "get" them. Merricat interprets "getting them" as an opportunity for consuming them: "I wonder if I *could* eat a child if I had the chance" (146). Despite the seeming impossibility of her statement, Merricat has proven herself capable of following through on her desires to annihilate the people and places that threaten her. This statement, for all its gruesome implications, is delivered more with curiosity than malice. Living on the moon, for the sisters, becomes an act of rejection of the heteropatriarchal options for intimacy, allowing them instead space to inhabit an alternative relationality approaching a queer inhumanism.

Conclusion

Before Jackson was writing about the agency of homes and the objects within them in her novels, she was exploring these ideas in her letters and memoirs. After she and her family moved into

their new home in Vermont in 1945, they began to fill the place to bursting with "assorted beds and tables and chairs and rocking horses and lamps and doll dresses and ship models and paint brushes and literally thousands of socks," plus many thousands of books, a few children, several cats, and all manner of indigent bats and mice (*Life Among the Savages* 1). Jackson writes in *Savages*—in a way that prefigures her characterization of Hill House—about how the Fielding house seemed to have a will of its own in deciding what new objects would go where, and which existing pieces of furniture were not to be touched: "After a few vain attempts at imposing our own angular order on things with a consequent out-of-jointness and shrieking disharmony that set our teeth on edge, we gave in to the old furniture and let things settle where they would" (18). Decisions are made differently, Jackson seems to be saying, because the objects in the home demand their say. Jackson depicts settling into the Fielding house as a collaboration among her family, the house itself, and the objects with which they filled the home. She details the list of subsequent compromises she makes in collaboration with the house: setting up a writing table in the corner where she had planned to put a radio, stringing up a new clothesline in the basement rather than in the backyard (after the one in the yard had fallen for the third time), accepting an uneasy truce with a door that mostly insisted on staying slightly open at all times.

Jackson's fiction disrupts the dichotomy between the real and the mystical. My reading of Jackson and her weird domestic fiction relies on the cooperation of material feminism and mysticism. Jackson's own interest in esotericism, and the way that interest manifests in her fiction, was not anchored in the airy realm of the metaphysical, but in the very tangible *things* she encountered in the ebb and flow of her daily life. Indeed, there are many ways to reject consumerist ideology. The postwar blueprint for relating to material objects was a rigid one and drove many to reject this lifestyle entirely. As consumer culture ramped up in the 1950s, the

1960s saw the rise of the counterculture movement in the United States. Counterculture women and the communities they helped to create, though certainly not free of their own unique brand of misogyny and their appropriation of Indigenous and Eastern cultural practices, provided an alternative for women who wanted to "turn on, tune in, drop out." Jackson's approach represents a different sort of way out, though: to persist in domestic spaces, alongside the material objects of the home, and subvert from within the set of prescribed relations to the material world that were thrust upon housewives of the era. Her characters move through familiar spaces and contend with household objects: all the trappings of a well-stocked kitchen, cramped into corners by the oppressive presence of family heirlooms. There is resistance to be found from within.

Critics often disagree about whether to read the hauntings and demonic intrusions in Jackson's work as either real or supernatural. Is there something literally demonic or otherworldly about James Harris, the Daemon Lover, the sinister figure who lurks throughout *The Lottery and Other Stories*? Is Hill House actually haunted by malevolent spirits, or are its effects purely psychological? Samantha Landau, in "Occult Influences in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" argues that the supernatural in Jackson's fiction is mostly ambiguous, that "it is never clear whether the ghosts, witches, or demons are real" (11). While Landau is right to suggest that Jackson's fiction is ambivalent about this question of "realness," the whole question of whether "ghosts, witches, or demons are real" is one that Jackson's fiction renders insufficient. The supernatural in her oeuvre is often attributed to the characters' mental state—if experiences of the supernatural live in the mind, they are still explainable; diagnosable. Eric Savoy, for example, writes that Jackson's "explanatory matrix…is essentially psychoanalytic" (827). These questions of whether or not the irruptions of the weird in her work are meant to be seen as "real" are faulty from the moment they are asked, though, because for Jackson, there can never be a rigid

dichotomy between the so-called "real," or the material, and the supernatural. Such thinking is the legacy of a longstanding effort in Western epistemologies to secularize and explain weird phenomena, to bring them within a scientific, rational framework. Even as arguments abound over Jackson's depiction of the supernatural in her fiction–debates over whether these supernatural irruptions are "real" or whether they are products of the mind–the fiction itself complicates this whole question, what Nelson calls the "Is this real or am I crazy?" motif (*Secret Life of Puppets* 165). Jackson's fiction complicates the distinction between the real and the imagined, the material and the immaterial, and offers a sustained critique of the notion that supernatural events must either be real or imagined, material or spiritual—they are always, her fiction seems to be saying, both.

Across these three novels, Jackson explores the importance of matter and place, and how the built environment actively resists attempts to inscribe them with heteropatriarchal rules for intimacy and relationality. She reminds us that these spaces, though perhaps fashioned by human hands and for particular human ends, are comprised of vibrant matter that can never wholly cooperate with prescribed gendered narratives. Bennett deconstructs the distinction between "dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" (vii). Jackson juxtaposes the denial of women's agency and subjectivity in 1950s U.S. white suburbanism with the inherent vibrancy and acting-power of supposedly passive, inert objects. When we read Jackson's work through the lens of entanglement, the division between matter and spirit begins to grow wobbly. Donna Haraway has argued for her understanding of sympoiesis, a collaborative making-with, asking, "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social?" (*Staying With the Trouble* 30). She seems to be underscoring the necessity of

apophatic knowledge, rather than balking in the face of it (30). This celebration is not without terror: sympoiesis, Haraway, says, yields "generative joy, terror, and collective thinking" (31). I anchor my reading of Jackson's oeuvre in the spacetimemattering that becomes significant in her protagonists' pursuit of fractured, intimate relations with one's selves and others. By sincerely acknowledging the thing-power inherent in the objects with which they interact and through the spooky action-at-a-distance at work in their multiple selves, Jackson's protagonists reassert their autonomy by building intimate relationality with and through more-than-human phenomena.

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CHAPTER THREE: ECOLOGIES OF DOMESTIC ENCLOSURE AND MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY IN RACHEL INGALLS'S FICTION

"How much duct tape would it take to make actual homes as impermeable as the national fantasy of home? How can we seal out threats that are already within?" —

Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed* (2017)

Rachel Ingalls's fiction has been described as many things: as "dark, ambiguous, and threatening, but not without humor"; as "macabre, fantastic, and haunting." Various attempts have been made to categorize or classify her work, to determine how it ought to be situated alongside and within literary history and movements. She has, for example, been called a writer of the American gothic—the "best since Poe"—a writer of "hallucinatory realism," of fables that "hybridize classical literature and midcentury Americana." Virtually all of the articles— including reviews, retrospectives, obituaries—that have been written about Ingalls or her writing include earnest attempts to describe the type of fiction she wrote. It has become impossible, it seems, to write about her without also listing any number of moods or modes to characterize her work in a particular way, or suggesting her inclusion in a recognizable canon or movement. It is almost as though, ever since her work reemerged with the 2017 reissue of *Mrs. Caliban* by New York publishing house New Directions, reviewers and critics have been clamoring to be the one who will solve, finally, the question of Ingalls's genre. This phenomenon speaks to the inherent slipperiness, the uncategorizability of her oeuvre. Because her work is, of course, all of the things critics have called it: it occupies multiple different genre spaces all at once.

Her fiction is full of people—most often middle-class, white women—who have been sleepwalking through their lives, tethered to uninteresting or callous lovers or spouses. These characters encounter phenomena so subtly strange they often don't even register: a young couple

is served a noxious bowl of soup that may or may not have human ears stewed in its brothy depths, but they continue to sit at the dinner table anyway; a housewife comes face-to-face with a hulking frogman in her kitchen and instead of fleeing she strikes up an affair with him; dreams and portents seep into the waking hours and it becomes impossible to distinguish reality from illusion, fact from myth. Complying with the mundane, by contrast, often leads to brushes with madness—the women in her fiction reference "fend[ing] off an induced crack-up for many years," as in *Binstead's Safari*; or nearly getting sent to the "loony bin," as in *Mrs. Caliban*. If they aren't mad, they are simply "completely hysterical, lying [their] heads off," as in *Friends in the Country*. These reactions to domestic enclosures are reminiscent of texts like *The Awakening* or *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which enclosure leads to an eroded sense of self and culminates in a break with the rational.

Despite the seemingly exhaustive attempts to describe her work or place it within a literary history by listing her various classical and mythological influences, there have been virtually no attempts to move beyond that question and apply a critical framework that closely reads her fiction and situates it within its social, cultural, and philosophical milieu. Ingalls's work is situated at the nexus of what Carolyn Merchant calls "the woman question and the environment question," an intersection that emerged from the linked patriarchal and capitalist oppression of women and the environment after the early 1960s. Ingalls critiques the instrumentalization of women and the more-than-human within Western social structures and epistemologies. She draws a parallel between the plight of the housewife and that of the nonhuman, and importantly affirms the significance of materiality to both the woman and the environment questions. Her fiction significantly contributes to a tradition of women writing about the ecological implications of materiality and embodied experience at a time when feminist

thought was becoming increasingly interested in poststructuralism and social constructivism. She emphasizes the importance of women's sexuality as an essential means of interfacing with the material world in the present, rather than only as a means of reproducing the future, thus affirming pleasure and care and denouncing Western conceptions of mastery, husbandry, and enclosure that were the prevailing orientations of man toward both women and the more-than-human.

Because the weird is a mode and not a genre, I treat it here as part of my critical framework, rather than as a genre within which I wish to place Ingalls. Her fiction makes use of several key devices of the weird, which is protean enough to accommodate a multifaceted, fluid reading of her work. The mode of the weird provides a vehicle for critiquing problems with no name, those ideological Big Others that become so deeply ingrained into the fabric of daily life that they begin to elude our critical gaze. Ingalls borrows aspects of the weird in the way she side-steps tidy taxonomies and classification, both formally and within the context of her narratives. Speaking of her fiction in terms of weird domesticity allows for us to move beyond genre and to focus on the ways in which her fiction contributes to a material critique of domestic enclosure under a capitalist patriarchal regime, and the ecological implications of this enclosure. The "domestic" in weird domesticity is not descriptive of form, but rather of the social and cultural preoccupations that play out in the narrative. Rather than fitting Ingalls inside of a predefined genre category, this chapter will argue that her work exemplifies narratives of weird domesticity in its concern with the alienation of women from the more-than-human in domestic space. The weird is a mode that characteristically exists on the fringes of other genres. Mark Fisher writes about the weird's chimerical leanings in *The Weird and the Eerie* and reminds us that this fringe status is inherent in both the form and content of texts that operate in a weird

mode. For Ingalls, the combination of seemingly disparate narrative elements includes a novel brew of fairy tale, B movie, and domestic fiction.

