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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Postmodern Family Gothic: Bodies of Narrative

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Elizabeth Ashley Gumm

June 2017

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Katherine Kinney, Chairperson

Dr. Jennifer Doyle

Dr. Emma Stapely

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The Dissertation of Elizabeth Ashley Gumm is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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## **Dedication**

For the late Katherine Dunn whose writing brought me healing

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Postmodern Family Gothic: Bodies of Narrative

by

Elizabeth Ashley Gumm

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English

University of California, Riverside, June 2017

Dr. Katherine Kinney, Chairperson

“The Postmodern Family Gothic: Bodies of Narrative” analyzes postmodern novels that use feminist-gothic narrative strategies to disrupt ideologies of family. Within the context of late twentieth and early twenty-first century laments over the “broken” family, I argue that ideological manifestations of family security, the home and financial stability in particular, actually damage family health from the inside out. Novels such as Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Jeffery Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* all demonstrate how family dysfunction is temporal, specifically because in attempting to conform to the ideal Family, who lives in a house and is economically stable, families disavow past trauma, which only comes to haunt the structures of security. Using the sociological and historical work of authors such as Judith Stacey and Susan Faludi, I argue that the popular conception of the “ideal” family is always founded on some rejection of trauma that continues

to haunt families through bodily traces, as seen in novels such as Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*. Healing from trauma requires a disruption, not to family, but rather to the narrative structures that promise freedom from past pain. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* present healing from past family trauma as a commitment to flexible storytelling, metaphorized in the family road trip and performed in family spiritual ritual. Gothic tropes such as haunting, monstrosity, and the grotesque are used to manifest the significance of the past and become less traumatizing as the family narrative shifts from linear to constellatory. The disruption to family narrative also makes for an uncanny reading experience as the forms of the novels unsettle linearity and exposition, ultimately incorporating the reader into the literary drama. In drawing together cultural histories of objects, like the car and the home, economic theories of family, and feminist critiques of readership and the body, I challenge the typical focus on postmodern literature's emphasis on the individual and abstraction.



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## **Introduction: Family Portraits**

*White Noise*: Jack Gladney and his third wife, Babette, marvel at the strangeness of the children that they have accumulated through previous marriages. Babette says to Jack one night in bed “Isn’t it great having all these kids around?” (80).

The couple rests easily, if somewhat uncomfortably with one another in a bed covered with “magazines, curtain rods, a child’s sooty sock” (27). Jack relishes in the pleasures of the slight discomfort he experiences in the presence of each of his children, both biological and step, whom he never fully understands. Indeed, when the youngest, Wilder, begins to cry incessantly for an unknown reason, Jack considers how “it was a sound so large and pure...He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony” (78). Wilder, and all the children, contain some unstated wisdom for Jack that is inexpressible, but “if [he] could join him in his lost and suspended place [they] might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility” (78). Something wondrous has developed in the fragmentation of the family that assembles members without clear origin or hierarchy. Husband and father may be an outsider, now, but such an experience isn’t so awful.

*The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: Lola begs her little, but enormously fat brother, Oscar, to bring her money. Lola fantasizes that when they meet up,

she'll convince him to run away with her, run away from their angry, abusive, dying mother. When Oscar shows up to the coffee shop to greet Lola, they "embraced for like an hour" (69). But Oscar has told his mother about Lola and their mother "was holding on to [Lola] like [she] was her last nickel, and underneath her red wig her green eyes were *furious*...when [their mother] pulled back her hand to smack [Lola, Lola] broke free. [She] ran for it" (69). Footnotes that accompany the family story show how the pain of Dominican history shapes the family violence, the desire – but inevitable failure – to flee, and Oscar's increasingly heavy body: "I mean, shit, what Latino family doesn't think it's cursed?" (32). Cultural and national history are embodied in the family, reflecting family's always-politicized structure. One can never escape from family.

### **The Postmodern Family**

The above portraits depict the different faces of the postmodern family: that which has been sutured together by blood and paperwork and that which has been fragmented by traumatic history. The postmodern family has been the source of conflict in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries because its defining characteristic, discomfort, resists the idealized image of family. Jack doesn't quite know how to place himself in his own family; Oscar and Lola's mother inspires fear, hatred, and love, all at once. However, this discomfort isn't quite traumatic

enough to predict the “death of family.” The typical qualities associated with, and desired, for family – love, support, trust – still apply; they have not been made completely obsolete, even as the structure and boundaries of family change and fragment.

Cultural conflicts over family and its role in larger society took on particular significance in the period after WWII. As Elaine Tyler May points out in her history of American families during the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war drove the U.S. to prize the family as its most precious asset. Judith Stacey’s famous sociological study of families in Silicon Valley during the 1980’s and 1990’s argues that the “family values” rhetoric of the time actually worked (and continues to work) against the health of the postmodern family. And Susan Faludi documents a history of family narratives being mobilized against women and people of color in the final decades of the twentieth century. What do texts such as these, along with popular literature and media, illustrate? The cultural conflicts over the changing realities of family and beliefs about its place in national identity and policies have manifested in four themes: Home, Faith, Business, and the Road.

Home and faith became the main battlefields over the efforts to protect the family, belying their role in determining the worth of the family in the first place. Business, especially as a part of a successful national (male) identity in the prosperous post-war period, offered greater social cause to maintain traditional

(gendered) boundaries of family. The road, as much as it might have illustrated the distance between the dangerous urban city and the safe family suburb, does provide an alternative narrative to family unity in its representation of an escape from the socially determined qualities of a valuable life. But even with the resistant narrative of the road, all these post-war themes have positioned the patriarch at the center of the family; thus, as the reactionary period of the 1980's sought to further instantiate the patriarch as the organizing principle of family (and society), feminism, in its moves to provide supportive social structures for women, was lambasted as explicitly anti-family.

Such associations of feminism with "anti-family" agendas have not really been undone with the arrival of early twenty-first century post-feminist and "new feminist" politics. Post-feminism re-appropriates what was critiqued under second wave feminism (sexual objectification, for example) as now empowering. "New feminism" seeks to create space for anti-abortion feminists. The legacy of feminism is such that it must be "repackaged" to gain popularity. Such "repackaging" maintains the distance between feminism and family in the popular imagination as both post-feminism and "new feminism" merely reincorporate patriarchal definitions of gender roles. And despite postmodernism's disruption to the master narratives that continue to slow the progress of feminist causes, it would not be inappropriate to describe the relationship between postmodernism and feminism as a family feud.

Both postmodernism and feminism, in their philosophic and critical perspectives, look to the world with suspicion, especially regarding its dictates about subjectivity and value. In this way, postmodernism and feminism are family. But within this family, there is a feud over temporality and the body: disagreements about the consequences for disrupting linear time; disagreements over the ethics of relegating the past and present to the text; disagreements about the relationship between history and the body. If postmodernism is the genius brother who “no one seems to understand” and so he “doesn’t give a fuck,” then feminism is his older sister who challenges his careless attitude with the reality that his “genius” didn’t come from nowhere—it was nurtured and perhaps sacrificed for, demanding his ethical responsibility for his genius. Such feminist calls for ethical responsibility to the past and the embodied realities of socially constructed privilege and power did not occur in the wake of postmodern narrative play, but were coterminous with it. With a genius all her own, feminism has always been a ghostly presence buried under postmodern performance, or a monstrous figure within postmodern appropriation. In particular, feminism resituates postmodern “origins” not with cultural disruptions of individual identity, but with the unsure shape of the family, highlighting postmodernism’s indebtedness to the Gothic. Typical focus in postmodern literary criticism misses an entire lineage of narrative play, subject fragmentation, and historical disruption inherited from gothic tales of the

inevitable vulnerability of people to each other. The lineage of the postmodern family gothic examined here looks at the development of community among fragmented subjects. This strain of postmodern literature begins, not with John Barth or Kurt Vonnegut, but with Shirley Jackson.

### **Shirley Jackson and the Postmodern**

Jackson's body of work anticipates the familial tension between postmodernism and feminism. While Zoë Heller argues that "Jackson's work is less an anticipation of second-wave feminism than a conversation with her female forebears in the gothic tradition" (par. 17), Jackson's contributions to twentieth century feminist discussions are indisputable. In particular, Jackson's work speaks to the particular challenge women face as they negotiate the pain of gender expectations and the fears (and real dangers) of resisting those expectations, both externally and internally created. This tension between "inside" and "outside" of a woman alongside the collapse of the "inside" and "outside" of society makes Jackson's themes ideal for the Gothic, but also prime for what Darryl Hattenhauer identifies as a form of "proto-postmodernism." As he explains, "for postmodernists form *is* theme" (2) and Jackson's work in its genre-bending/collapsing structures and intertextuality "[anticipate] the postmodern self-consciousness of form..." (4-5). But such challenges to realist form are not without politics, as would become one of the primary critiques of

postmodernism proper. Her work, as this project will show, anticipated many of the ways that the genius of postmodern fiction would need to be reminded of the ethical use of the disruption to master narratives.

Specifically, Jackson's "rehabilitated and parodied Gothic...elements" (Hattenhauer 10) centralize the family in experiences of identity fragmentation. Such centralizing of the family narrates a necessity for community largely absent or merely bemoaned as lost in the high postmodern literature that would follow Jackson's time. Her uncanny stories of familial memory or memories of family explore post-war themes of home, faith, business, and the road from a temporal perspective that resists postmodernist treatments of the past. Postmodern fiction "ventures to reintroduce history by recognizing its availability to fictional devices" (Salzman qtd in Hattenhauer 4), but as seen in Jackson's politics of the family, such availability to fictional devices does not negate nor revise hierarchies of power and their embodied effects. For Jackson, the gothic is expressedly feminist. Through dark and terrifying stories of family that are also incredibly witty and absurd, Jackson is the starting place for a second trunk of postmodern literature that is the Postmodern Family Gothic.



## **The Postmodern Family Gothic**

In her analysis of Gothic-Postmodernism, Maria Beville defines her subject as explicitly distinct from “postmodern-gothic” because of how the words work differently as adjectives and nouns. She states “Decisively, Gothic is used here as the adjective of the term denoting that what is under investigation is the postmodern text that is characteristically Gothic” (10); in the postmodern-gothic, gothic subjects, like ghosts, vampires, etc., have been subject to postmodernization – commercialization or absurdity, for example. In this respect, my project does explore the postmodernization of gothic texts, but my integration of “family” as both noun and adjective draws attention to the inability for any genre, much less postmodernism, to be fully distinct from its literary history. Much of Beville’s own analysis argues for postmodern literature’s natural inheritance from gothic literature, primarily in the use of terror, which she claims is antithetical to the playful “candy gothic” produced by postmodern forms. But in positing “family” as both subject and descriptor, I aim to join both the terrifying and playful elements of both postmodernism and the gothic together. Family, as family is bound to do, creates ambivalence. But this ambivalence is important in its ability to resist both the amoral playfulness of postmodernism and the oppressive terror of the gothic.

This ambivalence reaches beyond the page as the postmodern family gothic novel incorporates the reader, much like traditional postmodern texts.

However, in making the reader complicit with both play and terror, these novels disrupt the isolation deemed necessary and the alienation thought consequential to the typical novel reader. In the family narrative, these novels produce an eerie sense of responsibility for family within the reader. This responsibility generally comes with the lack of closure indicative of these novels. Stories exist within and beyond the reader, making philosophies of reading and narrative integral to experiences of family.

Ultimately, these novels work through the popular post-war themes in their work as structures to meaning, rather than meanings in themselves.

“Home” does not signify as much as it conditions the possibility for certain meanings of family, gender, and the body, to arise. Jackson’s work initiates a critique that would be taken up by her progeny of feminist postmodern writers as they tried to imagine a new temporality that could respect the reality of the embodied past, while not letting such history become overly determinant.

### **Post-War Domestic Battlegrounds**

In chapter 1, “Homebodies,” I argue that the postmodern family gothic novel clarifies that outside “threats” to the family are markers of social difference and that the home is primarily a space of exclusion rather than a space of safety. Representations of the family are almost always linked to the space of the home. This domestic space is invested with a belief that it is the privileged site of refuge

and protection, keeping the family safe from the terrifying threats of the outside world. In other words, the home is the site of the future that a family fantasizes for itself.

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* all explore the tension and anxiety surrounding the boundary of the home with the introduction of a past family trauma. In response, and aligning themselves with the future-orientation of the home, these families respond to trauma by closing off the home and become "homebodies." But in the wake of enclosing themselves, the family rejects the past, rather than tries to heal – as is the purported justification for such a closing off. Yet the boundary of the home that "protects" the family slowly dissolves and the "home," in its symbolism of the ideal, happy, nuclear family literally takes over the bodies of family members. The past trauma that the family tried so carefully to escape comes back to haunt them, but only the reader is able to see this irony. Even in the experience of being haunted, families respond by merging more and more with the home and its ideals.

In chapter 2, "The Family Business," I look to another foundational theme meant to organize the public and private spheres of post-war and postmodern eras: business. While the concerns over family financial security seem to suggest the future or the present, I argue that the postmodern family gothic novel

demonstrates how the struggle over family economy and domestic labor are far more wrapped up in the past. Business, in its post-war evocations of “golden age,” ideal masculinity, developed as an especially fraught site over the *work* of the family. The backlash against feminism in the 1980s predominantly revolved around female labor and its proper place, a conflict chronically confronted in the homes of families that operate as both domestic and professional spaces. Shirley Jackson’s *Hangsaman*, Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*, and Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* all unveil the family business, in its post-war glorification of masculine production and female subservience, as dependent on a fantasy past of the gothic monster of the postmodern family, the super-patriarch. The fantasy past, on which a super-patriarch stakes his identity and his financial security (often considered the same), is dependent on the exploitation of female, or feminized, family members. Through representations of disability, incest, and food, these novels dramatize the precarity of masculinity as that which fuels the conflict over domestic labor and the ultimate exploitation of female bodies.

In chapter 3, “The Family Trip,” as families take to the road, their consistent movement through space alters their relationship to the past and the future, making the present a chaotic experience. But as the postmodern family moves further out of the home, temporality and family memory begin to change. Rather than be terrorized by the monstrous paternal figure in his desire to live by

a fantasy past, families go through an adoption of a monstrous maternal figure who disrupts the linear structure of the family. This chaotic experience is both seductive and frightening as the institution of family is broken down and reassembled as a constellation rather than a chronology. In this way, the writing of (the documentation of) the family is also altered. Discomfort, an experience based both on space and time, becomes the new means by which to promote family intimacy. I argue that discomfort is necessary in resisting the narratives of family security that inevitably lead to female oppression. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* all illustrate the need for family travel in the process of healing from trauma. Traveling works against static memories that enable fantasy futures and fantasy pasts. The maternal monster, particularly as she challenges ideals of maternity, encourages a collective meaning-making process that is constantly written and re-written.

In chapter 4, "Family Faith," I argue that narratives of the family apocalypse present ambivalent ends in order to reorganize the disrupted linearity of the family, and the novel. Since nearly all religious and spiritual traditions with Judeo-Christianity gain their meaning and importance explicitly from The End, how is meaning created without such a reality? Such reorganization and diminishing of the finality of "the end" creates a temporality of witnessing in which stories of the past are consistently read and reread into

the future. Stories about “end times” convey images of ultimate destruction, but within the postmodern family gothic, “the end” is only another beginning.

Shirley Jackson’s *The Sundial*, Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*, Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* examine the shift in family temporality from the linear beginning-middle-end to the dynamic storytelling ritual in which all ends can become beginnings and all beginnings can become ends. I argue that *storytelling* as a spiritual ritual, rather than the story as sacred object, allows for changes in form. Such changes maintain the sacredness of family without the blindness of a singular meaning.

## Chapter 1: Homebodies

*Marry him I don't think I will – unless he becomes steadier and more of a homebody.*  
~James Fennimore Cooper, *The Spy*, 1821

*There's no place like home.*  
*There's no place like home.*  
*There's no place like home.*  
~Dorothy, *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939

Homebody is a spooky term. While it identifies someone who prefers to stay home rather than go out and socialize, such an understanding misses the uncanny nature of the word and the ideology contained therein. As a single word, the concepts of “home” and “body” merge, pointing to the strange way that home could be said to incorporate the body, but also the way in which the body itself might be conceived of as a home. This lack of distinction in which the boundaries between “home” and “body” are blurred haunts the identification of a person who “prefers to stay home,” casting suspicion on the agency behind such a preference. In particular, the ideology of home, in its protective function, seems to take over the body, which has significant consequences for families. There may be “no place like home” but only because everything outside of it is imagined as universally and equally threatening, despite how those threats might manifest; confusion and irritation are deemed just as threatening as fear and terror. With this conception of home, which dominates twentieth century domestic literature, families allow themselves to become a physical part of their domestic spaces. This chapter looks at a group of novels that illustrate how

families' identification with the boundary that protects them from outside threats actually blinds them to threats inherent in the home and the family themselves.

The homebody-family cannot recognize the inherent trauma of the home because they are future-oriented. They close off the world in service of the longevity of the family, manifest in stable parent-child relationships. The paradigm that Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* articulate follows the aftermath of a trauma that specifically disrupts the idealization of parent-child relationships. In response to such disruption, families shut themselves into the home for the purpose of healing from this trauma. However, this healing is always motivated by a desire to make the family ideal, particularly as parents imagine a fantasy future for their children, understood as an extension of themselves. But such an ideal of self-sustaining relationships between parents and children necessitates compartmentalizing, if not outright forgetting, of both familial and social trauma, which causes more damage to family integrity than the initial tragedy. Families actually create the grounds for trauma to become overly determinate. Families become imprisoned by the past because of their desperate belief that trauma always and only originates from outside the home, outside the family.

The anxiety over a home's boundary between inside and outside comes from a long tradition in the Gothic. Edgar Allan Poe's work best exemplifies this



fascination as sisters are buried within castle walls, old men are buried under floorboards, and friends are immured. The postmodern family gothic incorporates the traditional Gothic's fascination with dissolving boundaries between physical bodies and building structures as it turns walls, floors, doors, and ceilings into terrifying sites of confrontation with trauma. In this way, the concept of "homebody" points to the complex and vexed relationship between family body and home structure. The difficulty of this relationship between family and home manifests in a temporal rift as the postmodern family looks to the home as a space to preserve the future and an escape from past trauma; but, as Gothic critic Eric Savoy notes, homes are "structures whose solid actuality dissolves as they accommodate (and bring to spectacular figure) a psychic imperative – the impossibility of forgetting" (9). The home is less an edifice *between* the family and their past, and more an edifice *of* all that the family would like to forget. Trauma becomes a part of the protective structure. Yet families, parents in particular, continue to retreat to the home in response to danger and pain, disregarding what are very weak boundaries, indeed.

Following in the steps of the feminist gothic, the postmodern family gothic resituates social identity at the center of narrative terror as spaces of safety – home and family – are shown to be constructions that develop out of social systems of patriarchal power (like sexism and racism), not constructions that exist autonomous from patriarchal power. The uncanny presence of social

identity, which is not supposed to have a role within the home – literally the unhomely – slowly dissolves the boundaries between family and society and markers of social identity become “ghosts” whose haunting is actually necessary for familial healing. *Memoirs of a Survivor* shows how twentieth-century concepts of age and generation haunt choices that ironically inhibit survival; *The Virgin Suicides* illustrates the dangerous ignorance of sexism in family and social formation; and *Beloved* dramatizes the racial conflict inherent in the concept of “home.” Trauma becomes chronic for the families of these novels as they persistently discount family as socially constructed.

But while parents tend to deny the way they have enshrined their families in the past, as if the home’s “impossibility of forgetting” relieves the family of the responsibility of remembrance, children, especially daughters, resist the seduction of forgetting. Children, often unconsciously, recognize that the house is a space so heavily weighed down with cultural meaning, which endorses a refusal of the past in service of a fantasy future, that it cannot serve as the space within which families can legitimately heal from trauma. The home is an always already existing narrative that haunts sheltering structures and forces families to compartmentalize and forget traumatic memories, which return in the grotesque body. The slow pace of dissolution rather than outright destruction – manifested in the detritus that litters the pages of these novels – makes the extraction of family identity from the ideals of home a messy process, and often only the

reader is able to identify the specific ghosts the have taken up residence. The reader's awareness, though, often comes through an alignment with voiceless children and daughters whose bodies signal the treacherous territory of the home. Under the weight of this embodied knowing, daughters and children become dangerous. Through their embrace of death, children draw attention to the reality of the home as a grave dug by familial denial of personal and social trauma. But ultimately, the violence of the home can only incorporate the reader into the crisis of memory and forgetting, as parents remain committed to forgetting, even as such a practice fails to heal them.

### **A Man's Home is His Castle: Shirley Jackson's Case for Demolition**

The work of Shirley Jackson is well known for its contemporary vision of the haunted house. As Angela Hauge points out, "a house is rarely a home in Shirley Jackson's fiction. Born into a family of architects, she was fascinated by houses throughout her life, and they often function as places of entrapment and incarceration for the women who visit or live in them" (82). Jackson's popularity as a contemporary gothic author is based in her careful portraits of houses whose boundaries create terror because, as in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," they are too strong. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson's last novel, published in 1965, provides a map of the kind of transformation necessary of the home in order to more thoroughly dismantle the fantasy family. Although Hauge argues

that this novel “is an extended narrative about the inability of the home to protect its inhabitants against invasive destruction, both psychological and physical” (85), I argue that the physical destruction of the home that occurs by the end of the novel makes a case against “impenetrable” home boundaries. Jackson’s last novel finally destroys the unhealthy space of the home, which she had explored so intimately in her oeuvre.

Significantly, Jackson’s lack of clear and explicit origin of familial trauma in this novel repositions the home, in its representation of a particular kind of family, as the site and source of trauma rather than the family itself. The novel begins in the aftermath of great drama concerning the Blackwood family, who, with the exception of two sisters and an uncle, have all died from poisoned sugar during a family dinner. Constance, the older sister now 30, was acquitted of the murders six years prior to the novel’s beginning, and she, her younger sister Mary Katherine (“Merricat” is also the narrator), and their Uncle Julian (who is confined to a wheelchair) live a fairly routine, if isolated, life. Much of the chronological plot of *Castle* must be gleaned from the fragments of history presented (and represented) in the story, and critics such as Lynette Carpenter do great work reassembling dialog, Merricat’s unreliable narration, and Uncle Julian’s repetitious recitations of the day of the murders. Carpenter posits “The Blackwood family exploited its women if they were docile [like Constance] and dismissed them if they were not [like Merricat]” (33). However, while

reconstructing the specific “why” of the murders is a satisfying exploration, what is more important is how a home now run by two women still maintains the ideology of a patriarchal family structure. While the patriarch and his son have been murdered, and an uncle has been handicapped, the patriarchal structure of the family does not die too.

The house physically structures the family as a unit set apart from the surrounding community, and the home’s manifestations of financial wealth signal the ideal of the family that is completely self-sufficient. The house, much like a castle, resides on the outskirts of a small city, deep within a forest. Merricat’s mother had the father put up “No Trespassing” signs and lock down the gates on either side of the path that led in front of and to the Blackwood’s front door because, as Merricat tells the reader, “‘The highway’s built for common people,’ our mother said, ‘and my front door is private’” (18). That which exists outside the Blackwood home has been already designated as threatening to the family’s privacy, requiring not only a home, but also boundaries beyond the home. The integrity and legacy of the family is dependent on keeping “common people” as far away from the home as possible.

The self-sufficiency of the family represented in its physical isolation from those “on the outside” is further substantiated in the actual material of the home. Merricat explains that “the Blackwood’s were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring...we always had a solid foundation of stable

possessions...Blackwood's had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighing it, and keeping it steady against the world" (1). Merricat describes the family as "solid," "stable," and "steady," language that is used to describe healthy and ideal families, but here is shown not to come from the actual family but from the home structure. The house's ability to withstand "the world" and easily incorporate new members to the family ("new wives") comes from anchoring the possessions of female family members to the house, not necessarily to the patriarch. Thus, even if the oppression of the daughters—Constance in her exploited service; Merricat in her constant punishment—was enacted by parents, Jackson shows that the home provides the conditions for such oppression.

The symbolic weight of the home as the site of familial wealth and stability prevents Merricat and Constance from owning their trauma, forcing them to live for a fantasy future imagined by their parents. Even six years after the murder of their mother, Constance and Merricat continue to keep their mother's drawing room as she would have wanted it. Merricat explains, "Constance and I only used the room when Helen Clarke came for tea, but we kept it perfectly...We polished floors and mended tiny tears in the rose brocade on the sofas and chairs" (23). The girls still conduct domestic business according

to their mother's desires, efforts that keep the mother's familial image of grace and civility intact. This attention to a persistent image of the family as "stable," "solid," and "steady" through the maintenance of the house undermines the sisters' authority in their own home.

In having cared for the house so well, Constance and Merricat have kept traces of the family fantasy available, roles to be taken up, which seriously threatens Merricat's place in the home at all. Honor Wallace argues that despite the killing of the father and the disruption to the patriarchal family, Constance is still vulnerable to the marriage plot as the house materially manifests a patriarchal space that must be filled. The introduction of Cousin Charles, who tries to claim the family fortune, disrupts the routine of the sororal home in a way that highlights the sisters' continued participation in the family fantasy. As Charles begins to take over the father's room and possessions, Constance begins to take on her mother's dress. Charles also takes over Merricat's one job of shopping for food in the city, and since Merricat does not fulfill traditional female domestic duties like her sister, such as cooking, her place in the family slowly dissolves and she spends more and more time away from the house out in the forest. Her ability to be part of the family is dependent on her ability to contribute to the management of the home in line with her gender, a requirement not demanded of her disabled uncle. Thus, it is not enough to destroy the family

as a means to resist the oppressive structures of patriarchy; the home, which operates in service of the patriarchal family, must be destroyed as well.

How, then, should the home be destroyed? Merricat's escape to her family's abandoned summerhouse in response to Charles' desire to punish her gives her an idea of how to finally destroy the patriarchal structure of her family. Although "no one had ever liked the summerhouse very much" and "something had gotten into the wood and stone and paint when the summerhouse was built and made it bad" (94), the domestic space ruined by time and the elements gives Merricat inspiration as she easily reimagines her position within her family of origin. She imagines her family sitting around the table and her parents discussing how she "should have anything she wants" and "must never be punished" (95). Whereas Merricat's history in her family is that of an outcast and a disappointment, within the structure of the ruins of the summerhouse, she can reimagine herself as important and central to the family organization.

But Merricat does not wait for time and the elements to naturally destroy her family's castle, because by that time she may have been forced to disappear again from her family. Instead, Merricat uses "the master's tools" to destroy the house and reorganize the family. When she finally returns to the Blackwood home, her sister sends her to wash up for dinner. While she's away from the dining room, she goes into Charles' room sees his pipe still burning on the nightstand and knocks it into the trash can next to it, which is filled with papers.



While setting the fire to the house does eventually get rid of Charles, the fire also threatens the entire house and firemen are called in from the community. The firemen are followed by the community to the house where, once the fire has been put out, they begin to throw rocks and ultimately ransack the house. Merricat leads Constance away from the destruction, back to the summerhouse, to wait out the mob. In the ruins of the summerhouse, Merricat provides Constance with protection, reasserting her role as central to family integrity.

Upon their return to the destroyed and abandoned “castle,” Constance—ever the parent of the sisters—looks to Merricat for guidance and assurance. Looking at the destruction, Constance asks Merricat, “Where are we going to sleep? How are we going to know what time it is? What will we wear for clothes?” to which Merricat responds, “Why do we need to know what time it is?” (124). Merricat, now in a position equal to her sister, restructures the family as she rejects the concept of time, and therefore the future. This shift, which recreates the family as sororal, is only possible within the space of a ruined home: “Today the house ended above the kitchen doorway in a nightmare of black and twisted wood...Two of the chairs had been smashed, and the floor was horrible with broken dishes and glasses and broken boxes of food and paper torn from shelves...It seemed that all the wealth and hidden treasure of our house had been found out and torn and soiled (113-114). Jackson suggests that allowing for the threats of the community to assist in a destruction of the home “create the

conditions of possibility for the emergence of alternative orders and appropriations” (Desilvey and Edensor 474).

In particular, the ruins of the home represent a more permeable boundary between the ideal family and the outside community, against which the family has set itself. Even though the sisters vow to never return to the village for food, the village takes up the responsibility for feeding the sisters. While the Blackwood’s had always garnered contempt and ridicule from the village (especially after Constance was charged with her family’s murder), in the aftermath of the home’s destruction, village people begin to picnic in front of the house and regularly leave baskets of food for the sisters, in way of apology for the destruction. As John Parks says of the novel, “Perhaps this violence is somehow necessary; it has its role, its part to play...It did lead to a new order of love, though fragile and precarious...” (28). This new order of love also shapes the way the sisters reorder the inside of the house. They close off the drawing room and the dining room, symbols of the idealized family, and spend their time in the entry-way, the kitchen, the basement (with all the food preserves made by Blackwood women), and the garden – all fairly transient and more feminine spaces.

Jackson’s final novel envisions an ambivalent future for the restructured Blackwood family of sisters who have effectively refused the nuclear family, which was only possible with the destruction of the home. The resulting

queerness of the family made up of two women specifically rejects the ability to have children and thus to participate in the fantasy-future practices of inheritance. Rather, the sister's "stability," "solidity," and "steadiness," comes, not from rejecting the community, but allowing themselves to become part of local mythology. As nominal "witches" to local children, the family history of violence is remembered, but in such a way that elicits awe and respect rather than derision. DeSilvey and Edensor argue that "the ruin's contingent stories often emerge at the interface between personal and collective memory, as material remains mediate between history and collective experience" (472). Only literally breaking down the stable home structure and allowing for fragmented memorial material to mediate between family and community can new relationships emerge between a family and their past trauma, as well as a family and the perceived outside threats. The postmodern family gothic continues Jackson's case for home destruction, but further develops the difficulty of resisting the seductive call of "home and family," a challenge that is generally not conscious, but rather manifests in the body in grotesque ways.

## **Home is Where the Heart Is: The Postmodern Homebody**

The presence of Uncle Julian in *Castle* and his physical disability draws attention to the embodied traces of the past in the present, despite attempts to forget or experiences of forgetting. However, for the most part, Jackson's exploration of the haunted house concludes at the boundary between the skin and the house walls. As the postmodern family gothic picks up from Jackson, the impulse to destroy the home is placed on the reader as homebody families slowly entomb themselves within a structure that begins to take over bodies. The meaning of the platitude, "home is where the heart is," is taken to a grotesque extreme as the body becomes a part of the house and the house becomes a part of the body. As the families in the following postmodern novels illustrate, commitment to the space of the home ironically forces a struggle with self-representation and remembrance. In the complete refusal of the past, a refusal encouraged by the boundaries of the home, the body comes to house the past, manifesting in a grotesqueness that undermines the protective narrative of "home."

Unlike *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* do not have a moment when the house, and therefore the ideal family, is completely destroyed. Certainly, the homes in these novels begin to fall apart and devolve into some kind of ruin; however, none of these novels narrates a moment of

extreme force that causes the house to fall apart. The slow decline of each of the homes – apartments become marketplaces for safety from the streets, the suburban home falls into neglect, families go without basic necessities – point to the illusion of the ideal family narrative, but not before the bodies within the homes manifest the force of the past, the cry of the physical body to remember trauma. Whereas the narrative of the home operates in service of a fantasy future, the bodies within the home reveal the damage of such a drive to compartmentalize the past. Homebodies are bodies transformed by the home, a process in which the distinction between the house and the bodies within is blurred. As grotesque bodies appear in each of these novels, the home becomes more and more unsafe and unfamiliar, and yet the families within hold the boundaries between inside and outside more firmly. The grotesque marks the degree to which the home and its visual rhetoric of safety and stability is an illusion. Yet, as characters' increasing grotesqueness leads to oblivion, death, and madness, the reader becomes the only witness to how *unheimlich*, unhomely, and uncanny the homebody is.

## **The Children are the Future: Generational Uncanny**

The ideal family, particularly as signaled by the stable home, is one that creates familiar and consistent roles for each family member. Specifically, the distinction between the roles of parents and the roles of children organizes the ideal family into a future-oriented structure. The concept of “generation” assumes a linear temporality of family and often present actions of a family are done in the name of “future generations.” But faith in “future generations” necessitates a faith in the heterosexual couple that procreates. This ideal fantasy construction of a family haunts the walls of the different housing structures in Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), to the point that trying to preserve a future for coming generations actually threatens any future at all. The familiar and idealized roles of parents and children are made frightening and scary as the “future generation” develops without any sense of the past.

