



UNIVERSITÄT
DES
SAARLANDES

The Transcultural Feminist Grotesque: Embodiment in Contemporary Anglophone Literatures

Dissertation
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines
Doktors der Philosophie
der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Universität des Saarlandes

vorgelegt von

Lena Schneider

aus Gornjak, Russland

Saarbrücken, 2019

Dekan:

Prof. Dr. Heinrich Schlange-Schöningen

Erstberichterstatlerin:

Prof. Dr. Astrid M. Fellner, Universität des Saarlandes

Zweitberichterstatler:

Dr. Dr. Juan Antonio Garrido Ardila, University of Malta

Tag der letzten Prüfungsleistung: 2. September 2019

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Astrid M. Fellner whose sustained effort has contributed substantially to what this dissertation turned out to be – a done dissertation. It was Astrid who helped me out when I needed to find a way of financing my project and who supported my application for the IRTG “Diversity.” Becoming a member of the research group provided me with financial and intellectual independence and thus made finishing this project possible. It was also Astrid who helped me rebuild confidence in my capabilities as a researcher and whose encouragement motivated me no end.

I am also immensely grateful to my second supervisor Associate Prof. Dr. Dr. John Ardila who has kept in touch in all these years, has always been prepared to support my applications and who has been there to offer very good advice. John has never seemed to doubt my intellectual abilities, and this has provided me with much strength throughout the last years.

I certainly would not have finished this dissertation without the help of my family, so I want to thank my parents whose incessant support has kept me going. They helped me move apartments four times in six years, took me away on a break when I needed to and managed to keep up my spirits in spite of all the difficulties. Even though my mom’s saying ‘*Всё что делается делается к лучшему*’ did not make sense to me at the time, in the end, it turned out to be absolutely right. I also want to thank my brothers, André and Arthur, who, even though they still do not know what I am doing and what I spent the last four years working on, have always been there to tease me and cheer me up.

Thank you, Caterina, for sharing home, food, coffee and thoughts with me whenever I came to Edinburgh!

A special thanks to Alexandra and Stela. You were the best office mates I could have wished for in Paderborn and your intellectual and emotional support was and is priceless. I feel extremely lucky to have such good friends.

I want to thank the Saarbrücken team as well, especially Bärbel, Julia and Svetlana, for being helpful, supportive and encouraging and for simply being lovely colleagues and friends.

Всё что делается делается к лучшему.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Transcultural, Feminist, and Grotesque	20
1.1 The Transnational and the Transcultural Turns	20
1.2 From the Body to Embodiment.....	24
1.3 Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology.....	30
1.4 Feminist Phenomenology.....	35
1.5 The Embodiment of Gender.....	38
1.6 Feminist Phenomenology and Racialization.....	43
1.7 The Grotesque Aesthetic.....	46
1.8 Transcultural Feminist Grotesque.....	50
1.9 Feminist Grotesque Style.....	54
2. Body Knowledge in Margaret Atwood’s <i>The Edible Woman</i>	59
2.1 “Every woman should have at least one baby:” The Advertising of Femininity.....	61
2.2 “I let go of Peter’s arm and began to run:” Subversive Materiality.....	68
2.3 “Her body had cut itself off:” The Agentic Body	71
2.4 “It’s mostly the head:” Rejecting the Mind	82
2.5 “I’ve chopped Peter up into little bits:” Subversive Thoughts	85
2.6 “Then I stopped for lunch:” Summary of Results.....	89
3. Disabled Embodiment in Angela Carter’s <i>Nights at the Circus</i>	92
3.1 “Like Lucifer, I fell:” Grotesque Sexuality.....	95
3.2 “This bright, pretty, useless thing, myself:” Embodying Objectification.....	102
3.3 “[M]y body was the abode of limitless freedom:” A Return to the Lived Body	112
3.4 “Let me tell you something about Fevvers:” Degrading Humour	118
3.5 “I’m not in the mood for literary criticism:” Summary of Results.....	126
4. Transgender Embodiment in Shani Mootoo’s <i>Cereus Blooms at Night</i>	129
4.1 “You cannot, you must not have desire:” The Materializing Effects of Discourse.....	131
4.2 “[E]very fibre was sensitized:” Grotesque Embodiment	136
4.3 “I could feel the fear trapped in this woman’s body:” Communicating Bodies	142
4.4 “Ole lady walk, ole lady fall:” Double-Voicedness.....	145
4.5 “My body felt as if it were metamorphosing:” Transgender Embodiment.....	148
4.6 “Her body remembered:” Summary of Results	156
5. Indigenous Bodies(?) Matter in Pauline Melville’s <i>The Ventriloquist’s Tale</i>.....	159
5.1 “[M]aking love with ghosts:” Sexual Deviance.....	162
5.2 “[V]egetable acts of love:” Grotesque Intertwining	169
5.3 “[T]he blows had driven him back to some period before speech:” Bodily Traces of Racism	176
5.4 “Beatrice McKinnon underwent some kind of seizure:” The Grotesque and the Gothic.....	179
5.5 “Hot and bitter or cold and sweet:” Polyphonic Entanglements.....	185
5.6 “It takes more than one life to make a person:” Summary of Results	191
Conclusion	195
Bibliography	203
German Summary	223

Introduction

“‘The grotesque’ describes a category of images that fits uneasily within the field of Western aesthetics and art history.”

(Connelly, “Grotesque” 241)

The second half of the twentieth century has seen a virtual surge of feminist writing. Concurrently, there has been a rise in representations of the grotesque in Anglophone cultures. Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969), Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* (1997), among others, attest to a concern both with the grotesque and with feminism. Moreover, transculturality has become gradually more represented in literary texts and has become an increasingly important critical concept. This thesis examines literary works written in the second half of the twentieth century that link these three elements – transcultural, feminist, grotesque – so as to trace the transformation of the mode of the grotesque during this time of intense, feminist debate. These four novels in particular are enmeshed in debates about feminism at their respective times. However, instead of simply reproducing dominant themes or concerns, these novels complicate some of the discourses around feminism.

The afore-mentioned novels challenge traditional representations of female bodies by means of the grotesque. Yet, they explicitly encourage a reading of the grotesque in a novel light, namely as linked to – at the time of their respective publications – the newly developing field of embodiment theory and in particular feminist phenomenology. In addition, based on the representations in these literary works, it is possible to carve out affiliations in feminist concerns that are global, i.e. that extend beyond national contexts. The primary texts analyzed here draw connections between grotesqueness and embodiment, and in particular, female lived bodily experience. As a result, they entail a feminist questioning of and reflection on the grotesque body as envisioned in art history and theoretically conceived by Mikhail

Bakhtin. In fact, they develop the grotesque towards a more gender-neutral and emancipatory aesthetic. In that sense, then, we can speak of a distinctly feminist use of the aesthetic, which employs the grotesque to convey feminist statements, above all the embodying of gender.¹ Some of the statements that these novels make concern both ideal and non-normative bodies, transgressive and subversive bodies, yet, above all, the novels provide comments on gender as ‘real,’ in the sense of material and lived. Consequently, the analyses of the grotesque in this study do not merely concentrate on the representation of grotesque bodies but extend earlier studies of the ‘female grotesque’ by devoting special attention to grotesque *being-in-the-world*. All four novels attest to the importance of lived experience for a more inclusive feminism and thus potentially extend their interventions beyond literature.

While transcultural elements are not central in the text itself, Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969) can be considered an early example of the transcultural feminist grotesque. This is so because Atwood’s novel anticipates feminist concerns, in particular of new materialist feminisms, of the 1990s. The novel puts emphasis on the agentic materiality of the main protagonist’s body. Not only does the protagonist, Marian, start behaving in unusual, grotesque ways, but her body also refuses the intake of food as a means of resisting the inscription of femininity into her body. Echoing current research in new materialist feminisms, Marian’s eating disorder can also be understood in terms of a symptom of insidious trauma. Marian suffers from insidious trauma precisely because femininity is inscribed into her body, yet ideal femininity remains an illusion and an unreachable ideal. The novel exemplifies the subversiveness, agency and fleshliness of the body and thus in many ways precedes theoretical debates of decades to come.

Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) foregrounds the experience of its grotesque main character Fevvers, the aerialist with wings. Even though Fevvers is clearly marked as grotesque because of her status as a bird-woman and her delight in earthy, bodily processes, the novel also establishes rarely commented on connections between grotesqueness, freakery, disability and femininity. In fact, it demonstrates how disability and femininity are mutually constituted. Moreover, *Nights at the*

¹ Some of the authors reject the label feminist, as Margaret Atwood does, for instance. However, that does not make her text any less feminist.

Circus illustrates the main character's incorporation of a view of her own body in terms of the 'objective body' and traces a transformation of body images towards a newly obtained understanding of her 'lived body,' foregrounding embodied experience. Hence, the novel extends Butlerian notions of gender performativity and illustrates how the performance of gender leaves 'real,' material traces in bodies, which makes it possible to affiliate the novel with feminist phenomenological ideas of embodiment.

By means of the grotesque – in the very positive sense of 'in a process of constant becoming' – representation of its transgender characters, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) reinforces a new materialist feminist understanding of the malleability of sex and provides a comment on the diversity of transgender experience. Moreover, the novel exemplifies how words affect and effect, speaking to the materializing power they have. Accordingly, the novel also hints at how gender is constituted by colonialism and how biological dimorphism is a result of colonialism rather than local knowledges. The novel further links the diverse struggles of Mala, who suffered years of abandonment, abuse and social ostracism, and her transgender nurse Tyler. It is Tyler who becomes the 'translator' of Mala's story for they are the only person who understand Mala via their body. The novel puts emphasis on the communicative nature of bodies and thus undermines dominant ideas of the mind as central to human understanding.

Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997) revolves around the grotesque, incestuous relationship between the siblings Beatrice and Danny who exemplify that human bodies are inherently connected to other bodies, animals and plants, thus tapping into the imagery of the grotesque and feminist phenomenological ideas of the connection of body images. The novel foregrounds indigenous experience and complicates dominant western feminist readings. On the one hand, it puts forward a type of female sexuality that defies western conceptions of sexuality. On the other hand, the novel portrays a type of female agency that is not founded on western ideas of agency as linked to individuality and self-determination. Moreover, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* addresses issues of racialization as a result of colonialism and

carves out the body's resistance to racialization in the body's uncanny unpredictability.

By virtue of their subject matter, these novels tap into earlier discourses of the 'female' grotesque. Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995) has paved the way for discussions of the, oftentimes biased, gendering of the grotesque. Yet, from today's perspective her work seems somewhat outdated because it did not engage in more detail with re-evaluations of materiality and matter,² which were beginning to take shape at the time of the publication of her book. However, as I argue in this thesis, discourses in new materialisms and embodiment theory are crucial for analyzing, scrutinizing and complicating the grotesque. Moreover, as the title of her book suggests, Russo's study was not able to overcome the binary oppositions it set out to break down (Duggan 26). From today's perspective, the lack of addressing issues of whiteness, which is so apparent in her choice of texts, presents a negligence.

Studies such as Robert Duggan's *The Grotesque in Contemporary British Fiction* (2013), even though not specifically feminist in origin, have offered much more nuanced discussions of works by such authors as Angela Carter who employ the feminist grotesque. Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia's *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess* (2011) is a more recent and more successful attempt at a feminist reading of postcolonial texts. However, the focus does not only lie on feminist grotesques but also, or rather primarily, on postcolonial grotesques, which has the effect of somewhat downplaying the relevance of the feminist qualities of the texts discussed. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund's *Grotesque* (2013), though an introduction to the grotesque in literature, refers to the discussion surrounding the 'female grotesque' and dedicates a section to female authors who use it to express feminist ideas. All in all, as this brief review of the existing literature suggests, there have not yet been any book-length studies of the feminist grotesque taking a decidedly transcultural approach.

The aim of the current work, then, is to close this gap in research and further reframe and revisit some of the literary works that depict female, grotesque

² Here, I have new materialist feminist and posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway in mind.

characters. Not only does this study challenge negative associations with the grotesque, which, incidentally, have found their way into modern, everyday uses of the term,³ but it also problematizes and extends some of the earlier analyses of feminist critics who, despite their feminist approaches, could not help but reaffirm the binaries they initially wanted to break down. Moreover, even though Atwood's and Carter's works have been analyzed through the lens of the grotesque, they have not yet been read through the lens of the grotesque in conversation with embodiment theory or feminist phenomenology. As Thomas J. Csordas contends, theoretical thinking, whether in the field of anthropology, philosophy or literary studies, has predominantly treated the body as a text – representative of this approach are phrases such as “the body as text,” “the inscription of culture on the body” and “reading the body” – and has not paid much attention to the body as a lived, embodied entity (“Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology” 145-46). Likewise, earlier studies of the female grotesque have focused on the grotesque body in terms of its representation instead of its phenomenological dimension of *being-in-the-world*. Reading my corpus through the now well-established field of embodiment theory and feminist phenomenology does not only add surplus value to the interpretations of these texts, but – I would like to stress – leads to different results as regards the ‘feminism’ of these texts, as much greater emphasis is placed on the experience of and experiencing bodies. Moreover, (female) grotesques have often only been read within national contexts, which, on the one hand, overlooks transnational and transcultural links⁴ that these texts have and, most notably, similar feminist concerns. This is one reason for me to favour the term *transcultural* instead of *postcolonial* in this work. On the other

³ Robert Storr notes that the grotesque can be defined by its “casually pejorative use as a synonym for the unsightly or the degraded” (13). Everyday use of the term also suggests that it has negative associations as it is used to refer to something “[i]ncongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree” (*OED*). Notable here are the negative connotations of phrases such as ‘grotesque spectacle’ or ‘grotesque betrayal.’

⁴ Even though my study is not comparative in the strict sense of the word, it is comparative in an indirect way. In the context of comparative history, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka show the benefits of a comparative approach. However, this approach – with minor adjustments – is equally applicable to literature. The benefits of a comparative approach are: first, “comparison allows scholars to identify problems and questions that would otherwise be impossible or difficult to pose” (3). Second, “comparison . . . helps to apply a clear profile to individual cases and often to a single, particularly interesting case” (3). Third, “comparison makes an important contribution to the explanation of [literary] phenomena” and “helps to find or check generalizations” (4). Fourth, “comparison can help to de-familiarize the familiar. When examined in light of observable alternatives, a specific development can lose the ‘matter of course’ appearance it may have possessed before” (4).

hand, the focus on national contexts has led to a disregard of issues of race and whiteness in studies of the (female) grotesque. Yet, embodiment is, according to feminist phenomenologist Linda Martín Alcoff, “in important respects a racialized and gender-differentiated experience” (103).

The grotesque is a central concept in my thesis as it has certain characteristics that lend it particularly well for feminist analyses. Three of the most important characteristics of the grotesque are its defiance of traditional categories, its connection to the body, and its malleability. From the moment of its discovery in underground chambers in Roman palaces at the end of the fifteenth century, the grotesque has had the status of an ‘outsider.’ For Robert Storr, “it is . . . useful and . . . accurate to think of the grotesque as a full-fledged, multilayered countertradition, a powerful current that continuously stirs calmer waters, sometimes redirecting their flow” (13). Bakhtin stated that grotesque images “remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics” (25). As Frances S. Connelly shows, it is in fact the reader’s or viewers’ response that makes an image grotesque (*Grotesque* 14). African sculptures that became popular at the end of the nineteenth century were considered grotesque and monstrous by nineteenth century viewers. Yet, there was nothing in these carved figures or masks to suggest that they were inherently grotesque; rather, they “ruptured the boundaries between European fine art and so-called primitive art” (*Grotesque* 14), which made them grotesque to observers. Decades later they were regarded as classical and even beautiful (*Grotesque* 14). As a result, “the grotesque identifies a class of imagery that has never fit comfortably within the boundaries traditionally set by either aesthetics or art history for its objects of inquiry” (Connelly, *Modern Art* 5).

Second, what is central to the grotesque is its inherent and close connection to the ‘body.’ Whether it is in the early fanciful drawings that were found in underground chambers and that lusciously combined human, animal and plant elements or in the sense that Bakhtin envisioned it, with the consuming, bearing, vomiting, fornicating body, the grotesque is concerned with fleshliness and materiality. By virtue of its connection to the body, however, the grotesque is also

closely linked to the feminine, for western mainstream philosophy has mostly constructed the female or feminine as body. As Elizabeth Grosz explains,

[i]t is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations. (195)

The grotesque is not feminine *per se* and it can in fact be used to challenge essentialized depictions of the female body. Even though the grotesque might have been used to re-affirm stereotyped and essentialized versions of femininity, it has also been used and continues to be used – and this is a point that this research stresses – to challenge precisely these archetypal constructions of female bodies.

Third, because the grotesque can describe a wide variety of, sometimes disparate, ideas, it “seems to render the category paradoxical, virtually teetering on unintelligibility” (N. Carroll 294). Yet, “[c]entral to the grotesque,” Connelly suggests, “is its lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability” (*Modern Art* 4). In fact, in spite of its malleability, there are different strands of the grotesque that can help make sense of the mode. According to Connelly, there are the ornamental, the carnivalesque and the traumatic strand of the grotesque (Connelly, “Grotesque” 242-43). The carnivalesque strand,⁵ profoundly shaped by Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal study of François Rabelais’s work in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) is the one that is most relevant to this dissertation, even though it might occasionally overlap with other strands.

Feminist scholars have both advocated and criticized the Bakhtinian understanding of the grotesque body. As Sue Vice points out, Bakhtin did not consider the ‘body’ in grotesque realism as marked by gender, which runs the risk of simply reaffirming gender stereotypes. She detects “gender alignment” in grotesque realism because in Bakhtinian theory “[e]arth and the reproductive body are

⁵ In his studies *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin uses the carnivalesque to describe the carnivalisation of literature: the depiction of real or imagined carnival acts, rites and festivities in literature and, by extension, art in general. Similar to carnival, the carnivalesque is understood as a suspension of official rule for the time of its celebration, a reversal of the normal order. In general, carnival and the carnivalesque are based on the idea of the world turned upside down or inside out. Thus, carnivalesque acts in literature, film and painting include mock crownings and decrownings; clowns and clowning; the wearing of masks and costume, especially drag performances which include the reversal of gender; human beings switching roles and behaviour with animals, and vice versa.

associated with the feminine; heaven and the rational body with the masculine” (Vice 156). Moreover, as Kathleen Rowe puts it,

[t]he grotesque body is above all the female body, the *maternal* body, which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of ‘becoming,’ of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death. (33-34, emphasis in original)

Margaret Miles goes even further in stating that “an element of the grotesque is present in every woman” and that “the creature closest to the male subject, but innately, disturbingly different, is ultimately more grotesque than are exotic monsters” (85). Even more damning, the grotesque body is seen as female by some because of its association of the grotto, the cave, and womb and consequently as all that is “hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent [and] visceral” (Russo 1).⁶

Duggan points out that the above-mentioned criticism, in particular by Russo, runs the danger of “circularity in reproducing at the level of [its] own critical discourse” (26). Even though these authors, as Duggan argues, try to question setups such as “male/female, mind/body, spirit/matter” (26), they end up consolidating them by maintaining these binary oppositions in their criticism. In this light, a concept such as Russo’s ‘female grotesque’ becomes particularly problematic. Russo argues that “[t]he frequency, intensity and salience of the association of these terms [female and grotesque] suggests a mutually constituted genealogy, but this is not to posit an exclusive or essential relationship between the terms” (Russo 12). By using the label ‘female’ in the ‘female grotesque’ however, she undermines her own criticism of essentialism.

One should take into account that Bakhtin’s use of Rabelais’s work “draw[s] on a cultural and literary tradition used to having women as its objects” (Vice 177).⁷ Consequently, the grotesque has been made “part of the historical arsenal of misogyny, a way of grounding women’s ‘aberrance’ in their distasteful corporeality”

⁶ Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical approach to the grotesque body as ‘abject’ is not of interest to me here. The ‘abject’ is devoid of humour or mirth which does not make it compatible with a Bakhtinian reading of the grotesque and consequently the corpus presented here.

⁷ Not only does Bakhtin ignore the female voices in Rabelais’s text and the fact that all the voices in the novel are men’s, as several authors object, but he does not even let these voices speak in his study *Rabelais and His World* and instead makes them the ‘objects’ of his analysis (Booth 165-66; Stam 162; Vice 179). The stress Bakhtin puts on parody is pointed out as problematic, too, as traditionally women are identified as the objects of laughter rather than the authors of their own comical visions.

(Shapira 53). Connelly confirms that “the grotesque is closely bound to the body and, consequently, to the feminine as it is constructed in Western culture” (*Grotesque 2*). The meaning of the grotesque is not ‘fixed,’ however. As Susan Stewart argues, we should keep in mind that we are confronted with images and representations of the grotesque body and that “[l]ike any art form, they effect a representation and transformation of their subject” (107).⁸ Erica McWilliam extends this argument by suggesting that the whole notion of the grotesque can be changed: “[W]hat women make of the grotesque body is dangerous, given what it can make of women. As a space of feminist possibility, it can ‘unmask’ much that is oppressive and objectifying for women” (220).⁹ Vice, too, has identified “potential for reappropriation” of grotesque realism for feminist purposes (3-4).

Most importantly, reading Bakhtin’s understanding of the body alongside feminist phenomenology and embodiment theory reveals that what seems to be at stake in the discussion is not the grotesque body, but the prevalent notion of ‘the body.’ Dualistic thinking has resulted in a devaluation of the body and, by extension, a devaluation of its relevance for rationality and thought. It has been shown that the mind/body dualism is firmly linked to another set of terms, namely male/female and nature/culture. Men are largely associated with the positive, powerful term (mind, culture), whereas women are associated with the devalued term (body, nature). For centuries women have been identified with their bodies.¹⁰ At the same time, however, the ideal body, which is pictured as able, white and masculine, has been admired; the very opposite of ‘leaking’ female bodies. By virtue of drawing on the concept of the body, then, Bakhtin has also inherited the negative connotations it carries. It is not the grotesque itself that denotes negative femaleness but rather our common notion of the body.

⁸ Kathleen Rowe raises an important issue in her discussion of laughter: “But because as women we cannot simply reject these conventions and invent new ‘untainted’ ones in their place, we must learn the languages we inherit, with their inescapable contradictions, before transforming and redirecting them toward our own ends” (4).

⁹ Yael Shapira, along the same lines, contends that the female grotesque can be appropriated to express meanings that subvert misogyny and classical depictions of women and their bodies (52). And Vice admits: “Bakhtin’s own methodology can be used to reclaim gender within his own work, and . . . to use his work for feminist analysis” (177).

¹⁰ Another link that has been firmly established is the link between corporeality and blackness (Alcoff; Fraser and Greco 2).

Central to concerns in feminist phenomenology and consequently this thesis is that Bakhtin levels criticism against the classical body and offers a new conception of the grotesque body instead. He states that “[t]he confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images” (*Rabelais* 315). First, Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body constitutes a re-evaluation of materiality, a praise of the material body. Images of “copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment” (*Rabelais* 25) are inherently grotesque for they “lend a bodily character to matter, to the world, to the cosmic elements, which become closer, more intimate, more easily grasped, for this is the matter, the elemental force, born from the body itself” (*Rabelais* 335). Similar to phenomenologists, who propose approaching the body not as an object, but rather as a lived body,¹¹ what is vital in grotesque realism is that the body is not devalued and demoted to an object. The body is praised precisely for its activity and materiality. Moreover, Bakhtin criticizes an overemphasis on intellectualism, spirituality and abstraction. Thus, he provides a challenge to humanist and Enlightenment ideas of the primacy of the mind.¹²

Second, Bakhtin stresses the social dimension of the body: “[T]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits (*Rabelais* 26). While this refers to the individual body, which, by means of its orifices and bodily fluids establishes a connection with its outside world, this can also be interpreted as a connection between separate bodies, which then cease to be individualized. This transgressive body is highly evocative of a feminist phenomenological understanding of the body image, which reflects the connections between bodies. The body image accounts for the lived body at the intersections of biology and culture. As an ‘unconscious awareness’ of our bodily capabilities it is contingent on the experience of one’s body, one’s emotional investment in one’s body, but also on context and other peoples’ reactions to a body.

¹¹ By means of the lived body, perception, experience and feeling are foregrounded. I will engage with this concept in more detail in chapter 2.3.

¹² Bakhtin’s attention to laughter as a bodily source also questions the dominance of the mind and the devaluation of the body.

Feminist phenomenologists are indispensable for broadening Bakhtinian theory in their greater awareness of the gendering of bodies. Feminist phenomenologists have further extended Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the lived body and in particular the body image in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012) to account for the influence of gender for human embodiment. Not only do feminist phenomenologists show that the dominant body image ideal is white, heterosexual, able-bodied, male (something Bakhtin implies with the classical body), but they also show that gender is inscribed into bodies and that this has material consequences. Nevertheless, as I will show in this thesis, Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body is highly compatible with feminist phenomenology and opens up space for criticism of the dominant western notion of the body.

In this thesis, I aim to investigate in what ways selected novels – both thematically and stylistically – challenge and subvert prevalent western ideas on and notions of gendered bodies. Based on my two main theories, Bakhtin's grotesque body and feminist phenomenology, I will analyze the ways in which the texts represent the embodiment and inscription of gender as well as examine how depictions of grotesque characters challenge inscriptions and imagine (gender) identities differently. In terms of style, the texts display a distinct type of humour, closely connected to the use of parody and irony, and, most importantly, of double-voiced discourse. Feminist transcultural grotesque writers' use of double-voiced discourse, irony and parody not only allows for a challenge to notions of traditionally 'male genres' but it also draws connections to questions of embodiment. By depicting grotesque bodies, these texts display an innovative conception of the body set free from dominant philosophical theories of a mind/body dualism. In fact, these texts demonstrate the inherent inseparability of mind from body and consequently undermine dominant ideas concerning gender identity. Thus, these novels are part of a wider feminist and cross-cultural project that revises understandings of gendered bodies.

Even though personal preferences have certainly played a role in the selection of the primary texts, I have applied the following criteria: The first and most significant criterion is that the novels portray female characters who transgress their

corporeal boundaries. While other markers, such as race, ethnicity and ability certainly play a role in my analyses, the focus of my study is primarily on gender as a marker, because “[g]ender has been established as one of the most all-encompassing binaries within dualistic society, and one which is fundamentally embodied” (Inckle 102). Second, these novels challenge and subvert traditional notions of the sex/gender and, relatedly, mind/body binary. Third, I have chosen novels written by female authors. This is partly due to the continued underrating of female authors, a trend which I want to actively resist. Moreover, many representations of grotesque female characters by male authors have tended to reaffirm gender stereotypes. Fourth, I have selected authors from diverse cultural backgrounds, with varying degrees of prominence and works published in various decades to account for the diversity of manifestations of the feminist grotesque in novels from different Anglophone cultures in the second half of the twentieth century. I intend to show that while ‘national’ concerns are not central to these works, they display a transcultural awareness. Read alongside each other, these texts, as I want to argue, are representative of the mode or genre¹³ of the transcultural feminist grotesque which they shape. Of course, the chosen works are only a limited selection of the many existing texts; but, in setting the tone for a wider corpus of the transcultural feminist grotesque, they are pioneering novels. What these works share is the fact that they all complicate discourses, specifically feminist discourses, about the body at the time of their publication.

The four novels, Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969), Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* (1997), employ the mode of the grotesque, albeit to varying degrees, as a means of voicing their feminist concerns. While these novels share certain continuities when it comes to their feminist agendas,

¹³ Veronica Hollinger, in her discussion of whether Science Fiction can be considered a genre or mode suggests that “SF now signifies something more than a particular kind of narrative complex – generally understood to be an archive of stories with particular themes, motifs, and figures, a kind of storytelling oriented toward the future, closely related to the realist novel in its rhetorical verisimilitude, at once an estranged mirror of the present and an imaginative extrapolation of worlds to come. In contrast, mode implies not a kind but a method, a way of getting something done. In this instance, it is a way of thinking and speaking about contemporary reality” (139-40). Hollinger’s argument is equally applicable to the grotesque and is in line with Erica McWilliam and Margot Northey. In her study *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (1976), Northey proposes “a working definition of the grotesque as an aesthetic term, referring to a mode of writing rather than a condition or attribute of nature” (7). As a result, in this study, I consider the grotesque an aesthetic or mode rather than a genre.

there are nevertheless also discrepancies worthwhile exploring. Some of these are connected to categories beyond gender, for instance disability, race, queerness, transgenderism and indigeneity. While the novels' contexts are vastly different in terms of epochs and cultural backgrounds, these differences are in fact vital to the mode of the transcultural feminist grotesque, for they help to point to the diversity and flexibility of the mode. Applying a transcultural lens to these texts allows me to both trace the differences and similarities and thus provide a more nuanced reading of these novels (see section 2.1 for a definition of the term transculturality).

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is firmly grounded in the Canadian literary context. As Laura Moss notes, "[t]here has long been a debate over the legitimacy and utility of studying the literary culture of a nation like Canada in the same terms as the Anglophone literature of the more conventionally accepted postcolonial contexts of India, Trinidad, and South Africa" (2). Yet, while Canada's postcolonial status is debatable, its transcultural and transnational links, which are often, but not exclusively, tied to a strong indigenous and Africadian presence, do put it into conversation with literatures from other transcultural nations. Admittedly, Atwood's novel does not include other presences and is very much focused on unmarked, white femininity. Yet, it is precisely in its foregrounding of the insidiousness of gender and the harmful effects that the inscription of gender into bodies has that the novel unfolds its feminist potential.

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is markedly transnational not simply because most of its plot develops outside of England, chiefly in Russia, but it is so, above all, because of the diversity of its central characters.¹⁴ Furthermore, the text itself is transcultural in its idiosyncratic merging of low and high culture and its varied intertextual references to French, German, Italian, Russian, Japanese, and Caribbean cultures, among others. While, similar to Atwood's novel, issues of whiteness prevail, other markers start being included in the discussion of female embodiment, as Carter's central character Fevvers is not only marked by her working-

¹⁴ Even though Angela Carter is often considered a typical English writer, her own life and works were much more transcultural than many scholars would grant. Not only did her extensive stay in Japan shape her approach to relationships, but it also, as she herself claimed, revealed to her "what it is to be a woman" and she "became radicalised" (*Nothing Sacred* 28). Moreover, Carter was a staunch critic of imperialism and in general was concerned with "decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought" ("Notes from the Front Line" 51).

class background, and in particular her upbringing in a brothel, but she is also marked in terms of disability. With Carter's novel, then, we can see a transformation and in fact an opening up of the mode of the transcultural feminist grotesque.

This flexibility and diversity of the mode of the feminist grotesque is further exemplified by Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. Even though both novels engage with diverse subjectivities, they demonstrate that the mode of the feminist grotesque can be used not only to remark on femininity but also to remark on race. Shani Mootoo's setting of *Cereus Blooms at Night* on the fictitious Caribbean island Lantanacamara and the novel's focus on the Indian diaspora on said island, strongly affiliate it with notions of transculturality. Even though *Cereus Blooms at Night* is often classified as a postcolonial novel and even as postcolonial grotesque (see Edwards and Graulund), there is a downside to the framing of the novel in terms of 'postcolonial' discourses. As Graham Huggan shows, "postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products" (*Postcolonial Exotic* 6). Not only does the use of the term postcolonial in connection to Mootoo's and other transcultural novels suggest a certain form of exoticism¹⁵ and thus "a particular mode of aesthetic perception . . . which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic* 13), but it also deflects attention away from the novel's feminist message, which might help explain why Mootoo herself rejects the label "postcolonial" (Jiwa n. pag.). As Christine Kim contends:

Reading Mootoo's novel through the lens of postcolonial discourse is a double-edged sword. Positioning *Cereus Blooms at Night* as postcolonial raises the visibility and marketability of the text but ultimately locates it within the cultural politics of the academy rather than the lesbian feminist politics of activism out of which it emerged. (159)

¹⁵ Huggan notes: "One need only look at the reception of works from Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) to, more recently, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), to recognize the prevalence of the word 'exotic' as a marker of metropolitan commercial appeal" (*Postcolonial Exotic* 20). Huggan further establishes an important distinction between postcolonialism and postcoloniality. He explains: "[p]ostcolonialism, understood this way, becomes an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts. . . . Postcoloniality, . . . is a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange" (*Postcolonial Exotic* 6). He argues that the two are intricately linked: "Yet a cursory glance at the state of postcolonial studies at Western universities, or at the worldwide marketing of prominent postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie, is enough to suggest that these two apparently conflicting regimes of value are mutually entangled" (*Postcolonial Exotic* 6).

Framing Mootoo's novel in transcultural terms instead allows for an examination of the key factors that the novel addresses, namely race *and* gender, and in particular transgender experience.

Similar to *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* unfolds in the Caribbean. Set in Guyana on mainland South America,¹⁶ in an indigenous community in the Rupunini and Guyana's capital Georgetown, the novel invites a transcultural reading not only because of the inherent transculturality of Guyana but also because it is concerned with indigeneity and de-colonization. To a comparable degree to *Cereus Blooms at Night*, critics have rejected 'postcolonial' readings of the novel because it presents an attempt to make the presence of Amerindian cultures known (Adair; Braz; Dabydeen; Misrahi-Barak; Shemak), yet "the overwhelming consensus is that postcolonialism has had little to offer when it comes to Indigenous issues" (Braz 30) (see section 6.3).¹⁷

While this is not to take away from postcolonial readings of literary texts – I consider postcolonial readings to be instructive and in fact vital for analyses in specific contexts – in regard to the novels discussed in this thesis, the transcultural lens offers the possibility of including a wider range of texts, which would be rejected if the label postcolonial were to be applied. Moreover, a transcultural lens more readily helps to trace similarities between the texts in spite of their vast cultural differences and their statuses within national contexts. According to Afef Benessaïeh, "transculturality suggests departing from the traditional, yet very current view of 'cultures' as fixed frames or separate islands neatly distanced and differentiated from one another" (11).

¹⁶ Even though Guyana is part of mainland South America, due to its close cultural links with Caribbean islands, it is usually discussed in the context of Caribbean literatures.

¹⁷ Thomas King has shown how the concept of postcolonial literatures is problematic in the context of Native literatures. He explains: "I was going to make the rather simple observation that in the case of . . . pre-and post-colonial, the pivot around which we move is . . . colonialism" and he argues that "the full complement of terms – pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial – reeks of unabashed ethnocentrism and well-meaning dismissal, and they point to a deep-seated assumption that is at the heart of most well-intentioned studies of Native literatures" (11). See also Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" in which they state that "relying solely on postcolonial literatures or theories of coloniality that ignore settler colonialism will not help to envision the shape that decolonization must take in settler colonial contexts" (5).

In addition, reading these novels through a transcultural lens

captures more adequately the sense of movement and the complex mixedness of cultures in close contact, and better describes the *embodied situation of cultural plurality* lived by many individuals and communities of mixed heritage and/or experience, whose multifaceted situation is more visible under globalization. (Bennessaieh 16, emphasis in original)

While a postcolonial approach might focus on issues of race, a transcultural reading that pays attention to the embodied situations of individuals and groups allows for analyzing diverse experiences and their complex interplays and overlays. Moreover, because, as Bennessaieh hints at, it is the embodiedness of human beings that is foregrounded in a transcultural reading, a transcultural approach more readily encompasses discussions of fleshliness. A transcultural reading is both attentive to similarities and, as a consequence, is more prone to help tracing the diverse manifestations of the transcultural feminist grotesque.

In the chapters that follow I illustrate some of the central issues that the transcultural feminist grotesque raises. In chapter one, I develop a theoretical basis with which I analyze my corpus. On the one hand, chapter one introduces the concept of *transculturality* and traces the change from engagements with the body to ideas on embodiment which has been taking place since the 1990s and has arguably shaped discourse and criticism in the humanities. As an alternative to the traditional notion of the body, I draw on and develop concepts from phenomenology, specifically feminist phenomenology, such as the lived body and the body image. Here, I also delve into the question of how gender, and to a certain extent race, is embodied and lived. On the other hand, I examine the grotesque as an artistic and literary term, exploring its origins in fifteenth century art, briefly commenting on the problems of defining it due to its inherent malleability and its different offshoots. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body, but extending it by means of feminist phenomenological thinking and embodiment theory more generally, I also put forward a definition of what I consider the transcultural feminist grotesque. In chapters two to five, I demonstrate how the literary texts illustrate, discuss and apply the ideas, concepts and concerns discussed in the second chapter.

In chapter two, I begin by looking at an early example of the transcultural feminist grotesque, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969). While the

transcultural feminist grotesque is not fully developed in this narrative, the novel is nevertheless informative as it carves out the subversive role of the female body. The novel centres around Marian, who struggles with conforming to feminine ideals. Even though, on the surface, she conforms to ideals such as submissiveness and self-silencing and actively gives in to them, her body powerfully counterbalances many of the conscious decisions she takes. Thus, she inadvertently runs away from her fiancé and friends, hides under a bed, starts a somewhat unenthusiastic relationship with the student Duncan, and, most importantly, develops an eating disorder. Her eating disorder is disconnected from any conscious decisions, however, and the text makes it abundantly clear that it is her body that decides not to eat, to Marian's dismay. Marian's eating disorder can thus be read as a symptom of insidious trauma, which she suffers because femininity has been incorporated into her body, making her conform to feminine ideals of the good roommate, well behaved tenant and obedient girlfriend, yet her body resists this inscription of femininity. The novel provides a resolution in the form of the grotesque consumption of a cake woman which Marian makes to brake off the engagement with her fiancé Peter, yet devours herself.

The novel I discuss in chapter three, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), is closely associated with the grotesque. Its main character Fevvers is not only grotesque in the art historical sense, as she is a hybrid between woman and bird, but she is also extremely grotesque in her exaggerated earthiness and vulgarity. However, what has been somewhat missing from readings of the novel are the resonances it creates with feminist disability studies. The novel addresses notions of freakery, but, more importantly, it tackles disabled, female sexuality by means of Fevvers. Moreover, the novel convincingly demonstrates how body images are shaped by one's investment in one's own body but also other people's investment in it. Fevvers experiences painfully what it means to be deprived of bodily agency because she is only interested in monetary gain. However, she learns to disinvest certain body parts with cultural and financial value and thus regains bodily and consequently mental agency. The novel aptly demonstrates how gender as well as disability and in particular the objectification that is a side-effect of inhabiting the world as a female, is embodied and lived. My reading of the novel extends analyses of Judith Butler's

concept of gender as performativity and demonstrates how gender leaves material traces in bodies, thus paralleling feminist phenomenological ideas of gender being embodied.

In chapter four I analyze how Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) links divergent struggles by means of its central characters and their lived bodies. While, on the surface, the novel engages with Mala's story, whose grotesqueness, that is, her connection to her garden and animals, unabashed celebration of bodily processes and defiance of feminine, housewifely ideals, leads to other people's detachment, the novel also provides a pertinent comment on transgender experience. It is through the 'male' nurse, who in fact is transgender as I argue, Tyler, and their bodily understanding that Mala's story of abuse, abandonment and ostracism can be told. Equally, it is by way of Mala's understanding of Tyler that their story finds an outlet. The novel foregrounds the communicative nature of bodies and consequently undermines dominant ideas of the mind as foremost channel of understanding. Moreover, it complicates straightforward readings of transgender characters and thus easily defined notions of sex, gender and sexuality by, first, having Tyler not conform to ideas of either masculinity, nor femininity, nor to ideas of a transgender character necessarily transforming into a 'specific' gender. Second, Otoh, the other transgender character in the novel, ostensibly conforms to straightforward male gender identity. Yet, he has moulded his body to become 'male,' which challenges ideas of the biological stability of sex. The novel connects the stories of three unlike characters and thus provides a pertinent comment on exclusionary feminism. Yet, it also hints at the construction of gender regimes as part of colonialism in the ambivalence it maintains concerning Tyler's gendered and racialized identity as well as in its emphasis on the materialising effects of discourse.

The final chapter, chapter five, is devoted to Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997). Drawing on the concept of the postcolonial Gothic, I show how the novel relies on both grotesque and Gothic elements for its criticism of colonialism and patriarchy as well as dominant western feminisms. The novel challenges the humanist boundaries between humans and animals, humans and plants, humans and inorganic matter as well as individual human bodies by means of the

grotesque, incestuous relationship between the siblings Beatrice and Danny. Moreover, the Gothic surfaces in the form of a blend between the natural and supernatural, the material and immaterial as well as the representation of uncanny bodily reactions which provide a comment on the continuing and embodied effects of colonialism on indigenous bodies. The polyphonic character of the narrative establishes ambivalence and insecurity as regards the overall message of the narrative and thus defies readers' attempts to read the incestuous relationship in any other than a sympathetic light, further adding to a positive sense of the unfamiliar.

This study offers a series of connected, yet independent, readings of transcultural texts in order to exemplify how contemporary female authors use the mode of the feminist grotesque to undermine dominant portrayals of women and their embodiment. The first part of this study establishes theoretical foundations which help situate the discussion of the texts in a wider context and provide the necessary tools for the literary analyses. Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body combined with a feminist phenomenological understanding of the lived body elucidate fundamental aspects that the novels address. The second, and larger part of this study is comprised of the readings of literary texts. The novels chronicle the shift in feminist analyses of the body which reached its peak in the 1990s. Consequently, they provide philosophical interventions in the role of embodiment more generally.

1. Transcultural, Feminist, and Grotesque

“In its very existence, the literary field constitutes a challenge to the disciplining of embodied discourse and affect: for, . . . from the point of view of authority, literature is usually felt to be little more than an unruly waste product, a non-normative body, a leaky vessel or a bloated, flabby thing.”

(Hillman and Maude 4-5)

1.1 The Transnational and the Transcultural Turns

In her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin firmly established the ‘transnational turn’ in American Studies. However, transnational approaches had already been present in earlier publications such as Donald Pease’s edited essay collection *National Identities and Postnational Narratives* (1994) or Robert A. Gross’s “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies in a Wider World” (2000), among others, and “gave leverage to a rethinking of North American cultural and literary history across and beyond national boundaries” (Straub 2).¹⁸ In particular the idea of the nation has become a contested space (Straub 1) within the transnational turn, with Donald E. Pease and Yuan Shu suggesting that “[w]hile the twentieth century was a time when the nation and the idea of national culture predominated, the twenty-first century is marked by crossnational linkages and transnational processes” (2). However, instead of completely doing away with the nation, terms such as transnational and postnational remain linked to it and in fact require it for their *raison d’être*.¹⁹

¹⁸ Several scholars have identified transnational turns beyond the US-American context, so that Canadian or South American literatures have also been read transnationally. See Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta Jara’s study on *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature* (2017) or *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde*, edited by Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy.

¹⁹ Similar concepts that somewhat overlap with the transnational are postnational and transareal. In *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature* (2017), Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta Jara argue, for instance, that “[w]ithout discarding the importance of the nation, the postnational aims to venture beyond borders, labels, and categorizations, well aware that we are still somewhat caught up within them” (5). Similar to the transnational and the postnational, TransAreal Studies remains tied to the concept of the nation. Ottmar Ette argues that “[t]he point, then, is not to deploy a (territorializable) counter-concept to the idea of national literature but, rather, to account for geocultural and biopolitical changes, and for the literary-aesthetic developments that accompany those changes. Neither the perspective of national literature nor that of world literature enables us to think through such transformations and describe them fully. My goal is to articulate practices of Writing-between-Worlds that cannot be territorialized in any permanent (or settled) way” (8).

In *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010), Paul Jay points out that the organization into literatures based on nationalities is “in some senses an arbitrary decision” (73). However, he is not advocating for a complete erasure of the ‘national models’ but instead that they be “supplemented, complicated, and challenged by newer approaches” (73). Jay identifies the intersection of the emergence of postcolonial studies and the study of globalization as the single most important element which gave rise to the transnational turn in literary studies.²⁰ Accordingly, the transnational study of literature is an effect of globalization and a focus on multicultural, minority and postcolonial literatures. Relatedly, in their introduction to *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations* (2008), Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram see societies and lives as “inherently transnational” (2). Accordingly, they state: “The task of Transnational Studies is to uncover, analyze and conceptualize similarities, differences, and interactions among trans-societal and trans-organizational realities, including the ways in which they shape bordered and bounded phenomena and dynamics across time” (10-11, original emphasis excluded).

Similar to the concept of the transnational, in recent years the term *transculturality* has gained prominence. There has been a discernible shift from postcolonial to transcultural issues, so much so that Graham Huggan speaks of a ‘transcultural turn’ that postcolonial studies has taken (“Derailing the ‘trans’?” 56).²¹ Transculturality is often discussed alongside apparently similar terms such as multiculturalism, transculturation and interculturality.²² Nevertheless, as Benessaieh underlines in her study *Transcultural Americas/Amérique Transculturelles*, “it is a

²⁰ For Jay and other scholars, globalization does not merely refer to a recent economic and cultural phenomenon situated in the twentieth and twenty-first century but can be traced at least to the beginning of the sixteenth century (Jay 3; Ette 11-12).

²¹ Huggan is critical of the term, mostly because the “contested prefix ‘trans’ . . . much like the battle-weary ‘post’ in ‘postcolonialism’ is being used to conjure up a far more positive picture of the world than a more historically informed and, particularly, a more economically driven argument would allow” (“Derailing the ‘trans’?” 59). What he implies is that it can gloss over differences as regards the economic and historic situation of human beings. However, transculturality accounts for “the same basic problems and states of consciousness today [that] appear in cultures once considered to be fundamentally different – think, for example, of human rights debates, feminist movements or of ecological awareness which are powerful cultural factors all over the world” (Welsch 223).

²² For a good overview of arguments for and against using ‘postcolonial’ in the Canadian context see Laura Moss’s “Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question.”

separate concept that designates specific processes inadequately captured by these other terms [transculturation, multiculturalism, interculturality]” (12).²³

For Wolfgang Welsch, one of the leading theorists and supporters of the concept, transculturality is a product of the inherent hybridization of cultures (223), its “internal multiplicity” (225). According to Welsch, cultures are always influenced by other cultures, they are “interconnected and entangled” (222). This parallels Kwame Appiah’s notion of contaminated cultures, that is, cultures that enter into productive contact with each other (107, 113). Welsch argues that “[s]trictly speaking there exists no longer anything absolutely foreign” (223). While this is even more so today, because of international networking that allows for certain lifestyles to move beyond national borders, he maintains that transculturality has always been a feature of human societies, albeit one that has been downplayed (226).

Transculturality is a process that takes place both on society’s macro-level and the individual’s micro-level (Welsch 225).²⁴ Thus, the concept of transculturality represents a move away from a monolithic understanding of culture as clearly delineated, an understanding in which national identity determines cultural identity. Accordingly,

[t]he concept of transculturality aims for a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive understanding of culture. It intends a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition. (Welsch 227)²⁵

Needless to say, this has wide-reaching consequences, because “[c]onceptions of culture are not just descriptive concepts, but operative concepts” (Welsch 227).