Historically speaking, weird fiction typically features a very particular kind of protagonist: a genteel scholar, an intellectual man of learning, whose research trajectories bring him face to face with the terrifying beings that exist just outside the bounds of human perception. This chapter focuses on a criminally under-examined subgenre of weird fiction in which the embattled housewife absconds with a nonhuman lover. In this chapter, I examine two of Ingalls' novels, *Mrs. Caliban* (1982) and *Binstead's Safari* (1983), that both make use of the interspecies romance trope in order to critique the fantasies of safety and authority within domestic space and the nuclear family. This trope is a familiar one, from folk and fairy tales to modern adaptations like Creature from the Black Lagoon, Saga of the Swamp Thing, King-Kong. These kinds of girl-meets-cryptid narratives often follow a similar blueprint: girl meets scary monster (who may or may not have already murdered some people), monster captures girl, but during her captivity she gains insight into the monster's "humanity." Those who hunt the monster conversely come to appear more monstrous with their violent, self-aggrandizing ambitions, and the narrative culminates in a tragic rupture of the relationship between the leading lady and her gargantuan paramour.[28] By presenting the creaturely romantic interests in *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari* as somehow the safer, saner choices, Ingalls underscores the eerie side of domesticity, devoid of its connection to the patchworked material self.

[28] Interestingly, Guillermo del Toro's Academy Award-winning film *The Shape of Water* follows this trope closely and its release coincided with the independent publisher New Directions' 2017 reissue of *Mrs Caliban*. The parallels between this film and Ingalls' novel are striking, even down to the way both protagonists are introduced through their extreme obsession with precision and time. Like *The Shape of Water*, *Mrs. Caliban* has all the trappings of a fairy tale, complete with an interspecies love story, set against a Cold War-era backdrop.

Not Exactly a Hermit: the Rise and Fall (and Rise) of Rachel Ingalls

The story of Ingalls's career as a fiction writer has become, not unlike the narratives she wrote, something of a fairy tale. Born in Cambridge, MA in 1940, Ingalls spent much of her early life on the periphery of academia. Her father was a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, and she graduated from Radcliffe College in 1964, after which time she relocated to the United Kingdom, where she remained for the rest of her life. She was a lifelong lover of theater and was drawn to the U.K. by the works of Shakespeare and, in particular, by his quadricentennial birthday celebrations that year. She stayed there for the rest of her life and found her footing in the publishing world with Faber, a British publisher who took a chance on her work, which had previously had trouble finding a home because they were mostly all written at, as Ingalls put it, an "odd, unsaleable length." According to her 2019 obituary in *The New York Times,* she referred to herself as "not exactly a hermit," though she believed herself to be "no good at meeting lots of strangers." Central to the lore surrounding her career is the back-and-forth progression of her work from unknown to rediscovery, back into obscurity again, and rediscovered once more. The event that almost always appears in the lede of any retrospective on Ingalls is that, after initially falling flat upon its publication in 1982, *Mrs. Caliban* was rediscovered after the British Book Marketing Council named it to their list of the best American novels written since World War II, an event that Ingalls, who was in her early 40s at the time, humbly called a "fluke." The novel centers on a suburban housewife named Dorothy who strikes up a romantic relationship with an amphibious creature who escapes from a nearby research institute after dismembering his captors. The British Book Marketing Council, it seems, is to be thanked for rescuing Ingalls from obscurity. A *New York Times* article from 1986 puts it this way:

> "Before this year, when the British Book Marketing Council made 'Mrs. Caliban' controversial by naming it one of the 20 'greatest [American] novels since World War II,'

> Rachel Ingalls's concise, affecting and highly original 1982 work was almost unknown. Now, republished and book-clubbed, it is for the first time accessible to a wide audiece [sic]. Readers will not be disappointed." (Dorris)

Although the spotlight was fleeting, Ingalls seemed to prefer it that way. She was not fond of publicity, rarely gave interviews, and in one such interview remarked that she was weary of "being set up as the new arrival in the zoo." She once remarked that she did not care whether her books sold, nor whether she received accolades or recognition for her work. She wanted to be published, but beyond that, she said she "[didn't] care." As the story goes, the momentary fervor around *Mrs. Caliban* faded, and Ingalls again fell back into obscurity and her works began to go out of print. Ingalls authored 11 books between 1970 and 2013, mostly during the 80s. While her relative obscurity may have contributed significantly to the mythology surrounding her oeuvre, it is ultimately the work itself that has proven to draw readers in. Thanks in part to the efforts of publishers like New Directions in the U.S. and Faber in the U.K., Ingalls's unique combination of whimsy, dry wit, and penchant for hijinks seems finally to have earned a lasting appreciation.[29] In 2017, the same year that *Mrs. Caliban* was re-released, Ingalls received a terminal diagnosis of myeloma at the age of 76. She died in 2019 after witnessing the reissues of both *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari* to much acclaim and seemed finally willing to take some pleasure in the impact of her writing. This second resurgence of her work seemed to finally indicate to her that all this admiration was not merely, as she'd once thought, a fluke.

Reviewers have noted the ways in which Ingalls borrows and manipulates fairy tale tropes—"I stuck with the Brothers Grimm while my friends went on to the Bobbsey Twins and

[29] She is an extremely funny writer. Her strange longform story *In the Act*, for example, tells the story of a woman named Helen whose disinterested scientist husband invents a robotic "companion" for himself. Up in his secret laboratory, the robotic woman emerges out of the chaos of, as Helen puts it, "pubic hair and nipples everywhere you look" (29).

Nancy Drew," she once said in a 1987 interview—particularly in the way she blurs the lines between human and the more-than-human, granting the latter agency and acting-power. In a 2019 interview with Harvard Magazine shortly before her death, Ingalls cites the Brothers Grimm and particularly the story of the Princess and the Frog as an influence on her novels *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari*: "These fairy tales spread all through Europe—some of them were fireside tales told by women to young girls to warn them against grown-up life in the world outside of the family. …But they go deeper than that—they are about the connection between the human and the animal worlds in which we still live" (para. 7). In her own fiction, Ingalls does not warn young girls about the perils of growing up and existing on the fringes of the family—she warns, instead, about the perils of domestic enclosure, about denying the "connection between the human and the animal worlds in which we still live." This understanding of fairy tales emerges in Ingalls's work in the form of a domestic ecological ethic that works to counter the sterility, presumed objectivity, and individualism of enclosure.

In her novels, there are consequences to the hubristic assumptions that these organisms (including women) can be enclosed, studied, and classified. The scientists who abuse Larry in *Mrs. Caliban* are seemingly dismembered; the anthropologist in *Binstead's Safari* is driven close to madness in his doomed quest to find a secret lion cult. Fittingly, though, these would-be stewards of knowledge are not the heroes of Ingalls's tales. The researchers in *Mrs. Caliban*, for example, are never onscreen—their cruelties and subsequent brutal deaths happen before the novel begins, and the reader learns about them secondhand. Stan Binstead, the anthropologist in *Binstead's Safari*, does get significant airtime, but is depicted as careless and overconfident. The real heroes of these texts, the interlocutors of Ingalls's critiques of patriarchal epistemologies, are women, often housewives, who mostly do not work outside of the home and instead focus

virtually all their time and energy on some combination of raising children, trying to have more children, cooking, and keeping. These women have also found themselves in loveless marriages or heterosexual relationships but they continue, up to a point, to cultivate domestic environments, even if at great expense to their own happiness or self-realization.

In *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari*, the housewife confronts the horrors of confinement within an idealized version of domestic space before breaking with those conventions and moving toward a more ecological mode of dwelling. Ingalls wrote often about women who struggle to find their own identities as they are hampered by material reliance on apathetic spouses all while dealing with intense grief. The normative heterosexual marriage or romantic relationship becomes an extension of oppressive domestic space, such that even when a woman is out in the world, her social status as a housewife acts as a tether to the home, mandating the ways she is allowed to move and relate. Her homemaking efforts are expected to be herculean but are nevertheless unwaged, which means she must rely on her spouse for material security. Friendships between women are presented as ambivalent: they are necessary outlets but are made difficult to sustain within the confines and codes of heteropatriarchal norms that serve to alienate women from one another. She positions the rationality of Western epistemologies as literally unintelligible, despite the claims to objectivity that have validated such modes of thinking and validates instead the embodied interaction with the material world. Moreover, Ingalls uses humor to mock the proponents of such "proper" study. In all of these ways, Ingalls demonstrates how fiction about domesticity must be read as a site within which to critique the capitalist relations that structure domestic space and the patriarchal image of the nuclear family in the late 20th century.

Through Ingalls's use of the weird in her scripting of interspecies romances for both women, Dorothy and Millie undergo transformations so stark that they not only explode the

boundaries of "domestic womanhood" and the family, they also probe the very limits of the human. Ingalls's fiction tacitly critiques Western epistemological frameworks that historically have relied on the use of enclosures and material disenfranchisement of women to prop themselves up. Her characters, when confronted with conditions that they have come to expect are reliably true—without acknowledging the canted power structures that prop them up—fall into the unknowing of apophatic thinking. They lose, in the final instance, their ability to speak about what they have been given to believe is "true."

Mrs. Caliban and the Nice, Safe Kitchen

Domestic space—and its related image of the nuclear family—is a physical enclosure within which bodies are confined and organized in particular ways under the jurisdiction of a patriarchal, capitalist order. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, first published in 1988, Elaine Tyler May writes that "Domestic ideology emerged as a buffer" against communism and nonreproductive or "deviant" sexual practices, and that "[c]ontainment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home" (16). More recently, material feminist Stacy Alaimo has pointed out that domestic space has become in the Western world a "defined container" of the human, "a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies" (*Exposed* 17-8). Alaimo entices us to see the ecological possibilities of dispensing with such contained thinking, such aversion to "exposure." To think of the home as a container and the human body as rigidly bounded is to view the more-than-human world as an externality, as separate. Instead, Alaimo writes, we must reframe our understanding of our relationship to the more-than-human as a messy assemblage within which human and more-than-human are continually interpenetrating.