Ironically, the ideal family is conceived as ahistorical in this dystopian novel following the aftermath of some unnamed apocalyptic event, referred to only as “it.” In describing her housing, the unnamed narrator details the conditions of isolation necessary for familial integrity similar to that found in Jackson’s novel. The narrator explains how the apartments were privately built for people who could afford privacy and cleanliness not available in public flats. She says, “These blocks were models of what such buildings should be for solidity and decency” (6), and then characterizes her neighbors, the Whites, a

couple and their teenage daughter, as the ideal family for which this building was intended. The Whites, a name that even suggests a family identity unmarked by trauma, history, or society, retain social and class resources that allow them to maintain privacy, even within the dystopia. The narrator says, “I didn’t realize how high the Whites were placed in the administrative circles; but they were not the only *official family* to half hid themselves in this way, living quietly in an ordinary flat, apparently like everyone else, but with access to sources of food, goods, clothes, transport denied to most” (56 my emphasis). The term “official” may reference Professor White’s governmental ties, but it also indicates the status of the heterosexual couple with a child who live fairly unaffected by the apocalyptic times – without history.

The official-ness of the White family, who live just on the other side of the wall of the unnamed single female narrator, makes the appearance of Emily at the narrator’s doorstep an even more uncanny experience. One day a stranger brings a young orphaned teenager, Emily, to live with the narrator. The narrator doesn’t question her new role as Emily’s protector, perhaps influenced by the idealization of the Whites; the narrator now has a significant element of an ideal family – a child. Although taking Emily in like a parent would a child, is not the only thing familiar to the narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator and the reader come to recognize the family who appears to the narrator “behind the wall” in some other realm is in fact Emily’s family from the past. Further, there

are suggestions that Emily and the narrator may be the same person. Despite accepting Emily as an ahistorical child who helps the narrator create something more akin to the ideal family, both characters are haunted by a disruption to the futurity of the ideal family in both Emily's past and the collapse of identity between "parent" and "child."

Indeed, the passages of *Memoirs* that peer into the past of Emily's family experience undermine the utopian assumptions of the heterosexual couple and their children, especially when conceived of as ahistorical. As the narrator first enters into this alternative space, she describes how "the walls were ruthless; the furniture heavy, polished, shining; sofas and chairs were like large people making conversation; the legs of a great table bruised the carpet" (66). Whereas the home of the apartment flats allows for privacy and cleanliness, this description of Emily's past home recasts the domestic space as something of an animate prison that holds the family captive. Since there is no history given about the family within the wall, the narrator shows the reader into the ahistorical home, which is terrifying. This alternative space also perhaps revises assumptions about the "official family" of the Whites.

In particular, age and generation are identified as the source of social dysfunction rather than the driving force into an idealized future. The narrator eavesdrops on the almost didactic monologue about the illusion of family spoken by the mother in the wall. The mother "went on and on as if no one but herself



existed...as if she were alone and her husband and her children...couldn't hear her":

But I simply did not expect it, no one ever warns one how it is going to be, it is too much...No one has any idea, do they, until they have children, what it means. It's all I can do just to keep up with the rush of things, the meals one after another, the food, let alone giving the children the attention they should have...And when you think of what I used to be, what I was capable of! (67-69)

The mother here identifies having a family and children as a trauma, one that specifically took away her identity. Lessing also makes the linguistic alignment between the "it" that created the dystopian setting and the "it" of having children. The oldest generation is revealed to be mere stewards of the younger generation, which turns the family in its specificity into something "universal" or ahistorical. But such a concept of family – "no one ever warns one how it is going to be" – works against the expectation of love and security in the family home. The mother feels trapped; Emily feels unwanted; the father feels out of place. Home becomes a space that is at best distinct from one's identity and at worst dissolving of identity.

But the fantasy concept of home continues to pull families, even those that seem to resist nuclear family construction, towards the ideal of father-mother-children, because such structure is assumed to support and benefit children. The dystopian circumstances of the novel see the appearance of an alternative family structure of the "communal family," which initially seems to promise a safe, if unknown, future. The community teenagers, including Emily and her boyfriend

Gerald, with a newfound leadership in the midst of homebody adults, work to consciously create families of those, both adults and children, who have lost their own families. Historian Mary Abbott describes this particular legacy of “chosen families” in this way: “Reacting against what they saw as the ‘tyranny’ of the nuclear families in which they had been reared, couples and individual men and women set out to establish communal households free from hazards of traditional family life: ‘there will be no orphans...No child will be subject to the whim of a particular parent’” (128). But while “chosen families” may work against the apparent tyranny of the idealized structure of the nuclear family, Abbott’s description highlights children as the purpose of family, a sentiment maintained from the ideology of the nuclear family. Indeed, as Gerald takes over an abandoned house and turns it into a home through his own efforts to feed and otherwise support abandoned children, Emily looks on with adoration and “believed herself to have acquired a ready-made family” at thirteen, despite her home with the narrator (95).

The narrator’s observations of Emily’s behavior and feelings towards Gerald illuminate a particularly generational disconnect that harkens back to the future that the narrator’s generation had tried to put in place for Emily’s generation. As the narrator watches the drama between Gerald and Emily unfold, she describes Emily’s behavior as “anachronistic” given the apocalyptic times. The narrator says,

I suppose it must be asked and answered why Emily did not choose to be a chieftainess, a leader on her own account?...The attitudes of women towards themselves and to men, the standards women had set up for themselves, the gallantry of their fight for equality, the decades-long and very painful questioning of their roles, their functions – all this makes it difficult for me to say, simply, that Emily was in love...There was nothing to stop her. No law, written or unwritten, said she should not [start her own home], and her capacities and talents were every bit as varied as Gerald's or anybody else's. But she did not. I don't think it occurred to her. (107-108)

This younger generation, which had the benefits of feminism, never developed a relationship to that history before the dominant structure of patriarchy took over during the time of crisis. While the oldest generation maintains a sense of the past before "it," the physical space of apartments positions them out of the sphere of influence for the teenagers who've taken up houses that still have great cultural weight. Within the trauma and aftermath of the "it," which would seem to welcome any experiences of interpersonal connection and any creation of safe shelter, the house and the ideal family haunt the efforts of survival, which eventually does harm Emily and Gerald's bodily integrity.

The novel's circumstances, a dystopia that puts the inevitability of a future into question, manifest a new abandoned child that turns the expected innocence of a child into a terrorizing quality. The narrator explains, "The oldest were nine, ten. They seemed never to have had parents, never to have known the softening of the family. Some had been born in the Underground and abandoned. How had they survived? No one knew. But this is what these children knew how to

do" (172). These children are violent and threatening; "They were...an assortment of individuals together only for the sake of the protection in numbers...They would be hunting in a group one hour, and murdering one of their number the next...There were no friendships among them, only minute-by-minute alliances, and they seemed to have no memory of what happened even minutes before...For the first time I saw people showing the uncontrolled reactions of real panic" (172). The narrator retells the story of a woman who tries to feed these feral children, only to just barely escape their attempts to kill her when the food was gone. As these feral children become ever present in the neighborhood, the adults find themselves in disbelief: "they were only kids — that was what I couldn't get into my thick head" (173). Quickly, though, the adults rally themselves to find some way to involve the police or some other aggressive means to rid the neighborhood of these kids. If nothing else, the adults move their markets and gardens indoors to abandoned flats to help ward against the disruption of these murderous children.

Although the adults of the community argue that banning the children from their homes is best, Gerald, a teenager who only sees himself as an origin of family rather than having come from a family, fights against the adult ban. Gerald operates by a philosophy that Lee Edelman refers to as the "cult of the Child." Edelman identifies the "cult of the Child" as a society that is driven by a "reproductive futurism" that places "an ideological limit on political discourse as

such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). In other words, society is organized genealogically and the politics of the present serves always and only the future, represented unquestionably by "the Child whose innocence solicits our defense" (Edelman 2), but "for what [are we to save them] not one of us would ask" the narrator states (177). The Child is always assumed to be without history or uninfluenced by social conditions and therefore not an agent. But these murderous children embody great agency and power that undermine the logic of the "cult of the Child." Lessing's portrait of these children follows "reproductive futurity" to an uncanny end in which the unquestionable value of children and their unquestionable innocence, in the abstract, blinds people to the very real violence and threat that these actual children pose. The metaphoric loss of identity attributed to the child foreshadowed by the mother behind the wall is made literal in children who take the lives of those who stand in the way of their survival.

But Gerald's intense desire to preserve the future through a domestication of the feral children eventually causes his household of various generations to break up. The new underground children ran and shouted in the house; they wouldn't wait their turn for food and instead grabbed fistfuls of food from plates being passed down the table, at which they would not sit. When the food ran

out and wasn't enough, they screamed and ran around the house "destroying everything" (175). Despite the appeals of the 'civilized' occupants of the home, Gerald would not remove the new children because "there was something about [their] situation...which Gerald could not tolerate; he had to have them in there, he had to try" (175). In a matter of hours, Emily and Gerald "find their 'family' all gone, while they were house-parents of children who were savages" (175). In taking in abandoned children, as dictated by the ahistorical idealization of the family, Gerald makes home even more dangerous.

Efforts towards domestication yield a grotesque reversal of domestic abuse; 'parents' become powerless to the abuse of their 'children.' When Emily and Gerald try to talk to the children and explain how they should behave within a home and family, Emily is attacked by one of the children with a cudgel. Gerald tries to rescue Emily and "found himself, too, being hit, bitten, scratched..." (176). When Emily explains to the narrator what had happened to her arm, she says "It had taken all their strength to fight off these children...and yet the inhibition against hitting or hurting a child was so strong that it 'paralysed our arms'" and Gerald questions, "How can you hit a child?" (176). Later, as Emily and Gerald think again on what to do about these children (even as Emily has a broken arm), the kids set fire to the home. Gerald puts out the fire, pleads with the children and they throw a rock at his face, breaking his cheekbone. Despite the changes to the social environment with the apocalyptic

“it,” which has put the idea of the future in to doubt, Gerald holds tightly to the idea that children, all of them, must be saved. He cannot see that children actually inhibit survival.

In the end, the home is not a place where these children would be disciplined or nurtured for anything. Home now is the place in which the adults of society hide from the violent power of these children. Whereas home has often been touted as the place that determines the wellbeing of a family, specifically of children – and therefore a guarantee of a healthy future – in this novel, the home is the only place to escape the children. Gerald’s bringing the children into his home only manifests the threat they pose to the security a home is supposed to provide. But because Gerald holds on to the idea of the future within the Child in the abstract, he puts himself in constant danger and after a while (after Emily has returned to the home of the narrator) has become something of a slave to these children. Thus, the home and the family no longer offer a space for creating a possible future. The future is in fact under constant threat by the very figures for whom it is often thought to be for. The idea that “the children are our future” now creates a strange threat of what was once a unifying social call.

Thus, the murderous child makes the role of the adult unfamiliar. How does the future occur outside the linear family structure? Although Emily and Gerald eventually retreat from their project of domesticating children, they still

maintain the illusion of their innocence, because to abandon that perspective would be its own form of identity loss. Without an understanding of the past before the apocalypse, Emily and Gerald can only see themselves as parents, whose purpose is to enable the future through fostering children. Eventually, the narrator, Emily, Gerald, and a (possibly murderous?) feral child named Denis close themselves up within the narrator's apartment, waiting for the unknown. When Gerald joins the narrator and Emily, he justifies his bringing of Denis, who might have helped kill a man, by saying "how can it be their fault? How can you blame a kid of four?" to which Emily replies "No one is blaming them" (210). In privileging the ahistorical family, Emily and Gerald allow themselves to forget the very real and violent past of these children.

Whether such a decision to protect and save just one child has future benefits remains uncertain. After a while, the apartment wall opens up and Gerald, Emily, Denis, and the pet Hugo all travel into this alternate universe. The narrator imagines "we were in a place which might present us with anything—rooms furnished this way or that and spanning the tastes and customs of millennia; walls broken, falling, growing again; a house roof like a forest floor sprouting grasses and birds' nests; rooms smashed, littered, robbed..." (212). This alternate home-space defies temporality and, like the house in *Castle*, becomes something of a ruin. There is something of an Edenic scene about this ending with the heterosexual couple, Gerald and Emily, their "child," Denis, and



their pet, Hugo, but the presence of the narrator modifies the promise of this scene. Despite the allegorical image, even biblical image of the original family, the narrator's presence points to a heritage that has been forgotten in the wake of the future. Indeed, the novel's title *Memoirs of a Survivor* suggests that the narrator, with whom the reader is meant to identify, remains in the present of the novel rather than the future behind the wall.

The ambivalence of the ending continues as the narrator describes how the scene begins to fold in on itself: "That world, presenting itself in a thousand little flashes...was folding up as we stepped into it, was parceling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going" (212). The futurity represented by the heterosexual couple and the child is something that cannot be narrated and indeed seems to disappear into oblivion. But while this ending scene might dramatize a nostalgic future for the ideal family that had been made socially obsolete, the child that makes its way into that future is dangerous and an inversion of idealized innocence. Assuming the ahistoricity of the child, enabled by the 'blank slate' of the home, always makes children dangerous, a narrative pattern continued from Jackson. Lessing shows that by retreating into the home, the futurity supposedly offered by children and the heterosexual couple is a fantasy that cannot actually be represented, and even if it could be represented the dangerous child of that fantasy makes oblivion safer. *Memoirs's* ending works against the traditional closure of the novel with two paths, each symbolized by a

specific generation, that the reader does not desire to follow. The novel itself becomes an unhomely experience.

### **A Woman's Place is in the Home: Gender Uncanny**

As much as the ideal family is formed by expected relationships between parents and children, the expectations of those children depend on gender. For the ideal heterosexual coupling to form a family (and thus the persistence of patriarchy into the future) female children are expected to be passive, while male children are expected to take charge. However, extending the logic of these expectations leads to some terrifying realities that defamiliarize those expectations. Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) illustrates how the expectations of passivity and domesticity of female children is part of a larger logic that women's deaths fuel masculine power, despite narratives of the home as the space that preserves women for the future. Specifically, female sexuality marks the transition from mere passivity to death. However, the mystery of that transition keeps the patriarchal fantasy future intact. As the collective male narrators of the novel seemingly look to the past in order to "figure out" the mystery of why the sisters killed themselves, they only work to maintain the future of their fantasy of the sisters as myths and legends. The unfamiliarity of women and "why they do what they do" is a necessarily familiar component of the home structure. The home keeps women contained, "unfamiliar," so that

men cannot see how their own persistence into the future depends on women's deaths.

There is no way to discuss the concept or structure of the 1970s-suburban home in Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* without first addressing the discourse of the American home during the early Cold War. Elaine Tyler May, in her book *Homeward Bound*, describes the vast increase in young marriage after World War II and a rush into homeownership and traditional gender roles. Much of this phenomenon seemed related to a desire for a "family-centered culture" resulting from a "domestic ideology [that] emerged as a buffer against" fears of McCarthyist-defined communism (10). This cultural push for strong family values as a guard against the "anti-family," "decadent," and "undisciplined" communist ideas required a stable domestic life, often including a literal bunker in preparation for an atomic bomb attack. May argues that the bomb shelter protects the heterosexual couple, and in locking them in, gives them ample opportunity to create a family within the safety of the home. The traditional gender roles inherent within this modern home depend on the proper containment or "protection" of female sexuality so as to harness it for the future.

But such narratives like "a woman's place is in the home" are as much for male protection as female protection. May further analyzes connection between the bomb and female sexuality in explaining that the logic of the time required strong men to stand up to communism; anything that made men slaves to their

passions or weak was a threat to national security and strength. Thus, excessive or undomesticated female sexuality was made just as threatening as the atomic bomb. How the house contains or “protects” female sexuality is of no concern to men, despite any feigned interest; indeed, the home must keep the manner of disciplining female bodies “mysterious” in order to maintain the future of the patriarchal family. As Catherine Jurca explains, “the suburban home life of housewives and commuter husbands has generally been regarded as the approximation of a Victorian ideal of domesticity...[or a] ‘source of meaning and security in a world run amok’” (6). In a time of social upheaval and the making visible of previously obscured systems of sexism and racism, the home creates security in its ability to keep those in power ignorant. In creating tension between the reader and the collective male narrators, Eugenides allows for the reader to simultaneously see how the house is structured by culture as well as how the narrators do not see this reality.

The ideal family, the most stable family, is assumed to be the one that exists only within the house, without any outside influence. The home denies its own origin in cultural narratives of sexism and racism, which allows the family to deny such origin and influence. Martin Dines argues that the Lisbon home is structured to be without even any ethnic heritage, which suggests a family without history. Dines notes, “the interior of the Lisbon’s’ home is devoid of any references to their Old World heritage; instead it is replete with ‘stark colonial

furniture,' and even a painting of Pilgrims plucking a turkey" (972). Here the invocation of the Pilgrims suggests a pious family that can be "in the world but not of the world," a concept that in a family of women points to sexual modesty. While my analysis of the Lisbon's myopia about their family of women focuses on the containment of female sexuality, I'd like to note that this sexuality is an explicitly *white* sexuality. Indeed, both Lessing and Eugenides make veiled references to the whiteness of the homebody – the White family in Lessing; the repressed suspicion of the sole black family that moves in to the neighborhood in Eugenides – but in privileging whiteness, neither fully explore the racial element. In the background of *Suicides* lay subtle references to the racial violence of 1970s cities, but the narrators' lack of remarks on these events contribute to the mythology of the protective suburban home, particularly in its participation in the long history of protecting the purity of white women from black men. Thus, the domestic structure that seeks to preserve the idealized heterosexual couple in the face of social change and disruption is always already haunted by a female sexuality that is both necessary and threatening.

Eugenides depicts the ghost of female sexuality through the voices of the sisters that have been explicitly absented or abstracted from their bodies. At the very beginning of the novel, Cecilia provides the answer to the question that resonates throughout the text and drives the male narrators' investigation, seemingly unresolved. When Cecilia is saved from her first attempt to kill

herself, the doctor asks “What are you doing here, honey? You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets,” and she responds, “Obviously Doctor...you’ve never been a thirteen-year-old-girl” (5). While this statement can be taken as a young girl’s inclination towards dramatics due to budding new hormones, Eugenides uses this “only form of suicide note” to illustrate just how little young women are listened to. The collective male narrators make painful and sometimes awkward attempts to stitch together their own memories of that time as well as the memories of others that they interview in order to shed light on this tragedy, but never do more than recount a few of the words actually spoken by the sisters. They are more concerned with the “place” of the girls’ bodies than with what they might actually have said about that place.

The detritus of a home, which collects from extensive time spent within the walls of the house, marks the continued effort of a family to build stronger boundaries between themselves and the outside, pointing to an unconscious or subconscious recognition that the home is not actually safe. But detritus also offers a distraction from the weak boundaries between society and family, which, for the male narrators of *Suicides*, allows them to continue to recommit the girls’ bodies, even traces of those bodies, back into the home. Regarding a box of pictures they collect:

Most of the photographs had been taken years before, in what appears to be a happier time of almost endless family cookouts. One photograph shows the girls sitting Indian style, balanced on the lawn’s seesaw (the photographer has tilted the camera) by the

counterweight of a smoking hibachi uphill. (We regret to say that this photograph, Exhibit #47, was recently found missing from its envelope.)...But despite all this new evidence of the girls' lives, and of the sudden drop-off of family togetherness (the photos virtually cease about the time Therese turned twelve), we learned little more about the girls than we knew already. (223-224)

The photo depicting the happy family goes missing because one of the male narrators has taken it for masturbatory material. The detritus that comes out of the house becomes treasure to the boys, but only in the way that it serves their needs rather than some supposed documentation of the sisters' voices. And the responsibility of seeing the implied sexual gratification of this moment is placed on the reader, who must use fragments of the rest of the novel to see the narrators' own ignorance of their complicity with a culture in which women and girls are objects for male pleasure.

The real trauma of the Lisbon family seems to be, not the suicides, but rather the sexual maturity of the sisters. Mrs. Lisbon's response to Lux's breaking of curfew is born out of a desire to protect their purity as she decides to alienate her daughters from the rest of the world. She tells the narrators that "At that point being in school was just making things worse...None of the other children were speaking to the girls. Except boys, and you knew what they were after. The girls needed time to themselves. A mother knows" (137). While Mrs. Lisbon clearly sees "boys" as threatening to the safety and purity of her daughters, Lux's actual experience of sexual trauma that caused her to break curfew gives Mrs. Lisbon an excuse to follow through completely on refusing her daughters'

sexuality. She, in fact, punishes all the girls for Lux's manifestation of sexual knowledge. While the Lisbon's bronze their daughters' baby shoes, they never take photographs of them in their Homecoming dresses. They cannot bear, and thus refuse, their coming into adulthood.

Mrs. Lisbon paints a picture of a static childhood that denies sexual maturity, which she believes the home protects. However, as Lux takes to the roof of the home, she illustrates that sexual objectification is part of the structure of the house. Lux's sexual recklessness – having sex with many different men on the roof of her home – dramatizes the unacknowledged hypersexuality of the suburban home that excludes women from owning their sexual expression and development. The house, the domestic structure, allows for the male narrators to abstract Lux's behavior and her body in such a way that her actions are no longer threatening to them, even as they manifest sexist oppression.

From the safety of their tree house and their own future homes, the boys take any of Lux's agency out of her excessive and excessively dangerous sex, and instead make her the muse for their own sexual agency. They explain, "For our own part, we learned a great deal about the techniques of love...Years later, when we lost our own virginites, we resorted in our panic to pantomiming Lux's gyrations on the roof so long ago; and even now, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that it is always that pale wraith we make love to" (141-2). This confession of disavowal ("if we were to be honest



with ourselves”) narrates the logic of the female “bombshell” of the time period. The descriptions, visual or otherwise, of her excessive and dangerous sexuality allow the masses to indulge in sexual fantasy while they simultaneously disavow her as a threat to the family and the nation (May 112). Her sexual provocation can be domesticated as men who are “threatened” by her power, take their lust home to the safety of their normalized relationships. The heyday of *Playboy’s* publication, which has only just passed by the time of the novel, commodifies this concept of separating an actual woman from her sexual expression to be taken to the safety and privacy of one’s own home.

Female sexuality is popularly deemed dangerous to men, but it is also really dangerous to women as it forms the paternalistic/protectionist foundation of their oppression. The depiction of Lux’s sexual escapades on the roof of the home link her to the fearful fantasy of the atomic bomb and the patriarchal logic that requires a “dangerous” Other to justify containment, which often suffocates those contained. Specifically, the contrast between Lux as a fantasy and Lux’s actual body and environment points to the way that young women’s suffering is obscured by domesticating narratives. The narrators watch Lux’s sexual activity from across the street, using binoculars, and from this distance explain, “At first it was impossible to tell what was happening. A cellophane body swept its arms back and forth against the slate tiles like a child drawing an angel in the snow. Then another darker body could be discerned...”(140). These abstract

descriptions suggest the billowing of the atomic bomb mushroom cloud, an otherworldly vision of something that belies the destruction at its source. Additionally, the boys describe how “through the bronchioles of leafless elm branches...we finally made out Lux’s face...smoking a cigarette, impossibly close in the circle of our binoculars because she moved her lips only inches away but without sound” (140-1). The soundlessness of Lux’s lips smoking creates a similar effect of the silence of the atomic bomb, in which the sound arrives later after the explosion. Further, the way the boys capture Lux’s face and her soundless motion within the frame of the binoculars, can be compared to the way the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb has made its way into popular culture as a framed portrait, bringing the devastation of the bomb “impossibly close” but within the safety of domestication. The domestication of the bomb, in which the threat it poses to the western world obscures how it has been used to harm those outside the west, parallels the discourses of female sexuality.

This ethereal image of Lux, which is beautifully captured in Sofia Coppola’s 1999 film version, illustrates how the fantasies offered by the home easily translate on to the bodies of young women. But such collapse of the home fantasies and the female body keep the narrators oblivious to the way that both the home and Lux are falling apart. The boys describe the way the house “sheds its shingles,” windows are repaired with tape, and the porch is taken over by unkempt bushes (3), but as the container of many female bodies, all the male

narrators can do is “smear our muzzles in their last traces, of mud marks on the floor...we had to breathe forever the air of the rooms in which they killed themselves” (243). Similarly, the deterioration of Lux’s body is missed. As is told to the narrators by the men who visit Lux, she has lost so much weight that her bones are clearly visible “and one, who went up to the roof with Lux during a warm winter rain, told [them] how the basins of her collarbones collected water” (143). Despite the fact that some of the men report a taste of digestive fluids in her mouth, cold sores, and missing patches of hair, the boys explain that “none of these signs of malnourishment or illness or grief...detracted from Lux’s overwhelming impression of being a carnal angel” (143). Excessive sex paired with malnourishment, or anorexia/bulimia are classic signs of a young woman desperately trying to control the circumstances around her by controlling her body, always to harmful and unhealthy effect. Yet, the men domesticate this hurting and grotesque body with stories of her arms as wings and her eyes shining with some kind of divine or nihilistic passion (143). But as much as the home becomes the sexy place for the narrators to experience their own sexual desires as they look on the home of four trapped girls, the house also becomes a weapon.

The descriptions of the way that Lux goes about contraception take the trope of comparing women to food (“apples,” “delicious,” “sweetness,” “honey,” etc.) and turn it into something disgusting. The reports to the boys describe her

“administering complex procedures, inserting three or four jellies or creams at once, topping them off with a white spermicide she referred to as ‘the cream cheese’” (144). When Lux is no longer able to obtain actual pharmaceutical birth control with food nicknames, she uses actual food – vinegar, tomato juice, Coca Cola, “Lux kept an assortment of bottles, as well as one foul rag, behind the chimney” (144). When roofers discovered the bottles later, they said “Looks like somebody was having salad up here” (144). These grotesque associations of food with birth control and Lux’s body illustrate the ways that the domestic might be used to prevent procreation rather than facilitate it, much like the recently available birth control pill allowed for women in general to manage their sexual activity in the domestic sphere. While the description of Lux’s birth control methods offers her a way to subvert the domestic – food and female associations with food – the narrators again abstract from her body and its gross reality to redomesticate her actions. They turn her actions in to something from a child’s storybook and describe how “Love’s tiny seacraft foundered in acidic seas” (144). Ultimately, the power of the domestic narrative serves to either limit Lux’s behavior, or turn her expressions of pain and suffering (the suffering suggested by the atomic bomb) into something akin to fairytales.

But the girls do ultimately make a horrific mockery of the concept that “a woman’s place is in the home” as their bodies become one with the literal structure. When the male narrators go looking for the sisters so that they may all

drive away together, they find Bonnie hanging from the ceiling beams, Mary with her head in the oven, Therese stuffed with sleeping pills on her bed, and Lux suffocated by gas fumes in the garage. The sisters use the structure of the home, its furniture, support structures, and specific spaces to end their lives, the lives that such domestic elements were supposed to protect. The image of the “suicide free-for-all” (220) completely undoes the narrative of the home as safe and secure, especially for the purpose of protecting the integrity of young women “bound for college, husbands, child-rearing...in other words, for life” (Eugenides 230). Freud states that “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (421). As such, these suicides actually speak to the way that the “home” is always already grounded in what is unheimely, its components can be used just as easily to kill as to keep a roof together, cook food, save space for a car.

Of course, recognizing the danger of the home and its cultural weight is left up to the reader. For all their “attempts” to put the pieces together (241), the male narrators never seem to recognize that they cannot be the audience to the girls’ stories. While the narrators experience this resistance as selfish and proof of the sisters’ other-wordily-ness (242), the reader of the novel is both distanced from the sisters’ story as well as the narrators’ attempts to master that story. Worth noting is how reading becomes as much the issue of the novel as the home

in its gendered nature. Patrocinio Schweickart explains how male readers seek to “master” and control the texts that they read, whereas female readers “communicate” with texts in which they might experience a “link ... to the larger community of women” (623). While the novel is generally a form in which readers are brought into special knowledge of characters, Eugenides’ use of “we” as the point of view challenges the reader to consider with whom and how they are meant to identify. While the reader may be included in the narratorial voice much like the use of a first person “I,” the “we” prevents the reader from completely disowning their own identity for the purpose of reading. Thus, the reader necessarily maintains a recognition of themselves as a reader, enabling them to read against the narrators’ readings and producing a more communicative, rather than masterful reading. But in the end, the reader is still distanced from the characters and the text, making for an uncanny experience that does not reveal the “truth” of what the sisters’ experienced but rather the ways in which the “truth” of home and family is exclusive.

### **It Takes a Village: Racial Uncanny**

All of the novels in this chapter struggle over stories of the past, which are shown to disrupt a family's ability to persist with ease into the future. Yet, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) raises the stakes of the confrontation between past memories and fantasies of the future by dramatizing the racial component that goes unacknowledged, but ghostly present, in the ideology of "home and family." While Morrison contributes to the literature of the inherent "unhomeliness" of the home, she also makes clear the need for community in the creation of family, if family is to survive the ghostly and grotesque force of past trauma. This perspective suggests that at the source of the distinction families make between themselves and others lies a recognition, a familiarity with the Other. Morrison's use of the grotesque highlights how the home as a concept has never been available to African Americans. The home space isn't a guaranteed protective space for black bodies and their family stories, despite nominal access to privacy explicitly not available during slavery.

Similar to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, *Beloved* locks the reader into the house with the characters. The 124 house, a character itself in the novel, sets the tone of the novel with the first sentence: "124 was spiteful" (3). Immediately the narrative of the home as the idealized space of intimacy, safety, and protection is undermined by both the description of the house as "spiteful" but also by the naming of the house according to its anonymous number rather than

the name of the family who lives within. Unlike *Castle*, which explicitly names the Blackwood house in the opening pages, the reader is not even aware they are in a house at the beginning of *Beloved*. The freedman home, the family hearth, exists at the intersection of conflicting ideologies about family.

Structurally, the 124 house offers Sethe's family an experience of privacy and an ability to claim space not previously available to slaves. Baby Suggs even closes off the side entrance to the home, the threshold of the slave, in a gesture of refusing the slave identity. Home is a place in which power dynamics are structured and embodied by controlling the movement through the space. For Baby Suggs, the front door is a threshold of significance in that it represents importance and visibility. By shutting off the side door, Baby Suggs forces all visitors to make themselves visible, which in turn makes the people who live in the house visible. Sethe's family, along with the other freedman families in the community ascribe to the belief that the house will not only protect their families, but also provide some coherence to the family in containing them.

However, in the postbellum era, while the public sphere became a space of (relative) freedom for those emancipated, the domestic, private sphere was never part of that emancipation as many families became displaced in the wake of their freedom. While freed African Americans were publically granted entitlements to their bodies, such entitlement did not extend to the structures meant to house and protect those bodies. Indeed, unlike the white families of



*Castle, Memoirs, and Suicides*, the emancipated family of *Beloved* is not the intended family of the 124 house. The owners of the house, from whom Sethe rents the house, are white, a fact just as haunting as *Beloved*'s ghost. In the aftermath of the history of slavery, "ownership" is always tainted with racial conflict. The house that is meant to provide shape to families' privacy and freedom, is still subject to the desires of who owns that space; in this case, a white family.

The ghost of "ownership" exists beyond the plot of the novel as the story is just as steeped in the politics of the 1980's as of postbellum Ohio. Although written in 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report on African American families continued to serve into the 1980's and 1990's as a "moralistic discourse on family values in the United States...depict[ing] black single-mother families as a 'tangle of pathology'" (Stacey 5). The intensity of conservative family values rhetoric took on obliquely racist language and helped implement policies that specifically disadvantaged families of color. Given this social dimension of the ghosts of racial trauma that haunt the home throughout the twentieth century, only communal memory can counteract the promises of "home and family" that seek to make social trauma an "outside" to the family "inside" the home.

Morrison shows how the lack of communal memory in Sethe's remembrance of her family trauma prevents her from healing from that trauma, despite the retreat to the home for the explicit purpose of healing. Once Sethe

shuts herself and her daughters in the house after Paul D is driven away, she is able to finally put her own voice to her story about her sacrifice of Beloved that has circulated throughout the community in newspapers and gossip. Once inside the house, Sethe becomes extremely vocal: "the more [Beloved] took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children...None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind" (284). Although Sethe gets the opportunity to tell her story in its fullness and truth from her memory, the family's isolation from the larger community during this process puts Sethe in a position to fantasize about a future that includes Beloved as something more than a memory; Sethe believes that behind closed doors, she can preserve a future in which her fatal actions of the past have been undone.

Beloved's arrival in physical form initially has the effect of assuaging Sethe's guilt as Sethe "smil[ed] at the things she would not have to remember now. Thinking, She ain't even mad at me. Not a bit" (214). As a result, Sethe succumbs to the seduction of the pain of her past, which at this point she sees as the only way she can love her daughter and make up for her crimes against Beloved. While Sethe is finally able to speak about the past, literally confronting trauma by speaking to Beloved, the boundaries of the house enable the story to take on a life of its own, through the weight and demand of Beloved's physical

presence, which becomes dangerous and infectious to both Sethe and her other daughter Denver.