²³ For an in-depth delineation of transculturality from other terms see Benessaieh’s study, specifically the section entitled “Multiculturalism and Interculturality” (15-20). Wolfgang Welsch criticizes multiculturalism and interculturality because they “remain bound to the traditional [culture] concept (220): cultures are still envisaged as separate, unrelated and homogenous entities (220-21).

²⁴ Welsch insists that cultural mixing happens both on the popular and high cultural level, as made apparent by McDonalds, Coke, Gauguin’s Tahiti and expressionism and African art (223).

²⁵ This does not lead to uniformization – as globalization does – however. Welsch contends that “[t]ransculturality does not mean simple uniformization. It is even intrinsically linked with the production of new diversity” (230): “Transcultural networks always have some elements in common while they differ in others, meaning that there exist between them not only differences, but at the same time overlaps. . . . So in terms of its structure the new type of difference favors coexistence rather than conflict . . . Transcultural identity . . . implies awareness of contingency and the acknowledgement of alternative elements of identity” (231-33).

A transcultural, rather than postcolonial, analysis is much more prone to reveal similarities instead of differences. Benessaieh further links transculturality to embodiment. As she puts it, transculturality

captures more adequately the sense of movement and the complex mixedness of cultures in close contact, and better describes the *embodied situation of cultural plurality* lived by many individuals and communities of mixed heritage and/or experience, whose multifaceted situation is more visible under globalization. (Benessaieh 16, emphasis in original)

It is precisely the embodied situation of cultural plurality that allows for the acknowledgement of similarities *without* glossing over substantial differences in the lived experiences of people. Accordingly, “transculturality as multi-situatedness can be used to qualify cultural productions in music, literature, food, film, clothing, and more generally works of art that deal with inner and more distant diversity” (Benessaieh 27). According to Jacky Bouju, transcultural literature entails “la reconnaissance réciproque d’un univers de significations partagées” [the reciprocal recognition of a universe of shared significations]” (cited in Benessaieh 25).

A transcultural, rather than a postcolonial, reading of literature, then, is concerned with both the awareness of difference *and* similarity.²⁶ Similarly, according to Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, transnational feminism is not a form of ‘global feminism’ which participates in “the relativistic linking of ‘differences’” (253) but its aim is “to compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender” (253). A transcultural and transnational framing of the literary texts discussed in this thesis has the advantage of offering a means of analyzing texts from distinct cultural backgrounds in dialogue with each other, including literatures, which under the label ‘postcolonial’ are rejected. Moreover, it more readily reveals the similarities in feminist approaches, creating their own variety of what several authors have identified as transnational feminism.²⁷ Having established the relevance of paying

²⁶ Frank Schulze-Engler provides a thorough and concise overview of the drawbacks of the term ‘postcolonial’ and its application (20-26) and promotes ‘transculturality’ instead.

²⁷ There are innumerable publications on transnational feminisms, which take a decidedly social studies or political approach such as Margaret A. McLaren’s *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (2017), Jennifer Suchland’s *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking* (2015) and Inderpal Grewal’s *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005). My study, however, is concerned with how

attention to the embodied situation of cultural plurality for a transcultural analysis in this section, the next section will be dedicated to explaining what exactly embodiment refers to and how it has changed the ground in feminist analyses.

1.2 From the Body to Embodiment

For centuries, the body has been absent from Western theorizing (Alaimo and Hekman 1; Price and Shildrick 1; Fraser and Greco 1). Whenever it did surface, however, it was rarely considered a serious topic for philosophical discussion. This is so because in Western philosophy, which derived many of its ideas from Christianity,²⁸ for almost as long as the discipline of philosophy itself has existed, a dualism between *mind* and *body* has prevailed. What this dualism has resulted in is, on the one hand, that it is exclusively the mind on which characteristics such as consciousness, communication, and thought were bestowed. On the other hand, this dualism has had negative repercussions for the body, because it was considered “a prison for the soul, reason, or mind” (Grosz 5), seen as a mere vessel, i.e. a passive material substance that failed to contribute to the intellectual or spiritual development of the human race. This ‘inanimate’ body is, in fact, in need of control in order for the individual to thrive intellectually. It is, as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick remark, an “obstacle to pure rational thought” (2). In the Greco-Christian tradition, the body has been established as the devalued term.²⁹

Dualistic thinking has resulted in a devaluation of the body and, by extension, a devaluation of its relevance for rationality and morality. It has been shown that the mind/body dualism is firmly linked to another set of terms, namely male/female and nature/culture (see Susan Bordo).³⁰ Men are largely associated with the positive,

the literary texts that I discuss create their own version of transnational feminism, which is why I do not engage with these publications in detail here but let the literary texts speak for themselves.

²⁸ Famous Whiteness scholar Richard Dyer argues, f.i.: “*Christianity* (and the particular inflection it gives to Western dualist thought) is founded on the idea – paradoxical, unfathomable, profoundly mysterious – of incarnation, of being that is in the body yet not of it” (14, emphasis in original).

²⁹ One need only consider some key philosophical thinkers’ notion of the body, such as Plato’s or René Descartes’s, to get a better notion of this unequal setup. For the sake of brevity, I simplify their understandings of the dualism between mind and body here.

³⁰ To be precise, connections between devalued terms do not only exist between the female and corporeality. In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Alcoff cautions that the same associations apply to black people, an aspect sometimes overlooked by scholars. Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco expand the list of negative associations between dualisms by including working-class people, animals and slaves (2).

powerful term (mind, culture), whereas women are associated with the devalued term (body, nature). For centuries then, women have been identified with their bodies.

Feminism has brought the devaluation of females to their bodies into focus and has helped to highlight and pinpoint the negative effects the mind/body dualism has had for female subjects. Criticism of mind/body dualisms has been taken up by various strands of feminism at assorted times, in diverse contexts and has taken many different shapes. Nevertheless, it can be said to have taken primarily two forms: either a rejection of the materiality of the body in favour of emphasizing women's intellectual capacities, or a praise of the materiality of bodies as something essential to female existence (Fraser and Greco 3). A third and alternative form has been surfacing in the last two decades with new materialist feminisms and feminist phenomenology.

New materialist feminisms have instigated a revaluation of the body as material entity and of matter more generally.³¹ From the new materialist feminist point of view, matter is not a passive substance or a fixed, unchanging quality, but rather active and "agentic" (Alaimo and Hekman 5; Coole and Frost 7). Matter is not simply a given but is always in a process of becoming (Coole and Frost 10). It is "active" (Alaimo and Hekman 4), "self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (Coole and Frost 9) and human bodies are equally active, malleable, adaptable, and volatile entities. Materialization, the process of becoming matter, is not a neutral process as matter is always immersed in culture; matter only ever becomes materialized within culture.³²

³¹ For a discussion of the criticism voiced at new materialisms and some of their major representatives see Samantha Frost's "The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology" and Maureen McNeil's "Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin."

³² New materialisms do not reject social constructivist arguments altogether – as some critics assume – but rather shift the focus. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost comment on this in the following way: "It is entirely possible, then, to accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse" (27) and add that "our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural" (27). For new materialists, matter constitutes the basis of reality, but it does not exist separately from culture. Further, new materialisms do not deny cultural-construction, but they argue that it cannot be separated easily from what we call matter. Thus, what can be defined as 'nature' and what can be defined as 'culture' is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. Anne Fausto-Sterling's research is a case in point. She demonstrates how 'biological' and 'cultural' aspects mutually influence each other. Fausto-Sterling puts it aptly: "we are always 100 percent nature and 100 percent culture" ("The Bare Bones of Sex" 1510). There is an apprehension that various factors 'intra-act,' as Karen Barad observes, within the discursive, material, human, non-human, and technological phenomena that shape our world. This is why Haraway speaks of the 'material-semiotic'

Phenomenology and in particular feminist phenomenology, while taking a different route, have also contributed to a reformed perspective on matter, albeit one limited to the human body. Be that as it may, both disciplines have contributed to the questioning of the notion of the human body and have helped shape the concept of embodiment.³³ Ever since the 1990s, embodiment has gradually gained importance in various disciplines of the humanities as a result of the criticism of the notion of ‘the body.’³⁴ ‘The body’ is problematic in that it stipulates a universal standard that applies to all of humanity. Katherine N. Hayles, for example, defines the body as “the human form seen from the outside, from a cultural perspective striving to make representations that can stand in for bodies in general” (297).³⁵ This is to say that there is only ‘one’ body and this body is representative of each and every human being. However, it is exactly because there is only *one* body that this body is imagined in a specific, normative way, and recurrently this entails that it is generally represented and conceived of as the able, male, white, heterosexual body. What is troublesome about this with regard to feminism and other disciplines, i.e. gender studies, race studies or aging studies, however, is that female as well as non-white, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, disabled body experience is neglected.

Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber refer to the body as “a nongendered, prediscursive phenomenon” (xiii) and thus address another downside to attributing universal validity to ‘the body’: thinking of ‘the body’ in those oversimplifying terms – as one body that is representative of all bodies – conceals the fact that ‘the body’ is

(Haraway, “Situated Knowledges 588) and Barad of the ‘material-discursive’ (Barad, “Posthumanist” 810). As a consequence, meaning/signification is conceived as both material and cultural/semiotic.

³³ The focus on embodiment is also paralleled in other areas, namely visual art. Since the 1950s in particular when “body art” came into being (Sturm 16), female artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Louise Bourgeois, and Marina Abramovic, among others, started engaging with the female and in particular female sexual body in their works. As Jules Sturm points out, “[b]ody art was above all an activist art form, reflecting a new experience of subjectivity that was embodied rather than transcendental” (16). Similar to the literary texts I discuss here, body artists worked “[i]n opposition to Cartesian thought, which postulates a mind-body split and assumes knowledge to be stable and objective [and] reconceived the subject as being simultaneously non-coherent and embodied. The body was thus recognized as a central actor to challenge conventions of subjecthood” (16-17).

³⁴ Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber, for instance, note that ‘the body’ “has become problematized” (xiii). But it is not just the body that has been problematized but also the “discourses *about* the body,” because they have drawn attention away from materiality (Alaimo and Hekman 3).

³⁵ Eva Cherniavsky argues along the same lines that ‘the body’ is “the physical or material frame of human and other living beings” (26).

never merely a 'neutral' or 'natural' entity.³⁶ As a matter of fact, 'the body' is always implicated in medical, biological, ecological, political and other discourses. Moreover, these wide-ranging discourses even have the potential to shape bodies. As many new materialist thinkers emphasize, discourses have a direct impact on bodies because meanings are inscribed into bodies (Wuttig, *Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 151).³⁷

One need only have a look at modern day physical exercise to see the intertwining of real material bodies and discourses: Current medical discourses on physical health suggest that 'normal' weight contributes to fewer diseases such as Type 2 Diabetes, heart diseases, strokes and certain types of cancer. Current beauty ideals, distributed via various types of media, suggest that attractiveness is linked to a fit and slim body. Both medical and cultural discourses encourage individuals to do sports, follow a particular diet, and purchase specific clothes – either for the purpose of exercising or of covering certain 'unattractive' body areas. As a consequence, these individuals will put their 'biological' bodies to a different use; expose their bodies to altered conditions. In turn, the adjustments to diet and an increase in physical activity will modify the 'natural' body. In this way we can conclude that social-constructivist arguments prevail.

However, drawing on medical research, new materialists argue that these changes in exercise and diet will trigger an alteration that goes beyond superficial changes to outward bodily appearance, such as weight loss, stronger, more clearly defined muscles, etc. Instead physical exercise, for instance, increases bone density (Fausto-Sterling, "The Bare Bones" 1510) and can thus prevent diseases such as osteoporosis. So, even though someone might be born with a particular predisposition for a disease such as osteoporosis, physical exercise can outweigh genetic factors. Another example concerns diet: a change in diet does not simply result in a slimmer

³⁶ Wuttig insists: "Natur in ‚Reinform‘ ist ‚uns‘ nicht zugänglich. Sie bleibt immer eine Spekulation vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Wissensdispositive und gesellschaftlich erzeugter Rationalitäten" (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 218). Kay Inckle comments: "Thus, there is neither a purely "natural" essentialist body, . . . nor is the body simply a social construction" (76).

³⁷ In her discussion of Friedrich Nietzsche's work, Wuttig comments on this in the following way: "Der Leib und seine Bedürfnisse sind für Nietzsche *keine Metapher*. Wenn er davon spricht, dass Wahrheiten sich in den Körper einschreiben, so meint er das nicht metaphorisch, sondern dass sie sich wortwörtlich ins Fleisch eingraben und einen materiellen Anker bilden. Einschreibung ist hier *die* ‚Funktionsweise der Macht‘ und ihre Modalitäten sind, wie Kalb zusammenstellt: 'Einprägen, Einstampeln, Einbrennen, Einritzen, Einschneiden, Einzeichnen'" (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 151).

body. A transformed diet has an impact on the bacteria in the gut, which has, due to hormones, a considerable influence on the brain (which is why the gut can be considered our second brain, as Michael Gershon has shown).³⁸ Significantly, some scientists have drawn connections between gut bacteria and mental diseases, such as depression (Gershon; E. Wilson).³⁹

Another case in point is Elizabeth Wilson's research who indicates that there exists a correlation between bulimia and depression. While there is uncertainty as to whether depression leads to bulimia or vice versa, the use of antidepressants with bulimic patients has produced positive results ("Gut Feminism" 82). Wilson maintains that "antidepressants alleviate bulimia because there is no radical (originary) distinction between biology and mood" ("Gut Feminism" 85) and "[t]he clinical data indicate extensive traffic among the body's organs and between the gut and mood in ways that are not delimitable to the flat logic of traditional biological science" (84-85). In *Psychosomatic*, Wilson takes this reasoning even further asserting,

a psychologically barren ENS [enteric nervous system] becomes implausible when we consider one noteworthy aspect of the gut: that it is one of the most important means by which the outside world connects with the body . . . Maybe ingestion and digestion aren't just metaphors for internalization; perhaps they are 'actual' mechanisms for relating to others. That is, perhaps gut pathology doesn't stand in for ideational disruption, but is another form of perturbed relations to others. (Wilson, *Psychosomatic* 43-44, 45)

These arguments make it extremely difficult to speak of a pure, 'natural' body because both genetic/biological and environmental/cultural factors influence bodies alike.

As has been established previously, 'the body' is problematic because of its claim to normativity. Due to its troublesome implications, the body' has largely been replaced by the notion of embodiment.⁴⁰ In contrast to 'the body' perceived as the

³⁸ This also complicates issues of mental disease, which can no longer be defined as 'mental' problems but are connected to physical process in the entire body, not just the brain. For more information on this topic see Giulia Enders's *Gut* (originally published in German in 2014, English translation in 2015) or Michael Gershon's *The Second Brain* (1998).

³⁹ Moreover, even though criticized by many, research in epigenetics suggests that certain environmental or cultural influences can cause epigenetic changes, and thus modify genes. Research in epigenetics suggests, for instance, that a poor diet will surface in the genes of an individual's descendants. I have simplified this matter here. For a more in-depth discussion of this topic see Saini.

⁴⁰ Admittedly, new materialist feminism is not the only discipline that has replaced 'the body' with embodiment. For studies on embodiment in sociology see Inckle's "*Writing on the Body?*" *Thinking Through Gendered Embodiment and Marked Flesh* (2007), Nick Crossley's *The Social Body: Habit,*

physical, material human shape, embodiment is concerned with the way that different living bodies, i.e. different subjects, experience the world around them and engage with this world through sensations, feelings and emotions; or, as Nick Crossley puts it, embodiment encompasses “the sensuous nature of human perception, emotion and desire,” and it forms “the corporeal basis of agency, communication and thought” (3). Accordingly, Weiss and Haber describe embodiment as “a way of living or inhabiting the world through one’s acculturated body” (xiii, emphasis in original).⁴¹ As a result, “[h]uman beings are neither minds nor, strictly speaking, bodies,” as Crossley proposes; they are “rather mindful and embodied social agents” (3). Csordas clarifies the difference between the divergent foci of studies, stating that “studies under the rubric of embodiment are not ‘about’ the body *per se*. Instead, they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world” (“Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology” 143). Unlike the dominant mind/body dualism, embodiment theory puts emphasis on perception, feeling and emotion as experienced through the body and as mediated through the mind, recognizing the body’s inherent embeddedness in culture. In other words, embodiment theory attests that perception, emotion and feeling are singular corporeal experiences, influenced by the way culture responds to bodies; it is not simply concerned with the fact of human beings having and experiencing one’s body, rather it is concerned with having and experiencing one’s body within a culture, with all the possibilities and constraints this carries.⁴² It follows that communication, thought and agency are not simply made physically possible by the mere existence of bodies, but they are made possible because of a human’s environment and surroundings. This means, in turn, that depending on the environment, communication, thought and agency can take distinct forms.

Identity and Desire (2001), and Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams’s *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (1998). For anthropological studies see Thomas J. Csordas’s *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (1994). Many of these provide useful definitions of embodiment.

⁴¹ Hayles’s claim that “[e]mbodiment is experienced from the inside” can be misleading as it might insinuate that embodiment is only about the inside, and hence only about consciousness. This is obviously not what she means as she also refers to “the feelings, emotions, and sensations” (297). Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty is helpful in this regard as he shows that consciousness is not purely a mental process but is dependent on the body.

⁴² Wuttig’s quote from Merleau-Ponty is a case in point here: “What things and events mean is derived from the frame of ideas within which the person is situated. The act of giving meaning is an act of attribution” (Merleau-Ponty, qtd. in Wuttig, *Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 227).

1.3 Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

A welcome side effect of the criticism of the notion of 'the body' has been that several philosophers and their ideas on subjectivity have been submitted to a thorough re-evaluation. One such philosopher is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writing looms large in the literature on embodiment. He provides a valuable account of the embodied subject, and feminist scholars have found Merleau-Ponty to offer a more nuanced way of talking about female (and other marginalized people's) experiences.⁴³

Merleau-Ponty rejects Descartes's understanding of the subject as being made up of two distinct substances and proposes an alternative instead. He refutes Descartes' view of the body as an "object," a "thing" (204), which serves solely as a shell or container to a soul that does the thinking, that has awareness and consciousness. In short, Merleau-Ponty questions Descartes's hypothesis of the soul making the subject and criticizes his conception of the body as being completely disengaged from consciousness.⁴⁴ For Merleau-Ponty it is simply not possible to conceive of mind and body as separate:⁴⁵ "The union of the soul and the body is not established through an arbitrary decree that unites two mutually exclusive terms, one a subject and the other an object. It is accomplished at each moment in the movement of existence" (91). As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty proposes two distinct ways of conceiving of the body, the objective body and the lived body.

⁴³ This is not to say that other philosophers have not been useful in this regard. Wuttig and some new materialists draw heavily on Nietzsche's notion of the subject. Others have turned to Spinoza, Darwin or Deleuze.

⁴⁴ Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty takes issue with both intellectualism's and empiricism's account of the body, not just Descartes's. For a more in-depth discussion of intellectualism and empiricism see Thomas Baldwin's *Reading Merleau-Ponty*. For the sake of clarity, brevity and because Descartes is the most representative of the mind/body dichotomy, I will only refer to Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Descartes here.

⁴⁵ When discussing the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty calls this strict division into question. The phantom limb is a condition due to which patients experience pain or other sensations in a body part that has been amputated. In many cases patients feel that the limb is still there. He shows that the phantom limb is not simply a result of entirely physiological phenomena, such as the actual loss of the limb or cerebral lesions. At the same time, he is eager to point out that it is neither the result of completely psychological circumstances. Instead of saying that the phantom limb is *both* the result of physiological and psychological circumstances, he suggests that it can be understood from the point of view of "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 83). He, therefore, offers a more nuanced and ultimately more organic or situated way of talking about and analyzing phenomena such as the phantom limb.

Merleau-Ponty proposes two ways of envisioning the body, namely knowing it as an object and perceiving it as a living body.⁴⁶ The objective body is the body that can be studied from a scientific perspective, as is done, for instance, in biology, physics or psychology.⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty is at pains to show that we ought to take up a third-person point of view with regard to our bodies, which then become one thing among many (*Phenomenology* 191). Thinking about ‘the body’ in this way reduces the body to an “idea” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 74, 205) or an abstraction. As a consequence, thinking about the objective body neither takes account of individual bodies nor of individual experiences, creating a universal standard that applies to all of humanity.

By means of the ‘lived body,’ Merleau-Ponty provides an account of embodiment that is firmly grounded in corporeality.⁴⁸ The body forms the basis of existence as a human being: the body is the starting point for perception, experience and thought.⁴⁹ Accordingly, he maintains that “I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 151). In contrast to the objective body, the lived body⁵⁰ implies that each human being experiences their body from a unique, individual perspective. The ‘lived body’ is the first-person point of view, so to speak. The lived body includes the way that a subject experiences or feels its body in a certain state, such as pain or tiredness, and the way the subject perceives its body doing something (reading) or being able to do something (sitting in this chair for hours). More specifically, the lived body entails an awareness of what I can do with my body, the capacities I have for doing something.

This is achieved through what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘body schema.’ He defines the body schema as “the global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world, a ‘form’ in Gestalt psychology’s sense of the word” (*Phenomenology* 102).

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s differentiation between the objective and the lived body is based on Edmund Husserl’s of *Körper* and *Leib*.

⁴⁷ Even though psychology is usually not considered a science, I have included it here because Merleau-Ponty refers to it as a science.

⁴⁸ Abby Wilkerson defines ‘corporeality’ as “the state of living in/through/as a body” (196). In contrast, ‘embodiment’ is employed “in relation to phenomenology, the philosophical study of conscious experience from an individual person’s subjective perspective” (196-97).

⁴⁹ Many critics point out the primacy of perception in Merleau-Ponty’s theorizing. See Taylor Carman and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc for more detailed accounts of this idea. These critics consider perception a bodily phenomenon instead of a mental process (Carman 78-79; Romdenh-Romluc 167, 183).

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty also uses the term ‘phenomenal body’ or ‘habit body’ to refer to the lived body.

This does not only entail that we have an awareness of our position in space, in a room for example, but it also includes an awareness of what we can do with our body in that space, what tasks we can perform with it. Awareness here does not mean a mental or intellectual, conscious awareness or knowledge but rather an unconscious awareness of the habits and skills that the body can carry out. The body schema, then, is our preparedness to use the lived body's skills and habits in order to be part of the world around us, access this world and make sense of it. Merleau-Ponty asserts that the "body schema" is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world" (*Phenomenology* 103) and it becomes, according to Taylor Carman, representative of the interdependence between the self and its world (109).

These two ways of conceiving of the body do not have anything in common (*Phenomenology* 191). However, this is not to suggest that Merleau-Ponty reproduces the Cartesian dualism of mind versus body. Quite the contrary, he suggests that the objective and the lived body are not two distinct entities but rather different perspectives one can take up in regard to the body (Matthews 51).⁵¹ "What prevents [the body] from ever being an object or from ever being 'completely constituted,'" Merleau-Ponty argues, "is that my body is that by which there are objects" (*Phenomenology* 94). The body cannot be solely an object, because it is the lived body that allows for our existence in the world and consequently our perception of and engagement with objects: "I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 205). Arguably, then, Merleau-Ponty refuses to demote the body to the objective body only and insists that a body is always lived. In fact, in order to be able to talk about the objective body and study it as a biological entity or as a "physico-chemical system" (Matthews 51), one needs to be embodied first, which is why he asserts that "the thinking subject must be grounded upon the embodied subject" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 199).

Merleau-Ponty offers a novel way of approaching the body, in the sense that there is no such thing as only one body. The body can be seen from two different perspectives – the objective body and the lived body. What is more, one subject's

⁵¹ Eric Matthews suggests: "This distinction between the lived body of our experience and the objective body of science is not Cartesian dualism: these are not two bodies or two separate things, but the same body described from different points of view" (51).

body is never the same, it is always changing: “[T]here are *several ways for the body to be a body, and several ways for consciousness to be consciousness*” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 125, emphasis in original).⁵² Since each and every situation we find ourselves in is unique, the way our body will find itself in that situation, i.e. be in the world and respond to its world, will be different.⁵³

In contrast to dominant philosophical beliefs, Merleau-Ponty comprehends consciousness as manifold, too, because it does not necessarily refer to thought processes only, but to perception and an unconscious awareness of one’s skills. Consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is therefore not an exclusively mental phenomenon but is rather connected to the whole being and influenced by bodily workings. On the whole, he suggests that there is a multiplicity of bodies and a multiplicity of consciousnesses within one subject.

Merleau-Ponty challenges another dominant philosophical notion by proposing that the body is essentially social in character. To Merleau-Ponty, it is not only the mind or soul that, within dominant philosophical (and religious) beliefs, that makes human understanding and thus relationships possible, but the lived body. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that “[i]t is the body that shows, that speaks” (*Phenomenology* 203).⁵⁴ The lived body is vital for being able to communicate with the world and to ultimately connect with other people. More importantly, he elaborates, “I understand the other person through my body, just as I perceive ‘things’ through my body” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 191-92). It is, therefore, by means of the lived body that we communicate amongst each other and convey meaning, be it intentional or not, since unconscious gestures or movements can betray someone’s true feelings.⁵⁵

⁵² This is an idea that can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche’s work, too, as he speaks of ‘Bewusstseins’ in the plural and a multiplicity of subjects.

⁵³ Wuttig highlights: “Gemäß Merleau-Ponty (1966) sind der Leib und die Bedeutung, die er für das Subjekt hat, ein offenes Zwischenergebnis innerhalb eines kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Referenz- und Deutungsrahmens” (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 227).

⁵⁴ M. L. Lyon and J. M. Barbalet describe the body as “intercommunicative and active” (48).

⁵⁵ Interestingly, the body’s social character has a neurological basis in what Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon in their study *A General Theory of Love* refer to as “limbic resonance.” These authors define limbic resonance as “a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other’s inner states” (63). “It is limbic resonance,” they further explain, “that makes looking into the face of another emotionally responsive creature a multilayered experience. Instead of seeing a pair of eyes as two bespeckled buttons, when we look into the ocular portals to a limbic brain our vision goes deep: . . . Eye contact, although it occurs over a gap of yards,

It consequently follows that emotions are integral to the body's role as a social actant.⁵⁶ In fact, Merleau-Ponty considers "affectivity" an "original mode of consciousness" (*Phenomenology* 157).⁵⁷ In an indicative passage in *Sense and Non-sense*, Merleau-Ponty puts it thus:

We must reject that prejudice which makes 'inner realities' out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behaviour or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them. (52)

Emotions are not individual experiences; they are intersubjective. We acknowledge and understand other people primarily via their emotions, to be more specific, as Merleau-Ponty points out, through the way they use their bodies to express a particular emotion (*Phenomenology* 195).⁵⁸ We understand emotions or can 'read' them because our own bodies respond in a particular way to emotions: they affect us, they trigger an emotional reaction in us. We do not need a conscious understanding of emotions in order to understand what they mean; our own emotions take on this task. We understand each other and each other's emotions because we are part of the same culture.⁵⁹ We possess shared cultural knowledge of emotions and understand intuitively the ways a body is used to express that particular emotion.

As has been shown, Merleau-Ponty provides an account of the lived body, the embodied subject, which makes it possible to speak about bodily experience without

is not a metaphor. When we meet the gaze of another, two nervous systems achieve a palpable and intimate apposition" (63). Furthermore, "[b]ecause limbic states can leap between minds, feelings are contagious, while notions are not . . . the limbic activity of those around us draws our emotions into almost immediate congruence" (64).

⁵⁶ Suzanne L. Cataldi maintains that "Merleau-Ponty did not draw distinctions between affective phenomena" (163) and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, too, asserts that he does not distinguish between emotions and moods (172). I refrain from drawing clear distinctions between 'affects' and 'emotions' and in fact employing the term 'affect' in this study because of the misleading uses of said term in Affect Studies. For an excellent critical discussion of the shortcomings of affect theory see Ruth Leys's "The Turn to Affect: A Critique" (2011).

⁵⁷ In his discussion of the phantom limb Merleau-Ponty includes emotions, because he contends: "A phantom limb appears for a subject not previously experiencing one when an emotion or a situation evokes those of injury" (*Phenomenology* 79).

⁵⁸ Similarly, Lewis, Amini and Lannon declare that "facial expressions . . . are the universal language of humanity" (39).

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty is very well aware of the fact that an emotion, or rather, the way individuals use their bodies to express a particular emotion, have not the same meaning across cultures: "[T]he gesticulations of anger or love are not the same for a Japanese person and a Western person. More precisely, the difference between gesticulations covers over a difference between the emotions themselves. It is not merely the gesture that is contingent with regard to bodily organization, it is the very manner of meeting the situation and of living it" (*Phenomenology* 194-95).

falling back into the dualism of mind and body, because he shows that these two cannot be conceived as separate entities. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject opens up the possibility to talk about sexual difference in ways that do not subscribe to male/female and sex/gender dualisms.

1.4 Feminist Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodiment is an indispensable one, on which a number of feminist theorists have drawn, most prominent among those are Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens and Gail Weiss. While they all recognize the inherent potential of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment for a feminist appropriation, they by no means fully subscribe to it. In fact, they accuse him of androcentrism in his theorizing and attempt to expose its shortcomings by claiming that it displays a latent disregard for any differentiation between the sexes. It is this absence of awareness, especially since virtually all the examples Merleau-Ponty employs are male, that Grosz and Weiss criticize. They are of the opinion that Merleau-Ponty is here unwittingly complicit in promoting the notion that the male body can be taken as the norm. Furthermore, Weiss argues that Merleau-Ponty overlooks significant factors such as race, ethnicity, age and (dis)ability.⁶⁰

As a consequence, Grosz, Weiss and Gatens, as well as other theorists such as Iris Marion Young and Linda Martín Alcoff, have contributed to the development of a feminist phenomenology.⁶¹ Through the lens of feminist phenomenology, embodiment can be defined "as a form of gendered experience" (Wilkerson 197). Feminist phenomenology sees gender as constitutive of experience because gender is understood as a variable that influences both individuals' experiences and the way they perceive their surroundings. In this sense, feminist phenomenology is also concerned with the consequences this gendered outlook on the world leads to.⁶² Grosz shows:

⁶⁰ Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to these features in his discussion, yet there is the pertinent implication that his theory and an inclusion of these factors are compatible.

⁶¹ One of the first, if not *the* first, feminist phenomenologist is without doubt Simone de Beauvoir.

⁶² According to the author of the *Philpapers* entry "feminist phenomenology holds the position that being-in-the-world is not an abstract condition – without sex or gender. At the most obvious level, this leads to a focus on gendered embodiment and its impact on subjectivity. From these beginnings, feminist phenomenology clarifies how sex and gender impacts one's experiences and understandings of the world, broadening to explore the social political consequences" ("Feminist Phenomenology").

If the mind is necessarily linked to, and perhaps is even a part of, the body and if bodies themselves are always sexually (and racially) distinct, incapable of being incorporated into a singular universal model, then the very forms that subjectivity take are not generalizable. (19)

One way of approaching gendered subjectivity is by means of the body image. While Merleau-Ponty and other theorists differentiate clearly between the ‘body schema’ and the ‘body image’, many feminist phenomenologists partly do not maintain a clear distinction or even merge these two terms by using ‘body image’ to mean both.⁶³ Feminist phenomenologists have adapted and extended Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body image instead to account for emotional investment in the formation of the body image. The body image refers to a ‘unconscious awareness’ of one’s body. This does not mean that the body image provides us with a mental map of our bodies that is disconnected from this body.⁶⁴ To be precise, it should be thought of as an unconscious awareness of our capabilities and bodily functions. As Kathleen Lennon explains, body images are “modes of experiencing our body, enabling or inhibiting our operation in the world” (n. pag.). The body image, then, rather than simply being formed through a cognitive representation of a body, is formed via the experience of but also the emotional investment in one’s body. Thus, the body image is necessarily flexible, and changes based on factors such as race, ethnicity, age and (dis)ability. For these are factors that tend to be more or less pronounced depending on a particular situation, time or place. However, the transformations a body undergoes due to aging or specific, deliberate or unintended situations (such as pregnancy or cancer) or

⁶³ As Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero highlight, ‘body schema’ and ‘body image’ are often used interchangeably as a result of ‘body schema’ being an appropriation of the German *Körperschema*. Unfortunately, however, *Körperschema* is often erroneously translated as ‘body image’ (104). As a matter of fact, the term ‘body image’ goes back to Paul Schilder who uses the term to refer to representations of bodies. Even contemporary discourses that are concerned with the negative effects of medially produced body images and their link to eating disorders go back to Schilder’s use of the ‘body image’ (Käufer and Chemero 105). A case in point for studies engaging with this type of body image are Maggie Wykes’s and Barrie Gunter’s *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill* (2005) and Beth Younger’s *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (2009). In contrast, ‘body schema’ is used by Merleau-Ponty, and others working in psychology, phenomenology and other disciplines, to refer to a position or stance a body takes up in space and an awareness of the capabilities this body has. Shaun Gallagher, for instance, differentiates between the body image and the body schema based on “conscious awareness” of one’s body (body image) and “non-conscious performance of the body” (body schema) (544). For the sake of the argument of this thesis, the distinction between ‘body schema’ and ‘body image’ is not relevant so that I will adhere to the use of ‘body image.’

⁶⁴ Lennon, too, addresses this issue: “A danger with the concept of body image is that it can suggest something like an inner map or picture which we have of our bodies, a mental representation of the body and therefore separate from it” (“Feminist Perspectives on the Body” n.p.).

social, cultural or psychical alterations can result in a different body image as well. Weiss emphasizes in this regard that each human being has “an almost unlimited number of body-images.” She suggests: “[T]hese images of the body are not discrete but form a series of overlapping identities whereby one or more aspects of that body appear to be especially salient at any given point in time” (1). This, in turn, also means that none of these factors “plays a determinative role” in the construction of body images (Weiss 167). That being said, a subject might not be aware of the prominence of one of these factors because as Weiss suggests, we are not always aware of a body image. She contends: “[O]ur body images . . . are not dependent upon our recognition of them as such” (166). Body images exist even though we might not consciously reflect on them.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, while a body image might be “un(re)marked,” it still plays a “constitutive role in the formation of . . . identity” (Weiss 166). According to Grosz, the body image

mediates the mind/body polarization, [and it] necessarily entails input from both poles in order to function and be effective. This term signals the impossibility of conceiving the polar terms as binaries, as mutually exclusive. . . The body image . . . attests to the necessary interconstituency of each for the other, the radical inseparability of biological from psychical elements, the mutual dependence of the psychical and the biological, and thus the intimate connection between the question of sexual specificity (biological sexual differences) and psychical identity. (85)

What the concept of the body image bears witness to is that the physical change of one’s body is always interlinked with the mind because it has implications for one’s emotions, consciousness and thought. Therefore, it presents a challenge to a clearly defined division between mind and body.

In addition, Weiss and Gatens concur with Merleau-Ponty as to the communicative function of the ‘lived body.’ Weiss, for instance, quotes Schilder on body images, which “communicate with each other either in parts or as wholes” (33). She arrives at the assessment that human beings constantly interact with each other. A person’s lived body causes other bodies’ reactions and responses in a specific way. By way of illustration, one will respond to each of the following bodies differently: “a woman’s body, a Latina’s body, a mother’s body, a daughter’s body, a friend’s body,

⁶⁵ This strongly resonates with critical whiteness studies. Dyer stresses that “white people are not racially seen and named” (1).

an attractive body, an aging body, a Jewish body” (Weiss 1).⁶⁶ According to Weiss and Gatens, it is because the reactions to particular aspects of a lived body vary (such as gender) that the body image of this person in these situations differs, too. Different responses create different body images that are not separate but overlap. Gatens also recognizes this “social character of the imaginary body” (12) and the “intertwining system of bodies” (31) as she declares that “all human bodies are part of [a] system of exchange, identification and mimesis” (31). “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality,” Weiss explains “is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (5). If we take into consideration the way a body is emotionally invested, then lived bodily experience is necessarily marked by sex, gender, race and (dis)ability.⁶⁷ Feminist phenomenologists thus draw from the elements in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that are compatible with a feminist re-evaluation of lived experience.⁶⁸

1.5 The Embodiment of Gender

One of the issues new feminist materialisms and feminist phenomenology have addressed is the inscription of gender into bodies. Feminisms have long argued that gender is not inherent to bodies and certainly not biologically given. Pierre Bourdieu is probably best-known for having argued that social categories, such as gender, show in a person’s habitus, that is, in their “dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour” (Bourdieu 19). Social categories become incorporated and manifest in a person’s hexis; they show in visible physical differences, such as “one’s comportment, accent, manners and all other such visible markers of social standing” (Crossley 107). Crossley contends: “Social categories penetrate the flesh, manifesting as habitus and hexis” (6).

⁶⁶ This quote strongly resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of Intersectionality. For a comprehensive exposition of this concept, see her essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”

⁶⁷ Weiss also raises the issue of visibility: “For Merleau-Ponty . . . to develop a body image is to develop an image of my body as visible to others. There is no body image without this visibility of the body” (33).

⁶⁸ Lennon points out that “[a]ttention to body image/corporeal schemas opens the way for a crucial feminist move in relation to such phenomenological accounts: to suggest that it is such bodily schemas which serve to constitute us subjectively and socially *as* sexed, raced, (dis)abled, culturally and nationally positioned” (n.p., emphasis in original).

However, as Bettina Wuttig points out, Bourdieu does not specify the bodily prerequisites that make incorporation possible (Wuttig, “Der traumatisierte Körper” 357) and Crossley remarks that “Bourdieu’s account of hexis focuses very much upon the communicative function of such forms of comportment. It is important to note, however, that differences in bodily comportment are ‘lived’ too, with considerable consequences” (156-57). As Alcoff puts it:

Both race and sex are social kinds of entities in the sense that their meaning is constructed through culturally available concepts, values, and experiences. But to say that they are social is not to say that they are some kind of linguistic rather than physical thing or to imply that meanings are conceptual items pasted over physical items. They are most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status. Social identities cannot be adequately analysed without an attentiveness to the role of the body and of the body’s visible identity. (102)

Young has provided the most insightful analysis of how gender is lived and embodied. In her now classic essay “Throwing like a Girl,”⁶⁹ Young scrutinizes observations concerning the difference in bodily comportment between men and women: “[T]here is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular modalities of the structures and conditions of the body’s existence in the world” (31). She identifies differences in the throwing of a ball, in the gait, and in sitting postures. “Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl,” she notes, “but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl” (33). Furthermore, women often fail tasks that require coordinated strength, for instance, lifting a heavy parcel. While, previously, scholars put this down to differences in physical strength, Young argues that while there are differences in strength, the main reason for this imbalance is “the way each sex uses the body in approaching tasks” (33).

This also translates into women’s use of space. While there is objective space, available to both men and women, phenomenal/lived space refers to how this space is used, how the body moves within it. Here, again, a difference between men and women is discernible: “Feminine existence lives space as *enclosed* or confining, as

⁶⁹ I quote from Young’s collection of essays *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays*.

having a *dual* structure, and the woman experiences herself as *positioned* in space” (39, emphasis in original). Young draws on an experiment by Erik Erikson to illustrate her point, who found that “girls typically depicted indoor settings, with high walls and enclosures, while boys typically constructed outdoor scenes” when asked to construct an imagined movie out of toys (39). While Erikson’s interpretation is psychoanalytical, suggesting that the girls’ focus on inner space is a “projection of the enclosed space of their wombs and vaginas [and] boys depict ‘outer space’ as a projection of the phallus” (39-49), Young claims that “it is far more plausible to regard this as a reflection of the way members of each sex live and move their bodies in space” (40).

Women use their bodies differently from men and Young contends that women lack complete trust in their bodies; they lack trust that their bodies will be able to accomplish a specific task, which almost automatically results in failure (34).⁷⁰ However, Young identifies another reason for women not to put their bodies fully into a motion or task, which is the fear of getting hurt (34). Women, much more than men, focus attention on the movement or task at hand, at the same time that they concentrate on not getting hurt, so that they experience their bodies “as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of [their] aims” (34). She explains: “We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies” (34, emphasis in original). As a result, women frequently develop a “feeling of incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness” (34) in their bodily capacities, in short, they develop feelings of disempowerment.

It is in particular this self-consciousness which leads to a different use of their bodies. From early on, “[t]he girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her” (43). Moreover, Young

⁷⁰ It is important to note here that Young makes an effort not to generalize: “None of the observations that have been made thus far about the way women typically move and comport their bodies applies to all women all of the time. Nor do those women who manifest some aspect of this typicality do so in the same degree. There is no inherent, mysterious connection between these sorts of typical comportments and being a female person” (35).

specifically states that girls and women are not encouraged “to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys are to develop specific bodily skills” (43). This reflects in “a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement” which she acquires while she comes to understand that she is a girl (43). Women move differently for fear of attracting attention (gazes, stares) or for fear of physical advances by men. This is why women tend to make smaller movements and movements that require less space, Young suggests. In a sense, then, women feel doubly uncomfortable in their bodies.

Since women have to divide their attention between the task to be performed and how to bring their body to perform it as well as check their movements on the grounds that their bodies are being “*looked at*” (39, emphasis in original), they incorporate a view of their body as a thing:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. (44)

Even though the idea that women’s bodies are treated as a thing is not entirely novel (f.i. female slaves or Victorian marriage laws), Young points out that women incorporate this view of their bodies and as a consequence become limited in their movements. Young extends Bourdieu’s theory in that she emphasizes how cultural components leave bodily traces.

The reasons, then, for women’s difference in bodily motility do not lie in biology, but rather in culture:

The modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality . . . have their source, however, in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine essence. Rather, they have their source in the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society. . . . Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. (42)

What is more, Young suggests that the lack of bodily freedom and feeling of limited bodily agency translates into mental agency as well: “I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body’s capacity” (45). Young’s account thus stresses that female embodiment is firmly grounded in women’s objectified experience in the world. This has consequences for their lived bodies, which they experience as having limited agency and also reflect in their social life as they underestimate their cognitive abilities, refrain from certain job positions or other senior positions.

Wuttig, in her outstanding study, *Das Traumatisierte Subjekt*, equally argues that gender is embodied and leaves traces in bodies. However, she links the inscription of gender directly to trauma. Wuttig contends that the cultural construct ‘gender’ leaves traces in bodies; these traces form an inconspicuous coherence via traumatic dynamics and connections between somatic impulses, images, feelings and thoughts (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 275). These metonymic processes convey the impression of an authenticity of gender. As a result, individuals perceive coherent gender identity as a (painfully) felt entity; yet it remains an illusion. Coherent gender identity entails, time and again, both a socially required striving for authenticity and the suffering involved in failing to achieve this very authenticity (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 275). Wuttig draws on Ann Cvetkovich, who argues that “the normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as form of insidious trauma, which is effective precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem” (46).⁷¹ Hence, based on Judith Butler and Cvetkovich, Wuttig suggests that the need to assume one of two binary gender identities along with compulsory heterosexuality generates insidious

⁷¹ Cvetkovich, in turn, bases her arguments on Butler. In “Melancholy Gender,” for instance, Butler maintains that “[h]eterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, and these prohibitions take as one of their objects homosexual attachments, thereby forcing the loss of those attachments” (“Melancholy Gender” 137). According to Butler, everyone suffers a psychic wound – not only those who do not fit neatly into sex and gender categories (Wuttig, *Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 261). This psychic wound consists in an “unresolved grief” (“Melancholy Gender” 146) – Butler calls this, drawing on Sigmund Freud, melancholia. As she explains, “[i]f we accept the notion that the prohibition on homosexuality operates throughout a largely heterosexual culture as one of its defining operations, then the loss of homosexual objects and aims (not simply this person of the same gender, but any person of the same gender) would appear to be foreclosed from the start (“Melancholy Gender” 139). Accordingly, “[g]ender itself might be understood in part as the ‘acting out’ of unresolved grief” (“Melancholy Gender” 146).

trauma (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 260).⁷² Trauma functions as a type of mediator between external and internal processes as it turns bodies into genders. Out of the material ‘body,’ trauma produces gender (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 276).

1.6 Feminist Phenomenology and Racialization

Feminism has often been criticized for its lack of representation of the experiences of black and indigenous women.⁷³ In its origins, many indigenous feminists and feminists of colour have argued, feminism was a predominantly white, middle-class movement (Huhndorf and Suzack 2). And, as Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack contend: “To a certain extent, feminism, especially in academia, remains white-centered, despite the active involvement of women of colour in the second- and third-wave feminist movements” (2). As Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues in her study *Talkin’ up to the White Woman* (2000), “white feminist discourse on ‘difference’ continues to be underpinned by a deracialized but gendered universal object” (xviii). The naturalization of whiteness via white feminisms thus remains a pertinent problem within feminism and actively contributes to the oppression of women of colour. Adrienne Rich has commented: “Marginalized though we have been as women, as white and Western makers of theory, we also marginalize others because our lived experience is thoughtlessly white, because even our ‘women’s cultures’ are rooted in some Western tradition” (“Notes” 374-75).

Likewise, several indigenous writers have raised concerns of an incompatibility between feminism and aboriginal or indigenous activism. “Aboriginal women cannot fit neatly into the feminists’ conceptions of human nature,” as Grace J.M.W. Ouellette explains, “because of different cultural values and beliefs, in other

⁷² Many feminists, especially lesbian feminists, have challenged normative heterosexuality. Both Monique Wittig’s and Adrienne Rich’s work is a case in point. Monique Wittig has famously written about compulsory heterosexuality and argued that “[t]he discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality” (24). Likewise, in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” (1980) Rich declares: “The assumption that . . . for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and ‘innately’ heterosexual” (322).

⁷³ From the very beginning of the women’s rights movement, black feminists such as Sojourner Truth have challenged the whiteness of the movement. Later, bell hooks, in publications such as *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), addressed the marginalization of black women within the feminist movement. Yet, even in the age of #MeToo the exclusion of black women as well as a continuing white bias remain irrefutable problems.

words, because of conflicting worldviews” (26). Joyce Green makes a similar point: “feminist analysis is widely considered to be divisive, corrosive of family and community, culturally inappropriate and even colonialist” (25),⁷⁴ which is why it is sometimes rejected by indigenous women. The roles of mother and caregiver in particular are for many indigenous women at odds with a feminist commitment. Ouelette elucidates:

Motherhood is an important concept in Aboriginal thought and is inherent in the Circle of Life philosophy. It is the women’s qualities that form the foundation of this belief. A woman gives and supports life through nurturing. She is important for the continuance of future generations . . . A woman’s role as childbearer, nurturer and custodian is perceived as central to survival. (90)

Feminist phenomenology, too, has to face up to this criticism, as it could be said to emanate from a predominantly white and U.S.- and Eurocentric standpoint. However, the interrogation of different gendered, racialized or classed subject positions, which are brought about by one’s unique position in the world, are indispensable to feminist phenomenological analyses. Aside from gender, feminist phenomenologists actively raise concerns concerning racialization. Alcoff stresses that “the experience of embodiment is in important respects a racialized and gender-differentiated experience” (103), undermining Merleau-Ponty’s and other phenomenologists disregard of gender and racialization. However, she also draws attention to the benefits of a phenomenological approach because it “can render our tacit knowledge about racial embodiment explicit” (185).