Mrs. Caliban opens upon such a picture of the domestic-as-container, as a housewife named Dorothy sends her husband off to work one morning like a mother would a schoolboy. Indeed, Fred seems completely incapable of getting himself out the door, forgetting "three things in a row" and "dithering" about the house as Dorothy advises him on the weather forecast and hands him the newspaper she had still been reading. He vaguely tells her that he might be home late and she accepts this with a placid "Sure. All right." Once he is finally gone, Dorothy gets to work on household chores: "She made the beds, vacuumed, washed and dressed," and finally ends up "at the kitchen sink doing the dishes" (4). Later that morning, Fred calls and tells her he'll be bringing back a colleague for dinner and suddenly she is on the hook for providing a hot meal she hadn't planned for. Her friend Estelle calls attention to the absurdity of this stifling situation: "you're scurrying around to fulfill all your wifely obligations. My God, I don't miss that" (9). And scurry she does, like a rodent trapped in a maze. Within the first few pages of the novel, Ingalls vividly establishes an unglamorous scene of domestic dissatisfaction in which Dorothy seems to accept her role because, although it might appear deadening, it appears "nice" and "safe" (Ingalls 19).

The novel's opening description of Dorothy's monotonous domestic routine is sharply juxtaposed against the strange behavior of her radio.[30] In addition to the usual broadcasts and product advertisements, Dorothy's radio has been delivering strange messages that seem, impossibly, to be directed specifically at her. These messages give her, Dorothy, advice for mending her marriage, and even reassure her that she "will have another baby, all right." Like the protagonist of any good weird tale, Dorothy tries and fails to find a satisfactorily rational

[30] The radio is an object with which housewives of the post-45 era have been intimately linked. It provided entertainment in the form of serial programs, and was also crucial in disseminating both product advertisements and messaging about emergency preparedness measures. Day-to-day, the radio provided housewives with advertisements for products they should purchase to keep their household in order. In the event of a public emergency, the radio could turn into an emergency broadcast mechanism and quickly communicate updates and safety protocol.

explanation for her radio's odd behavior: "It was an old radio, after all. A very old radio. Surely it was possible that the sound waves were getting mixed up, or something like that" (4). Mixedup sound waves, indeed. In a scene of such stifling suburban humdrum, the only possible explanation for an occurrence this strange must be that Dorothy is defective in some way—she must be losing her mind. Which is why, when the already-strange programming that morning abruptly switches to a public safety announcement about a "creature" who has escaped from a local research laboratory, it is not clear whether this creature actually exists, or whether this broadcast is a figment of Dorothy's imagination.

The announcement starts off like a wartime emergency preparedness broadcast: "*Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this programme to make the following announcement to all citizens in the area…*" and ends with a dire warning to civilians: "*We underline this warning to everyone in the area: this animal is violent and should on no account be approached. If you see him, phone the police immediately. Repeat: the monsterman is dangerous*" (5-6). The radio thus provides a moment in which the narrative of safety in a bounded domestic space is interrupted. Although nothing has, up to this moment, actually invaded Dorothy's home, the veneer of normalcy has been disrupted. The broadcast describes "Aquarius the Monsterman" as having a "mysteriously different physiology," and describes the gruesome murders of two scientists at the research institute. The broadcast thus introduces the threat of the weird into domestic space. The radio is an everyday object that typically airs everything from advertisements for products or instructions in emergency scenarios, encapsulating the close relationship between domestic consumerism and safety. Indeed, Dorothy notices that the voice relaying this emergency message spoke with the "emotionally heightened drone of the salesman-advertiser" (6). In this way the book implicitly points to the narrative that domestic safety was linked with consumerism, and that both were the responsibility of the housewife who was physically tied to that space and thus would be the one

listening to such broadcasts. The radio materially represents the close relationship between narratives of consumerism and safety as the underlying frameworks of domestic enclosure. These characteristics of the domestic are inverted, in the opening pages of *Mrs. Caliban*, and the radio becomes a site of the weird within Dorothy's otherwise normative home.

This is Ingalls poking fun at the absurdity of this picture of domestic safety and consumerism. The emergency broadcast is not warning civilians of an attack from a foreign government, but rather of an unidentified amphibious creature. Dorothy's response to the broadcast underscores this absurdity, as she seems mostly unperturbed by the news that this dangerous monster is roaming the streets. Instead, she thinks about the loss of her young child due to surgical complications and her subsequent miscarriage, both of which occurred at some unspecified point in time before *Mrs. Caliban* opens. The quick pivot away from the allegedly monstrous, violent creature running amok in the suburbs to these painfully mundane tragedies defangs the monster before he has even come on screen. Dorothy has already endured the worst possible things and has somehow managed to go on keeping house with mechanical precision—don't expect her to stop for the mere threat of disembowelment at the hands of a humanoid frog.

The question of whether any of this is "real" or whether Dorothy is only hearing these broadcasts in her head is settled almost immediately when Aquarius the Monsterman literally walks into her "nice, safe kitchen." She is in the midst of preparing the short-notice dinner for her husband and his colleague, behaving like one of her gleaming kitchen appliances, whirling back and forth between the kitchen and living room in a frenzy of inhuman efficiency. In the moments before Larry the frogman shambles his way into her kitchen, she is feeling the boundaries of domestic enclosure acutely. Ingalls makes use of frenetic pacing that comes to a screeching halt with the entrance of her supporting frogman:

> "She was into the living room to greet Art Gruber, and out again with such speed that she might have been one of the mechanical weather-people in a child's snow globe or a figure on a medieval clock…Back in the kitchen again, she had all the salad ingredients out, chopping up carrots and celery with her favourite sharp vegetable knife, had put some potato chips and nuts in bowls and just slid some cheese on crackers under the grill. Then she raced for the bathroom in the spare room. She came back into the kitchen fast, to make sure that she caught the toasting cheese in time. And she was halfway across the checked linoleum floor of her *nice safe kitchen*, when the screen door opened and a gigantic six-foot-seven-inch frog-like creature shouldered its way into the house…" (19, emphasis added)

The prose in this passage propels the reader breathlessly along as we chase Dorothy from room to room, from tossing salad to toasting cheese and back again. She is racing from one task to the next, like a "figure on a clock," seemingly on a predefined track. This material-discursive image of domestic enclosure is devoid of ecological thinking. In order to perform her role as housewife adequately, Dorothy must instrumentalize the household objects around her—they are nothing more than extensions of herself as a housekeeping automaton. She is doing things "automatically," keeping "her thoughts running," feeling like she was in "some sort of test or race," and she muses on the pride that laboratory rats might take in completing their puzzles. Ingalls drops the interruption of Larry into the otherwise ordinary scene so casually it almost goes undetected, forcing Dorothy to slow down and engage with another being. Given her singular focus moments before, Ingalls might as well be saying that a gargantuan humanoid frog is perhaps the only thing that could have distracted Dorothy from completing her wifely duties in this moment.

Only when face to face with this huge, bizarre creature does she see "how slowly everything was happening." She is finally forced to stop rushing around, her internal clock momentarily frozen, and she even (horror of horrors) lets the cheese burn on the crackers. The reference in this passage to the matter of Dorothy's kitchen being described as "safe" prior to this creature shambling his way inside should cause the reader some surprise. In domestic weird fictions, "safety" is always a bit tongue-in-cheek, and is less about conveying actual protection from harm and more about critiquing prescribed conformity in the blueprint of an idealized domestic setting. The entrance of the creature into Dorothy's "nice safe kitchen" encapsulates the text's immediate deconstruction of the home and the nuclear family it contains and reproduces. Not only is Larry exceptionally polite, he's a vegetarian to boot. Thus the emergence of the weird in *Mrs. Caliban* begins with the crossing of a portal or threshold, an event that Fisher outlines in *The Weird and the Eerie* as providing a contact point for the weird. Rather than a human character crossing a portal into an unknown or unrecognizable realm, though, it is the strange stranger who crosses a portal into what seems on the surface to be the most rational, orderly of places.

Dismantling Enclosure with the Expansion of the Material Self

The cover design of the 2017 New Directions reissue of *Mrs. Caliban* is striking. It's essentially just a bright green book, with very few design elements. The only elements at all, besides the almost garish color and the text, are two round discs set into the expanse of green, spaced evenly apart across the top of the front cover. At first glance, it is not clear what the circles are supposed to be. They are perfectly round, symmetrical, and look rather like two smooth buttons on a machine's control panel. If one continues looking at the cover, though, the seemingly disparate elements start to cohere into something vaguely recognizable as a face—when taken together

with the suggestion of a mouth near the bottom of the cover, the button-like circles start to look a bit like a pair of eyes. When considered in light of the narrative's interest in the act of observation—who has the right to observe, who is relegated to the status of the observed—it becomes clear that these gleaming orbs are the two unblinking amphibious eyes of Larry. The eyes have an undoubtedly mechanical look to them, suggestive of the way the researchers view Larry and justify their torment of him under the aegis of scientific study. To them, he is not human—he is no more worthy of compassion or dignity than a machine. But these eyes, as they are depicted on the cover of this particular edition, turns the act of observation back on us. Wide open, unblinking: they stare directly at the reader not so much to challenge, but to regard the would-be observer. Throughout her oeuvre, Ingalls critiques the ways in which humans interact with, and take ownership of, both women and the natural world under the sign of patriarchal capitalist hegemony. Just as Ingalls herself recoiled at the idea of feeling like a creature trapped in a zoo to be ogled and examined, so too do her protagonists.

Through her dialogues with Larry, Dorothy is exposed to the idea that one's environment, one's "home," changes the ways in which one moves through the world. While her environment has, to this point, foreclosed the possibilities for spontaneous, more-than-human connection, through Larry's description of his lifeworld, she begins to see alternatives to domestic enclosure. Stacy Alaimo asks whether we might be able to reimagine a way of dwelling that "revels in the pleasures of interconnection and the joy of the unexpected; it embraces the possibilities of becoming in relation to a radical otherness that has been known as 'nature'" (18). Such a mode of dwelling would, in viewing ecological relationships as sources of pleasure and joy, privilege seeking something like enchantment within the material world, rather than using enclosure as a means of alienation from it. In *Mrs. Caliban*, Larry comes from this "nature," this "radical otherness," and his descriptions of dwelling in his community resemble Alaimo's vision. Indeed,

Larry's primary purpose in the narrative is to present Dorothy with alternative possibilities for conceiving of "home." His entire lifeworld is premised on contingency, on the "joy of the unexpected." Of living in the sea, he tells Dorothy: "When you move, the place you live in moves too" (37). For Larry, the physical substance of his home is inseparable from the experience of dwelling within it. In this case, the experience is movement, which is to say that it is change, is fluidity—a sharp contrast to the rigidity and insularity of Dorothy's domestic life. Dorothy has grown somewhat used to her role as housewife authorizing her entrapment in the home, but Larry, prior to his capture and imprisonment at the institute, was used to a freedom of movement and expression that Dorothy finds difficult to fathom. Larry's imprisonment at the institute is premised on the act of observation. Ingalls critiques the violence inherent in the hierarchy between the observer—who is, in this case, ostensibly working to advance the aims of biological study—and the observed. What these observers cannot grasp, however, is that what Larry can teach, as a representative of his species, cannot be seen, but must be lived for oneself. Even trying to answer Dorothy when she asks, "What is it like?", he likens it to explaining color to someone with colorblindness: "They can't believe they suffer from this thing, because they have never known any other way" (37). The mode of observation practiced in the research institute, then, is guilty of performing what Donna Haraway has called the "God trick" of Western epistemologies: a way of looking at the world that claims to be disembodied and thus unmarked and allegedly "objective." Hopeless as it would be for them to understand what they seek to understand purely by looking, their motivations are revealed to be impure. As the specimen under study, Larry is not only presumed to be less human and thus more insensate to pain or fear, he is sexually abused by his captors during his imprisonment.