The scenes of Sethe and Beloved “locked in a love that wore everybody out” (286) depict the home as a space of illness. Indeed, the novel explains how if the lunatic asylum were not exclusive to whites, the community “would have found candidates in 124” (294). The discourse of illness reflects white anxieties about contagion, hygiene, and the consequent morality of newly freed slaves. As Saidiya Hartman explains in her analysis of primers given to freedmen, “The emphasis on hygiene expresses larger concerns about national well-being, since hygiene legitimated, if not invited, the policing of dwellings but also the setting of guidelines for marriage and other forms of social association, particularly those considered dangerous or destabilizing of social order” (158). Certainly, the descriptions of Sethe and Beloved in the home in the final section of the novel illustrate this dangerous and destabilized social order: they sleep wherever they happen to be (281); a poker is slammed against the wall (281); Beloved gorges herself on sweets and Sethe gives her her share of food (282); Beloved yells and screams, clawing at her own neck until blood begins to appear (294); Beloved would even “go to Sethe, run her fingers over the woman’s teeth while tears slid from her wide black eyes” (294). This chaotic environment is the very kind of setting that white discourses about hygiene—a clean and tidy house; modesty in

expression and consumption – imagine as the result of un-policed domesticity of the recently freed.

However, while discourses of hygiene are focused on what is the imagined “natural behavior” of freedmen, Morrison’s novel clarifies that this kind of “moral degradation, sloth, indolence, and idleness” (Hartman 159) so feared by white communities does not come from a “natural state” but rather from the embodied memories of violence, loss, and guilt that have been too quickly forgotten. Discourses of hygiene meant to purify or whiten black bodies did so by encouraging a physical removal of the traces of slavery and the violations suffered within. The safety and intimacy of the home is premised on an exclusion of racial bodies. The racial body in the home suffers defamiliarization. As much as Sethe relishes the return of her daughter to the family, such return, anchored in the trauma of racism, disrupts the family coherence that Sethe believes she has finally achieved. Sethe’s attempts to forget or simply not acknowledge her past as a slave are no match for the power and rage of *Beloved* as a memory.

From this perspective, *Beloved* becomes a vampire similar to the traditional gothic figures who represent fears of the invasion of the Other into the home. Vampires signal anxieties about the domestic sphere because they are figures who have been invited in to the home and then proceed to excite taboo pleasures as they penetrate the body. The pleasure the vampire inspires in its

victim suggests the bodily desire for connection and submission, which is explicitly contrary to liberal humanist principles of bodily autonomy and rational individuality. As a vampire, Beloved manifests white fears of contagion in which “appropriate” bodily boundaries would not be maintained within the private or domestic sphere of the recently freed. Like a vampire, Beloved seems ageless, without lines on her feet or palms, and Denver describes how “the smile under her jaw [was] crooked and much too long” (285). Beloved’s impact on Sethe is similar to a vampire as “the bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became...Beloved ate up [Sethe’s] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (295). The boundaries between mother and daughter dissolve, and in living the fantasy of a future with her daughter, Sethe is once again in a position to lose the rights over her own body.

Twice, in particular, through Denver’s eyes, we see Beloved’s impact on Sethe in her hands: “The flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk” (281); and “Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade” (285). This especially striking image draws attention to an area on the hand prime for biting, but also draws attention just to the hand itself. The hand as a symbol of action and creation is shown to fade and the area of the hand that connects the thumb to the forefinger – and thus the joint responsible for our human ability to labor because we can hold things – is shown

to weaken. Beloved is not only taking away Sethe's life energy in general, but specifically her ability to make, create, and labor, which positions Sethe in opposition to the "progressiveness" of the home; rather than a space of production that establishes a future, the home becomes a space of slow death. This removal of the capacity to labor plays into Sethe's willingness to succumb to Beloved's demands and power.

But in working with the vampire figure as a forceful ghost of social and familial trauma, Morrison reframes the domestic "invasion" by repressed memories in order to question the mechanisms of repression in the first place. Until the end of the novel, much of the recently freed of the area contribute to the policing of Sethe's role in the community because of her past murderous actions. They encourage Sethe's repression because they too repress their own histories that might allow for them to sympathize with Sethe. It is only when Denver seeks help and reveals the circumstances of her home that the community (or some of the women) comes together to confront Beloved. As Pamela Barnett argues in her reading of Beloved as vampire and succubus, Beloved's return is dependent on "the community [failing] to realize that forgetting, not communal memory, is the condition of traumatic return" (425). As a domestic space shut off from communal support, 124 provides the ideal conditions for a growing infection of memory brought on by forgetting. The home, when structured around a future that refuses the past makes one vulnerable to its power.

As Sethe and Beloved slowly, but torturously, lose bodily agency and independence from one another, Denver recognizes that she too will die unless there is some reconnection to the larger community. Specifically, the family has run out of food. Denver, in a difficult separation from the home, “[stepped] off the edge of the world” (286) to seek help from the community. The community comes in to help Sethe extricate her body from the home that has imprisoned her to a fantasy future. Ella, who eventually gathers the neighbors to rescue Sethe,

didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy...As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came into her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. (302)

There is a difference between the ghostly reminders of the past and a ghost who becomes flesh to create “rememory,” a return to a memory, which comes to take over all experience of temporality. Ella's respect for the ghost that haunts the house *as a ghost* illustrates her recognition that the home is always going to be an uncomfortable space, an “unhomely” space, but that resistance to believing that the home is an ideal comfort protects against an overdetermining past.

Sethe's psychosis manifests the way that the black family is imprisoned by the fantasy future of the national family narrative. At once, black families are encouraged to see the house as cohering force of family as long as their racial history is forgotten—participating in the fantasy future—and at the same time,

black families become the objects of a racist social fantasy future as the house becomes an excuse to police black families. Thus, the community takes the rescue and “policing” into their own hands. The women who run Beloved out of the house don’t seek to punish Sethe for having invited Beloved in, but merely desire to share the burden of confronting the past and not letting the future be determined by the seductive fantasy of family coherence.

In a linguistic twist that complicates the need for communal memory in healing from past trauma, the novel repeats “it was not a story to pass on” like a mantra. The novel clearly demonstrates the importance of telling one’s story and sharing trauma with others, or else risk being literally consumed by the past. And, indeed, the reader has just been “passed” the story in having read the novel. But Morrison’s ending creates an uncomfortable reading space similar to *Eugenides* in implicating the reader in the ways that stories and memories are often unrightfully claimed. Morrison doesn’t advocate a reader’s silence about the text, but rather draws attention to the way in which stories and memories are often thought of as objects to be owned, able to be passed on at all – a challenge that questions the legitimacy of the actual object of the novel in the hands of the reader. The life of the story told in *Beloved* exists beyond the pages of the novel and cannot be completely and coherently contained within it, just as the house cannot completely contain the experience of family that is always racial. *Beloved* illustrates how the house objectifies the family, which creates psychosis in those



who aim to limit their familial understanding to that object. Sethe persists in her mental illness because her memory of her daughter becomes an object to hang on to, “she was my best thing” (321), rather than part of an ever-evolving story and family.

### **Conclusion**

Jackson, Lessing, Eugenides, and Morrison all trouble our dependence on the home for a neutral and safe domesticity. They dramatize the crisis that occurs when families try to forget how much their own family trauma is structured by the social concept of Home. As a result, families remain plagued by trauma despite being protected by the intimate space of the home. Yet, even as past traumas – apocalypse, suicide, murder – reappear in the bodies of family members – feral children, hypersexual teenagers, vampyric adult children – the family fails to connect their isolation and dependence on home with the persistent trauma. Indeed, the concept of futurity inherent in the home as a space to protect the family coherence and legacy makes it a space concerned with children. The fact that the children within these spaces embody, not life, but death is only apparent to the reader who can recognize the misplaced faith in the safety of the home inasmuch as the “homeliness” of their own reading practice has been disrupted by the novel’s structure. A permeable boundary of inside and outside the home is necessary for families to heal from traumas that are just as

social as they are personal, especially as the concept of Family haunts and traumatizes in its obsession with the future. Yet, merely opening up the home to the community is not enough to help families address past trauma. As I will illustrate in the next chapter, families that open up their homes up for purposes of financial stability not only try to forget the past, but also try to renarrate it to benefit traditional gender power structures.

## Chapter 2: The Family Business

*“...constant expansion is its always inadequate but nonetheless necessary attempt to quench an insatiable thirst...crisis is for capital a normal condition that indicates not its end but its tendency and mode of operation” (Hardt & Negri Empire 222).*

While the homebodies of chapter one fall in line with the gothic tradition of the haunted house and the uncanny, the entrepreneurs of chapter two seize upon the monster story using the gothic foundations of the most “civilized” of systems – capitalism. The postmodern monster of the novels of this chapter is the super-patriarch, a hyper masculine, dominating father figure who manipulates family members, particularly women, and family history in order to secure his own image as a successful businessman. However, such an image is incredibly fragile as depicted in Shirley Jackson’s *Hangsaman*, Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*, and Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*. These novels show how masculine and patriarchal success and virility are dependent upon the disavowal and forgetting of exploited feminine labor. Part of the business of the super-patriarch, aside from the actual family business, is to alter family narratives such that the labor of women is erased and his own “autonomous” power is glorified. The effort and affect on daughters, mothers, sisters, and feminized brothers and nephews is renarrated as evidence of the super-patriarch’s power, which ultimately equates family with a single individual. Patriarchy always begets the super-patriarch who does mental and physical violence to female or feminized family members. This violence manifests in the

productivity of disabled and incestuous bodies, and in the familial consumption of food. However, such exploitation is ultimately self-destructive as the practice of forgetting culminates in the patriarch's death or downfall.

The monstrosity of the super-patriarch in the postmodern family gothic novel is one version of a feminist reworking of the contemporary monster story.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, Others are represented as threatening figures, and women and femininity are shown to be the source of danger. This depiction of women as monstrous persists even into popular domestic narratives. Susan Faludi's *Backlash* recounts numerous examples of the way in which feminism and female equality within the public and private spheres were depicted in threatening gothic terms. The novels of this chapter rework this patriarchal narrative of women as the gothic Other in order to reveal patriarchy, specifically its primary beneficiary the super-patriarch, as the real monster that preys upon women even within the context of feminist cultural impulses.

The story of the family business in the postmodern family gothic illustrates how those contemporary monster narratives that come from a more reactionary place, which would posit the powerless (women, ethnic others, etc.) as threatening, are ultimately narratives that hide oppressive powers behind a veil of goodness and rightness; the feminist reworking of this structure is

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<sup>1</sup> The other version of feminist reworking of the contemporary monster narrative will be explored in chapter three.

revealing in nature – unveiling the narrative mechanisms that keep power in place by obscuring its fear and precarity. Importantly, feminist reworkings of the reactionary monster story do their unveiling within the narrative of the family business, a concept that is extremely significant for contemporary understandings of masculinity. The family business is a subset of the small business, which has great meaning within the late twentieth century, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The family business represents many qualities valued in contemporary U.S. and Britain: independence from authority, control of finances, ingenuity, and a coherent family unit. The U.S. Senate Small Business Committee from 1945 stated that the small business “stimulates expression of the fundamental virtues of thrift, industry, intelligence, schooling, home ties, and family pride – in short, those fireside virtues which have counted for so much in developing our [national] strength and character” (qtd in Bunzel 87). Such post-war idealization of the businessman, particularly as the face of national pride, persists into the postmodern period. Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* begins with a description of the initial patriarch as “a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence” (7) and Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* describes Uncle Philip as a craftsman who righteously justifies his expensive prices for his handmade toys as “a fair price for the work...a man must charge a fair price. That’s only economics” (86). But, just as the values embedded within the home were shown

to be oppressive to female family members, the values of the family business are also diagnosed as qualities that disguise how the patriarchal family mirrors the exploitative qualities of capitalism.

As capitalism is predicated on the disavowal of the exploitation of surplus labor, the power of the super-patriarch is predicated on the disavowal of the trauma caused by the exploitation of female labor. Specifically, the family trauma that is ignored, forgotten, glossed over, or otherwise refused, provides counter evidence to the patriarch's mythology of himself as supreme controller of all effort and meaning of the family. In place of the familial trauma, the super-patriarch substitutes a fantasy past of his origin, which often obscures that he has an origin at all. Indeed, all the super-patriarchs in these novels present themselves to the outside market, as well as to their own families, as something of a deity. Mr. Waite of *Hangsaman* claims that he is god; Uncle Philip of *The Magic Toyshop* is a literal puppet master; Arty of *Geek Love* starts a cult; and Milo Silk of *Fledgling* manipulates humans to destroy evidence of the changing vampire species. But mythological masculine authority is equated with financial stability, a formula that sets the patriarch on a path towards self-destruction.

Such a belief that finances adequately represent identity is necessarily gendered as financial stability is understood as the prime characteristic of masculinity. Susan Faludi explains, "for twenty years, the leading definition [of masculinity], ahead by a huge margin, has never changed. It isn't being a leader,

athlete, lothario, decision maker...It is simply this: being a 'good provider for his family'" (65). Scott Sandage also makes this connection between financial terms and identity in *Born Losers* as he identifies the coming-of-age of capitalism in the nineteenth century as when "entrepreneurship [became] the primary model of American identity" (3). This cultural integration of economic success with personal character primarily indicts men. The stakes of being a loser are much higher for men, as like Faludi illuminates, masculinity becomes synonymous with socio-economic power, particularly in its ability to support the family. This identity of the "good provider" is, however, illusory in its interest in the benefits to family members, and is rather incredibly singular in its investment.

Acknowledging the share of work that women do for the family business is seen to encroach upon the identity of the patriarch. The novels of this chapter illustrate the paranoia and fear of the patriarch that drive his monstrosity as all contributions to the family business must be absorbed into the individualizing narrative of masculinity.

Yet this individualizing narrative of masculinity – a deified figure with total autonomy and control necessary to "provide" for his family (a testament to his virility) – is particularly dependent upon daughters. Indeed, one of the primary narrative patterns of the gothic novel revolves around the intimate ties between a patriarch's economic and social vitality and his daughter's affective behavior, namely sexual. In her analysis of the rise of the nuclear family in

Ireland and Britain and the subsequent shift of gothic anxieties from the public to private spheres, Margot Backus explains, “Male power and the sexual subordination of women within the family are...naturalistically associated with wealth and prestige” (60). Although sons may traditionally inherit the family business, daughters inherit the responsibility of expanding a father’s economic and social prowess through their ability to become wives and mothers. A father’s ability to marry his daughter off adds to his deified self-construction, as focus from his own origins shifts to his ability to originate – his daughter becomes mother. In this shift of focus, the source of the super-patriarch’s life and power as ultimately with his own mother becomes an untenable narrative. Thus, subordination of all women in the family by treating them all as if they are daughters becomes the primary way that patriarchs exploit feminine affective and material labor. Thus does all female behavior, especially in their traversing of the private/public boundary as required by business, become fodder for patriarchal appropriative and vampiric narratives that rewrite such labor as their own.

Shirley Jackson’s second novel *Hangsaman* diagnoses this paternalizing that persists even within a culture increasingly influenced by calls for women’s equality. Jackson analyzes the way in which women’s progress in the public sphere is appropriated by paternal figures, leading women into an existential void, as their material and immaterial labor is shown to never belong to them.



The novel tells the coming-of-age story of Nathalie Waite, a recent high school graduate going through her first year of college. While the majority of the novel explores Nathalie's increasing mental instability and social alienation, the first part of the novel establishes the narrative frame through which to view Nathalie's first taste of independence. As Jackson shows, such "independence" is highly predicated on Nathalie's co-dependent relationship with her father. Nathalie is seen to initially buck tradition by taking the role of the son to inherit the family business and identity, in this case that of writing and writer. But Jackson's depiction of the mental gothic labyrinth of Nathalie's mind exposes the illusion of women's independence as access to the public sphere doesn't change the paternal structure of family from which female oppression comes. Indeed, despite the potentially progressive attitude of Mr. Waite about his daughter as his intellectual successor, his constant criticism of her work and manipulation of her mental labor suggests that he isn't interested in "succession," shifting the temporal concerns from the future (which one might expect from a "provider") to the present, and even to the past, as experiences of the present are constantly shaped by reworkings of the past.

The inciting incident of the novel in which Nathalie is raped by one of her father's friends at a party, including Jackson's narrative handling of this moment, highlights silence and "absence" as the mechanisms by which women are kept endowed to the patriarchal family structure that renders them exploitable and

invisible. At the level of the text, Nathalie's rape is never confirmed. Her threatening experience with the man at her father's party ends with "Oh my dear God sweet Christ, Nathalie thought, so sickened she nearly said it aloud, is he going to *touch* me?" (43) and then the narrative moves into the next morning. Throughout the following morning, Nathalie continues to think disavowing thoughts to herself: "No, please no"; "I will not think about it, it doesn't matter"; "I don't remember, nothing happened, nothing that I remember" (43). Jackson's structure, which leaves Nathalie's sexual assault a mystery but manifests a mantra of denial, performs the difficulty of linguistically making connections between the family and the public spheres. Women know this conflict in their bodies, but can't verbalize the trauma.

In fact, what can be recalled by the reader is that before her rape, which escapes the printed text, is Nathalie's verbal performance of confidence in herself and her intelligence. During their conversation before the rape, Nathalie states unapologetically, "I didn't hear you...I was thinking about myself instead of listening" (40). When questioned about what about herself she was thinking, she replies "About how wonderful I am" (40). In following Nathalie's self-confidence with her anxiety and feelings of trauma, rather than a clear traumatic event, Jackson diagnoses in her structure the obscure narrative of paternal violence that punishes female self-confidence, especially as she takes ownership of her qualities that the super-patriarch attributes to himself. Thus, the connection is

made between women's independence and self-confidence and subsequent debilitating guilt, as if cause and effect. This silence around paternal violence, or within the paternal sphere of influence, positions women to mistrust their affective experiences and depend on the shaping power of the father's language to understand themselves.

Jackson's inspiration for the novel provides an eerily appropriate metaphor of her overall diagnosis. According to Jackson's papers at the Library of Congress, *Hangsaman* was partially inspired by the real disappearance of a Bennington co-ed in 1946. Paula Jean Welden went for a walk along the Long Trail and never returned and her body has never been found. While Jackson's literary aesthetic style seems to naturally be attracted to the mysterious and tragic, in the context of women's history in the public sphere, Welden's disappearance seems to offer a more than apt portrait of women's professional and mental labor at the time. The institution of the university is essentially a gateway to the void. There is literally no place for women, either in the home or in the public sphere. Jackson foresees the failure of this system, meant to liberate women, as long as the paternal family remains intact. More specifically, as long as the mythology of masculinity that governs both material and immaterial labor remains intact. But while Jackson offers a cautionary tale of the inevitable failure of changing social structures for women, postmodern texts follow Jackson's

vision to narrate patriarchy's eventual undoing as they take on the fantasy past of masculinity's myths.

### **Producing the Repressed: The Labor of Disabled Bodies**

*...first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby carriage...*

Disability signifies the flesh of memory, acting as a present, if silent testament to the labor necessarily forgotten for the benefit of patriarchal family organization. As the childish "kissing song" excerpted above indicates, there is a distinct path towards this family, which, within the economically focused family, becomes a terrifying ritual that shows up in disabled bodies. In particular, disabled female bodies draw attention to the exploitation of daughters, wives, and mothers whose affective labor of desire, service, and reproduction is manipulated. Jackson's *Hangsaman* makes this point by shifting the labor of disability into the body of the reader, effectively disembodying its main daughter character as she tries to make sense of her experiences of desire. However, as the postmodern family gothic examines the "return of the repressed" female trauma in silenced and freak bodies, something is also produced rather than merely repeated. The effort of disabled bodies does create some small space within which to resist the patriarchal control of female labor.

In *Hangsaman*, Nathalie inherits the feminine trauma of having her pleasure and identity bound to patriarchal intentions. Mrs. Waite speaks at length to Nathalie about how when she was young her father named her Charity

for the purpose of securing a husband, which of course is a boon for the father of a daughter. But despite Mrs. Waite's appeals to her daughter, Nathalie tunes out most of her mother's cautions regarding the threat men pose to women as they exploit their love. This "tuning out" demonstrates Nathalie's internalized patriarchal value system that silences women, but such disavowal shows up in the narrative representation of Nathalie's increasing mental instability.

Throughout the novel, the narrative awkwardly and abruptly changes between real dialog and the dialog in Nathalie's imagination. These changes occur without any typographical indication of the change in psychic space, and, until the reader understands the pattern, can be a confusing experience. Across the few critiques there are of the novel, this quality of Nathalie's character is diagnosed as schizophrenia.

Consciously, Nathalie denies her sexual assault, which makes language and its ability to access repressed experiences a dangerous space for self-expression. As a result, her labor as a writer, her love for working with words, is more vulnerable to her father's desires that Nathalie write about him, talk with her professors about his writing, and submit her work to his scrutiny, even while she is in school. The disavowal of her own bodily memory of rape at first enables her to persist in school as her language expression is dictated by paternal figures in university professors, or her actual father. But her delusions only increase the longer she is at school. Pursuing an education primarily dependent on skills with

words results in mental disability. In his famous description of postmodern aesthetic schizophrenia, Fredric Jameson explains that “personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present...[and if] we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of our [language], then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience of psychic life” (26-27). Because Nathalie has denied her past altogether, replacing it with her father’s fantasies of her intellectual image, her work with language becomes chaotic and unsettling.

As a literary device, the schizophrenic quality of the novel produces real physiological tension in the reader’s body, which serves as the site of the return of the repressed trauma of Nathalie’s body. In displacing the physical trauma onto the reader’s body through winding, long, and stream-of-consciousness passages, Jackson diagnoses the linguistic void of female identity. Even the choice to write in third person limited highlights Nathalie’s own distance from herself. The labor of reading the novel puts the reader in the position to make choices for Nathalie, or resisting the desire to make Nathalie cohere all together. For Jackson, the only solution for Nathalie to escape either living a life of paralyzed protest or active submission to paternal manipulation is to deny any desires at all. Thus, the novel ends with Nathalie’s walk into the unknown.

While Jackson implicitly associates disability with the paternalism that undergirds institutions purported to assist female freedom (the university),

Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* literalizes the silencing of women that occurs within familial rituals, like marriage, in actual muteness. Melanie, the protagonist of the novel, and her two younger siblings, Jonathan and Victoria, have recently been orphaned when their parents are killed in a plane crash. The children are sent to live with their maternal Uncle Philip and his family – Margaret, his wife, and Frances and Finn, her brothers. On the taxi ride from the train station to Uncle Philip's house, Frances and Finn inform Melanie about her Aunt Margaret: "'Not a word she can speak,' said Finn. 'Ah, they should have told you. It is a terrible affliction; it came to her on her wedding day, like a curse. Her silence'" (37). Margaret can hear and understand, but she can only communicate through physical gestures or through the process of writing on a notepad or chalkboard. As the novel later introduces Uncle Philip and his home above the toyshop, Margaret's muteness comes to be a spectacular symbol of a variety of family traumas, not the least of which is the emotional abuse he dispenses.

Margaret's muteness is a logical extension of the rules and regulation of the family, especially female behavior, within the economy of the toyshop. In many ways, Uncle Philip is as much an artist as he is a businessman with his handcrafted puppets and other toys. But just as Mr. Waite's creativity is dependent upon his daughter's willingness to network for him or submit to his "expertise," Uncle Philip's creative labor is dependent on the silencing of the

creative expression of women. Melanie is told she will not be returning to school, even though she is only fifteen. Melanie is also not allowed to wear trousers, nor are any female customers. In silencing female expression, which is made explicit to the reader in Margaret's quiet but industrious body as she cooks, cleans, and minds the new children of the home, Philip is able to create his own temporality for his business in which feminist progress after the second world war never occurred. Part of the popularity of his toys are their gesture to a bygone era and nostalgia for the labor of the craftsman, which has subsequently in the later twentieth century been replaced by machine labor. However, Uncle Philip refuses for his products to be sold as "conversation pieces." There is no room for discussion about labor, women, or the past *as* something past.

But as Philip disables female self-expression in his home and business, Carter illustrates how the exploitation of Margaret's labor actually necessitates even more effort on part of all family members, male and female, for the everyday functioning of the house and business. Margaret can only communicate by writing, a process that can at times be painstakingly long, and so communication between Margaret and others is determined entirely by her desire to write and the timing required to wait for her. When Melanie first meets Margaret, she "noticed the woman's index finger was stiffly grained with chalk dust. She would have been a talkative woman if she could" (41). Although Philip may have no interest in what Margaret has to say or how she feels (further



symbolized in the choker necklace he makes her wear during sex), he has put up obstacles to the efficiency of his own business by employing Margaret.

But Melanie's observation that Margaret would have been a talkative woman suggests that Margaret, to a certain degree, controls and makes demands of others as they wait for her to "talk." Her disability embodies the present, if silenced, strength, which does eventually threaten Uncle Philip's power. At the end of the novel, Margaret's muteness is discovered to be self-imposed. During a rage, Uncle Philip sets the house on fire. In warning, Margaret speaks to Melanie and tells her and Finn to "get out." Melanie reflects, "with her voice, she had found her strength, a frail but constant courage like spun silk. Struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day she was freed" (197). Throughout the novel, Margaret's suffering offers a challenge to Melanie's fantasies of marriage, love, and femininity, which have been primarily determined by the masculinized romance of DH Lawrence, Gustav Klimt, or the Pre-Raphaelites. Margaret's voice, whether spoken or unspoken, offers Melanie freedom in her own voice to grieve for the past rather than anxiously anticipate a fantasy future. Rather than cower in fear at the fire or look to Finn to protect her, Melanie says quietly, "I have lost everything at once" (199); "My bear. He's gone. Everything is gone" (200). Melanie takes on the labor of grieving, which Margaret's disability has shown to be a powerful labor necessary for feminine agency.

While Carter illustrates the way that marriage shuts down verbal and other forms of female self-expression, in *Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn takes on the most sacred of feminine identities, motherhood, in order to demonstrate such identity as a disabling consequence of patriarchal economy, which not only ties women to their reproductive labor, but also usurps the life-giving significance of reproduction. The premise of the novel puts the literal labor of motherhood front and center, only to relegate it to the background within the narrative past. Before the novel's beginning, the Binewski father, Al, came up with a plan that he imagined would provide his carnival with economic security – breeding his own freak show. He and his wife, Lil, decide to create a variety of different concoctions of “illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes” during each of her pregnancies (7). The results are: their oldest son Arturo, born with fins instead of legs and arms; Iphigenia and Electra, conjoined twins who share a set of legs; Olympia, an albino dwarf with a hunch back (who is also the narrator); Fortunado, nicknamed Chick, who does not have any apparent disability or deformity, but is discovered to have telekinetic capabilities; and a handful of children that never lived past infancy and are kept in jars for display at the carnival. As Nell Sullivan explains, “the carnival's profits all trace back to Lil's maternal labor. Her body is broken by ten pregnancies and the chemical and radioactive experiments Al performs to create his freak labor force” (414). Not only are her children's disabled bodies the sign

of her manipulated maternal labor, but also Lil's own body and mind suffer from this economic exploitation of her reproduction. Throughout the novel, her mind becomes a disoriented shell that in the end cannot distinguish between past and present, nor even recognize her own child. Whereas the trauma disavowed in *The Magic Toyshop* is ignored or violently rejected, *Geek Love* shows the process of disavowal through renarration.

Lil is the first to renarrate her own reproductive labor as something that denies its role in a capitalistic endeavor. Lil explains to her children, "What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living by just being themselves?" (Dunn 7). "Gift" suggests an object or good that does not participate in market exchange, but Lil's optimism about her "freak" children being able to financially support themselves belies that initially they support the family business. Even further, this imagined fantasy of a past in which the origin of the children is envisioned as a "gift" to them as opposed to a "dedication to a joint business venture" (Warren 325) completely disavows the reality of trauma suffered by the mother. This model in which the mother's bodily labor is renarrated as a "gift" and a "minor-by-product of their creative collaboration" offers Arty, the super-patriarch the narrative skeleton of maternal labor as always already a material good that can be manipulated and exploited for patriarchal power and financial gain.

Arty takes this control of reproduction to the extreme as he develops his own cult. While Jerrold Hogle argues that “the frequent goal of that journey in the gothic...[is]...the recovery of a lost or hidden maternal origin by both women and men” (10), the postmodern family gothic, as represented by Arty in *Geek Love*, is a journey of the super patriarch to usurp that hidden maternal power for himself. Arty’s cult develops out of his performance of a spiritual guru. In preaching about how degraded and pathetic “norms” are, one woman cries that she wants to “be like him,” which Arty takes literally as he provides her the means to cut off her arms and legs. Thus, the cult begins to organize around amputation. With every toe or arm shed, “norms” are reborn with a little bit more “rot” removed from their souls (Dunn 183), and the more money Arty makes. Additionally, the disabilities of the Admitted to Arty’s cult manifest the repressed labor of the feminized Chick, whose ability to anesthetize and amputate “norms” is exploited by Arty’s domination. While Arty couldn’t kill Chick, he manages to determine how his “gift” should be used. The super-patriarch is able to confer the labor of love, marriage, and reproduction on to female and feminized bodies, all while reaping the benefits of that effort. The denial of this exploitation may reappear in the effort of disabled bodies, but that return of the repressed is only as powerful as it is free from the super-patriarch’s seductive exploitation.

### **Incestuous Production: Manipulation of Desire through Simulation**

In the family, the labor of mothers and daughters is exploited in the service of the patriarch who capitalizes on their affective support without compensation. But this familial exploitation is difficult to discuss because so often measurements for love and services within the family seem inappropriate. Love and care are considered “priceless” and “beyond measure.” The family is deemed to be beyond the market and therefore not subject to the critiques of capitalism. Family eludes materialist critiques because family operates largely from immaterial labor or affective labor. Affective labor “arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (Gregg and Seigworth 1), which contrasts sharply with the labor of the family business that explicitly makes money. As a result, affective labor is vulnerable to the power of the patriarch who pushes the boundaries of what is already “in-between.” Incest operates in this liminal space because, in the family’s lack of measurement of love or care, desire escapes clear boundaries. Incest extracts a surplus of affective labor by turning desire inward to the family and manipulating the power dynamics that come with desire for the sole benefit of the super-patriarch’s self-conception as hyper-masculine.

Within the postmodern family gothic, incest becomes a simulated event in which the primary body of power that exploits the silenced or disabled body is removed from the physical actions of incest. The effectively “disembodied” father figure gestures towards one of the primary cries against the postmodern family – that of the absent father. Both Susan Faludi and Judith Stacey document the popular panic over increasing fatherless families. Judith Stacey argues that the “belief in the destructive effects of fatherlessness itself has destructive effects. It fuels reactionary initiatives injurious to vast numbers of children and families and to the social fabric more generally” (*Radical Philosophy* 1998). One of the most significant destructive effects is an equation of physical absence with a lack of emotional influence.

However, the physical distancing that the patriarch does of his own body makes the issues of emotional and sexual exploitation, for which he is responsible, more difficult to assess. While disabled bodies produce physical signs of repressed female labor, simulated incest produces signs of paternal virility, and thus economic prowess. These signs are by design disembodied so that women’s subjection and submission is interpreted as voluntary and not coerced. Without the body of the father, “virility” cannot be challenged, and women become hyper-embodied. The simulated incest reaffirms the father-daughter model as the disembodiment of the patriarch obscures his origin—

essentially his connection to the maternal – and materializes his power in the sexually exploited and hyper-embodied daughter.

Most stories of incest function by way of distancing, narrating the actions of violation as something else: love, “playing doctor,” etc. Jackson’s work in *Hangsaman* puts the use and abuse of language qua language at the center of the distancing of the father from his violation of the daughter. While there are moments that point to “play” as a form of distancing – Nathalie and her father play “student-teacher” for which she dresses up like for a date – it is the letters that Nathalie and her father write to each other that demonstrates just how well language games work to keep the father self-righteously in power and the daughter mentally damaged. This exploitation never results in a physically sexual relationship, but does provide a specter of incest to the reader.

Nathalie writes fairly typical letters home that tell her father about her environment, classes, teachers, and other minor experiences at college. Despite the informal circumstances for the letters, Mr. Waite continues to critique Nathalie’s writing in the letters he writes back. These critiques simultaneously distance him from the content of what Nathalie has to say and draw her further in to the process of writing. Nathalie’s mental illness already makes her especially sensitive to language. Wyatt Bonikowski notes that once Nathalie leaves for college, “The remainder [of the novel] is about Nathalie’s attempt to find a mode of expression for her imagination that would not be bound by her

relationship to her father" (81). Yet her negotiation of her own imaginative work becomes more and more difficult as the letter exchanges take on notes of seduction. In one letter, Mr. Waite begins by writing "It is late at night, and I have just come home from a rather *ribald* gathering, and nothing, it seems to be at the moment would delight me more than a note of paternal warning to my only daughter" (116 my emphasis). Mr. Waite proceeds to drunkenly warn Nathalie against "false friends" and her own ability to determine who is in fact a false friend. But more important to note is how his own drunken evening out that he qualifies as "ribald" inspires him to contact his daughter.