According to Alcoff, race and gender are the most prominent factors shaping individuals and their life-choices. She explains that the difference between gender and race, and class and nationality as embodied identities lies for the most part in their visibility and the fact that class and nationality are “more easily alterable” and their “physical effects can often be overcome” (86). What differentiates race and gender – and I would add certain disabilities – from other identity categories is their operation as “visible marks on the body” (86).⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Huhndorf and Suzack also comment: “Indigenous feminism frequently elicits accusations that it fractures communities and undermines more pressing struggles for Indigenous autonomy” (2).

⁷⁵ To be sure, intersex, transgender and mixed-race individuals put visible marks of gender and race into doubt. This results in insecurity, anxiety and, I would add, outright hostility in other people. “The truth of one’s gender and race,” Alcoff contends, “are widely thought to be visibly manifest, and if

Furthermore, concerning the incompatibility of different roles, feminist phenomenology can be productive for indigenous feminists because it does not reject roles as mother or caregiver and, instead, challenges normative discourses that portray these as naturalized and eternal. For instance, Young suggests conceiving of pregnancy and childbirth less as a process of producing a baby and more “as a way of being-in-the-world with uniquely interesting characteristics” (10), thus making room for discussions of motherhood. I would argue that more than any other feminist strand, feminist phenomenology is able to reconcile roles that are seemingly opposed and can thus support indigenous studies.

Admittedly, feminist phenomenologists have taken different approaches to the question of racialization. Weiss undertakes a reading of Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the embodiment of race, entitled “Racial Epidermal Schemas and White Male/Masculine Body Image Ideals” (26-33),⁷⁶ whereas Alcoff and Sara Ahmed bring whiteness into focus. Weiss shows that Fanon develops “his own understanding of the racialized body image” based on phenomenological and psychoanalytic analyses; yet, “he too, quite explicitly focuses on the situation of the male, the colonized black man in particular, leaving the unique situation of black women almost entirely out of account” (28). This is why in the following I will concentrate on Alcoff’s and Ahmed’s observations.

While I do not have the space to elaborate on their ideas here, as this study is primarily concerned with the embodying of gender, I would nevertheless like to comment briefly on important points these two authors make. Alcoff is incisive in her

there is no visible manifestation of one’s declared racial or gendered identity, one encounters an insistent scepticism and an anxiety” (7).

⁷⁶ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon’s feelings of inferiority are expressed in phenomenological terms: “I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (109) and “[i]n the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body . . . is a third-person consciousness” (110). Not only does Fanon consider his body the objective body in the Merleau-Pontian sense and consequently, his whole being is objectified – for ‘I am my body,’ according to Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology* 205) – but he also shows that he cannot develop his bodily schema satisfyingly because of this ‘third-person’ view of his body. He later explains that “[b]elow the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema . . . Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (111; 112). As a consequence, “[m]y blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me” (117). Fanon’s skin colour is inevitably connected to his body, his perception of it and consequently his entire self. Thus, Weiss contends, “as Fanon shows in his discussion of the historico-racial schema that underlies the body image, there is no way one’s blackness can be separated from one’s corporeality” (32).

analysis of gender *and* race and does not merely focus on the racialization of black or Latino/a bodies but specifically addresses whiteness as a racial category. According to Alcoff, gender and race are essential to one's embodiment:

Social identities may be relational, then, as well as contextually variable, but they remain fundamental to one's experience of the world and to the development of one's capacities. One's racial and gender identity is fundamental to one's social and familial interactions. It contributes to one's perspective on events – to one's interpretation of conversations, media reports, and social theories – and it determines in large part one's status within the community and the way in which a great deal of what one says and does is interpreted by others. Thus, our 'visible' and acknowledged identity affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience or subjectivity. If social identities such as race and gender are fundamental in this way to one's experiences, then it only makes sense to say that they are fundamental to the self. (92)

As she later remarks, the reasons for the pervasiveness of these visible identities is connected to the body: “[R]ace and gender consciousness produces habitual bodily mannerisms that feel natural and become unconscious after long use; they are thus very difficult to change” (108). This does not only apply to racialized bodies, however. Whiteness, too, is embodied, as Alcoff stresses. It exacts certain responses by people – often connected to a privileged position – and these responses feed back into the individual's view of herself.

In “Phenomenology of Whiteness,” Sara Ahmed also addresses whiteness and white privilege. Whiteness, she notes “could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (150). Taking up space has repercussions for white people who are both privileged in their access to particular spaces and the space awarded to them. This, in turn, results in limited space and access to certain spaces for racialized individuals. Ultimately, Ahmed argues, phenomenology “helps us to show how whiteness is an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies ‘can do’” (150).

1.7 The Grotesque Aesthetic

As numerous exhibitions in the past two decades attests to there is a continuing interest in the grotesque: “Grotesque!” (2003) at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the 2004-2005 exhibition *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque* at the SITE

Santa Fe, and *The Grotesque Factor* 2012-2013 at the Museo Picasso Málaga, to name but a few exhibitions. Aside from exhibitions, there have been ground-breaking publications in the field, such as Connelly's *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (2012).⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the interest in the grotesque in literature is not to be underestimated, either. Duggan's *The Grotesque in Contemporary British Fiction* (2013), Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund's *Grotesque* (2013), and *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* by Ondřej Pilný (2016) all speak to the continuing interest and the need to scrutinize the term and aesthetic.

As is often the case with literary motifs or genres,⁷⁸ the grotesque defies easy categorization or definition (Duggan 11; Connelly, *Modern Art* 2). Sometimes it is used to refer to artists' particular styles, for instance the style of painters such as Brueghel or Goya or writers such as Rabelais, Dickens, Swift, Hoffman, or Poe. Entire artistic movements are characterized by their use of the grotesque, most notably surrealism. Greek and Latin mythological figures, most notably the Hydra, sphinxes, satyrs, griffins, minotaurs, centaurs and mermaids are strongly associated with the grotesque. In addition, there are innumerable examples of grotesque figures in modern day popular culture (e.g. Homer in *The Simpsons* or some comic book heroes and heroines). Last but not least, surprising or incongruent situations can be grotesque.

While the grotesque is a slippery and ambiguous term, there are nevertheless some discernible trends when it comes to defining it. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and contemporary uses, the noun 'grotesque' can describe either a "very ugly or comically distorted figure or image" or "[a] style of decorative painting or sculpture consisting of the interweaving of human and animal forms with flowers and foliage." The first use derives from the second and goes back to the origin of the term. The term "grotesque" was first used to describe paintings that had been rediscovered at the end of the fifteenth century in Rome underground the *Domus Aurea* (also

⁷⁷ As the title suggests, Connelly's study is firmly grounded in art history and provides indispensable discussions of the theoretical background and insights into the discourse on the term.

⁷⁸ Bakhtin identifies grotesque realism as a genre (*Rabelais* 20), and Harold Bloom suggests it is a trope (xi), whereas both Margot Northey and McWilliam identify it as an aesthetic.

known as a pleasure house) of the emperor Nero.⁷⁹ These ornamental paintings were called “grotteschi” because they were found in what were then underground chambers, so-called “grotte” or “grottoes.”⁸⁰ The word “grotto” (feminine in Italian, “grotta”) derives from the Greek and Latin word for ‘crypt,’ describing something hidden. What was so remarkable about these paintings was that they presented rather unusual figures at a time when realism, seriousness and high style were the norm: they were intricate fusions of human, animal and vegetable forms. These figures were fantastical and appealed to the senses, they “were painted in a light and playful manner” (Riccardi-Cubitt 699), and hence they presented a stark contrast to sober Roman architecture and sculpture. Wanting to escape classical themes, some of the best-known Renaissance artists, such as Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer, drew heavily on grotesque motifs.

In the seventh book of his *De architectura*, Vitruvius ardently criticizes the grotesque:

We now have fresco paintings of monstrosities, rather than truthful representations of definite things. For instance, reeds are put in the place of columns, fluted appendages with curly leaves and volutes, instead of pediments, candelabra supporting representations of shrines, and on top of their pediments numerous tender stalks and volutes growing up from the roots and having human figures senselessly seated upon them; sometimes stalks having only half-length figures, some with human heads, others with the heads of animals.

. . . Such things do not exist and cannot exist and never have existed . . . Yet when people see these frauds, they find no fault with them but on the contrary are delighted, and do not care whether any of them can exist or not. (211)

While Vitruvius’s criticism has much to do with his desire for artistic works to be authentic and realistic, it is nevertheless revealing because it demonstrates that it is the combination of disparate elements that characterizes the grotesque. Moreover, other “people,” that is viewers, find these paintings “delightful,” which hints at a

⁷⁹ For a historical overview of grotesque art, literature, and criticism see Frances K. Barasch and Pimentel Biscaia and in particular Connelly’s entry on the “Grotesque” in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (2014).

⁸⁰ The name of these paintings does not make reference to their characteristics, however, which for some art historians results in the term being “problematic” as we are dealing with a misconception (Summers 5). Geoffrey Galt Harpham, too, recognizes this incongruity without considering it a misconception: “[T]his naming is a mistake pregnant with truth, for although the designs were never intended to be underground, nor Nero’s palace a grotto, the word is perfect . . . *Grotesque*, then, gathers into itself suggestions of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy” (Harpham 27). Harpham, instead of recognizing a certain arbitrariness in the term and its functions, sees a connection between the origin of the word and its meaning.

comic function of the grotesque. John Ruskin, too, found much fault with certain types of the grotesque. Yet, his criticism is also productive in terms of defining or at least delineating the meaning of the grotesque. He also identified a combination of disparate elements, usually a comic and a fearful element, which leads to two types of grotesque, the “sportive” and the “terrible” grotesque (115). Yet, he argues that there is always some element of fearfulness or ludicrousness in both types, as this combination is crucial to the grotesque. Incidentally, this parallels a twentieth century definition of the grotesque as “*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*” (Thomson 27, emphasis in original).

Centuries of grotesque writing and criticism have not done away with the need to define it. Many authors have tried to find one coherent and universally applicable definition of the grotesque. As a result, the grotesque has mainly been divided into two categories:⁸¹ a humorous-physical grotesque connected to the carnivalesque and laughter, predominantly associated with Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais’s work and a rather threatening grotesque, which is associated with alienation, unease, horror or fear, often affiliated with Wolfgang Kayser’s study of the grotesque or Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.⁸²

However, more recently scholars have suggested that it might be more constructive to approach the grotesque not in terms of one single function, but in terms of its malleability. Noël Carroll, for instance, proposes a taxonomy of the different types of grotesques, which does not pin the term down to just one function. As he suggests, there exists a “*genus*” of the grotesque that can be identified “structurally,” and varying “*species*,” which can be classified “functionally” (N. Carroll 295, emphasis in original). The different types of the grotesque have structurally speaking something in common, namely that they all violate our

⁸¹ Both Russo and Pimentel Biscaia recognize these two types of grotesque. For Russo’s distinction between these two types of grotesque see her “Introduction” to *The Female Grotesque* and especially the section “Two Kinds of Grotesque: Carnival and the Uncanny.” For Pimentel Biscaia’s discussion of the same issue see pages 10-11 in her *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*.

⁸² Many scholars are also drawn to defining the grotesque only within one frame of reference. Northey maintains, for instance, that the grotesque is a “mode of the gothic” and that “[a]lthough ... associated at times with comic exaggeration which is pure fun, the usual interpretation ... insists upon a horrifying or fearful aspect, linking it with the gothic” (7). While it is certainly true that the grotesque as part of the Gothic genre and in other contexts can take on a fearful or horrifying aspect, it is by no means the dominant or usual interpretation. There are at least as many instances of the comic grotesque as there are of the horrific.

“standing categories or concepts” as they are subversions of our “common expectations of the natural and ontological order” (N. Carroll 296). However, they can be distinguished structurally in terms of their specific function because these grotesques trigger different emotional reactions, such as mirth, fear, horror, etc.

Connelly, too, has proposed a definition or rather description of the grotesque for visual art, which is equally applicable to literature, and does not pin it down based on whether it gives rise to humour or fear. She notes that there are different “processes at work in the grotesque image, actions that are both destructive and constructive” (*Modern Art 2*) and that

[i]mages gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metaphoric. These grotesques are not exclusive of one another, and their range of expression runs from the wondrous to the monstrous to the ridiculous. (*Modern Art 2*)⁸³

Instead of prescribing its meaning, Connelly offers a definition of the grotesque that accounts for its different varieties based on what they do, rather than what they aim at.

1.8 Transcultural Feminist Grotesque

Having discussed the shift in feminist theorising from the body to embodiment and the origins of the grotesque, in this chapter I will attempt to give a working definition of what I understand as the transcultural feminist grotesque. The novels that are examined in this thesis all draw to varying degrees on grotesque imagery. While the ‘original’ understanding of the grotesque (established in art history) is relevant only to some novels, such as Carter’s or Melville’s, all four novels resonate strongly with a Bakhtinian understanding of the grotesque. Bakhtin’s central concepts can help elucidate some of the issues my primary texts raise in regard to the body. In the following paragraphs, I work out definitions of a feminist grotesque body based on Bakhtin’s conceptualizations. The four main characteristics of the grotesque body –

⁸³ Terms such as the fantastic, the Gothic, the sublime, the uncanny, the disgusting, the ridiculous, the monstrous, the abject or the freak are often used interchangeably with the grotesque or are employed to describe and define it. It is certainly the monstrous that is most often mentioned in discussions of the grotesque. Yet, as Pilný notes, “not everything that is monstrous is also grotesque” (4). Drawing on Barbara Creede’s work, I would like to suggest that the single-most important difference between the monstrous and the grotesque is their function. Whereas the monstrous primarily instils fear and is, according to Creede, connected to abjection, thus a rejection of bodily processes (Creede 9), the grotesque, from its very beginning in the underground vaults, is connected to laughter and mirth. The comic grotesque is life-affirming and embraces the body’s materiality.

its materiality, its transgressiveness, its ambivalence and its social aspect – help to clarify the conception of bodies that the novels in my corpus propose.

First, the four novels in my corpus portray characters who revel in their bodies and bodily processes. This is certainly one of the central themes in Bakhtin's grotesque realism in which the grotesque body constitutes the human body shown eating, drinking, defecating, having sex (*Rabelais* 18). Bakhtinian depictions of the human body tend to be predominantly exaggerated, magnified, and boundless in nature. On the one hand, this is meant to create humour. On the other hand, Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body constitutes criticism of the classical body. The grotesque body stands in stark contrast to the classical body, which is the individual, self-centred body (*Rabelais* 19) with fixed, pre-set limits, limits that are never exceeded.⁸⁴ Bodily fluids never enter or leave the classical body. In contrast to the classical body, the grotesque body is a body that transgresses and is transgressed. Thus, Bakhtin provides an indispensable conception of the body that contributes to a re-evaluation of corporality. This is immensely important in the discussion of my primary texts, for they emphasise the materiality of bodies, while at the same linking Bakhtinian thinking to new materialist feminisms.

Second, transcultural feminist grotesque novels depict bodies that do not end at their skins, but instead extend beyond apparent bodily limits. The Bakhtinian understanding of the body has a transgressive body at its center, a body that extends its limits. Grotesque bodies establishes connections to other human beings and their surroundings. The body in grotesque realism is limitless, it opens itself, or is open, to the outside world. The 'body' either gives something to the outside world, or receives something from it:

[T]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. (*Rabelais* 26)

⁸⁴ Duggan explains that Bakhtin "is referring to a modern canon of ideas about the body that is classical in structure and not Classical, i.e. ancient Greek or Roman" (21).

This is why in grotesque realism there is a strong emphasis on the major orifices: the mouth, the nose, the ears, the anus and genitals. The grotesque body represents “all the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed” (*Rabelais* 19). Hence, the body in grotesque realism, is, foremost, a social body (Jervis 18). For, as the human body is continually growing and renewed by food, drink, defecation, and sex, the social body is equally extending and revived by birth and death.

Grotesque realism stresses the social quality of bodies for they “could not be considered for themselves; they represented a material bodily whole and therefore transgressed the limits of their isolation” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 23). A grotesque body is not isolated, does not stand alone, but is in fact always connected to other bodies and its environment, and indeed shaped by it. It is a body that is connected to its outside world and is, thus, part of something bigger, part of a “cosmic” whole and “universal” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19). This is highly evocative of the feminist phenomenological concept of the body image, which situates the lived body at the intersection of nature and culture and accounts for the experience of one’s body, one’s emotional investment in one’s body, but also on context and other peoples’ reactions to a body. In connection to the phenomenological concept of the body image, then, Bakhtin’s social body helps to explain connections between characters and in particular a type of corporeal understanding in my primary texts, which cannot be explained using a Cartesian understanding of the body.

Third, transcultural feminist grotesque novels include ambivalent representations of bodies, either breaking boundaries between human or animal, male and female or individual human bodies. In Bakhtinian theorising, the embodiment of this idea can be found in Kerch’s “pregnant hags.”⁸⁵ The pregnant hags are figurines of females that, even though they should be infertile, are pregnant, and “laughing” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 25). Bakhtin explains:

It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (*Rabelais* 25-26)

⁸⁵ Bakhtin connects the combination of opposed, contradictory elements to the “archaic grotesque” (26), that is, the grotesque as found in the paintings in underground chambers.

These figurines express a combination of decay and deformation with a new beginning and fertility (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 25-26). For Bakhtin, this coming together of apparently irreconcilable elements is very positive, in fact “regenerating” (*Rabelais* 21). In the grotesque image, “we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 24). It evidently reflects the life circle, the unfinished-ness of life and the impossibility of complete closure.⁸⁶ Needless to say, the underlying symbolism in grotesque realism is based on “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19). The combination of seemingly opposed elements which Bakhtin addresses with this ambivalent body and which reflects new materialist feminist and feminist phenomenological concerns is central to my corpus in which several seemingly incompatible elements are combined such as body and mind, human and animal, male and female, as well as brother and sister.

As Vice points out, Bakhtin himself did not consider the grotesque body as marked by gender, which is interpreted by many scholars as a transcendence of gender stereotypes. Hence, grotesque realism is understood as an “androgynous” or “gender-free” realm (Vice 171). Accordingly, Robert Stam argues that “[r]ather than privilege sexual difference *between* bodies, with the phallus as ultimate signifier, Bakhtin discerns difference *within* the body” (162, emphasis in original).⁸⁷ This, in fact, affiliates Bakhtin with new materialists who propose reading the body outside patriarchal notions of sex/gender, male/female.

Similar to feminist phenomenology, Bakhtin criticizes the ‘classical,’ idealized body and puts forward the grotesque body as an alternative. The grotesque body is understood as incomplete; it is a body that continually transgresses its boundaries; it thus undermines traditional conceptions of the body, especially an idealized male version. Moreover, in a footnote Bakhtin alludes to the embodied or lived aspect of the classical body:

⁸⁶ While Kayser has been criticized for defining the grotesque only in relation to horror and alienation, generally negative aspects, Bakhtin has equally been criticized for depicting the grotesque as solely positive and liberating.

⁸⁷ If we are to follow Stam’s reasoning, then Bakhtin is much closer to modern notions of sexuality, too: “Rather than envision sexuality exclusively as a ‘genital act,’ as a series of isolating close-ups of body parts, Bakhtin sees sexuality as a broad, multi-centered canvas . . . Sexuality per se is relativized and relationalized” (161).

Similar classical concepts of the body form the basis of the new canon of behavior. Good education demands: not to place the elbows on the table, to walk without protruding the shoulder blades or swinging the hips, to hold in the abdomen, to eat without loud chewing, not to snort and pant, to keep the mouth shut, etc.: in other words, to close up and limit the body's confines and to smooth the bulges. (*Rabelais* 322)

Far from being only an abstract idea, Bakhtin implies here that the classical body manifests corporeally; it shows in the behaviour, gait and posture of an individual. Here, Bakhtin comes very close to a modern understanding of embodiment and how social structures manifest by means of the body. As a result, Bakhtin's grotesque body can be read as mirroring the new feminist materialist criticism of a universal and standardized notion of 'the body' and favouring an understanding of the body as active, malleable, adaptable and lived. In short, Bakhtin is much closer to new materialist feminist understandings of embodiment than has previously been assumed.

The main characteristics of the grotesque body, its materiality, its transgressiveness, its ambivalence and its social aspect in connection to feminist phenomenology help to elucidate the version of bodies that the four novels propose. However, what remains problematic in Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body is its emphasis on representation. Thus, I propose extending Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body by putting emphasis on experiencing bodies, as this has proven to be a central concern in my corpus. Adding to the re-evaluation of matter, the transgressive, ambivalent and social body, I would like to suggest that transcultural feminist grotesque novels do not simply engage with grotesque bodies in terms of representation, but that they also pay attention to the lived experience of bodies. Transcultural feminist grotesque novels foreground perception, emotion and bodily feeling and thus further revise the prevalent conception of the grotesque body.

1.9 Feminist Grotesque Style

While the transcultural feminist grotesque novels I discuss in this thesis engage with similar issues on the level of content, such as questions of the productive materiality of bodies, transgressive, ambivalent and social bodies as well as questions of embodiment, there are also some discernible similarities on the level of stylistics these novels display. Thus, in this chapter, I would like to propose some stylistic characteristics of transcultural feminist grotesque novels. The three main

characteristics I have identified are anti-realist elements, polyphony and double-voiced discourse.

From the early grotesque paintings found at the end of the fifteenth century in Roman palaces to the gargantuan bodies that figured prominently in Rabelais's writing and thus shaped Bakhtin's further development of the meaning of the grotesque, the grotesque has had strong connections to the fantastic. These fantastic elements still figure prominently in writing that employs the mode of the grotesque today. However, while the genre of fantastic literature is often removed from the 'real' world or realist writing, i.e. set in an imaginary world or universe, transcultural feminist grotesque texts operate predominantly within realism, but include non-realist or anti-realist elements. The first point I would like to make about transcultural feminist grotesque novels is that they include anti-realist elements and some, in particular Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, are considered to include strong magical realist elements.⁸⁸ Yet, while there are pertinent similarities,⁸⁹ I consider magical realism in most contexts a genre of fiction or even literary movement,

⁸⁸ There is, unsurprisingly, disagreement as to what magical realism exactly is, and whether it should be called magic or magical realism. Some scholars consider it part of postmodernist fiction (Faris, D'haen); for others it constitutes an entirely separate form, and, in fact, a genre of fiction. It has also been identified as a postcolonial literary practice in essence (Slemon), whereas some critics insist on it being not exclusive to the postcolonial world (Delbaere-Garant), more of an "international commodity" (Faris 2). Several critics also reject such generalizing labels as 'magical realist writers.' Moreover, for many authors it constitutes a literary mode, for others it is akin to a movement in the Latin American context (Camayd-Freixas). Christopher Warnes has suggested that magical realism is "a kind of modified, expanded or subverted realism" (155). However, I adhere to a definition of magical realism which refers to a genre that employs an overall realist narrative with anti-realist, i.e. magical, fantastic or marvellous, elements. Within the narrative, these anti-realist elements are not experienced as such, but are accepted as realist, as common, everyday events within the stories and thus merge with the overall narrative. Another point of contention is whether these elements merge into each other and form a symbiosis with the realist elements, or whether they oppose each other, creating tension and representing a battle between these two fictional worlds (Slemon). See Alejo Carpentier's "On the Marvelous Real in America" (1949) and "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (1975), Roberto González Echevarría's "Isla a su Vuelo Fugitiva: Carpentier y el Realismo Mágico" (1974), Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse," Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995) and Warnes's *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (2009) for some of the major works of criticism.

⁸⁹ Jeanne Delbaere-Garant has suggested that grotesque realism is a subcategory or related genre of magical realism. In her discussion of magical realism, she defines grotesque realism as "a combination of North American tall tale, Latin American baroque, and Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque'" (256) and suggests "'grotesque realism' be used not just for popular oral discourse but also for any sort of hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion or interpenetration of different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal" (256). Aside from grotesque realism, Delbaere-Garant suggests two other related terms – psychic and mythic realism – in order to "leave more room for bordercases and help to situate any contemporary magic realist text, or part of a text, more accurately in a larger conceptual and terminological constellation" (256).

whereas the grotesque refers to an aesthetic or mode of writing. Accordingly, as a mode, the grotesque “is a way of thinking and speaking about contemporary reality” (Hollinger 139-40). What magical realism and the transcultural feminist grotesque certainly have in common is their questioning and even challenging of the mode of realism. Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris note in regard to magical realism:

An essential difference, then, between realism and magical realism involves the intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two modes . . . realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities – in short, that realism functions ideologically and hegemonically. Magical realism also functions ideologically but . . . less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity. (3)⁹⁰

Accordingly, the anti-realist elements in the transcultural feminist grotesque novels provide a comment on precisely the realist elements and thus contribute to a questioning both of the mode of realism and of the ‘real’ consequences of some forms of gendered violence represented in the novels.

Second, transcultural feminist grotesque texts are polyphonic. Several scholars have discerned parallels between Bakhtin’s theorizations of carnival and the grotesque body and his explorations of heteroglossia and polyphony. Pimentel Biscaia observes that there exists an “intimate link joining together dialogism, polyphony, carnival and the grotesque” (41). Vice suggests that “the truly grotesque body is that of the text itself” (176).⁹¹ A grotesque text is “abundant, substantial, voluminous and rich in . . . verbiage,” it is “not a sleek, classical text placed on a pedestal but one with multiple protuberances and buds” (Vice 176). In addition, a grotesque text is “dialogic” and makes (extensive) use of irony (Vice 176). Bakhtin himself pointed out that it is not possible to separate content from style, arguing that “[f]orm and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (“Discourse” 259). It is not surprising, then, that what happens on the level of content, namely the representation of grotesque bodies, is paralleled in the style of a text.

⁹⁰ Linden Peach makes a similar point: “Social realist fiction ‘naturalises’ what it portrays so that we trust what we are reading. Non-realist fiction distances, or even alienates, us so that we are disturbed, puzzled, confused and possibly critical of what we are reading” (6).

⁹¹ Even though Vice refers to another novel in her analysis, *Life-Size* by Jenefer Shute, her observations are equally applicable to *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* and the other novels in my corpus.

Polyphony refers to ‘multi-voicedness,’ an “autonomy of the characters’ voices” (Vice 112). The term originates in music, where it describes the “style of simultaneously combining a number of parts, each forming an individual melody and harmonizing with each other.” Bakhtin claims that it was Dostoevsky who created the polyphonic novel and that it is another device that creates heteroglossia in the novel.⁹² In Dostoevsky’s and in fact, all properly polyphonic novels, the author and the characters, including the narrator, are on the same level; the author is not superior in regard to a character or the characters in general and is a “participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself the final word” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 72).⁹³ According to Vice, “[t]he equality of voices in the polyphonic novel is realized dialogically, as being on the same plane means they can hear and respond to each other” (56).⁹⁴ I would also like to suggest that polyphony and the texts’ high ambiguity on the level of narration are related. The novels often include unreliable narrators, the focalization is difficult to pin down, and they hamper with the readers’ attempts to mark the narrator as homodiegetic or heterodiegetic. Likewise, these texts undermine distinctions between covert and overt narrators.

Third, transcultural feminist grotesque novels employ what Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse,⁹⁵ that is, the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance

⁹² Heteroglossia refers to the mixing of different linguistic varieties, or as Vice describes it, ‘multi-linguagedness’ (113). Vice describes heteroglossia [raznorečie, raznorečivost] as “differentiated speech” (18). Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is very similar to sociolinguistic notions of language, which, at the time of writing, were “unavailable” to him (Vice 18). Moreover, in his understanding of heteroglot languages, words do not have one fixed meaning, but their meaning changes depending on the context (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 293), similar to notions of contextual meaning in pragmatics.

⁹³ In *Introducing Bakhtin*, Vice explains that “[w]here Bakhtin . . . says ‘author’, it is often clearer to replace this with ‘narrator’ (126). According to Vice, for Bakhtin, the ‘author’ does not refer to the actual, real, historical person but rather to the literary work as a whole. In contrast to this, the ‘narrator’ is “an identifiable voice in the text” (Vice 145).

⁹⁴ While Bakhtin himself uses the term ‘dialogism’ ambiguously, to refer both to linguistic as well as novelistic dialogue, in the context of the latter it is thought to describe “double-voicedness.”

⁹⁵ Bakhtin also distinguishes between the different types of discourse in the novel. The first is direct discourse, which is “directed exclusively toward its referential object” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 199), meaning that it is directed at the object or subject matter at hand. This discourse is usually authorial discourse as its function is to describe, name, inform, express, represent. The second type is represented or objectified discourse, which predominantly takes the form of the direct speech of characters (Bakhtin, *PDP* 186). Objectified here means that it is the object of authorial understanding (Morris 102). This type of discourse has direct referential meaning, too, but is not on the same level as the author’s; it retains a certain degree of distance, for it is understood as someone else’s discourse. Both the first and the second type of discourse are regarded as single-voiced because they stand for one “voice,” one intention and ultimately one consciousness (Bakhtin, *PDP* 189). The third type of discourse is double-voiced discourse. Sometimes the boundaries between these types are not easily drawn as Bakhtin points out that at its “outer limit” one type can transform into another (*PDP* 198).

(Vice 45), often with the result of creating humour and irony.⁹⁶ Double-voiced discourse “incorporat[es] a relationship to someone else’s utterance as an indispensable element” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 186). Bakhtin refers to three main varieties of double-voiced discourse. The first variety of double-voiced discourse refers to instances in which two voices exist alongside each other, without creating any tensions or contradictions. Types of this variety are stylization, first-person narrations, and stories narrated other than by the author.

Parody and irony fall into the second variety of double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, *PDP* 199). In these cases, however, “[d]iscourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 193). The two voices or discourses do not merely exist alongside each other but actually oppose each other and clash. As a consequence, the original intention and meaning is transformed. In the first two varieties discourse is “a passive tool in the hands of the author wielding it” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 197). The third variety, which Bakhtin describes as the “active type” (*PDP* 199), differs from the first two in that the author does not use someone else’s words but that his/her discourse is affected instead: “the other’s words actively influence the author’s speech, forcing it to alter itself accordingly under their influence and initiative” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 197). Bakhtin refers to internally polemical discourse and “word[s] with a sideward glance at someone else’s hostile word” (Bakhtin, *PDP* 196) in this context. All in all, in my analyses of the four novels I will pay attention to their use of anti-realist elements, polyphony and double-voiced discourse.

⁹⁶ Humour is particularly important because laughter affirms the connection between mind and body. Laughter in grotesque realism “degrades and materializes” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 20). As a consequence, it is connected to the body and does not purely serve mental or intellectual purposes. As has been shown recently, laughter is both an intellectual and a physical phenomenon. For Plessner laughter unmasks “the essence of the *conditio humana*, which consists in the fact that human beings not only have a body, but at the very same time also are a body” (qtd. in Horlacher 24, emphasis in original). When laughing, the body takes control and “counteracts the instrumentalization and subjugation it suffers in daily life” (Horlacher 41). Thus, laughter should be treated as an expression of the interconnectedness between mind and body and, ultimately, as an expression of the embodied nature of human life.

2. Body Knowledge in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

“Sometimes men put women in men’s novels but they leave out some of the parts: the heads, for instance, or the hands.”

(Atwood, “Women’s Novels” n. pag.)

Marian, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (*EW*), leads a seemingly ‘normal’ life. She graduated from university, works in the office of a market research company, Seymour Surveys, where she revises questionnaires, shares an apartment with her roommate Ainsley and has a boyfriend, Peter. In some way or another, she bides her time until she can have what all her friends have settled for, namely family and children. For this is, ostensibly, what Marian desires. Her “abnormaly normal” (*EW* 211) life begins to change, however, when her body gets out of hand. Marian’s body starts behaving in unexpected, grotesque ways.⁹⁷ She starts crying without any apparent reason, involuntarily runs away from her boyfriend and friends, hides under a bed the night that Peter proposes to her, or inadvertently touches and kisses Duncan, a self-absorbed student whom she meets when conducting research for her company and who does not even like Marian very much (*EW* 188). Moreover, she develops an eating disorder.⁹⁸ First, she is unable to finish a steak. Then all kinds of meat become off-putting. Next, eggs come off her list of edibles, then carrots and other vegetables, and finally even rice pudding so that she is left with vitamin pills as her only source of nutrition. Marian’s body, then, is grotesque in its sheer unpredictability.

While most critics connect Marian’s eating disorder to the major themes in the novel, which are consumerism and the role of women as consumable objects, and Marian’s rejection of food to her identification with an object to be consumed, in this chapter I would like to suggest instead that the novel carves out the agentic role of

⁹⁷ Many of Atwood’s later texts are considered prime examples of the grotesque, such as her short story “Hairball” (1991) or her novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009).

⁹⁸ Elspeth Cameron argues that Atwood did not even know what anorexia nervosa was when she wrote the novel (45). Ellen McWilliams notes that Marian’s bodily reactions could also be read in terms of a hunger strike. However, as the author argues, “Marian’s case defies a number of the key motives and symptoms in either case” (69). I find the concept of anorexia more fitting in Marian’s case, for the disorder itself cannot only be considered in terms of a mental disorder, whereas a hunger strike is the result of a deliberate choice.

Marian's body.⁹⁹ Marian's anorexia is a form of agentic resistance to the inscription of gender. The novel presents Marian's body as matter that has agency, an agency that is not dependent on the mind. It is Marian's body that refuses the intake of food, which Marian – try as she might – cannot control. Thus, the novel undermines readings of anorexia as exercising control over one's body (with one's mind) and, accordingly, the related idea that eating disorders are merely psychological events,¹⁰⁰ which feeds back into discourses that blame anorexics for their 'disorder.'

However, the novel also provides a pertinent comment on the connection between gender and insidious trauma. According to Wuttig, gender and (insidious) trauma are intimately linked. She notes that the cultural construct 'gender' leaves traces in bodies; these traces form an inconspicuous coherence via traumatic dynamics and connections between somatic impulses, images, feelings and thoughts (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 275). Thus, Wuttig suggests that the need to assume one of two binary gender identities along with compulsory heterosexuality generates insidious trauma (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 260). In Marian's case, insidious trauma surfaces in the form of her bodily comportment and eating disorder. Marian's anorexia can be interpreted as a symptom of the insidious trauma she suffers as a result of having to fit into a feminine gender ideal, yet never being able to reach this ideal. Reading Marian's anorexia as a form of agentic resistance to the inscription of gender and a manifestation of insidious trauma, extends previous analyses of the

⁹⁹ Commentators seem to mostly agree that *The Edible Woman* illustrates consumerism, in particular women "as passive objects for male consumption" (Bouson 65). Alice Palumbo, Nathalie Cooke and Margaret Griffith read the novel in terms of consumerism: Griffith contends that Marian "gradually withdraws from her role in the consumer plot by refusing to eat" (87). Palumbo goes even further in arguing that Marian develops anorexia as a result of rejecting the role of the consumer: "Marian's increasing identification with the object consumed (her over-identification as a victim) leads to her becoming a victim of her own body" (74). While I agree that consumerism is a dominant theme in the novel, especially the construction of women as consumable goods, Marian's anorexia cannot be interpreted solely in terms of consumerism. The notion of "victim of her own body" is also problematic as it reaffirms a mind/body dualism, which the novel clearly challenges. Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson makes a better point: "Marian's refusal to eat may be a cry for help, but it is a cry more that she herself needs to recognize than anyone outside her needs to hear. Indeed, it does not manifest itself into 'real' anorexia (a disease, in 1969, without the high profile it has today), but is, rather, a symbolic gesture of refusal to conform, even whilst apparently doing so" (28). I agree that Marian's anorexia is a cry for help directed at herself rather than at other people. It is in fact her subjectivity's cry for help expressed through her body.

¹⁰⁰ In fact, even the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an eating disorder as "[a]ny of a range of psychological disorders characterized by abnormal or disturbed eating habits (such as anorexia nervosa)." Elizabeth Wilson's research calls into question such definitions, for she refers to a correlation between bulimia and depression. Depression is nowadays not thought of as a purely mental problem either because it often goes hand in hand with bodily, chemical processes.

novel and demonstrates how deeply concerned it is with matters of corporeality and fleshliness and thus in many ways precedes the theoretical thinking of decades to come that did indeed contribute to a re-evaluation of matter. Thus, in the following analysis, I will concentrate on five aspects: first, the advertising and inscription of femininity, second, subversive materiality; third, the agentic body; fourth, a rejection of the mind, and, fifth, subversive thoughts.

2.1 “Every woman should have at least one baby:” The Advertising of Femininity

While one of the central themes in *The Edible Woman* is the role of women as products of consumption, the novel also exemplifies how gender is memorized, that is, how gender is memorized and thus internalised bodily. This illustrates the point that Alcoff makes that “[r]acial and sexual difference is manifest precisely in bodily comportment, in habit, feeling, and perceptual orientation” (126). Marian is constantly confronted with idealized versions of femininity and masculinity, which leave permanent traces in her subjectivity. And it is in particular via other women that Marian learns what femininity entails. The novel illustrates how consumerism and especially advertisements leave a trace on subjects. The beer advertisement for which Marian has to run a pre-test at the beginning of the novel depicts clichéd masculinity, with its references to a “real man” on a “real man’s holiday” who drinks beer while going hunting, fishing or “old-fashioned relaxing,” and generates associations of masculinity with “wilderness,” ‘tanginess,’ and ‘sturdiness.’ Equally, Marian sees an advertisement on the bus of “a young woman with three pairs of legs skipping about in her girdle” (*EW* 95). Marian admits that she is, “against her will,” “scandalized” by advertisements such as these.

Aside from these obvious advertisements, Marian is confronted with gender identities in her work and private life. At Seymour Surveys, the company she works for, gender hierarchies are clear: there are the “men upstairs, since they are all men,” below Marian’s department are “the machines” (where women work, albeit in a much lower position) and in the middle, the “link between the two,” taking care of the “human element” (*EW* 18) – in an ironic hint to women’s supposedly superior emotional intelligence – is Marian’s department, which is comprised of “housewives

working in their spare time and paid by the piece” (*EW* 18). Marian states that “[t]hey don’t make much, but they like to get out of the house” (*EW* 18), thus implying that being a housewife and mother might not be as entirely fulfilling as dominant narratives would have it. Needless to say, the men upstairs “have carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of Group of Seven paintings on the walls” (*EW* 18), a clear indicator of their higher status but also of the fact that status is represented by means of material objects in capitalist societies. There is a strict separation between the men and the “motherly-looking women” (*EW* 18) and the office parties used to be mixed but were separated, too, “in the interests of allover office morale” when “parties started to get out of hand” (*TEW* 167). Incidentally, the washroom in Marian’s department is “pink” (*EW* 19), as if to remind women of their colour preferences, and thus their position, *as* women. Marian is aware that there is not much choice for a woman within the company, as this is not simply a spatial separation but in fact a categorical one: “What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymore Surveys? I couldn’t become one of the men upstairs” (*EW* 19). On the one hand, this is Marian’s realization that she cannot acquire the same status as men have. On the other hand, however, this also connotes that the men’s status is linked to their corporeality. It is impossible to turn into one of these men, simply because Marian does not have the necessary biological setup, or does not seemingly have the necessary biological setup.

The colleagues Marian is closest to, the so-called “office virgins,” also ‘advertise’ femininity:

They aren’t really very much alike, except that they are all artificial blondes – Emmy, the typist, whisk-tinted and straggly; Lucy, who has a kind of public-relations job, platinum and elegantly coiffured, and Millie, Mrs. Bogue’s Australian assistant, brassy from the sun and cropped – and, as they have confessed at various times over coffee-grounds and the gnawed crusts of toasted Danishes, all virgins – Millie from a solid girl-guide practicality (“I think in the long run it’s better to wait until you’re married, don’t you? Less bother.”), Lucy from social quailing (“What would people *say*?”), which seems to be rooted in a conviction that all bedrooms are wired for sound, with society gathered at the other end tuning its earphones; and Emmy, who is the office hypochondriac, from the belief that it would make her sick, which it probably would. They are all interested in travelling: Millie has lived in England, Lucy has been twice to New York, and Emmy wants to go to Florida. After they have travelled enough they would like to get married and settle down. (*EW* 20-21, emphasis in original)

While there are, on the surface, differences between these young women, prompting Marian to say that they “aren’t really very much alike,” her descriptions of them and their goals show how alike they in fact are. They are all blond – implying that they all strive to fulfil the ideal of western feminine beauty – they are all virgins; they share an interest in travelling and their ultimate goal in life is the same: getting married and settling down. The ironic tone of this episode suggests that Marian is aware of their similarity, for in fact, in spite of superficial differences, all three represent femininity, albeit slightly different versions of it.

Moreover, the performances of femininity by women who are close to Marian, such as Clara and Ainsley, are even more insidious than sexist advertisements or the setup of the company. Even though Ainsley seems to be a type of ‘man eater’ or at least sexually progressive (*EW* 22), she conforms to the feminine ideal because she firmly believes that having a child will complete her and make her a ‘proper’ woman:

‘Every woman should have at least one baby.’ She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. ‘It’s even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity.’ (*EW* 40)

The reference to an advertisement on the radio is a comment on the insidiousness and naturalization of cultural notions of gender, especially as regards motherhood. In the same way that some products are being advertised, feminine roles are also being ‘advertised’ by other women. Marian’s friend Clara also represents traditional feminine gender: in school she was “everyone’s ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity” (*EW* 35), exempt from physical education because so thin and fragile. She married Joe and gave up her studies to be a mother.

Marian, even though aware of many of the constricting and manipulative mechanisms at play in real advertisements and her social circles, conforms to femininity and her prescribed heterosexual role. In line with traditional female gender roles and the traditional romance plot (Bouson),¹⁰¹ she is in a relationship with a man and plans a life with him, which entails marriage and children. At the start of the novel, Marian is presented as compliant with her roommate, at work and her relationship with Peter. When a senior colleague encourages her to sign a pension

¹⁰¹ Bouson reads *The Edible Woman* alongside the traditional romance formula and shows how it upsets the traditional plot.

plan, which she does not want to sign, she does so nevertheless because she does not want to offend: “I signed it, but after Mrs. Grot had left I was suddenly quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have” (*EW* 19). Marian is careful not to displease her landlady, which is why she cleans up after her roommate Ainsley. In her dealings with her roommate, she also simply accepts facts such as splitting the costs for alcohol which Ainsley consumes on her own.

Above all, Marian’s submissiveness comes to the fore in her relationship with Peter. Marian represses her real thoughts and comments (*EW* 64) and watches her tone when speaking with Peter (*EW* 116). Marian cooks for Peter because “he is made irritable by errands” (*EW* 57). At the beginning of the novel, she has sex with him in the bathtub, even though it is “too small and uncomfortably hard and ridged” (*EW* 60). However, she does not object because she feels she “should be sympathetic” as one of his friends is getting married, making him the only bachelor of his group of friends, which leads to his moodiness. However, when Peter asks her how she liked their sex, she thinks to herself “[r]otten” (*EW* 63). In addition, Marian increasingly allows Peter to take decisions for her: “He could make that kind of decision so effortlessly. She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her . . . Peter could make up their minds right away” (*EW* 150). Moreover, Marian frequently thinks about what Peter would like: “‘Peter will probably like it. Anyway,’ she reflected, ‘it will go with the dress’” (*EW* 216). She even tries to convince herself that Peter, his life and his friends are more important than her own life and friends: “Clara and Joe were from her past, and Peter shouldn’t be expected to adjust to her past; it was the future that mattered” (*EW* 185). Elspeth Cameron argues that Marian is afraid of turning into an old maid (52), which is why she does not show more resistance. Yet, things are more complicated. Marian embodies the notions and conceptions of femininity. She has internalized the bodily mannerisms, the behaviours and ideas that are part of her gender identity, which is why it is so difficult for her to actively resist.

In addition to being confronted with different kinds of femininities, Marian is also confronted with the female body as inherently grotesque. It is in Marian’s

thoughts at the office party that the connection between the grotesque and the female body is established and problematized.¹⁰²

She looked around the room at all the women there, at the mouths opening and shutting, to talk or to eat . . . They could have been wearing housecoats and curlers. As it was, they all wore dresses for the mature figure. They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay... (*EW* 171, ellipsis in original)

The description of these women's bodies as growing from stems, just as vines do, and their bodies as representative of the stage of growth they are in is highly reminiscent of the original meaning of the grotesque as "[a] style of decorative painting or sculpture consisting of the interweaving of human and animal forms with flowers and foliage" (*OED*) because they are figures that combine human and vegetal elements. The stages these fruits are in, i.e. these bodies are in, ripe, overripe, shrivelling, some even decaying, resonate negatively not in a grotesque sense, however, but rather in a cultural sense, for these are fruits that cannot be sold anymore, they are inadequate for the market. Hence, women who are overripe, 'mature,' which is to say, old or older cannot be 'consumed'¹⁰³ anymore, cannot be put on offer. Here, the text establishes a clear analogy between women and consumer goods. Incidentally, the only way these women can be saved from this 'fate,' saved from the humiliation of not being consumable anymore is, ostensibly, by marriage.¹⁰⁴

The novel reveals by way of Marian's observations the associations between the grotesque and the female body:

¹⁰² According to T. D. MacLulich, Marian has a grotesque, "distorted" point of view (MacLulich n.pag.).

¹⁰³ At the office Christmas party, Marian does *not feel* gluttonous by the food itself but is rather *made to feel* gluttonous by how it looks and by the sheer abundance and proliferation of it: "The loaded table made her feel gluttonous; all that abundance, all those meringues and icings and glazes, those coagulations of fats and sweets, that proliferation of rich glossy food" (169). Taste is not addressed but rather sight. Food stands in for material goods, glossy, pretty material goods; it represents consumerism. Just as food becomes a matter of consumerism and capitalism – instead of a 'simple' alimentary supply – so do women come to occupy consumerist roles, both as consumers and as products to be consumed. It is the women Marian describes who are the main consumers when it comes to anything household- or family-related. A case in point is the demonstration of a grater with an apple-coring attachment in a department store, which Marian passes. The viewers of this demonstration are all female. Moreover, these women represent "lower-middle income domesticity" (217).

¹⁰⁴ Gayle Rubin makes a similar argument, albeit more elaborate, in her essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975). To be precise, women can have 'meaning' outside of marriage, but it is limited to roles as prostitutes and other outcasts.

She examined the women's bodies with interest, critically, as though she had never seen them before. And in a way she hadn't, they had just been there like everything else, desks, telephones, chairs, in the space of the office: objects viewed as outline and surface only. But now she could see the roll of fat that pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge's back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases around the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly teacosy over those rounded shoulders; and the others too, similar in structure but with varying proportions and textures of bumpy permanents and dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones, without by a carapace of clothing and makeup. (*EW* 171)

Marian notices these bodies for the first time; previously, she had merely registered them as objects, as neutral, value-free containers. However, her awareness has changed and now she attaches social value to them. All of a sudden, she notices their unattractiveness, their lack of appeal.¹⁰⁵ All of a sudden, she has become aware of their social worth within the patriarchal system.¹⁰⁶ Marian has thus not only internalized ideas of femininity, which she applies to herself, but she also applies these idea(l)s to other women. Moreover, women's bodies are characterized by fluidity and volatility – the very opposite of the closed, finished, classical body. This is why their bodies have to be kept in check by clothing and makeup, or else they will 'spill over.' Marian further imagines these women as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense:

What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage... (*EW* 171-72)

This passage constitutes a prime example of the Bakhtinian grotesque because the contact with the outside world is emphasized: the grotesque body receives something from the outside world and it returns something to it, in this case excrement, etc. Bakhtin explains: "The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (*Rabelais* 26). Even though the quote from Atwood's novel might potentially refer to *all* bodies – with the possible exception of babies –

¹⁰⁵ Bouson argues that Marian "is both fascinated with and repulsed by" these bodies and that this derives from "matrophobia" (22).