The narrative, as with most of Ingalls's work, is written in the third person limited, and frequently gives insight into Dorothy's thoughts and feelings. Throughout the text, the reader is

often privy to Dorothy's internal arguments about what she ought to do with Larry. It's clear he can't stay hidden in her spare bedroom forever, even if he wanted to. He grows increasingly restless, wanting to take riskier outings to stroll around gardens or swim at the beach. Dorothy does her best to attire him as inconspicuously as possible, but it seems painfully obvious that a wig and sunglasses can't hide him forever. She considers, at one point, helping him take his story of imprisonment and abuse to the news and even to the Supreme Court. She thinks, rather naively, that Larry's story would be a "test case," that:

> "[t]hey'd have to define the nature of the term *human being*. If Larry wasn't human, he couldn't commit murder, only kill like an animal and not be punished for it. On the other hand, if he were to be considered human, he had killed in a self-protective anger brought on by pain caused through torture by two sadists, who had taken away his human rights and wrongfully imprisoned him in the first place just because he was of a different race." (40-1, emphasis original)

Even as she entertains this fantasy, though, she admits that it would be impossible, suggesting that, despite her circumscribed role as housewife, Dorothy is an ecological thinker. That is to say, she thinks of the "human" not as a fixed category that exists at the top of an agency hierarchy, but as one that is fluid enough to permit redefinition and renegotiation. She recognizes that the term, despite being a moving target in her estimation, has attached to it certain legal or political baggage, and she sees these as arbitrary and imperfect designations. This understanding of the nonhuman is instinctual for her: although she is initially startled by Larry's appearance, when her hand reaches toward the cutting board sitting on her kitchen counter, she grabs a piece of celery rather than the knife. This moment, in which she recognizes kinship rather than danger, sets the tone for the rest of the tale. The danger, we come to find, has been inside the home the whole time and has nothing to do with the presence of a monstrous being. While these structures fail to

provide the safety they promise, the exposure to monstrosity conversely proves not only "safe," but also pleasurable. Because there is necessarily an overtly sexual dimension to the penetration of boundaries in Ingalls's fiction, I turn again to Alaimo's Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times, in which she outlines her notion of the exposed subject:

> "The exposed subject is always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted for…And if penetration suggests something sexual, all the better…pleasure, desire, sensuality, and eroticism can pulse through the human exposed to place, permeating environmentalist ethics and politics as inspiration, catalyst, and energy." (Alaimo 5)

The concept of exposure typically pertains to one's proximity to danger. The phrase "exposed to the elements" conjures up images of sun and windburn, a fragile human body battling extreme weather without access to the safety of the built environment. What Alaimo and other material feminists aim to mark is that exposure is always already happening within spaces, including domestic spaces, that are purportedly bounded and closed off. Alaimo does not read exposure as a state that is imposed upon a subject, but rather as itself a fluid form of subjectivity that is cocreated among bodies that interface and penetrate one another. Dorothy seduces and is seduced by the possibility of another way of being in the world in which the rules imposed on her by patriarchal authority no longer apply. Through her exposure to a nonhuman sexual partner, her worldview and experience of her own body's place within the world is transformed.

Toward a Nonreproductive Futurity

In her 2012 book, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*, Alison Stone provides an update to Western philosophy's conception of mother-as-subject, which she argues has long been neglected in favor of an emphasis on the child as the protagonist. Stone, by building on the work of theorists like Luce Irigary and Julia Kristeva, rejects the notion that selfhood and

motherhood must necessarily be opposed, despite more "masculine" conceptions of subjectivity in which "the child is at least seen as a potential subject; the mother is seen merely as the background and nourishing soil of her child's subjectivity-to-be" (2). Stone asks what, then, becomes of the maternal subject in this scenario? How can she conceive of herself as subject if her only purpose is to provide another with the conditions for coming into selfhood? For Stone, maternal subjectivity cannot merely be conflated with female subjectivity broadly, but the two cannot be completely disentangled from one another, either. While Kristeva and others have discussed the possibility of "matricide" in asserting subjectivity apart from her mother figure, Stone argues that the mother, too, must distance herself from her child in order to reassert her own subjectivity through authorship and autonomy.

The ecological notion of nonreproductive futurity provides a way of moving beyond this structure, and one possible manifestation of nonreproductive futurity is spinsterhood. The spinster is who the housewife has chosen not to become, whether consciously or not, because the spinster (much like the witch) exists outside the official protections of the state and its proxy, the nuclear family.[31] In her article, "Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity," Sarah Ensor explores the figure of the spinster—the unmarried, childless woman—as an interlocutor in thinking otherwise about futurity. Ensor discusses how Rachel Carson's detractors famously attempted to discredit her groundbreaking work in *Silent Spring* because she was a childless woman. Why would a woman want to protect the environment if not for the sake of children she did not and would never have? Ensor explores the possibility Carson opens up in *Silent Spring* for "tending the future without contributing directly

[31] As Silvia Federici outlines in *Caliban and the Witch*, the rise of capitalism is tied to the emergence of enclosures and the disappearance of communal lands. This created a social and economic order in which only certain types of labor were compensated with a wage. The work of women—particularly unmarried, childless women—did not earn a wage and thus these women were often forced to rely on mere charity to subsist.

to it" (409). This notion of nonreproductive futurity and spinsterhood has been generative for thinking about feminist and queer approaches to ecology, as it argues for a communal sense of environmental responsibility that goes beyond the Western emphasis on the nuclear family. Ingalls presents the figure of the spinster as a shadow self to the housewife characters in the novels I examine in this chapter. The spinster represents an alternative future, one that does not come with attendant requirements to reproduce the structures of the nuclear family. This ambivalence allows for an autonomous selection from a multiplicity of subjectivities that become readily available beyond merely passive conferral of subjecthood. Safety is a fraught concept for Dorothy, one that is bound up in her complicated relationship to maternity. Before we meet her, her young son has died during what should have been a routine medical procedure; she has had a miscarriage; and even her tiny companion dog has been killed after running out into the street and getting hit by a car. Dorothy has begun to believe that everyone she is charged to care for is doomed; she sees herself as having failed to provide safety within the boundaries of the home, the site of her responsibility and purview. Her initial response to her grief is to retreat further into her domestic role, and we come to learn that her grief is initially so great that she is nearly committed to a mental hospital, as though crying in the face of such loss were indicative of insanity.

The tension between safety and exposure in Ingalls' fiction rests on a critique of the nuclear family and, necessarily, the experience of motherhood under capitalist patriarchal hegemony. Children are almost always ambivalent figures in her narratives—they either cannot be protected or they cannot be conceived in the first place.[32] Before she meets Larry, Dorothy's sexuality is framed as useful only when it is channeled into the act of reproduction. After these

[32] When they do survive, they are depicted as reproducing the attitudes and aspirations of their fathers, as in Ingalls' *In the Act*.

efforts have failed and it seems quite possible she will never be able to (or perhaps even want to) have another child, in walks a creature with whom it seems unlikely she can procreate, but with whom she reclaims some sense of ownership of her sexuality, experiencing the physical sensations of comfort and pleasure without the reproductive mandate. Dorothy's identity as a mother has been ruptured and thus her care for the world and her own place in it must be renegotiated. The subject of having a child together does come up between Dorothy and Larry, and Dorothy says she would be "delighted if it happened" (57). Larry seems convinced such a union would not bode well for any potential offspring ("A mixing of the species is said to produce sterile offspring, isn't it?"), but Dorothy pushes aside his concerns. The scientists at the institute emphasized his otherness in order to justify their treatment of him, she maintains. Consequently, anything they said about his species difference, and any related reproductive implications, could be thrown out the window. The anxieties of the scientists indicate a fear of transspecies—that is to say, queer—reproduction. The possibility of the monstrous combination of things that do not belong manifests as a completely novel species would be a serious threat to patriarchal supremacy and its fears of species "degeneracy." Ingalls pulls on this thread, though, so that by the end of the novel the two things that appear impossibly monstrous when combined are the human and the prescription of domestic enclosure.

Their relationship does not follow any existing set of gender norms—while Larry is coded as a "male," this means very little in terms of how he interacts with Dorothy. If the novel's title, in its reference to the character of Caliban in *The Tempest*, underscores Larry's antipatriarchal, anti-colonial otherness, Dorothy's character embodies a desire to become joyfully entangled with the other. Dorothy tries to launch into "an explanation of the mating habits of human beings," but as she does with her discussion of the rise of patriarchal social codes,

devolves into uncertainty: “She wasn’t even sure that she was right about half her pronouncements. Every time Larry asked a question, she felt less sure” (71). Again Dorothy is left in a state of apophatic questioning. The more she lists out the purported facts of human reproduction, the more uncertainty she has. When confronted with the inexplicable matter of Larry’s existence in his extreme otherness, she displays no similar compunction to find all the answers. But when she attempts to explain the cultural narratives around social and sexual practices that reinforce patriarchal control, she becomes overwhelmed by her lack of answers.

Despite the horrors of the mundane that structure Dorothy’s days, she retains a sense of humor. *Mrs. Caliban* manages to remain relatively buoyant against its bleak backdrop, and the tension between horror and humor is integral to the project of the domestic weird. For as short as it is, this novel has a surprisingly high body count. Besides the deaths that happen offscreen before the novel opens, Larry slaughters two of his captors at the institute and later a group of adolescent bullies, and Fred dies in a fiery car wreck along with his 16-year-old girlfriend (who also happens to be the daughter of Dorothy’s best friend Estelle, with whom Fred had also been having an affair before moving on to the daughter). Despite all of the loss she has endured, Dorothy is constantly stifling giggles and fits of laughter throughout the novel. And Ingalls makes the reader laugh, too—gifting us with such images as a hulking frog-like creature wearing a wig and sunglasses in order to catch some rays at the beach undetected. Rather than being driven into raving madness by coming face to face with the uncanny or the strange, Dorothy welcomes such intrusions readily, even joyfully. Laughter represents a rupture of the tightly bound conventions keeping an allegedly “safe” household in order. That Dorothy is able to laugh despite enduring so much loss and isolation is itself an act of resistance. Humor is the mechanism by which she subverts her prescribed role as housewife and find some release

(emotional and physical) from the strictures thrust upon her by the patriarchal blueprint for "family life."