The seduction continues with Mr. Waite's invocation of the romance narrative to which Nathalie responds in kind: Mr. Waite greets Nathalie with "My dear captive princess...It has always been my opinion, you know, that princesses are confined in towers only because they choose to stay confined..." and Nathalie responds, "Dear Sir Knight, It was not you, then, caroling, *lustily* under my window these three nights past?" (137 my emphasis). While on the surface this exchange is a playful one about Nathalie's avoidance of visiting home, the chosen structure of the play is undoubtedly erotic. With these kinds of exchanges, it is difficult to not make connections to Nathalie's experience of sexual assault. "Perhaps because Nathalie is already the victim of her father, it is easy for her to become victim of another of his doubles, a man her father invited to the party" (Hattenhauer qtd in Bonikowski 80), further supporting the



simulated incest that develops from a relationship exploitative of a daughter's imaginative labor and love for her father.

The story of Nathalie's transition to college should qualify as a story of female empowerment, especially during the early 1950s when Jackson is writing. Yet as Theresa Ebert, in her admonishment of a postmodern feminism that has lost sight of the economic and social grounds of inequality, explains, "Patriarchal ideology, for example, operates through romance narratives, among other places, to mystify the social contradictions and material conditions of women's exploitation in patriarchal capitalism. It seductively covers male violence against women and the growing poverty of women...by constructing narratives of female empowerment" (9). The romance that Nathalie's father has created with her, specifically grounded in her immaterial labor of intelligence and imagination, positions Nathalie to use her efforts for the benefit of her father's masculinity; he is both teacher and Knight in his virile language.

If the romance narrative is used to "mystify the social contradictions and material conditions of women's exploitation in patriarchal capitalism," the postmodern family gothic novel turns the romance narrative into a grotesque puppet show that preys on daughters who are without maternal models of power. The sexual exploitation that befalls Melanie of *The Magic Toyshop* shows how the products of the family business become the tools of incest, which distance the patriarch from the sexual violation he orchestrates.

In particular, the forms of Uncle Philip's incestuous acts towards Melanie produce a sense of shame in Melanie regarding her parents' social class and simultaneously produce greater value in his toys. Uncle Philip's only joys in life are the puppet performances he puts on using his life-sized marionettes. He forces his family to attend these shows, and with the arrival of Melanie, he decides to integrate her into his performance of Leda and the Swan, a myth of glorified rape. In assessing Melanie for the role of Leda, Philip licentiously critiques her body, which she had only just begun to love in its adulthood: "'You're well built, for fifteen...It's all that free milk and orange juice that does it. Do you have your periods?' 'Yes,' she said, too shocked to do more than whisper. He grunted, displeased. 'I wanted my Leda to be a little girl. Your tits are too big'" (143). These comments explicitly attribute Melanie's body to her previous economic situation of wealth and privilege before her parents died, which Uncle Philip judges as unworthy for his purposes. Patricia Smith explains, "the social oppression that pervades *The Magic Toyshop* is, for the most part, the detritus of Victorian imperialism and sexual repression" (342). But in critiquing Melanie's blossoming sexuality – "your tits are too big" – Uncle Philip reveals an underlying incestuous desire for Melanie's body, which he has distanced himself from initially in his complaints, and subsequently in his use of surrogates for his desire.

The scene of Leda and the Swan itself is the most uncomfortable moment in a novel composed of uncomfortable moments. The specter of incest from Jackson turns into a grotesque and fantastic display. The family has gathered together as an audience to watch the “Unique Phenomenon” that Uncle Philip has prepared. Feeling incredibly foolish and uncomfortably underdressed in her see-thru tunic, Melanie begins to follow the cues of her actions as Uncle Philip narrates them. Philip has not actually rehearsed with Melanie because he wants her responses to the startling sounds and appearance of the human-sized puppet swan to be “authentic.” Following Philip’s cues, Melanie gets down on her knees and, from a state somehow outside her own body, witnesses her own violation:

Looking up, she could see Uncle Philip directing its movements. His mouth gaped open with concentration. She noticed that his black bow tie had glossy spots in the fabric which caught the light and shone... ‘Almighty Jove in the form of a swan wreaks his will.’ Uncle Philip’s voice, deep and solemn as the notes of an organ... The swan made a lumpish jump forward and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realizing she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan mounted her...there were feathers in her mouth...the passionate swan had dragged her dress half off. (166-7)

Through the use of a puppet, Uncle Philip manages to rape Melanie without having to physically touch the body that both disgusts and arouses him.

Elizabeth Gargano observes that through “her choice to reenact Zeus’s rape of Leda through a surreal and absurd puppet show, Carter emphasizes that

Zeus's iconic masculinity is reduced to 'an artificial construct, a puppet'" (58). While the reader experiences this reduction, Melanie's experience of sexual violation is not reduced; postmodern parody is not without corporeal effects. Philip's "mouth gaped open" and he even drools a little on his bow tie as he watches from the perspective of the swan and simulates raping his niece. The swan literally chokes Melanie with the feathers, which impacts her ability to scream. The swan becomes the instrument by which Uncle Philip authentically orally rapes Melanie, which exaggerates the value of the swan beyond being a mere toy.

While Mr. Waite and Uncle Philip explicitly make their daughter/niece's sexuality an economic issue, *Arty of Geek Love* disguises his economic threats as betrayals of the heart, painting himself as the victim of the exploitation of affective labor, which only serves to have his sisters "voluntarily" reaffirm his virility, and therefore his economic power. Arty is a particularly prime example of the "culture of personality" that evolved in the twentieth-century (Sandage 260) due to the "typically American duet" of "panic and adventure" (Sandage 259). This duet is especially heightened when sisters and daughters become both the source of paternal legacy and paternal anxiety. Arty, like capitalism, "is an organism that cannot sustain itself without constantly looking beyond its boundaries, feeding off its external environment" (Hardt & Negri 224). However, in order to maintain the thrust of his own following and popularity, Arty must

remain hyper-vigilant to the threats from inside his own family. Specifically, his anxiety over his sisters' sexuality and reproductive abilities reveal the erotics of family capitalism.

For the majority of Arty's life, his sexual attractiveness to his sisters allowed him a power of "disinterest." Arty always captivated his sisters' fantasies and the girls speak openly as children, and dream secretly as teenagers, of marrying Arty. As the Binewski children come into adulthood, especially with the rise of Arty's cult success, their sexual activity takes a central role in the family dynamics. Oly discovers that every night after his shows, Arty "entertains" norm women in his trailer, which drives Oly into envious self-pity. The twin sisters, however, develop their own business out of their sexuality. Victoria Warren observes, "the conjoined twins decide not to be outdone by Arty and to go into business for themselves. Norms, they say, are preoccupied with how Siamese twins have sex, and the twins decide to 'capitalize on that curiosity'" (331). In their own way, the twins exploit the affective labor of the norm imagination and sexual desire similar to Arty's exploitation of norm affects of pain and sorrow. Although the twins seem to be following along with the family business of preying on the repressed feelings of their audiences, Arty cannot abide by entrepreneurial endeavors outside his design. Before Arty really knows what the twins are actually doing, he, with suspicion, sends The Bag Man

to be their constant “protector.”<sup>2</sup> Already, Arty’s true motivations of surveillance – he must know anything that his sisters are doing that might make them popular – are masked with a gesture of love or “protection.”

But as seen in texts like *The Virgin Suicides*, “protection” regarding daughters (even if they are technically sisters) is code for control of female sexuality, which eventually takes on more incestuous qualities. Arty’s interest in his sisters’ sexuality becomes explicitly incestuous when his discovery of their “business” inspires, not anger, but grief, as if the sisters committed adultery. After they have been discovered with a judge who has paid them ten thousand dollars for their sexual services, Arty forces Oly to push him in his chair to burst in on the twins. As Oly recalls:

He leaned there, propped against the door jamb, looking at them. I figured he’d have a set speech ready to flay them with. He’d stare for a while until they were off balance and then spray them with icy words. But when he finally opened his mouth it was the private, alone-in-the-dark Arty who spoke in a then, scared voice. “How come?” He asked. “How come you did that?” The twins, wide-eyed and wary, were startled too. They had expected ‘God’ Arty... “I mean,” Arty’s forehead folded in peaks of bewilderment, “you didn’t have to do that”...Elly took a breath and got back on her high horse. “You don’t run us, Arty...We don’t worship your ass, Arty. Not at all.”

“Is that it? Iphy, tell me. Did she do it to keep you away from me?”

“No,” she said. “I wanted to.” (243-4)

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<sup>2</sup> The Bag Man is actually Verne Bogner who shot at that children when they were very young, but missed killing them. After a long story of his own downfall, including a failed suicide attempt that left him with half a face (hence the bag), he has come to Arty as a means of reconciliation – to be his perfect slave.

Arty's pain over the twins' actions speaks to some greater attachment to their sexuality beyond perhaps their ability to make money from it, although his affect of heartbreak belies the persistent economic threat the sisters have posed to Arty throughout their lives. Nevertheless, Arty's jealousy is akin to a betrayed lover and his appeal to Iphy, the sister who has always tried to give Arty pleasure, in the aftermath illustrates his desire to reestablish his sexual virility.

Arty's pain over his sisters' own capitalistic drive, manifest in their sexual agency, comes from a disbelief that they see themselves as anything other than his property. As Anne Dalke explains about incest in the early American novel, "The personal deprivations suffered by the children are not as important as the loss of the services they provide for their parents. The focus is the privation of the father, rather than that of whose primary function is to make his life comfortable" (190). Thinking more economically about Arty's pain, the twins' sexual life that has developed without his approval represents an inability for him to ever be the broker for their virginity, an economic but also incestuous patriarchal desire. He has not profited from their sexual ventures, nor experienced the pleasure in facilitating their sexual lives, and his pain comes from a recognition that they are spoiled merchandise.

Dalke refers to this form of patriarchal pain as "affectional authoritarianism," which, within the postmodern family gothic, is enacted in patriarchal disembodiment and daughterly imprisonment within her body "for

her own good." Arty "gives" the twins to the Bag Man "to keep them out of trouble" (Dunn 244). Arty refuses to see the sisters anymore, but uses people in the carnival, especially Oly, to operate on his behalf. He cautions his sisters, "the Bag Man is dangerous. Don't struggle. Don't fight him" (249), which shifts the responsibility of the oppression onto the sisters rather than Arty or the Bag Man. Indeed, it does come to pass that the Bag Man rapes the twins, all the while believing that his doing so is a loving gesture to Arty. The Bag Man is clearly a surrogate for Arty to control and enjoy the sexual bodies of his sisters. Although the Bag Man doesn't live past his climax – Lil finally remembers who the Bag Man is and kills him during the rape – Arty has regained control of his sisters' sexual lives by making it unmarketable, especially since the Bag Man still manages to impregnate them. The twins stop performing in the carnival with the onset of their pregnancy, their body effectively weighed down and limited by their growing belly. Motherhood is the most unsexy and unmarketable condition of female identity, but one that speaks to the virility of the patriarch.

While Jackson establishes the exploitative power of language that extracts surplus labor from women, particularly their feelings of desire, Carter and Dunn both illustrate how desire is also unpredictable and its "boundary-less-ness" also opens up the door to forms of incest that work against patriarchal power. In particular, as the patriarch makes himself "guiltless" of incest through



disembodiment, the hyper-embodied women of the family find ways to get their physical desires met in the physical realm of the family.

While incest is often deployed to illustrate the manner in which women's affective labor is exploited, it can also be deployed to give material, bodily weight to a woman's desires that a patriarch has distanced himself too far from. Unlike the simulated incest of Uncle Philip and Melanie, the incest between Margaret and her brother Frances in *The Magic Toyshop* is real and challenges Philip's authority. Finn explains to Melanie, "They are lovers. They have always been lovers...They are everything to each other. That is why we have stayed here" (194). Margaret and France's love and sexual desire has forced Uncle Philip to structure his home to include them, even if he doesn't know why. Not too long after Finn and Melanie leave the sibling-lovers alone, they hear screams; Uncle Philip has come home and discovered them. He proceeds to tear the house apart and set it on fire. The love between Frances and Margaret is not something that he can economically exploit like Melanie's sexuality and her desire for Finn. In realizing that he has been cuckolded, Uncle Philip has lost the virile power established in the outward signs such as Margaret's sex-choker and Melanie's puppet rape.

While Arty gains much of his panopticon-like power from his disembodiment, such practices confer unexpected power on to his sister Oly, whose incestuous desire eventually unveils the fragility of Arty's sexual

proWess. Arty already sets up his own source of destruction by having Oly be responsible for his bodily needs. Because Arty's disability prevents him from walking or easily feeding himself, someone must always be there to help him with daily physical activities. Oly wheels him around everywhere; she oils him after his shows; she washes him when mold begins to grow in his crevices from swimming; and she holds his books for him and turns the pages when he wants to read. Oly is literally responsible for keeping Arty healthy and informed. Initially, Arty sees this dynamic as a source of power. Oly says "Arty wouldn't admit that he ate or slept. Information was a marketable commodity to Arty" (172). The "mystery" he creates around his body and its abilities allows for him to forget how much he depends on Oly for daily functioning. In a sense, by blurring the physical boundary lines between his own body and Oly's, Arty has deepened the incestuous feelings of his sister, which actually empower her.

But in letting down his guard with Oly, merely because she poses no outright economic threat, he doesn't anticipate how her own sexual and reproductive needs might work outside the market of his control. Oly's love for Arty creates in her a desire to have his baby "as a gift for him." She asks her little brother Chick to telekinetically move Arty's sperm into her uterus. He agrees and Oly becomes pregnant with Miranda, the primary audience for the novel's content. Whereas Arty reacts to the twins' sexual experimentation with grief, he reacts to Oly's reproductive experimentation with rage: "The stick hit my ear and

I yelled into the blanket as I woke up...Then I heard the unmistakable rasp of Arty, angry, sputtering behind the stick, 'Cunt!...Slimy! Twisted bitch'" (302). Arty calls his sister a traitor, and even when the baby is born, Arty refuses to acknowledge her, especially since her "speciality"<sup>3</sup> is only a small pig tail. Not only is Miranda a physical manifestation of Arty's corporeality, she is one that does not demonstrate his prowess in her "freakishness."

This real product of incest embodies desire that cannot be economically rationalized or measured. Oly's actions have produced something outside the market as envisioned by Arty. Her orchestration to become pregnant with his child not only yields no economic value, but also was done without economic value in mind – Miranda is a "gift." Arty cannot even restructure the reality that he retains control, as he does with the twins, except to kill Miranda or force Oly to send her away, as if she never existed. To her devastation, Oly believes up until the birth of her daughter that she has operated within the familial boundaries devised by Arty – the child is meant to be an embodiment of her unconditional devotion to Arty. However, once Miranda is born, Oly reflects, "Understand, daughter, that the only reason for your existing was as a tribute to your uncle-father. You were meant to love him. I planned to teach you how to serve him and adore him. You would be his monument and fortress against mortality. Forgive me. As soon as you arrived I realized that you were worth far

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<sup>3</sup> In the world of the carnival, "speciality" refers to someone's spectacular disability or gimmick.

more than that" (309). Miranda's value cannot be determined, which resists Arty's entire family and business philosophy. Distance is necessary in successful capitalist ventures; Miranda collapses the distance between Arty and the affective labor that supports him and testifies to his dependence on others.

### **The Economics of the Family Meal: Consumptive Masculinity**

From the vampire to the zombie, consumption has long been a part of the lore and fear about monsters, and food acts as the site in the postmodern gothic that best manifests the conflicts between the super-patriarch's fantasy history of his identity and the exploited labor upon which his power depends. While women have been traditionally associated with consumption in their bodies as "receptacles," in the modern and postmodern period, consumption becomes a sign of masculine power. Scott Sandage identifies an "acquisitive personality" as that which sets powerful men within capitalism apart from those less masculine in their ambitions. Sandage clarifies capitalism's "rules of action" as "the rational pursuit of profit, the perpetual increase of capital *as an end in itself...*" (5 my emphasis). Thus, masculine prowess is determined by accumulated capital, rather than productive output, despite myths of being "a good provider." This paradox of masculinity, in which being a man is defined by one's ability to

consume more than produce, can only be resolved through the simultaneous dependence on and subsequent disavowal of female labor. Food, as the literal fuel for productive bodies and primary object of domestic consumption, acts as a symbol that brings the worlds of productive labor, affective labor, and consumption into confrontation. The scenes of eating best illustrate the complicated ties between the socially valued product of the market (family business) and the socially ignored process of affect that contributes to the value of said product (female family labor), all which reflect the fragility of masculinity.

While Jackson's depiction of consumptive masculinity is shown to literally break down the mental stability of female family members, *Hangsaman* also reveals an important truth that becomes more explicit in the postmodern gothic. The fragility of masculinity comes from its *empty* consumption of female labor. Despite a persistent acquisitive personality, patriarchs seeking to demonstrate their economic prowess through an accumulation of capital (cultural capital in the case of Mr. Waite) don't actually accumulate anything, and thus such acquisitiveness becomes insatiable. Mr. Waite holds literary parties to show off to his academic and intellectual acquaintances and demands that his wife cook and make cocktails for his guests to support his academic networking, even if he can't remember how many people he invited. These refreshments distill the conflict of power between Mr. and Mrs. Waite because, during the party, Mrs.

Waite begins to agonize over the discrepancy between food and number of guests. She despairs to Nathalie, "They've almost finished *everything*...I *never* know what to do...No matter how much I get ready, there are always too many of your father's friends, and not enough food in the world to feed them all" (32). The guests seem to never quite be full, always empty, which simultaneously drains Mrs. Waite's energy and labor power. Presumably, food and drink are consumed in order to satisfy a physical need, to nourish. However, Mrs. Waite's efforts to nourish are for naught. Within an environment that speaks to Mr. Waite's popularity and cultural capital, Jackson draws attention to how such popularity is based on Mrs. Waite's ability to fuel the energy of Mr. Waite's image.

This empty consumption, which obscures the physical and mental depletion of women through their material and immaterial labor, takes on greater significance in the postmodern gothic as masculine authenticity becomes an object of male confrontation at the dinner table. Patriarchs challenge other men in the family over the way consumption occurs, which shifts focus away from the essential fragility of their masculinity. Play, a postmodern narrative strategy often used to disrupt tradition, power, and chronology, is a direct threat to traditional masculine power. Playing is also a form of labor that does not contribute to the market economy as it is neither specifically productive nor specifically consumptive. Within Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, Uncle Philip and

Finn battle for power through a dispute over playing with one's food. In particular, play, beyond its challenge to hierarchies and economical organization of labor, illustrates a fear of feminization that keeps the patriarch particularly paranoid.

Playfulness is already a sensitive issue with Uncle Philip, as he makes toys and owns a toyshop but is in no way playful himself. Play, to Uncle Philip, is a feminizing quality that his chosen profession constantly must confront and undermine. Finn explains to Melanie that once a journalist came to do a photo feature of the store – “toys for grown-ups” – and promised Philip that the whole of London would soon come to purchase his crafts; in response, Philip smashes the journalist's camera and other equipment. Such a characterization of his craft as “toys” that might bring some nostalgic delight to adults triggers a childish tantrum. Essentially, what exactly Philip intends for his toys, beyond his own use of them, is uncertain, except that they should generate a seriousness. This anxiety regarding his own product and its “softness” ultimately set up the battle of masculine power between Philip and Finn at the dinner table.

For Philip “play” is disruptive to his order of the domestic sphere. As Philip's apprentice, Finn is the target of much of Philip's abuse. He views Finn and his brother as disgusting Irishmen, but Finn's proclivity for play especially aggravates Philip. At one point during a meal, Finn uses the maple syrup to make lacy patterns on his food to which Philip barks, “Stop playing with your

food or else" (72). Often Finn's playful and slow pace which delays consumption triggers Philip's rage. Finn takes his time to get the table for meals, which causes food to cool because Philip will not allow anyone to eat until everyone is present at the table. In playing around before the meal, Finn disrupts the order represented by the food. Philip says "'It is cooling because you are so late. If there's one thing that disgusts me it's cold porridge. Besides you Jowles,' he added" (69-70). Philip eats quickly and once he has finished the meal is over, regardless if anyone else is done. This quick pace and mindless eating, which does not see the capacity for food to be fun or pleasurable, anchors Philip's masculine power in a severe utilitarianism. Finn's direct challenge to the temporality of the table reveals how fragile Uncle Philip's sense of masculinity is. Indeed, the time that Finn takes to eat allows more time for the actual slower eaters, the women, to eat. Philip's power operates off of what is the empty or unfinished consumption of the rest of his family.

In *Geek Love* food consumption becomes a way to punish male family members who have rejected the idealized disembodied masculine authority. Part of Arty's power is demonstrated through his ability to shift his bodily needs onto the bodies of his female family members. In fact, feeding Arty becomes a privilege among the sisters. For Arty, this bodily disengagement speaks to his masculinity. The ideal masculine authority, demonstrated by Arty, despite his freak body, is to mentally and emotionally manipulate the bodies of others.



Indeed, his own freak body enables this manipulation for financial gain. Chick, however, has no visible “speciality,” which already makes him less powerful in the eyes of Arty. But it is Chick’s refusal to use his telekinetic powers all the time that provokes Arty’s anger and cruelty. Chick, as male and telekinetic should have an easy time subscribing to this disembodiment by merely transporting food into his mouth without having to touch it. However, Chick’s telekinesis triggers even greater sensitivity within him. When he “moves meat” to feed the tigers, he develops an intimacy so great with the animal that the meat used to be that he gets sick. After discovering this, Chick becomes vegetarian and opts to move meat with his hands rather than his mind. For Arty this is a direct violation of not only family identity, but also masculine identity. Arty often forces Chick to make him food with meat and forces him to do so with his mind. Arty punishes Chick for his sensitivity to the pain of others as well as for his refusal to labor in the most masculine way – disembodied.

Ultimately, the circularity of “Produce, Consume, Disavow, Repeat” is self-negating. The family cannot be sustained through business practices, especially as those business practices serve only the acquisitive personality of the patriarch. This self-negation through excessive and insatiable consumption is depicted in the postmodern gothic by a symbolic child who grows ever fatter. This child harkens back to the critique of the future-oriented homebody family who cannot see the child as anything other than innocent and worth sacrificing

for. With a focus on the fantasy past that guides the patriarch's current actions, the two fat children of *The Magic Toyshop* and *Geek Love* illustrate the burden that disavowal causes the present.

In *The Magic Toyshop*, Victoria, Melanie's little sister, and Mumpo, Elly and Iphy's baby, both represent the way the insatiability of capital, which has exploited female labor, is embodied in "innocence." Victoria, like an infant who is just learning to eat on her own, is almost always described as eating and covered in food: "With a spoon, she scoured the crumbs from a used jar of raspberry jam. She sat on the floor. Her hair was stuck in spikes with jam. An angry rash of jam surrounded her mouth and her dress was speared and sticky. She was content. She had grown fatter than ever. She was always clutching a fistful of sweets or biting into a between-meal snack of bread and condensed milk or scraping out a bowl in which Aunt Margaret had mixed cake. Aunt Margaret spoiled her and adored her...there was no point in talking to Victoria, who had forgotten anywhere else because she lived from day to day" (Carter 88). Victoria's sloppiness and insatiable desire for treats is seen as cute by Aunt Margaret, and Victoria distracts her from her own oppression and inability to consume given the dynamics of the table that keep her hungry. Perhaps Margaret overfeeds Victoria as a way to vicariously feed herself; however, the more Victoria fattens up, the more she loses any qualities of identity other than

being a fat child. She “lived from day to day,” which speaks to the ideal qualities of submissive women. Victoria is the repository of masculine economic power.

Mumpo even further represents the burden that capitalism and the economically charged family puts on women’s labor and physical bodies. Because Elly attempts to abort the baby she and Iphy conceived during their rape by the Bag Man, Arty has Elly lobotomized. Thus, Iphy must carry around Elly’s droopy half of their body in addition to their excessively fat baby, Mumpo. Mumpo is anticipated to provide the family with the spectacle of “the world’s fattest baby” but such a spectacle is shown to be vampiric. Lil is kind to the twins, but privately tells Oly, “Greedy, takes it in. Won’t let it go. Keeps it!” (310) in reference to the fact that Mumpo hardly ever excretes. While Victoria as a female child (although she’s so fat, who can tell), is a repository of foodstuffs that illustrate masculine power, which keep her passive and compliant, Mumpo, as a male child is deemed an inheritor of Arty’s legacy of exploiting affective labor. Thus, his economic promise inspires the domestic violence that Arty commits via the surgeon who lobotomizes Elly. Once again, Arty takes over maternal and reproductive rights.

However, importantly, these two fat children whose bodies keep expanding might also point to the rising desire of the body that is otherwise ignored by the super-patriarch. This rising desire will ultimately spell the demise of the super-patriarch. The more the children consume, the less identity they

develop. The more the super-patriarch consumes and simultaneously denies his own body, the less defined his power becomes – these children literally lose bodily definition. Yet in this process of exploitation that leads the super-patriarch further and further away from his own body, women of the family find greater power in embodiment that requires a transparency, not a disavowal, of labor.

### **The Business of the Feminist Family: Transparency of Labor**

As the postmodern family gothic novel represents more and more areas of resistance within the patriarchal family, especially as that patriarchal family structure becomes more and more wrapped up in the identity of a single patriarch, the fragility of masculine identity is exposed and begins to buckle under the pressure of his own hypocrisy. The patriarchal family economy operates just as capitalism does, through obscurity and disavowal of certain kinds of labor. As women in such family structures find spaces of resistance, the family economy becomes more transparent, which disrupts the autonomous and mythical power of the super-patriarch. While novels such as *The Magic Toyshop* and *Geek Love* provide invaluable critiques of the mechanisms of patriarchal power and its exploitation of primarily affective labor, Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* takes such critiques further by envisioning possible new structures in which the

family economy is not only transparent, but is matriarchal. For Butler, the productive and consumptive sites of disability, incest, and food operate with greater social support to resist certain conservative forms of community.

In this contemporary vampire novel, Butler challenges and sees beyond mere critiques of the labor exchange of the patriarchal family in her sharp comparison of two vampires. Milo Silk, the main antagonist, represents the traditional archetype of the super-patriarch who consumes the labor of others without adequate return; Shori Matthews, the narrator and hero of the novel, represents the alternative maternal family leader who makes labor exchanges transparent and democratic. The plot of the novel is driven by actions taken by Milo Silk to kill Shori Matthews' families because Shori's genetically engineered body threatens the vampire traditions held precious by the Silks. Shori, a small girl of color, is able to be out in sunlight due to her mothers' experiments with the genetics of Ina, the vampire race, and humans. The Silks do not consider Shori to be a genuine Ina because of her ability to go out in sunlight and her skin color. Her existence challenges the Silk family's power among the Ina, especially since Shori's complete memory loss – the result of being almost burned alive by the Silk's human symbionts – requires her to depend more on her own human symbionts than the Silks see as acceptable. The Silks prize their ability to control and manipulate humans for their purposes – what is arguably the family business. However, Elizabeth Lundberg argues that Butler's text reflects a

poststructuralist understanding of the subject: “rather than the humanist idea of the subject, a detached and unitary individual deriving rights from property and (self) possession, [Butler’s novel establishes] the idea of the subject as an evolving, contingent being, one who is enmeshed within discursive webs and whose subjectivity emerges out of relationships...” (562). *Fledgling* ultimately documents the inevitable downfall of the super-patriarch’s subjectivity.

Whereas the family businesses of the other novels of this chapter are actual businesses with a specific product that is produced, *Fledgling* demonstrates how family as an institution is itself a business that is created out of contractual relationships. Common beliefs about vampires posit their total control over the human, but Butler depicts human-vampire relationships that are never so absolute. Humans, like Wright, express ambivalence over their dependence on their vampire, since the longer they stay, the harder it is for them to leave. Additionally, the death of a human symbiont results in the severe illness and/or death of the Ina. Ina, once they have bonded to their humans, need them for their health. During the trial meant to judge the responsibility of the Silks for the murder of Shori’s family, Shori becomes exhausted and weak. Her adopted symbiont, Brook (who was previously her brother’s) tells her that “You need to touch your symbionts more...you need to touch us and know that we’re here for you, ready to help you if you need us...We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That’s the way and Ina-and-symbiont household works, or that’s the

way it should work" (177). Both Ina and humans openly acknowledge this interdependent relationship as Shori is re-educated about her race and history. This acknowledgment sharply contrasts with Marx's vampire of capitalism that, while dependent on and exploitative of the labor of others, expressly denies such dependence. Because Ina cannot function easily within the human world, human symbionts take on responsibilities of finances and other ventures on behalf of the Ina. Power within the family is always in check as the sexual and nourishing way that Ina and human symbionts gain strength is less subject to disavowal because of feeding's hyper-embodied and intimate process.

Butler reconceives "disability" as hyper-mobility. Shori's body, which is interpreted as an abomination and that which makes her not Ina, is one that is more capable than that of the oldest male Ina. Not only can Shori go out during daylight, she is also stronger and faster than other Ina, and her senses are even more heightened, which makes her even more difficult to kill. Shori's hyper-able body is only enriched by her more conventional disability of memory loss. Shori's inability to remember anything of "what it means" to be Ina empowers her family structure as she must depend more on her human symbionts and other Ina for assistance. Shori is able to approach the politics of the Ina with effectively an open, or empty, mind. This openness and vague sense of loss gives her greater fire to resist the super-patriarch. Further, Shori's memory loss and her accusations that the Silk family murdered her family requires the species as a

whole to revisit their history in a way that makes the origins of their power more transparent. Her disabilities produce a cultural rearticulation of social and racial identities that would have otherwise remained unreflectively fixed.

In *Fledgling*, incest does not produce signs of male virility, only because incest cannot be simulated. The main reason that Ina live by themselves with their human symbionts is that the intense feelings of sexual desire between Ina are too powerful to combat with will, even among directly related family members like fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, brothers and sisters. Shori's father explains to her "We Ina are sexually territorial...As your body changes, and especially as your scent changes, you will be perceived more and more as an available adult female" even among her male family members (Butler 79-80). He clarifies, "Your brothers and I have our genetic predispositions – our instincts – but we are also intelligent. We are aware of our urges...Your scent right now is interesting, but for us, it's more irritating than enticing" (80). Incest is the primary reason why Ina don't live together, and simulated incest, or that which would exploit the affective and desirous feelings of family members, does not occur mostly because real actual incest between Ina is such a threat. The only form of incest that does occur among Ina family is actually another form of resistance to the traditional family hierarchies.

Celia, one of Shori's brother's symbionts explains that "The relationship among an Ina and several symbionts is about the closest thing I've seen to a



workable group marriage” (127). Symbionts are allowed, and even expected to have relationships among themselves. In this way, incest, or the sexual and familial relationships among human symbionts within a single Ina’s household, resist the total control that an Ina might have over them. Shori’s response to Celia’s descriptions of the Ina home resonates with her: “I wanted that – a home in which my symbionts enjoyed being with me and enjoyed one another and raised their children as I raised mine. That felt right, felt good” (127). Given Shori’s memory loss, her experiences of what feels “natural” carry more weight than what might be described as “natural” by other Ina with their own agendas that have formed from history and socialization. Further, because Ina and humans cannot reproduce (hence the favorability of symbiont-symbiont relationships), “Ina familial networks deconstruct the heteronormative family by decoupling sex from reproduction and reproduction from living arrangements” (Lundberg 573). Thus, motivations behind sex are more transparent than within the nuclear family.

As the consumption of food symbolizes the way that masculinity is a consumptive personality masquerading as a productive personality, Butler places the “family meal” into the privacy of a solitary room and something that occurs only between two people. As a result, the power dynamics are no longer performed for an audience, which is the main way that patriarchy maintains masculine prowess. The family meal is hyper-literal. Feeding occurs between

bodies, which collapses the distance so necessary for the mythology of masculine power. How family power is developed and negotiated is never an oblique process and much less subject to manipulation by a single person.

*Fledgling* reimagines the critiques dramatized in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Geek Love* as that which can produce a real alternative feminist family. This reimagining provides a lens of hope that shifts our understanding of the fiery ends of Carter and Dunn. In particular, the uses of fire all highlight a structural commonality of the postmodern family gothic, which is that of reflection or “looking back.” This structure, while present within the novels of the first chapter, takes on a more revolutionary quality when understood within the narratives of labor and family economy.