¹⁰⁶ Here, Atwood makes clear that Bakhtin's grotesque "has both conceptual and historical ties to women" (Shapira 52).

the context makes this description applicable only to female bodies. What the text implies is that the female body has culturally been envisioned as grotesque, despite the fact that the grotesque in itself does not refer to a particular set of bodies. As Connelly suggests: “the grotesque is closely bound to the body and, consequently, to the feminine as it is constructed in Western culture” (*Grotesque* 2). All bodies are potentially grotesque, but it is the female body in patriarchal cultures that is *constructed as* grotesque, because it is the grotesque body that is uncontrollable and thus potentially dangerous. The following passage makes clear what is at stake for Marian:

For an instance she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be – or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. She drew a deep breath, clenching her body and her mind back into her self like some tactile sea-creature withdrawing its tentacles. (*EW* 172)

Once more, this is reminiscent of the grotesque body in its social dimension, “her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh” in the sense that the grotesque body is not “an individual body. . . ; it [is] the drama of the great generic body of the people, and for this generic body birth and death are not an absolute beginning and end but merely elements of continuous growth and renewal” (*Rabelais* 88). However, her negative feelings do not derive from picturing the grotesque body but rather from the ascription of femininity and her fear of becoming just like ‘these other women.’ It is the “flowered room” with a “sweet organic scent” and the “sargasso-sea of femininity” that produces a ‘choking’ and ‘suffocating’ in Marian. In short, it is femininity which confines and constrains and deprives her of her ‘self’ – and which ultimately leads to Marian’s anorexia. Marian is unable to evade it, she is, in fact, like these women. Her gender identity has already been ascribed to her: their identities and substance “pass over her head like a wave” (*EW* 172). Marian knows that she cannot escape her pre-defined gender identity – she cannot turn into a man – and she is thus meant to fail, for her body will turn into a grotesque body. The only way Marian thinks she can be ‘saved’ is by having “something solid, clear: a man” (*EW* 172).

2.2 “I let go of Peter’s arm and began to run:” Subversive Materiality

In spite of devoted and self-sacrificial enactments of femininity, there are moments when the text casts some doubt on Marian’s wholehearted compliance with her gender role. Even though Marian seems to conform to femininity and seems to have internalized it, she does not always act according to a pre-set feminine script. In fact, Marian’s bodily (re)actions are ‘incoherent’ at times and this suggests that she does not ascribe to femininity as unreservedly as it might look at first. In fact, Marian “[speaks] a kind of body language” (Bouson 21) with a strong subversive undertone. However, Marian’s grotesque or “incongruent” (*OED*) behaviour can also be interpreted as a response to the insidious trauma she suffers. Marian suffers insidious trauma because she has to fit into a feminine gender role; she has to live up to the ideal of the housewife, lover, mother, yet knows that this is an unreachable ideal. As Wuttig explains, coherent gender identity entails, time and again, both a socially required striving for authenticity and the suffering involved in failing to achieve this very authenticity (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 275). Marian’s bodily reactions, then, represent a form of resistance to both femininity and the inability to ever achieve the feminine ideal.

At the beginning of the novel, Marian and Peter go out to meet her friend Len, who had been abroad. Ainsley, who is looking for a suitable sperm-donor, joins them unexpectedly as she suspects that Len might be exactly the type of man she is looking for. During their get-together, Marian starts feeling uneasy and tries to will herself into self-control because she assumes that her reaction is related to the effects of alcohol (*EW* 70):

After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! (*EW* 71)

Marian’s bodily reactions and her feelings are disconnected in this episode. She has started crying without realizing it and she does not even understand the reasons for her reaction. She is taken by surprise and even shocked by what she is experiencing; she is uneasy instead of sad because she has lost control over her body. As soon as she realizes that she is crying, she goes to the bathroom where she spends several

minutes crying without access to her emotions: “I couldn’t understand what was happening, why I was doing this; I had never done anything like it before and it seemed to me absurd” (*EW* 71). The idea of absurdity of her reaction derives from an outward perspective she occupies in regard to her body. It is only absurd for an outsider who does not know where these emotions come from and who does not appreciate emotive reactions. Marian occupies exactly this outsider position for she does not have access to her lived body at this moment, she can only see her body and her reactions as other people do. At the same time, she knows that *she* is doing this; the implication being that her body makes her do it. Marian even chastises herself by saying “Get a grip on yourself” and “Don’t make a fool of yourself” (*EW* 71). She has internalized cultural values to such an extent that any sign of emotion is considered to be negative. Moreover, when she returns to the table, Len gives her “a quick peculiar look, as though he was disappointed with [her]” and Peter, she comes to realize, is treating her like a “stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline” because he depends on her (*EW* 72).¹⁰⁷

As a result, she has an immediate urge to escape this situation and when Marian and her friends have to leave the bar, her *body* in fact takes over and it starts running: “I let go of Peter’s arm and began to run. . . . I was running along the sidewalk. After the first minute I was surprised to find my feet moving, wondering how they had begun, but I didn’t stop” (*EW* 73). It is not a conscious decision Marian takes but rather a bodily reaction to her mental feeling of wanting to “get out” (*EW* 72). Needless to say, the others, and in particular Peter, stalk and capture Marian. According to J. Brooks Bouson, this is evidence of “the sexual hunt as a form of predation” (19).¹⁰⁸ As is to be expected, not only do Peter and Len physically capture Marian, but they also put her back into her place. Peter is noticeably annoyed with this “public” display (*EW* 73) and Len even suggests that Marian is the “hysterical type” (*EW* 75). As soon as a woman acts, in fact displays some agency, she is punished. Marian’s flight at the beginning of the novel is the first indication that her

¹⁰⁷ Because there have been a number of analyses of the figure of Peter and his function (Bouson f.e.), I will limit myself to some selected passages for the sake of my argument. Bouson argues convincingly that Peter “embodies society’s repressive forces” (17).

¹⁰⁸ Marian’s flight can thus be read as an unconscious identification with the rabbit of Peter’s story (Bouson 19).

body plays an important role within the narrative and that her subjectivity relies as much on her body as it does on her mind.¹⁰⁹ Marian's escape is an indication that despite her mental conformity, her body does not conform.

Even so, Marian's attempted escape is not over. At Len's place, where the four, or rather Peter and Len, continue drinking and socializing, Marian hides between the bed and the wall:

I began to find something very attractive about the dark cool space between the bed and the wall.

It would be quiet down there, I thought; and less humid. . . .

A minute later I was wedged sideways between the bed and the wall, out of sight but not at all comfortable. This will never do, I thought; I'll have to go right underneath. . . . But the semi-darkness, tinted orange by the filter of the bedspread that curtained me on all four sides, and the coolness and the solitude were pleasant. (*EW* 77)

First, Marian has an urge to escape, then, she wants to literally disappear.¹¹⁰ Marian hides in a "dark cool space." She disappears into a place where there is no-one. "Though I was only two or three feet lower than the rest, I was thinking of the room as 'up there.' I myself was underground, I had dug myself a private burrow. I felt smug" (*EW* 77). When Marian disappears under the bed, her behaviour could be described as grotesque in the modern sense of the word: she behaves in a manner that is "[i]ncongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree" (compare absurd or hysterical), which shows in the others' reactions (*EW* 79) who treat her "like a sulking child who has locked itself in a cupboard and has to be coaxed" (*EW* 79). Furthermore, she is underground where it is dark, or almost dark – with an orange tint, alluding to dim light – and cool, which creates a sense of ease and even dominance. Thus, the burrow evokes the image of the rabbit and predation once more (Bouson). However, it also conjures the grotto; Marian quite literally creates her own grotto.

Finally, Marian realizes what has gotten her there, i.e. into her own, private grotto: her "prevailing emotion" is rage (*EW* 79). Rage is important, for it makes Marian act. According to Rowe, "anger remains the most unacceptable of emotions

¹⁰⁹ To be precise, many embodiment theoreticians argue that the mind is embodied, i.e. that the mind is not separate from the body.

¹¹⁰ This is later intensified in her anorexia, which might also be read as an attempt to diminish, to disappear.

for women” because, ultimately, similar to laughter, it is a “strategy of danger” (7). While the reader does not know what this rage is directed at – the reader assumes Peter – on the next page the reader learns that motivation is not central: “Once I was outside I felt considerably better. I had broken out; from what, or into what, I didn’t know. Though I wasn’t at all certain why I had been acting this way, I had at least acted. Some kind of decision had been made, something had been finished” (*EW* 80). Without grasping what exactly motivated her and what precisely she wants to free herself from, the very fact that she has done *something*, that her body has acted, creates a sense of agency in Marian.

In their ensuing fight, Peter accuses Marian of “rejecting [her] femininity” (*EW* 82), is “forgiving, understanding, a little patronizing” (*EW* 84) and proposes to her. His proposal can be read as an attempt to capture her in another way. Marian does not respond decidedly and consequently consents to marrying him indirectly. Neither does she retract the next day when she has a chance to (*EW* 90). Marian’s bodily reaction after his proposal, however, suggests that this is not what she wants. Her body “would not stop shivering” and she draws “back from him” (*TEW* 84). Moreover, the thunderstorm and the “tremendous electric blue flash” function as an ironic premonition in regard to their relationship.¹¹¹ What is most notable is Marian’s view of herself: “I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (*EW* 84).¹¹² Here, not so much the male gaze is at stake,¹¹³ but rather Marian’s body image. Body images “communicate with each other either in parts or as wholes” (Schilder qtd. in Weiss 33) and body images are impacted by other people’s reactions to them. In Peter’s eyes, Marian sees a diminished, distorted (“oval”) version of herself. In her relationship to Peter, then, Marian’s body image is diminished and distorted.

2.3 “Her body had cut itself off:” The Agentic Body

While the will of her body is only insinuated at first, it manifests in Marian’s relationship with Duncan and her eating disorder. Marian’s relationship with Duncan should be seen in the context of her body asserting itself. She meets him while

¹¹¹ Several critics point to the Gothic elements in *TEW* (f.i. Bouson).

¹¹² The prevalence of eyes and reflections in mirrors is also a defining feature of much of Angela Carter’s work.

¹¹³ Bouson explains this only in terms of the male gaze: “as the object of male desire, Marian is subjected to the male gaze which seeks to assimilate, and thus erase, the female self” (20).

conducting an interview for her company and runs into him unexpectedly several times afterwards. How she reacts in their encounters is revealing:

When we were outside the laundromat we turned, both at once so that we almost collided. We stood facing each other irresolutely for a minute; we both started to say something, and both stopped. Then, as though someone had pulled a switch, we dropped our laundry bags to the sidewalk and took a step forward. I found myself kissing him, or being kissed by him. I still don't know which. Apart from that taste, and an impression of thinness and dryness, . . . I can remember no sensation at all. (*EW* 103)

In this episode, as earlier, Marian's body takes over. Marian does not seem to take conscious decisions anymore. Instead, she simply acts. Yet, these actions, because they are unknown to Marian, do not produce any sensations, do not seem to give her joy. This also parodies the 'romantic' kiss which tends to be emotionally charged.

Furthermore, when, by coincidence, both Marian and Duncan are in the same cinema hall, she experiences the following: "[S]he noticed a peculiar sensation in her left hand. It wanted to reach across and touch him on the shoulder. Its will seemed independent of her own: surely she herself wanted nothing of the kind" (*EW* 128).¹¹⁴ It is interesting how Marian's thoughts seem to be completely opposed to her bodily movements and reactions. Her hand seems to have a will of its own and wants to act accordingly. Even though she suggests that she wants nothing of the kind, the "surely" turns this into a double-voiced remark, casting doubt on Marian's conscious decisions. This is also in line with Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson who notes that "Duncan acts as a foil for Marian, expressing her inexpressible desires" (27).

The agentic role of Marian's body is expressed most clearly in her eating disorder. Whereas Cameron argues that Marian is on a "self-imposed diet" (52), controls her intake of food (55) and strives for a thinner version of herself, I contend that the very opposite is the case. Contrary to the idea that women (and increasingly men) develop eating disorders because of conscious decisions that then get out of hand (mentally), Marian's eating disorder seems to be a purely physical decision, a bodily reaction. I argue that instead of her actions being governed by the mind, Marian's body displays an organic, somatic intentionality. It represents subversive and active materiality. However, as mentioned previously, her eating disorder is also a

¹¹⁴ As Pamela Bromberg observes, Marian's relationship with Duncan is defined by tactility, instead of the relationship to Peter which is characterized by sight (19).

reaction to the insidious trauma she experiences. This becomes all the more apparent because the phases which she passes through in the course of her eating disorder are linked to experiences in her life.

First, she is unable to eat meat and blames something outside of her. “Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, *not her mind certainly*” (*EW* 156, emphasis added). Initially, it is not Marian who decides not to eat, but this “thing”¹¹⁵ which is pictured in terms of an infectious disease that “spreads;” a disease such as cancer, which is “malignant” (*EW* 157). Slowly but surely, this bodily ailment prevents her from eating certain products, such as eggs:

The next morning, however, when she opened her soft-boiled egg and saw the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye, she found her mouth closing together like a frightened sea-anemone. It’s living; it’s alive, the muscles in her throat said, and tightened. She pushed the dish away. Her *conscious mind* was used to the procedure by now. She sighed with resignation and crossed one more item off the list. (*EW* 165, emphasis added)

Not Marian, but the muscles in her throat react, they ‘say,’ they have a life of their own, they take the decision to not eat the egg. It is not Marian’s “conscious mind” (*EW* 165) that decides here, but rather her body. Her ‘conscious mind’ and her ‘body’ are at odds. When her eating disorder worsens, she even tries to force her body to subject to her will, but she is unsuccessful: “She was becoming more and more irritated by her body’s decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled” (*EW* 182). Her body literally takes on qualities of an individual. Marian refers to her body as if to a person, whom she has to reason with, whom she can accuse, whom she can coax and tempt. And “she faced each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind” (*EW* 183). Marian’s body takes over and seems to provide a mode of resistance as regards gender identity/femininity. Everything she is unable to express openly because of negative repercussions, her body acts out. Cameron and other scholars see this as proof that Marian’s disorder exemplifies the mind/body split which is common in anorexics. Yet, the novel complicates the mind/body split because Marian has no

¹¹⁵ Later Marian asks: “why had this thing chosen to attack *her*?” (*EW* 212, emphasis in original).

mental control over her body.¹¹⁶ Finally, after crossing meat, eggs, vegetables and rice pudding off her list, she only ‘eats’ vitamin pills.

The different stages in Marian’s eating disorder parallel certain events in the narrative and her life and thus provide a clue as to why her body reacts in such an extreme way. Marian’s first negative encounter with food occurs after Peter proposes to her (*TEW* 84). It is at this point of the narrative, incidentally – after Peter and Marian decide to get married and Marian meets Duncan and they kiss (*EW* 203) – that the narrative switches from first- to third-person narration. During dinner, Peter belittles Marian and tells her she does not have the necessary expertise when it comes to matters of the education of children (*EW* 151). However, he does not only belittle her but he, in fact, asserts his ownership rights over Marian by putting his hand over hers (*EW* 150) and by taking the decision of what to eat and what to drink. (Admittedly, Marian lets him take these decisions.) Moreover, during their dinner Marian has a ‘vision’ of her body: “Marian gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoon: herself upside down, with a huge torso narrowing to a pinhead at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled, then receded” (*EW* 150). According to Bouson, this “recalls Marian’s fantasy of the pregnant Clara as body” (23), Clara as “a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead” (*EW* 117). For Bouson this reflects Marian’s “disintegration fears” and “a threat to the self” (*EW* 24). However, it should instead be understood as the fear to be associated with the body only. Clara’s and her own shape make her think of a “queen-ant, bulging with the burden of an entire society, a semi-person” (*EW* 117). The text illuminates what is problematic about constructing women as bodies: they lose intellectual capabilities and thus a sense of individuality. During, the, what Marian considers “more vegetable stages” of Clara’s pregnancy, Marian “had tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perceptive faculties above the merely sentient and

¹¹⁶ Nowadays scholars argue that the mind/body split in the disorder is not as straightforward as it might seem because anorexia and bulimia are intricately linked to chemical processes in the gut (see E. Wilson).

sponge-like” (*EW* 133).¹¹⁷ Clara becomes her body because she is only defined in its terms, in its productivity.

Furthermore, Marian realizes that Peter has started watching her. She comments: “Lately he had been watching her more and more. . . . Frequently . . . she would open her eyes and realize that he had been watching her like that” (*EW* 153). Peter’s gaze makes Marian “uneasy” because it is an expression not of affection, but rather ownership: What is usually considered an intimate touch, the hand that runs “gently over her skin” is done “without passion, almost clinically” (*EW* 153). Not only is this highly evocative of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, but Peter’s attitude towards Marian and her body is reminiscent of the Sartrean sense of possession. Penelope Deutscher explains that

[d]esire is narrated by Sartre as a strategy, part of our impossible but constant struggle to appropriate the other’s freedom. I wish to grasp the other’s freedom, but I can only grasp the other’s body. Desire is a wily ruse to incarnate a body with consciousness and then possess it. (143)

Peter wants to possess Marian and to mould her as he pleases. As a result, during the dinner, Marian is unable to finish the steak she is eating and thereafter her body refuses “anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre” (*EW* 156).

Her body’s inability to consume meat is thus not her subconscious fear of consuming something that is alive because it reminds her of pregnancy, as Cameron suggests, but might instead be understood as her identification with the product to be consumed. Marian literally identifies with flesh. This becomes apparent through the choice of words, as the cow is referred to as “someone waiting for a streetcar.”

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. (*EW* 155)

The cause of her anorexia is, initially, framed in terms of vegetarianism, even though this is used ironically, for, as a matter of fact, Marian herself is none too happy about

¹¹⁷ This contrasts with the sea creature metaphors that Marian uses in regard to herself. She pictures herself as a “sea-anemone” (*EW* 165) and a “tactile sea-creature” (*EW* 172), which emphasizes her auto image as malleable and flexible instead of fixed and passive.

turning into “a vegetarian . . . one of those cranks” (*EW* 157).¹¹⁸ In the next stage of her eating disorder, Marian becomes unable to eat eggs after Len recounts an episode from his childhood in which he was forced to eat an egg with a chicken inside it (*EW* 164). Marian’s inability to eat her egg the next morning might be read as her fear of pregnancy, albeit not from a psychoanalytical standpoint but rather from the perspective of ultimate fulfilment of her gender identity and thus dependence and entrapment within the heterosexual matrix. Yet, it can also be read as a response to the disparaging comment Len makes: “That’s what we get then . . . for educating women. They get all kinds of ridiculous ideas” (*EW* 161-62). This remark by one of her oldest friends leaves a trace on Marian, not simply a verbal trace, but in fact a bodily one.

When Peter starts taking “pride in displaying her” (*EW* 180), Marian reaches another stage of her eating disorder: she becomes unable to eat vegetables (*EW* 183).¹¹⁹ Next, she crosses cake off her list after Peter uses her as an ashtray holder (*EW* 213), i.e. an actual object. After the episode at the hairdresser, where she goes in order to please Peter, Marian is unable to eat anything but vitamin pills. The scene at the hairdresser is interesting, for Marian feels completely objectified. She feels “as passive as though she was being admitted to a hospital to have an operation” (*EW* 215).¹²⁰ The attendant is “nurse-like” and the hair dresser is “the doctor . . . set to work.” Marian is put on an “operating-table”, the doctor has all the necessary equipment: “surgical cloth,” “clamps,” “gleaming instruments and bottled medicines” (*EW* 215). It comes as no surprise that Marian feels like “a slab of flesh” and an inert object (*EW* 215). The medical metaphors are telling because of the disparity between

¹¹⁸ Cameron states that Marian’s rejection of ‘living things’ is rooted in her fear of pregnancy, thus carrying a living thing herself. I find this explanation highly unsatisfying considering the overall message of the novel.

¹¹⁹ Marian starts displaying ‘real’ symptoms of anorexia; she takes “a perverse delight in watching other people eat” (*EW* 159). When she goes to see her parents to organize the wedding, she avoids eating in front of other people but binge-eats later on: “She had said she wasn’t hungry, and had eaten huge quantities of cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes and mince pie when no one was looking” (*EW* 178). Moreover, she does not talk to anyone about her problem, except to Duncan, not realizing the extent of the disease herself. She also puts considerable effort into the planning for menus because she is afraid of being found out (*EW* 181). Towards the later stages of her anorexia, when she has stopped eating solids, her body reacts with what might be symptoms of the lack of calorie intake, such as dizziness: “She ought to have her eyes examined, things were beginning to blur” (*EW* 223).

¹²⁰ Interestingly, the body’s objectification is often put in medical terms, as for instance when Peter touches her “without passion, almost clinically”: “she would begin feeling that she was on a doctor’s examination table” (*EW* 153).

female patients and male doctors, which can make women feel uncomfortable, but it also alludes to the increasing objectification of patients in doctor-patient interactions. The medical metaphors not only serve as a comment on the beauty industry, which increasingly uses medical procedures to alter women's physiques, but it also resonates with the medical profession's history, which "leaves out the subjectivity of the woman" (Young 54). When, finally, the "stitches [are] taken out," Marian is not exactly happy with the result, she says that it is a little "extreme" and thinks to herself that she looks like a "callgirl," but decides not to have it changed because "'Peter will probably like it. Anyway,' she reflected" and "'it will go with the dress'" (EW 216).

After the episode at the hairdresser Marian feels that her body is not her own anymore and is afraid of "dissolving." When she takes a bath before Peter's party, she becomes acutely aware of her body as 'other:'

Looking down, she became aware of the water, which was covered with a film of calcinous hard-water particles of dirt and soap, and of the body that was sitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle. (EW 224)

Picking up on her nightmare, in which body parts start dissolving (EW 43), this scene demonstrates that Marian finally feels disembodied; her body is no longer her own. While it might seem that Marian loses control over her body, even to herself, she, in fact, loses a unified body image. The text illuminates what Bernadette Wegenstein contends, namely that "anorexia, hysteria, and other (often female) illnesses can be seen as mourning for the loss of a unified body [schema]" (28).¹²¹ She slowly but surely loses a unified version of herself, that is, a unified body image – which, incidentally, does not equal a mind/body split.¹²²

The penultimate phase of the development of her eating disorder is related to Peter's party, where she does not eat anything anymore but only drinks something. Before the party, Peter wants to take pictures of Marian, which makes her feel uneasy

¹²¹ As I have pointed out in the theory chapter, body image can refer to two separate ideas. It can either refer to what the phenomenologists call body schema, *Körperschema*, i.e. the position of one's body in time, space and culture, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world" (*Phenomenology* 103). In the context of media studies, the body image refers to representations of bodies.

¹²² This is also why Marian feels threatened by the dolls sitting on top of her dresser, who "[b]y the strength of their separate visions . . . were trying to pull her apart" (EW 226).

and, later, he wants to take a group picture. Peter wants to take a couple of “shots” (hunting analogy)¹²³ of Marian before the guests of his party arrive, but Marian feels uneasy, the “suggestion had made her unreasonably anxious” (*EW* 238). This pointedly shows in her body language, for Peter tells her to “stand less stiffly,” to “relax,” to not “hunch [her] shoulders,” to “stick out [her] chest,” to not “look so worried,” “look natural” and “*smile*” (*EW* 238, emphasis in original). Even though Marian herself does not realize what is happening,¹²⁴ her *body* is expressive in that it “had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn’t move...” (*EW* 238). Marian’s inability to move is a sign that she has internalized subordination and that her social role as a female has left real, material traces on her body, impeding her from reacting in certain situations. Even though the original context this quote refers to is not a literary one, the quote fits Atwood’s text passage perfectly:

Die Unterordnung ist als Inkorporierung in den Körper eingeschrieben und wirkt als körperreflexive Praxis, da auch die (Nicht-)Reaktion als Handeln in der sozialen Welt gedeutet wird. Sie äußert sich als körperliche Fixierung in der Unmöglichkeit, aus der Erstarrung zu entfliehen. (Budde qtd. in Wuttig 272)

Subordination, too, becomes inscribed into the body and becomes manifest as Marian’s inability to move and to react in this situation. Because there is a knock on the door and Peter opens it, Marian is saved from becoming the object of Peter’s fancy. However, she can still feel the physical impact: “Marian came slowly from the corner. She was breathing quickly. She reached out one hand, forcing herself to touch it” (*EW* 238-39). As Marian’s quick breathing suggests, this is a stressful and trying situation for her.

When the guests start arriving, Marian plays her assigned role as fiancée, welcomes them and engages in conversation. One of these is with Joe, who comments on his wife’s role:

¹²³ Bouson argues that “[t]he fact that Peter’s grisly hunting story about killing a rabbit prefaces his pursuit of and proposal to Marian underlines the narrative’s view of the sexual hunt as a form of predation” (15). Further references in the text to stalking and being followed can be read in line with this hunting analogy.

¹²⁴ In fact, she asks herself “What’s the matter with me? . . . It’s only a camera” (*EW* 239).

I think it's a lot harder for her than for most women; I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university. She gets the idea that she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded. . . .'

. . . 'Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her. . . .'

. . . So she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is any more; her core has been destroyed. (*EW* 242)

While, according to Bouson, this passage “contains a political message – through Joe Bates, Atwood is telling her women readers to avoid such a fate” (Bouson 21), it also aptly shows that ‘progressive’ men such as Joe are, in fact, quite traditional in their views of their wives. While “meditating on the life of the mind and doing the dishes” (*EW* 243), they seem to be unable to grasp that women such as Clara are not encouraged to pursue studies within their culture because motherhood and a career/university education are not compatible.¹²⁵ Joe seems to be ambivalent, for even though he encourages his wife to pursue her studies, he does not understand why she gives him a funny look (*EW* 243). He even suggests that women refrain from going to university because “then they wouldn't always be feeling later on that they've missed out on the life of the mind” (*EW* 242-43). Here, the text provides its most obvious feminist comment: It is not women's university education that is the problem and that makes women feel discontent, but it is a system in which women are encouraged to go to university (or not) and pursue a career, but never to choose this over a family. Family and career, *or both*, remain incompatible within patriarchal culture.

Interestingly, it is at the moment at Peter's party, when Joe talks about his wife's ‘feminine role’ which requires her to be passive, that Marian has a “vision of a large globular pastry, decorated with whipped cream and maraschino cherries, floating suspended in the air above Joe's head” (*EW* 242). The vision of the pastry suggests that not until Marian is able to reject the feminine role that is characterized by sacrifice, especially of intellectual capabilities, does she regain her appetite. Yet, it is also a humorous element that undermines Joe's pseudo-philosophical ruminations.

¹²⁵ When Atwood's text was written and published (in the 1960s) this was a dominant theme. Yet, it remains pertinent in many cultures to this day.

Marian has another vision, which is even more revealing. While leaning in the doorway, she examines everyone present at the party. Peter reminds her of “home-movie ads” and this gives rise to her imagining or seeing several rooms with their possible married future:

She opened the door to the right and went in. There was Peter, forty-five and balding but still recognizable as Peter, standing in bright sunlight beside a barbecue with a long fork in his hand. He was wearing a white chef’s apron. She looked carefully for herself in the garden, but she wasn’t there and the discovery chilled her.

No, she thought, this has to be the wrong room. It can’t be the last one. And now she could see there was another door, in the hedge at the other side of the garden. She walked across the lawn, passing behind the unmoving figure, which she could see now held a large cleaver in the other hand, pushed open the door and went through. (*EW* 250)

Her absence from the scene chills her and gives rise to her feeling that this is not the right scenario. Moreover, the Peter in this room holds a cleaver in his hand, alluding to possible danger. This is not the last possibility, however, for she notices a door on the other side of the garden. In Alice-in-Wonderland like fashion,¹²⁶ she enters the next room which brings her back to the present.

She was back in Peter’s living room with the people and the noise, leaning against the doorframe holding her drink. Except that the people seemed even clearer now, more sharply focused, further away, and they were moving faster and faster, they were all going home, a file of soapwoman emerged from the bedroom, coats on, they teetered jerkily out the door trailing husbands, chirping goodnights, and who was that tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space...This couldn’t be it; there had to be something more. She ran for the next door, yanked it open. (*EW* 250, ellipsis in original).

While these are all familiar faces and people, who are preparing to leave as the party is apparently coming to an end, Marian’s perception has changed. The people seem “clearer” and “more sharply focused” yet “further away” and “moving faster” at the same time. And she notices another figure but cannot connect that figure to herself. She finally notices that this “tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space” (*EW* 250) cannot be herself. This is not the possibility of the

¹²⁶ The novel is replete with references to *Alice in Wonderland*. For an analysis of some of the dominant Alice-in-Wonderland themes see Sharon Rose Wilson’s third chapter “Cannibalism and Metamorphosis in *The Edible Woman*” in *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993).

future she wants, for she states that “[this] couldn’t be it; there had to be something more” (*EW* 250). Marian still seems to think that she is in a (day-)dream. She panics and runs to the next door only to find Peter in it:

He had a camera in his hand; but now she saw what it really was. There were no more doors and when she felt behind for the doorknob, afraid to take her eyes off him, he raised the camera and aimed it at her; his mouth opened in a snarl of teeth. There was a blinding flash of light.

“No!” she screamed. She covered her face with her arm. (*EW* 250-51)

In her dream-like state, Marian does not recognize the camera as a camera and instead “saw what it really was.” Even though the text does not specify what this might be, it is likely, given her reaction, that the camera represents a fixing of her image in a material way. Marian is afraid of being fixed, of being confined in an image of someone she cannot identify with. Yet, she realizes that she can still opt out as Peter did not take a picture of her but of his friend Trigger instead: “She was still safe then. She had to get out before it was too late . . . She could not let him catch her this time. Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (*EW* 251-52). It is in fact the fear of being fixed in an image and an identity that she does not feel herself to embody that she is running from.

Because of her fear of being confined by Peter, Marian escapes Peter’s party and looks for Duncan with a particular aim in mind, namely sleeping with him. They book into a cheap hotel room where, after some initial problems, they have sex. The next morning Marian has some doubts, even though the previous night it had seemed “resolved” and she had some “simple clarity rather than joy” (*EW* 263). The next day, “[w]hatever decision she had made had been forgotten, if indeed she had ever decided anything” (*EW* 264). She is faced with the need to talk to Peter and break off with him, yet not necessarily to tell him about Duncan: “There was no real reason to explain because explanations involved causes and effects and this event had been neither. It had come from nowhere and it led nowhere, it was outside the chain” (*EW* 264).

As a result of her transgressive act, she is also faced with a complete inability to eat: “It had finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off” (*EW* 264). Thus, her extreme state reaches its climax after she sleeps with Duncan. This is not

due to guilt, as one might assume. Even though, according to Butler, “[h]eterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions” (“Melancholy Gender” 136) which applies primarily to the prohibition of homosexuality, other prohibitions apply as well, namely the prohibition of incest, the prohibition of abortion/childlessness, and the prohibition of polygamy or polyamory. By sleeping with Duncan, Marian defies the prohibition of polygamy.¹²⁷ It also signifies agency on Marian’s part, however, for it is she who drives it forward. And this is an agency that is achieved through her body.¹²⁸ Marian’s body cutting itself off can rather be interpreted as the need to take the final step, that is, break off the engagement with Peter. Her body literally forces her to take this last step so that she can eat and thus live.

2.4 “It’s mostly the head:” Rejecting the Mind

Marian regains her embodiedness and consequently a unified body image via a grotesque, and consequently liberating act, namely through the consumption of the cake she bakes for Peter.¹²⁹ The cake is a smaller version of herself, underlined by its vamped up look – the same flashy colours – exactly how Peter wants her to be. “‘You look delicious,’ she told her. ‘Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food’” (*EW* 277-78).¹³⁰ Marian bakes the cake for Peter because she intuits that this is what he wants:

“You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,” she said. “You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork,” she added somewhat prosaically.

Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She wasn’t smiling. His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he didn’t find her silly. (*EW* 279)

¹²⁷ Duncan is the very opposite of Peter because he is not interested in appearances and looks but in intellect to an exaggerated degree. He is self-involved but not in the same way that Peter is.

¹²⁸ Bouson suggests that “Atwood uses the conventional love triangle plot both as a weapon and as a device to rescue Marian from her relationship with Peter. Invoking and parodying the male fantasy of the split good/ bad woman, the text casts Marian, who has shunned the culturally scripted roles of wife and mother, as a prostitute” (29). The text subverts such roles as the nurse and prostitute and thus ascribes Marian dominance. In fact, “*The Edible Woman* acts out a fantasy of female sexual domination and male subordination” (30).

¹²⁹ This scene is read differently. Some scholars do not see a liberating potential in the eating of the cake. For Robert Lecker, for instance, Marian “re-enacts her female as food role” (179). Others read the ending in more positive terms as Bromberg does: Marian “is quite literally joining her subject and object selves . . . She has become active again, an agent, a subject, a consumer, rather than a consumable object of exchange traded on the marriage market” (18). For more information on these divergent positions see Bouson (35-37).

¹³⁰ This establishes a connection to the office party during which the abundance and the look of the cakes make Marian “feel gluttonous” and women are compared to consumable goods.

Previously, Marian has a moment of doubt in which she has “a swift vision of her own monumental silliness” (*EW* 278) and fears that if Peter thinks she is silly, she will believe him, that is, fall back into seeing her body and herself as others do. The passage above illustrates that she has realized what Peter wanted all along, namely a woman he can possess, one he can mould to his own liking. For Marian, however, this equals destruction of her subjectivity. For despite her apparent compliance with gender identity, she does not want to marry Peter and have children with him. What is so forceful in this confrontation is not so much the words but Marian’s lack of a smile and her matter-of-factness.

Peter’s eating of the cake would have meant that Peter’s version of Marian as silly, Peter’s version of reality, would have prevailed and that they would have stayed together. Instead, Marian eats or rather devours the cake herself:

Suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry. The cake after all was only a cake. . . . She considered the first mouthful. It seemed odd but most pleasant to be actually tasting and chewing and swallowing again. Not bad, she thought critically; needs a touch more lemon though. (*EW* 279)

Marian can experience eating as pleasurable again. Thus, Marian recovers the experience of her lived body. She can feel and taste again. By devouring the cake, Marian engages in a grotesque act: “In the act of eating . . . the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body” (*Rabelais* 282). And it is the more grotesque because there is an implication of “symbolic cannibalism” (Bouson 15). It comes as no surprise that Ainsley is scandalized: “You’re rejecting your femininity!” (*EW* 280).¹³¹ After breaking off her engagement with Peter, Marian returns to her ‘normal’ eating behaviour.

As is to be expected, critics are divided about the final scene. Macpherson conjures up the author on the ending: “Atwood herself has noted that Marian is really no better off now than she was before: her prospects are limited, and she has, even if metaphorically, offered herself up to be consumed” (29-30). However, at another point Atwood states the very opposite: Marian is “acting, she’s doing an action. Up until that point she has been evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing” (Gibson 25). As Bouson and others argue, “[t]hrough the cakewoman

¹³¹ Peter accuses her of the same thing at an earlier point (*EW* 82).

‘text,’ she signifies her own transformation into a consumable object” (32).¹³² Rather than offering herself up to being consumed, what Marian puts on offer to be consumed is her femininity. First, the cake is a vamped-up version of herself – the way she decorates the cake is reminiscent of how she is handled at the hairdresser. However, the cake’s meaning changes from symbol to real cake, underlined by the statement that the cake was only a cake and that it “needs a touch more lemon,” which stresses materiality. It is an actual, material cake, it is something to be eaten and not just a representation or symbol.¹³³ “As a symbol it had definitely failed” (*EW* 279). While the text blurs the lines between metaphor and reality,¹³⁴ materiality seems to prevail over metaphor. Marian stresses that “[i]t’s only a cake” (*EW* 280) and before offering the cake to Duncan, she herself devours part of it. The cake is a ‘real’ cake; it is real food. Pamela Bromberg suggests, and I agree, that Marian “has become active again, an agent, a subject, a consumer, rather than a consumable object of exchange traded on the marriage market” (18). This is also why in part three of the novel, in the very last pages, the focalization returns to Marian and the narrative is told from a first-person perspective once more.¹³⁵ Moreover, scholars rarely comment on the fact that what Marian offers Duncan is “mostly the head” (*EW* 287). She has “sever[ed] the body from the head” (*EW* 280) and devoured the body. This is hardly a coincidence. Marian regains a sense of being in touch with her body, a unified body

¹³² Bouson elaborates on the whole process of the making of the cake: “Asserting active mastery over passive suffering, Marian does to the cakewoman what was done to her. She begins ‘to operate’ on the cakewoman, just as she was operated on at the hairdresser’s; she scoops out part of the cake and makes a head with it, repeating her feeling that the contents of her head had been ‘scooped out’ after she became engaged to Peter; and she uses icing to draw ‘masses of intricate baroque scrolls and swirls’ of hair on her creation, reenacting what was done to her when her hair was decorated like a cake” (32-33).

¹³³ Atwood moves to a metafictional level at this point by implying that there are real Marians out there in the real world, who struggle with eating disorders: “And they all wore clothes of real cloth and had real bodies: those in the newspapers, those still unknown, waiting for their chance to aim from the upstairs window; you passed them on the streets every day. It was easy to see him as normal and safe in the afternoon, but that didn’t alter things. The price of this version of reality was testing the other one” (*EW* 279).

¹³⁴ Bouson makes a similar point: “Yet the ending remains puzzling. In a maneuver meant to entice and frustrate literary interpreters, the closure indicates that the cake is a ‘symbol’ and insists that it is ‘only a cake’ . . . Because the closure both tells and refuses to tell what it knows, readers are left with the uneasy sense that they have not mastered the text but rather that the text has mastered them” (34-35).

¹³⁵ The shift from first-person to third-person narration “serves not only to emphasize Marian’s self-alienation and threatened loss of self as she is objectified by the culture” (Bouson 21) but it also suggests that Marian’s “sense of herself as sexual object makes her the object of someone else’s discourse” (Greene 27).

image, because, without realizing it, she rejects the head: the humanist ideal of the mind as constitutive of consciousness.

2.5 “I’ve chopped Peter up into little bits:” Subversive Thoughts

Even though Marian and other female characters conform to femininity and their heterosexual roles, things in *The Edible Woman* are not always what they seem. Atwood employs double-voiced discourse and irony to undermine some of Marian’s voluntary acts and thus questions her adherence to feminine ideals as well as the other female characters’ very ‘unfeminine’ life choices. While, initially, Ainsley sets out to be a single mother – which undermines the traditional nuclear family – she returns to the ideal of the heterosexual couple because she believes that her baby will become a homosexual if she raises it without a father figure (*EW* 186).¹³⁶ As a result, at the end of the novel, she marries Duncan’s roommate Fischer and spends a stereotypical honeymoon at the Niagara Falls, reaffirming the ideal of the heterosexual couple. Ainsley subverts traditional gender roles, however, by tricking Len, the prototypical womanizer, into getting pregnant. Not only does this underline an anti-marriage attitude, which, admittedly, changes in the course of the narrative – initially she believes that “[t]he thing that ruins families these days is the husbands” (*EW* 39) – but it also ironically reverses roles and the concomitant power setup. As Bouson shows, “the Ainsley/Len seduction plot reverses the gender hierarchy and acts out female desires for power and revenge” (31). Len is surprisingly shocked by Ainsley’s behaviour:

All along you’ve only been *using* me. What a moron I was to think you were sweet and innocent, when it turns out you were actually college-educated the whole time! Oh, they’re all the same. You weren’t interested in me at all. The only thing you wanted from me was my body! (*EW* 163, emphasis in original)

The narrative deliberately – for obvious humorous and ironic purposes – puts ‘female’ accusations into Len’s mouth, “you’ve only been using me,” “The only thing you wanted from me was my body” and Ainsley accuses Len, correspondingly, of “uterus envy” (*EW* 163-64). However, what is striking is the negative status Len ascribes to education. Previously he says: “That’s what we get then . . . for educating women.

¹³⁶ The absence of queer characters in the novel is indicative because it emphasizes the power of the heterosexual matrix.

They get all kinds of ridiculous ideas” (*EW* 162). Educated women are a particular threat to men like Len because they are smart enough to trick them. So, while, in the end, Ainsley’s character seemingly represents conformity to the heterosexual ideal and thus a return to the traditional romance plot (Bouson), Atwood herself has commented: “In my book the couple is not united and the wrong couple gets married. The complications are resolved, but not in a way that reaffirms the social order” (Sandler 13).

Clara, too, cannot be associated with the traditional role of a mother easily. The children were not planned (*EW* 36) and Clara is not particularly good at taking care of the household with two and later three children, so that Joe takes over most household chores (*EW* 32-33, 34-35, 133). Clara does not represent the idealized mother either because she swears frequently (*EW* 131) and refers to her children with all kinds of not-so-endearing terms: “little leech” (*EW* 31), “stinking little geyser” (*EW* 32), “little bastard” (*EW* 33, 37), “little demon” (*EW* 33), “little bugger” (*EW* 33, 131) and “turd” (*EW* 184), to name but a few. “Her metaphors for her children,” Marian comments, “included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock” (*EW* 36). Furthermore, Clara almost revels in the ‘unpleasantness’ of human bodies, making Marian wish that “Clara had a few more inhibitions. Clara didn’t deny that her children stank, but neither did she take any pains to conceal it. She admitted it, she almost affirmed it; it was as though she wanted it to be appreciated” (*EW* 184). Neither is Clara idealistic about motherhood nor giving birth. After bearing her third child she admits that giving birth is “messy, all that blood and junk” (*EW* 131) and that “it hurts like hell” (*EW* 132). She tells Marian to “[n]ever believe what they tell you about maternal instinct” (*EW* 32).

Critics are especially divided about Marian’s attitude towards femininity: for some commentators she resists a complete consent to femininity (Bouson), for others, the novel is “metaphorically circular” because, despite resistance to feminine ideals, Marian ends up where she started (Lecker 203). Yet, in particular at the beginning of the novel, before Marian starts displaying the first traces of an eating disorder, her thoughts reflect a non-conformity to her feminine role. In fact, Atwood uses double-voiced discourse and irony to complicate some of Marian’s utterances and

thoughts.¹³⁷ When Marian and Peter talk about his proposal, Marian's ambivalence concerning their engagement is brought to light:

"You know," he said, "I didn't think I was intending – what happened last night – at all." I nodded: I hadn't thought I was, either.

"I guess I've been running away from it."

I had been, too. (*EW* 91)

Marian's echoing of Peter's words in her mind in the first line suggests that she does not feel the way he does. Moreover, the echoing of Peter's words in the third line is humorous because she literally ran away from him. Yet, she does not voice these thoughts as she is aware that they might be understood in the way she thinks them, namely ironically. When Peter asks her about their prospective marriage date, Marian thinks:

My first impulse was to answer, with the evasive flippancy I'd always used before when he'd asked me serious questions about myself, 'What about Groundhog Day?' But instead I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, 'I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you.' I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it. (*EW* 92)

It is notable here that the double-voicedness does not exist between the voices of the distinct characters, but rather between Marian's two voices. This has a strong parodic element, for "[d]iscourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 193) and Marian's two voices in fact clash. As a result, Marian is surprised by her own reaction, her own submissiveness. Even though she says she means it, her surprise reveals that there is something at odds in her thoughts and her actual behaviour. She does not recognize herself with the "soft flannelly voice" (*EW* 92). Although Marian is aware of the, oftentimes, ridiculous demands of femininity and aware of her own thoughts and usual reactions to it, she does not resist them actively, as the feminine habitus and bodily mannerisms have been deeply ingrained in her consciousness and she believes this is really what she wants. She comments at another point: "Of course I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does" (*EW* 104). This sentence carries some ambivalence though. It is in the past tense and includes the verb

¹³⁷ According to Bouson, Marian occasionally "speaks in an oppositional voice" (18).

‘to assume,’ potentially suggesting a different view in the present. And when Ainsley asks Marian at the beginning of the novel whether she is going to the laundromat, Marian replies: “I’ve chopped Peter up into little bits. I’m camouflaging him as laundry and taking him down to bury him in the ravine” (*EW* 94). Marian’s use of irony is not appreciated by her roommate who does not even smile, but the reader realizes that Marian does not take everything as seriously as is expected of her. Moreover, she imagines Peter to be the ‘Underwear Man’ who calls women pretending to conduct a survey for her company and requiring after their underwear.

Even in the second part of the novel, which is told from a third-person point of view, thus reflecting Marian’s alienation from her body image, there are pertinent examples of irony. When Ainsley and Len fight about Ainsley’s misleading Len into believing that she is an innocent girl, the narrator comments on Marian’s reaction: “Marian walked out to the kitchen. She was coldly revolted: they were acting like a couple of infants. Ainsley was getting a layer of blubber on her soul already, she thought; aren’t hormones wonderful” (*EW* 164). Marian ironically praises the power of hormones, yet Ainsley’s behaviour is not so much influenced by hormones as it is by the “layer of blubber on her soul.” This implies that it is the identification with motherhood that makes Ainsley act in this way. Moreover, it is not only Ainsley who behaves like an infant, but Len, too, who certainly is not affected by prenatal hormones. And Marian is “coldly revolted” because she can see through all of this. A comment by Peter about Marian’s look for his party is equally revealing:

‘Darling, you look absolutely marvellous,’ he had said as soon as he had come up through the stairwell. The implication had been that it would be most pleasant if she could arrange to look like that all the time. . . . Now she wondered whether or not she did look absolutely marvellous. She turned the phrase over in her mind: it had no specific shape or flavour. (*EW* 235)

Even though the sentence “[t]he implication had been that it would be most pleasant if she could arrange to look like that all the time” might well be expressing the narrator’s point of view, it is also possible that Marian thinks this herself, for she questions its real meaning. She realizes that it has “no specific shape of flavour” and thus does not produce the desired reaction in her, which, in the case of other women, would probably be joy. So, while on the surface, Marian coheres with her gender identity and feminine role, her utterances and thoughts often suggest otherwise.

Marian displays an internal double-voicedness that serves a humorous function, but also reveals that authentic femininity is an illusion.

2.6 “Then I stopped for lunch:” Summary of Results

This chapter has shown that Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* resonates both with the Bakhtinian grotesque and new feminist materialist ideas on insidious trauma. The novel displays an awareness of the cultural construction of the female body as inherently grotesque and it undermines this cultural construction precisely by means of Marian’s ‘unruly’ body. To start with, Marian incorporates different versions of femininity by means of her friends and colleagues. She unconsciously embodies these modes of feminine behaviour and thought. As a result, she tries to comply with certain ideals of femininity even though this goes against her independence and agency and even though she realizes that she will never be able to aspire to the ideal. This realization that the ideal is unreachable, that her striving for an authentic gender identity is in vain, leads to insidious trauma.