The moment of horror or awe in a weird tale comes when the protagonist realizes they do not have the language or any sufficient conceptual framework to describe or define the source of their terror. Although Dorothy is repeatedly confronted with all that is unknowable about Larry (his origins, customs, mating practices), it is ultimately the fact of her own domestic entrapment that she finds most horrifying, a fact Ingalls underscores by making it impossible to describe, unlike Larry, who is described in great detail:

> "His eyes were huge and dark, seeming much larger than the eyes of a human being, and extremely deep. His head was quite like the head of a frog, but rounder, and the mouth was smaller and more centred in the face, like a human mouth. Only the nose was very flat, almost not there, and the forehead bulged up in two creases. The hands and feet were webbed, but not very far up, in fact only just noticeably, and as for the rest of the body, he was exactly like a man--a well-built large man--except that he was a dark spotted green-brown in colour and had no hair anywhere. And his ears were unusually small, set low down and rounded." (20)

When Larry is first introduced, his physical appearance is catalogued nearly exhaustively. Even the biological and cultural differences of his "unknown" species become clearer, as he discusses them matter-of-factly with Dorothy on several occasions. We can assume, then, since the text is operating within the matrix of the weird, that whatever is most difficult to explain is the weirdest entity in the text. Dorothy tries to explain modern heteropatriarchal conditions to Larry, but falters:

> "She had started out with the introduction of agriculture, the coming of industry, the exploitation of women, the fact that *it all started in the home where there was no choice*,

> the idea that eventually robots and machines would release people to live a life of leisure and explore their own personalities; but, just before she reached that point, *she forgot how to wind it up*" (62, emphasis added).

This passage is the essential moment in the text. First, Ingalls applies the essential epistemological framework in weird fiction, apophasis, to the conditions of domesticity. When trying to explain to Larry how women's domestic labor has been exploited, Dorothy loses her train of thought and becomes confused. She literally cannot find the words to explain how she got to be in the position she's in. She has also, in a rapid gloss, summarized hundreds of years' worth of social transformation. By listing, in quick succession, "the introduction of agriculture, the coming of industry" and "the exploitation of women," Dorothy seems to be suggesting that these developments occurred in a causal relationship, one leading to the next; from her perspective, the exploitation of women has emerged, whether directly or not, as a result of agricultural and industrial developments. I use the term "enclosure" here in the way that Silvia Federici defines it in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* to refer to physical enclosures as well as ideological and epistemological ones. Federici historicizes the witch hunts of the seventeenth century and the ways in which they provided essential preconditions for the emergence of capitalism through land privatization and the commercialization of agriculture. She uses the term enclosure to refer to the physical enclosure of land and to the enclosure of "knowledge; our bodies; our relationship to other animals, people, and nature" (21). This understanding of women's exploitation is fundamentally tied to economics and the ways in which land and labor have been privatized and commodified. Dorothy tellingly chooses as her starting point for explaining Western culture to Larry "the introduction of agriculture, the coming of industry," and through the unknowing of this moment, Ingalls critiques the confinement of women to domestic space as an enclosure.

The novel is, in so many ways, like one of the Grimms' fairy tales that Ingalls was so fond of reading. Despite its whimsy and humor, it doesn't have a happy ending. Just as Larry's escape from his artificial environment comes at the cost of mangled bodies, so too does Dorothy's. After her husband dies in a bizarre car wreck, Dorothy returns to her house to find that it feels alien to her, a sterile, empty space in which she can't imagine anyone ever having lived. It's in some ways liberatory, but also deeply melancholic and ambivalent. She loses Larry somewhere in the frenzied car chase, and though she goes back to the beach on several occasions to wait for him, he never arrives. However, we are left recalling something Larry says to Dorothy when he notices that she is "too frightened" of the world. Gesturing toward the earth and sky surrounding them, he reminds her of a simple truth: "You've got all this," he says. "You live here. It's your home." The real horror in this novel is that she'd been blind to this simple truth all along. The end of the novel leaves Dorothy, in the wake of her husband's absurd death, in a position to move through life outside the structures of the nuclear family. The narrative seems to offer this to her as a counterbalance—her husband, in his own frenzied desire to either deny the affair he's been having or to attack Larry—is driving recklessly, and ultimately brings about a fiery highway wreck that kills both him and the teenage girl he has groomed into having an affair with him. In her literal bodily relationship with Larry, Dorothy begins to rethink the parameters of "the home," ones that have nothing to do with safety. Instead, she begins to imagine a more ecological model of dwelling that is co-created with nonhuman actors and agents. Ingalls's fiction thus contributes to a body of domestic weird fictions that depict the alienation of women from the more-than-human world, with a keen attention to the interlocking forces that have led to the confinement of women to such roles, particularly the rationalization and domination of the natural world.

Binstead's Safari: Domestic Enclosure and Anti-Ecological Fantasies of Safety

Apart from their differences in setting, *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari* have a lot in common. Both focus on the plight of an embattled housewife confined within an unhappy marriage; both indicate that some type of trauma around motherhood has occurred off screen; both meditate on the idea of safety and its relationship to domestic space; and both use the interspecies romance trope. While Larry the frogman strode directly into Dorothy's home through the side door, Millie Binstead, the protagonist of 1983's *Binstead's Safari*, encounters her nonhuman paramour while accompanying her husband, a folklorist, on a research trip to the African countryside. Just as *Mrs. Caliban* begins with a look inside a scene of domestic enclosure and material reliance, *Binstead's Safari* opens with a glimpse into the claustrophobic domestic relationship of Millie and Stan Binstead. When we first meet her, Millie is asking her husband, a folklorist, if she can join him on his research trip abroad. Stan is setting out to revive his tepid career by proving, despite eye rolls from his colleagues, the existence of a lion cult in Africa that worships a powerful, shapeshifting man capable of turning himself into a lion, notorious for "supernatural powers in battle and medicine, and love" (23). Stan has plans to track down and "uncover" this lion cult, to "discover" and document the local secret that will earn him renewed credibility in his field of research.

Stan declines to bring Millie on this trip because it would be an extravagance—it would "cost too much." It is clear that he simply just doesn't want her tagging along, but Millie is incapable of calling his bluff. As a housewife, she earns no wage of her own that she could use to pay her own way. The limited omniscient narration—which, for Ingalls, typically follows the woman at the center of the narrative—draws attention to Millie's material dependency on her husband only to provide a serendipitous resolution: "right on time, as though planned that way," Millie's great aunt Edna dies and leaves her a pile of money (3). It is worth noting that Edna

represents one of several spinster figures in this novel. She emerges at the beginning of the book as the benefactor capable of catalyzing Millie's journey. Not much is said about Great Aunt Edna throughout the rest of the narrative, but it seems likely that she did not have any children of her own and so chose to leave a sizeable part of her fortune and valuable personal effects with Millie, who is able to do with this windfall what she wants. Thus, in contrast with *Mrs. Caliban*'s Dorothy, Millie is able to physically leave domestic enclosure behind almost immediately because she has been able to subvert the limitations of her marital finances thanks to a gift from an elderly woman relative.

Millie's desire to break out of her domestic enclosure is also apparent from the novel's outset, as the reader learns that she has "never been out of the country at all.' It was true. She hadn't even been away from New England before the first time he'd taken her to visit his family" (3). Ingalls characterizes Millie as extremely wet behind the ears, and Stan as dismissive and reluctant to "hold her hand" on their travels as though she is a child incapable of moving about in the world on her own. Later in the novel, Millie will reference how she "fended off an induced crack-up for many years," and that she had been "dead on [her] feet for many years" (pp). However, almost as soon as she is left to her own devices in London on the first leg of their trip, she begins to blossom. She ventures around town on her own, takes in a ballet, getting "carried away" and shouting approval at the end of the performance. She buys herself "unnecessary and fancy clothes." Stan notes the change in her before they leave London: "She no longer had the eager, pathetic look, hoping to please; nor the stunned, expressionless stare. London had changed her" (16). That this transformation happens almost immediately is not an indication of poor pacing on Ingalls's part—pacing is always deliberate for her—but rather works to emphasize how quickly such transformation can happen outside the bounds of domestic enclosure. This trend only intensifies when the couple finally makes it to Africa, where even Stan feels "slightly

out of step" because of what he perceives as extreme otherness in his new surroundings: "the sudden change in temperature, altitude, and the general look of things—the tremendous variation and mixture of peoples and languages" (19). Conversely, Millie becomes even further removed from the patriarchal coverage of Stan's mantle and appears to be completely at ease, rather than being "tied up by a nervous reaction to the strangeness of her surroundings…she was actually smiling and looking around with interest" (19). Ingalls tellingly juxtaposes the freedom she feels there with the domestic enclosure of the New England home she is used to: "The air is different here, it gives you such a sense of excitement and *space* and freedom" (35, emphasis added). "Space" is the operative word here, as a contrasting concept to the notion of enclosure. Space is tantamount to a freedom of movement and a freedom of expression for Millie, reminiscent of how Larry describes his ocean dwelling in *Mrs. Caliban*. All of this "space" allows Millie to exist outside of patriarchal norms and predefined relations with the more-than-human. As a result, she becomes reacquainted with her body and its relationship to the material world: she creates things with her hands, she learns to paint, and she meets a strange man named Henry Lewis with whom she begins an affair of her own. As we discover later in the narrative, Lewis is likely the one Stan has come to Africa to find: the shapeshifter who can take the form of a lion.

As Millie's own autonomy continues to grow and her reliance on Stan all but disappears, Stan becomes increasingly disgruntled and is determined to bring down the hulking lion that has begun stalking their hunting party. It should start to become obvious to the reader that this unusually large and intelligent lion is Millie's lover. Stan, then, is not only seeking empirical and physical domination over his quarry, but he is also (perhaps unknowingly) seeking revenge for Lewis turning him into a cuckold. He believes can only be satisfied by killing:

> "When you squeezed the trigger, you captured that life. On the instant of being no more, it became yours forever. It really was true, he told himself: when you killed a thing, you

became its owner in a way nothing else was ever owned…He didn't consider that there was a point of view belonging to the one marked out to die." (83)

Throughout the narrative, Stan is plagued by guilt that has lingered ever since his brother died in the war, and a generalized self-loathing he seems to remedy with endless philandering. He is convinced he can make life mean something if only he can unearth the essential truth about the human condition. The keepers of the secret knowledge he seeks, of course, are "exotic" people he would otherwise dismiss as primitive, regressive, but simultaneously fetishizes for (as he sees it) their elemental understanding of the inner workings of things. Just as Ingalls critiques the objective gaze of the scientist in *Mrs. Caliban*, she draws attention to anthropology as a colonizing discipline that presumes to search for objective truths and to tame those truths, bringing them safely inside of a Western epistemological framework—in this case, to legitimize these obscure, "primitive" views under the aegis of a Western academic field of study.