### **Concluding Fires: Patriarchal Self-Destruction and Daughterly Witnessing**

The effort by which the super-patriarchs work to fantasize the past, and force a forgetting of the way in which their power is dependent on the effort of female labor ultimately comes to a spectacular self-destructive end. While Jackson can only see a void for women in the future because of the way that paternalism exploits women inside and outside the home, the authors of the postmodern family gothic see a transitional point in family structure. This transition starts with the super-patriarch’s attempts to burn down his own family to protect the illusion of his power. In the midst of greater spaces of resistance

that come with increasing tunnel-vision-focus on a single individual in the family, the super-patriarch takes action to destroy any evidence of his own fragility. As the fires make their way across the novel *Fledgling*, readers can sense the persistence of women after the destruction of both the family and its sources of economic support. Such a perspective shapes the interpretation of both *The Magic Toyshop* and *Geek Love*, which each end in a fire initially intended as a call to forget.

The narrative structure of the biblical story of Lot's wife can be seen as the inspiration for this shift in family. Indeed, Carter uses the reference to Lot's wife explicitly to provide Melanie with a premonition of the end. When Melanie offers her aunt her green dress to wear when Uncle Philip is gone, she observes "In her slip, she looked like a refugee camp child, all limbs and eyes...The cupboard door swung open revealing the dress, grey and upright as Lot's wife after she looked back" (188). When Philip returns to discover Margaret and Frances cuckholding him, he immediately burns the house down. He cannot bear that his wife has found a way to have her desires met. Of course, his fire triggers Margaret's renewed sense of power as she speaks and tells Melanie to run away. Essentially, Margaret saves Melanie and Finn's lives and as they stand and watch the toyshop go up in flames, an uncomfortable Edenic portrait is created. However uncertain and uncomfortable of a beginning suggested with this ending, Carter does provide for the possibility of life beyond the home and

beyond the capitalistic formation of the family. While Melanie's future is still attached to the heterosexual coupling with Finn, the looking back at the fire does not leave Melanie a pillar of salt.

In *Geek Love*, Chick, in a rage that has been building up through his entire life, telekinetically blows up the carnival after Elly kills her and Iphy's baby, Mumpo. The fire kills those who have followed along with Arty's rule, but those who survive are the characters who have resisted the call to forget. The only survivors of the family are Oly, her mother Lil, and her daughter Miranda. While Chick cannot be seen as trying to destroy the evidence of his own weakness as Philip is, Chick's response to Mumpo's murder in many ways covers up the evidence of Arty's fragility (Elly seems to come back to consciousness after her lobotomy to stab Mumpo), a phenomenon made possible only from years of Arty's abuse and narcissism. Unlike the imperative to "not look back" that the biblical story conveys for fear of paralyzing punishment, *Geek Love* is a novel structured on looking back. The novel is told from Oly's adult (and postmortem) perspective in a letter to her daughter about her origins. The maternal survives the destruction and looking back becomes a grand gesture of love. Such love is composed of a transparent accounting of both the super-patriarch's own vulnerability and the ways in which women have underestimated their own power. The carnival fire marks the point at which Oly can structure and create her own family while not ignoring the past.

Within narratives of the family business, which are so wrapped up in controlling the mythology of the patriarch, the story of Lot's wife haunts the reader. The family business is that which requires a disavowal of origins – the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah meant to start the human community over again, as if Sodom and Gomorrah never existed. But as the patriarch sets fires to the homes to destroy the space that now evidences his complete lack of control over *his* family, he also loses control over the meaning of the fire itself. By the end of each of these novels, fire becomes cleansing – painful and traumatic, but cleansing nonetheless. If the narrative structure of Lot's wife is taken as an underlying story for the postmodern gothic, then salt – what one turns into when looking back – becomes a preservative, that which maintains the nourishment of memory. These fires offer an opportunity, not to forget the oppressive structures of patriarchy, but rather to remake the conditions of family within the memory of patriarchy, the memory of family trauma, in consciousness. The super-patriarchy's consolidation of power is his own undoing and women, particularity daughters, stumble, but persist in the wake of his destruction.

### **Chapter 3: The Family Trip**

*“Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next.*

*~ Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five*

No one likes family vacations. In fact, cultural representations of the family vacation in popular culture are often grounded in the truth that everyone hates the family trip, but continues to participate in the ritual for arbitrary social reasons. An unacknowledged reason for this ambivalence resides in the tradition of the post-war road narrative, which posits the road as a space of freedom and escape from the drudgeries of everyday life, specifically men’s lives. Indeed “drudgeries” is a euphemistic term for changing realities of power within the domestic space that drive fathers to take their families on the road. Men seek to escape the transformational fire of the home from chapter two that would challenge their leadership and authority. As is well documented in literary criticism of the road narrative, the genre primarily centers on men’s freedom and

striving towards an authenticity they failed to sustain within the home. As the home and marketplace fall apart, particularly in their linear temporality, “The reinvigorated mythological value of car travel...[enabled] a return to a more coherent, ‘linear’ and deliberate identity-building living, that is a ‘life seen as a pilgrimage’” (Bauman qtd in Enevold 406). Despite the rallying-cries of the prime authors of the road narrative, the Beats, road narratives often replicate the linearity they claim to want to upset.

But without the patriarchal structures of home and business, men eventually lose even more power out on the road (hence the tradition of the foolish father figure of numerous family road trip films). The car especially offers promises of mobility and power to women, no longer tied to the home, and the disruption to linearity invites new conceptions of family relationships. Yet, such disruption is not without discomfort, to all members of the family – “the trips aren’t necessarily fun” – so can the family that travels avoid the seductive patriarchal call to linear structure? The novels of this chapter illustrate the difficulty of resisting the ease of linearity – the fantasy future and past – promised by patriarchy. The ability of characters in these novels to consciously make change to their relationships to time and to their families is tempered by the seduction of dominant social narratives: The Osaka family in Cynthia Kadohata’s *The Floating World* eventually moves into a home and opens a business; Shannon in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* struggles let go of the

ideal image of female beauty determined by society; Jordan in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* continues to place faith in satisfying his desires with the "perfect woman." Rather than the road offering a space of escape, travel merely brings all narratives – dominant, forgotten, disavowed, remembered, fantasy – to the surface and in chaotic juxtaposition. Sorting through and taking responsibility for such narratives requires an entirely different monstrous figure than the super-patriarch. The monstrous maternal figure of the postmodern family gothic models for her family the way to embrace chaos by indulging in the power of dark humor and desire, and by documenting the experience in writing.

Traditionally, the use of travel within gothic literature operates as a narrative strategy that creates the conditions for the invasion of the home: either an outsider travels from afar to penetrate the secure domestic sphere (*Dracula*), or an outsider's travel allows for the reader to observe the drama of an insecure home space (the unnamed narrator of Poe's "The House of Usher"). But even in the case of the *Dracula*-like outsider, the reader still remains an outside observer. The element of travel offers the reader a mode of escape from the narrative. Even the earliest of feminist gothic literature provided the reader the security of the outsider – Jane's perspective rather than Bertha's. In this way, the traditional gothic use of travel and the initial post-war use of travel parallel one another. That which frightens us or challenges the privilege of independent agency must



be escaped, and the individual reader always gets this opportunity. This possibility for escape is best manifest in the symbolism of the car that “was the keystone of this narcotizing edifice of consumerism” (Gartman 177), a sentiment not so different from historical critiques of the novel. However, in the convergence of gothic and postmodern narrative strategies, the postmodern family gothic unsettles travel as a means of escape. Instead, the road of escape becomes its own frightening territory where structural change – to individual identity, to family – is on the horizon.

Structurally, the novels of this chapter shift between pleasing moments of repetition and exciting/terrifying moments of uncertainty. This structure dramatizes for the reader the usually internal, but also communal, conflict felt regarding the ‘comfort’ of patriarchal order and the ‘discomfort’ of change. In this way, these novels don’t shy away from the very real possibility that the present can just as easily be co-opted by patriarchy as the past or future. If only understood as a forms of escapism, travel and its counterpart, writing, delay the onset of change. Travelers and writers can remove themselves from participation in society or family, but with the intersection of gothic maternal monstrosity and postmodern disruption of time and memory, characters cannot insulate themselves from “the world” for long.

The maternal monster is, of course, ubiquitous in gothic literature and her presence is persistent into contemporary literature, gothic and non-gothic alike.

Despite, or perhaps due to, a cultural idealization of the mother as the most precious of people – hence terms like “motherland” – the mother is also the figure who can most quickly morph into a monster with any show of control or agency beyond the will of the father. In post-war culture, this tension shows up in social and legal fights over a woman’s reproductive rights – her agency in determining the structure and timing of family composition. Thus, the increasing mobility of car culture is an especially fraught issue for mothers. While cars offer mothers similar opportunities as men to escape the home, “mothers bear the primary burden of transporting their children both in the womb and in the car, suggesting a disconcerting slippage between uterus and car” (Clarke Ch. 5, location 1150, par.10). Mobility for mothers can extend their maternal identity indefinitely. Yet, in as much as the car, or other modes of familial transportation, might compound the oppression of the patriarchally designated mother, the car still insists upon a maternal movement that defies certain ideals of motherhood.

On the whole, the collapse of women and cars is predictable given the objectification of women and the sexualization of cars. Yet, as Deborah Clarke notes, “to associate women and cars is one thing; to associate mothers and cars is something else...Mothers are natural; cars are mechanical. Mothers create life; cars take it away. Thus, when mothers and cars intersect, both automobility and maternity get reshaped” (Ch.5, location 1100, par. 3). But because motherhood does hold such a sanctified place within post-war culture – bearing the new

generation who will benefit from the sacrifice of the previous one, creating a profound sense of post-war national identity – actual mothers are all the more conscious of this conflict in their mobility. Indeed, the consciousness of how one’s body is at the center of conflicting social narratives produces a sense of shame. In carrying out the duties of a mother to her children in driving them around, the mother’s body becomes the site of simultaneous order (serving children) and disorder (such service requires a machine/ the mother becomes an active part of the public sphere). As Elspeth Probyn claims, shame “is felt in the rupture when bodies cannot or will not fit the place – when, seemingly, there is no place to hide” (329). The mother’s body is both invisible and hyper-visible in her use of the car for domestic responsibilities. This shame in the mother’s mobility – “the self in its essential vulnerability [and] its everyday dependence on the proximities of others, of place, of routine, of biography and history” (Probyn 329) – is passed on to daughters as they get behind the wheel. The promises of freedom of the car in post-war culture are limited for women, not just because women are objectified like cars, but also because of a daughter’s inevitable inheritance of a shame in mobility from a monstrous mother.

The postmodern family gothic will, like the car, reshape maternity and its shame in mobility, but Shirley Jackson’s work provides an important initial exploration of the daughterly inheritance of shame. Indeed, while writing within the male-dominated road narrative of the post-war era offered men another form

of mobility, self-expression, Jackson illustrates how writing within the woman's travel narrative becomes a documentation of daughterly shame. Importantly, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* sees some space of freedom in both travel and writing, but ultimately, as within most of Jackson's work, such freedom is unsustainable.

### **"Mother Knows Best": Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House***

Shirley Jackson is unequivocally the author of the contemporary haunted house. Rarely do her plots extend beyond the doors of a home, thus depicting the suffocating and terrifying nature of domesticity and the family. If any novel does take on travel, such scenes are minimal and never receive critical evaluation as scenes of mobility.<sup>4</sup> Even her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), which puts "road" at the center of the title, considers almost nothing of cars beyond the discussions at home between a father and his son who wants to begin driving. While the developing California highway system provides an elusive and vague background to the interpersonal drama of the neighborhood, Jackson's repertoire always returns to the home.

Writing, on the other hand, makes frequent appearances within Jackson's domestic horror. Nathalie's nervous breakdown in *Hangsaman* manifests in her

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<sup>4</sup> Several of Jackson's short stories, however, do offer an exploration of travel, especially of women in cars. "The Tooth," in particular follows a woman's solitary travel from a small town to the big city.

relationship to writing; notes become a primary mode of communication in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Road Through the Wall*; and spiritually inspired writing takes on a significant role in *The Sundial* and *The Haunting of Hill House*. Indeed, Jackson seems to invoke writing as one of the only options for mobility and agency in women oppressed by the domestic sphere. Such writing is, of course, not without its own dangers; the case of *Hangsaman's* Nathalie and her schizophrenia is case in point. However, Jackson's novels depict the impulse to write, to document one's voice, as a limited liberation, even as the act transforms the writing into a woman possessed.

In contrast to the existing criticism, I argue that Jackson's fifth novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, is actually a novel that makes explicit the comparable mobility offered to women by both writing and driving. Narrowly examined as *the* haunted house novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* offers a road map of the history of women's mobility, particularly as it is conditioned by the family. *Hill House* depicts a biological mother whose monstrosity, in service of the monstrous paternal, limits her daughter's movements and ability for self-expression. Yet in the car ride that bookends the plot, the reader is able to see glimpses of an imaginative space of agency for daughters, literally outside the home of patriarchal domination. In fact, the car ride is a necessary frame for understanding the instances of "supernatural" writing that occur within the space of the home, especially as such writing documents an ambivalent shame

regarding the daughter's position within the family. Jackson's depiction of the terrifying clash of fantasy future, fantasy past, and temporality of family desire in the relationship between driving and writing in *Hill House* provides the seed of narrative resistance taken up by postmodern novels of the family trip.

Eleanor's access to mobility is immediately confronted with a shaming of her identity. Eleanor and her sister Carrie argue over the rights to their mother's car left to them after her recent passing. Eleanor wants to take the car so she can travel to Hill House for Dr. Montague's spiritual experience; Carrie wants to have the car available for her own use in case her child gets sick while they are on vacation. Carrie refuses to let Eleanor take the car, even though it belongs to each of them equally: "I don't think so...we don't know where you're going do we?...I don't think I can see my way clear to letting you borrow my car..." (7). This argument over the car, and Carrie's insistence that the car is hers only, highlights familial legitimacy according to patriarchy. Carrie has a husband and a child, which provide her with the justification to keep the car from Eleanor, who is unmarried. Carrie upholds the tradition of daughterly mobility – from daughter to wife to mother – using the car solely for family purposes. For Carrie, the car becomes an extension of women's domestic space, "a delightful living room on wheels, ... provid[ing] 'all the comforts of home'" (Scharff 125). Such shaming of Eleanor's single status and desire to use the car for self-directed movement is inherited from the mother as Carrie invokes her to finalize the

argument: "In any case, Eleanor, I am sure I am doing what Mother thought best. Mother had confidence in me and would certainly never have approved my letting you run wild..." (7). While it is the patriarchal family that requires Eleanor's submission to particular forms of familial identity, it is the mother, the dead mother, who is used to keep Eleanor without agency in her own family. Carrie reifies Eleanor's identity as daughter when she acts on what "Mother thought best." Eleanor's right to mobility can only come from becoming a mother and wife; until then, despite her age, she remains infantilized.

Eleanor's single status and desire for mobility summons the specter of female sexuality untamed by family. Carrie worries about Eleanor "running wild" and says, "even if *Eleanor* is prepared to run off to the ends of the earth at the invitation of any man, there is *still* no reason why she should be permitted to take my car with her" (7). John Heitmann explains, "As early as the first decade of the twentieth century, the automobile was equated with adventure, including and perhaps especially sexual adventure" (91), which automatically disqualifies Eleanor's desire for mobility in the eyes of her sister. But "cars...served to liberate women from their Victorian roles and retrains" (Parissien 108), and desire, even pleasure, becomes a key experience for Eleanor when she steals the car. For example, throughout Eleanor's trip to Hill House, she thinks, "Journey's end in lovers meeting" over and over. A famous line from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, this mantra can be thought to characterize Eleanor's desire for love that

moves her. Considering that her whole life was spent caring for her demanding and ill mother, this road trip is her first experience with the sensations of desire. But while this journey for a meeting of lovers seems to cite heterosexual coupling as Eleanor's goal – that she become like her sister – the road trip forces Eleanor to confront her real desire, a loving maternal, which plays on the gender swapping of *Twelfth Night*.

As Jackson shows, and the postmodern gothic develops, car rides do not so much allow riders to escape from anything, but rather force them to confront whatever it is they might be trying to escape. Eleanor “could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair” (Jackson 3). Eleanor definitely needs the freedom and leisure promised by car culture. However, in her escape, Eleanor's road hypnotism, which brings the past, present, and future into a confusing simultaneity, she imagines, not a fantasy future of being rescued by a romantic partner, but rather a fantasy maternal figure who inspires her desires:

At one spot she stopped altogether beside the road to stare in disbelief and wonder. Along the road for perhaps a quarter of a mile she had been passing and admiring a row of splendid tended oleanders, blooming pink and white in a steady row. Now she had continued...Now what was here, she wondered, what was here and is gone, or what was going to be here and never came? Will I, she thought, will I get out of my car and go between the ruined gates and then, once I am in the magic oleander square, find that I have wandered into a fairyland, protected poisonously from the eyes of people passing? Once I have stepped between the magic gateposts,



will I find myself through the protective barrier, the spell broken?...I will walk up low stone steps past stone lions guarding and into a courtyard where a fountain plays and the queen waits, weeping for the princess to return. She will drop her embroidery when she sees me, and cry out to the palace servants – stirring at last after their long sleep – to prepare a great feast, because the enchantment is ended and the palace is itself again. And we shall live happily ever after.  
(13)

As Eleanor imagines this new mother-daughter scenario, she sees herself – the princess – as the heroic figure who rescues the queen, just as the prince might rescue the princess of a traditional fairytale. This passage is an invocation of feminine romance and desire, which heals the family torn apart by the monstrous maternal as imagined by patriarchy, embodied in Eleanor’s mother and sister.

The passage also brings about a new control over temporality for Eleanor. Whereas daughters are traditionally beholden to the temporality of the patriarchal family (daughter-wife-mother), the car ride offers Eleanor an experience resistant to this temporality. The representation of “Now” in her road trance suggests the instantaneity and duration of the present moment, which reframes the past as an illusion rather than disavows the past as if it never happened. Further, as Eleanor travels, she thinks anxiously about the journey not taking enough time and she relishes in her choices to stop along the way to eat and drink coffee. These pauses in the journey, emboldened by her reframing of the past and adopting a new maternal image, offer her an opportunity to exert agency over how her time is expended. Some critics of the novel suggest that this

new agency over time is indicative, not of adulthood, but rather “a sort of bildungsroman in reverse” (Pascal 480). While this criticism sees Eleanor as becoming more infantilized by the novel’s end, I believe that the temporality of the home, which can only conceive of time linearly – either Eleanor is a daughter-child or a mother/ wife-adult – disrupts the productive shift in Eleanor and her relationship to her family and time brought about by the car ride. In the juxtaposition between the car ride and the home, Jackson dramatizes the paralyzation of desire, or the shame in owning desire, that contemporary domesticity inspires in women, even as the road promises some mobility and movement.

But the “home” in *Hill House* must be read in the context of travel, rather than the road trip read in the context of domesticity. Indeed, it is Eleanor’s failure to see the home as a transient space that leads her into madness. While the houses of most of Jackson’s novels are lived in, the named Hill House of the 1959 novel is a uniquely transient space, much like a motel. No one actually lives in the house, even as many people have tried. The house is a failed space for domestic stability. As such, the movement and mobility represented by the car reappears within the house as writing, documenting Eleanor’s shame associated with her conflicting feelings about family. The transience of Hill House, made clearer by Eleanor’s road trip, is key to understanding the mobility offered by writing, even as it documents shame. In making the link between the transience

of actual travel and writing, Jackson illustrates how the “perpetual” daughter has some limited freedom in the space of imprisonment and exploitation, if she is able to own the documentation of her shame and vulnerability.

If Hill House is considered to be a transient space and never one in which people intend to stay, then the writing that appears on the walls throughout the house can be thought of as messages left by other passing travelers to mark their mobility, to create a history of the space that includes them. The primary message that appears several times on the walls of the house says “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME.” The message first appears in chalk, and then later in what appears to be blood, and is presumed to be the work of a ghost. Yet, as Eleanor begins to lose her grip on reality, other characters make suggestions that leave the reader wondering if Eleanor is herself responsible for the writing. Another incantation of the novel, “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME,” on the surface, speaks to Eleanor’s persistent guilt of traveling away from her family, including the expected roles she is to play. If she is writing the message herself, then house becomes a pit stop along the way of Eleanor’s journey towards “home” or “lover’s meeting” – some kind of self-fulfillment. This participatory writing of the traveler who documents their presence (“Kilroy was here”), aligns well with the experience of shame because it registers interest. Probyn notes that “shame is the body’s way of registering that it has been interested, and that it seeks to re-establish interest” (329). While Eleanor seeks to escape her family, the writing

which appears in the house documents her continued interest in being a part of a family, something that she cannot consciously own up to as she denies writing the message when confronted by the other characters.

However, if we consider the phrase to be written by a fellow transient, even a ghostly one, then readers can connect the unknown author of the message to the imaginative scene at the beginning of the road trip. Like the fantasy maternal queen that Eleanor adopts in her pursuit of pleasure, the author of the message “Help Eleanor Come Home” points to someone waiting for Eleanor to show up. The message is one of care. The lack of punctuation in the message makes demands of others on behalf of Eleanor. The phrase does not read “Help, Eleanor, Come Home,” which would make demands of Eleanor. Additionally, the message is not “Help Eleanor go home,” implying that there is a specific home to which she must go. Rather, the author of the phrase speaks from the place that is “home,” which can only be determined if the author of the phrase can be determined.

Because the invocation for Eleanor to “come home” is without clear authorship or temporality, it leaves the verbs “help” and “come” in a perpetual present that also brings the past (when was the message left?) and the future (where is this home to which Eleanor is to come? When will she get there?) into juxtaposition. In bringing the past – her mother’s home – into juxtaposition with a possible future home – with Theodora? Alone? – Eleanor must confront the

reality that home, however terrible, is itself unstable, and the trauma that she thought she was escaping has traveled with her. The writing on the wall becomes a resistance to Eleanor's easy assumption of a new community of friends without dealing with her own traumatic relationship to home, particularly to her mother. While a message of care that offers Eleanor support and assistance, "Help Eleanor Come Home" is also a message that forces the issues that Eleanor wanted to escape, a shameful experience that leads Eleanor to madness. Writing resists the way that imagination may not always account for itself and stay strictly a flight of fancy.

As "writing on the wall" indicates, a disastrous future awaits Eleanor, a future that is brought even more into the present moment with the automatic writing of Mrs. Montague. It is tempting to read the phrase on the wall and Mrs. Montague's communication with the disturbed spirit of the home as a maternal force terrorizing Eleanor from beyond the grave. As Mrs. Montague reveals from her automatic writing sessions, the ghost identifies itself as "Nell" and "child" and indicates that it wants to "go home" because of its "Mother." The automatic writing repeats that the ghost is "lost, lost, lost." While Eleanor is driven mad by the writing that indicts her and the house that "knows her name," the writing gives voice to the trauma that Eleanor still cannot explicitly own. The decision to drive away from the house, prompted by the other characters who want to save Eleanor from own madness, reconnects Eleanor with her family trauma as she

drives the car into a tree and kills herself. Death becomes the home to which Eleanor was meant to come.

Again, Jackson's fiction offers glimpses of resistance to women's oppression, only to show that such resistance is limited, if not completely futile. Eleanor in spectacular fashion literalizes the death drive. The structure of the novel, which is bookended by a car ride, identifies the temporality of patriarchy (the home) as something that takes center stage in a novel that might otherwise engage with the complexity of female desire, power, and mother-daughter relationships. Indeed, several feminist revisions of the monstrous feminine lurk throughout the novel: Eleanor is a spinster; Theodora is coded as queer; Mrs. Montague emasculates her husband and is fearless. But Jackson doesn't hold out hope for the fringe narratives that, while resisting the patriarchal logic of family and maternity, can only come out in temporally unanchored messages that are repetitive and confusing. While the reader may see the possible healing in the transience of the writing on the wall, or the experience of haunting, none of the characters do. The materiality of Hill House, which, in its monstrous patriarchal energy, takes precedence in Eleanor's adventure, and, thus, with the sudden absence of her domestic duties and a mother to justify her single status, the only solution becomes death.

At the edges of the patriarchal narrative, anchored in the home, lie female monsters that awaken Eleanor's desire, which can only be sustained while

Eleanor travels. However, much like the traditional gothic, the journey always ends with “the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal” (Hogle). Richard Pascal says “the conclusion seems inescapable: ultimately, in a sort of reverse birthing, Eleanor is absorbed into Hill House – or else, at the very least, the promise on a return to such amniotic oneness is the delusion that lures her to her death there” (469). Such a description posits the monstrous feminine as that which exists at the end of a death drive, but without an ability to see the narrative or familial possibilities after such a death. Yet, as the proto-postmodern gothic novelist, Jackson’s imaginative spaces opened up by travel and writing, however limited and however frightening, provide the optimal narrative openings for the postmodern family gothic to explore, not only resistance, but also a dismantling of the patriarchal family. Authors of the late twentieth century imagine the monstrous feminine as the beginning of life after death and an adoptive, rather than biological, maternal figure.

### **The Adoptive Maternal Monster**

A feminist revision of monstrosity, especially as women have historically been characterized as monsters, is to embrace such monstrosity. Experiences of dread and terror become sought after – consciously desired – rather than fled from. This choice of discomfort and confusion brought about by the maternal monster is represented in the narratives by a form of reverse adoption in which

the child, especially daughters, choose their own monstrous mother figure as a guide through the chaotic aftermath of the destroyed patriarchal family.

Adoption can in fact be understood as a philosophy that guides the postmodern family creation that resists many of the dominant critiques that see the postmodern family as the damaging result of social justice movements. Modern adoption violates much of the ideology of the patriarchal family by changing the structure from one of biology to one of choice. Whereas “the family” has often denoted a natural formation that must be protected at all costs *by virtue of its naturalness*, adoption highlights how all families are “public institutions, regulated by law, interwoven into economic life, the subject of political agendas, and the source of rich cultural meanings” (Melosh 52). As a philosophy, adoption never concedes to a specific family form and its reality illustrates the arbitrariness of all family formations. For the adult children of this chapter, to choose their own mother figure violates both the “naturalness” of family as well as the social privileging of fathers.

The postmodern gothic maternal monster is the key to changing family form and power specifically because she provides a model, not for how to bring order to the chaos of the “broken” family, but rather for how to relate to such chaos in a way that isn’t fear or anger. Rather than obsess over the future of the past, the monstrous maternal embraces and performs a chaotic present, which shifts familial relationships determined by linear time to an unbounded



imaginative constellation. Unlike high postmodern texts that often see the complete disintegration of the family as the logical extension of the fragmented and incoherent subject, the maternal monster of the postmodern gothic “because of its ontological liminality...notoriously appears at times of crisis as the kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes” (Jerome 6). Family is not defunct simply because the subject is fragmented. This shift that disrupts the temporal determining of family relationships enables for modes of resistance to patriarchy to be sustained – perpetually present – rather than futile, as depicted by Jackson. Philosopher David Hoy, in explaining William James, states “the term ‘Now’ equivocates between a knife’s edge and a saddleback conception of the present. The former thinks of the present as an instant, roughly equivalent to the snap of one’s fingers. The latter assumes that the present itself takes time and that it lasts for a while. The present is thus ambiguous insofar as it connotes both instantaneity and duration” (45). This postmodern feminist revision of the maternal monster refocuses the family narrative on the ever-changing process of meaning making rather than the overly determined meaning set by patriarchal logic.

In this light, the act of “children” adopting a “mother” rather than the other way around signifies the releasing of patriarchal linear temporality. While in its own way disruptive to traditional family structure, the adoption of children still contributes to a fantasy future and a fantasy past, especially when done in the event that procreation has proven unsuccessful. Again, the child is at the

forefront of all familial choices. However, when children adopt their own parental figures, they refocus the family structure away from themselves. In particular, in adopting a maternal figure, especially one that defies traditional feminine definitions, children reframe the popular narrative of the broken family as one not about the absent father, but rather one about the liberation of the mother. The ambivalent leadership of the adoptive maternal mother inspires families to take on the unknown of a temporality not ordered by patriarchal capitalistic fantasies, if ordered at all. But with the liberation of the mother from the oppressive dimension of the linear family focused on children comes greater responsibility and children must take on a more active role in redefining an institution that has always privileged them.

This responsibility extends particularly to negotiating the desirous elements of the adopted mother. The maternal monster's method of relating to the chaos of a disrupted linear family temporality arises from her sexuality. As Melosh explains, adoption also "violate[s]...kinship [by] rendering parent-child relationships too much like the contractual and consensual relationship of marriage" (52), and, thus again is the specter of incest raised. However, unlike the disembodied patriarch who exploits the affective labor of his children, the maternal monster inspires family intimacy, a nuanced and often mobile form of desire. As adult children consciously choose an erotic and sometimes grotesque figure as a mother, they work against the ideology of patriarchy that would

make the mother devoid of sensuality. As an ambivalent figure, she creates both terror and desire within her adopted family and the reader. Grappling with this ambivalence is important to resituating the family's relationship to society and memory, especially the trauma of patriarchy. Because of the adoptive maternal monster's embodiment of disruption, her presence cannot be contained within the home or a capitalistic economy. Her excessiveness requires the movement of travel and writing, activities that also engage with terrifying and pleasurable sensations. In the postmodern family gothic, this maternal monster motivates, through the movements of travel and writing, the uncomfortable process of disruption necessary to break free of the patriarchal family ideology and temporality.

### **The Terror of Travel: Parodying the Death Drive**

Traveling, especially in the postmodern age, can be a terrifying experience. With the development of numerous modes of travel, particularly global travel, along with threats of machine malfunction and terrorism, traveling is legitimately dangerous. As a symbol of change, travel narratives ultimately become stories of weighing the benefits of change with the risk of the change itself. For Freud, risk is not an opportunity for change, but rather an opportunity to "return to the inanimate state" (46). Within Freud's "death instinct," more popularly known as the death drive, a subject is plagued by an urge to resist the

pleasure principle, and in this way “the aim of life is death” (46). This Freudian instinct is key, both to traditional Gothic texts as well as the logic of the patriarchal family, which dramatize the conflict of the simultaneous pulls of life and death. But within the postmodern family gothic travel narrative, risk is not met with death or oblivion, but with change—a change that may be ambiguously defined but continues life nonetheless. Specifically, the adopted monstrous mother’s body mocks death and its powerful hold on the family.

Death sits behind the wheel of the family car as the monstrous maternal, in her dead or deathly body, drives the travel narrative and the structural change of the family. Within patriarchy, death and the dead body are precious as the “incontestable reality of the body...is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue” (Scarry 62); the dead body justifies patriarchal power<sup>5</sup>. Yet, rather than using death as an anchor of power, the postmodern maternal monster reveals death as a dispersal or diffusion and not an absolute reality. This disruption to the assumed final conclusion of death becomes a darkly humorous process that plays both on the abjection of death as well as the abjection of the female body. Such humor, more than merely inverting civility, “is the mortal enemy of sentimentality...which too often passes itself off as poetry, vainly persists in inflicting its outmoded artifices on the mind” (Breton xix). In *The*

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<sup>5</sup> This process of using the dead body to confer legitimacy and “reality” on the power of the patriarch can be seen in the male narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* who appropriate Lux’s dying body, as well as in Arty of *Geek Love*, whose power is embodied in the disfigured bodies of his followers and his lobotomized sister.

*Floating World, Invisible Monsters, and Sexing the Cherry*, the mobility of travel challenges the idea that death concludes anything. When death is not the end, family identity can and must change.

Although the monstrous maternal dies early on in Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World*, Obāsan, the narrator's grandmother, drives the narrative and inspires a particular reading of "the death drive" as a gendered experience. Specifically, the physical death of the grandmother, and the subsequent adoption of her as a motherly guide by her granddaughter Olivia, is juxtaposed with the social death experienced by Japanese men in the novel. The "death drive" as it manifests within female bodies contains a good deal of levity, as a physical death does not mean the end of life (for better or for worse); the "death drive" as it manifests within the male body becomes absurdly terrifying as men attach their identities to the car *as an object* rather than a vehicle.

The monstrosity of the grandmother, Obāsan, within the narrator Olivia's coming of age tale is established with the first sentence: "My grandmother has always been my tormentor" (1). As the family travels along the western coastline looking for work in the 1950's United States, Obāsan yells, hits, pinches, and insults everyone in the family, but most especially Olivia. Although aggressive and intimidating, Olivia enjoys the stories that Obāsan tells, which include defining the "floating world" in which the family travels: "the gas station attendants, restaurants, and jobs we depended on, the motel towns floating in

the middle of the fields and mountains" (2). Obāsan and her monstrosity are joined with a pleasurable narrative of change and movement, which also "referred to...the pleasures and loneliness change brings" (Kadohata 3). Obāsan embodies the ambivalence of a matriarchal family structure that is dramatized in her darkly humorous death scene.