However, her body opposes these inscriptions of feminine gender identity and the unreachability of the ideal by means of its agency. In the course of the novel, Marian starts displaying unusual bodily reactions: she starts crying without any apparent reason, she runs away from her friends, hides under a bed, kisses and touches Duncan, all without having taken any (conscious) decision to do so. Moreover, Marian’s body rejects the intake of food: First, she is unable to finish a piece of steak, then she cannot bring herself to eat eggs, following vegetables, cake and rice pudding, until she is unable to eat anything anymore. While Marian’s body’s rejection of food is related to certain events in her private life, for instance Len’s scene after he realises that Ainsley ‘tricked’ him into getting pregnant or Peter’s use of her as an ashtray-holder, her body can be said to possess an organic intentionality, which her mind clearly lacks. Marian’s body is active, volatile and independent; it actively resists cultural constructions of femininity both by behaving in ‘unfeminine’ ways and by rejecting food.

The feminist phenomenological concept of the body image, and in particular the distinction between the objective and the lived body is instructive for reading Marian’s behaviour. Marian is increasingly estranged from her own body as she

internalizes the way Peter sees her, namely as an object. This is also reflected on the narratological plane as the initial first-person narration switches to a third-person narration in the main part of the novel. Her eating disorder can thus also be read as a result of this estrangement from her own body and the internalization of the objective body. The final scene of the grotesque devouring of the cake (it is grotesque because it represents an exaggerated consumption as well as symbolic cannibalism), reconnects Marian with her lived body. It is a grotesque act, then, which allows Marina to fully experience her own body again.

The novel's reliance on grotesque themes is further made manifest in the use of double-voiced discourse. Double-voiced discourse permeates the text and creates irony as well as serves a specific humorous function. It frequently undermines Marian's but also other character's utterances and opinions. It thus creates ambivalence as regards Marian's and other characters' wholehearted compliance with femininity and the social role ascribed to them.

Because Atwood's novel is such an early example of the transcultural feminist grotesque – and in fact *her* first novel – some of the ideas are not as fully developed as they are in the later texts. *The Edible Woman* somewhat maintains a mind/body split, with the mind and the body presented as warring parties in the fight for consciousness. Moreover, the use of double-voiced discourse is relatively subtle compared to other feminist grotesque novels, which employ it much more frequently with the result of creating a much greater sense of ambivalence and also unease.

In terms of the transcultural feminist grotesque, the novel helps to shed light on the beginnings of the mode, which were very much focused on white, able, middle-class, heterosexual and thus 'unmarked' femininity. Even though Atwood's text leaves out the experiences of the other cultural, in particular indigenous and Africadian, presences in Canada, it is nevertheless helpful to consider this type of female embodiment alongside the other forms of female embodiment I discuss in the chapters to come. Notwithstanding its representation of unmarked femininity and whiteness, the novel presents problems for a dominant reading of the female body and has broken new ground for more complex analyses. For it is the traumatic results that the inscription of gender has on individuals that the novel wants to foreground. It is in

particular in its emphasis on the traumatising and in fact fleshly traces that gender leaves in bodies that the novel makes a pertinent and crucial feminist comment.

3. Disabled Embodiment in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

“[T]here’s a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously”

(Carter qtd. in Haffenden 85)

Angela Carter’s exuberant narrative in *Nights at the Circus* (NC) accompanies Fevvers, the famous aerialist with wings, on her quest for agency at the end of the nineteenth century in London, St. Petersburg and Siberia. The novel tells Fevvers’s story and the stories of those she encounters on her journey in a highly intertextual manner, with references ranging from the picaresque,¹³⁸ the Gothic, romance, speculative fiction, magical realism, fairy tales to the carnivalesque. Resembling the structure of a three-act play, the novel takes us from Fevvers’s dressing room of the Alhambra Music Hall in London to the Circus in St. Petersburg and finally to the Siberian wilderness. The stories Fevvers and Lizzie, surrogate mother and ex-whore, tell the young and enthusiastic American journalist Walser at the beginning of the novel and the story the reader follows via the text itself can hardly be disengaged from Fevvers’s exceptional physique.

The tour starts in London, Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s home, where they both meet Walser during an interview in Fevvers’ dressing room of the Alhambra Music Hall. During this interview, which turns out to be puzzling intellectually and physically for Walser, the two ‘women’ construct Fevvers’ life story, which takes them from her ‘birth,’ to life in Ma Nelson’s brothel, to a museum of female monsters and a dangerous encounter with a religious fanatic who wants to gain immortality by means

¹³⁸ According to the biographer Edmund Gordon, Carter felt that the picaresque was “gender-and-class-neutral compared to other modes of writing” (176). In “Toward a Definition of the Picaresque,” Claudio Guillén proposes eight main characteristics of the picaresque novel. However, J. A. G. Ardila reduces these eight characteristics to three because he claims that some of the features proposed by Guillén are the results of other features. Thus, according to Ardila, the three main characteristics of the Picaresque novel are: firstly, it is a narrative that explains a final situation; secondly, it has a dogmatic message (which results in irony); and thirdly, the main character is a picaro, a rogue (4). However, generally speaking, one has also to distinguish, firstly, between the picaresque genre; secondly, the picaresque novels which are constructed according to the model of the Spanish picaresque novels and thus can also be called picaresque; thirdly, novels which are considered picaresque in a very broad understanding of the genre – some authors refer to them as quasi-picaresque or semi-picaresque – and finally, novels which are part of the picaresque myth (Guillén 71).

of desecrating and sacrificing Fevvers. The journey continues with both Fevvers and Walser's engagement as performers in Colonel Kearney's circus on its "Grand Imperial Tour" in Petersburg. The circus they join is comprised of a company of clowns, a talking pig, educated apes and a princess with dancing tigers, to name but a few. Walser follows Fevvers to St. Petersburg because, initially, he wants to prove that Fevvers is a "hoax" but falls in love with her instead. In the course of their work at the circus, both Walser and Fevvers have near-death experiences: Walser is attacked and almost killed, first by a tiger, and later by a clown, and Fevvers is in danger of being turned into a miniature version of herself by a Grand Duke but manages to escape miraculously.

In the third part of the novel, on their way to the East, the circus' train crashes in Siberia, which results in Fevvers and Walser's separation. While Fevvers, Lizzie and the other members of the circus are taken hostage by a gang of male outcasts, Walser, after suffering from amnesia due to a head injury, briefly encounters a group of runaway female convicts and wardresses and becomes an apprentice to a shaman in his native village. After episodes that include the blowing off the earth of both the outcasts and the clowns, tigers on a roof of a Conservatory in the middle of the Siberian wilderness, Fevvers and Lizzie's rescue of a young mother and her child, and the fight with the Shaman for a sacrificial bear cub, Fevvers and Walser are (sexually) reunited.

The fabulist quality of the novel does not come short of providing a comment on more serious and realist issues, however. The novel is replete with stories of oppressed women, either in the form of individuals like Mignon and the Babushka, or groups such as the prostitutes in Ma Nelson's brothel as well as the community of female convicts. Yet, the most intriguing engagement with the role of women in western society is conferred through the figure of Fevvers, whose exceptional physique provides much food for thought. Fevvers is a grotesque character similar to the drawings found in underground chambers at the end of the fifteenth century: she is a fusion figure combining elements of a woman and a bird. Yet, Fevvers's body is also portrayed as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense, as a body that is open to the outside world, a body grounded in its materiality. Fevvers relishes food, drink and

bodily processes. She is thus closely connected to “the material bodily principle” replete with “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 18). It is by means of Fevvers that the novel provides its most pertinent feminist comment. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, *Nights at the Circus* far extends notions of gender as a mere performative act, which has been central to scholarly criticism of the novel.

Discussions of Carter’s feminism have almost exclusively been limited to notions of ‘gender as performance,’ ‘femininity as masquerade’ or ‘theatricality’;¹³⁹ so much so that Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton speak of an “after-the-fact Butlerification” (19) of Carter’s oeuvre. Since Fevvers treats herself as a commodity and performs female roles, scholars have criticized Carter for her depiction of ‘gender as performance.’ Paulina Palmer, for instance, takes for granted that Carter “associates gender with performativity” (“Gender as Performance” 29) and argues accordingly that Carter does not “explore its problematic aspects” in her works (“Gender as Performance” 32). Christina Britzolakis is even more critical of Carter’s depiction of gender as a performative act in *Nights at the Circus*. According to Britzolakis, Fevvers is a character who engages in gender performance – who uses performance to her own advantage “to demonstrate that femininity is culturally produced” – but is fetishized because she treats herself as a commodity (186). She argues that Carter, by using “masquerade-like tactics in order to expose the fictional and inessential character of femininity” in fact reproduces constricting structures by depicting fetishized characters such as Fevvers (185). In general, critics have found fault with Carter’s depiction of Fevvers’s unreflected use of masquerade, because Fevvers is “forever staring at reflections in mirrors or reflecting back the gaze of others in the bottomless abyss of eyes that open up universes” (Waugh 195).

However, what might be at stake in this type of discussion of the novel is not so much Carter’s use of the notion of gender as performance, but rather the shortcomings in Butler’s theory or critics’ reading of it. Wuttig shows that materiality

¹³⁹ See Paulina Palmer, “Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood,” Christina Britzolakis’s “Angela Carter’s Fetishism” and Sarah Sceats’s “Performance, Identity and the Body.”

is sidelined in Butler's theory and she extends Butler's argument by exemplifying that gender does something materially speaking to a body. Wuttig explains:

Butlers starker Teil besteht darin, die Macht der Geschlechternormen als Grausamkeit zu erkennen, und darin Geschlecht als soziale Kategorie zu begreifen, die ihre Legitimation über die wissenschaftstheoretische Behauptung von Natürlichkeit des *sex* (biologisches Geschlecht) erhält. . . . Problematisch ist Butlers theorieimmanente Annexion von Materialität, von der Dimension ‚Natur‘ hin zu einer Form der Grammatik. (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 131)

While Wuttig draws on the strengths in Butler's theory, she also points to its weaknesses, which she identifies as an annexation of materiality. And she carves out that "Butler . . . zwar ein potenziell gewaltsames/verletzendes kulturelles System der Zweigeschlechtlichkeit kennzeichnet, aber keinen hinreichenden Ort, *auf den* diese Verletzungen treffen können – der Körper – das Somatische bleibt eine Leerstelle" (*Das traumatisierte Subjekt* 90, emphasis in original). In other words, according to Wuttig, Butler does not dedicate sufficient attention to the body's fleshliness. Yet, it is precisely this fleshliness which provides a space on which gendered meanings are inscribed.

I read *Nights at the Circus* as an example of what Wuttig identifies as a gap in Butler's theory, then, and I would suggest that while the novel engages with performativity because Fevvers performs gender, the novel in fact adds to Butler's theory in exemplifying how gender is embodied and thus puts emphasis on the materializing effects of gender. *Nights at the Circus* engages with notions of gender as performative act, yet also demonstrates how gender leaves lasting, material traces in bodies. Thus, by drawing on feminist phenomenological thinkers and in particular their notion of the body image, my reading of the novel offers fresh insights into the pivotal role that the material, fleshly body plays for gendered consciousness and subjectivity. In order to substantiate my reading of *Nights at the Circus*, I will focus on four aspects: first, grotesque sexuality, second, the embodiment of objectification, third, a renewed access to the lived body, and, fourth, degrading humour.

3.1 "Like Lucifer, I fell:" Grotesque Sexuality

Fevvers's excessive size, her vulgarity, her insatiable appetite and thirst, her bodily functions, in short, her grotesqueness is what characterizes her. According to Bakhtin,

the “material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase” (*Rabelais* 62). This is why Fevvers is described as extraordinarily big, frequently in terms of a “giantess” (*NC* 51, 143, 205) and with adjectives and nouns that refer to excessive size: “big girl” (*NC* 7); “bullish nape” (*NC* 57); “bulk” (*NC* 52).¹⁴⁰ Fevvers’s is firmly established as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense because she is insatiable food-wise and drink-wise: she displays an “enormous appetite” (*NC* 22, 51), devours food with “gargantuan enthusiasm” (*NC* 22), has a propensity for alcohol (*NC* 8, 12, 13, 80, 171) and, moreover, eats in a very unladylike manner:

She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety. Impressed, Walser waited with the stubborn docility of his profession until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. (*NC* 22)

Furthermore, Fevvers farts (*NC* 11) and belches (*NC* 22, 51) openly. She is connected to matter in that she does not pay attention to cleanliness: Her dressing room stands out through its “feminine squalor” (*NC* 9) and “dirty underwear” lying around (*NC* 11), she herself through a “fishy” smell (*NC* 8), having “stale feet” (*NC* 9), wearing a “baby-blue satin dressing-gown” (*NC* 8) with “soiled quilting” (*NC* 7), “rancid silk” (*NC* 19) and having “lips smeared with grease” (*NC* 53).

Moreover, Fevvers does not refrain from addressing topics that would usually be left unsaid, such as farting (*NC* 11), urinating (*NC* 52), inebriation (“Can’t have the ladies pissed on their lonesome, can we?” *NC* 13), giving birth (“normal channels” *NC* 7), menstruation (*NC* 23), breasts (*NC* 22, 23), genitalia and backsides (“more the colour of that on my private ahem parts,” *NC* 25; “whore’s bum,” *NC* 26) and pregnancy (“another in the pot,” *NC* 54). Her eyes are “indecorous” which is just another way of saying that *she* is (*NC* 7). She frequently makes lewd comments and jokes:

‘Not his mind as interests me,’ said Fevvers.
‘Oh, Sophie, you’re a devil for a pretty face.’
‘Not his face as interests me –’ (*NC* 172, emphasis in original)

¹⁴⁰ Anne Fernihough points out that “Fevvers’ fleshy presence, her corporeality, is insisted on throughout the text” (89).

However, I read Fevvers also as a feminist grotesque character because she undermines a clearly defined gender binary.¹⁴¹ Even though Fevvers is marked as female through names, other people's descriptions, and bodily features such as breasts, her behaviour evokes masculinity. Fevvers is frequently described as 'unfeminine' and, at one point, one of her movements is even described as "disturbingly masculine" (NC 166). She has "[a] strong, firm, masculine grip" and her voice evokes a man's, too, as it is compared to "dustbin lids" (NC 7); it is "raucous and metallic" (NC 13), "rusty" (NC 43), and her laugh is like a guffaw (NC 7). Walser, at the beginning of the novel, even asks himself: "Is she really a man?" (NC 35). While these might simply seem provocative aspects of Fevvers that are meant to catch the reader and his expectations off-guard, Fevvers's 'masculinity' in fact alludes to the impossibility of fixed borders, in particular male/female. Similar to the border between the classical and the grotesque body as well as human and animal that Fevvers crosses, she equally transgresses borders of masculinity and femininity.

While these grotesque aspects have been discussed in quite some detail,¹⁴² little attention has been paid to sexuality in the novel, which is a vital element of the grotesque. The representation of sexual intercourse is indeed one of three "main acts in the life of the grotesque body" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 353).¹⁴³ Aside from obvious references to Fevvers's infertility and her vulgarity, references to sexuality are usually overlooked in discussions of the text. The story of Fevvers's breaking out of her wings is, in fact, a story of an awakening of female sexual desire, a story traditionally untold. In this novel, a 'disabled' woman does have sexual urges and indeed fulfils them.¹⁴⁴ Fevvers's "peculiar inheritance" thus provides an indirect critique of the

¹⁴¹ Grosz, agreeing with Gatens, shows that "the 'masculinity' of the male body cannot be the same as the 'masculinity' of the female body, because the kind of body inscribed makes a difference to the meanings and functioning of gender that emerges" (58). Fernihough argues that Fevvers blurs the boundaries between feminine and masculine (92), selfhood and performance (92) but also between the grotesque and the classical (98-99). She cites Fevvers masculinity as an example of drag (Fernihough 92). She argues accordingly: "Inevitably, Fevvers' overstated femininity makes Walser think of masculinity, of drag," similar to Mae West, who Fernihough argues is one of the sources Fevvers is based on. However, I argue that it does not make Walser think of drag, but rather masculinity.

¹⁴² See, for instance, Abigail Dennis's article "'The Spectacle of her Gluttony': The Performance of Female Appetite and the Bakhtinian Grotesque in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*," Anne Fernihough's "'Is She Fact or is She Fiction?': Angela Carter and the Enigma of Woman" or Robert Duggan's chapter on Carter's work in *The Grotesque in Contemporary British Fiction*.

¹⁴³ The other two are death throes and the act of birth (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 353).

¹⁴⁴ At the end of the novel Fevvers in fact reveals that she is not a virgin.

‘asexual objectification’ of disabled women (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 267; Hahn 30).

Even though Rosemarie Garland-Thomson comments that “much current feminist work theorizes figures of hybridity and excess such as monsters, grotesques, and cyborgs to suggest their transgressive potential for a feminist politics,” she nevertheless points out that this “metaphorical invocation” of disability fails to acknowledge the existence of “actual bodies of people with disabilities” (“Integrating Disability” 261). Accordingly, “[e]rasing real disabled bodies from the history of these terms compromises the very critique they intend to launch and misses an opportunity to use disability as a feminist critical category” (ibid.). I argue that the narrative of *Nights at the Circus* bridges a gap between what Garland-Thomson understands as ‘metaphorical invocations’ and ‘actual bodies.’ Reading Fevvers’s body as an ‘actual body’ provides insights into the harmful effects of objectifying encounters. One way of analyzing ‘actual bodies’ in the novel is by means of the ‘lived’ body and ‘body images.’ The narrative puts emphasis on Fevvers’s lived body as it represents the way Fevvers ‘becomes’ a bird-woman, comprising the breaking out of her wings, the first time she flies and later in the narrative the fracture of one of her wings. Thus, my reading of the grotesque elements in the novel is informed by disability theory. Similar to the marker gender, dis/ability in feminist phenomenological terms is also understood as embodied. According to Anne Waldschmidt, “disability does not denote an individual’s feature, but an always embodied category of differentiation. Disability is taken as ‘true’ because it is not a natural fact but a naturalized difference” (25), which rings equally true for ‘femaleness.’¹⁴⁵

In spite of or rather *because of* Fevvers’s infertility, her sexuality is frequently stressed in the novel. Associations with the earth, fertility and reproduction are frustrated, however, because Fevvers was hatched: “I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*” (NC 7). Furthermore, her “father and . . . mother, [are] both utterly

¹⁴⁵ Even though there has been an attempt at an intersectional reading of *Nights at the Circus* (see Erin Douglas’s “Freak Show Femininities: Intersectional Spectacles in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*”), it has overlooked disability as a category.

unknown” (NC 21) and she is, allegedly, the “only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world” (NC 294). This means that she is not able to produce offspring and defies associations with fertility. Thus, Helen Stoddart claims:

Fevvers’ weightiness connects her to the Earth, but the fecundity that would make this ‘regenerative’ in Bakhtin’s terms is symbolic rather than actual. . . . Fevvers’ peculiar combination of weight, flight and symbolism (the conception of ideas and history) mean that she is, all the time, linked both to Earth and regeneration and to the upward, heavenward movement that Bakhtin situates with males and masculinity. (30)

Yet, Fevvers’s account of becoming a bird woman is, incidentally, reminiscent of a sexual awakening:

I was yet more moved and strangely puzzled by what, at first, manifested itself as no more than an infernal itching in my back. . . . ‘At first, but a small, indeed, an almost pleasurable irritation, a kind of physical buzzing, . . . ‘And the itch increased. If it started in small ways, soon it was as if my back was all on fire and they covered me with soothing lotions and cooling powders and I would lie down to sleep with an ice-bag on my back but still nothing could calm the fearful storm in my erupting skin. ‘But all this was but the herald to the breaking out of my wings, you understand; although I did not know that, then. (NC 23-24)

Not only does Fevvers’ breaking out of her wings coincide with the growth of her breasts (NC 24) – already a reference to sexuality – but the text also features terms reminiscent of sexual urges. “The pleasurable irritation” and “physical buzzing” are expressions of a newly awakened sexual desire that grows as time goes by and, not too surprisingly, results in “erupting skin,” a reference to ejaculation. Fevvers continues her description of her changing body:

‘I spread,’ said Fevvers. ‘I had taken off my little white nightgown in order to perform my matutinal ablutions at my little dresser when there was a great ripping in the hindquarters of my chemise and, all unwilling by me, uncalled for, involuntarily, suddenly there broke forth my peculiar inheritance – these wings of mine! Still adolescent, as yet, not half their adult size, and moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage on an April tree. But, all the same, wings. (NC 24)

The adjectives “moist” and “sticky,” more specifically, allude to genital fluids. And as is to be expected, the reaction to this newly awakened growth (sexuality) leads to puzzlement, bewilderment and even fear and carries culturally a tint of sinfulness (“infernal,” “fire”).

Fevvers's first attempt to use her wings and fly is also highly reminiscent of sexual intercourse (NC 30). Phrases such as 'the closing of eyes' and 'precipitate' hint at the sexual act itself. Yet, this is not discussed further, and after a brief pause, Fevvers moves on to describe how she fell. Interestingly, religious terms feature once again: Fevvers falls like Lucifer, which evokes cultural associations of the sexual act as sinful. And the 'fall' conjures Eve's 'fall from grace.' Fevvers's choice of words when describing the great distance between the mantelpiece and the floor is suggestive of female genitalia: "[Y]et it yawned before me like a chasm, and, indeed, you might say that this gulf now before me represented the grand abyss, the poignant divide, that would henceforth separate me from common humanity" (NC 29). The "chasm," "abyss" and "divide" stand in for female genitals. Thus, the divide that will separate her from common humanity might not simply be her physiognomy, her 'freakishness,' but rather her femaleness.

It is not surprising that when Fevvers recounts the first time she flies, metaphorically speaking the first time she has sexual intercourse, Walser feels immensely attracted to her. Fevvers entices Walser physically, albeit not through her femininity:

At that, she turned her immense eyes upon him, those eyes 'made for the stage' whose messages could be read from standing room in the gods [sic]. Night had darkened their colour; their irises were now purple, matching the Parma violets in front of her mirror, and the pupils had grown so fat on darkness that the entire dressing-room and all those within it could have vanished without trace inside those compelling voids. Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold. (NC 29-30)

Walser is drawn to Fevvers's huge eyes whose messages, on the surface, can be read easily. However, her eyes also pose problems of interpretation. Not only do her irises change colour, but they also turn purple, which is an ambiguous colour. Moreover, her pupils have grown so "fat" as to devour the entire room; they are "compelling voids" and their *mise-en-abyme* quality suggests infinity and "unguessable depths" – a hint at the culturally invested idea of the vagina as a mysterious place. Thus, Fevvers's eyes signify ambiguity and uncertainty. Yet, her eyes stand in for her whole

being and especially her sexuality, which is unguessable for Walser because it defies traditional concepts. Thus, Walser, too, encounters an unknown threshold and responds physically, unconsciously, with trembling.

Walser's attraction to Fevvers serves several functions in the narrative. On the one hand, it is a reminder of the materiality of bodies and hence their grotesqueness. On the other hand, instead of presenting sexuality as a 'base' human and animal need, it establishes sexuality in embodiment theoretical terms as both a physical and a mental phenomenon. For, according to Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is ambiguous because it is impossible to separate the physical from the emotional: "Sexuality, then, is not an autonomous cycle. It is internally linked to the whole thinking and acting being" (*Phenomenology* 160). This is exemplified in an episode in which Walser reacts to Fevvers's body:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk. As she raised her arms, Walser, confronted by stubbled, thickly powdered armpits, felt faint; God! she could easily crush him to death in her huge arms, although he was a big man with the strength of Californian sunshine distilled in his limbs. A seismic erotic disturbance convulsed him – unless it was their damn' champagne. He scrambled to his feet, suddenly panicking, scattering underwear, grazing his scalp painfully on the mantelpiece. 'Ouch – excuse me, ma'am; the call of nature –' (*NC* 52)

This passage describes Fevvers as a grotesque figure on several levels. First, her excessive size is underlined repeatedly. It is not only conveyed by means of the words "huge" or "bulk" but also by way of big animals or objects such as the shark and a hot-air balloon. Second, references to animals such as the shark or cat – and in this context the maw – her sudden movements and her "stubbled" armpits, increase associations with animality, and, since these animals are predators, voracity, especially sexual voracity.¹⁴⁶ Third, Fevvers's taking up of space can be read as grotesque in terms of her size but also in terms of dominance, for, traditionally, it is usually men who take up more space than women do, which is an embodied reflection of their position of power. Fevvers, by taking up space, also takes up the position

¹⁴⁶ Carter frequently challenges a straightforward division between human and animal characters, as she does, for instance, in her fairy tale rewrites of such classics as "The Beauty and the Beast" and "Little Red Riding Hood."

awarded to men and, as a result, denotes masculinity. Walser is not put off by Fevvers grotesqueness, even though he is slightly scared of Fevvers's excessive size: "God! she could easily crush him to death in her huge arms," making him feel "faint." Instead, he is taken by surprise by what he experiences. Blaming this "erotic disturbance" on the champagne, but nevertheless realizing that it might not only be that, he panics, tries to flee this situation, in the process of which he hurts his head. Consequently, his reaction to this situation is both emotional and physical and this is doubled by the pain he feels after hurting his scalp.

3.2 "This bright, pretty, useless thing, myself:" Embodying Objectification

The novel presents us with a paradox in regard to Fevvers. Fevvers, in spite of her exceptional physique, which provides her with strength and the ability to fly, and thus agency, nevertheless has only limited agency because she is objectified and she objectifies herself. She is objectified by other, especially male, characters, because of her physical exceptionality. She is described as having a "deformity" and being a "cripple" (NC 19). Fevvers is objectified because she is a 'wonder' and a 'woman.' First, she is incarcerated in the "museum of woman monsters" (NC 55). Then, Mr Rosencreutz purchases her because her wings in connection to her female genitals are vital to his immortality. And finally, the Grand Duke almost turns her into one of his *objets d'art*. Second, she objectifies herself both intentionally and unintentionally. Her wings being her most prominent trait, Fevvers learns that her most distinctive bodily marker can open doors for her. She learns to turn her 'mutation' into physical capital because she becomes a famous trapeze artist and even creates her own brand, based on her slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (NC 7). She 'uses' her 'disability' or added ability to her advantage,¹⁴⁷ both physically and financially. In the process, however, she incorporates a view of her body as object, so that her attitude towards her own body is, initially, one of self-objectification. However, she overcomes her self-objectification by means of her lived body.

¹⁴⁷ The term differently-abled has received considerable criticism, which is why I refrain from using it in my study. See Susan Wendel's chapter "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability" (251).

As Anne Fernihough states, “the transgressive body, the body that subverts cultural stereotypes, . . . is always at risk of being read as freakish” (99). Fevvers is incarcerated in the ‘museum of women monsters’ because, as a ‘freak,’ she is considered an object.¹⁴⁸ In fact, the term ‘freak’ was first introduced to describe human beings with exceptional or anomalous bodies. As Stewart explains, freaks were considered and treated like objects (110); a common practice was to capture them and give them as a gift to persons of higher rank or exploit them in shows for economic purposes.¹⁴⁹ Russo argues along the same lines: “Freaks are, by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed. In the traditional sideshow, they are often caged and most often they are silent while a barker narrates their exotic lives” (79-80). Hence, freaks, similar to women or racially marked people, are not granted a subject status. In addition to that, while the freaks’ corporeal exceptionality was heightened through staging, narrative, pseudo-medical explanation and costume – a process David Hevey describes as ‘enfreakment’¹⁵⁰ – freaks would often be grouped into one category, ‘the freak,’ despite major physical and intellectual differences (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 10).

As Garland-Thomson has pointed out, exceptional bodies have always been part of society, but the ways in which they are depicted or treated vary according to contemporary intellectual concerns (*Freakery* 2). While ‘freaks’ used to be “[d]omesticated within the laboratory and the textbook,” studied for scientific or exploited for entertainment purposes, ‘abnormalities’ nowadays require “genetic reconstruction, surgical normalization, therapeutic elimination, or relegation to pathological specimen” (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 4). Thus, Garland-Thomson argues, the ‘freak’ comes to represent a reflection of Western society’s questions, necessities and insecurities (*Freakery* 2). Walser ponders over this process:

¹⁴⁸ There are several intertextual links between *Nights at the Circus* and the 1932 movie *Freaks*. One pertinent parallel is the trapeze artist Cleopatra, who, after an attack by the ‘freaks’ of the company she is part of, turns into a ‘grotesque’ human duck.

¹⁴⁹ For a discussion of the use of freaks as spectacle in shows see Garland-Thomson and Bogdan. For the link between freak shows and pornography, see Stewart.

¹⁵⁰ See Hevey’s *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*, in particular his chapter on “The Enfreakment of Photography” (53-74).

[I]f she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then – she was no longer a wonder. She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but – a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged. (NC 161)

Part of Fevvers's allure to the audience is that she appears to be fake, that she seems to be a "hoax" (NC 17). (Even in the brothel Nelson insists during exchanges with customers that Fevvers's wings are not real but simply attached with glue.) Her identity as a performer, but also as a woman and a human being, depends on keeping up the appearance of her wings not being real. Not only does the novel resonate with the notion of 'passing,' but the text also refers to the process of cultural construction of an exceptional body. If Fevvers's wings turn out to be real, she will be objected to stereotyping, which will deny her a subject status. She will be "denied the human privilege of flesh and blood" and will thus be disembodied. As soon as a body deviates from the norm, it is connected to something negative, here a freak or even monster. What Walser ponders over, then, is in fact what many scholars have commented on, namely that 'freaks' are not granted a subject status but are instead treated in a similar way to objects. However, the insecurity *Nights at the Circus* addresses by conjuring the notion of the freak does not just concern non-normative bodies and 'disabilities' but also sex and gendered 'abnormalities.' As Fevvers and other 'freaks' such as the Wiltshire Wonder whose story is characterized by men mistreating her (NC 68), exemplify, for Carter freakishness and femininity (or sexual non-normativity) are closely linked.

Garland-Thomson highlights that there is an 'inherent' connection between the marker 'female' and the marker 'disabled.' As she argues: "Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard" ("Integrating Disability" 260). In fact, "both women and the disabled have been imagined as medically abnormal [...] Sickness is gendered feminine" (Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability" 262). Her examples range from Aristotle who "defined women as 'mutilated males'" to more recent reflections of the "general American public," which considers "housewives, disabled people, blind people, so-called retarded people, and the elderly" as "similarly incompetent"

(ibid.). Relatedly, Susan Wendel claims that “[s]ome of the same attitudes about the body which contribute to women’s oppression generally also contribute to the social and psychological disablement of people who have physical disabilities” (243). To add to this, Robert McRuer has shown that there is a mutual interdependence between compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality (2).

Especially feminist phenomenology has been crucial in uncovering that as a result of gender roles and norms, limited mobility and restricted space, women become “physically handicapped . . . physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified” (Young 42). The devalued manner of ‘throwing like a girl’ is not the result of an inherent, biological predisposition, but rather the result of a sexist society that polices women’s bodies and their movements (ibid.).¹⁵¹ Moreover, feminist phenomenology calls attention to the connection between disability and femaleness, which is closely linked to the normative body. According to Weiss, “the body image ideal” entails the white, male, able, heterosexual body, making it impossible for women, racialized people and disabled people to ever reach this ideal.

While Fevvers’s status as an object is imposed on her from the outside, she also internalizes it. Young has shown how women acquire a view of their body as object:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. (44)

Fevvers grows up and grows into a bird-woman at Ma Nelson’s brothel.¹⁵² It is in “a certain *house*” (NC 21, emphasis in original) that her wings break out and she flies for the first time in her life. However, it is also in the brothel that Fevvers incorporates

¹⁵¹ This resonates strongly with Michel Foucault’s notion of the ‘disciplining of bodies.’

¹⁵² Not only does the setting – the brothel – serve as an ironic comment, but the fact that Fevvers grows up with prostitutes also resonates with Lennard J. Davis: “The problem for people with disabilities was that eugenicists tended to group together all allegedly ‘undesirable’ traits. So, for example, criminals, the poor, and people with disabilities might be mentioned in the same breath” (8-9). Prostitutes, as both ‘criminals’ and sexually active ‘women,’ are, arguably, closely associated with disability.

some bodily mannerisms that come to shape her body image later on. Fevvers's time in the brothel is characterized by 'posing' as a mythological figure with wings:

'So, with my wreath of roses, my baby bow of smouldering guilt and my arrows of unfledged desire, it was my job to sit in the alcove of the drawing-room in which the ladies introduced themselves to the gentlemen. Cupid, I was.' . . . 'So there I was . . . I was a *tableau vivant* from the age of seven on . . . and for seven long years, sir, I was nought but the painted, gilded *sign* of love, and you might say, that so it was I served my apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder. (NC 23, emphasis in original)

Fevvers learns from early on to regard herself as an object and she incorporates this view physically. Fevvers *is* a *tableau vivant* from the age of seven until the age of fourteen. She internalizes and embodies immobility. Moreover, she connects it to financial benefits, for this is how she "first earned [her] crust" (NC 23). Despite being 'promoted,' at the age of fourteen, to pose as the "Winged Victory" with a sword (NC 37), she nevertheless remains immobile in this role.

Admittedly, in her role as Cupid Fevvers does act (subversively) on occasion: "[S]ometimes, out of childish fun, [she] sprung off her toy arrows amongst them [the customers], hitting, in play, sometimes an ear, sometimes a buttock, sometimes a ballock" (NC 38).¹⁵³ Furthermore, the Winged Victory or Nike, the Greek goddess of victory whom Fevvers impersonates, is based on the marble sculpture "Winged Victory of Samothrace." Incidentally, the female sculpture does not have a head and arms. On the one hand, this is ironic, for how does Victory fight without arms?

Ma Nelson put it out that I was the perfection of, the original of, the very model for that statue which, in its broken and incomplete state, has teased the imagination of a brace of millennia with its promise of perfect, active beauty that has been, as it were, mutilated by history. (NC 37)

The female body without a head and without arms is the one patriarchy encourages, for it cannot think and only has restricted ability of action. Fevvers defies this by way of her physiognomy; she has wings *and* arms and (a head), and in addition to that, is even equipped with a sword.

¹⁵³ In addition, Cupid is usually represented as a boy and thus undermines Fevvers's construction as excessively feminine.

Moreover, similar to the women in the brothel, Fevvers learns that she must ‘sell’ a particular body part – in her case her wings, in the women’s their genitals – in order to make a living. As Crossley contends:

Different bodily markers, including genitalia and skin colour . . . effectively become tokens of physical capital, opening (or shutting) doors and shaping life trajectories and, in this way, habits. Social categories penetrate the flesh, manifesting as habitus and hexis. (6)

Fevvers decides to make a living by ‘selling’ her extraordinary body and thus joins Madame Schreck’s “museum of woman monsters” (*NC* 55). There she meets fellow sufferers: “Fanny Four-Eyes; and the Sleeping Beauty; and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three foot high; and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite, that is to say, half and half and neither of either; and the girl we called Cobwebs” (*NC* 59-60). As is to be expected, these women make a living by providing sexual pleasure to men: “It cost another hundred guineas to have the Wiltshire Wonder suck you off and a cool two fifty to take Albert/Albertina upstairs because s/he was one of each” (*NC* 62). Fevvers is miraculously spared this fate because she merely has to re-enact the “Angel of Death” (*NC* 70), unlike her fellow convicts who have to provide sexual gratifications.

Even though Fevvers joins the ‘museum’ voluntarily in order to secure an income, she quickly realizes that she is not allowed to leave, Madame Schreck having blocked all the windows and thus all the escape routes there are. Fevvers rebels against being held a prisoner by Madame Schreck and finally decides to collect the money that is due to her. Having rid herself of the Madame by using her wings and hooking her on the end of a curtain rail, she has a chance to flee. Held back by money, however, she does not escape and is then immediately taken prisoner by “two great louts with gallows-meat all over them” with a fishing net (*NC* 73).¹⁵⁴ As it turns out, these two men kidnap her for Mr Rosencreutz, who had been a customer of Madame Schreck’s and secretly purchased Fevvers from Madame Schreck because he considers her “Azrael, Azrail, Ashriel, Azriel, Azaril, Gabriel; dark angel of many names” (*NC* 75) and believes she will bestow him with eternal youth.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ The fishing net clearly underlines associations of Fevvers with animals.

¹⁵⁵ These men have the power to name, to categorize, to represent, which exercises symbolic violence. See Stuart Hall’s subchapter on “Representation, Difference and Power” (259), in which he speaks

While, initially, Fevvers thinks that Mr Rosencreutz simply wants to have intercourse with her and will compensate her financially, which is why she goes along with his plan, when the time approaches, she realizes that he wants to sacrifice her to gain eternal youth. Fevvers manages to startle Mr Rosencreutz by drawing the toy sword that she used for posing as Cupid in Ma Nelson's brothel and thus gains time to escape by flying through a window and hiding in a tree. When she reaches home, she is "so weary, so bedraggled, so hungry" and her "nerves so much on edge" that she breaks down and cries (NC 84). In both episodes, at Madame Schreck's and in Mr Rosencreutz's mansion, Fevvers escapes due to her physical superiority. Her body, then, provides her with agency. Fevvers's agency is firmly linked to her ability to use her wings, for it is her wings that guarantee her freedom, they ensure escape. Thus, Fevvers's subjectivity is firmly grounded in her wings and thus a particular part of her body. However, Fevvers ends up in these situations because she is easily lured by money and because she overinvests in her wings (and breasts) as a means of capital.

Fevvers narrates these occurrences to Walser in the first part of the novel, while they are still in her dressing room of the Alhambra. At this point, she has succeeded in having a career as "the most famous aerialiste of the day" (NC 7). As a performer Fevvers relies heavily on female symbols. Her nickname 'Fevvers' contains a direct reference to her exceptional physiognomy and she is eager to point out that she is not simply *any* human or *any* bird, but an 'updated' version of Helen of Troy.¹⁵⁶ Similar to Helen, Fevvers has been hatched from an egg, yet, unlike Helen, both her parents are "utterly unknown" (NC 21). One of the first things she says, in fact, is the following: "Not billed the 'Cockney Venus,' for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire'" (NC 7), thus actively putting forward associations with Helen of Troy.¹⁵⁷ In addition to Helen of Troy,

about regimes of representation and racial stereotyping. His ideas are equally applicable to sexist stereotypes.

¹⁵⁶ Many mythological figures are original forms of the grotesque because they represent fusion figures. In the case of Helen of Troy, the fusion is between human and swan.

¹⁵⁷ According to Greek mythology, Helen is the daughter of Zeus and Leda. She was born from an egg ("Helen," *OED*) and is renowned for her exceptional beauty, which is said to have triggered the Trojan War. Readers familiar with Carter's oeuvre will also be aware that the story of Leda and the Swan is a recurring motif, most prominently dealt with in *The Magic Toyshop*. Leda is connected to a much more sinister story. According to myth, she was the wife of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Zeus fell in love with her and one night, in the disguise of a swan, raped her. As a consequence, Leda laid two eggs, one of which is the egg Helen hatched from.

Fevvers tries to call to mind associations with the English Angel (NC 8), which she cites as one of her nicknames. Fevvers's use of these recognizably 'positive' female characters seems to provide her with some agency as regards her image, counteracting negative images imposed by men.¹⁵⁸ As Paulina Palmer states: "Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*, engages in an exuberant version of ['playing with mimesis']. She playfully mobilizes and parodies the images of womanhood available in nineteenth-century culture" ("Gender as Performance" 31). Helen is positive because she is beautiful and desirable; the Winged Victory is a symbol of success; the English Angel or any Angel carries connotations of divinity, purity and beauty.¹⁵⁹ However, Sandra Bartky argues in a different context: "Female stereotypes threaten the autonomy of women not only by virtue of their existence but also by virtue of their content" (24). In fact, the narrative reveals how these apparently 'positive' images are just as harmful as the 'negative' ones because they do not grant Fevvers a subject status. The narrative problematizes Fevvers's use of female symbols as it reveals how constricting they are, even when they appear to provide agency. By taking on nicknames of stereotypical and mythical women, Fevvers also incorporates their passivity, for these women are fixed in their roles, with limited ability to change. As a result, she considers herself a "bright, pretty, useless thing" and she correctly observes that this has nothing to do with her "value as such" but rather with her status as a rarity (NC 185). Fevvers frequently receives gifts from male admirers, and at the beginning of the novel Walser notes that despite her sexual "inaccessibility," she is willing to make certain exceptions for favours in return. In her professional dealings, she uses her body as a commodity. While she believes that this will result in wealth

¹⁵⁸ Agency refers to the "ability to act or perform an action" (Ashcroft 6) or to "make choices . . . and to carry through with these choices within existing social structures" (Nayar 5). The question this has raised especially in postcolonial theory is whether individuals are always entirely free to take choices or whether agency is limited by the way particular identities (such as gender or race) are constructed. Moreover, new materialism further complicates traditional understandings of agency, for it is not only humans who can have agency, but animals and other non-human entities, too. Barad suggests, for instance, "[a]gency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of "subjects" or "objects" (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever – it is "doing"/"being" in its intra-activity. . . Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" ("Posthumanist" 826-27).

¹⁵⁹ Fevvers certainly tries to evoke associations with the Victorian ideal of the 'Angel in the House.'

and consequently power, she learns that the very opposite is the case, for by objectifying herself, Fevvers deprives herself of agency.

This has given rise to criticism of Carter's depiction of Fevvers and in particular her association with performativity (see the section at the beginning of this chapter). What is problematic about Britzolakis's and Palmer's argument quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is that they consider Fevvers's self-objectification at the start of the novel as a given that rings true for the entire text.¹⁶⁰ Fevvers does indeed fetishize herself and treat her body as a commodity, as these critics argue. However, this is due to the cultural and social meanings she has incorporated. Initially, she considers herself from the point of the objective body, yet the value she attaches to her body and consequently her body image change throughout the narrative.¹⁶¹

Towards the end of the second part of the novel, when the narrative seems to be dominated by Fevvers and Lizzie's story, Fevvers accepts an invitation by a Grand Duke. There are several details that make Fevvers uneasy at the beginning of the encounter with the Grand Duke: there are no servants present, yet there is a life-size statue of herself in ice, which is slowly melting (*NC* 186), the Duke knows her christened name, Sophia, (*NC* 187) and he shows her a clockwork orchestra "almost full-grown," which includes a bird puppet (*NC* 187). The Duke comments that he is a "collector of all kinds of *objets d'art* and marvels. Of all things, I love best toys – marvellous and unnatural artefacts" (*NC* 187, emphasis in original). Throughout the course of their encounter, Fevvers feels "less and less her own mistress" (*NC* 190) – an indication that her loss of bodily control starts effecting her subjectivity. Nevertheless, Fevvers does not try to flee, for she expects something from the Duke:

¹⁶⁰ It is highly unlikely that a complex and multi-faceted author such as Carter – an author who was very well versed in literature and literary theory at that – would subscribe to notions of 'gender as performance' or 'femininity as masquerade' wholeheartedly and unquestioningly. The treatment of carnival and the circus in *Nights at the Circus* is another case in point because Carter is critical of carnival's liberatory function and its safety-valve mechanism. See Palmer's essay "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman," Peach or Britzolakis.

¹⁶¹ This is also reflected through changes in narrative perspective, as will be shown later. Moreover, the text undermines Fevvers's self-fetishization through humorous, ironic and critical narratorial comments.

All the same, since fair is fair and he deserved *something* for going to so much trouble, she reached round behind her and unfastened the hooks and eyes at the back of her dress. There was a swishing rush of released plumage and the Grand Duke exclaimed softly under his breath. Nuzzling away, he begged her to spread a little more and she did, whilst, although he did not ask her to, a deep instinct of self-preservation made her let his rooster out of the hen-coop for him and ruffle up its feathers, as he was ruffling hers.

Yet it was then, as her eyes went round the shadowy, two-tiered room, that she saw there were no windows anywhere and, when the Grand Duke's arms tightened around her, she realised he was a man of quite exceptional physical strength, sufficient to pin even her to the ground. (NC 191)

Fevvers seems to feel an obligation to provide certain services because the Grand Duke has 'paid' for her, reflecting her internalized objectification. Thus, she shows him her wings and masturbates him. Not only does Fevvers realize that there are no windows, but following this scene, the Duke finds her toy sword and destroys it. She is "defenceless [and] could have wept" (NC 191). By losing the sword, Fevvers loses phallic power. The wider implication is that adopting patriarchal tools can only result in a temporary liberation but does not lead to long-term emancipation. It leaves one, in Audre Lorde's terms "inside the walls of the master's house" (332).

The Grand Duke invites Fevvers so as not to shower her with gifts but in order to add her to his collection of miniature eggs. When Fevvers notices a miniature tree and bird inside one of his collector's egg, she realizes that he wants to turn her into an object. Fevvers manages to escape otherwise, however. She distracts the Grand Duke by continuing to masturbate him, takes out one of the miniatures, a model train with the legend "*The Trans-Siberian Express*" (NC 191), and boards it.¹⁶² Once again, Fevvers manages to escape a dangerous and possibly life-threatening situation, but this time it is magic that helps her instead of her wings or a sword. While, in terms of the overall narrative, this is a favourable and necessary outcome, it does raise questions concerning the mistreatment of women, for it compels the reader to reflect on situations in which women are mistreated and abused yet from which they cannot escape magically.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Needless to say, this is one of a number of magical realist elements in the novel. Stoddart maintains in regard to *Nights at the Circus*: "Use of magical realism, then, enables Carter to make observations about society, gender and the power of myth, and she is particularly sceptical about any construct that has been naturalized and accepted without question" (36).