In *Mrs. Caliban*, Ingalls critiques the limits of biological observation in understanding Larry's species; in *Binstead's Safari*, she critiques the limits of anthropological observation in a similar fashion. Ingalls tellingly emphasizes the pride Stan takes in his vision, which he has long relied on to orient himself to the world. His sight, though, is insufficient for "seeing" lifeways that do not mirror his own: "He'd always had good eyesight. All the good things he'd always had, never given a thought to them, and now it seemed that they were running out. But if Millie stayed it would have to be all right" (157). This prized sensory prowess of his is challenged by the prospect of losing his control over his wife, his marriage. Despite the feeling that her presence somehow can heal whatever it is that ails him, moments later he is back to wondering about a more rational cause: was it a parasite he'd picked up? No, he thinks, it must be his reaction to the sun, "an unusual kind of photosensitivity" (157).

Millie's transformation, on the other hand, allows her greater insights into the subjects Stan intends to study on this trip, subjects that prove impossibly elusive to him. For Ingalls, the housewife becomes the observer of the observer. The housewife has been presumed to be a passive witness—disinterested and unqualified—to the very important official work of "serious" scientists. In Ingalls's narratives, though, she becomes physically intimate with the "subjects" of these studies. It begins to confound Stan that his wife—a woman he has long written off as vapid and meek without bothering to question his own role in her gradual selfward retreat—seems able to convene with his "subject" on a research trip where she's merely meant to be an inconvenient interloper. He seeks the lion god with the intent to document the stories he learns and then use them to advance his own career. Meanwhile, Millie has managed to seduce him.

Weird Irruptions and Emesis

Just as he is beginning to feel his ownership of his wife, whom the heteropatriarchal social order promises is his to own, slipping away, Stan doubles down on his quest to hunt down the lion, turning his focus from his academic study and prioritizing the hunt. Millie's arc is essential to understanding Ingalls' use of the housewife trope in domestic weird fictions, but Stan is equally as integral to her critique. The more Millie knows herself, the less Stan (and the reader) have access to her. There is a stark difference between the way Ingalls writes from the third person limited perspectives of Millie and Stan. Millie, like *Mrs. Caliban's* Dorothy, takes strange happenings in stride. When the reader occupies the perspective of the housewife, strange events are described matter-of-factly, and are often even tinged with humor. When we are occupying Stan's perspective in *Binstead's Safari*, the overwhelming dread he experiences is existential, inexplicable, dark. As Millie begins to regain confidence and curiosity for life, we move more firmly into Stan's point of view, as he becomes increasingly uneasy. As she becomes more fully self-realized, she becomes less readable from the outside. He is caught on several occasions in

the narrative by an intensely physical response when Millie expresses unusually strong opinions or judgments. The first "attack," as he calls it, is fleeting but debilitating:

"All at once he was gripped by a sense of dread that took the strength out of his legs and made him feel sick all over. He had never known anything like it. It went almost as quickly as the time it took to notice it. He was seized, made faint, and emptied as though he'd just thrown up. Then, the instant was gone...The attack had just seemed to rush at him *from the outside*, like the sky dropping on top of him. It was one of the weirdest things he had ever been through; like an hallucination." (43, emphasis added) The way Stan experiences this sudden onset of dread is reminiscent of how contact with the weird is described in a Lovecraftian mode. It comes at him "from the outside," it empties him out "as though he'd just thrown up." This suggestion of emesis is indicative of the uneasy interplay between fascination and revulsion that is characteristic of the weird. As is also typical of an encounter with the weird, Stan attempts to find a rational explanation for the feeling that assailed him—residual effects of drugs he took in London, a problem with his heart or lungs, the unfamiliar altitude of his new surroundings—and fails to convince himself that any of these could be the cause, and he is left with a lingering sense of dis-ease that the feeling has no identifiable source. His disgust reveals a sudden feeling of instability in his conception of self.

When he is no longer able to inhabit his role as patriarchal subject in the ways he is used to, he literally feels as though he has thrown up, as though he has been emptied out. He needs Millie to remain less of a subject so that he can define his own subjecthood against her perceived lack. As the outline of her begins to fill in and she becomes more fully realized, his own sense of self begins to crumble and he is seemingly forcibly reminded of his materiality. The experience overtakes Stan again later:

> "...the world in front of him slowed down. Everything came to a stop. He could hear, but the sound reached him from far away. He looked out into a blazon of light and tried to concentrate. He stood completely still, hoping for the confusion to pass, for his mind to remember what he had been about to do. *Come back*, he thought. *Come back*. And then he was standing there again, on his way to the car park. And, as always, it was as though the thing had never been." (156)

Ingalls seems to suggest that clinging to a Western way of dwelling, one premised on objectivity, one that refuses to acknowledge the inherently exposed—that is to say, inherently ecological—nature of the human's relationship to the more-than-human will lead to this sort of violent experience within one's own body. The body seems to act automatically, reminding itself of its porosity, its inherent openness to material exchanges.

Nonreproductive Futurity

In her essay "Desiring Bodies: Sexology and The Hite Report after New Materialism," Jean Bessette writes that the "apparent disconnect between measurements of physical arousal and selfreported experiences of desire" that Shere Hite articulated in her 1976 report on women's experiences of sexual pleasure "suggests something ontologically and politically vital about desire: the role of conscious awareness of bodily sensation" (76). The Hite Report was a watershed moment in 1976, suggesting that women pursue desire for the body's sake, rather than merely for the sake of its reproductive potential. Ingalls establishes trauma around motherhood as an integral detail that sets up Millie's domestic situation, and *Binstead's Safari* proves to be even more ambivalent toward motherhood than *Mrs. Caliban*. Millie and Stan have had problems conceiving a child, and we later come to find that these issues have contributed significantly to the breakdown of their relationship. In the opening pages of the novel, Ingalls suggests that Millie is the one who has struggled with infertility. As we will see, though, Millie is

ambivalent about her fertility—her emotional response goes beyond simply lamentation (84). Just as in *Mrs. Caliban*, we have a protagonist who does not have the choice to comply with social expectations to reproduce the nuclear family. Dorothy could not protect her son from the medical mishap that led to his premature death, and she could not protect her unborn child from the overwhelming distress that seemed to contribute to her miscarriage, and Millie Binstead cannot conceive a child. What, the novel seems to ask, is to be done about a woman incapable of performing what has been framed as the most important contribution she can make to society? In both novels, the failure of the woman to provide children causes the husband figures in each text to lose interest in the marriage. The purpose for the marital relationship, from the perspective of the men in Ingalls' novels, is to allow the system within which heteropatriarchal authority thrives to reproduce itself. Millie vehemently refuses to see the doctor after Stan goes and learns that he is not "the problem," and although we never learn the gender of that doctor, it would be reasonable based on the conspiratorial tone he takes with Stan to read that character as a man.[33]

However, motherhood is an ambivalent subject for Millie. She does not, at least in the first part of the novel, appear to lament her childlessness. When the couple first arrives in London, Millie occupies herself while Stan runs around town on his own: "She saw exactly the right present for her mother-in-law, attended an afternoon piano concert, was caught in the rain afterwards, couldn't find her way back for an hour, and got her period" (7). Most of these events are pretty standard fare for a day of sightseeing in a new city, but the detail about getting her period clearly stands out in this passage in its bodily intimacy. This moment establishes early in

[33] According to a 2010 study in the Journal of Women's Health, just 12% of obstetrician gynecologists were women in the year 1980. This is a phenomenon that Federici as well as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have discussed at length—that since the witch hunts, midwives and healers have been persecuted for and prevented from providing care work to women.

the novel that even when removed from the confines of domestic space, even while preoccupied with the sights and sounds of a new place, she carries the reminder of her childlessness in her physical body. Almost immediately after, she glimpses herself in a shop window and is startled to see "an ordinary woman, mooning along the street, who looked like somebody else," thinking, "*My God, I look like somebody's mother*" (7). The sight makes her so uneasy that she is frozen for a moment before she is drawn to cross the street and approach her reflection. The juxtaposition between confirmation of her childlessness and her reluctance to "look like somebody's mother" immediately complicates any presupposition that she feels her childlessness to be a complete tragedy.

There is power in this ambivalence; by constantly re-negotiating their own relationship to maternal subjectivity, Ingalls's protagonists are able to conceive of themselves as subjects independent of their potential for motherhood; that is, independent of their potential for bestowing subjectivity on others. After Millie becomes involved with Henry Lewis, though, she becomes pregnant. Her hope for a new life with Henry as her lover and the child she carries is, just as her earlier state of mind indicates, complicated. In some ways, the joy she feels at becoming pregnant might be read instead as nothing more than proving to herself—and Stan—that her body was not "the problem" in their marriage. Her joy is squashed fairly quickly after receiving word that Lewis has been killed. Despite her new pregnancy, after the news about Lewis's death, Millie begins to fantasize about dying herself. She becomes convinced that the lion stalking the hunting party is Lewis in shapeshifted form, come to collect her. And indeed, the lion does seem to take a special interest in her. Rather than being afraid, she welcomes the creature's pursuit. Stan attributes this to fearful paralysis, but she counters: "'I was like somebody who's stuck his finger in the light socket. Thrilled and shocked. And I knew—totally,

all over—that nothing I could do would stop it…I had this feeling that he'd come to get me. It was so strange. I can't describe it. If he hadn't intended to charge, I'd have done something to make him. I wouldn't have been able to help it.'" The way she describes the overpowering, almost mystical sensation she has is reminiscent of Stan's own attacks of an inexplicable urge from the outside. The difference here, though, is that she is not overcome with dread at her fate, but is instead thrilled with excitement.

Death becomes a fantasy in which Millie seems to find the possibility for renewed intimacy and physical touch that has otherwise been lost for her. After Henry's reported death, Millie is grieving in her tent when she hears a sound outside that makes her think immediately of Henry. She thinks: "*If you were here, if you could talk. Speak to me now. If we were lying side by side or with our arms circling each other, outside around inside around outside. If I could die*" (154). Her thoughts are confused here but it sounds, even at this point in the narrative, that she is fantasizing about death. She seems to celebrate the pregnancy, but ultimately seems to choose to destroy it and herself by running into the jaws of the lion that may or may not be a shapeshifted Lewis. This choice might be read as one Millie makes without full understanding of the outcome. There is one reading of this ending that would assume Millie tragically, delusionally strides forward to meet a being she believes to be her lover, Henry Lewis, appearing to her in the form of a lion. In this reading, there is no shape-shifter, and there never was. There are, and have always been, only the hungry jaws of a predator waiting for Millie. There is, though, another reading of this ending. One in which Millie is fully aware that when she walks off to meet the lion head-on, she is walking not to her death, but to a refashioning of herself.