Death becomes a primary characteristic of the Osaka family and their experience of family travel which begins with Obāsan's death. Olivia sees her grandmother in distress in the middle of the night in a hotel bathroom and chooses to watch her grandmother die rather than go get help. Just as in life, Obāsan's death is terrifying: "she was already not of this world, and she spoke with a fury unnatural even for her...It was a hiss, a rasp, and a cracked whisper all at once. I felt cold as if there were ghosts in the room" (25). But the intensity of this moment shifts quickly to something more banal: "She closed her eyes and I left... Obāsan was ready to die, I thought. And then I felt very sleepy" (25). Olivia's response to her grandmother's death makes it into something of a poorly executed performance of a death. "A hiss, a rasp, and a cracked whisper" no longer signal something scary, but rather something overdone.

But Olivia's response to Obāsan's death is inconsistent, making the "meaning" of death mobile and eventually ridiculous. After an initially "sleepy" response, Olivia breaks out into a terrifying self-indictment the next morning. "She made me kill her!" Olivia screams over and over when her family discovers

Obāsan's body. Olivia's wild twelve-year-old pronouncement of herself as a murderer humorously, if darkly, contrasts with her previous sleepiness. Such uncomfortable humor continues for the reader when Olivia's mother explains that Obāsan has not gone to either Heaven or Hell, but rather, her soul "just sort of dispersed, so it's a little bit in everyone who knew her" (34). Olivia and her brothers are grossed out by this explanation as they all start to feel "itchy" and begin to twitch and squirm (34). This grotesque lesson about death, along with Olivia's vastly different responses, turns death, not into something conclusive, but something open and partial. But while disquieting, Obāsan's death and the way Olivia and her mother undermine the "absoluteness" of death offer the women more freedom to define the family according to their own terms.

Death, not life, becomes the primary characteristic of the Osaka family in their traveling. This characteristic begins with Obāsan's death that is associated with a fatal bus crash that occurs after her funeral. "Because the death and the accident occurred within a few days of each other, I have always connected the two events" (33) Olivia states, a sentiment that highlights the mystery of death, specifically as it is associated with mobility. Even after her family has settled into a home and she moves away, Olivia still allows for the "magic on the road"<sup>6</sup> to shape her understanding of her family.

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<sup>6</sup> "Too much magic on the road" is a phrase that Obāsan used to express the superstitions of the family while traveling, which might influence them to stop and take a break.

As a young adult, Olivia lives up to this ambivalent relationship with death and its mobile meaning when she inherits a vending machine route from her deceased biological father. Olivia explains, "I talked to a ghost once, but he didn't talk back...The ghost was my real father, who'd died a month earlier. We sat on a curb and ate candy bars together. I ate the real thing; he ate candy you couldn't see through exactly, but wavered whenever the wind blew. By the time we parted, I no longer hated him. Or I realized it wasn't as simple as that" (150). In this final road trip of the novel, Olivia interacts with her dead father, whom she had never met in life, and begins to come to peace with her origins as the bastard child of an unmarried woman and a married man. The road and the death of her biological father bring about a change in Olivia's sense of family rather than a solidification of it. This openness of death and family is reflected in the end of the novel, as rational time becomes something of which Olivia lets go. After her encounter with her father's ghost, Olivia wonders "What time was it?...I tried to calculate from the night sky what time it was, but then I gave up. It didn't matter; it was high time I left" (161). Releasing the dependence on the external order of time, the clock, Olivia instead trusts her own instincts and desire---"I was getting sleepy" (161)---in order to determine time. Indeed, Olivia returns to a state of sleepiness, suggesting a parallel between her biological father's death and her grandmother's death. The fact that the ghost never speaks back and that Olivia "gives up" on figuring out what time it is allows Olivia to



accept the chaos of her family in its history because family meaning does not come from anything external.

Kadohata contrasts the women's ambivalent experiences of death with a more Freudian death drive that occurs in men's relationships to cars. Mr. Tanizaki, Olivia's teenage-boyfriend's father, had recently been falling in his productivity at the chicken factory. The labor organization is such that groups are hired and fired together, so if one person in a group performs poorly, he risks the jobs of everyone else; thus, the group decides to fire Mr. Tanizaki before getting them all fired. Before being let go, Mr. Tanizaki absent mindedly chats up his group, completely unaware of what is happening to him. Importantly, he talks about cars: "Me and my wife are thinking of getting a new car...I want to get a Chevy, but my wife says Ford...Furthermore, me and my wife can't decide between a blue car and a red one...I don't know, you live without a car and then everyone else gets one and you feel like you have to get one, too...It's keeping up with the Joneses, that's all it is...But I ask you, what's so bad about that? Why not keep up with them?" (104-5). Rather than a vehicle that expands the definition of family, for Mr. Tanizaki, the car becomes a symbol of a particular definition of a successful family, the socially mobile family. Mr. Tanizaki's use of amphetamines that have led to his mental breakdown were presumably for better job performance so that he might be a better provider; however, in this sad and

pathetic scene, Kadohata shows the self-destruction of patriarchal logic that marks social mobility, especially of the marginalized Other within the 1950s U.S.

The self-destructive “death drive” is further associated with men in Olivia’s adult boyfriend who crashes cars for a living. Andy is paid by wealthy white people to wreck their cars so that they can collect on the insurance money. While the treatment of the cars seems completely opposite between Mr. Tanizaki and Andy, the relationship to the car remains the same. The car becomes a symbol of Mr. Tanizaki’s ability to provide for his family, and this value of the car as an object enables Andy to support himself. While Andy’s wrecking of cars mocks the death drive some, since he doesn’t actually die when he very well could, the scenes of Andy wrecking cars come across like a child playing. Indeed, Andy’s job gives him a sense of power and agency within a culture that has marginalized him. Whereas mobility, symbolized by the car, becomes a way for women to restructure a family and thrive after death, mobility is seen as an individual experience with a specific goal of power in mind for men. Men operate on already determined meaning; they do not create meaning.

The ambivalent responses to death are further inspired by the adopted maternal monster in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters*, particularly through the novel’s structure. While *The Floating World* doesn’t kill its maternal monster until a few chapters in, Brandy the, trans maternal monster, is found bleeding to death within the novel’s first pages. Essentially, Palahniuk’s novel begins with

the “ending” of death. Such a beginning creates structural chaos as the narrative is told out of chronological order through a series of flashbacks and flash forwards. The phrase “jump to” is frequently used to designate the movement back and forth in the narrator’s, Shannon’s, memory and present experience.<sup>7</sup> Brandy’s “death” (she doesn’t actually end up dying) organizes the temporal and identity chaos for the reader. Her death scene – which she performs with great dramatic flourish as a scene on television, film, or stage – initiates a story of emotional discomfort that satirizes the way family identity depends on death.

On the surface, the three travelers, Brandy, Seth, and Shannon, follow the traditional consumerist narrative of the car as the manifestation of the escapist logic that “freedom has always been conflated with geographic movement” (Gartman 171). However, rather than “the journey [being] a break for all of them, an eternal present in which *they do not need to cope with their fears*” (Baelo-Allué 126, my emphasis), when the novel is understood as a *family* road narrative, the journey is one of confrontation with fears. Once the reader realizes that Brandy used to be Shane, Shannon’s queer brother whom she had assumed had died of AIDS many years before, the car becomes an uncomfortable space in which the fantasy past and the embodied traces of the disavowed past converge and have to sit next to one another. *Invisible Monsters* performs the physical and emotional

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<sup>7</sup> In the recent “Remix” edition of *Invisible Monsters* (2013), Palahniuk uses the “choose your own adventure” technique to incorporate more reader participation in the disruption of temporality.

frustration and annoyance of family drama within the densely packed space of the car.

This confined space puts Shannon's past selective memories of her family in conflict with her evolving story of her sister and the memories and stories of other people in the car. Shannon remembers her brother Shane as someone who was always the favorite child, which pushed her to follow a life path of persistent earning of attention: "you'd think my folks totally forgot they even had a second child...So I just kept working harder and harder for them to love me...He didn't have to work at it. It was so easy" (Palahniuk 73). Shannon becomes a model, but much to her dismay, despite her success, the death of her brother (even as he was disowned for being gay) keeps him the center of attention with her parents. Their parents even reinvent the past in the wake of their son's "death" to depict themselves as martyrs for PFLAG. As Shannon interacts with Brandy, who she knows is her brother/sister before revealing so to the reader, her relationship with her brother shifts between continued resentment and a desperate desire to connect and love. Shannon's own physical disability at the present time of the novel – a shotgun blow to the face has left her with half a jaw – contributes to this uncomfortable shift as she cannot speak and all that comes out is "thsiljdgiy" or "owietffilwss." She is dependent on Brandy and Seth for her own safety as someone who might at any time die from sleep apnea, and for her own social interaction since she hides behind silence and veils. She resents this dependence,

but as she is forced during long hours in the car to listen to Brandy's blithe life philosophies, she begins to understand more about how her brother survived being kicked out of the family and why he felt it necessary to fake his own death. While Shannon had previously always seen herself as a victim, her time in the car, in which her memory and her brother/sister's memory are juxtaposed forces Shannon to realize her own agency and culpability in the passage of her existence.

In fact, the car is not just emotionally unsettling as Shannon watches a relationship develop between her motherly trans sister and Seth, her ex-boyfriend, but also physically unsettling. The amount of drugs done by Brandy and Seth are enough to not only make their bodies suffer, but also enough to make Brandy a terrible driver as she constantly drives while high. Shannon's open orifice is also a constant threat for choking. But if the characters "spend much of their time imprisoned with others...and their stories have a distinctly claustrophobic feel...[and] these characters are, at the very least, unable to get away from one another and form their own tortured psyches" (Truffin 78) and bodies, why do they persist in this road trip? Despite the real risk to the bodily integrity of each character, Brandy's aimless drive generates a new familial understanding between the sisters. Brandy's own transformation from Shane to Brandy inspires Shannon to radically transform as well. But as Brandy's transformation leaves her looking more like Shannon when she was a successful

model, Brandy illustrates that transformation of one's identity does not happen alone. The entire road trip can be seen as a quest for a lost sister, but because Brandy and Shannon are already together in the car, the discovery and connection comes from travel, not from reaching a destination.

Ultimately, Kadohata and Palahniuk demonstrate how the journey after the destruction of the patriarchal family must be pointless, which does not mean that one should not undertake the journey; indeed, as long as the journey continues, the family is able to negotiate with the past, present, and future and offset the trap of a static definition of family. However, as Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* explores, undertaking the fruitless journey must be both an embodied and communal process. Even as the finality of death is mocked, traveling without a goal lends itself to the abstract and singular process of pursuing the sublime. The adoptive maternal monster produces just enough of an anchor in her grotesque body to keep the mobile boundaries of family from dispersing into singular oblivion.

The logical end of the Freudian death drive is not simply a corporeal death. If one is compelled to repeat actions that lead to that ultimate union with "the inanimate state," then the death drive becomes a sublime journey. Clayton Crockett claims, "The Kantian sublime...reappears, most explicitly and powerfully, in the death drive" because of the uncanny disjunction that occurs between the ego and itself (110). Even within a family or community, the

tendency of a journey without a destination is towards isolation and abstraction, especially since new conceptions of family in their mobility, flirt with the sublime qualities of “formlessness” and “boundlessness.” Winterson dramatizes this tension in her novel whose story and structure posit disembodied isolation as the greatest obstacle to new formations of the family outside of patriarchy.

Despite the beginning of the novel with Jordan’s adoption by the Dog Woman, *Sexing the Cherry* doesn’t seem to be a family novel at all. Indeed, its fragmented and mosaic structure that combines theory, fantasy, fairy tale, religious parable, as well as its separation of the voices of Jordan and the Dog Woman in distinct sections, encourages literary critiques to focus on sexuality and philosophy rather than family. However, in setting aside the familial relationship between Jordan and the Dog Woman, especially as an adoptive one, critics miss the undercurrent of community that draws all the disparate pieces together. At the heart of *Sexing the Cherry* lies the element of choice in family creation, represented by the grotesque body of the Dog Woman, which sharply contrasts with the compulsive drive towards disembodied oblivion, represented by Jordan’s persistent global travels to seek out the ideal woman.

Jordan’s identity, as an adopted son without clear biological origin perhaps represents the ideal beginnings of a family apart from the trappings of patriarchy. The Dog Woman finds Jordan floating in a river as a baby, much like Moses, and she explains, “I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound

to anything, just as the waters aren't bound to anything" (3-4). Indeed, Jordan's boundlessness (attributable to his nature or his name?) invites in an element of time travel and poetic language into the novel that might be said to characterize constellated temporality: Jordan says "Time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning, on this journey. All times can be inhabited...The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body" (87). But despite the resistance to linearity, for Jordan, there is clear cause and effect of a "timeless" journey that demands his heterosexual coupling, specifically with a woman whose body seems absent. In this way, Jordan does seem compelled to return to that traditional gothic maternal that might obliterate his existence. Jordan is even uncertain if he is "searching for a dancer whose name [he] did not know or...the dancing part of [himself]" (36), collapsing his identity with the people he attempts to make a family with. Yet Winterson uses the Dog Woman to explicitly undermine Jordan's sentimental attachment to the patriarchal family narrative.

As an anchor for Jordan's travels, the Dog Woman illustrates that embodied community is actually what Jordan seeks. Her description of her own family of origin humorously disrupts the sentiment of Jordan's search for love and belonging, which he seeks outside of his adopted family. To explain her monstrous size, she says "When I was a child my father swung me up on to his knees to tell me a story and I broke both his legs. He never touched me again,



except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs. But my mother, who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not to go out in a wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles. There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love" (21). The Dog Woman reenacts this embodied gesture of love when, while travelling to see King Charles I, she carries Jordan when he was tired (26). Motherly strength is depicted as spectacular in its power, specifically stronger than male bodies, and it is this strength to which Jordan constantly returns as he grows older and becomes a sailor. While female embodiment can be terrifying, like breaking a father's legs, it is also the site of great, if grotesque, love. The Dog Woman says "When Jordan was new I sat him on the palm of my hand the way I would a puppy, and I held him to my face and let him pick the fleas out of my scars. He was always happy. We were happy together..." (21). This moment is undignified in comparison to Jordan's quest for the perfect woman, but ultimately he is never happier than when he has physical contact with his mother.

Ultimately, Jordan's own failure to recognize the importance of embodied connection in creating family leads him to an unfulfilling meeting with the idealized Fortunata. When he finally happens upon her he observes, "There appeared to be ten points of light spiraling in a line along the floor...Then I saw a young woman, darting in a figure eight between the lights and turning her hands through it as a potter turns clay on the wheel. At last she stood back, and one by

one I watched the light form into a head and arms and legs. Slower and slower...until on the floor were ten women, their shoes in holes, their bodies wet with sweat" (103). While Jordan has been chasing this ideal woman who, for most of the novel remains abstract, she is shown here not so much to be without a body but actually spectacularly embodied. Fortunata has been teaching the women to dance so quickly and strongly that they lose the limitation of their physical bodies and become points of light. Jordan has finally reached the end of his journey to his ideal woman and she rejects him – he is not the center of his family story. As always, he returns to his mother, repeatedly adopting her. The love and heterosexual coupling that Jordan seeks is shown to be without material; Jordan is not the agent of family creation. Because of their embracing of an embodied nature, women are able to construct family definition, even as such definitions change, without succumbing to the oblivion and individualism of the sublime.

### **The Terror of Writing: Desire and the Constellation of Time**

On the surface, the few narratively significant moments of writing in these novels come across as reasonable, but ultimately ineffective, attempts to make sense of the chaos resulting from traveling with family trauma. Patrick Brady observes "Many writers, both male and female, use writing as a means of putting order into a disorderly word; is such 'creation' a distortion, dissimulation, or

deception?" (69). To put his question another way, if writing is a mechanism for bringing about order, particularly when master narratives have been undermined, could writing be anything other than an act of complicity with the ideology that determines what qualifies as "orderly" and "disorderly"? The lack of scholarly attention to the moments of writing in these postmodern gothic novels speaks to an assumption that all writing, regardless of content, creates "limits [which] are reassuring manifestations of order – and we all have a thirst for order" (Brady 69). However, in the context of family travel, writing is not a mere translation of order; rather, writing provides traces of embodied temporality that actually denotes more chaos. Paraphrasing Derrida, David Hoy states "in contrast to the eternal atemporality of the present, writing first makes the perception of temporality possible" (80). As such, I argue that the scenes of writing in the postmodern family gothic become important scenes to resist the 'atemporality' that the present invites, especially since traveling can easily separate itself from surrounding society.

In particular, through the body of the adopted monstrous mother, writing, often thought to be a solitary act, is an expressly social act, much like adoption papers create family from individuals and the state. As a social act, writing plays on the desirous tensions between and among family. The discomfort inspired by the forced intimacy of travel points to fears of broaching the physical boundary line between family members that carries the weight of incest. But in playing

with this line, the authors use writing to push past the discomfort in order to expand the understanding of desire as not merely sexual, undermining the exploitation of desire within the patriarchal family. As mode of desire, writing draws to the surface the social and temporal conditions that make writing an act of responsibility and imagination, which resists impositions of order. Depicted as movement and desirous agency, writing resists the passive temporality so encouraged by dominant narratives of self and family.

As writing becomes an embodied social act, represented in the disruptive behavior of the adopted monstrous maternal, it takes on the qualities of what Hélène Cixous defined as *écriture féminine*. Such writing seeks to position women visibly in the social order as 'body as agent' not 'body as object.' Within the family, the writing encouraged by, or associated with the monstrous maternal body repositions women in the family as intelligent leaders because of their *embrace* of desire rather than their exploitation of it. In this way, writing almost becomes an erotic act within the family, but "erotic" as Audre Lorde would define it: "the erotic is the measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (54). The erotic and desire then become a way to gauge the fluctuation of distance and connection within the family, the balance between autonomy and community. But getting to this new mode of understanding family identity and its necessary mobility and variability requires choosing to be uncomfortably close to the maternal monster.

While much of patriarchal legacy seeks to pass on property or traditions that secure capital, *The Floating World's* maternal monster depicts matriarchal legacy as sexual. Obāsan's monstrosity lies in her resistance to both Japanese and American expectations of women, especially single women. Olivia says, "In her day it had been considered scandalous for young Japanese women to smoke, but she smoked cigars" (1). With characteristically dry humor, Kadohata implicitly uses Freudian symbolism to depict Obāsan's excessive sexuality, which is further confirmed by her marital history. Olivia's grandmother, "besides her three husbands...had seven lovers – unusual for her day," and a tradition that Olivia's mother maintains in her affairs and children by different men (96). Whereas sex and sexuality are used as a mode of oppression in the patriarchal family, the sexual knowledge that comes through a collective writing process of grandmother, mother, and daughter makes sexuality and desire integral to the non-patriarchal family formation.

Once Obāsan has passed away, her liberating sexual monstrosity is only available to Olivia through her diaries. Given that Olivia was afraid of her grandmother when she was alive, this new mode of connection and communication allows Olivia to reconstruct their relationship, with sex at the center. But in order to access the advice within the diaries, Olivia has to actively create meaning since "small parts of [the diaries] were in Japanese [and] translating them was difficult" (91). Olivia works with her mother, who "did all

the hard parts" (91), to make sense of the grandmother's writing. The bilingual nature of Obāsan's diaries opens Olivia, and the reader, up to the imaginative possibilities of writing that resist order: "I liked the two languages, Japanese and English, how each contained thoughts you couldn't express exactly in the other" (91). Olivia and the readers' imaginations are further instigated by the fact that "some parts [her mother] refused to translate at all" (91), presumably because of their sexual explicitness – that is why Olivia turned to the diaries in the first place. But the "gaps" in the grandmother's written word does not keep Olivia from returning to the diaries throughout her adulthood. The lack of definitive meaning in the diaries and their linguistic hybridity inspire a desire in Olivia to pursue her grandmother in death, when she ran from her in life.

Further, Obāsan's journals are materially unstable and the physical traces of her body and time within them resist impulses to make them authoritative references outside of Olivia's own contribution to their meaning. In the one scene that actually depicts Obāsan writing in her diary, Olivia observes how her hand would shake every time they drove over a bump (148). The handwriting would reflect the movement of the car, as if the writing itself were moving and less a record of travels, but an embodiment of travels. In reading such unstable handwriting, Olivia would have to re-experience the car ride, bringing the past into a material present, but with the challenge for Olivia to create meaning from what might be illegible. Additionally, the diaries, which are kept in a cabinet-

shrine to Obāsan, have begun to succumb to the humidity: “the diary pages started to change and warp, as if they were alive, growing” (95). For the diary to take on a life of its own challenges the idea of writing as merely transcriptive and part of an eternal past, especially as the material might become cumbersome to hold or unpleasant to smell.

This “aliveness” of the physical pages of the diaries points to the evolving quality of their content as Olivia notes the increasing ambiguity of her grandmother’s entries. Olivia observes how the earliest entries “were vigorous and certain, full of answers and proclamations. Later...her entries were filled with questions and answers, and finally, toward the end of her life, only questions. I thought you grew more certain with age, but she grew less” (148). Olivia sees how in her grandmother’s life, death does not provide closure, but rather uncertainty. Thus, even in the consulting process, Olivia does not necessarily find the answers she seeks. Rather, she connects to her grandmother’s own experience of becoming unstuck from the patriarchal family narratives. As Olivia manages her own uncertainty about college and fulfilling familial expectations, these uncertain and unstable entries bring about a healing between Olivia and her grandmother. The scenes of writing are not about ordering reality, but about a practice of changing the family relationships as well as the dominant narratives of family among various cultures. Such shifts and healing are sparked by an embrace of desire and passion, which not only guide the women in

Olivia's family, but actually make them powerful. While desire seems only to lead to death in Shirley Jackson, desire provides wisdom in Kadohata.

Desire takes a more ambivalent turn in *Invisible Monsters* as the scenes of writing present the reader with textual contradiction. Arguably, the writing that appears within Palahniuk's novel performs one of the greatest offenses of postmodernism: textualizing history such that accounting for history becomes amoral. When Brandy and Shannon meet for the first time in the hospital and Shannon shares her story about her face with Brandy, Brandy encourages a tearful Shannon by saying

You are going to tell me your story like you just did. Write it all down. Tell that story over and over. Tell me your sad-assed story all night...When you understand...that what you're telling is just a story. It isn't happening anymore. When you realize the story you're telling is just words, when you can crumble it up and throw your past in the trash can...then we'll figure out who you're going to be.  
(61)

The professed moral of *Invisible Monsters*, perfectly distilled in the above passage, is that the past can and should remain in the past so that one might feel, at best, freer or, at worst, less responsible in the future. However, despite the novel's professed future-oriented disregard for the past, the act of writing actually works against the pithy morals that the past can be so easily disavowed.

Throughout the novel, writing actually leaves material traces where there are assumed to be none. Despite Brandy's encouragement to throw away the story of the past, the trash still exists. Brandy proclaims that "you can't base your



life on the past or the present" (60), but the writing she instructs Shannon and Seth to do illustrates how the material presence of the past and present persist regardless of the narratives that come to take their places. After their trip to Canada, the trio drives to the Space Needle in Seattle and performs a communal, almost ritualistic, writing act. Brandy goes to the gift shop at the top of the attraction and gathers a bunch of old and faded postcards. On them she directs the other two to write messages and advice to the future. These messages generally reflect critiques of contemporary consumer culture such as "Game shows are designed to make us feel better about the random, useless facts that are all we have left of our education"; or "Only when we eat up this planet will God give us another. We'll be remembered more for what we destroy than what we create" (103). When they write down the message, Brandy reads it out loud, kisses the postcard, and then throws the card off the Space Needle. While this scene parallels Shannon's "throwing away" of her life story, Brandy has intended for these notes to be found. Like the writing on the wall of Hill House, the messages perform a temporal transiency.

Rather than "throwing away" some trauma, this scene suggests a sharing of trauma as Brandy intends for someone (in the present? In the future?) to pick up the postcards and read them. Further, the messages themselves encourage a reflection on a social and cultural past. Even the place of the Space Needle highlights the conflicting messages of the novel regarding the relationship

between the past and present, which ultimately impacts how the sisters find an uncertain healing. The Space Needle represents “an optimistic projection of the future—just before the chaos of the 1960s seemed to fixate on the world’s problems instead of its blessings. That utopian landscape...promised a world where most hardships had been overcome, and humanity could relax and venture into proactive fun, adventures like space travel (Palahniuk qtd in Kavanagh 189). Yet, despite Palahniuk’s idealistic and nostalgic intensions for the Space Needle locale and its purpose to re-encourage people to again dream big for the future (Kavanagh 189), Brandy’s actions encourage a rethinking of that fantasy future in which “most hardships had been overcome.” Indeed, the material traces highlight competing narratives about family that cannot be resolved by a mere sweeping disavowal.

In a moment that could be described as a repetition with a difference, Shannon writes a message, which she throws off the tower without letting Brandy read it. It reads: “I love Seth Thomas so much I have to destroy him. I overcompensate by worshipping the queen supreme. Seth will never love me. No one will ever love me again” (103). The message conveys the honest insecurity Shannon has about traveling with the man who abandoned her (Seth) and the sibling who inspires both love and hatred (Brandy). Shannon writes this message down in the first place because she wants to share this heartache and loss, but she has yet to figure out how to incorporate her desires for family connection

into the evolving relationship between her and Brandy. When the trio returns to the car, “on the windshield is a ticket, but when Brandy storms over to tear it up, the ticket is a postcard from the future...I love Seth so much I have to destroy him...” (105). Shannon’s story has returned even though she “threw it away.” Brandy “reads it to herself, silent, and slips the postcard into her handbag” (105). Brandy literally carries Shannon’s pain with her and gestures to the responsibility we have to supporting family, especially within the chaos of changing boundaries.

The fragmentation of Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* separates the scenes of writing from the already ungrounded family story. The scenes of writing seem to be especially separated from the Dog Woman and any encouragement or inspiration she might offer to the revised family identity. However, as Winterson creates reincarnations of Jordan and the Dog Woman in contemporary London, she depicts a family unbounded both by biology and time. But the conflict for this kind of unbounded family is the way that language necessarily ties them together. While writing is a communal act in *The Floating World* and *Invisible Monsters*, in *Sexing the Cherry*, writing is the means by which a family persists through time and without biology. This reality becomes a conflict as such dependence on language seems to encourage an abstract and disembodied concept of family. However, Winterson illustrates just how mutual the body and

language are as the contemporary reincarnations of the Dog Woman and Jordan find each other again 400 years later.

One of Jordan's daydreams points to the conflicting relationship between the body and language that often gets in the way of allowing for family boundaries to change. Jordan comments that he sometimes leaves his physical body to travel to unknown places. In the imaginary town, people's words are so strong that they have materiality and float above the town. Eventually the town becomes saturated in language and people are employed to clean the air. Jordan recounts following a cleaner and being bitten and attacked by the words as the cleaner tries to "clear the air;" once, a pair of lovers suffocate in the cloud of their own language because the lead roof did not allow the words to escape. If language has weight enough to write itself into the sky, then as writing persists through time, it also has a physical component.

In the fifteenth century time period of the novel, Jordan's travels seem to be geared towards creating his own family through heterosexual coupling. He travels away from his mother. His language, full of abstract philosophical wanderings seem opposite in nature from the embodied monstrous language of the imaginary town that bites and suffocates. However, as Jordan's reincarnation as Nicholas appears, such language of travel is given material weight in the travel books that he comes across from his childhood. He recounts that some pages fell out of a book that were his "précis of heroes" in his childish

handwriting. At this point his more adult observations are that heroes “can behave badly...Heroes are immune” (133), which espouses the disembodied, autonomous individual so antithetical to family. Yet, Nicholas’s writing and language about travel and independence serve only to guide him to the Dog Woman’s reincarnation, a woman protesting environmental degradation.

In a newspaper, Nicholas reads about this woman who has parked herself on the side of the Thames. He reworks his definition of hero as he describes this woman and how she has given up what is comfortable. He also seems to recognize her as he reads the paper and sees her picture. Eventually, he goes to join her in her protest. This woman has described herself as embodied by a monster, who is the Dog Woman. Jordan’s travels may have taken him away from his adoptive mother, but eventually, through the material weight of language, their travels through time and space have led them back to each other. But rather than be sublimated by this “return to the maternal” of traditional gothic, Winterson depicts a maternal character who also evolves and changes.

### **Conclusion: The Temporality of Shame and the Move to Constellatory Faith**

In opening up time, travel and writing resist the ways that identity, especially family identity, is based on the practice of compartmentalization – of specific family members, of social oppression, of competing narratives. Instead, mobility creates a family identity based in shame, which highlights both “painful

individuation...[and] uncontrollable relationality” (Sedgwick 37). Shame is the opposite of fantasy as it tells a narrative that is never fully controlled by one person or institution, but for which everyone is responsible. Family survives, even if its patriarchal structure falls apart, and requires the guidance of a parent who can reimagine the traditional relationship to the discomfort of shame. Indeed, families adopt a maternal monster because she relishes in what is shameful – the sexual body: Obāsan frequently tells her adolescent grandchildren about her love affairs; Brandy sexualizes her hybrid body, forcing strangers and her own sibling to confront unacknowledged desires; the Dog Woman calls out the hypocrisy of religious leaders in spectacularly sexual ways. Adopting a mother whose sexuality is dominant in her character embraces the shame at the center of the family that patriarchal fantasies must disavow: the mother’s body is always a sexual body. And it isn’t enough to have such a maternal figure as a guide through the chaos of the lost patriarchy; this journey and the discomfort of shame must be documented in writing.

The monstrous maternal interrupts the patriarchal family’s claims to immortality, claims that are founded in a fantasy temporality that disavows the reality of and the fear of death. The monstrous maternal shifts the relationship to fear from something disavowed, to something ever-present. In this shift, shame, including its physical and emotional impact, doesn’t disappear. Shame encourages families make connections where patriarchy has encouraged

compartmentalization and obfuscation. But the chaos that the adopted maternal mother inspires, the imagined space of a restructured family, will only be temporary if it isn't transformed into an embodied practice by the whole family. This transformation is delicate, as modes of resistance are often, even chronically, subsumed into the narratives of power. As such, embodied practices of restructured families must incorporate rituals that work against the co-optation of linearity.

### **Family Faith**

*This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang, but with a whimper.*  
~T.S. Eliot

Apocalypse is a necessary element of post-war faith. Frank Kermode explains that fictions of The End, which provide meaning and coherence to all that came before, "make tolerable one's moment between beginning and end" (4). Within the post-WWII era a faith in an all-encompassing nobler meaning offset experiences of loss and social change that occurred during the war. Specifically, such Judeo-Christian faith, in its establishment of a linear and progressive temporality, towards a "City of God" (Kermode 5), works to maintain hierarchal power structures that were up-ended during the war and its aftermath. "In fact the mythology of Empire and of Apocalypse are very closely related" (Kermode 8) as each resists ambivalence and uncertainty. The "ultimate evil" suggested by communism, in its radical social and economic equalizing,

would destroy the nation and identity of the west and justified social anchoring in proclamations of faith in God. Patriarchy and capitalism are only as strong as their invocation of threat, of the End, that justifies their power. As Johan Höglund claims about gothic narratives, the rise of national crises produces a cultural call for stories of conquering the Other who would obliterate you. In the post-war era, such gothic stories focus on the invasion of the family and the making terrifying of women's power.

But throughout the course of the post-war period, the family and its sacred status has always been challenged. The chaos brought about by shifting experiences of subjectivity, from the fragmentation of war, changing gender roles, pushes for racial equality, etc., only marks the end of the patriarchal family structure, not the family itself. This end, in which holy treatment of the family becomes an ambivalent practice, does, for some, bring about an apocalyptic destruction – of national identity, of power. But such destruction, specifically in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, and Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial*, is less an event of cohering meaning, justifying the power that comes with linear temporality, than a disclosure or opening up of meaning. Indeed, apocalypse carries this dual meaning of destruction and disclosure. The story of apocalypse that accompanies the end of the patriarchal family becomes one of disclosure. And this disclosure



occurs through a storytelling-ritual: of nature, of the body, of literature itself, and reflects a faith in the divine feminine unbounded by the “End Times.”