¹⁶³ According to Andrzej Gasiorek, "*Nights* remains in the realm of the imaginary – it is a narrative that 'does not belong' to 'authentic history'" (131). While I agree that the text is highly parodic and that

3.3 “[M]y body was the abode of limitless freedom:” A Return to the Lived Body

It does not come as a surprise that Fevvers’s incarcerations and near-death experiences, the physical manifestations of objectification, leave a permanent mark on her subjectivity. As was delineated in the theory chapter, “social categories penetrate the flesh, manifesting as habitus and hexis” (Crossley 6). The experience at the Grand Duke’s palace has had a lasting effect on Fevvers for never before has she come so close to losing complete control over her body. This episode represents a turning point for Fevvers because she realizes what her self-objectification and self-fetishizing entails: namely being turned into a literal object. On the train, she says that she has learned her lesson, rips off the diamond bracelet and earrings and gives them to little Ivan (NC 192-93). Consequently, when Walser sees her, he is “struck dumb to see Fevvers, raddled with tears, hair coming down, again, gypsy dress ripped and clotted with semen, trying as best she could to cover her bare breasts with a filthy but incontrovertible tangle of pin feathers” (NC 193). This is not grotesque, regenerating filth; neither is the dress clotted with semen a sign of sexual pleasure but rather of sexual abuse. Fevvers’s loss of bodily control almost translates directly into how she looks. Aside from her torn dress, she cannot control her hair, which keeps coming down, and her feathers are starting to moult. Moreover, her gesture of protecting her breasts indicates shame of displaying this body part openly because it is culturally and emotionally invested. In this case, as in the former episode with Mr Rosencreutz, Fevvers’s female genitals in connection to her wings have made her a potential victim of sexually motivated murder. These episodes disclose that the abuse and the palpable threat of rape/death that Fevvers was exposed to are part of the lived experience of

fantasy – or rather magical realism – plays a significant role, I consider Gasiorek’s view representative of the criticism of anti-realist literature that has often been directed at Carter’s work and especially *Nights at the Circus*. Anti-realist literature is often considered inferior to realist literature because it does not represent ‘real’ issues, as realist literature is believed to do. However, realist literature is highly ideological and can, in this respect, not be considered superior to anti-realist literature. Peach contends, for instance: “Social realist fiction ‘naturalises’ what it portrays so that we trust what we are reading. Non-realist fiction distances, or even alienates, us so that we are disturbed, puzzled, confused and possibly critical of what we are reading” (6). This type of criticism also misses the point that *Nights at the Circus*, while it does not represent ‘real’ historical events and facts, is still very much a ‘real’ narrative in that it represents the lived abuse and oppression of women.

many women, especially women who are marked otherwise by disability, race or ethnicity.

Incidentally, after the aforementioned experience with the Grand Duke, Fevvers breaks one of her pinions. At the beginning of the third part of the novel, while the circus is on board the Trans-Siberian Express, there is an explosion on the train. The train wrecks and as a result Fevvers is stuck between the debris:

The giantess found herself trapped under the collapsed table . . . Her first emotions were surprise and indignation. Nearby in the dark, her foster-mother expostulated eloquently in her native dialect but none of Lizzie's tricks could get them out of this hole. Only the strength of the muscles Fevvers now stretched to their fullest extent would shift the wreckage and let them and their bruises scramble out into the open air which in itself was hazardous, filled with flame and flying debris. The wind, now risen to a gale, scorched them.

I have broken my right wing. As the first shock passes, I feel the pain. It hurts. Hurts as much as a clean fracture in the forearm. But no more. A lot to be thankful for. I can still keep the use of my right arm, even though the wing is broken. God, it hurts. Could be worse. Keep a stiff upper lip, girl; keep on telling yourself how it could be worse! (NC 205)

This episode is initially told from a third-person narrative perspective and the narrator comments on Fevvers's emotions, which are surprise and indignation. The narrative situation switches from a third-person omniscient narration to a first-person narrative perspective so that the reader gets an insight into Fevvers's experience. She voices the pain she feels and can locate it in her right wing. What is compelling here is that Fevvers explains that it hurts as much as a clean fracture in the forearm. Not only does this create authenticity within the story world of *Nights at the Circus*, substantiating the 'realness' of Fevvers's wings, but this also provides the reader with a reference point so that she can empathize with Fevvers's pain. Conjuring the experience of pain comments on the embodiment of human beings and the vulnerability of bodies. As Kristin Lindgren points out: "In health it may be possible to ignore the body, but in illness it demands acknowledgement and attention" (146).

The narrative frequently alternates between omniscient narration and figural narrative situations, in which the reader gets an insight into Fevvers's thoughts and feelings, albeit mediated through the narrator. This is to indicate that Fevvers's negative experiences with (self-) objectification have left marks on her subjectivity:

She knew she had truly mislaid some vital something of herself along the road that brought her to this place. When she lost her weapon to the Grand Duke in his frozen palace, she had lost some of that sense of her own magnificence which had previously sustained her trajectory. As soon as her feeling of invulnerability was gone, what happened? Why, she broke her wing. Now she was a crippled wonder. Put on as brave a face as she might, that was the long and short of it. (NC 273)

Fevvers's "vital something" and the sense of her "own magnificence" refer to agency. There appears to be a direct correlation between her loss of agency and her broken wing. Losing her agency in the episode with the Grand Duke manifests physically in her broken wing. Moreover, Fevvers's mental state shows physically otherwise because she has a disheveled look, the Colonel thinks her "shabby" because her plumage has lost colour, as has her hair, she has spots and rashes; and the lack of a corset makes her shape sag (NC 276-77). Fevvers correctly associates the loss of her sword to the Grand Duke with her feeling of lack or the loss of her magnificence. Yet, it is not the loss of the sword itself which causes these feelings but rather her body image which has been transformed; her body image has incorporated her experience of losing control over her body and she retains a feeling of being confined and inhibited.¹⁶⁴

At the end of the novel, Fevvers and Lizzie come to the village where Walser lives with the Shaman after the latter picks him up at the site of the train crash. Having lost his memory due to a blow to his head, Walser does not recognize Fevvers and, to Fevvers's dismay, has turned her brand song "Only a bird in a gilded cage" into "same kind of charm, some kind of dirge . . . meant to do her harm" (NC 289).

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea. (NC 289)

Fevvers reacts physically to the fear of losing control of her singularity, that is, her subjectivity. This is why she feels she is turning from a 'woman' into an 'idea.'

¹⁶⁴ At one point, Fevvers remarks that not only does she suspect that her wing but also her heart is "a little broken" (NC 234), because she assumes Walser is dead. Walser, and the feelings Fevvers develops for him, play a considerable part in her transformed body image, for it is due to Walser that she stops striving for financial gain and revises the view of her body. Lizzie remarks: "And perhaps it is a sign of moral growth in you, my girl . . . that you pursue this fellow only for his body, not for what he'll pay you" (NC 282).

Woman here refers to an actual, material body, Fevvers's body, characterized by certain biological and social traits, yet in the eyes of men, a woman can turn from real, material, individual body into the abstract idea of 'woman,' which becomes disengaged from its materiality and thus easily controlled and subjugated. Fevvers even comes to doubt the existence of herself:

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis in her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (NC 290)

On the one hand, this is an ironic, metafictional comment on the construction of Fevvers as a literary figure and the seemingly central question in the narrative of whether Fevvers wings are real or not. As Aidan Day remarks in regard to Fevvers: "She has been constructed and has constructed herself; she's been composed or written into being and in that sense is fictional" (181). On the other hand, this is a comment on identity construction and in particular the identity category woman. 'Woman' is a constructed category, contingent on the category 'man' – in the same way that 'disability' is contingent on 'ability' – hence Fevvers's doubts about her realness and her identity and the fear that she might be trapped within this category by means of a man. That being said, Fevvers's fear of being trapped in Walser's eyes is also connected to the power men have of categorizing and representing women. Fevvers's justifiably worries about a man's power to confine her within a particular role, one that does not coincide with her subjectivity necessarily, which is why she speaks of the "reflection in Walser's eyes." When Fevvers and Lizzie arrive in the village, Walser and the Shaman are about to conduct a ceremony, during which they mean to sacrifice a bear cub. Having freed the bear cub, Lizzie urges Fevvers to show the Shaman and Walser her wings in order to distract them:

Fevvers, with a strange sense of desperation, a miserable awareness of her broken wing and her discoloured plumage, could think of nothing else to do but to obey. She shrugged off her furs and, though she could not spread two wings, she spread one – lopsided angel, partial and shabby splendour! No Venus, or Helen, or Angel of the Apocalypse, not Izrael or Isfahel . . . only a poor freak down on her luck, and an object of the most dubious kind of reality to her beholders . . . She felt their eyes on her back and tentatively fluttered the one whole wing at them. She was hesitant, uncertain, at first; but then her plumage – yes! it did! – her plumage rippled in the wind of wonder, their expelled breaths. Oooooooh! (NC 290)

There are two main points to be made about this passage. First, the narrator firmly establishes Fevvers as anything but Venus or Helen here, she is not an ideal and no mythical woman, nor is she a ‘negative’ harbinger, no Angel of the Apocalypse, Izrael or Isfahel. Fevvers, in fact, is none of these constructed images. She is ‘only’ a ‘freak.’ Her ‘freakishness’ is a physical fact, the physical fact she is left with after she is stripped of these images, or to put it in Fevvers’s terms, the ‘essence’ of herself, the ‘essence’ of her body.¹⁶⁵ Instead of carrying negative connotations of objectification, in this episode freakishness denotes a specific materiality and exceptionality of the body which is a physical fact. Fevvers’s plumage rippling in the wind constitutes physical, lived experience, something she can feel and hear, and which becomes vital to her sense of self. Second, this passage provides a meta-fictional comment on the construction of the text and Fevvers as an impossible, grotesque figure. Her status as an “object of the most dubious kind of reality to her beholders” refers to the Shaman and Walser, who will think she is a vision or some mythical creature. Yet, this also refers to the reader who knows that Fevvers is unrealistic. The narrator continues describing the encounter:

She cocked her head to relish the shine of the lamps, like footlights, like stage-lights; it was as good as a stiff brandy, to see those footlights, and, beyond them, the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was. . . . Hubris, imagination, desire! The blood sang in her veins. Their eyes restored her soul. She rose up from her kneeling position on Walser’s chest. She put on a brilliant, artificial smile, extending her arms as if to enfold all present in a vast embrace. She sank down in a curtsy towards the door, offering herself to the company as if she were a gigantic sheaf of gladioli. Then she sank down in a curtsy towards Walser . . . She batted her lashes at him, beaming, exuberant, newly armed. Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates. (NC 290-91)

¹⁶⁵ Carter frequently plays with ideas on identity construction and undermines essential identity while at the same time alluding to an ‘essence’. Fevvers comments: “‘My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible. To sell the use of myself for the enjoyment of another is one thing; I might even offer freely, out of gratitude or in the expectation of pleasure – and pleasure alone is my expectation from the young American. But the essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what would there be left of me?’” (NC 280-81). Statements such as these have given rise to criticism of Carter’s work, because some scholars argue that Carter puts forward an essentialist view of sex and gender (see Palmer, “Gender as Performance” 29 and Sceats, “Performance”). Paulina Palmer argues in regard to *The Passion of New Eve* – even though she seems to apply this to all of Carter’s later work – that Carter “sometimes slips inadvertently into an essentialist position” by displaying “the true self” (“Gender as Performance” 29). While the discussion of this issue is covered elsewhere (see Bristow and Broughton), suffice it to say that this does not imply an essentialist point of view. As Fernihough quotes Diana Fuss: “one can talk about the body as matter . . . without presuming that matter has an essence” (102).

Fevvers appears to be performing here, as she “put[s] on a brilliant, artificial smile” and extends her arms and curtsies, underlining some scholars’ criticism of Carter’s use of the notion of gender as performance or masquerade. However, in this passage, Fevvers remains a ‘poor freak’ and a ‘crippled wonder.’ In fact, she does not create an illusion here of being excessively feminine, of having colourful wings but instead presents her ‘essence,’ making her ‘performance’ paradoxical if not ironic. This episode draws attention to two further aspects. First, it is other people, the audience, who take part in restoring Fevvers’s agency. It is the others’ eyes that tell her who she is, “their eyes restored her soul.”¹⁶⁶ As Grosz has shown: “[T]he body image is the result of shared sociocultural conceptions of bodies in general and shared familial and interpersonal fantasy about particular bodies” (84). We gain a sense of self and revise this sense of self through other people. Body images are in constant interaction with each other and our body image is transformed by other people’s reactions to it, which the text aptly demonstrates by means of Fevvers. Second, reclaiming agency also results in a revised body image. Fevvers looks “big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut,” so in her body image she has increased in size and she is “all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates.” Her mental state mirrors her physical appearance and vice versa. Because she has regained a sense of self and agency, the way she perceives and values her own body has changed too – which is why her discoloured plumage, the brown at the roots of her hair and her sagging shape are not of immediate relevance to her any longer. After disempowering experiences, Fevvers regains agency by shedding a view of her body as an object and by recovering access to her lived body. She, ultimately, regains agency through her body.

¹⁶⁶ This is not the only passage in the novel in which the perception of other people is central for subject formation. Fevvers, for instance, realizes: “When she thought how it was the presence of the other that made Mignon so beautiful, little tears pricked the backs of her eyes for she, Fevvers, was growing uglier every day” (NC 276); “And she would see, once again, the wonder in the eyes of the beloved and become whole. Already she felt more blonde” (NC 285). Even Lizzie comments on the change Fevvers experiences: “for, in the light of his grey eyes, her foster-daughter was transformed back into her old self again, without an application of peroxide, even” (NC 293). The last quote in particular demonstrates that Fevvers’s transformation ‘back’ into her ‘old self’ is nevertheless an alteration, for Fevvers does not rely on appearance as much as she did.

3.4 “Let me tell you something about Fevvers:” Degrading Humour

As discussed above, *Nights at the Circus* is a novel that engages with the grotesque thematically by way of its protagonist Fevvers, her hybridity as bird-woman and her gargantuan traits. However, *Nights at the Circus* cannot only be considered a grotesque novel in terms of theme or content, but also in terms of its style. The mixing of character’s voices, intertextual¹⁶⁷ references that establish links between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, the incorporation of other literary genres, the inclusion of vernacular language and narratorial comments all participate in a combination of, at times, opposed elements and thus make *Nights at the Circus* a novel that is stylistically speaking grotesque, too.¹⁶⁸ Even though Mikhail Bakhtin never directly defined a grotesque style, scholars have found clear parallels between grotesque realism and the carnivalesque, heteroglossia, polyphony and double-voiced discourse (see Pimentel Biscaia and Vice and the section on “Feminist Grotesque Style” in this thesis).¹⁶⁹ Fernihough, for instance, argues that “the text of *Nights at the Circus* is itself a carnivalesque body, which has ingested the whole of European culture and, in its bloated and uncontainable state, released it in all manner of reconfiguration, inversion and parody” (97).

What makes *Nights at the Circus* a grotesque text stylistically is its use of humour. Laughter is central to grotesque realism as it “degrades and materializes” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 20). During laughter the body takes over and thus undermines an overemphasis on intellectuality. Laughter, Brian Poole suggests, “marks a breaking point in man’s control of his anatomy as a machine for the expression of logical or

¹⁶⁷ The term “intertextuality” was coined by Julia Kristeva (see Orr) and, by and large, refers to the relationship one text establishes with other texts. Mostly, intertextuality manifests itself in references to other texts, which might be explicit (quotes, pastiche, parody, etc.) or implicit (i.e., one writer’s influence on another in terms of style).

¹⁶⁸ Bristow and Broughton consider Carter’s “a distinctly democratic aesthetic” (9) due to her reference to a wide variety of cultural products, including ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

¹⁶⁹ *Nights at the Circus* displays many of the characteristics that Bakhtin discerns when discussing dialogic discourse in the novel. “Direct authorial literary artistic narration” finds its expression in the omniscient, at times judgmental, narrator. *Skaz*, the “[s]tylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration” and “the stylistically individualized speech of characters” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 262) is represented in the idiosyncratic vernacular ways that Fevvers, Lizzie or the Colonel speak. And the “stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 262) is to be found in the form of letters (Toussaint’s letter *NC* 84-85), poems (“So we’ll go no more a-rowing”, *NC* 255), folk songs, classical music (Wagner, 18; “The Ride of the Valkyries”, 16; the ballad “A Bird in a Gilded Cage” 14) and fairy tales, to name but a few. These elements create what Bakhtin calls a heteroglot dialogue within the novel, as many different voices – the voices of characters and texts – communicate in the novel.

consciously intended content. It overrides the Cartesian dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and the Platonic dualism which subjugates the body to the control of the mind” (197). Humour in *Nights at the Circus* is created by means of degrading and parodic narratorial comments. The narrator, by way of humorous, ironic and parodic asides, undermines Fevvers’s unreflected reliance on symbolic women in her construction of her identity. Moreover, the comments partly give away the ‘real’ Fevvers or at least one of her rather more negative character traits.

Before taking a closer look at some of the comments the narrator makes, the question of who the narrator might be should be addressed. While several critics have argued that Walser is the narrator (based on the narratorial voice in the “Envoi”), it is to be doubted that Walser *alone* is the narrator of the story. Carter herself commented: “People babble a lot nowadays about the ‘unreliable’ narrator . . . so I thought: I’ll show you a *really* unreliable narrator in *Nights at the Circus!*” (Haffenden 90, emphasis in original). In the first part of the novel, Fevvers is indisputably the narrator, yet Lizzie intervenes and there are “two Scheherazades” (NC 40) who lure Walser into believing that they can perform magic tricks with clocks. In the second part of the novel, the narratorial voice cannot be ascribed to any one character and the focalization switches between Walser, Fevvers and an omniscient third-person narrator. In the third part this is even amplified by frequent switches to Fevvers’s first-person perspective. And to add to the confusion, Walser is indeed invoked as narrator at the end of the novel:

Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her. . . . All that seemed to happen to me in the third person as though, most of my life, I watched it but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again. (NC 294)

However, as Beth A. Boehm shows in her excellent reading of Carter’s novel, *Nights at the Circus* defies androcentric readerly conventions, which is why the narrator cannot be pinned down as easily. She observes that

when Fevvers ceases her narration and the point of view is no longer Walser as reader of Fevvers but instead alternates between a third-person account of the sometimes separate wanderings of Walser and Fevvers, Walser’s journalistic writings, and Fevvers’s interior monologue, the novel becomes difficult to decode according to comfortable readerly conventions. (40)

The assignment of the role of the narrator to any one character is constantly frustrated in the novel so that one is left with the feeling of ambivalence and ambiguity. Whoever the narrator might be, it is clear that s/he does pass judgement on the characters.¹⁷⁰ The narrator is frequently critical of Fevvers and indeed ‘brings her down to earth.’

Fevvers, the most famous *aerialiste* of the day; her slogan, ‘Is she fact or is she fiction?’ And she didn’t let you forget it for a minute; this query, in the French language, in foot-high letters, blazed forth from a wall-size poster, souvenir of her Parisian triumphs, dominating her London dressing room. . . . pinions large enough to bear up such a big girl. And she was a *big* girl. Evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder blades. (NC 7, emphasis in original)

First, the narrator stresses Fevvers’ persistence in maintaining the indeterminacy in regard to her genuineness by commenting: “And she didn’t let you forget it for a minute” and thus introduces Fevvers as a character who is self-centred and in constant need of attention. At the same time, however, the narrator consolidates that Fevvers is a genuine bird-woman. There is no doubt cast on her origins. Instead, the narrator simply remarks that Fevvers’s pinions match her size – her size being one of the indicators of her Gargantuan traits and a harsh contrast to the stereotypical aerialist, who tends to be slim and tiny.¹⁷¹ While there are no doubts raised concerning Fevvers’s genuineness, the last sentence, with its ironic tone and reference to Helen of Troy, expresses doubt over Fevvers’s construction as a female performer by drawing

¹⁷⁰ I would like to suggest that the narratorial comments in *Nights at the Circus* serve primarily three functions: first, they are intertextual references which create a heteroglot dialogue within the novel which brings ‘classical’ literature and ‘low’ art together, shows how they feed off and enrich each other and consequently serve a democratizing aim. Second, the narratorial comments are used to express criticism of the unreflected reliance on theories. Third, and most importantly, they function as degradation, bringing down to earth specific characters and their idealized or distorted self-images, in particular Fevvers’s. While it is mainly Fevvers who is degraded, other characters are not exempt from the narrator’s comments. In the second part of the novel in the circus in St. Petersburg, when one of the tigers escapes, Walser is momentarily paralyzed by fear but recovers control over his body. In order to save Mignon from the blood-thirsty tiger, he acts as is to be expected of a ‘real man:’ “Involuntary as his heroics, Walser let rip a tremendous, wordless war-cry: here comes the Clown to kill the Tiger! Kill it, how? Strangle it with his bare hands, perhaps?” (NC 112). This vignette derives its humour from several incongruities. First, Walser, at this point of the narrative, is not a reporter but a clown, thus, the very opposite of a tiger-slayer. Second, in spite of his masculinity as expressed through his “war-cry,” Walser is unable to defeat a beast without a weapon. Not only does he overestimate his own power but his attempt at masculinity (heroics) is touching at best.

¹⁷¹ Stoddart argues that “Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* sends up the long-standing myth about circus aerialist’s bodies being able to confound the laws of gravity with her enormous, bawdy and inelegant body” (20).

on images of mythical women. “Evidently,” as a ‘weasel word,’¹⁷² refers to her claim of being a ‘version’ of Helen of Troy. Her wings and feathers are an inheritance from her putative father, the swan. The statement is weakened through the use of the word ‘evidently’ and the information that Fevvers resembles him only “around the shoulder blades,” instead of the face or her figure. Is it not rather difficult to trace her origins if the only resemblance lies in the shoulder blades? What is called into doubt then is not her feathers and wings, but rather that these wings are an inheritance from a famous swan-father. What the narrator implies is that rather than being the offspring of a god in disguise, Fevvers is the biological result of someone less glamorous.

In the course of the novel the narrator becomes increasingly critical of Fevvers:

At close quarters, it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel. At six feet two in her stockings, she would have to give Walser a couple of inches in order to match him and, though they said she was ‘divinely tall,’ there was, off-stage, not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar. Her face, broad and oval as a meat dish, had been thrown on a common wheel out of coarse clay; nothing subtle about her appeal, which was just as well if she were to function as the democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man. . . . You’d never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers. Even Walser did not guess that. (NC 12)¹⁷³

This description is anything but flattering. The narrator describes Fevvers as rather plain, ordinary and not beautiful at all and strips her of all the extraordinary and beatific associations she is trying to establish for herself. There is a stark contrast between the feminine ideals Fevvers herself evokes and her actual body. Her size is a feature that is stressed frequently, and which, in Noël Carroll’s terms, makes her “anomalous” (296) because deviant from the ‘norm.’ Even though Fevvers’s looks seem to be aligned with classical beauty ideals, her proportions disrupt this ideal. Duggan claims:

¹⁷² A ‘weasel word’ is a superfluous word that seems to intensify the meaning of a statement but in fact weakens it. The *OED* defines weasel words as follows: “Words or statements that are intentionally ambiguous or misleading.”

¹⁷³ The narrator’s comment that “Even Walser did not guess that” puts into doubt theories of Walser being the narrator here. Would Walser as a third-person narrator be likely to make a comment such as this one about himself? Unlikely. I argue that, in most of the novel, there is a hetero-diegetic omniscient narrator who passes judgement on the characters.

Carter reveals how Fevvers's perceived vulgarity is located in her excessive size rather than in a particular feature. Instead of having a locatable defect, Fevvers by her size alone violates canons of moderation and decorum associated with female beauty in Western culture, creating a degree of aesthetic disorientation for Walser. (69)

The result is a harsh contrast to the beautiful, symbolic, mythical women Fevvers is drawing on in her construction of her performer identity. However, from a feminist disability studies perspective, Garland-Thomson suggests that

the differences of disability are cast as atrophy, meaning degeneration, a [sic] hypertrophy, meaning enlargement. People with disabilities are described as having aplasia, meaning absence or failure of formation, or hypoplasia, meaning underdevelopment. All these terms police variation and reference a hidden norm from which the bodies of people with disabilities and women are imagined to depart. (261)

Not only does Fevvers's size disrupt ideals of beauty, but she also disrupts the idea of a normative body. By virtue of being both a woman and having a disability though, Fevvery is doubly marked and doubly disruptive.

Moreover, not only is she *not* extraordinarily beautiful but beauty is not what truly matters. The narrator is quite explicit: If she is meant to be "the democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man," the century in which "all the women will have wings" (NC 285), "the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (NC 25), which Fevvers actively promotes, then beauty should be obsolete because it should not be a defining feature for women anymore. Furthermore, in this paragraph, the narrator's comments tend towards criticism. The narrator is particularly ironic and critical of her illusion of being 'divine' and the only possibility of fulfilling this by joining "gin palaces in heaven." Not only is the narrator critical of Fevvers' drinking habits, but s/he also provides us with an insight into Fevvers's mind-set as someone who is extremely greedy.

When Fevvers accepts the Grand Duke's invitation because he gives her diamond earrings as gifts and promises more, which he knows Fevvers cannot resist, the narrator steps in with his/her comments. Fevvers enters the Grand Duke's palace and reflects on wealth and poverty:

Always the same! thought Fevvers censoriously. Money is wasted on the rich. For herself, if she'd been as Croesus-wealthy as her host, she'd have fancied something like the Brighton Pavilion to call home, something to make each passer-by smile, a reciprocal gift to those from whom the wealth had come.

And, conversely, she went on to herself, sneering at the Grand Duke's palace, poverty is wasted on the poor, who never know how to make the best of things, are only the rich without money, are just as useless at looking after themselves, can't handle their cash just like the rich can't, always squandering it on bright, pretty, useless things in just the same way.

Let me tell you something about Fevvers, if you haven't noticed it for yourself already; she is a girl of philosophical bent.

Since *money* it is that makes us rich or poor, why, then: abolish money! she sometimes said to Lizzie. For all that money is, is a symbolic means of facilitating exchanges that should, by rights, be freely made or not at all. (NC 184-85, emphasis in original)

The irony is that Fevvers is critical of others but not of herself. She is, first of all, very much interested in "bright, pretty, useless things." In fact, diamonds are the reason for why she meets the Grand Duke hoping to receive some more, or as Lizzie aptly identifies her reason for going: "sheer greed" (NC 181). Her greed makes her oblivious to clear signs: "But Fevvers saw no death in the snow. All she saw was that festive sparkle of the frosty lights that made her think of diamonds" (NC 184). Not only is she greedy, but she does not seem to be someone who shares readily, she can be "less generous" (NC 19) than she portrays herself, for her reciprocal gift would be to make people smile by owning Brighton Pavilion instead of sharing the money that would go into building it. The narrator's insertion "[l]et me tell you something about Fevvers, if you haven't noticed it for yourself already; she is a girl of philosophical bent" is ironic, because the reader knows by now that Fevvers's ruminations are, if anything, pseudo-philosophical or naive at best. According to Fevvers, neither the rich, nor the poor know how to handle money, thus, no one can, and, consequently, it should be abolished. This shows Fevvers' naivety because she does not realize, as Lizzie does, that it is impossible to abolish money in a world in which capitalism is the reigning force, especially when one profits from it personally, as Fevvers does.¹⁷⁴

As Magali Cornier Michael shows, Lizzie and Fevvers reflect diverse feminist approaches, an engaged Marxist feminism and a subversive utopian feminism, which

¹⁷⁴ See Cornier Michael's essay on "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies."

becomes especially apparent in episodes such as the following. In fact, Lizzie corrects Fevvers:

But Lizzie would whistle through her moustache at Fevvers's naivety and reply: the baker can't make a loaf out of your privates, duckie, and that's all you'd have to offer him in exchange for a crust if nature hadn't made you the kind of spectacle people pay good money to see. All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure of the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbolic exchange in the marketplace; you couldn't say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl? (NC 185)

Lizzie is quite pragmatic about Fevvers's role: Fevvers's exceptionality in terms of her physique is something she must sell. Not only is this a reference to freak shows but it also comments on women's roles within capitalism. If Fevvers did not have wings, she would have to sell another part of herself, namely her genitals. Moreover, Lizzie is equally ironic about Fevvers's newly awakened political enthusiasm. Again, this does not just put Fevvers's enthusiasm and her 'prophetic role' into perspective, but it also creates humour. Fevvers's utopian vision of a new world in which "all the women will have wings, the same as I" and in which "[t]he dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed—" is only met by Lizzie in the following manner: "It's going to be more complicated than that" (NC 285-86). Again, Lizzie rebukes Fevvers's for her naive idealism. Partly, this is because Lizzie has a much better awareness of people's material needs, such as the simple need for food or shelter. Lizzie's and Fevvers's disputes add a further layer of humour to the narrative, for their political opinions could not be more opposed. In another intertextual reference, Lizzie invokes the romance plot:

'And, when you *do* find the young American, what the 'ell will you do, then? Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers' reunions always end in a marriage. . . . Orlando takes his Rosalind. She says: "To you I give myself, for I am yours." And that,' she added, a low thrust, 'goes for a girl's bank account, too.' . . . 'The Prince who rescues the princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they've taken a liking to one another or not. That's the custom. . . . The name of this custom is a "happy ending.'" (NC 280-81, emphasis in original)

While Rebecca Munford believes that the ending reaffirms traditional plots or structures in her reading of the novel as Gothic narrative that includes “traditional notions of marriage and the domestic” (252), I contend that even though the text alludes to Walser as a “deceived husband” (NC 295), it does so ironically and with Fevvers’s infertility and her feminist commitment in mind. Thus, the traditional “happy ending” as depicted in fairy tales (NC 281) that Lizzie cautions Fevvers against is more of an unconventional union. Boehm insists that “[a]lthough Carter’s ‘happy ending’ does reunite the lovers (but not in marriage), it does so in a self-conscious, metafictional way by drawing explicit connections between marriage as a literary device and marriage as a social convention” (42). Episodes such as the above suggest that Carter is employing the romance plot ironically and the ending, while indeed a happy ending, does not end in marriage but in a sexual union instead.

The novel ends with Fevvers’s and Walser said sexual union and Fevvers admitting to Walser that she fooled him concerning her status as the “only fully-feathered intacta in the history if the world” (NC 294), resulting in her laughter that spreads over the globe, “until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing” (NC 295).¹⁷⁵ While the end of the novel seems to be the ‘biggest joke,’ providing a meta-fictional comment on a literary text such as *Nights at the Circus* and implying that the reader has been fooled into believing that the seemingly central question of Fevvers’s genuineness will be answered at the end of the novel, it reveals that questions such as these are, in fact, irrelevant. The last sentence in particular seems to be of relevance: “‘To think I really fooled you!’ she marvelled. ‘It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence’” (NC 295). It refers to Fevvers’s claim of being the only fully feathered intacta in the world.¹⁷⁶ Carter herself commented on the ending: “Her boast is partly a celebration of the confidence trick, among other things, as well as a description of her way of being: she’s had the confidence to pull it off,

¹⁷⁵ Some critics (Palmer and Peach) read this in terms of the carnivalesque with Fevvers’s final laughter defying traditional, social order. Sceats, for instance, reads it as “truly comic inasmuch as it stresses fertility, continuance and the restorative power of laughter; the spirit Fevvers embodies is none other than that of libido” (Sceats, *Food* 60). Other critics challenge precisely the use of carnivalesque laughter for it does not provide the necessary means to change oppressive structures; it only represents temporary liberation – something Carter criticizes herself. Thus, Gasiorek argues that Fevvers’s “weapons are those of mockery and laughter rather than of silence and cunning” (134) and that the novel “adopts a carnivalesque mode that undermines gender hierarchies but also deflates its own messianism” (135).

¹⁷⁶ It also refers to Fevvers’s “self-confidence as a narrator,” as Miriam Wallraven argues (392).

after all” (Carter qtd. in Haffenden 1985, 90).¹⁷⁷ Yet, it also refers to her trajectory, from apparent confidence in her worth, her lack of it due to being objectified and objectifying herself, and her regaining of confidence (agency) through her lived body. Yes, there is nothing like confidence as *Nights at the Circus* illustrates, but confidence can only be gained by means of the body.

3.5 “I’m not in the mood for literary criticism:” Summary of Results

This chapter has demonstrated that in its invocation of the grotesque, *Nights at the Circus* provides a critical examination and reflection on the response to non-normative female bodies. By means of engaging with histories of disability ingrained in terms such as the ‘grotesque,’ ‘freak’ or ‘monster,’ the novel exemplifies innovative insights which recent disability theory and in particular feminist disability theory has brought to the fore. The novel is concerned with uncovering the mutual construction of the female and the disabled body which becomes especially apparent in episodes in which Fevvers is objectified both because of her exceptional body and her femaleness. As exemplified through the various images Fevvers assumes and which are imposed on her, femaleness and disability in the text are represented as embodied and not naturally given. Thus, Fevvers’s experience of ‘becoming’ a bird-woman – in the Beauvoirian sense of “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (*The Second Sex* 293) – can be read as a metaphor for female bodily experience in general.

Nevertheless, Carter also employs the grotesque in the way Bakhtin conceptualized it in order to undermine the dominant body image ideal, which is pictured as male, white, heterosexual and able-bodied. Hence, Fevvers is presented as an excessive and transgressive character in terms of food, drink, bodily processes and, most importantly, sexual urges. This challenges the “asexual objectification” (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 267; Hahn 30) of disabled women and adds a twist to the notion of the grotesque as representative of fertility and thus inherently linked to the female.

¹⁷⁷ Cornier Michael maintains: “Fevvers’s subjecthood is assured through Walser’s question, since it proves that she has the power to construct her own version of herself” (517).

Furthermore, *Nights at the Circus* engages with the notion of female agency by way of tracing the adaptation of Fevvers's body image: Initially Fevvers invests heavily in her exceptional body, in particular her wings, and thus internalizes a view of herself as a (fetish) object. As she is brought up in a brothel where she also has to help out occasionally, Fevvers embodies self-objectification. She learns to actively take advantage of her exceptional body, of her most prominent bodily markers – her wings and her genitals – and thus becomes complicit in her own objectification. Due to her own identification with the objective body and her interest in monetary gain, she is exposed to and willingly participates in harmful and life-threatening encounters with men who want to possess her – notable episodes are her incarceration at Madame Schreck's, her near-death experience as a sacrificial victim at the hands of Mr Rosencreutz and, finally, the objectification at the Grand Duke's place.

In these encounters Fevvers experiences physically what it means to be deprived of agency and bodily freedom. She is made aware of the limited agency she has as a 'disabled' woman in spite of her assumed prominence. When she breaks one of her wings at the beginning of the third part of the novel, this is emblematic of the harm that has been done to her by men such as Mr Rosencreutz or the Grand Duke. The emotional harm which she suffers and the lack of agency she experiences translates directly into physical harm, namely a broken wing. However, it is by means of precisely this broken wing that Fevvers starts recovering a sense of her lived body, which results in a renewed sense of agency. Unlike many critics who regard Fevvers's self-fetishization to be representative of the whole novel, this chapter has shown that Fevvers's perception and point of view in regard to her own body, i.e. her body image, change throughout the narrative and that, as a consequence, she sheds this view of her body as fetish object.

Nights at the Circus also draws heavily on the grotesque mode in terms of its style. Laughter is central to the narrative not only because it features so prominently at the end of the novel but also because of the text's humour and irony. The narrator's ironic and sarcastic comments serve a degrading function and reveal Fevvers's essential motivation in her work and her transactions with other people, especially men. While these degrading comments serve clearly humorous purposes, they also

establish ambivalence in regard to the narrator of the novel. While Walser is invoked as the narrator at the end of the novel, the first part of the novel is clearly in the hands of Fevvers and Lizzie. In the second part of the novel, the narratorial voice switches between Walser, Fevvers and an omniscient third-person narrator, and in the third part, the reader frequently encounters a first-person focalisation through Fevvers. The difficulty in ascribing the role of the narrator to any one character does not only hint at the possibility of polyphony in writing, but it also defies traditional (male) readerly conventions.

In its emphasis on the fleshliness of Fevvers's body, the novel extends the notion of the performativity of gender and puts emphasis on what material traces the performance of gender leaves in bodies, thus somewhat paralleling the concerns raised in Atwood's novel. Unlike Atwood's novel, however, *Nights at the Circus* puts greater emphasis on femaleness as connected to another marker, namely disability.¹⁷⁸ Even though whiteness seems to remain mostly unremarked, the novel, in conjuring concepts such as the grotesque (in terms of the paintings found in underground chambers), the 'freak' and the 'monster,' alludes to the marker disability and in particular female disability and thus hints at the impossibility of only focusing on the factor gender. For, as the novel shows, disability is always already gendered and, relatedly, femaleness is always already associated with disability. Thus, in terms of the diversity of female embodiment, Carter's novel makes an important contribution by linking gender to another identity marker.

¹⁷⁸ Even though I have not focused on this aspect in this chapter, Fevvers's working class background marks her as well, albeit not as strongly as her disability.

4. Transgender Embodiment in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

“I am painfully aware that as a writer I am making things up for a kind of entertainment – but the situations that I put my characters in, actually exist in the real world and they happen to real people.”

(Mootoo qtd. in Jiwa n. pag.)

Cereus Blooms at Night, set on the fictitious Caribbean island Lantanacalara, intertwines the lives of Mala Ramchandin, her nurse Tyler and Mala's only friends, Ambrose and Otoh Mohanty. At the beginning of the novel, Mala is committed to the Alms House where Tyler works – based on her assumed madness and the rumour that she has killed her father even though she cannot be tried for lack of proof. Mala and Tyler form almost immediately a strong bond even though Mala is not able to communicate via words anymore. It is Tyler, in fact, who tells Mala's story.

Mala's father Chandin, whose father was an indentured laborer from India, is educated in a white missionary family and, to the Reverend's dismay, falls in love with his 'sister' Lavinia. Both the Reverend and Lavinia reject him, and he marries Sarah, a woman from his community, instead, with whom he has two daughters, Mala and Asha. When he learns of his wife and Lavinia being lovers, catastrophe is rife. The two women escape leaving Mala and her sister Asha behind, who then become the victims of verbal and sexual abuse at the hands of their father. While Asha runs away from home in her teens, Mala stays and becomes a substitute for her mother, suffering emotional and physical abuse. Her relationship with her childhood friend Ambrose leads to the violent climax of the story in which Mala is raped and beaten by her father, yet fights him and finally locks him up in a basement room. This is followed by years of social ostracism, during which Mala has barely any contact to other people. Mala's seclusion is only interrupted when Otoh, Ambrose's son, wants to get to know her but instead triggers the police's search of the house, the discovery of Chandin's corpse and consequently Mala's transferal to the Alms House. While Mala's story is marked by her mother's and later her sister's flight, abuse at the hands of her father followed by decades of social ostracism, the narrative also provides a

subtle, yet powerful, comment on transgender experience by way of the representation of Tyler and their lover-to-be Otoh. The cereus plant, which surfaces as the central image in the novel, traces the histories of the main characters and unites their diverse, yet similar, struggles.

According to Edwards and Graulund, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is representative of the postcolonial grotesque because of its depiction of “[g]rotesque violations” (130), because it engages with “conceptions of margin and centre, normality and abnormality” (130) and because it is “fraught with transgressions and taboos” (131). While this cannot be denied, *Cereus Blooms at Night* cannot *only* be classified as grotesque because it engages with various forms of transgressions.¹⁷⁹ Instead, I argue that it reflects important grotesque themes because of its emphasis on materiality. In fact, critics have noted *Cereus Blooms at Night*’s resonance with embodiment theory and new materialisms. In her chapter on “Intergenerational Witnessing in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Donna McCormack focuses on embodied acts of witnessing and trauma and contends that “the body is central to the possibility of achieving change (and to maintaining the status quo)” (65). In the most comprehensive new materialist analysis so far, Tania Aguila-Way shows how the novel “prefigures” many new materialist concerns and how

by highlighting the need to engage with biological bodies and material processes in order to challenge the epistemic violence generated by colonialism, Mootoo’s novel opens up possibilities for a different kind of engagement with scientific ways of knowing, even if it does not fully realize this materialist vision within its own narrative space. (53)

Yet, both McCormack’s and Aguila-Way’s analyses focus on Mala’s connection to materiality, sidelining the novel’s transgender characters and overlooking the materializing effects of language.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, the representation of transgender characters in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is not only vital for discussions of new materialism but it also complicates

¹⁷⁹ There is a separate field dedicated to the study of transgression, as publications such as Julian Wolfreys’s *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* and Chris Jenks’s *Transgression* attest to.

¹⁸⁰ Chen points out that the criticism directed at social constructivism and its emphasis on language and discourse has virtually led to a complete rejection of language discussions in new materialist writing (51). Language is not “dematerialized” (51) as Chen argues and should indeed figure in discussions of the materializing of matter.

certain conceptions of feminism and especially the notion of a “lesbian feminist novel” (Kim 155). Susan Stryker shows how

‘Woman’ typically has been mobilized in ways that advance the specific class, racial, national, religious, and ideological agendas of some feminists at the expense of other women; the fight over transgender inclusion within feminism is not significantly different, in many respects, from other fights involving working-class women, women of color, lesbian women, disabled women, women who produce or consume pornography, and women who practice consensual sadomasochism. Just as in these other struggles, grappling with transgender issues requires that some feminists re-examine, or perhaps examine for the first time, some of the exclusionary assumptions they embed within the fundamental conceptual underpinnings of feminism. Transgender phenomena challenge the unifying potential of the category ‘woman,’ and call for new analyses, new strategies and practices, for combating discrimination and injustice based on gender inequality. (7)

Similar to the exclusions that women of colour have faced, and still face within feminism, transgender activists, too, have been and are still being rejected within certain feminist groups. *Cereus Blooms at Night (CN)* actively questions this exclusionary thinking by having a transgender character narrate the story of a heterosexual woman who has been abused for most of her life. The novel does not equate their struggles yet shows that the cause of sexual abuse and transphobia springs from the same source. Thus, in my analysis of the novel, I place emphasis on, first, the materializing effects of words; second, the embodied grotesqueness of Mala’s body; third, the communicative potential of bodies; fourth, the double-voicedness of the narration; and, fifth, transgender embodiment.

4.1 “You cannot, you must not have desire:” The Materializing Effects of Discourse

This section takes a closer look at the materializing effects of language.¹⁸¹ For, as Mel Chen observes: “Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response” (54). I am in particular interested in, first, how words

¹⁸¹ According to Chen, “animacy is much more than the state of being animate, and it is precisely the absence of a consensus around its meaning that leaves it open to both inquiry and resignification” (4) and “[u]sing animacy as a central construct, rather than, say, ‘life’ or ‘liveliness’ – though these remain a critical part of the conversation . . . – helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times” (3).

affect Chandin Ramchandin and trigger his turn into a violent and abusive individual and, second, in the physical effects of words, more specifically so-called ‘gossip.’

Mala’s story, or rather the story of how she got to the Alms House, as told through Tyler’s perspective, begins with her father Chandin and his upbringing in a white missionary family. Chandin is the son of an “indentured field laborer from India” (CN 26). Wishing to leave behind his “karmic destiny as servant labourer” (CN 26) old man Ramchandin agrees to convert so that his son can be adopted by the white Reverend Thoroughly and his wife who are from the “Shivering Northern Wetlands” (CN 27). Chandin becomes part of the Reverend’s household and thus gains a sister, Lavinia. However, even though he is adopted, he is not truly treated as the Reverend’s son. First, when Chandin’s name change is discussed, which Chandin does not have a say in, Mrs Thoroughly thinks that “a Christian, if not Wetlandish name was more suitable for a son of theirs” (CN 30). The Reverend, however, believes that if Chandin keeps his name, he can more easily “win his people’s trust” (CN 30). While this might be a reasonable decision in terms of what the Reverend wants Chandin to do, namely become a teacher of the gospel, it in fact betrays his rejection of Chandin as his ‘son.’ The Reverend does not want Chandin to have a Christian name, because this would entail fully accepting him into his family. Second, Chandin has a specifically allocated place in the household, a “straight-back upholstered chair had come to be marked as his,” which Chandin himself considers “an antidote to the chaos of his uprootedness” (CN 31). Yet, again, it betrays the Reverend’s hypocrisy in not allowing Chandin to close to the Reverend’s own family and to choose his own place and thus exercise his ‘rights as a son’ independently. Third, when the Reverend informs Chandin of an impending family journey, he does not include Chandin in his family:

“Before the term starts up again, I have decided to take the family to spend the next few months back home in the Wetlands. You know we have not been back in a long time.”

Chandin’s heart leapt, thinking he was to be included in the family journey.

“Mrs. Thoroughly, Lavinia and I will leave in a matter of days,” said the Reverend. (CN 40)

The Reverend's exclusion of Chandin from his family gives an indication as to his 'real' feelings towards Chandin and his inability to accept someone into his family who is racially marked.

When Chandin falls in love with his 'sister' Lavinia, who does not share his feelings, Chandin, instead of losing interest, begins to hate himself. Chandin's attachment to Lavinia transforms and "what sprang up were flames of anger and self-loathing. He began to hate his looks, the colour of his skin, the texture of his hair, his accent, the barracks, his real parents and at times even the Reverend and his god" (CN 33). As a result, he decides to change "what he had the power to change. Chandin took note of the Reverend's rigid, austere posture, so unlike his own father's propensity to bend or twist or fold his body whichever way the dictates of comfort tipped him" (CN 34). Chandin becomes a colonial "mimic man," who copies the Reverend and later his white classmates at the seminary. Yet, he is "[a]lmost the same but not white' (Bhabha 130). The white, able-bodied, heterosexual, male body image ideal is unattainable for Chandin simply because of his skin colour and thus his racial marking. While he mimics the Reverend and his white classmates, his body image, which is also formed by responses to his body by other people, in this case the white Reverend and classmates, remains defined by a racial dynamic.

When the Reverend is made aware of Chandin's attachment being more than a brotherly one, he imposes a prohibition:

Your attentions have not been unnoticed by my wife and me. . . . You are to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more. A brother. She is your sister and you her brother. . . . You cannot, you must not have desire for your sister Lavinia. That is surely against God's will. Do you understand? Do you understand me, Chandin! Otherwise, otherwise..." (CN 37, ellipsis in original).

When the Reverend pronounces his shattering prohibition, it is based on a paradox: Even though Chandin is officially 'adopted' by the Reverend, he is not truly treated as Lavinia's brother or in fact the Reverend's son. The Reverend insists on Chandin and Lavinia being siblings yet is unable to produce good reasons against Chandin's desire for Lavinia as indicated by his lack of words, "Otherwise, otherwise..." (CN 37, ellipsis in original). The text clarifies that it is not the fear of 'incest' that motivates the Reverend, but rather his fear of miscegenation, for Lavinia later becomes engaged to her cousin who is "not a true relation" but who is financially better off than

Chandin (*CN* 44), adding to Chandin's confusion and alienation. It is in particular the Reverend's pronouncement ("You cannot, you must not," *CN* 37) that shows that Chandin has been dispossessed "of humanist self-determination, self-definition, and agency" (Chen 50).¹⁸²

While Chandin has not been directly insulted by the Reverend's words, they nevertheless have an impact because they put into doubt his worldview: "His world seemed suddenly to have shrunk" (*CN* 37); "Chandin's world spun and blackened as if the sun had suddenly been switched off" (*CN* 45). Consequently, when Chandin is confronted with Lavinia and Sarah's love affair and resulting escape, the core notions his life is based on are destroyed. Not only has his Christian upbringing taught him that relationships ought to be heterosexual, but owing to the Reverend he has also implicitly incorporated the view that relationships between individuals of different 'races' are not to be accepted.¹⁸³ Prohibitions do not merely constitute words, however, as this illustrates. Chandin has embodied these prohibitions (the prohibition against miscegenation and the prohibition against queerness), that is, they have literally become part of his flesh. This exemplifies that words have a profound impact, an impact that extends beyond the superficial. The novel thus illustrates that words leave physical traces in bodies that shape the individual.