It's unclear how much Millie knows about what she's walking into at the end of the novel. Pregnant, she chooses to walk out to meet the lion that has been stalking their party. She exercises her agency here in perhaps the only way she can. Read in light of her earlier

ambivalence about pregnancy and motherhood, this scene does not necessarily indicate that she thinks she will be mauled by an enormous predator, and that she actively wants to destroy the pregnancy, but that it doesn't matter: she's open to the transformation that waits for her, in whatever manner it comes. As Alaimo writes in *Exposed*: "To occupy exposure as insurgent vulnerability is to perform material rather than abstract alliances, and to inhabit a fraught sense of political agency that emerges from the perceived loss of boundaries and sovereignty" (5). Millie sacrifices her own body in order to once and for all destroy the illusion of sovereignty she has been afforded under patriarchy.

Conclusion

Across these three texts, the idea of "safety" is established as a condition to which women aspire when they enter into the enclosure of domestic space that is offered to them by a heteronormative romantic partnership. We come to realize that safety within Ingalls's fictional worlds is never a guarantee within domestic space and, more than that, is possibly even incompatible with the parameters of domesticity. Safety is emphasized as a reason for accepting the conditions of enclosure. Ingalls explodes one notion of domesticity by offering an alternative, one premised on mutuality and kinship with the more-than-human, one that redefines the parameters of safety. The notion of safety is essential to my reading of the domestic weird. It has been the excuse given for structuring domestic space in a way that closes out all perceived threats. But Rachel Ingalls's fiction forces us to ask: from what, exactly, are the walls of her "nice, safe" home protecting her? Safety, or a lack thereof, is ultimately a question of boundaries; a fantasy of domestic safety relies on upholding boundaries between inside and outside, between human and nonhuman, between life and death. Domestic weird fictions, like *Mrs. Caliban*, reimagine the fantasy of the "nice, safe home," because when faced with the choice between unremitting

banality and absconding with a giant frog or running into the jaws of a lion god, the latter will always win out.

Such potential pleasures go beyond reproductive futurity. Ingalls' approach in *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari* is decidedly nonreproductive. Neither Dorothy nor Millie are able to raise a child into adulthood, either because the child dies at a young age or because one couldn't be conceived in the first place. Dorothy had a child who died before *Mrs. Caliban* opens, and Millie becomes pregnant late in *Binstead's Safari*, but is killed (or spirited away) before giving birth, and the book ends. This is not to say that nowhere in Ingalls' entire oeuvre does she completely omit the children of her women characters, but it is telling that she explicitly makes this choice in the two novels that deal with interspecies romance. Neither woman fulfills her expected duty to the future but each is, as a result, free to pursue other passions, to care for the Other and herself. Her thwarted attempts at motherhood bring with them grief and longing, but they also allow the women in these novels to fashion alternative futures not premised on false promises of safety within a Western structure of family life. The women in Ingalls's fiction reclaim their sexuality by returning to a pre-Enlightenment view of their place within the natural world.

The walls of the home literally demarcate the limits of ownership, uniting the image of the nuclear family with the aspiration of private property, and also enact certain boundaries around how a woman is allowed to move through the world in order to maintain access to the protections the enclosed space claims to provide. The women in these texts have tried, to varying degrees of success, to fit within these pre-drawn roles: they have either had children or have attempted to, they say nothing of their spouses' infidelities, and they cook and clean all while taking no wage for themselves. Silvia Federici has written extensively about the ways in which the family "institutionalizes [women's] unwaged labor," which she argues has led to women's

"wageless dependence on men and, consequently, the institutionalization of an unequal division of power that has disciplined us as well as men" (29). She describes the erasure of women's domestic work not only on the basis that such work does not earn a wage, but also because this work has been excluded from official economic narratives, like the national GDP for example. These contributions, then, seem to become almost spectral: they materially shape the domestic conditions around them, but they are unacknowledged, unattributed, as though some immaterial being were responsible for their seemingly autochthonous effects. When Mark Fisher says that capital is fundamentally an eerie entity, "conjured out of nothing," who better to understand this than the housewife, who labors under (and in support of) the sign of capital with no tangible compensation for such work? Further, as Federici has pointed out, the devaluation of domestic labor under capitalism is historically linked to the development of a hierarchy between humans and animals, "amounting to a cultural revolution if we consider that before the advent of capitalism a continuity was assumed between the animal and human worlds, animals often being deemed responsible beings who were even endowed with the capacity to speak" (Federici, Witches, Witch-Hunting, & Women, 22). Ingalls counters this by returning to the body and its attendant pains and pleasures in an attempt to re-enchant the material world for her heroes, rather than insulate and alienate them from it. In her novels, animals can once again act and effect change, can speak, can have meaningful partnerships with humans.

Words like "domestic" or "housewife" have often had pejorative undertones, particularly when examining fiction written by women, fiction that happens to depict things like relationships between spouses, motherhood, or everyday household activities. But by bringing domesticity and the housewife to the forefront, it becomes clear that domestic space and the prescribed gender roles delimited within are inherently strange. The fear of the unknown or the abnormal, in weird tales, often relies on the instability of boundaries, with the revelation that what was once thought

to be unbreachable is, in fact, inescapably permeable. In tales of the domestic weird, the moment of horror comes when we realize the monstrous is already inside. In *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari*, Ingalls inverts threats to both the home and the heteropatriarchal relationship between housewife and husband. The discursive figure of the housewife (and her counterpart, the spinster) is at the center of domestic weird fictions. The housewife often starts out in these texts as a caricature of compliant efficiency, laboring within the artificial environment of the "nice safe home." She smilingly performs her duties of drudgery as she absorbs abuses from an at best apathetic spouse. But when confronted with the unknown or unknowable within the confines of her "nice safe home," there is a break in the narrative where that tightly controlled persona and the boundaries of the environment itself start to break down. Ingalls inverts the horrors of estrangement, revealing the eeriness of what Susan Sontag has called "unremitting banality." Domestic space—despite being framed in Cold War era popular discourse as a refuge against the nonhuman, the encroaching otherness of "unnatural" sexual identities and forms—becomes for Ingalls a space where violent estrangement occurs when we attempt to *deny* entry to the strange and uncanny. That which terrifies the protagonists of the domestic weird because of its elusiveness, its unrepresentability, is not "the monster"—instead, the stomach-churning eerie entity is revealed to be the mandate of heteropatriarchal homemaking.

Often, books considered women's fiction are supposed to have some sort of moral or lesson attached to them. Nina Baym's blueprint for the heroine of a domestic novel requires a depiction of the young woman who "is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world," who when we first meet her "has no ego, or a damaged one," and who undergoes a significant transformation throughout the novel such that "the change in herself has changed the world's attitude toward her, so much that what was formerly denied her now comes

unsought" (19). Despite their resourcefulness, the women in nineteenth-century domestic fictions maintain their virtuousness—in other words, they typically never reach beyond the limits imposed on them by heteropatriarchal expectations. The counterparts to such narratives depicting the triumph of virtue are ones that instead presented the consequences awaiting women who dared to step outside the bounds of their conventional marriages. Both novels I discuss in this chapter, *Mrs. Caliban* and *Binstead's Safari*, offer a third option for what can happen to a woman who decides to throw "virtue" to the wind and engage in a nonhuman affair. In both novels, we begin with women who have already secured the social supports that are supposed to keep them safe and secure. Dorothy and Millie Binstead have both completed the task of finding a husband and moving into a home that is virtually theirs to run as they wish. In contrast with the protagonists in Baym's assessment of nineteenth century domestic novels, we are meeting Dorothy and Millie after they have already completed the domestic heroine's journey and have secured the stability and safety that the women of nineteenth century domestic fiction must work so hard to secure for themselves. And yet these conditions of domesticity have made Ingalls's protagonists positively miserable. Husbands, in Ingalls's worlds, are pretty monstrous characters, and marriage is depicted as disastrous to a woman's desire for self-determination. These men are neglectful, dismissive, and condescending. Dorothy's and Millie's marriages to a pair of such scoundrels prove to be fundamentally destructive to their self-confidence and inherent passion for life. Like Baym's nineteenth-century heroines, they begin with "no ego, or a damaged one," but it is not through the pursuit of marriage that they regain themselves--it is through the pursuit of their own independence and pleasures. Though they are not forced to "make [their] own way in the world" financially, they have been virtually abandoned by their spouses and feel deeply, crushingly alone. Over the course of both narratives, Dorothy and Millie Binstead undergo the requisite transformation of the domestic novel, but they certainly do not reestablish a status quo

of housewifely bliss, but nor do they end up quite like Emma Bovary or Edna Pontellier. Ingalls takes the tropes of women's fiction (virtuousness, motherhood, and general selflessness in providing emotional and material support to spouses and children) and inverts them. Again Ingalls swerves away from this and refuses to provide any easy answers or template for behavior. She holds up the housewife and her plight and redefines the parameters of women's fiction almost as if to say, if these novels are labeled "women's fiction," then the lesson is for women to pursue extramarital, transspecies. She entices the reader to imagine the dissolution of the nuclear family not only by rupturing its social bonds, but even, perhaps, its genetic ones.

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CONCLUSION

Narratives of weird domesticity in the post-1945 era problematize the distinction between *unheimlich* and *heimlich*. Domesticity is often taken as an antonym for wildness or ferality; for that which exists outside the control of the human. Domesticity, though, can also provide the grounds for making it possible to forge alternative kinship structures—ones that can and must include nonhuman others. Stacy Alaimo notes in this vein that while "domestic" shares a prefix with words like dominion and dominate, there are several other valences that can also mean "to live familiarly or at home (with)" (19). Narratives of weird domesticity imagine possibilities for living familiarly within alternative kinship structures that can and must include nonhuman others. The women in narratives of weird domesticity move within a sexually conservative, heterosexist and patriarchal framework of family life in the post-1945 era. As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson write in *Queer Ecologies*, "It is clearly not the case that all sex leads to reproduction, for humans and other animals alike, yet the presence of nonreproductive sexual activities is frequently read as a sign of ecological decline" (11). Within this framework, the women in narratives of weird domesticity are tasked with maintaining the family home as a bulwark against the allegedly threatening, but instead pursue their latent desires for modes of intimacy—with the self, with human and nonhuman others—that the heteropatriarchal social order has attempted to foreclose. The farce of the enclosed or contained family home is juxtaposed with the more meaningful material interchanges that allow the women in these novels to create and connect, rather than merely reproduce, thus redefining the possibilities for sex and intimacy.