The Gothic is well versed in the spiritual and threats to power disguised as religious legitimacy. Among the first Gothic texts, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* engaged explicitly with the Catholic Church and its abuses of power. As the Gothic made its way to the early United States, the fascination and critiques of religious practice continued, but now focused on the fanaticism of American Calvinism and Evangelism, as explored in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Weiland*. The fears of porous boundaries between past and present, but also the righteous and the blasphemous, persist into the contemporary period as the family takes on the religious status that the church used to.

While the roots of the Gothic are grounded in the fear and criticism of the spiritually inexplicable, which often obscures seemingly uncontrollable human abuses of power, they also register an aesthetic of fluid boundaries of past and present, as well as male and female. As the characters in these novels shift faith in divine paternity to in the divine feminine, they take on a more performative storytelling practice that develops a relationship to the past and those social changes that disrupt hierarchies that does not require a coherent meaning – mere observation and witnessing are meaning enough. Put another way, Kevin Vanhoozer refers to Derrida who “distinguishes the ‘messianic’ from

'messianism,' where the latter stands for the belief that a particular Messiah has already come. The messianic, by contrast, has to do with what cannot (at present) be determined. The messianic is a structure of experience, apparently universal, that opens us to an unknown future" (18). I would like to argue that the very move in post-war faith that centralizes the family as The Sacred invites the messianic, open-ended, ambivalent experience of the divine feminine, a process represented in the postmodern family gothic.

As Molly McGarry explores, there is an alternative perspective of the religious and spiritual inheritance of modernity. Her work *Ghosts of Futures Past*, which follows the radical and progressive threads of nineteenth century American Spiritualism, provides a new lens with which to see the social changes of modernity, specifically as they impacted the family. McGarry's analysis of nineteenth century Spiritualism illustrates both the centrality of women in emerging faith practices and a model of the productive ambivalence of the postmodern family gothic. Indeed, the centrality of women creates such productive ambivalence as rigid religious rules (the belief in the damnation of unbaptized infants who died, for example) "died a happy death" with women leading the movement. Structurally, the Spiritualist movement was never one for dogma or widespread organization, which undergirds McGarry's recuperative work of this history. However, that very "disorganization," McGarry argues, is what allows for the spiritual practices to be ones that continued to align

themselves with progressive political movements such as gender equality and the restoration of Native American lands. McGarry shows how the boundaries of family broaden with the development of communes and the resistance to relegating mourning of death to the nuclear family only.

Temporally speaking, Spiritualism resists the linear mode of religion that uses The End to justify all manner of oppressive pasts and presents. McGarry explains, “whereas linear, secular history demands the transcendence of the past, Spiritualist practice collapsed time and refused to accept the past as over” (6). While such a perspective of the past seems more in line with a more traditional gothic determinism, Spiritualist practice actively sought out the past in order to find connection rather than domination or submission. For McGarry, “deploying the metaphor of the ghost to depict, among other things, alienated subjectivity and an alienated relationship to history tends to belie the ways in which certain historical subjects engaged spirits precisely in order to resist such alienation” (8). This temporal orientation pairs well with Avery Gordon’s notion of “something-to-be-done,” which inspires a “particular combination of acute timeliness and patience, of there being no time to waste at all and the necessity of taking your time...what [Gordon] associates with the abolitionist imaginary” (“Some Thoughts” 8). The past was used as a means to make the present and future more equitable as seen in the progressive politics of the Spiritualists.

This look towards the past that mirrors that of the Spiritualists takes specific forms in the postmodern gothic novels of faith. Nature, the body, and reading all measure faith within more linear religious practices, but have been altered within the more feminine and temporally defused work of the novels of this chapter. The ghost, defined by Gordon as “a social figure [that points us] to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (*Ghostly Matters* 8), is appealed to, but not mastered, within family spiritual practices through nature, the body, and reading. These three themes are important modes of knowledge within postmodern spirituality and reflect the impulses of nineteenth century Spiritualism, while also developing on them.

Postmodern spirituality is ambivalent as the influence of postmodern philosophies of truth and the subject as fragmented, diffused, and relative upset the very structure of religious practices as based in a certainty – certainty based on faith, but certainty nonetheless. Postmodernism, as a worldview, is generally dedicated to embracing the experience of uncertainty. Much like nineteenth century Spiritualism, Postmodern spiritual practices are based on personal experience rather than given meaning.<sup>8</sup> As a result, postmodern spiritual practices often look to the form of ritual itself as sacred, in that the meaning conveyed by the form is open and variable. Amy Hungerford explains this

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<sup>8</sup> Molly McGarry explains, “Unlike other religions, in which faith was a necessary prerequisite for belief, Spiritualism asked only that one become an ‘investigator,’ attend a séance under ‘test’ conditions, analyze ‘evidence,’ and weigh whether or not to believe” (8).

phenomenon of Post-War faith, which she describes as a “faith in faith.” Because of the Red Scare, leaders of the United States began to use a general concept of faith as a means to unite the various practices of the American public against the “faithless” Communists (Hungerford 3). As Hungerford points out, this “belief without meaning becomes...a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions...[and] a hedge against the inescapable fact of pluralism” (xiii). Faith, emptied of its contents can be chronically manipulated to benefit those already in power.

However, the “faith in faith” to which Hungerford refers still operates within the context of the Judeo-Christian worldview that maintains The End as core to the issue of faith. While those in power might be able to “change” the meaning of ritual without content to benefit themselves at any time, such changes must still work within the context of an End Times. The ambiguity and “meaninglessness” of the postmodern faith within *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Swamplandia!*, and *Ceremony* resist the linear progress towards an End through a memorial and corporeal expansion of family identity. Through an explicit play with form and literary reference, space, and the body’s relationship to language, these novels illustrate ever-evolving rituals of storytelling, which allow for greater healing from traumatic pasts. In particular, the form of the novel itself comes to resist its own ending as the authors highlight that sincerity of religious experience is dependent on the “unstable” narrative, the narrative without end

or the narrative that does not fulfill expectations. This ambivalence may cause discomfort in the reader, but it ultimately drives the resistance to the static meaning found in the home of chapter one.

Indeed, the home of chapter one haunts the families of postmodern faith. In this way, I frame the ambivalence of family faith within the larger concerns of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century domesticity. In what ways does the everyday become sacred as the patriarchal family structure falls apart? Does storytelling become a creative act similar to procreation and birth? How do men define their place within a new and ever-changing family structure? The ritual of storytelling that does not end may open up space for the divine feminine and the sacredness of the everyday, but in resisting the teleology of patriarchal religious structures, the future of the family will always remain uncertain.

The novel, in its controversial history as the object of domestic reading, is the ideal form within which to address the End of family. In her history of the novel, Karin Littau documents the immediate worries and critiques of the novel as it posed physical and mental “threats” to the growing mass of readers. Walter Benjamin falls in line with those documented worries as, during the first half of the twentieth century, he chides the “rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” for the “earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling” (87). For Benjamin, “what differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it

neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it" (87). The domestic nature of the novel in its isolating and privatizing nature resists the communal nature of proper storytelling. For Benjamin, the novel cannot do what the story does, which is resist explanation in the telling: "the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them" (Benjamin 89). Much of this critique is based on the physical object of the novel, which tames the story with a literal cover.

But I would like to argue that the novels of this chapter in their ritualizing of storytelling bridge the intimate, yet communal character of storytelling that Benjamin privileges and the increasingly more isolated individual that comes with stories of apocalypse and salvation. Within these novels that resist the concept of a teleological end, apocalypse takes on its definition of disclosure rather than a prophesy of a worldly end. Disclosure is something that brings all things to the surface. While "revelation" suggests a specific meaning attached to what has been revealed, "disclosure" makes no such interpretive, or explanatory gestures (as Benjamin might say). Further, I would argue that these novels of spiritual disclosure embrace the vulnerability and discomfort that often comes with acts of making known. What is disclosed, without any edifying "revelation," is the arbitrariness of The End, which requires a different relationship to family and the past as they no longer fit into a cohering story.

## **Mother Nature and Father Time: The Disclosure of Female Divinity**

The natural world has a distinct place within spiritual traditions and religious rituals. In particular, the natural world is often a sign that heightens religious experiences because, as a sign, nature often represents mystery – the ‘wild.’ Confronting nature often acts as a rite of passage in many cultural and spiritual traditions in order to demonstrate qualities like bravery or wisdom. Within the modern world and its Enlightenment principles of order and rationality, confronting nature becomes a ritual to reaffirm an anthropocentric narrative of society and culture. Religion becomes a practice of mastery, with human progress and perfection as the End goal. Additionally, nature or “the natural” also operates as a quick legitimizing sign of religious or social hierarchies, as in man is *by nature* superior to woman. “There is a basic agreement that patriarchal Western conceptualization of nature [is] a feminized, exploitable resource” (Sturgeon 117), which serves to justify both the domination of nature and women through a circular logic: Women are more connected to the natural world, which justifies their submission; nature, because of its connection to women, should be mastered.

The gothic preys on anxieties of mastery by depicting nature (and women) as something unknowable and uncontrollable, and apocalypse in this respect becomes a disclosure of nature as too vast, varied, and changing to be truly mastered. Father Time is no match for Mother Nature. But while gothic anxieties



stop at a hopelessness of man in the face of Mother Nature, the postmodern family gothic presents a hybrid natural world that incorporates human will. Postmodernity is haunted by, not only the feminine agency of a natural world within a system of the patriarchal drive to master it, but also the desire to connect with that force in a way that is not of mastery. Specifically, nature and its resistance to mastery dissolves the illusion that is the patriarchal fantasy past in which the domestic and affective labor of women has been forgotten. Ultimately, nature gives families faith in women's labor, which takes on a sacred quality.

Nature discloses a universal family not bounded by religion in *The Poisonwood Bible*, which comes from a literal submission to Mother Nature. Nathan Price, the patriarch of the novel's family appropriates nature in order to demonstrate the power of his religious faith. As an evangelical Christian, he believes his role, as a man, is to have dominion over the earth. When he arrives in Kilanga, Congo, his first action is to plan and prepare a garden. The preparation for the garden serves as his first major lesson to his daughters in their new home: "Why do you think the Lord gave us seeds to grow, instead of having our dinner just spring up out there on the ground like a bunch of field rocks?...Because Leah, the Lord helps those that help themselves" (36-37). With rapture, Leah develops a fantasy future based on her father's power over the land: "He took back the hoe and proceeded to hack out a small, square dominion over the jungle, attacking his task with such muscular vigor we would surely,

soon, have tomatoes and beans coming out our ears" (38). In the story that Nathan tells himself and his family, there is promised good to those who work hard and vigorously enough to shape the land from something wild into something submissive. Nature is regarded as something that can only be tamed in man's service to God.

The problem, of course, is that Nathan's approach to the jungle land is the same as to farmland. In treating Nature as universally subordinate to the will of God, Nathan actually brings about the End of this family, primarily through their constant inability to feed themselves. Nathan's story of his "Garden of Eden" that would manifest the power of Christian faith to the native people, whose language Nathan cannot speak, fails. One of the local women, Mama Tataba, watches the construction of the garden with knowing suspicion and says "You got to be make hills...He won't be grow. You got to be make hills" (39). Nathan, sure of his religious (and racial) superiority over Mama Tataba, dismisses her advice and later violently destroys the "graves" of hills that she had created for them while they slept—effectively erasing her labor. But as Adah recounts a terrible and common rainstorm:

the torrent had swamped the flat bed and the seeds rushed out like runaway boats...[but] No one can say he does not learn his lesson, though it might take a deluge, and though he might never admit it in his lifetime that it was not his own idea in the first place. Nevertheless, Our Father had been influenced by Africa. He was out there pushing his garden up into rectangular, flood-proof embankments, exactly the length and width of burial mounds. (63)

Nathan's understanding of his mastery over nature must be revised because Nature is varied; however, his storytelling ritual will always manipulate his relationship to nature in order to demonstrate his God-given power. Despite Nathan's yielding to nature, his refusal to acknowledge his lack of control over nature contributes to the continued fragmentation of his family as they see more and more how little he has power over anything.

The power and drama of the jungle proves too much for the Price family, no matter how often Nathan restructures the story of their experiences to showcase his and God's power. The end that marks the ultimate fragmentation of the Price family is only really the end for the Father, who cannot let go of the Judeo-Christian End – best seen in his treatment of Ruth May's death and the subsequent rainstorm. During their entire stay in the Congo, Nathan had tried to have a community baptism in which he would bring all the native children down to the river and, in true Baptist style, submerge each of them, which was of course a stupid and dangerous idea given the alligators. But Nathan's faith in the End, designated by a final separation of the faithful from the unsaved, requires his push to baptize. This desperate need to baptize eventually overshadows any grief at his daughter's death. Rather than participate in the local mourning rituals over his daughter, as his wife does, Nathan uses the sudden rainstorm as an opportunity to "baptize" all the children who are honoring and mourning his youngest daughter. Whereas Nathan sees himself as a unifying factor in this

moment – “[God’s] bubbling spring of eternal life” – the children are all unified in mourning because of Ruth May’s efforts to play with the local children.

Nathan has never noticed his daughter’s real success to do what he has continued to fail to do. Nathan tries to control the “meaning” of the rainstorm, but his attempts cannot offset the meaning of a dead child, which incites the mother to flee from Nathan with her remaining children.

The previous missionary, Brother Fowels, during a visit, advises Leah, “When I want to take God at his word exactly, I take a peep out the window at His Creation. Because that, darling, He makes fresh for us everyday, without a lot of dubious middle managers” (248). Rather than using nature to justify the word of the Bible, this alternate version sees nature as something that is already itself sacred: a present moment, not a sign of the promised end to come. While Nathan baptizes the local children, he misses both the sacredness of a rainstorm that has ended a dry spell and the manifestation of God’s universal family that his daughter has already facilitated. In *The Poisonwood Bible* the refusal to cede mastery over nature, and therefore seek connection and support from the community, leads to the destruction of the Price family.

While *The Poisonwood Bible* uses the ultimate failure of man to hold dominion over nature to illustrate the End of the patriarchal family, *Swamplandia!* shows how a blind faith in Mother Nature as a source of divine power cannot recuperate the past. Rather, the gothic anxieties of the supernatural feminine

prove to truly be dangerous when set outside of cultural history. For the Bigtree family, the natural world is far more of a commonplace than for the Price family. The Bigtree family has developed their own theme park around the alligators of the swamp, the wild environment where they live. While the Bigtree family professes a cautious respect for the environment and the alligators they work with – “The gators are not your pets, Ava... That creature is pure appetite in a leather case. A Seth<sup>9</sup> can't love you back” (Russell 16) – the social status they assume based on their special relationship with nature makes them vulnerable to all the ways that nature is not insulation against culture. The Divine Feminine of the swamp does not push the family to incorporate ‘tribal’ wisdom as it does in the jungle of *The Poisonwood Bible*; rather the Divine Feminine of the swamp pushes the family to witness all the ways that they are inevitably cultural.

Indeed, the adopted “tribal” name of the family, Bigtree, sets up a story that uncomfortably appropriates the “outsider” status of real Native Americans. Noel Sturgeon explains, “white authors present themselves as privy to Native American cultures in ways that allow them to hold them up as ecological resources...” (115). While the white family takes on the name in honor of the swamp, and the children are very clear about the history of the native peoples of the swampland, the gesture cannot escape charges of fetishism. Ava describes how “Although there was not a drop of Seminole or Miccosukee blood in us, the

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<sup>9</sup> “Seth” is the nickname the family has given all alligators.

Chief [her father] always costumed us in tribal apparel for the photographs he took. He said we were ‘our own Indians’” (6). Despite all their knowledge and respect for the swamp environment, Russell shows how such deference without cultural understanding leads to ignorant faith in Mother Nature.

In the absence of the mother, who has died at the beginning of the novel, the father’s over-reliance on the natural world – literally Mother Nature – to shape his children into competent adults excuses him from the responsibility of teaching his children the significance of mainstream/mainland society in their maturation. The End of the Bigtree family occurs with the death of the mother and the subsequent inability of the family to integrate their wild life with other cultural realities like financial debt, education, and sexuality. While their father is encouraging of his children’s independence and self-expression, which he sees as absolutely linked to engaging with the swamp and wild animals, his avoidance of issues of sexuality in particular set his teenage children up for great pain. Kiwi does not know how to negotiate the aggressive masculinity of the mainland culture, except to adopt it himself; Ava’s faith in her own privileged relationship to the swampland prevents her from recognizing the sexually predatory nature of the Bird Man. Mother Nature cannot take the place of “mothering.”

But the memory of the mother is associated with the swamp in a way that does help the family to survive the “enemy forces, natural and corporate” (Russell 7). Stories about the mother guide Kiwi away from his learned sexual

objectification of women, as he mourns the destruction of his mother's poster by his friends who try to replace it with a "hotter" poster. And the memory of her mother's voice helps Ava escape from both the Bird Man and the alligator she meets while running away from him. In an allegory, Russell points to memory and witnessing of the mother and the natural world as ways to keep the family together, even in the trauma of death and debt. Ava witnesses the hatching of a red alligator that she believes will save the family business. This alligator, despite the phallic symbolism of its shape, is described in sexually feminine terms: "Her skull was the exact shape and shining hue of a large halved strawberry...The door to the shed stood open, and her skin brightened like an ember. [Ava] half-expected her temperature to flare up, too. To burn and sizzle" (Russell 59-60). But while Ava clings desperately to this potential saving grace, her life depends on her releasing the alligator back to the natural world. She is only able to escape the Bird Man when she throws the red alligator at him. The past cannot be recreated, but as Joan Scott says, "real relations of identity between past and present are discovered and/or forged" (287) with the work of the imagination.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the Bigtree family forges a new relationship based on remembering both their lost mother and swamp homeland, rather than trying to recreate it.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Scott uses the term "fantasy" to describe this work of the imagination. However, her definition of the work of fantasy is more one of disclosure rather than of obfuscation as I have used the term in my previous chapters about "fantasy future" and "fantasy past."

Such acts of remembrance lead to a recognition that nature, in its “wildness,” incorporates the human-made and simulated world. Such is the disclosure of *Ceremony*. In the context of mass genocide of Native Americans and the continued exploitation of the land by white people, Mother Nature and Man would seem to be explicitly opposed. Indeed, Silko presents her readers with Native American characters whose belief in their special knowledge of nature (that is appropriated in *Swamplandia!*) makes them targets of ridicule among the majority of the Native American community that has abandoned nature for the simulated culture of Christianity or alcohol. But such opposition between Mother Nature and the simulated world of white men creates a particular kind of illness in Tayo. In the apocalyptic environment that Silko creates, the eternal tie between Mother Nature and her man-made simulations is disclosed. Even as simulations will never be eliminated, they will never fully take the place of nature. Thus, the family is ever tied to its fantasy forms, traumatic memories, and chaotic present, but such ties only open up new ways of being family.

Tayo’s return to the U.S. after his tour in the Pacific Theater of WWII has left him with PTSD and no resources to support him in his transition home. His experience at the VA hospitals leaves him only feeling like “white smoke” and his experience with the traditional medicine man Ku’oosh isn’t successful either. Ku’oosh sadly explains that “There are some things we can’t cure like we used to...not since the white people came” (38). The only ceremony or ritual that



seems effective for the illness of the Native American veterans is alcohol: “the beer stoked a place deep under his heart and put all the feelings to sleep” (60). Only in visiting the more radical and innovative medicine man, Betonie, does Tayo begin to heal mentally and spiritually.

Simulations are not without their own stories, which is how the connection between Mother Nature and her simulations can be developed. Such is the lesson that Tayo learns from Betonie. Once inside Betonie’s home, Tayo visually explores the miscellany of newspapers, telephone books, Coke bottles, shrunken skin pouches, gourd rattles, rawhide, among other items (120). Betonie addresses Tayo’s anxiety over all the materials and explains, “In the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays...All these things have stories alive in them” (121). The “layers of old calendars” that had “Indian scenes painted on them—Navajos herding sheep, deer dancers at Cochiti, and little Pueblo children chasing burros” (121) strike Tayo as particularly meaningful. He remembers that his uncle “used to bring the calendars home every year” (121), which proves that the mass marketed item has a life or a story, despite its two-dimensional representation of nature. Developing a relationship with the simulated environment becomes just as important as reconnecting to the natural environment. Perhaps best explained in the words of Betonie:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people

came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong...things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery wants to scare people, to make them fear growth. (126)

Tayo's willingness to allow for this great disclosure of the imbrication of the natural environment and cultural changes positions him to heal from the war trauma that has left him terrorized by the death of his cousin and the drought that plagues his family home.

Tayo rebuilds his relationship to his family in his own personalized ceremony that bridges the dead to the living. Tayo's ceremony of healing from war trauma is to fulfill a promise he made to his uncle to care for the Mexican cattle they purchased, which were lost after his uncle's death while Tayo and his cousin were at war. The cattle were taken by a white rancher to the north, a direction that goes against the southern-oriented Mexican cattle. Tayo brings the ownership papers with him, even though he doesn't actually plan on negotiating with the white rancher. This gesture suggests Tayo's recognition of the simulated relationship to nature modeled by white men's paper work, but primarily, Tayo works with the nature of the cattle. He cuts a whole in the fence that would let the cattle escape to the south, as they are naturally inclined to do, which allows him to retake the cattle even as he's captured by the white men who monitor the land. Once Tayo escapes, he finds that his lover Ts'eh has used the natural formation of an arroyo to corral the cattle for him. Tayo rebuilds his place within

his family as he fulfills the promise to his uncle. This ceremony also allows Tayo to forgive himself for the death of his cousin. Rocky's death is depicted, particularly by Tayo's aunt, as Tayo's failing to care for and protect Rocky. Rocky was seen as the family's access to a better (and whiter) life. In caring for the cattle, and reclaiming a financial resource for the family, Tayo brings some peace to the loss of Rocky.

The deaths in the families of *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Swamplandia!*, and *Ceremony* point to an apocalyptic loss of family cohesion. However, in the conscious submission to nature, families find ways to continue as the loss merely marks an opening to the family, rather than an explicit End. Such disclosure of coherence within fragmentation is also developed in language rituals that reconstitute the physical bodies of the family.

### **Body Language: Sacred Skin, Bones, and Muscles**

As the family begins to fall into chaos from some apocalyptic event, female family members ritualize the practice of defamiliarizing language. This practice reworks the relationship between the body and language, so as to mark the limit of language's ability to make sense and order. The defamiliarizing rituals of language point to the body as in excess of language, but such excess allows for the family body to become more constellatory rather than unitary (i.e. the family "unit"). A constellatory family body defies what Julia Kristeva would

define as paternal/symbolic language. According to Kristeva, the semiotic “is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body, which...serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the Symbolic” (Butler 108). While I agree with Judith Butler’s critique that “Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice” (110), as a ritual, linguistic “elision, repetition, mere sound...and metaphor” (Butler 112) do find corporeal weight in the fragmented, diffused, and even ghostly family body. The language with which families use to express faith shifts from the paternal order to the maternal disruption. As a result, the body comes to define family in conjunction with language.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Adah uses disordering, or hyper-ordering language to bring new meaning to her body, which broadens the concept of who counts as “family” within the context of Christian evangelism. Whereas Adah’s family often uses language to discipline bodies and identities, Adah makes a practice of writing and speaking backwards and in palindromes, which draw attention to the arbitrary ordering of words. Amy Hungerford summarizes Kenneth Burke’s idea that “words about God are in essence words about words...[so] it doesn’t take much to reverse the equation and...to suggest that words about words...are in some sense words about God” (9). Adah’s “meaningless” language takes on the quality of incantation, which makes her

body – and those with similar bodily deformities – a sacred site rather than one of lack.

Specifically, Adah's creation of backwards language and palindromes resists the teleology of language suggested by sentences, which have a beginning and an ending. Adah explains, "When I finish reading a book from front to back, I read it back to front. It is a different book, back to front, and you can learn new things from it. It from things new learn can you and front to back book different a is it...This is another way to read it, although I am told a normal brain will not grasp it: *Ti morf sgniht wen nrael nac uoy dna tnorf ot kcab koob tnereffid a si ti*" (57). This pattern of writing backwards, especially writing entire words backwards, persists throughout the text of Adah's chapters and forces the reader to slow down and test if the sentence has such backward logic. A reader's time with a sentence is not complete once the sentence has been read through one time. Although much of her backwards language is written in italics, often it does not have typographical signals for the reader and may surprise the reader, again asking the reader to return to the sentence. Much like the sacredness of the word of God, Adah's disruption to the logic of a sentence encourages readers to spend time with the form, or even sound, of letters and words.

But whereas the word of God generally conveys a sense of discipline and punishment within Nathan Price's evangelical faith, Adah's disruptive language creates pleasure, for herself as well as for the reader. In reference to singing in

church, Adah says “In my mind I invented snmyhymns, as I call them, my own perverse hymns that can be sung equally well forward or backward: *Evil, all its sing is still alive!*” (72). Again, the reader is encouraged to re-read sentences in a circular fashion to sense the back-and-forth flow the palindrome; the ends of sentences are also the beginnings and the beginnings are also endings.

Such pleasure in the sacredness of meaningless language is connected to the body, particularly in its vulnerability and materiality – characteristics that Nathan believes must be transcended in order to connect with God. Adah loves the life and work of William Carlos Williams because he was both a poet and a doctor: “He wrote the poem while he was waiting for a child to die. I should like to be a doctor poet, I think...I would spend all day with people who could not run past me, and then I would go home and write whatever I liked about their insides” (170). In Adah’s fantasy, poetic language is directly associated with the body’s “insides,” as if blood and organs are the source of sacred words. This invoking of the grotesque body, exposed both by the hands of a doctor and the words of poet, shift Adah’s identity as an outsider in her own family and in her American society. While Nathan’s word of God drives him to “save” the indigenous Africans, whose bodies are also grotesque (racially and in various disabilities), Adah’s rituals of language disruption that arises out of her body’s sacredness discloses the already existing family bond between her family and the Congolese. Nathan’s ordering and linear language prevents him from seeing an

already embodied community. Indeed, because Adah's disability is not so uncommon in their jungle home, the sacred becomes something less distant than Nathan's preaching would indicate.

Language is often understood as that which spiritually guides people of faith to transcend their bodies. Whereas Adah's manipulation of language aligns the sacred with the "abnormal" body, Ossie's unintelligible voice expands the boundaries of her body giving her a spiritual power primarily anchored in the sexual body. In the novel, Russell gives Ava a first-person narration and Kiwi a third-person narration, but Ossie's voice is only presented through the perspective of Ava. This lack of clear and direct voice, plus Ossie's physical description as "snowy – not a weak chamomile blond but pure frost, with eyes that vibrated somewhere between maroon and violet" (6) creates a ghostly image that initially suggests that Ossie is more like an apparition that appeared at the call of any voice but her own. But Ossie herself is a medium. As a vessel for the voices of spirits, Ossie counteracts her own father's silence surrounding sexual maturity, which ultimately helps Ava let go of her faith in the coherence of the patriarchal family.

Ossie's channeling of ghosts is depicted as a form of autoeroticism that frightens Ava. At fourteen, Ava has yet to really think about her sexuality, particularly because her family has been isolated from any kind of society. Ava explains, "During the day it was easy to roll your eyes at Ossie's love spells. At

night everything changed...I could see my sister disappearing, could feel the body next to me emptying of my Ossie and leaving me alone in the room" (43-44). The "love spells" that annoy Ava during the day are understood as fantasies, or stories that her sister places faith in, a ritual that Ava herself understands. However, once the spells begin to have physical manifestations at night, Ava feels abandoned because the story is no longer legible to her. When Ava tries to talk to her brother about her worries, he points to the sexual nature of her possessions. Ava says "Sometimes when the ghost shows up she starts...moving in the bed and she moans, Kiwi, it sounds funny but it's a little scary, too?" to which Kiwi replies, "She *moans*?...I'll tell you a secret, Ava. When she's tossing and turning that way? You are probably watching a *good* dream" (72). However, Ava still fails to understand the spiritual practice as sexual, which seems unintelligible to Ava primarily because Ossie seems to have given over authorship of her fantasies.

Ossie's autoeroticism is initiated by a search for the maternal, which manifests the ambivalence of Kristeva's semiotic language. Ossie's primary intension for exploring the exercises in an occult text she found is to communicate with her dead mother – literally channeling the lost maternal body. This spiritual practice of channeling the mother, specifically through the language of a Ouija board, makes Ossie both hyper-embodied and disembodied. Kristeva's semiotic language is characterized by "instead of a negative



attachment to the body, the maternal body is internalized as a negation, so that the girl's identity becomes itself a kind of loss, a characteristic privation or lack" (Butler 115). In trying to reconnect to the lost maternal, Ossie inevitably opens up her bodily boundaries for many voices, which disrupts Ava's understanding of family identity. Specifically, Ossie seeks out community in the wake of the End of the family when Ava and Kiwi seek out autonomy and independence. Even when Ava relays Ossie's voice, Ossie quotes from her occult text in entire passages: "The language of the living rains down on the dead...and often our communications overwhelm them. The hailstorm of our words can be too intense for them to bear" (27-28). If language is secondary or even a limit to communicating with the dead, Ava must find new ways to organize her family that is not dependent on the rationalizing language of family.

But while Ossie may challenge the linguistic and corporeal identities of family, Russell shows how such challenges and submission to sexuality can be taken over by patriarchal stories. A significant portion of the novel is devoted to Ossie's channeling of her ghost boyfriend, Louis Thanksgiving, and his telling of his life and death. Initially, the channeling of Louis gives Ossie a new voice and an opportunity to speak with an authority previously denied in her family. Further, her possession by Louis continues a form of autoerotic heterosexual practice, but the fact that Louis occupies her body also gives the experience a queer dimension. This queerness undermines a historical and cultural severing

of sexuality from the spiritual, a process that explicitly references the American Spiritualist Movement. Molly McGarry explains that the history of sexuality has been overly dominated by Foucault's analysis that "makes bodily knowledges secondary to linguistic ones" and looking at "an alternative history of nonsecular sexualities" shows that spirituality "fostered emergent sexualities" (157).

However, as Ossie allows Louis sole access to her body, her queered sexual-spiritual practice of possession begins to take the shape of the marriage plot. Ossie and Louis "run away" to get married, but marrying a ghost requires that Ossie give up her body completely through suicide. Ossie doesn't commit suicide, but only because Louis "abandons" her at the last minute. Ultimately, in giving over her body, Ossie does open up the door for a more communal experience of loss and healing, but without some voice of her own she makes her body problematically vulnerable.

The use of silence within *Ceremony* operates in between the disruption of language in *The Poisonwood Bible* and the embodied language of *Swamplandia!*. Rather than merely illustrate the arbitrary nature of symbolic language or unconsciously open the body up to stories of the past, Tayo and Ts'eh use silence as a pause in language that both disrupts the oppressiveness of language and makes space for stories of the past without losing a sense of identity. In particular, the pause of silence allows for a sacred sexual experience that heals

Tayo's psyche, caused by white language, and generates cooperation between body and language – a new ceremony.

As much as Tayo's psyche pain is caused by the loss of his cousin and his feelings of guilt, it was a pain begun with the empty words of the white man as he tried to shape the body of the Native Americans. As Tayo reflects on his understanding of his aggrieved Aunt, he points to the way that white words created a fragmentation among the Native peoples. Tayo "learned to listen to the undertones of her voice...her terror at being trapped in one of the oldest ways" (67). Tayo's Aunt has an "old sensitivity" within her that feels the pain of the whole family, but with the domination of the Europeans/Christians, "all of creation suddenly had two names" and "Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to cruse the single clan name...Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, her family" (68). This duality is the source of shame of Tayo's mother in herself, but because "the feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach" (69), all Tayo's aunt can do is replicate the separation between her sister's son and her own son – particularly through the use of silence: never letting her son share things with Tayo, for example.

The empty words follow him when he returns to the reservation community. Tayo's time in the VA hospital makes him feel like "white smoke,"

pointing to a disconnect between his body and his soul. In the hospital, words are used to diagnose and fix the body – language shapes the body. For Tayo, this shaping actually makes him feel empty. Such emptiness of body and spirit is nurtured in the drinking rituals of the Native veterans who all spout out their anger about the way the government has abandoned them with violent words. But the words mixed with alcohol only nurture the fragmentation and disembodiment, encouraging the veterans to be reckless and violent with their bodies by driving drunk and getting into bar fights. Only in allowing for deep sexual pleasure in silence can Tayo reconnect with his body and find new language that resists the abusive narratives that seek to contain his body.

During their initial meeting, when Tayo stays at Ts'eh's home while on his journey to find the lost cattle, no words are spoken between them. Tayo says a few greetings, but she doesn't speak; she merely cares for him. Before he can talk about his pain or begin to write a new story not already written by the white world, Tayo must reconnect to his body and breath, which requires silence, but also the feminine body. When they make love, he treats her body like a map because he's "afraid of being lost" (180); her body becomes something he can read. When Tayo leaves Ts'eh, he claims that "being alive was alright then: he had not breathed like that for a long time" (181). Tayo's ceremony requires him to remember the physical basis of language, which is the breath. Because Tayo's breath becomes smoother and more open, he can speak more authentically.