The materializing effects of language can also be discerned in the aftermath of Lavinia and Sarah's elopement. While the story is not discussed openly, "during the evenings when villagers congregated in the shade of their favourite trees to take in the breeze, talk out their problems and hear a little gossip," it nevertheless "spread across the island with the swiftness of a brush fire and the quietness of ripples in a sugar-factory pond" (*CN* 64). In the aftermath of Sarah and Lavinia's escape, Chandin starts abusing his daughters. Even though the community is aware of Chandin's abuse of his daughters, it does not intervene:

¹⁸² Interestingly, Mootoo refrains from constructing Chandin as animalistic in his attacks on his children and, in particular, Mala. This is clearly meant to not put Chandin on a lower position of the animacy scale (see Chen). All in all, she does not wish to de-humanize Chandin and thus re-affirm constructions of the colonial other as savage.

¹⁸³ Aguila-Way makes a similar point: "Sarah and Lavinia's subsequent elopement . . . completely shatters the prohibitions against miscegenation and same-sex desire that Chandin first internalized through his cultivation as a colonial mimic man and has now remobilized within the framework of his own Indo-Trinidadian household" (Aguila-Way 65). McCormack suggests that "Chandin's attachment to the Reverend's teachings is both intellectual and bodily" (60).

While many shunned him there were those who took pity, for he was once the much respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And, they further reasoned, what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children. Whether they disliked him or tolerated his existence, to everyone Chandin was Sir. (CN 195)

First, Lavinia's and Sarah's relationship and escape – incidentally, they transgress national borders – is seen by many as the cause of Chandin's 'mental' state. According to the community, it is Sarah who is to blame for Chandin's behaviour; her disappearance is used as an explanation for Chandin's "madness." Because of her "devilish mind" (CN 195), Chandin abuses his children. "The romantic relationship between Sarah and Lavinia," Kim argues, "is the ultimate transgression because it contradicts the authority of church and father" (160). However, not only do Lavinia and Sarah cross racial and heteronormative boundaries, but by leaving the children behind, Sarah also severely undermines an idealized image of motherhood. Sarah leaves her daughters in order to be with her female lover and thus undoes a self-sacrificial version of motherhood. It is Sarah's transgression of norms of motherhood rather than her queerness that people object to. Accordingly, equating Chandin's abuse of his daughters with Sarah's transgression assuages collective guilt.

Second, while many members of the Lantanacamaran community seem to be connected to the church and its teachings, they do not dare to intervene in what some must consider to be morally wrong. It is not simply moral righteousness that is at stake here, but a man's status in society. Even though he clearly does not enjoy this status anymore, Chandin used to be "the much respected teacher of the Gospel," yet he remains "Sir" to "everyone" (CN 195). This betrays Lantanacamaran society's adherence to social status and in particular the status of a man. However, it also betrays a reliance on words and the status and consequently power they confer.

Chandin's "perversion" has also direct and long-lasting implications for Asha and Mala because they are socially ostracized. At the end of the novel we learn that Asha tried to contact Mala and sent her several letters but "[n]one of Asha's letters were ever delivered because the righteous postman, deeming the Ramchandin house to be a place of sin and moral corruption, refused to go up there" (CN 243). Once again, since Chandin behaves in a sinful way and is morally corrupt, his children are

deemed to be sinful and corrupt, too. Here, the text even insinuates that Lantanacamaran society might believe these perversions are hereditary. Again, words in the form of rumours or gossip have a direct impact on Mala's well-being, for, had she received the letters, things might have turned out differently. Mootoo thus exemplifies that far from having no impact, 'gossip' can have a direct bearing on the psychological *and* physical wellbeing of individuals.

The materializing effects of discourse further exert influence beyond the characters involved, however, as Tyler's struggle with his queer desire suggests:

Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my "perversion," which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. (CN 47-48)

Society's conflation of Chandin's perversion with queerness has an impact on Tyler and, arguably, other members of society, most notably those who deviate. Initially, Tyler is confused by the equation between Chandin's perversion and his own, for he senses that they are not the same. Moreover, the gender and sex roles available to people are always connected to "rules" which Tyler knows may vary. Thus, Tyler goes abroad so as not to be defined by his sexual orientation but rather by his "foreignness." The crossing of a national border carries the hope of simultaneously crossing a sexual one as well. As he realizes, however, he can only momentarily break free from being sexually marked, for there is no complete getting away from gender hierarchies.

4.2 "[E]very fibre was sensitized:" Grotesque Embodiment

The cereus plant, which establishes a material connection between the main characters in the novel, is the novel's leading grotesque motif: It is an "unruly" and "gangly" (CN 5), unremarkable cactus, which blooms only once a year with huge white (CN 134) and crimson flowers (CN 152). Not only is its rare, night-time bloom

almost immediately followed by the flowers' withering, but its characteristic smell with its "vanilla-like sweetness" and "curdling" (CN 152) is both pleasant and repelling.¹⁸⁴ The cereus plant speaks to the ambivalence at the heart of the grotesque, where "we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 24).

The cereus is only one of many grotesque motifs in the novel. The character most easily identified with the grotesque is Mala Ramchandin. First, she is closely connected to 'nature,' earthiness and matter and thus represents "the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 18). Tyler describes her as having "an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost" (CN 11) and "a curiously natural smell" (CN 12) when he first meets her. Indeed, the novel presents her as closely connected to nature and other non-human beings:

The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings – every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. (CN 126-27)

Mala responds physically to an animal's movement, something as minute as the flapping of wings. Her body is attuned to her environment to such an extent that it directly responds to what happens around her. Interestingly, words are unable to perform this kind of communication. Not only does the text imply that the body has other means of communicating aside from verbal language, but it insinuates that this material form of communication is much more precise and pays more attention to detail, for "every fibre was sensitized."

Second, Mala can be associated with the grotesque because she performs bodily functions without shame:

¹⁸⁴ Aguila-Way and Hong trace the novel's engagement with Linnaean botany (Aguila-Way) and natural history (Hong).

Many of her sounds were natural expansions and contractions of her body. She grunted when lifting something heavy. She dredged and expelled phlegm. She sighed melodiously. Cried and belched unabashedly. She coughed and sneezed and spat and wiped away mucus with no care for social graces. She laughed, sometimes as quietly as a battimamselle flapping its wing tips against water in an old drum, or as raucously as a parrot imitating it. She farted at will, for there was no one around to contradict her. . . . She fed herself when she needed to, voided when and where the impulse knocked. (*CN* 127)

Through grotesque acts such as farting, belching, laughing, expelling phlegm, spitting, coughing, sneezing, crying and defecating, Mala's body overcomes its boundaries and becomes part of her surroundings. In its contractions and expansions her body is connected to the world. Moreover, some of her bodily sounds are described in comparison to animals, which underlines her connection to 'nature.' However, one grotesque element is missing, namely Mala's connection to other human bodies. Bakhtin argues that

the body and the bodily have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. (*Rabelais* 19)

Mala performs these bodily functions "unabashedly" with "no care for social graces" as "there was no one around to contradict her" (*CN* 127). The text implies that it is her role as a social outcast that allows her to behave in such an unrestricted way. Yet, Mala does establish a connection to Tyler and thus is partly reintegrated into society, with Tyler, Otoh and Ambrose representing a community that is able to incorporate an individual such as Mala – unlike her former community that rejected her.

Furthermore, it is the role of a social outcast that frees her from culturally formed disinclinations:

She paid no attention to the odour rising out of the bucket. The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended, and she revelled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms along the back wall of the house. (*CN* 128)

Mala does not distinguish between pleasant and unpleasant, 'good' and 'bad' smells; all smells are the same to her because she considers decay simply an extension of life, a transformed version of life. For Mala, growth and decay go hand in hand and she has a bodily awareness that one cannot exist without the other.

The above-quoted passages establish Mala as connected to ‘earthiness.’ She is depicted as ‘in touch’ with nature and the animals in her garden: “Mala’s companions were the garden’s birds, insects, snails and reptiles” (CN 127). Mala cohabits the garden with “moths, centipedes, millipedes, cockroaches and unnamed insects,” with “Aves, Hexapoda, Gastropoda and Reptilia” (CN 128) and she does not intervene in their lives: “Mala permitted them to roam boldly and multiply at leisure throughout her property” (CN 128). Mala’s life revolves around the garden, which she inhabits instead of the house.¹⁸⁵ However, the narrative establishes a connection between Mala and ‘nature’ only to undermine it. Otoh’s “dreams of meeting Mala [are] filled with the scent of frilly herbs and potions, potpourri and balms, and nothing so oppressive as what choked him now” (CN 153). Otoh falls victim to cultural imagination that envisions nature as pure, beautiful and benign and ‘ideal’ women as barer of these attributes. What he encounters is, in fact, the very opposite of what he imagined. The novel comments on the juxtaposition between nature and culture, and the concomitant association of women with nature and men with culture.

Indeed, the text undoes associations of women and benign nature by presenting Mala, in line with the feminist grotesque, as a female character who defies feminine ideals, especially ideals of purity and cleanliness. Several scholars have commented on Mala’s queerness as a result of her non-conformity to feminine gender ideals (see Howells; Wesling; Wallace; Hong). As Gayatri Gopinath states,

Mootoo’s text. . . imagines queerness as residing not solely in particular bodies that are specifically marked as ‘lesbian.’ Mala, for instance, is explicitly named as queer in the novel in the sense that she extricates herself from the terms of heterosexual domesticity. (184)

Moreover, the text undermines associations with women as the makers of homes.¹⁸⁶ Instead of keeping house, Mala lets it decompose. She lets nature take over, and it is the plants that keep the house from falling apart completely (once again underlining the agentic aspect of non-human organic matter). Mala strips furniture of its intended

¹⁸⁵ According to Edwards and Graulund, Mala is “reduced to living in a ‘cave of abjection,’ a grotto-like space” (132). The key problem with this explanation is that Mala, in effect, does not live in the house (230). She lives outside of it, in the garden.

¹⁸⁶ For more exhaustive analyses of ‘home’ in *Cereus Blooms at Night* see Meg Wesling’s article “Neocolonialism, Queer Kinship, and Diaspora: Contesting the Romance of the Family in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” Gopinath’s chapter “Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: *Funny Boy* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*” and Helff’s study *Unreliable Truths: Transcultural Homeworlds in Indian Women’s Fiction of the Diaspora*.

function because she uses it to build walls (CN 129): “The individual shapes of the furniture were all but obliterated by the density of dust” (CN 129). She does not cook or prepare food, which is why Ambrose and later Otoh deliver food to her house once a month and she only consumes pepper sauce to dull her pain; it does not serve as nourishment. Being the very opposite of a homemaker, then, Mala undermines feminine stereotypes. Thus, the novel complicates the nature/culture and equally the male/female binary, which assigns a passive role to nature and matter (female) and an active role to culture and thought (male).

As discussed above, Mala lives in the garden, instead of the house. Kim considers the garden a space of contradiction (162). Indeed, while it connects Mala to fertility and femininity (Helff 99), these associations are weakened by her grotesqueness.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, many scholars consider the garden an “alternative space” (Gopinath 183). Sissy Helff, for instance, maintains that “the garden represents a fertile ground for the cultivation of an alternative society or system, a society with a vital, transcultural spirit in which transformation is daily business” (100). According to Helff, the garden is too close to the ancestral house and thus its oppression, so that the garden (or matriarchy) is not a viable alternative to the house (patriarchy), which is why it is destroyed at the end. Aguila-Way also points out that

Mala’s garden [is] a place of disorientation which, more than simply disrupting the racial and sexual hierarchies constructed by Linnaean botany and other related scientific discourses, enacts modes of interrelation and affiliation that cannot be described through the knowledge systems produced by colonial *or* postcolonial discourse. (54, emphasis in original)

Yet again, the garden’s destruction at the end of the novel signifies “that the novel ultimately cannot support the materialist possibilities it sets in motion” (Aguila-Way 91).

I read Mala’s garden primarily as a grotesque space where life and death combine and intermingle. In the Bakhtinian sense, it is a place of ambiguity, for it is both paradisiacal and hellish, a place of death and regeneration. When Otoh enters the garden, he is overcome by the smells: there is a “pungent stagnancy,” “full-bodied foulness of an overflowed latrine,” “putridity,” “miasma” (CN 153) and “stench” (CN

¹⁸⁷ In her outstanding reading of the novel, Aguila-Way also draws attention to its Gothic elements. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, then, the grotesque and the Gothic conceptually overlap.

154). On entering the garden, Otoh is reminded of a smell,¹⁸⁸ “the memory of an outdoor latrine far behind his grandmother’s house, down by the edge of the cane field” (CN 153). The reference to cane fields conjures associations with slavery and indentured labor: “In Caribbean plantation societies, where sugar was the dominant economic resource,” Donette Francis points out, “the cane fields have long been seen as a site of labor violations” (80). The cane field, then, conjures a shared past, a shared heritage of slavery and the inhumane conditions people were subjected to and connects directly to the sexual abuse Mala was exposed to. However, the strong emphasis on olfactory perception is also an implied criticism of the reliance, or overreliance, on visual proof, which might be faulty or insufficient. What Otoh *sees* in the garden is in direct contrast to what he *smells*: Not only does he see a mudra tree that is exceedingly large and in which peekoplats live which he had “[n]ever before . . . seen . . . in the open” (CN 155) – both of which are fictitious, magical species – but “[i]t was as though he had stumbled unexpectedly on a lost jungle, and except for the odours he would have sworn he was in paradise” (CN 155). Thus, Otoh’s olfactory and visual perceptions are at odds in Mala’s garden, undermining the colonial and patriarchal emphasis on sight.

Similarly, the decaying house symbolizes the remains and the decay of patriarchy and colonialism. This is also why it serves as food for the animals, insects and plants in the garden. It is Chandin’s corpse, moreover, which provides nourishment to moths: “Thousands of tiny white moths had so tightly packed themselves side by side that the tiny hooks on the edges of their wings had locked together, linking them to form a heavy sheet that was slowly devouring the corpse underneath” (CN 184). This is literally “death feeding life” (CN 130).¹⁸⁹ The representation of the garden and Chadin’s corpse thus connects to the idea of renewal and what Bakhtin calls the “reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (*Rabelais* 21). At the same time, it connects to new feminist materialisms because matter is considered agentic and active. In fact, as

¹⁸⁸ McCormack suggests that “[s]mells are an embodied access to memories that might otherwise remain inaccessible” and that “[s]mell is the *body’s* way of remembering” (52, emphasis in original).

¹⁸⁹ For Edwards and Graulund, Mala’s unwillingness and inability to “discern incongruity, excess, disproportion or disgust” signify that she is “post-grotesque” (133). However, I argue that there is no such thing as the “post-grotesque” because, as an aesthetic mode, the grotesque is timeless.

Chen shows, animacy can illustrate “how matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’ animates cultural life in important ways” (2). The novel illustrates that negative experiences and an abusive heritage can initiate change, can give rise to something new, without leaving this abusive heritage behind completely. The “ghost[s],” “remnants” and “memory” mentioned in this episode allude to the remains of such a heritage, which can never be completely wiped out. As a grotesque space, the garden offers ways of resisting dominant culture. It is a grotesque space where the world is turned upside-down or inside out. The destruction of the garden then would not necessarily suggest a failure of this ‘alternative space’ but rather the possibility of a ‘regeneration’ of the social structure.

4.3 “I could feel the fear trapped in this woman’s body:”

Communicating Bodies

Another element that affiliates Mala with the grotesque is her way of communicating with her body. As McCormack maintains: “Mala speaks with and through her body” (43). It is through her body that she establishes a connection to the outside world and to other people, at least those people who are willing and able to understand her. I suggest that Tyler and Mala’s connection is first and foremost bodily. When Tyler and Mala first meet, Mala does not talk, or to be more precise, she does not use words to communicate with others. Speaking out has only brought Mala misery because she has been taken from her house as a result of it (CN 185-86).

Mala communicates via her body with Tyler, and Tyler understands not simply intellectually, but he rather understands by means of his body. The novel illustrates that body images “communicate with each other either in parts or as wholes” (Schilder qtd. in Weiss 33). When Mala is brought to the Alms House, Tyler is assigned to her care because the other sisters and nurses are afraid of Mala. Tyler describes seeing Mala’s body for the first time in the following manner:

For such a tiny spectre of a being, the new resident breathed deeply and loudly in her drugged sleep. I squatted at the side of the canvas stretcher, peering at her. I expected her facial skin to be grey but it was ochre, like richly fired clay. Her skeletal structure was clearly visible, her thin skin draped over protruding bones and sagged into crevices that musculature had once filled. Even so, it did not take much imagination to realize that she must have once had a modest dignity. She slept on soundlessly. (CN 11)

Tyler watches Mala sleep and examines her body. He reads the signs Mala's body gives: the thinness, the colour, the movement of breathing. Even though Mala is tiny and thin, resulting in clearly visible bones, thin skin and a lack of muscles, she has a certain presence through her deep and loud breathing. Thus, Tyler detects a 'modest dignity' simply by reading Mala's body. However, it is not simply Mala's body that Tyler reads but rather her lived body, that is, the way Mala inhabits this body, even while asleep. Without having spoken to her, Tyler already establishes a strong bond with Mala and even touches her.

The urge to touch overcame me. I rested my palm gently on her silver hair. I expected it to be coarse and wiry, qualities that would have fit the rumours. But her hair, though oily from lack of care, was soft and silken. This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving. (CN 11)

Tyler has heard of the rumours surrounding Mala that construct her as a madwoman. However, one simple touch is sufficient to turn Mala from "the incarnation of fearful tales" into a "living human being." Interestingly, Tyler is surprised by the quality of Mala's hair, which is "soft and silken" (CN 11). This is a type of knowledge that is only accessible to him because of touch. Hence, this episode emphasizes the importance of human touch, the acknowledgement of someone else's lived body and materiality, which produces another, a different kind of epistemology.

Moreover, touching Mala leads Tyler to an understanding of what she might have experienced. He comments: "I could feel the fear trapped in this woman's body." Later he adds that "I felt as though I were witnessing a case of neglect" (CN 11) and that he can feel the "symptoms of trauma" (CN 13). Tyler has to clean up Mala and it is then that he comes even closer to understanding Mala's past:

Miss Ramchandin did not help me turn her body. I understood and did the job quietly, trying to be as invisible as is possible when working on her private parts. She was beginning to perturb me, not because I feared her but rather because I felt an empathy for her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips and deep, slow, calculated breathing – an empathy that words alone cannot describe. (CN 19)

Tyler 'understands.' The reader, at this point of the narrative, does not know what Tyler understands, for it is only later that we learn what type of abuse Mala suffered from. Yet, the mention of private parts and her tense body, "her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips and deep, slow, calculated breathing" (CN 19) alludes to the sexual

abuse at the hands of her father. Needless to say, Mala's bodily stance while being cleaned up by Tyler parallels her bodily comportment during her father's abuse (CN 65). Tyler feels empathy for Mala, but it is not simply emotional/mental, but bodily empathy he feels for her. He understands Mala via his own body and reacts with his body to Mala's distress: by smoothing back her hair (CN 16), taking her face into her hands (CN 21) and by holding her (CN 23). Thus, their bodies, or body images, interact and communicate. Moreover, their bodies establish a grotesque connection that overcomes "the biological individual" (*Rabelais* 19), a connection which "represent[s] a material bodily whole and therefore transgress[es] the limits of their isolation" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 23).

Tyler is assigned the duty of taking care of Mala at night but is not allowed to take off the straps because the nurses are afraid of Mala. She gives Tyler an "indication of her will" by turning her "head away slightly" when she is bound up, so that her "muscles around her mouth twitched" (CN 16). As a result of being strapped to her bed, Mala makes a "frightful sound" (CN 18) at night, which wakes everyone. When Tyler enters the room, "[t]he wailing halted abruptly, only to be replaced with breathless gasps of fright" (CN 18). Tyler notes that "[t]here was nothing to be alarmed about" but that he can equally detect "a fighting spirit" in Mala's "clenched fists" (CN 18). Tyler understands that what upsets Mala is being confined. Even though the sister does not agree to removing the straps, she offers Mala to remove them the next day if she remains quiet during the night, to which Mala responds physically as her "breathing deepened to a low growl" (CN 19).

While Tyler initially thinks that Mala only makes sounds such as "crying, moaning, wailing and sighing" (CN 23), he realizes that Mala imitates animals. First a parrot, then a cricket and then "bird, cricket and frog calls" (CN 24). On the one hand, this reflects Mala's connection to nature and grotesqueness, for she becomes, metaphorically, a hybrid between human and animal. On the other hand, it is her way of communicating and showing Tyler that she is doing better. Thus, while Mala's withdrawal from language can be read as a symptom of her trauma, it can also – and I am more inclined towards this reading – be interpreted as an active withdrawal from the patriarchal and colonial order. When Mala imitates the sound of the cricket, "[s]he

looked directly and proudly back, for the first time a hint of a smile lighting her face” (CN 24), Tyler comments. Certain sounds are Mala’s means of talking to Tyler and showing him how she feels. And these animal sounds are affirmative instead of a sign of psychological distress.

4.4 “Ole lady walk, ole lady fall:” Double-Voicedness

Tyler establishes themselves as narrator at the beginning of the novel with the words: “By setting this story down, I, Tyler, – that is how I am known, simply as Tyler, or if you wanted to be formal, Nurse Tyler – am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people” (CN 3). This appears to be a straightforward introduction by the narrator, which is reminiscent of many beginnings of novels told by a first-person narrator, in particular the *Bildungsroman*. Tyler’s subjective experience and his beliefs (“am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people”) seems to be foregrounded from the very beginning of the narration.

This is why Aguila-Way problematizes Tyler’s role in the narration of Mala’s story as she contends that Tyler “engages in narrative practices that inadvertently reinforce the standards of authorship, as well as the gender and sexual binaries, produced by colonial epistemology” (70). According to Aguila-Way, Tyler constructs himself as a ‘modest witness’ to Mala’s trauma which “threatens to appropriate Mala’s story and thus silence her for a second time” (73). However, the role of the narrator cannot be ascribed to Tyler exclusively, for the novel is polyphonic and parts of the narration are not easily attributed to any one character. There are passages in *Cereus Blooms at Night* that are clearly narrated by Tyler, such as part I and V of the novel as the narratorial ingressions at the beginning of these parts and the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ and ‘me’ throughout the narration suggest. The second part is also told by Tyler as the narratorial ingression at the beginning of that part imply, yet, with fewer insertions by the narrator than in the first part. However, these narratorial insertions are missing from the beginning of the third and fourth part. I suggest that these parts are told by an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator, who has access to knowledge that Tyler could not possibly have, as these parts predominantly revolve around Ambrose’s and Otoh’s stories in connection to Mala. Moreover, even within specific parts there are stories within stories that are told by other characters. Tyler

hears the story of Chandin from his Cigarette Smoking Nana (CN 46), for instance, so that either the entire section is narrated by her or constitutes a reproduced story of her story by Tyler. Whichever it is, this is a clear instance of double-voiced discourse in the text where two characters' speeches come together in one utterance, and the boundaries between who narrates what cannot be easily drawn.

As Aguila-Way shows, "*Cereus Blooms at Night* highlights the need for modes of witnessing that attend to questions of materiality and embodiment" (75). Yet, according to her, the novel does not fulfil this potential. I would suggest instead that Tyler's close bodily connection and understanding of Mala outweighs his ostensibly complicit role as narrator. The "shared queerness" Tyler identifies between himself and Mala is primarily based on their roles as outsiders. This shared queerness is a bodily queerness that resides in their ability to communicate bodily, as has been shown in the previous section. Tyler is the only one who can tell Mala's story, because he is the only one who understands her bodily. Accordingly, Vivian May contends that "by filtering Mala's voice through Tyler (a different form of bilingual, two-tongued speaking), Mootoo enacts a strategic movement . . . *Cereus's* form highlights how this two-tongued speech is more adequate to narrating marginalization" (126). This two-tongued speech, or double-voiced discourse in Bakhtinian terms, makes it possible for Mala's story to be told without having her being ridiculed or not taken seriously, as occurs when the police come to her house. However, this also enables Tyler to tell their own story, which otherwise might not find the necessary means of expression either.

Aside from the narrator(s),¹⁹⁰ another pertinent case in point for double-voicedness in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is the childhood ditty that Mala starts singing at the Alms House:

¹⁹⁰ Bakhtin's "[s]tylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration" and "the stylistically individualized speech of characters" is often to be found in *Cereus Blooms at Night* when characters communicate in their vernacular language, for instance, when Chandin's future is debated by the community (27-28) or when neighbors assemble in front of Mala's house after Otoh sees Chandin's corpse and bolts (166). While not as present as the other types, the "[s]tylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration" and the "[v]arious forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech" surface in *Cereus Blooms at Night* in the form of letters (244-46) and, in the latter case, in the form of scientific language (128).

Ole lady walk, ole lady fall
Hit she belly. "Lord!" She bawl.
Crick crack, all say oops!
Brick brack, break she back,
Le we go tief pom-er-ac. (CN 71, 74-75)

When Mala sings this for the first time, she is at the Alms house and Tyler identifies it as "a ditty that children sing and play games to" (CN 71). In fact, this leads the narrator a few pages later to an episode from Mala's childhood when in fact children sang it (CN 84), including a child called Walter, who tormented Mala, Asha and Boyie (Ambrose) and later turns out to be the judge put on Mala's case. When Mala chants the song, it is not only double-voiced because it goes back to childhood memories and to other children chanting it but also because it connects to Lantanacamaran and thus Caribbean culture. "This technique of narrating," Helff notes,

intimates that the act of storytelling is an important cultural element and resource, especially in the case of allusions to Caribbean and Indian oral traditions. By combining these various narrative styles and genres, the novel generates transcultural narrative modes. (98)

In a sense, the song represents traces of past meaning. In the same way that Mala has a story to tell, this song, too, derives from the story of the Caribbean which is not always a story characterized by joy but rather hardship.

Another important element of double-voicedness in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is the split that Mala experiences as Mala/Pohpoh. When the police come to search her house, Mala is sitting in her garden, imagining one of Pohpoh's nightly excursions. Pohpoh, out on a mission to explore a house in the neighbourhood, is spotted by the night-watchman and runs back to her/Mala's house. The closer the police get to the room where Chandin's corpse is, the closer Mala/Pohpoh gets. Yet, when the police arrest Mala, she, wanting to save Pohpoh, encourages her to run away. Pohpoh does not only get away from the house, but in fact flies away from the entire island. It is worth quoting this passage of Pohpoh taking off in full:

At the top of the hill Pohpoh bent her body forward and, as though doing a breast stroke, began to part the air with her arms. Each stroke took her higher until she no longer touched the ground. She soon found herself above even the tallest trees. High enough, calmed, she glided, dipping to the left, angling to the right. She made a wide circle trying to make out familiar gardens, to pinpoint the cricket pitch and the yard with the rabbits' hutch. Before long her village was swallowed up in an unfamiliar coagulation of green, brown and yellow. She did three more breast strokes and soared higher before gliding again, basking in the cloudless sky. She practised making perfect, broad circles, like a frigate bird splayed out against the sky in an elegant V. Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea. (CN 186)

While this split in subjectivity might be and, in fact, has been read as a sign of trauma, it can also be read as a liberating act of internal double-voicedness. "It is possible," notes May, "to read Mala's psychic split into Mala/Pohpoh as a result of incest and her subsequent abilities to talk and commune with nature as simply evidence of a flight into 'madness'" (120). However, May also suggests that this can be read as "double consciousness" and, in fact, a practice of disobedience or disloyalty, and Mootoo's refusal to dissolve this split in consciousness as a "subversive potential in interstitiality, in 'splittedness'" (120). I agree with the latter, for the novel clearly establishes this double-voicedness in Mala which frees her both mentally and bodily. In fact, the above episode suggests peace and calm, for the cloudless sky and turquoise sea, as well as verbs such as 'basking' and 'gliding' refer to ease and a benign atmosphere. By experiencing this split, Mala can somewhat find resolution in Pohpoh's escape.

4.5 "My body felt as if it were metamorphosing:" Transgender

Embodiment

The notion of 'queerness' has received considerable critical attention in discussions of *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Even though, as Stryker argues, "[t]he emergence of transgender studies has closely paralleled the rise of queer studies," the relationship between the two has been "close" yet sometimes also "vexed" (7). While queer usually encompasses "all forms of sexual minority[:] homosexual men, lesbian women, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, transgender folk, bdsm/leatherfolk, and others who simply identify with nonnormative sexual practices or interests" (Chen 68), I find it nevertheless instructive to think about characters such as Tyler and Otoh

in terms of transgender instead of queer.¹⁹¹ There is a danger in subsuming different kinds of bodily and political experiences under the banner of ‘queer,’ as several transgender studies theorists have pointed out (Halberstam; Stryker and Whittle). Moreover, transgender more readily encompasses bodily states that are unfinished, in a process of becoming in the terms of Bakhtin, as transgender experience often refuses “a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity” (Halberstam 4).

The representation of transgender characters in *Cereus Blooms at Night* has been the focus of attention of several articles and book chapters and has been praised either for its ‘radicalism’ (Donnell) or ‘ordinariness’ (McCormack). However, relatively little attention has been paid to how the novel’s representation of its transgender characters corresponds to the developments in new materialist feminism that followed the novel’s publication. In fact, Mootoo’s text exemplifies innovative insights which recent embodiment theory and new feminist materialism have brought to the fore. As regards my overall reading of the novel as a transcultural feminist text, I consider transgender bodies to be inherently grotesque, for, first, they more readily cross boundaries of maleness and femaleness, queerness and straightness and put into question naturalized meanings of the body, and, second, because they represent bodies in perpetual transition.

Even though the cover of the novel by Granta Books¹⁹² refers to Tyler as “a gay male nurse” – as many scholars such as Edwards and Graulund (131), Howells (149) and Gopinath (178) do – Tyler’s gender and sexual identity throughout the novel is much more uncertain, as his gender ambiguous name indicates. He is indeed the “only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing,” which is considered unusual by his peers. Further, he is sexually attracted to men. Admittedly, people refer to him as “pansy” (CN 10) and “funny” (CN 73) and in the text itself “queerness” is used, albeit in regard to a “shared queerness” with Mala in the sense of strangeness or status as an outsider. Yet, he considers himself to display an “unusual femininity” (CN 71), which Mala detects. In one of the most memorable

¹⁹¹ For a comprehensive overview of the etymology and uses of the term ‘queer’ see Chen’s *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*.

¹⁹² The novel was first published by the small feminist Press Gang.

episodes in the novel, Mala steals a nurse's uniform for Tyler and indicates to him to put it on. Even before changing into the dress, Tyler comments:

My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs. (CN 76)

This is an apt description of how Tyler's body image changes in the course of his encounter with Mala. He does not simply imagine his body transform; this is not a cognitive representation of his body, but he, in fact, experiences this change, he feels his flesh take on a different form. And this is not any form, but in fact akin to a female form. Tyler continues to describe changing into the nurse's uniform in the following way:

I unbuttoned my shirt and felt an odd shame that my mammary glands were flat. I dropped my pants. My man's member mocked me yet was a delight to do battle with when pulling the stockings up against my thighs. I had no corset to hold them up, but it was enough to see the swirl of hairs on my calves and thighs trapped under nylon. There was something delicious about such confinement. I held up the dress and slowly stepped into it, savouring every action, noting every feeling. I powdered my nose, daubed rouge on my cheeks and carefully smeared a dollop across my lips. (CN 76-77)

I would like to comment on two ideas in this passage. First, while Tyler's penis serves as an uncomfortable reminder of her¹⁹³ 'biological' maleness and she is ashamed of her lack of breasts, Tyler does not feel estranged from her body, that is to say, she does not want to actively change it; change the fact that she has a penis and hairy thighs. Her body itself is not the source of the problem. She is not in the 'wrong body.'¹⁹⁴ While socially Tyler's body's lack of a clear gender identity poses a problem, her body is a source of pleasure to her; even confining her male parts is framed as a pleasurable experience ("There was something delicious about such confinement," CN 77). This leads me to my second point. Mala's lack of reaction surprises Tyler at first. He comments:

¹⁹³ I deliberately alternate between female and male pronouns here to underline the text's indeterminacy in regard to Tyler's gender identity.

¹⁹⁴ As Jack Halberstam points out, this is a phrase that was frequently used in the media in the 1980s to describe transgender and transsexual embodiment (1).

When I stepped out from behind the curtain, I saw that Miss Ramchandin had made herself busy. She was piling furniture in front of the window. She glanced at me, made no remark and kept right on building the tower. I walked over to her and stood where I was bound to be in her vision. At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women's clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun. I felt flat-footed and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and non-existence. She had already set a straight-back chair on the table in front of the window. On top of that she placed a stool and was now preparing to stand on her bed and place an empty drawer on a pinnacle.

Just as I was hoping the tower would come crashing down and extinguish me forever, a revelation came. The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn – it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting me its freedom. (CN 77)

Initially, Tyler invests the nurse's uniform and the make-up with an almost magical power to transform him. However, when he realizes that it does not transform him, he feels "silly," "flat-footed and clumsy" (CN 77). He feels as if he were merely cross-dressing and is disappointed that the uniform does not provide him with the clarity he desires, at first. This desire to fit into binary, normative gender is conditioned by his society, which, as mentioned previously, puts great stock in normative gender roles. "The truth of one's gender and race," to quote Alcoff again, "are widely thought to be visibly manifest, and if there is no visible manifestation of one's declared racial or gendered identity, one encounters an insistent scepticism and an anxiety" (7). Tyler feels that without a clear, that is to say, binary gender identity she is demoted to nonexistence: "Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence" (CN 77). This is why she hopes that the tower Mala is constructing with furniture will crash down and kill her. What is vital in this passage, then, is not gender or the representation of gender via the nurse's uniform and make-up, but rather emotional investment in her body. Or, to put it in Jasbir Puar's words, "how the body is materialized, rather than what the body signifies" (n. pag.). It is not the uniform, or make-up, that ultimately enables a changed body image, but emotional investment in her body and the support she receives from Mala. As Weiss states: "For Merleau-Ponty . . . to develop a body image is to develop an image of my body as visible to others. There is no body image without this visibility of the body" (33). Tyler's visibility of his body mostly leads to

disapproval, or at least this is what she experiences/feels, which is why he hopes that Mala will at least approve. Yet, it is precisely the lack of response from Mala that exemplifies that there is no need to respond to something that is inherent to Tyler, or, as he puts it, in his 'nature.' While nature refers to character here, it also refers to the physical world, biology, but the novel establishes nature as always already tied up with culture. Mala's refusal to comment on Tyler's body triggers a renewed body image, one more accepting of his own 'nature.' Thanks to Mala, then, Tyler slowly builds up self-confidence. He explains later: "I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it" (CN 78). While, at this point, Tyler takes off the uniform because of fear of negative repercussions, he becomes bolder and more open about applying makeup (CN 125, 246, 247), so that at the end of the novel she "defy[s] caution" and "present[s] [her]self like a peacock in heat" (CN 246), wearing the nurse's uniform in front of everyone (CN 247-48).

Before turning to the novel's second transgender character, Otoh, I would like to comment briefly on Tyler's racialized identity. The novel itself is vague about Tyler's heritage, but Carol Ann Howells suggests that he is "a gay Afro-Caribbean male nurse" (149) and Grace Kyungwon Hong is more reserved and calls him "presumably Afro-Caribbean" (89). Based on the cultural and social context the novel is set in, which resembles Mootoo's 'home' Trinidad and in which slavery and indentured labor are used as points of reference, Tyler might well be Afro-Caribbean, but the text is quite deliberate in not pinning this down. Incidentally, Tyler, in his function as the narrator, does not feel the need to spell this out. However, Tyler's racialized identity is not commented on because, according to the text, Tyler's sexual in-betweenness does not bring him together in shared relationships of sociability that are based on a similar lived experience of race. Quite on the contrary, he mentions how he is often not just ridiculed but discriminated against by members of his cultural or ethnic group. Moreover, the refusal of marking Tyler racially illustrates an important point Jack Halberstam makes:

The fact that current definitions and uses of the term 'queer' proceed without a clear sense of the centrality of bodies of color to the production of its meaning suggests that one function of sex/gender classifications is the occlusion of the operations of white supremacy within seemingly natural systems of naming. (51)

Thus, by maintaining vagueness in regard to Tyler's racial identity, *Cereus Blooms at Night* provides a subtle comment on the intricately linked workings of heteronormativity and (colonial) racial discourses. Moreover, this also illustrates what Jessica Berman refers to as a 'trans' text. According to Berman, the 'trans' text "challenges the normative dimensions of regimes of nationality and disrupts the systems of embodied identity that undergird them" (218). The prefix 'trans' of both transgender and transnational (as well as transcultural) entails the idea of movement and a continuous unfinishedness. Thus, "the prefix 'trans' can work to destabilize discourses of both nationality and gender without erasing their specific nuances or foreclosing their possibilities of divergence" (220). In both its emphasis on Tyler's indeterminacy as regards binary gender and their indeterminacy concerning their racial identity, the novel hints at the close connection between regimes of gender and regimes of colonialism. This echoes Maria Lugones's concept of "the modern/colonial gender system." Lugones demonstrates how gender is constituted by colonialism and how "biological dimorphism, the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations – is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along 'racial' lines" (190).

Not only does the novel complicate culturally reinforced gender and sexual identity by means of Tyler, but it also comments on the malleability of biological matter through its character Otoh. In contrast to Tyler's, Otoh's "transformation" goes unnoticed (CN 110). Born a girl, Ambrosia becomes Ambrose at the age of five (CN 109). Otoh complies with heteronormative masculine gender: he has female lovers and does not remove his trousers when he is intimate with them (CN 141), which does not betray his 'real' sex. Otoh, unlike Tyler, is "the object of desire of almost every Lantanacamaran woman, regardless of her age. (It is also noteworthy that a number of men were shocked and annoyed by their own naggingly lascivious thoughts of him)" (CN 135). While Tyler has to control his 'performance of gender,' "for the most basic level of survival" (CN 78), Otoh does not have to fear such things. While Alison Donnell argues that "the union between Tyler and Otoh is radical precisely because it is anatomically normative but socially queer" (176), by means of Otoh, the novel undermines clear-cut readings of anatomical normativity or stability. In *Cereus*

Blooms at Night, Otoh's body is not presented as passive biological matter, as this passage exemplifies:

Hours of mind-dulling exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juices defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marvelled at their carelessness having declared him a girl. (CN 110)

Donnell reads this passage as “epitomiz[ing] Judith Butler’s argument that ‘gender is always doing’” (173). I would like to suggest, however, that Mootoo goes even further here, showing that the ‘doing’ of gender has real, material consequences.¹⁹⁵ As new materialist feminisms insist, the social construct gender does not simply lead to external, superficial changes to bodies but in fact has an impact on our ‘biological’ setup ranging from hormones, to gut bacteria, to the hardwiring of our brains. Otoh actively inscribes male sex into his body by “mind-dulling exercise” in the course of which he transforms the processes – hormonal exchanges – within his body. It might seem unrealistic, if not Utopian, that Otoh can be so successful in his transformation as to change his body’s sex from female to male, leading Gopinath to conclude that “Otoh’s seamless transformation . . . speaks to an antirealist system of logic the text sets forth” (184). Otoh’s transformation nevertheless alludes to something that is very ‘realistic:’ a body and its sexual organs are not given, unchanging, or barely changing, biological facts, but rather variable, dynamic. Anne Fausto-Sterling argues:

Not only does sexual physiology change with age – so, too, does sexual anatomy. . . . We take for granted that the bodies of a newborn, a twenty-year-old, and an eighty-year-old differ. Yet we persist in a static vision of anatomical sex. The changes that occur throughout the life cycle all happen as part of a biocultural system in which cells and culture mutually construct each other. (*Sexing the Body* 242)

According to *Cereus Blooms at Night*, sex is as malleable as gender. The novel thus reflects that “[t]ransgender phenomena,” as Stryker contends, “call into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of ‘gender’” (9). There is no pure ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness,’ only gradations of fictitious extremes, as exemplified by the cereus plant. “The cereus, like all cactus plants,” according to

¹⁹⁵ The materializing effects of gender are not spelled out in Butler’s work as Wuttig shows.

Isabel Hoving, “is a hermaphrodite; it can boast of both a stamen and an ovary, parts usually designated as respectively male and female” (162). It is no coincidence that it is Otoh who brings Mala a clipping of the cereus plant from her garden, which in turn was given to her by Lavinia. Thus, the plant does not only connect the central, ‘queer’ characters in the novel but it also symbolizes the malleability of matter.¹⁹⁶

The representation of Otoh not only reveals the malleability of biological matter but also the multiplicity and ‘inconsistency’ of transgender, and in fact all gendered, experiences. Otoh’s transformation, while flawless to the outside world, might not be as flawless on the ‘inside’ as one episode suggests. Otoh longs to share his secret with Mala, puts on one of his mother’s dresses one night (*CN* 121) and sets out to Mala’s house. The scene parallels Tyler’s changing into the nurse’s uniform. Yet, the way Otoh experiences this is entirely different from Tyler: “In the mirror of his armoire he watched himself pull on the blue-and-white-flowered garment, half expecting to resemble his mother, but there was no resemblance” (*CN* 121). There is no metamorphosis of his body image from masculine towards feminine, no mention of the pleasure of confining one’s body parts. This is a much more pragmatic act. The only thing Otoh imagines is looking like his mother, which is not the case. However, “[w]earing a dress made Otoh carry himself gracefully” (*CN* 121). It is not the dress that makes his movements more graceful but rather the associations he has with dresses as signifiers of femininity. As a consequence, readying himself for action, “he gathered the skirt of his dress in one hand and tied the cloth in a knot high up his thigh” (*CN* 121). Moving in his usual, masculine manner requires more freedom of his limbs and a lack of grace, for “[h]e raced home with much less grace than he had set out” (*CN* 122). There are differences in bodily comportment between men and women, which Otoh, as a heteronormative masculine character reflects. These differences are not the result of biological difference, however, but rather embodied cultural notions of what male and female bodies can or should do, or as Young puts it, “they have their source in the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (42). Because women are not supposed to

¹⁹⁶ I understand and use the term ‘queer’ here in Chen’s sense as describing “exceptions to the conventional ordering of sex, reproduction, and intimacy” (11) and “as probing beyond the bounds of normativity, taking on the load of rejection, resistance, negativity, indiscretion, quirkiness, and marginalization” (68).

master the world, they are not encouraged to use their body freely. The text demonstrates amply that sex does not reside in bodies, but that instead bodies are moulded based on societal roles and that this moulding leaves permanent traces in bodies.

Incidentally, Otoh's mother Elsie remarks: "every village in this place have a handful of people like you. And is not easy to tell who is who. How many people here know about you, eh? I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see" (CN 238, emphasis in original). Queerness and transgenderism are established as common, indeed ordinary, occurrences on this fictitious Caribbean island. Furthermore, while people comply with normative gender identities from an outsider's perspective, they might have body images that digress from normative body image ideals, and sexualities that are not based on gender identities. Otoh's mother Elsie inquires whether Otoh really desires women and thus acknowledges desire as diverse. Thus, the novel illustrates, as McCormack calls it, the "diversity of queer identities" (73), that is, the multiple ways of living in a transgender body, some of which are apparently more 'gender-conforming' and others which are not, without fixing the differences that exist between these forms of having and being a transgender body.

4.6 "Her body remembered:" Summary of Results

This chapter has clarified that *Cereus Blooms at Night* is pronounced in its attention to and re-evaluation of matter. On the one hand, the novel establishes Mala as a grotesque character in the Bakhtinian sense. Mala's body is connected to the world; she is intricately linked to the insects, animals and plants in her garden, is characterized by 'earthiness' and revels in bodily processes. On the other hand, Mala's body as communicating matter speaks to an epistemology that is not based on the mind and consequently patriarchal structures. Mala communicates bodily with Tyler as she does not use words to communicate anymore. Yet Tyler understands her by means of her body and the way she incorporates it. When Tyler and Mala communicate via their bodies and Tyler learns to read Mala's body for the signs of suffering inflicted on her, this is implicitly juxtaposed with the mind as the seat of consciousness. It is because of their corporeal rather than verbal communication that

Mala's story finds an outlet through Tyler. Even though Tyler's narrating of Mala's story might pose problems of 'appropriation' (see the section on "Double-Voicedness" in this chapter), I consider it an important element which underlines the interconnection between disparate characters in the novel and the similar problems they face in patriarchal culture.

The novel further speaks to a re-evaluation of matter by means of its emphasis on a diversity of transgender experiences. Not only do we learn that Tyler's body image changes throughout the narrative without a specific, ideal gender as its 'final' goal, but by way of Otoh, the novel also exemplifies the malleability of biological matter. While Tyler, at the beginning of the novel, refers to himself as a man, his body image transforms and becomes increasingly feminine, which, rather than suggesting that Tyler is a gay man, suggests that they might be transgender. Similar to Tyler's racialized identity, which is not clearly delineated in the narrative, their gender identity is also treated ambivalently. Relatedly, Otoh's 'biological' gender is female, yet he manages to transform his body to such an extent that it becomes male. This is not an antirealist logic that the text addresses, as Gopinath suggests, but rather illustrates embodiment theoretical understandings of the body as matter into which meanings are inscribed, in particular gendered meanings. The text demonstrates that the social construct gender does something real and material to bodies but that more traditional inscriptions can also be resisted.

The novel's polyphonic nature is revealed in its ambiguity concerning the narrator of the story. While Tyler establishes themselves as narrator, certain passages in the novel are most likely narrated by other characters, as Tyler cannot have these insights. For instance, the reader is told Chandin's story by Cigarette Smoking Nana and thus learns of the prohibition imposed on Chandin that leaves a permanent mark in him. Yet, the episodes that Tyler does narrate, instead of running the risk of appropriating Mala's story, render it possible that her story is told, for she is unable to tell it herself.

Language is further foregrounded in the novel by means of an emphasis on the materializing effects of discourse. Discourse, especially in the form of prohibitions, rumours and gossip has real, material consequences for the characters in the novel,

above all Chandin, Mala and Asha. Because Chandin embodies the notions he has been taught by his white missionary foster father, the prohibitions that the latter pronounces shatter Chandin's worldview. These meanings have become part of Chandin's body and subjectivity so that Sarah and Lavinia's elopement does not just shatter his ideas of heteronormativity but also miscegenation and leads to his extreme violence and abuse. Mala and Asha, too, are made to suffer because of the materializing effects of language. While their father's transgression is projected onto them, which is why they are ostracized, the community does maintain a certain level of respect towards Chandin, which frustrates any attempt of help, as, for instance, when the postman does not deliver the letters Asha sends Mala.

Unlike the first two novels that I have analyzed in this thesis, *Cereus Blooms at Night* does not merely include the oftentimes neglected experience of transgender characters, but it also addresses issues of racialization. The novel demonstrates that issues of gender are always already embroiled with issues of colonization and consequently racialization. However, this does not only refer to the dual oppression that women suffer from within colonial systems – the abuse Mala suffers from as a result of her father's experience of racism, for instance – but it also extends to issues of biological dimorphism. Thus, Tyler's experiences and in particular difficulties with 'fitting in' can be traced to colonialist notions of binary sex and gender. In terms of the transcultural feminist grotesque, then, the novel is an example of both how the mode can function in a culturally diverse and non-European context and how it can complicate readings of the mode as predominantly middle-class, cisgender and white.