There is a clear gap between the old weird and new weird that scholars have readily accepted and codified as an indelible part of the mode's lore. This project explores a tradition of un- and underexplored weird fiction by women. An attention to weird domesticity suggests that

weird fiction did not fade, as many scholars have argued, during the years between Lovecraft and Ligotti. Rather, I have shown that the mode flourished during the post-45 period with a number of women writers exploring and inverting the terrors of transcorporeal contact with the morethan-human, revealing instead the violence of heteropatriarchal conformity in domestic spaces. Identifying texts that exemplify the aims of weird domesticity will open up avenues for more texts in this era to be discussed. Considerations of the weird have not been attentive enough to gender, and have been even more resistant to examine the intersection of the weird and the domestic. It should be unsurprising, then, that we are only just beginning to properly assess the ways in which women authors have been perceived as contributing valuable insights into these modes of thought. If what has historically "counted" as weird in old weird tales has been defined by an awe in the face of unspeakable excesses and indeterminate commingling of species and forms, we might also say that the weird is fundamentally queer. Weird domesticity reaffirms, sometimes ambivalently, the possibilities of connecting with the more-than-human and forging such queer kinship structures.

The narrator in a weird tale will often use apophasis as a rhetorical technique for attempting to say *something* about the indescribable, to represent the unrepresentable, even when nothing can be said. When Lovecraft argues that a truly weird tale must deal with "unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces," he surely was not thinking such forces could take root in a housewife's "nice, safe" kitchen or the marital bedroom. It is this idea of "outer" forces that post1945 narratives of weird domesticity aim to problematize; outer and inner worlds become inverted or diffracted through one another. In these narratives, the claustrophobic is barely distinguishable from the unimaginably vast. Indeed, there is a desire among the women in narratives of weird domesticity to permit the "outer, unknown forces" entry in order to counteract the dread they feel when their own identities and means of relating to the world around them are

curtailed by the sanitized heteropatriarchal norms for right behavior. Through relationships with the material world and the more-than-human, protagonists of weird domesticity are subject to unrepresentable, unnamable bodily transformations and relations that preclude them from being contained within the boundaries of domestic enclosure.

The heteropatriarchal rules for enclosure disallow many forms of relationality from taking place within domestic space. The form of relationality such enclosure authorizes is linear, one-directional, and hierarchical, and relies upon kinship structures that devalue and instrumentalize feminized bodies and the more-than-human in order to maximize reproductive output under the sign of capital. Not only do so-called housewives literally reproduce and raise future laborers to sustain the workforce, they maintain order in the domestic sphere that makes it possible for their spouses to work outside of the home. Such busy work leaves little room for unproductive, excessive, or disruptive sexualities and intimacies. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, alludes to the eeriness and dis-ease that result from foreclosing, in domestic space, possibilities for more capacious relations with and among the self and the other. In calling this "blight" of widespread domestic disillusionment "the problem with no name," Friedan suggests that it had become so insidiously embedded in the fabric of the everyday, it was almost indetectable. One woman she interviewed described the feeling as an "emptiness," another as feeling like she doesn't "exist" (20). Another said that sometimes, she would be so overcome that she would either "run out of the house and walk through the streets," or "stay inside her house and cry" (21). This image of the housewife—the woman who has no identity of her own outside of being a wife or mother—had led to a widespread psychological epidemic that, Friedan writes, "lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women" (57). The idea of an old, nameless force, buried for years, emerging only to elicit feelings of emptiness and

selferasure sounds an awful lot like the premise of a good weird tale, though not one that has previously been articulated in weird studies.

Domestic enclosure and its hostility toward nonreproductive modes of relationality has long been a focus of horror media. Jill Anderson has written about the specter of the nuclear threat (and the commercialization of that threat) and representations of domestic horror in atomic age media and locates the domestic as a site of the uncanny because of this inherent tension between "compulsive normativity" and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Building on the work of Elaine Tyler May, Anderson writes that "Domestic containment was the answer to security in the postwar period, and the American way of life was distinctly capitalist in nature, bolstered by the policies that reaffirmed the centrality of the home marked by a suburban, white nuclear family and seemingly attainable affluence" (53). She goes on to analyze domestic horror stories from across a variety of media, arguing that domestic horror is fundamentally about the tension produced by the existential threat of nuclear annihilation on the one hand, and homemaking on the other. Weird domesticity is aware of this tension as Anderson describes it, but is more interested in the intimacy and relationality that can be forged despite it.

Weird domesticity, though it hasn't been named as such, has been a preoccupation of publishers seeking to "recover" novels written by women in the second half of the 20th centurt. Over the past two decades, a number of publishers, particularly independent publishers, have recovered works of weird domesticity from a global cadre of post-45 women writers, and the proliferation of these reissues is notable. This reinvigorated interest in such texts invites a critical reappraisal of these works, many of them originally published in a post-45 era, that share key thematic and formal preoccupations: a unique combination of domestic themes told in a weird fiction mode. American publishers like New York Review Books; New Directions; and Dorothy, a publishing project have been reissuing a striking number of works by women writers of the

post-45 era that share a central preoccupation with the relationship between domesticity and gender using narrative styles that uniquely blend realism with the weird, and even sometimes with levity and humor.[34] Besides Comyns's *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, Dorothy Project published a collection of short fiction by the feminist surrealist Leonora Carrington. *The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington* includes tales of human-animal transformations and strange encounters between human and more-than-human worlds. New Directions has become an extremely prolific publisher of contemporary and classic titles, including formerly out-of-print titles or works that were previously only available from foreign publishers, like the two Ingalls novels I discuss in chapter 3. New York Review Books, in addition to releasing a new edition of Comyns' *The Vet's Daughter* in 2003, has since published new editions of her other novels, *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* in 2015 and *The Juniper Tree* in 2018.

In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher distinguishes between the weird and the eerie by arguing that the eerie is evoked when there is "something there when there should be nothing," whereas the weird is evoked when something is there which does not belong, or the "conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together" (10). Fisher's subtle parsing of the weird from the eerie is overly granular for my purposes in this project, but my approach to the weird aligns with his view that the weird and the eerie are affective registers and artistic modes of expression that rely on a mixture of fascination and repulsion, rather than merely horror or terror. He asserts that "[a] sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces…we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human" (11). Later, Fisher argues that capital itself is an "eerie entity" because of its ability to act in the absence of

[34] Comyns and Ingalls, for example, juxtapose gruesome images of self-harm, dismemberment, and otherwise mangled bodies with others that might be found in a whimsical children's book: ducks are delighted to find themselves swimming in the drawing room, a gargantuan frog wears a wig and sunglasses.

an identifiable agent: “conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity” (11). Who better to critique the eeriness of capital than one whose existence is devoted to performing unwaged domestic labor? Silvia Federici has argued that “the circuit of capitalist production, and the ‘social factory’ it produced, began and was centered above all in the kitchen, the bedroom, the home” (3). Federici’s writing and work in the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s argues that housework has long been exploited as unwaged labor despite the indispensability of this work to maintaining a capitalist economic and social order.

There are a number of authors whose work would take on new meaning in the context of weird domesticity. These include authors who wrote in English, like Daphne du Maurier and Anna Kavan, and others whose work has been translated into English. Du Maurier is perhaps best known for her Gothic masterpiece, *Rebecca* (1938), but her later fiction, particularly the stories collected in *Don’t Look Now* (1979), explored stranger subject matter probing the relationship between gender and the mysticality of the material world. The lesser-known Kavan wrote bleak but powerful fiction that deals with depression, isolation, bureaucratic entrapments, and ecological upheavals. Future criticism in the vein of weird domesticity should also consider work that been translated into English from other languages and should explore what weird domesticity looks like from different global perspectives. Argentina, for example, has produced several women writers working in weird modes, particularly Norah Lange and Silvina Ocampo. Scholars of the weird are often interested in Jorge Luis Borges, but few have looked at the work of Lange or Ocampo. Lange and Ocampo both reimagined what kinds of stories can be told by and about women, and in their hands the domestic spaces women were often confined to become alienated, uncanny, abject. Future work exploring weird domesticity as a narrative mode must also consider the work of feminist surrealist Leonora Carrington, particularly her short fiction

and her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974). Carrington's esotericism is well documented in her visual art, but less has been written about her fiction. In Carrington's fiction as well as in her paintings, the figure of the human is never simply a self-contained system of flesh and blood; the human, in her often whimsical and sometimes horrifying imaginaries, is part of a larger ecological entanglement alongside nonhuman animals and forces who are figured in her work as equally, if not more, capable of exercising agency.

Bodily transgression is at the heart of weird domesticity because it allows feminized subjects to disavow the reproductive mandate of heteropatriarchy, forge alternative kinship structures, or be destroyed in the process. Narratives of weird domesticity respond to the prevailing view in weird fiction studies that the weird era's evolving understanding of the relationship between intimacy and the material world. In particular, a shift in intimacy away from the austere, repressive sexuality of mainstream heteropatriachal culture in the postwar era was directly linked to a sanitization of materiality. This project examines the ways in which weird domesticity narrativizes intimate ecological relationships that manage to survive despite the enclosure of the feminized body in post-45 domestic space. Thus, I have drawn from material feminisms and have examined the ways in which these texts frame agency and complicity as being shared across bodies and forms, only some of which are human. The women in weird domesticity welcome all manner of bodily transformations as they seek to assert autonomy over how they choose to interface with the material world. Blurring the boundary between matter and spirit, the real and the unreal, is one way of escaping this enclosure. Narratives of weird domesticity teem with nonhuman actants who become entangled with the allegedly enclosed worlds of the heteropatriarchal kinship structure. The human becomes entangled with the more-than-human, and the environment thus emerges not as an inert backdrop, but as an active collaborator in forging new and ever fluctuating conceptions of the self. Narratives of weird

domesticity also destabilize what might appear as "real." Protagonists in these novels are often questioning their own existence, or their own positioning in space and time. Comyns's Alice Rowlands wonders whether her ability to levitate is real or whether she dreamed it; Jackson's Natalie Waite conjures entire other worlds and relations to inhabit; Ingalls's Dorothy considers the possibility that the weird voices on her radio are figments of her imagination. By moving through disbelief and into acceptance of the materially or rationally impossible, these protagonists entangle themselves with the material world in mystifying ways and attempt to eschew the limitations that heteropatriarchy places on their ability to create unbounded selves.

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