Whereas Tayo's silence before was self-induced through alcohol, reconnecting with his breath through sexual silence allows him more clarity in language and his new story.

This sexual silent pause occurs even after Tayo has found the cattle and is returning them to his family. He spends time again with Ts'eh as she teaches him rituals of healing the earth through cultivating soil, which is paralleled in their ritual lovemaking. At one point, Tayo wakes up from their lovemaking to find her gone and he worries that he had dreamed her – that her body did not really exist. While not her first spoken words in the novel, her response to his clear distress when he comes looking for her mark the beginning of a spiritual conversation that Tayo can now have. She says, "I'm over here" and then offers her name, which are both manifestations of language that suggest physical grounding. In calling to Tayo with "I'm over here," Ts'eh offers Tayo stability and a sense of hope – she is real and there is a 'here' to which he can accompany her. In offering her name, she invites Tayo into linguistic intimacy that follows their physical intimacy. Anything that Ts'eh says after this opening up of communication is deliberate and full of meaning. Unlike the empty words from his past, Ts'eh's words are material and "he could see the story taking form in bone and muscle" of his body and the bodies of the cattle (226). While perpetual silence might allow for Tayo to remain "white smoke," sexual silence creates a

disruptive pause to white stories and encourages him to find his breath so that he might persist in a different story based on the truthful language of Ts'eh.

Ultimately, the defamiliarization of dominant language through spiritual rituals draws greater attention to the body's shaping of knowledge and family. This defamiliarization of dominant language is further developed as the authors shift readers' attention to the shaping power of form. Rather than sacred texts containing messages about apocalypse, sacred texts themselves become the objects of apocalyptic disclosure, illustrating their historical and social construction.

### **Reading Form: The Material Life of Sacred Texts**

Through the use of form and literary reference in postmodern gothic novels about family faith, authors create a two-fold strategy to both integrate the reader into the text without moralizing and position reading as the main element of stories of faith. The reader is made "part of the family" through literary references that connect readers and characters, but is still distanced from the family through the novel's form. This strategy of making the reader complicit at a distance provides the mystical foundation necessary to keeping the novels as ever-evolving works rather than autonomous pieces. This opening-up resists the way that sacred texts (both religious and non-religious) are often used to shut down meaning.

The complicity of the reader in the narrative formation is a common strategy within the postmodern period and develops a gothic consequence of haunting for stories about faith and families. Linda Hutcheon explains that a shift in the narrative strategies of postmodernism “replaces the challenged author-text relationship [of modernism] with one between reader and text...” (126). But often, this renewed concern over the reader-text relationship manifests in reading practices of mastery. Karin Littau, in her history of reading, notes “Reading here [in twentieth-century literary criticism] is a negative pleasure of self-assertion and self-control, certainly a master of self and in many respects a mastery of the text” (137). She argues that such an approach to the reader-text relationship leaves little room for the role of the body and of affect in reader experience. Such an opposition between reader and affect from reading creates a limited understanding especially of sacred texts. Littau claims that “affect, once meritorious, becomes dangerous before it disappears from critical view altogether. Only certain feminist approaches present an exception to this” (156-7). The postmodern feminist structures of these novels resituate the reader, not as master, but as witness.

In establishing this kind of role for the reader, authors open up the reader to what is beyond the physical boundaries of the book and thus better attuned to a larger mythology of literature, including, but not limited to, spiritual texts and “master narratives” of national and gender identity. This witnessing role for the

reader, combined with a continued defamiliarization of language makes texts the sites of juxtaposition between the sacred and the arbitrary. This juxtaposition develops a new binding for families who simultaneously cling to and disrupt sacred texts in order to structure family within apocalyptic disclosure. The confrontation between family and sacred stories within a temporality of disclosure creates a constellation of meaning. The authors of these novels design the confrontations as constellations in order to point to the difficult terrain that families negotiate as they structure themselves against linearity, consciously embracing haunting.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the sacredness of the Bible is disrupted through the revision of “Biblical” language and democratizing of Biblical form. As the women of the Price family and Kingsolver herself work with the qualities that position a text as sacred – language style; pronouncements about humanity; or historical duration, for example – they make the reader witness to a reconfiguration of the source of faith. Whereas Nathan’s patriarchal perspective demands a respect and elevating of the Bible that is unquestionable, Kingsolver illustrates that the sacredness of a text is not immanent, but rather develops out of the exchange between the text and the reader’s body. As such, the Bible is shown to suffocate the body, and those ghosts created from the Bible reemerge in the freer exchange of other texts.



Adah's practice of disrupting linear language allows her to identify linguistic codes that span across religious and non-religious texts, which challenges the source of sacredness in the language of a text. Early on in the novel, Adah plays a trick on her devout twin sister, Leah. Adah writes down the following passage: "It was neither diabolical nor divine; it but shook the doors of the prison house of my disposition; and like the captives of Philippi, that which stood within ran forth" (55). She then gives the passage to her sister "with the query: FROM WHAT BOOK OF THE BIBLE?" (55). As Adah explains, "Leah fancies herself Our Father's star pupil in matters Biblical...[she] read the quote, nodding solemnly, and wrote underneath, *The book of Luke. I'm not sure which verse*" (55). Yet Adah has deceived her sister because the passage is actually from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Adah's deception of her sister preys on Leah's assumption that "Biblical" language is unique to the Bible. Adah can identify the linguistic codes that give the passage from Stevenson's novel spiritual authority, which illustrates Robert Alter's assertion that "literary power and religious power...are not easy to distinguish" (Hungerford 85). The fact that Leah can agree to the condition of Adah's quiz that the passage is in fact from the Bible simultaneously diminishes the transcendent power of the Bible and enhances the spiritual authority of Stevenson's text.

Yet, it is unclear if Adah reveals her sister's mistake to her. This textual ambivalence on the part of Kingsolver depicts Adah as a witness to the family's spiritual disconnect and also resituates the sacredness of a text, not as omnipotent, but rather intimate. Adah's status as witness, or interested outsider, is initially based in her disabled body, but it is also based in her literary knowledge that allows her to narrate the family's story within larger patterns not identified in the Bible of Nathan's interpretation. For example, Adah herself identifies with "Dr. Jekyll's dark desires and...Mr. Hyde's crooked body," but this notably gothic story also helps the reader recognize a duplicity within Adah's father and frame his religious fervor: from his mastery of religion and Biblical knowledge he slowly morphs into a monster who is unrecognizable as a human.<sup>11</sup> Literature, particularly those texts influenced by gothic themes – Adah lists among her favorite texts, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* – provide a more cosmic, and generous, framing of Nathan's cruelty. Although most of Kingsolver's novel positions the reader to witness Nathan's verbal and emotional violence from a critical standpoint, Adah's literary references to the duality of humanity give readers a more intimate experience of that terrifying family

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<sup>11</sup> After the death of the youngest daughter, the Price mother flees from Nathan. Leah ends up married to an African man; Rachel ends up married to the pilot who brought them into the Congo; and Adah and her mother return to the United States. Nathan disappears into the jungle and becomes something of a "crazy old man" of local folklore. He dies unknown.

dynamic that, at least for Adah, is harmful but pleasurable to watch within the “sacred code” of literature.

This “sacred code” of literature is also apparent in the structure of the novel, which Kingsolver uses to draw attention to the gendered nature of the Bible as well as the literary canon. Amy Hungerford states that during the later half of the twentieth century, many novels were written to “[appropriate] some essential quality of the Bible...[and therefore could] surpass the secular realm of the merely literary to enter the higher realm of cultural authority occupied by the Bible as a sacred book” (80). *The Poisonwood Bible* follows this tradition of borrowing Biblical authority in order to exalt the literary and establish it as sacred. Kingsolver has segmented her novel into seven “books,” several of which take actual Biblical book titles: Genesis, Exodus, and Judges for example. Other titles use the names of stories from the Apocrypha, the series of texts that are associated with Biblical writing, but not considered to be canonical: Bel and the Serpent, and The Song of Three Children, for example. In forming her novel in a structure similar to the Bible, Kingsolver takes on the cosmic and epic force of the Bible as she frames the narrative of a single family, which encourages readers to witness this family not as particular, but as representative. As such, the female voices that make up each of the books suggest a divine feminine denied by the Bible. In this way, Kingsolver, reconstructs the family bible, which records genealogy as matriarchal. The pain of witnessing the domestic abuse of the Price

family, made more painful by its religious foundation, is rendered pleasurable as the voices of the abused are not only heard, but also spiritually elevated by the form of the text.

But the Bible is not the only sacred text subject to a revision of gender. Each book of Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* is supplemented with a secondary title page that references Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried." These secondary title pages – "The Things We Carried"; "The Things We Learned"; "The Things We Didn't Know"; "The Things We Lost"; and "What We Carried Out" – undermine the mythology of the biblically-inspired title pages and draw the reader's attention to the central issue of O'Brien's short story: the painful juxtaposition of dominant hero narratives of war and the real experiences of soldiers. Especially since Nathan sees himself as a hero of God, fighting a war to save the heathens of Africa, the metaphorical association of the daughters as soldiers works well. In paralleling the painful detail of boredom, malnourishment, disillusionment, and illness of Vietnam soldiers of O'Brien's text with the Price women, Kingsolver draws attention not only to the plight of these specific women, but also to the plight of women within the context of religiously grounded patriarchy. Further, by invoking a narrative of Vietnam, a historical event fraught with imperialism, colonialism, and racism, Kingsolver also frames the Price women in a way that complicates their status. They are not merely the passive soldiers at the whim of a dominant hero, but they are also

complicit in exercises of colonization of the Congolese people. What becomes sacred in this constellation of texts is the reader's witnessing of the multiple frames and imbrication of the stories.

While there are several explicit literary references within *Swamplandia!* and one explicitly sacred text – *The Spiritist's Telegraph* – Russell's implicit literary references, which depict stories that haunt, point to larger feminist histories at work within the ritualized stories that Ava and Ossie tell about themselves and their family. Russell makes such references implicit to illustrate how stories are at work regardless of if their work is recognized or not. In this way, faith becomes a practice of letting go of sacred texts as determinant and of witnessing the unspoken narrative forces that influence how family stories are shaped by individual family members. In particular, as the reader becomes witness to stories that the characters are not privy to, Russell cautions against rituals that individualize faith and isolate practitioners from one another.

The characters in *Swamplandia!* are haunted by stories they are not aware of, making the reader witness of special and "divine" knowledge. For the Bigtree siblings, putting oneself in a larger story has become ritualized: Kiwi reads himself into the narrative of the "self-made man" in his intellectual reading of textbooks and philosophy; Ava reads herself into the narrative of the "rugged hero" in her reading of westerns and superhero comic books; Ossie reads herself into the narrative of Cassandra in her reading of *The Spiritist's Telegraph*, which is

dismissed as weird and crazy by her siblings even as Ossie seems attuned to the larger forces at play in their lives. Yet, these stories are held so tightly and so independently by each sibling that the stories morph into possessions and lose their power of spiritual insight. Her implicit references to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, emphasizes the importance not only in revising rituals of stories (like in *The Poisonwood Bible*), but also in the recognizing that one can never be fully aware of the stories at play, especially as those stories manifest a divine feminine. Such ambivalence allows for the family to come together in the unknown.

Russell's reference to the beloved novel *The Adventures of Huck Finn* illustrate the damage of certain forms of masculinity that masquerade as unquestionably valuable universal traits. The parallels between this still-commonly read novel and Ava are clear: Ava/Huck is a strong willed and adventurous adolescent who travels across dangerous waters with an adult of unstated wisdom, The Bird Man/Jim. Indeed, Russell has even explicitly claimed the influence of Twain's novel on her own in an interview when she said she "wanted [her novel] to have a Huck Finn on the underworld tale [sic]" (*PBS News Hour*). But the story of Huck Finn can also be seen in Kiwi's evolution from studious, intellectual snob to worldly, irreverent teenager. Indeed, previous to reconnecting with his sisters by the end of the novel, Kiwi's character seems to devolve into the qualities prized by mainstream culture for men. However, in

letting the references to *Huck Finn* remain implicit, Russell allows for the story's sexism to reveal itself. Ava does not enjoy the same safety and equality in her relationship with the Bird Man as Huck does with Jim. The Bird Man rapes Ava, and she comes to realize how she cannot see herself outside of society, particularly in its gendered construction. During the rape Ava thinks to herself, "Oh, this...and got a counterfeit déjà vu from the stories [she] had read and overheard" (328), stories that she had chosen to not read herself into, but had shaped her nonetheless. The universal qualities touted by lovers of Huck – his independence, his lack of reserve, his self-assuredness – are not available to Ava within systemic sexism.

The influence of *Huck Finn* on Kiwi reflects the more problematic qualities of Huck himself, rather than just how those qualities are not universal. Christi Rishoi explains that Huck's "coming of age is arrested because finally he is unable to reconstitute the self in light of his experiences...Huck is left standing on the margins of society, attempting to persuade himself that a solitary life in the territories is preferable to the comforts and supports of human company" (18). Ultimately, Rishoi argues that Huck's character never changes and that his ability to remain impenetrable, or maintain a self-delusion of impenetrability, literally prevents him from coming to adulthood. Such is the case for Kiwi, who, despite being humbled by the mainland teenagers who make fun of his "smarts," persists in a narrative of autonomy and mastery that keeps him from recognizing

how he has also abandoned his sisters like his father did. Only in his rescue of Ossie does Kiwi release his attachment to independence. In letting the story of *Huck Finn* play out implicitly, particularly in its inevitable failure to empower those who have faith in its narrative iterations, Russell allows Ava and Kiwi to grow in a way that Rishoi argues that Huck cannot. Ava learns to save herself and Kiwi learns how to save someone else. "Independence" becomes not the final stage in adulthood, but rather the beginning of a larger story of creating family within social systems of identity, such as gender.

The even more implicit references to Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* makes the reader witness to a feminist narrative of self and family development alternative to the ubiquity of *Huck Finn*. Indeed, readers unfamiliar with *Geek Love* will not recognize the references. However, the influence of Dunn on *Swamplandia!* is indisputable. Aside from the fact that Russell includes Dunn in her acknowledgements page, the parallels between the families are notable to the witnessing reader: Dunn's Binewski family runs a carnival; Russell's Bigtree family runs an alligator theme park. Both oldest children in each family – a highly intelligent boy – seek to usurp power from fathers they view as clowns. Daughters in each family are raped by a mysterious stranger who has been invited in to the family – The Bag Man in *Geek Love* and The Bird Man in *Swamplandia!*. One child in each family is psychically inclined and considered physically weak – Dunn's Chick is telekinetic and Russell's Osceola



communicates with the dead. I make these connections, not to disparage Russell's creativity, but rather to suggest that Dunn's portrait of twentieth century domestic drama is one that has replaced *Huck Finn's* coming of age as a narrative touchstone, in spite of its anonymity.

The idea that the domestic drama in America on both sides of the millennium<sup>12</sup> is a horrific carnival of violence, secrecy, and performance is not a new trope among postmodern feminist writers. However, the way that Russell uses this trope implicitly makes attuned readers into witnesses of a reality that does not need to be "proven" or "argued for" in fiction more interested in making these depictions explicit. While *Huck Finn* might provide a reference for the sexism at work within Ava and Kiwi's faith in stories of independence, *Geek Love* provides a reference for the troubling reality that feminist visions of family have lost their narrative presence, even as they continue to haunt families.

This loss is seen most clearly in the connection between Oly of *Geek Love* and Ossie of *Swamplandia!*. Both albinos, and thus gestures to the ghosts that make up families, these two characters represent the embodiment of larger feminist histories. Oly, the first-person narrator of *Geek Love* ultimately reveals the persistence of maternal legacy when the patriarchal structure of the family literally explodes. Her post-mortem narrative to her daughter Miranda offers hope in the wake of trauma and divine feminine guidance at the "end of family."

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<sup>12</sup> *Geek Love* was published in 1989 and *Swamplandia!* was published in 2011.

However, in Russell's reference, such a character of maternal persistence has lost her voice. Ossie has no voice of her own in the novel even as her sister has a first-person narration and her brother has a third-person limited narration. Indeed, Ossie's connection to a larger feminist history in American Spiritualism shows how such mystical practices that challenge linear time (Ossie builds community between past and present in her communications with the dead), have been silenced. Ossie's lack of voice, despite her visions, has been silenced like Cassandra and narratively locked away like Bertha. Russell's dedication to temporal ambivalence at the end of her novel ("We used to have this cardboard clock on Swamplandia! and you could move the tiny red hands to whatever time you wanted, next show at \_\_:\_\_ o'clock!" [397]) offers a poor resolution to the narrative fragility of the divine feminine, represented in Ossie's subjection to psychotropic drugs in the end of the novel.

If a sacred text is that which is venerated for the worship of a deity, then *Ceremony* critiques the practice of the way material objects are surreptitiously made into sacred texts, if even unconsciously. Indeed, the process by which Betonie creates new ceremonies for the purposes of healing the soul in postmodern culture highlights a person of faith's responsibility for their sacred texts. While Betonie's integration of detritus from both the Native American world and the white world into spiritual practice illustrates a conscious recognition that objects contain stories that have become sacred and must

therefore be treated as such, Silko's juxtaposition of oral mythologies with depictions of violent masculinity demonstrates how forgetfulness maintains the sacredness of objects that are ultimately destructive. The reader becomes a witness to the connection between myth and the worship of violence; specifically, the reader is witness to the relationship between the universal and the particular. This recognition allows for healing and change, as seen in Tayo's own witnessing of these connections.

When Tayo visits Betonie as a final effort to cure him of his war trauma, guilt, and nausea, he becomes overwhelmed by the amount of clutter within his home:

The boxes were stacked crookedly, some stacks leaning into others, with only their opposing angles holding them steady. Inside the boxes without lids, the erect brown string handles of shopping bags poked out; piled to the tops of the Woolworth bags were bouquets of dried sage and brown leaves of mountain tobacco wrapped in swaths of silvery unspun wool. He could see bundles of newspapers, their edges curled stiff and brown, barricading piles of telephone books with the years scattered among cities...Light from the door worked paths through the thick bluish green glass of the Coke bottles... (120)

Betonie tells Tayo to not try to see everything at once and explains that all this material is now necessary for creating new ceremonies because "All these things have stories alive in them" (121). The spiritual purpose that Betonie recognizes in the detritus mirrors the spiritual effect of consumer goods that Don DeLillo parodies in *White Noise*. However, unlike the mantra of car brands that the daughter chants in *White Noise*, Betonie does not see the power of these objects as

mysterious or unable to be shaped and used for a specific purpose. Rather than treating the objects as fetishes, Betonie integrates them into a practice of reading as he looks to the stories the objects tell for spiritual healing. As he tells Tayo, “[Your] sickness was only part of something larger, and [your] cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (125-6). Thus, objects, or even texts, are in themselves not enough for healing. The ritual becomes a practice of witnessing the interconnection of the stories.

This practice of reading back and forth between the particular, Tayo, and the universal, “something great and inclusive of everything,” is structured into the beginning of the novel. The first page of *Ceremony* begins with a transcript of an oral story of how the world began: “She [the Spider Woman] is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now / I’m telling you the story / she is thinking” (1). This first act, not only positions the story of Tayo within a larger pattern of the making of the world, but also invites the reader to listen to the Spider Woman, not Silko, which expands the story beyond the physical pages of the book. Silko depicts herself, not as author, but as witness, a position she shares with the reader. Thus, as the reader switches back and forth throughout the novel between Tayo’s particular story and the more mythological story of the Spider Woman and her sisters; the reader is witness to the concept of family as a constellation, and family faith becomes the practice of recognizing and participating in that constellation.

But even as the reader can see this constellation unfolding and shifting as Tayo himself begins to heal and see himself as part of something larger, the reader is also made aware of how objects become fetishes and paralyze those who unknowingly believe in their stories. While at the bar, one of Tayo's fellow veterans explains how the military uniform acted as a narrative, a sacred text in how it combatted the disenfranchisement of Native men: "White women never looked at me until I put on that uniform, and then by God I was a U.S. Marine and they came crowding around...They never asked me if I was Indian...I was a big spender then. Had my military pay. Double starch in my uniform and my boots shining so good" (41). But as Tayo observes when an old white woman said "'God bless you, God bless you' ...it was the uniform, not them, she blessed" (41). The uniform carries within it stories of heroism and respect previously denied to Native men in the long history of colonization and genocide. Native men can literally cover their bodies in a story in which "Anyone can fight for America...even you boys" (64). But the mythology of the uniform has been severed from its connection to that larger history. The reader can become a witness to this connection, however, in the reading of the mythology sections that bookend this discussion of the uniform.

The mythological sections before and after the discussion of the uniform's sacred powers encourage readers to see that such "sacred powers" are based on a forgetting of responsibility. Before the discussion of uniforms, the novel includes

a section reflecting on the necessary ceremonies of warriors “who killed / or touched / dead enemies” so that they would not be haunted or endanger the environment (37). The mythological section that follows the uniform discussion relates a much longer story of Pa’caya’nyi who teaches the people the power of magic but that “From that time on / they were / so busy / playing around with that / Ck’o’yo magic / they neglected the mother corn altar” (48). The uniform is structurally positioned between a memory of a warrior’s responsibility to their violence and a story of how magic is a seductive power that ultimately leads to self-destruction (the divine Mother takes away the water from the people, leading to a drought). The uniform is shown to be a form of such magic that seduces one to forget one’s responsibilities. Yet, such connections remain severed in the minds of the Native men who spend their time drinking to forget their pain, but remember the glory provided by the uniform. *Ceremony* establishes that sacred texts are not specific, but rather those texts with which a relationship has been consciously created and recreated as necessary.

### **Shirley Jackson’s Cautionary Tale**

In the wake of the chaos of the *End of Family*, new and unexpected familial connections are revealed and developed. The experience of these new connections often soften the pain of family trauma. The disclosure of alternative and imaginative relations and fluctuations of family structures resist oppressive

patriarchal practices as faith comes to rely on a less linear and more embodied divine feminine. However, these edifying qualities do not suggest a “new order” that has moved on beyond the past. Faith in the divine feminine requires a practice of remembering the past; otherwise, a matriarchal family is vulnerable to the linear temporal scheme that reproduces oppression. Such is the caution of Shirley Jackson’s novel *The Sundial*.

While Jackson’s work has provided a map to the terrain of the issues of the postmodern family gothic novel, *The Sundial* offers a reflection on the ease with which faith returns to its linear form, becoming an object to which one submits. *The Sundial* depicts how faith as an object feigns disclosure of divine knowledge, but maintains the status quo of class, gender, and racial power structures. Jackson cautions against appearances of a new order that position women in power; for, despite the dominance of female characters in the novel, the text is literally haunted by the ghost of the family patriarch whose ideas, whether real or imagined, maintain authority in the family.

*The Sundial* provides a biting depiction of how class hierarchies gain spiritual veracity. Carl Raschke explains that the “reformatting of religion” which occurred in the twentieth century “has more to do with the market-driven and milieu-conditioned performance of religious life...than with any kind of set of texts or ‘traditions’” (3). For the Halloran family of *The Sundial*, spirituality becomes a possession and greed masquerades as faith. Orianna, the matriarch of

the family, explicitly follows her greed at the beginning of the novel. After the death of her son, she works to kick all of her family out of the house, except for her granddaughter, so that she might enjoy the luxuries of her wealth alone. However, after her sister-in-law has a spiritual vision about the end of the world, the Halloran home becomes a different kind of sanctuary. Although Orianna initially discounts Aunt Fanny's vision, and inspires similar disbelief in the rest of the family, a "sign" occurs that grants power to Aunt Fanny: "a small brightly-banded snake...turning at once into liquid movement, slipped from the fireplace...and, without hesitation, angled behind a bookcase and disappeared" (32). Aunt Fanny's vision of the coming apocalypse, from which anyone in the Halloran house will be spared, is legitimized by an object, and a phallic one at that. Jackson's direct address to the reader states "abstract belief is largely impossible; it is the concrete, the actuality of the cup, the candle, the sacrificial stone, which hardens belief" (33). Indeed, as the family reorients themselves around spiritual authority, they begin to take on the traits of prosperity theology of the Cold War era.

**Orianna's** response to the shift in power dynamics from her dominating personality to Aunt Fanny's spiritual vision fortifies the connection between faith and class, what might be called materialisticism. Orianna explains to her servant Essex that she considers Aunt Fanny's vision "claptrap," but then says "I insist upon being saved along with Aunt Fanny" (41). Orianna sees that Aunt Fanny's



spiritual narrative has social power and she is not inclined to lose her social position and so takes on faith as a strategy for power. Further, Orianna claims “I agree that I would not be so willing to believe Aunt Fanny if her messages dictated that I give away all my earthly possessions. But then, of course, Aunt Fanny would never accept such a message” (41-42). Class power, designated by social status and material objects shapes faith. In fact, as the family and their guests prepare for the end of the world, the house takes on more and more objects. Even as Orianna offers one of the guests, The Captain, money to leave because she argues that she will not need it in the future, she still makes sure to wear an old crown for her send off into the new world. Throughout the novel, faith only seems to intensify the class distinctions that the family makes between themselves and those who work in the shops from which they accumulate goods for the End, and those who they deliberately don’t ask to be saved along with them.

Class hierarchies also pervade the way that the divine feminine operates in nature. Specifically, the “wildness” that makes up the authority of nature has been tailored to suit the materialisticism of the Halloran’s. In a comparison between two moments in which women “commune” with nature, Jackson illustrates how “otherworldly” experiences with nature can be manipulated and challenge the idea that nature is in itself a spiritual space. Aunt Fanny’s vision of the end of the world, as told to her by the voice of her dead father, occurs while

she travels through the family's garden maze. Despite the garden's overgrowth and lack of maintenance by the dismissed gardeners, the maze is a product of simulated nature. Even as Aunt Fanny becomes inexplicably disoriented and loses her bearings, she is still within the Halloran grounds. Her spiritual experience occurs within a space that manifests Halloran exceptionality and power. The garden maze is a gesture to not only the patriarchal power who designed it (it was in fact Fanny's father's maze), but also to the patriarchal power of linearity. There is a right way to proceed through nature – a beginning and an end.

The guest Julia, who does not believe in the coming apocalypse, offers the reader a bit of hope in the escape from the increasingly claustrophobic setting of the Halloran family. Her experience in the fog on the way to the city mirrors Fanny's terror in the maze, but also provides some resistance to patriarchal power. Julia expresses her desire to "get the hell out of here" (121) as the Halloran home grows increasingly cultish. Orianna agrees to let her leave but explains that "I have at present no one whom I can spare to drive you [to the city], but I know of a fellow from the village who may be available. I will arrange it, of course" (122). Julia, mistakenly trusts Orianna, and ends up getting into the taxi by herself (she was hoping the Captain would come with her) without any way to get back into the house or communicate with anyone as the gates lock behind her. A woman alone with a rude and rapacious driver, Julia spends much

of her time traveling toward the city in silent anxiety and prayer. However, the driver becomes so threatening to Julia that she eventually gets out of the car in the middle of nowhere and fog. Unlike the women of the home who submit to the conditions of faith and power, Julia refuses the conditions of sexual abuse and takes action to change the circumstances. Julia's fear for her bodily safety, specifically her fear of being raped, leads her to take her chances in the fog and trust her own two legs to lead her to the city.

Despite the differences between the maze and the fog, which make the fog more dangerous, Julia speaks to herself in an encouraging and resolute manner that is absent from Fanny's terrorizing experience. Fanny moves erratically and continuously cries out for help, but Julia says to herself, "*Now, my girl, now, Julia, my fine creature, suppose you just get a goddam hold of yourself*" (136). She even speaks to herself in a manner of prayer: "Close your eyes my sweet baby...you can see better with your eyes closed, close your eyes and take my hand and I will show you the way home" (136). Julia's faith, unlike Fanny's faith in the omnipotent power around her, brings faith back into the body. As she works her way through the fog, she spoke "grimly, perhaps again aloud, and stamped on, putting her weight down firmly" (135). Even when Julia sprains her ankle, she quickly dismisses the idea of laying still until someone finds her because she recognizes how faith in a potential search party of men threatens her safety even more. She thinks, "If I hear one dog baying or one man shouting I

will climb into a tree and hide, if I can find a tree, and she laughed wildly" (135). Whereas Aunt Fanny's experience in the gardens leads her to a faith in the disembodied voice of her father, Julia's experience in the fog leads her to faith in her female body and develops a particular caution and fear of the disembodied voices of the men who might rescue her.

Unlike the maze, which has a definite beginning and end, the fog is without clear boundaries and thus it becomes a space of an eternal chaotic present, similar to that discussed in chapter three. Yet, Jackson's cautionary tale in *The Sundial* shows how the structure of faith impacts how revolutionary such a chaotic present can become. While Julia provides the only gestures towards a divine feminine that is suspiciously absent in a novel full of "faithful" women, her actions that demonstrate faith in herself have already been manipulated and conditioned by those who have class and gender power. Orianna chose the particular driver, who she had told, "you get a lady there, take her to the city. She will be going quite alone...quite *quite* alone"; and the driver, despite clear class differences, speaks to Julia from a position of power that can only be accounted for by his sense of masculine dominance, sponsored by Orianna's social status. Julia's faith in herself and her determined disbelief in the coming apocalypse are no match for those who control resources to access a different temporality.

In true gothic fashion, the house seems to have called Julia back. In her efforts to find her way to the city in the blinding fog, Julia ends up back at the Halloran house. In Jackson's literary nightmare, Julia's choices seem to be: to exist forever within the fog, or to submit to the power structures, masquerading as spiritual enlightenment, of the Halloran clan. Without a recognition of the stories that inform the faith practices of the Halloran family, Julia is destined to have no alternative structure for herself. Indeed, Jackson's literary references point to the social dynamics that condition religion and spirituality, despite claims for faith's detachment from worldly concerns.

Although minimal, references to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* haunt the novel and position the reader as witness to the way faith is engineered for the purposes of social power. Defoe's adventure narrative is referenced three times throughout the novel, which establishes a spirit of survivalism and civilization within the Halloran family's preparations for the End. Fanny specifically imagines herself and the family within the narrative of Defoe as she collects items for their adventure into a new world: "Two complete tool boxes, with a keg of nails, since the bag of nails which Robinson Crusoe brought from the ship proved so comforting; mindful of Robinson Crusoe, Aunt Fanny had added a grindstone, and with some embarrassment, several shotguns and an assortment of hunting knives" (140). Fanny refers to Defoe's text for guidance as one might

the Bible during the End times. Part of the ritual of preparation is reading themselves into a known story.

Yet, Jackson's inclusion of *Robison Crusoe* reminds readers that the desire to follow Defoe's narrative is still based on desires for power and feelings of exceptionalism, not community. Jackson quotes from the novel to refer to Crusoe's grief over the fact that people would have survived the shipwreck if they had stayed aboard. Fanny cherry-picks from the sacred survivalist text, overlooking Crusoe's grief of having survived. Further, the appearance of Friday and other natives in the novel — *Robison Crusoe* is a novel about colonialism — haunt the Halloran family's anticipation of inheriting "the world's best." Although the time period of *The Sundial* is somewhat indeterminate, the novel's publication in the late 1950's provides some context of racial tension that had yet to be brought to the national stage during the Civil Right's Movement. For modern readers, the racial power structures of *Robinson Crusoe* illustrate a willfully ignorant faith that maintains white privilege, which often works hand-in-hand with patriarchy (especially as people of color and women are infantilized). For readers, what is disclosed during The End are the stories that undermine the idea that faith is separate from culture.

## **Conclusion**

The novels of this chapter refuse clear endings. Without satisfying conclusions, readers are forced to consider the “failure” of family’s storytelling rituals that attempt to place the family in a linear story. Such open-ended narrative structure encourages a reconsideration of the meaning of family without a temporal end. While Jackson’s novel offers a cautionary tale of the manipulation of spiritual narratives, novels of the postmodern era work to resituate faith, not as an object, but rather as an ongoing practice that specifically calls on the divine feminine, but also resists individualizing narratives of exceptionalism. Jackson provides a dark satire of the way that the divine feminine is vulnerable to recuperation into dominant patriarchal narratives, specifically through a devotion to capitalism. However, in those novels which revisit these rituals of divine femininity – unbridled nature, embodied language, and affective reading – a devotion to change, hybridity, and a constellated relationship between the past and present resists the overdetermined narrative of capitalism and patriarchy. The ambivalence of the divine feminine may maintain pain and loss, and the experience of being haunted, but that ambivalence is precisely what keeps families and readers witnesses to the past without the obsession of the future.

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