5. Indigenous Bodies(?) Matter in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*

“Being a writer is like being a window-cleaner in a house or a castle where the windows are obscured by dirt and grime. Writing is like cleaning the windows so that people can see a view of the world they have never seen before.”

(Melville qtd. in Metcalfe n. pag)

Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (VT) traces three generations of a Scottish-Amerindian family and their transcultural exchanges. The reader is greeted by the ventriloquist of the novel's title in an “Prologue,” who proclaims that he is the narrator of the entire novel and that he “must put away everything fantastical that [his] nature and the South American continent prescribe and become a realist” (VT 9). The “tales of love and disaster” (VT 9) begin with the frame narrative in modern-day Guyana at the end of the twentieth century and revolve around Chofy, a Wapisiana Indian who lives in the Rupununi with his wife, son and elderly aunt. Having lost most of his cattle and going through a marital crisis, Chofy seeks work in the capital Georgetown and takes his aunt Wifreda with him who needs eye surgery. In Georgetown, Chofy meets and falls in love with the Jewish-British literary scholar, Rosa Mendelson, who conducts research on the English writer Evelyn Waugh and his fictional stay with the McKinnons in the savannahs in 1933. Rosa seeks to speak to Chofy's aunt Wifreda, who met the English writer, but Wifreda is reluctant to discuss Evelyn Waugh and her past because it brings back memories of her sister and brother's incestuous affair and her role in ending it.

In the second part of the novel, the embedded narrative, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, we are introduced to Chofy's ancestor, Scottish “free-thinker” Alexander McKinnon who comes to the Rupununi “determined to get as far away from civilisation as possible” (VT 96). He ‘goes native,’ marries two Wapisiana sisters, Maba and Zuna, with whom he has ten children and engages in all sorts of enterprises, many of which include crossing over to Brazil on a regular basis. The novel's main plot revolves around the incestuous affair between his children Danny

and Beatrice, however. While their relationship is considered part of Wapisiana myth and accepted for the most part, it poses problems for their Scottish father and the English Father Napier, who has come to evangelize the savannahs and keeps falling in love with young male charges. When Danny and Beatrice's relationship is brought to light by their sister Wifreda, they run away. As soon as the priest learns that Danny and Beatrice are committing a "mortal sin" (VT 214), he sets off to find them. He convinces Danny to separate and return to their community. Danny eventually gets married to the Brazilian girl Sylvana and has children, whereas Beatrice bears a son who is the result of the incestuous union, but finally immigrates to Canada because she is suspected of being a *kanaima* (the spirit of revenge) and having poisoned the priest. In the end, McKinnon leaves realizing "he did not belong" (VT 219), the priest goes mad and burns all the chapels he has erected, and Danny turns into an alcoholic.

In the third part, the story returns to the frame narrative to modern-day Guyana in the 1990s, where Chofy's affair with Rosa is brought to an abrupt end when his wife Marietta arrives in Georgetown due to their son having been fatally injured in an explosion. As a result, Chofy returns to his native lands and Rosa to England set on writing her thesis "Evelyn Waugh – a Post-colonial Perspective" (VT 351). Yet, the frame narrative ends on an optimistic note with the grotesque image of "[f]ertility and growth" (VT 352), for Marietta is pregnant. And the narrator reappears in the "Epilogue" and outs himself as the mythical figure Macunaima only to disappear and "take up residence once more in the stars" (VT 357).

The Ventriloquist's Tale emphasizes and exaggerates the transgression of borders and boundaries. The novel incessantly blurs the boundaries between myth and reality, the natural and supernatural, humans and animals, humans and organic, humans and inorganic matter, and borders between individual bodies and thus, unsurprisingly, has been read through a posthumanist lens.¹⁹⁷ Even though a posthumanist reading would somewhat overlap with a new feminist materialist one and consequently provide invaluable insights into the novel, I will rather highlight the

¹⁹⁷ In "Indigenous Posthumanism: Rewriting Anthropology in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*," Gigi Adair provides an important reading of some of the posthumanist themes in the novel. As Adair notes, the posthuman is not a particularly recent, nor an exclusively Western phenomenon (175). Yet, posthumanism, as Julie Livingston and Jasbir Puar note, often operates behind a veiled Euro-American background (5). Thus, in the context of Melville's novel, Adair speaks of "indigenous posthumanism" (175).

grotesque resonances in the novel, as these have rarely been noticed, yet are central to understanding some of the major themes that the novel addresses. The grotesque can be particularly instructive when it comes to the novel's central theme: consensual sibling incest.

The incest theme in *The Ventriloquist's Tale* has been interpreted differently by scholars but a number of them agree that it provides a comment on endogamy and exogamy in the novel (Shemak 363; Ness 62). According to Tanya Shields, incest in *The Ventriloquist's Tale* functions as a comment on the – ultimately unviable – position of endogamy: “incest is . . . a pathway to one's ancestors, the ultimate retreat to one place and one bloodline” (“Rehearsing” 161) and it “fractures the family and community, [and] it functions, in the novel, as an effective vehicle to engage with questions and rivalries of nations coming to terms with complicated histories forged in desire, conflict, and taboo” (“Amerindian” 283-84). However, Lydia Kokkola and Elina Valovirta argue that incest in the novel reflects “fiction's need for thwarted romances” (121). According to Kokkola and Valovirta, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* is one among a number of novels which “use the couple's fraternal relation to engender an abject response from the audience” (122). However, none of these readings does explain sufficiently the ambivalent treatment of the incest theme. For the text is neutral, if not sympathetic, in its representation of the theme. Admittedly, the novel does not present the incestuous relationship between Beatrice and Danny as a viable alternative to non-incestuous relationships, as the bond between them is broken up (thus commenting on the impossibility of endogamy). Yet, the novel does not clearly condemn their incestuous acts and instead shows how they are not the worst of transgressions in the Wapisiana community. Moreover, the novel neither encourages endogamy nor exogamy but rather represents an intertwining of different actors.

I read the incest motif as a grotesque intertwining that questions dominant western notions of subjectivity. It provides a challenge to hegemonic western ideas of the body and sexuality. Yet, it also comments on female embodiment and in particular how Beatrice's character reveals problems in dominant western feminist approaches. Moreover, in its emphasis on unexplainable bodily reactions, the novel constructs bodies that are grotesque in their unpredictability. This serves to point to racialization

and past and continuing colonization. In order to support my reading of *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, I will focus on five distinct yet interrelated aspects: first, the sexually deviant female body; second, the grotesque intertwining of individual bodies; third, bodily traces of racism; fourth, grotesque distortions; and, fifth, the polyphonic entanglements in the text.

5.1 “[M]aking love with ghosts:” Sexual Deviance

Even though the novel traces various characters and their struggles, it is Beatrice who stands out. As one reviewer puts it, “Beatrice . . . is unusual by any culture” (B. King 669). As a teenager, Beatrice is daring, bathes in the part of the river where men usually bathe or lies about her period so that she can continue bathing and fishing in the river (*VT* 129). Beatrice is known for breaking rules: “She did not only break the rules of the Church. She broke all the rules. . . . She just seemed to follow her own impulses” (*VT* 129). Not only does Beatrice present an unusual female character because she engages willingly in an incestuous relationship, but her sexuality is also more generally speaking extraordinary or grotesque because, similar to the concept of the grotesque, it “fits uneasily within the field of Western aesthetics [and philosophy] and art history” (Connelly, “Grotesque” 241). Prior to the relationship with her brother, Beatrice has non-human and non-organic sexual partners. In fact, “she remembered that her first sexual experiences had not come about through human agency” (*VT* 126). The first time Beatrice feels sexual pleasure is when she is about eleven years old and standing in the sun:

The heat was making her newly sprouted breasts tingle and the hotter the sun became, the more she became aware of an incandescent darkness at the bottom of her belly, between her legs, in a mysterious place that she had hardly been aware of before.

She vaguely heard the others shouting as they played but they seemed to be calling from a distance, some faraway place. The sun burned even more fiercely and as the sun grew in intensity, so the darkness inside her turned into a delicious fizzing feeling that just teetered on the edge of an explosion and then died away again. She just stood there. The other children had stopped playing and were collecting their arrows and bows to go fishing. (*VT* 126)

Beatrice’s body has begun to change (“sprouted breasts”), yet her perception has started to change too, implying that physical and mental changes go hand in hand. Not only do external influences lose their impact at this very moment (“they seemed to be

calling from a distance, some faraway place”), but she notices things she had not noticed before. All of a sudden, she becomes aware of her tingling breasts and this ‘mysterious place’ between her legs, which seems to be stimulated by the intensity of the sun. Moreover, this immaterial place can turn into something akin to material, as it becomes a ‘fizzing feeling’ and even explosion. Not only does this imply that female sexuality is real, that is, material, but it also alludes to the possibility of female sexuality not being dependent on the male or in fact the human.

In addition to presenting female sexuality as independent, the novel also explicitly addresses masturbation:

Experimenting more, she found that, if she was patient and lay in her hammock and rubbed herself for long enough, there would first of all come that sensation of warmth spreading through the bottom half of her body and then an increase of intensity that built up to a burst of pleasure followed by deep, pulsing pulls that only gradually subsided. She learned how to control the bursts of pleasure. (*VT* 127)

This description of Beatrice’s pleasuring herself displays her knowledge of her own body which she gradually gains. Beatrice quite ‘naturally’ learns what gives her sexual pleasure, actively strives for understanding what arouses her and even understands how to ‘control’ this. The novel thus dispels with the taboo of sexual pleasure and female masturbation. In the Wapisiana community masturbation is not a taboo and neither is it a source of shame:

Beatrice discovered that the intense colours of certain flowers had the same effect on her as the sun. Branching off on her own to look for bark, taking all the usual precautions to mark her trail, she came across some scarlet flowers under a ceiba tree. The shade from the huge trees prevented much plant life on the ground. But these flowers seemed to burn the air around them. She stared, fascinated. The flowers blazed like sores. She could not take her eyes off them. First came the familiar tingling in her nipples and then the other feeling started up in the bottom of her belly. She lay down on her back under the huge tree and began to play with herself, her hand diving between her legs like a duck’s head.

Her older cousin Gina followed her trail and came back to look for her, a warishi full of bark slung on her back. She saw Beatrice gasping and panting under the tree and thought for a moment she had been poisoned.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked and then said, matter-of-factly: ‘Oh I see. You’re making love with ghosts.’ (*VT* 128)

Beatrice’s arousal has clearly organic reasons: “Certain blossoms with a particular vibrating wavelength of colour affected her sexuality like that” (*VT* 128). The scarlet

flowers she sees are reminiscent of female genitalia (“blazed like sores”), suggesting an autoerotic element. Both the sun and intense colours of flowers give Beatrice pleasure, which underlines the independence of female sexuality from human influence. According to Helen Scott, “the women experience sexual pleasure in Guyana’s natural environment, following in the long tradition of literary associations between the landscape and women’s bodies. Here, again, the women become active desiring subjects rather than the passive recipients of male fantasy” (115). The novel underlines that female sexuality is not dependent on male sexuality and male desire, but can exist independently of it. The novel thus puts into doubt androcentric notions of sexuality.

Moreover, her cousin is not shocked by what she is doing but instead calls it by what it is known as in the community, namely ‘making love with ghosts.’ Her cousin’s neutral and practical reaction suggests that there is no moral judgement involved. Later still, Beatrice rubs her pelvis against a tapir, when it happens to be in a bed (*VT* 129). In the above-mentioned scene, ghosts do not refer to frightening or haunting elements, but a crucial part of Wapisiana culture. While ghosts and spirits can have negative associations, such as the *kanaima*, the spirit of revenge, other ghosts and spirits have a positive meaning. In fact, Maba consults her father’s bones, i.e. intends to communicate with her father’s spirit when confronted with her children’s incestuous relationship.¹⁹⁸

The relevance of Beatrice’s sexual pleasure as being caused by natural elements, such as the sun or plants, lies in the questions it poses in regard to female sexuality. According to Thomas Bonnici, “it seems that the sexual awakening of Beatrice immerses her in a more fundamental aspect of nature. Besides, sexuality is given an ecological dimension that the Western world has never had or has lost” (18). Beatrice’s ‘unusual’ female pleasure and incestuous relationship question western notions of (female) sexuality, which are predominantly connected to other human beings. Any behaviour that does not include a human sexual partner, or the appropriate human sexual partner, is deemed not only deviant, but abnormal.

¹⁹⁸ Adair shows how Maba’s reading of the bones represents “a communication technology” and constitutes a form of reading media, which is similar to McKinnon’s reading of newspapers. Yet, “both read media . . . difficult to decipher, unreliable, and rather old” which puts “the efficacy of both characters’ reading (and writing) practices . . . into doubt” (180).

This criticism of dominant western ideas of sexuality is intensified when Beatrice engages in an incestuous affair with her brother. The affair begins when she returns from the convent after three years of schooling. Danny visits her one night and makes love to her – thus paralleling the Amerindian myth of the sun and the moon. Initially, she thinks that the man who has come to her is Raymond, a man who is part of the group of black coastlanders employed by McKinnon, whom she is attracted to initially. Beatrice and Danny’s first intercourse takes place in complete darkness and thus emphasizes touch rather than sight:

A warm hand began to move gently over her left breast, cupping and kneading it while the thumb stroked her nipple. After a while, the hand moved to the other breast and explored that in the same way, as if making a careful map of her body. She could hear somebody’s slow and regular breathing.

Then she felt a mouth on hers, lips pressing down firmly and methodically as if they had a job to do, printing something all over her face. The hand moved down her body, seeking the underground entrance, and played with her there for a while. The hammock swayed a little.

Darkness and anonymity relieved her of any shyness. . . .

The back which she held on to with both arms was as smooth as Aishalton rock. She felt him nuzzling into her neck. Something about the head brushing against her ear puzzled her for a moment but she concentrated on twisting herself sideways, letting one leg hang over the edge of the hammock so that he could come inside her more easily. The weight of both of them wriggling to lie slantwise rocked the hammock making her feel as though she were flying through the night. She clung on tightly; the top half of her body arched backwards over the side. Her hair brushed the floor. As he fucked she felt a dark, aching pain mingled with the far-off intimations of that familiar pleasure, but she was too alert and too curious to lose herself in the sensation and it faded away. (*VT* 162-63)

Even though the beginning of the episode might suggest that Danny takes possession of her body by trying to map her “as if making a careful map of her body” reminiscent of colonial mapping, and by trying to mark her body as his, “lips pressing down firmly and methodically as if they had a job to do, printing something all over her face,” the overall emphasis in this episode is on Beatrice’s experiencing of this encounter, underscored by an emphasis on tactility. As Young points out drawing on Irigaray, “[a]n epistemology spoken from a feminine subjectivity might privilege touch rather than sight” (Young 81). By means of the focalization through Beatrice the reader learns that the lover’s hand “move[s] gently” and that it is Beatrice who “felt him.” Moreover, she is puzzled by the way his head brushes against her ear,

probably because it is familiar; still she does experience “the far-off intimations of that familiar pleasure,” the possibility of sexual pleasure. Moreover, even though she does not orgasm because she is “too alert and too curious,” the episode indicates that Beatrice is actively experiencing this sexual encounter.

When Beatrice realizes that it is Danny who has come to her at night, she absorbs the news “with a mixture of fury and mysterious pleasure,” but forgives him quickly (*VT* 167). Partly because “[a]s he came nearer, his eyes, which had grown dark and deliquescent, exerted a lodestone attraction over her which brought about an unexpected loss of will” (*VT* 168). In the previous episode, Beatrice compares Danny’s skin to Aishalton rock, thus establishing a connection to non-human entities. Again, Danny is compared to stone-like, mineral matter, his eyes, however, become liquid, which attracts her and brings about a loss of her ‘will.’ When they make love again, Beatrice now fully aware of whom she is making love to, experiences her sexual pleasure fully. This time she does not compare him to a rock but to “a baffled root in the darkness seeking moisture, striking out and always trying to go deeper” (*VT* 169) instead. And the feeling is compared to something material, yet flexible, namely clay: “it felt to her as if a potter was running his thumb around the top edge of a spinning, wavering, moist clay pot, like one she had seen at the convent, so that the rim grew sometimes bigger and sometimes smaller” (*VT* 169). Moreover, the detailed description of Beatrice’s pleasure, or to be more precise, her orgasm, is reminiscent of several non-human others, such as water (“For a long time, she waited, and then she squeezed and the pleasure came unstopably from the outer rim to the dark base and burst outwards from there,” *VT* 169) or snake skin (“When they made love, her insides felt as if they changed pattern like a kaleidoscope or the expanding and contracting geometrical pattern of a snake’s skin,” *VT* 172). The novel’s emphasis on Beatrice’s unusual pleasures and the frequent parallels to organic and inorganic matter oppose western notions of sexuality and thus make the reader question what s/he herself considers to be ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ female sexuality.

Beatrice’s decision to continue the relationship is, on the one hand, connected to the naturalness it conveys. For Beatrice, her incestuous relationship feels quite natural, as the text keeps reminding us: “They were brother and sister. The

relationship was by *nature* indissoluble” (VT 232, emphasis added); “Danny and herself still felt so *natural* that she could not believe there was anything bad about it” (VT 268, emphasis added). By engaging in an incestuous relationship Beatrice rejects her Catholic schooling and the values it conveys. This then also includes the incest taboo and the notion of the exchange in women it carries. According to Gayle Rubin, the incest taboo ensures the exchange in women and she explains that

marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts. [Lévi-Strauss] argues that the incest taboo should best be understood as a mechanism to insure [sic] that such exchanges take place between families and between groups. Since the existence of incest taboos is universal, but the content of their prohibitions variable, they cannot be explained as having the aim of preventing the occurrence of genetically close matings. Rather, the incest taboo imposes the social aim of exogamy and alliance upon the biological events of sex and procreation. The incest taboo divides the universe of sexual choice into categories of permitted and prohibited sexual partners. Specifically, by forbidding unions within a group it enjoins marital exchange between groups. (778)

However, as I show in a later section (section 6.2), the novel engages ironically and critically with the anthropologist Michael Wormoal and his Lévi-Straussian analysis of the Amerindian incest myths, in particular the idea that the incest taboo is universal. Beatrice’s defiance of the incest taboo, then, represents an act of female agency that defies western logic. Lugones shows how colonialism and patriarchy mutually constitute each other. She argues:

Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing. (186)

Thus, by engaging in an incestuous relationship Beatrice rejects both a colonial power setup and patriarchal gender relations.

Later in the novel, after Beatrice and Danny are separated, Beatrice is exiled to Canada. However, instead of being rejected because of the incestuous affair, she is sent away because of another transgression; she is believed to be a *kanaima*: “Whereas people had tolerated, although not particularly liked, her relationship with Danny, when they began to suspect her of being a *kanaima*, they were appalled and attitudes towards her changed altogether” (VT 266). *Kanaima*, or the spirit of revenge,

is even more threatening to the community than incest. When Beatrice realizes what form her reputation has taken, she “resign[s] herself with surprising patience to her fate” (*VT* 266) and agrees to leave her community. However, this episode also signifies that female power and anger, directed at Father Napier primarily, is kept in check within a society marked by colonialism and patriarchy. Agnel Barron suggests that “Beatrice’s exile in Canada can be read as a suppression or containment of female resistance to the intrusion of colonial outsiders” (5). Beatrice’s patient reaction also demonstrates that she is aware of the limited agency she has within “the modern/colonial gender system” (Lugones 187).

The novel also addresses female agency in later episodes, when Beatrice has moved to Canada. In Montreal, at first, she suffers because of the cold: “It was then that it occurred to her that what she had been taught at the convent was wrong. The nuns had told them that hell is one hot place, full of fires and conflagrations” (*VT* 271-72). Yet, this is not the only thing the nuns at the convent were wrong about, as the text ironically implies – they were also wrong about believing that Beatrice stepped on Nella’s foot on purpose (see section 6.3). Beatrice also seems to feel homesick because “for the first six months or so Beatrice felt quite numb” and she feels like a doll that is being handled by other people, “someone had picked me up and put me down somewhere else and I’d just continued walking” (*VT* 272). In the Notre-Dame Cathedral she feels as if in an “icy forest . . . dead and fossilised” (*VT* 275), which contrasts with the rain forest, which was teeming with life.

Within a short space of time, Beatrice has received a marriage proposal and contemplates whether or not to accept it.

Everything seemed to have brought her to a point where she was about to make a decision she had hoped to avoid. She could feel herself drifting towards marriage. And the odd thing was that she felt she would be marrying to spite the world in some way. As if she would be saying to the world: There. See. Look what you made me do. The way some people’s suicide is an act of triumphant aggression. Although no one was forcing her to do it and nobody really cared whether she married or not. (*VT* 272)

It is interesting that Beatrice contemplates marriage as a form of spite or even revenge. “Look what you made me do.” In spite of this, Beatrice starts going out with her future husband Horatio regularly and grows quite fond of him. When a travelling circus comes to town, they visit it together, yet “Beatrice felt the faint warning signs

of an approaching migraine” (*VT* 275) – an indication that something is not quite right – and thus does not join Horatio. Instead, she slips into a tent where the spectacle consists of a Native American Indian woman being locked in an ice coffin.

After a while, Beatrice began to worry that the woman’s air must be in short supply. In a minute or so, surely, she would be unable to breathe. Beatrice could almost feel the anguished burning of the flesh on ice. She tried to see whether the woman was still breathing. Astounded and horrified, she stared at the woman in the ice tomb. The circus artist must surely be released now or die, she thought, and then lapsed into a state that felt like eternity without passage of time. (*VT* 277)

Beatrice sees the ice coffin as a representation of the state she is in. She feels confined in Montreal, in particular because of the cold, which is so unlike the warmth she knows from the Savannahs. Moreover, she does not have the same kind of agency or freedom she had in the Rupununi. Yet, she comes to understand that she has a different kind of agency in Montreal. When the woman is finally freed, Beatrice “felt as though she herself had been freed” (*VT* 277). Surprisingly, her “headache had vanished” (*VT* 278). Moreover, Beatrice’s attitude has changed: “Everything looked bright. It was possible to survive the ice coffin and emerge unscathed. For the first time for months she felt lively. The feeling spilled over into a renewed affection for Horatio” (*VT* 278). This episode seems to suggest that a different life is not necessarily better or worse, it is simply different. Relatedly, the agency that Beatrice felt she had in the Rupununi is not the same as the agency she has in Montreal, yet again, neither is superior to the other, it is simply different forms of agency. In short, the novel takes issue with global forms of feminisms that “elide[...] the diversity of women’s agency in favor of a universalized Western model of women’s liberation that celebrates individuality and modernity” (Grewal and Kaplan 252).

5.2 “[V]egetable acts of love:” Grotesque Intertwining

The incestuous relationship further breaks up the borders that seemingly exist between individual bodies and can thus be regarded the central grotesque motif in the novel. It challenges the humanist, patriarchal idea that bodies are separated from other bodies, instead of being inherently connected as suggested by phenomenology. To quote Weiss again: “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already

mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nunhuman bodies” (5). Beatrice and Danny’s making love is at one point described as reminiscent of the original grotesque drawings, which were found in the ‘underground chambers’ of emperor Nero’s pleasure house: During their “vegetable acts of love” (*VT* 197) their “arms, thighs and legs [are] entangled like roots” (*VT* 198) paralleling the definition of the grotesque as “[a] style of decorative painting or sculpture consisting of the interweaving of human and animal forms with flowers and foliage” (*OED*).

At another point, Beatrice and Danny are described in terms of rocks, which become magnetized:

There is a certain sort of black rock-stone to be found on the banks of savannah creeks. The rocks lie scattered all around. If you take one in your left hand and one in your right and circle them round each other, they become magnetised and it is impossible to prise them apart. Danny and Beatrice became as inseparable as the savannah rocks. (*VT* 170)

Beatrice and Danny’s attraction is described in terms of magnetic fields or magnets attracted to each other, “[t]he attraction was both inexplicable and irresistible. And growing stronger” (*VT* 171); it is inevitable, something that is outside of their control.

Indeed, Beatrice’s and Danny’s affair is intimately connected to the agency of nature. A case in point is Beatrice and Danny’s escape to the jungle:

Beatrice . . . thought that she had never seen surroundings that were more alive. The river was about thirty feet across. The trees on either side shimmered, tingled and exploded with exuberant bird noise. The surface of the water teemed with ducks and otters. Over by the far bank an alligator lazed, his goggle-eyes just above the water. . . . Danny himself seemed to come alive in the bush. He was more alert, vigilant and inventive than at home. . . . There was an abundance of food. They lived well on fish, nuts, fruit and game. (*VT* 196)

Instead of presenting nature as passive and inactive, as something that is acted upon, Melville depicts nature as active and agentic and Beatrice and Danny as active participants in it, albeit not superior participants.¹⁹⁹ There is an abundance of vegetal and animal life, but organic matter itself seems to display an activity usually only associated with animals or humans:

¹⁹⁹ The abundance and fertility might further be read as a comment on the paradisiacal image which the first explorers had sought and thought to have found in the new world, yet realized to have the potential to become hell. In fact, to Father Napier the same surroundings are hostile (*VT* 215, 223).

It was a storm. Lightning lit up the topmost arches of the trees and a massive crash of thunder burst overhead. A distant clattering in the canopy of leaves hundreds of feet above signalled rain. After a few minutes, dead leaves and twigs began to float and drop to the forest floor. Beatrice stood still, alerted by movement in a nearby bush. Movement usually meant an animal. But all at once, everything started moving. Bushes swayed. Leaves upturned and shivered, showing their pale sides. Everything shook. Little rivulets and streams began to run down the tree trunks. Soon pools occupied every hollow. (VT 218)

In the forest during a storm, everything is in motion, all matter is moving, not only the animals. Inorganic matter such as lightning, thunder, wind and rain is as powerful as organic matter. It seems as if the entire forest were moving. The forest undoubtedly has a life of its own, for whenever Beatrice is in the forest, she has the feeling she is being watched (VT 218). This is so because “the wild rain forest . . . was neither darkness nor light but a gigantic memory” (VT 96); it is a gigantic organism with human characteristics. Not only is the rain forest anthropomorphized in the novel, but various animals are as well. In contrast to this, as Gigi Adair shows, “[c]haracters in the novel are also repeatedly given the characteristics of various animals, plants, fungi, rocks, geometrical patterns and quantum particles” (179). Father Napier, for instance, to the amusement of the McKinnon family, resembles a cricket when playing his violin.

The differentiation between nature and culture is further displaced by the images of entanglement between the Wapisiana community and the ecosystem they inhabit. Even though the Wapisiana men kill animals, they are aware of their own dependence on animals, plants and other organic matter and express a degree of respect towards these living bodies. Both Danny and his uncle Shibi-din feel sad when they have to shoot an animal (VT 122). “Animals are people in disguise” (VT 122), Shibi-din suggests after having Danny shoot his first deer. Moreover, the narrator describes hunting in terms of a relationship: “[H]unting means making love with the animals. The hunt is a courtship, a sexual act” (VT 7), thus further underlining the respect that is involved. Ultimately, the novel evokes Karen Barad’s suggestion that “[h]uman” bodies are not inherently different from ‘nonhuman’ ones” (Barad, “Posthumanist” 823). It is important to note, however, that the novel does not present an idealized version of nature (see Bonnici). In fact, the way of life

of the Wapisiana community is connected to hard work, something Scott refers to as the “unromantic experience of labor” (105). In addition, the connection to nature or rather their entanglement with it, frequently leads to hardship as the beginning of the novel suggest, when Chofy’s cattle are wounded and killed by blood-sucking bats.

The incestuous relationship between Beatrice and Danny is presented as natural in other terms, too, because it is associated with Wapisiana and other Amerindian myths concerning the creation of the world. Michael Wormoal, the anthropologist with nationalistic tendencies whom Rosa meets at the beginning of the novel, conducts research in comparative mythology and carries out an analysis of Amerindian eclipse myths à la Lévi-Strauss (81). John Thieme argues that “the influence of Levi-Strauss permeates” *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* and is an indication of the continuing influence of European narratives on postcolonial writers, who do not seem to succeed in dispelling these narratives (184). According to Thieme,

the comparatively understated use of the incest motif in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* has not sufficiently overcome the problem of slipping into a subtle form of sensationalism, since it still promotes a degree of intellectualized exoticism through its use of the Levi-Strauss archetype. (183)

Yet, this overlooks the ironic treatment of both Lévi-Strauss’s theory and its main supporter in the novel, Wormoal. I suggest instead that anthropology, especially Lévi-Strauss, is invoked only to be undermined.²⁰⁰

In contrast to Thieme, I argue that the novel provides a trenchant criticism of the mind/body dualism. As Anke Abraham and Beatrice Müller show, the idea that the mind can control the body does not merely derive from occidental cultures and the Christian belief in the dichotomy between body and soul, but also goes back to classical anthropology, which envisioned the human as superior to other lifeforms (11) and has thus also given rise to ideas on the superiority of certain ‘races.’ *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* employs the incestuous affair to reveal the inconsistencies in Lévi-Strauss’s theory and hence in the founding beliefs of anthropology and western ‘civilization’ in general.

²⁰⁰ The novel also parodies Charles Darwin and his *On the Origin of Species*: “My grandmother. She still refers with rage to a man called Charles Darwin who wandered through the region with the slow-motion frenzy of a sloth, measuring and collecting. . . . Anyway, according to my grandmother, Charles Darwin without so much as a by-your-leave parked his behind on my ancestors and wrote the first line of *Origin of Species*, declaring that we were descended from monkeys. If his eyes had been in his arse he would have known better” (VT 3).

Lévi-Strauss argues that there is a universal incest taboo, which the novel vehemently defies. Even the quotes at the beginning of the novel insinuate that there is no universal rejection of incest, because the “fifteenth-century Portuguese proverb” of the epigraph suggests that ‘[b]eyond the equator, everything is permitted,’ potentially including incest. And, in fact, incest, or a brother and sister living “close” as it is described in the novel, is not “unheard” of in Amerindian communities (*VT* 176). It is not a taboo, nor is it the worst transgression. As Maba states: “I know it’s not good, what Danny and Beatrice are doing, but it’s not the worst thing in the world” (*VT* 215). The text is quite explicit: “It was not unknown for a brother and sister to live together, usually outside the village. Nobody approved of it, but nobody tried to stop it. . . Vengeance attacks were more terrifying than incest” (*VT* 266). Rather than the relationship with her brother, Beatrice’s poisoning of the priest, which leads to casualties, is considered an unacceptable transgression. Unlike many Christian, western cultures, which consider incest to be a “mortal sin” (*VT* 214), as made manifest by Father Napier’s and McKinnon’s reactions, for Amerindians in the novel Beatrice’s revenge constitutes a much graver wrongdoing.

Furthermore, the novel challenges Wormoal’s ‘scientific’ approach to myth which is devoid of the human element. In contrast, the Wapisiana community uses the myths to justify or explain Danny’s and Beatrice’s behaviour: “What they were doing was more understandable in relation to an eclipse” (*VT* 208). This demonstrates that myth functions as a method or methodology similar in the way that Lévi-Strauss’s ‘structural analysis of myth’ does. However, the aim is not ordering and dissecting, as is the case with the European methodology, but rather making sense. While incest is not entirely approved of, yet not prohibited, by means of its representation the text raises the reader’s awareness as regards the inapplicability and universal invalidity of cultural rules and thus undermines Lévi-Strauss’s claim to a universal incest taboo.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Moreover, as several scholars have suggested, the novel also writes back to Evelyn Waugh and his ‘version’ of Amerindians. Ness notes that “such textual links are also intended to remind us that the stories’ writers tell imply the ‘absent’ stories and the hidden potentialities, which we do not hear” (56). Thieme suggests that “the reader – and particularly the Western reader – who comes to the novel with the assumption that the links with Waugh will provide some kind of key to the text’s meaning is almost certain to be disappointed” (177).

The ‘factual,’ historical incestuous relationship between Beatrice and Danny is intricately linked to the fictitious, though equally ‘real,’ stories of the sun and the moon as siblings. Wormoal recounts the Wapisiana myth as follows:

The Wapisiana myth I am using also concerns the eclipse. They believed that man was at one with nature – incest I should add is the symbol of nature as opposed to society – until an eclipse separated humankind from the animals and plants. They believed that a brother came secretly to his sister at nights. She enjoyed this but, not knowing who he was, blackened his face with the magical genipap plant to identify him. In his shame he rose to the sky and became the moon. That is why the moon has dark patches on its face. (*VT* 82)

Scott argues accordingly that the incest theme in the novel serves to comment on a blurring of fact and fiction, as “the historical tale of incest . . . does conform to an Amerindian myth” (98). However, the incest theme also comments on other blurrings: “There is no fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future,’ ‘here’ and ‘now,’ ‘cause’ and ‘effect’” (Barad, “Nature’s” 148-49). The incest myth does not only evoke notions of a blurring of fact and fiction, but a blurring of past, present and future: past, for the myth has been passed down and in fact explains the origin of the Amerindian peoples; present, because Beatrice and Danny turn into the myth at the present (see the following quote); and future, because both the myth by means of oral storytelling and Beatrice and Danny, by means of Sonny, will continue to exist. Relatedly, this episode blurs ideas of cause and effect, for it makes the reader question what caused what, the myth the incest or the incest the myth. In fact, Beatrice and Danny turn into the protagonists of the myth in the narrative:

A field of fireflies, caught by the sudden shower, had settled on the ground. They winked in the blackness, as brilliant in the dark underfoot as the stars in the sky above. It was as if the vast night sky had unfolded under their feet as well as over their heads and they were suspended in space. For a long time she stood there, feeling that she was where she was meant to be, standing in the sky with Danny. (*VT* 270)

This establishes Beatrice and Danny’s bodies as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense because of their “cosmic and universal” quality: “It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars. . . . This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 318). Not

only are Beatrice and Danny's bodies part of their natural surroundings; they in fact merge with them, leaving Beatrice with the feeling that they are in the sky and thus have turned into the mythical figures.

Beatrice and Danny's incestuous affair produces new life, another transgression of bodily boundaries and a materializing of the myth.²⁰² Beatrice gives birth to a son and admits to herself that she "loved him but felt that he should never have been born – that she had expelled a beautiful secret out of her body that should have remained there. He was a secret made flesh" (*VT* 268). Something immaterial, abstract, "a secret" turns into a human being – which is why the birth scene is not depicted. Moreover, they "never gave him a name" (*VT* 228) and he is simply nicknamed Sonny, which parallels one of the Amerindian myths that Wormoal recounts (*VT* 83) – in the myth a brother and sister make love, he turns into the moon and she turns into the evening star; they leave a child behind "who is never named" (*VT* 83). Because he is so detached, there and not there, "a walking event-horizon. A singularity. No one knew what went on inside" (*VT* 283), he is a "figure of indeterminacy" (Adair 182). He seems to both exist and to disappear at the same time (*VT* 298), which makes him an ambiguous, grotesque figure. He describes himself as a "chameleon" (*VT* 7) and as the reader learns in the course of the narrative, he transgresses human boundaries, for he disappears quite magically (*VT* 290).

The narrative adds a further layer of complexity to the character of Sonny by having him declare that he is descended from stones (*VT* 2). On the one hand, this is a reference to the creation myth of Macunaima and his brother Chico, who are the sons of the sun and his wife, who is a "reddish, rock-coloured woman" (*VT* 105). On the other hand, this establishes a link to Beatrice and Danny whose attraction is compared to magnetized savannah rocks. Moreover, similar to Beatrice and Danny who become entangled like roots, Sonny states: "If you were to see me fishing, in the dim green light of the forest, you would never be able to tell my legs from the twisted tree branches at the side of the creek" (*VT* 7). Whether this refers to his skills at

²⁰² Incidentally, the novel also dispels with the misconception that a child born out of incest will have a disability, for there is nothing wrong with the child (*VT* 228), even though some people think otherwise. Adair explains: "Characters in the novel (just as critics of the novel) cannot decide whether he is precociously intelligent or intellectually disabled" (Adair 182, emphasis in original). Ness refers to Sonny as autistic (64), even though there is little evidence in the text to support this.

camouflaging himself or whether this is meant quite literally, Sonny is a grotesque figure by all means. Ultimately, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* questions (western) boundaries of bodies as stopping at their skin. Instead, the novel suggests that bodies extend beyond their confines, implying that they are not as individualized as we often think of them. The novel challenges a dominant western conception of bodies which has been shaped, among other theories, by anthropological thinking and has given rise to racialized and sexualized distinctions.

5.3 “[T]he blows had driven him back to some period before speech:”

Bodily Traces of Racism

Aside from having an indigenous or mixed-race family at its centre, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* also engages with the more bodily aspects of being an indigenous person. It exemplifies how indigeneity is embodied, i.e. inscribed into bodies. When Beatrice and her sisters are sent to a convent to be educated, their bodies' and body images change considerably:

For the first few weeks, all three girls felt sick in the pit of their stomachs. What depressed Beatrice most was wearing shoes. Her feet weighed so heavily, dragging her to the ground. The school uniform felt as restraining as one of the harnesses that hung in the outhouse at Waronawa. (*VT* 137)

Not only do the girls feel sick, which might be interpreted as home sickness, but as the text implies, it is the physical restraint that has a lasting impact. Their bodies are being shaped in a western, Catholic fashion. It is the shoes and uniform which mould the girls' bodies. The allusion to a harness, used for horses or other draught animals, insinuates the dehumanizing treatment of indigenous people by making them conform to bodily rules and customs that are not theirs. Moreover, it is in the convent where Beatrice is confronted with some of the notions that colonialism has brought with it:

Beatrice was introduced to the complicated colour-coding that afflicted Georgetown society. Behind the natural friendships that sprang up at school lay the poisoned knowledge of who was 'high-yellow', 'high-brown', 'red' or 'black.' (*VT* 139)

The convent, as part of broader Georgetown society, clearly adheres to colonial ideas of race and distinctions based on skin colour. And these are ideologies that the children learn from early on and which will affect their friendships later on, as the text suggests, in spite of the 'natural' friendships that develop at school. Since Beatrice

cannot be easily placed within this colour-coding scheme, because she “was not black and she was not white” (*VT* 139), even though she is the most popular of the three sisters, she is nevertheless exposed to bullying. Because of her indeterminacy she causes “confusion:” “People circled her warily, not certain where to place her, proffering friendship and then arbitrarily withdrawing it” (*VT* 139). In addition, other people take the decision of placing the McKinnon’s within the racial spectrum. One of Beatrice classmates states: ““The McKinnons are bucks”” (*VT* 139). “She said this firmly,” the narrator remarks, “as if that put an end to the matter. It then became permissible to taunt them” (*VT* 139).

In fact, Beatrice is further racialized when she accidentally steps on one of her classmate’s feet. It is interesting that the other girl, Nella Hawkins, has a “haughty brown face and frizzy hair” (*VT* 141), implying that she is part of the group of coastlanders who frequently discriminate against indigenous people in the novel. Nella calls Beatrice a “dirty buck girl” and as a result, “Beatrice’s heart thumped with fright. At the same time she felt humiliated” (*VT* 141). To add further humiliation, the other girl indicates that Beatrice stepped on her foot on purpose (*VT* 141). When prompted by the teacher, who accepts Nella’s story without doubt, to apologize to her classmate, Beatrice remains silent because she “could not get her tongue round the unfamiliar word that was required” (*VT* 142).

The Portuguese Jesuits in Brazil explain to Father Napier that Wapisiana is one of the languages which does not have a word for sorry (*VT* 186). Chofy, too, clarifies that he only learned to “to say please, sorry and thank you” because he was partly raised by a priest (*VT* 40). On the one hand, Beatrice cannot apologize because Wapisiana does not have a word for ‘sorry.’ On the other hand, this is because Beatrice did not step on her classmate’s foot on purpose and she was insulted, which would require an apology from Nella. Yet, Beatrice knows that this is not an option. As a result, Beatrice’s teacher asks her to come to talk to her after class and when Beatrice returns to her seat, “the left half of her field of vision [is] blacked out” *VT* 142) and she faints. Beatrice’s body reacts to an injustice she suffers, for she is not in the position to clarify the matter. The text thus shows that verbal harassment affects bodies. To quote Chen once more: “Words more than signify; they affect and effect.

Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response” (54). In fact, verbal harassment turns into physical harassment. This also demonstrates that certain social relations, here a power relation based on notions of race, have materializing effects.

Bla-Bla, too, learns physically what it means to be an indigenous child. When his mother comes to his school to talk to him one day, she addresses him in Wapisiana, and he, quite naturally answers in Wapisiana. However, because the children are forbidden to speak Wapisiana or Macusi at school (*VT* 316), and his teacher, “from the coast, who did not understand the language and who, anyway, was eaten up with rage because his wife had left him” (*VT* 317) punishes him:

The blow took Bla-Bla utterly by surprise. It stunned and cut. The strap caught him on the side of the head but the blow seemed to coil round the root of his tongue. The teacher was asking him something angrily and telling him to speak English. But his English deserted him and he was unable to answer: the strap whistled and landed on the other side of his head and the top of his left shoulder. Instinctively, he held on to the desk but nearly lost his balance. Tiny electric shocks ran from his cheek to the fingertips of his left hand. He stared down at the wooden desk, speechless with misery. Since his father left, he had especially wanted to do well. He had done everything he could to please the teacher. The ugliness of the blows shocked him. The teacher told him to sit down and he did. The little girl who sat next to him was looking at him, her eyes full of worry. During the morning break, Bla-Bla stayed apart from the others and refused to speak, as if the blows had driven him back to some period before speech, as old as silence. It was not until he was walking home on his own at the end of the afternoon that he allowed himself to sob. (*VT* 317)

This episode illustrates that indigeneity is being kept in check not by a white man, but rather a coastlander. The novel thus complicates a simple colonizer/colonized dichotomy, for Amerindians in the novel are primarily oppressed by black coastlanders. Moreover, Bla-Bla is punished for the use of his native tongue which equals an annihilation of indigenous history. Melville explicitly raises issues of the forgotten history of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean.

The novel exemplifies how indigeneity is being controlled physically. While Beatrice’s encounter with racism is verbal, yet nonetheless harmful, Bla-Bla is marked physically by racism. As Alcoff explains,

[b]oth race and sex are . . . most definitely physical, *marked on and through the body*, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status. Social identities cannot be adequately analysed without an attentiveness to the role of the body and of the body's visible identity. (102, emphasis added)

Because Bla-Bla is marked physically as an indigenous child, the teacher decides to respond to his body in a particular way, namely by beating him. Yet, this further marks him, for it leaves long-lasting traces in his body which further reinforce his racialized identity. This becomes apparent in the description of the blow and the pain it causes suggesting that everything is connected in a body. It is not merely separate parts that suffer, but separate parts in the body are always interconnected and thus one part affects the entire body.²⁰³ The pain Bla-Bla feels demonstrates that these blows have a much deeper impact than just superficial, cutaneous pain. The hits permeate his whole body, reaching to the root of his tongue (where speech is produced), and even his fingertips. The dehumanizing quality of this violence is evoked by the image of the blows driving him back to “some period before speech, as old as silence” (*VT* 317). Thus, these blows further consolidate his status as an indigenous, racialized individual as they lead to a change in behaviour, namely silence. We also encounter this silence when Chofy comes to Georgetown and is insulted by a “sharp-faced boy, black as ebony” with the words “‘Hey, buck man’ . . . ‘Look at de moon-face buck man’” while another boy throws a mango seed at him (*VT* 31). In response, “[h]e [Chofy] put on a blank expression and continued walking” (31). Chofy has internalized the modes of behaviour ascribed to racialized, and in particular indigenous, individuals and groups. While on the one hand, indigeneity is inscribed into bodies by upbringing and an identification with a community's way of life, it is also inscribed from the outside by physical violence and humiliation.

5.4 “Beatrice McKinnon underwent some kind of seizure:” The Grotesque and the Gothic

In their collection of essays, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009), Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte explore the

²⁰³ It would be easy to extend this image to broader systems, such as the ecosystem in the rain forest or even society.

“subgenre” (x) of the postcolonial Gothic in a Canadian literary context. According to these authors, the postcolonial Gothic “is concerned less with overt scenes of romance and horror than with experiences of spectrality and the uncanny” (viii-ix). They see the portrayal of ghosts and hauntings in literary works from Canada as emblematic of “unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression, diasporic migration, or national consolidation” (vii). They further contend that

[i]n Canadian literature, the postcolonial Gothic has been put to multiple uses, above all to convey experiences of ambivalence and/or split subjectivity resulting from the inherent incommensurability of conflicted subject positions that have emerged from a colonial context and persisted into the present. (xi)

However, much of what they establish for the Canadian white settler context is equally applicable to other postcolonial and transcultural nations. Accordingly, when they suggest that “[i]n many instances, the postcolonial Gothic involves a transposition of conventional gothic and colonialist metaphors, turning gothic conventions on their head by converting the unfamiliar or ghostly into nonthreatening – even sustaining – objects of desire,” (xi) this applies just as well to the Guyanese situation represented in Melville’s novel.

Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny is central to the postcolonial Gothic, as many essays in Sugars and Turcotte’s collection demonstrate.²⁰⁴ The German term *unheimlich* refers to a situation in which the familiar, or “the familiarity of home,” has turned into something unfamiliar. According to Freud, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (620). The word itself has two meanings in the German language; one refers to the familiar and the homely, a state of comfort, the other to something hidden, concealment and discomfort. Thus, derived from these two meanings, something uncanny creates a sense of unease, disquiet and even fear. The uncanny is a major mode of the postcolonial Gothic which “include[s] scenes where the distinction between past and present, real and spectral, civilized and primitive, is tenuous and disjunctive” (Sugars and Turcotte ix). In Sugars and Turcotte’s collection, Shelley Kulperger states:

²⁰⁴ In her entry on the “Grotesque” in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Connelly links the uncanny to the traumatic strand of the grotesque (245).

Whether it is a historical or geographical artifact, there is an undeniable (re)assertion of the material within the literary and a return to the 'real.' Within the postcolonial Gothic, this realism resides, comfortably and naturally, alongside the supernatural and the unreal. This blurring of the real with the surreal is not a marker of postmodern aesthetics but, rather, is very much in keeping with the cultural materialism of the postcolonial Gothic. (108)

Even though this study is not concerned with postcolonial literatures as such (see "Introduction"), I consider the concept useful in particular when discussing the grotesque. As was delineated in section 2.7, scholars have identified two varieties of the grotesque, the humorous-physical grotesque and the threatening, terrible or alienating grotesque. Thus, the Gothic as a genre can be associated with the latter. While I would argue that in *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, the postcolonial Gothic does not develop its full potential as uncanny episodes do not lead to fear, it nevertheless helps to make sense of the ambiguity that the text creates.

The novel is replete with unusual reactions of bodies, such as children going blind after watching a solar eclipse reflected in a pond (*VT* 147), violent shudders, unexplainable seizures and inexplicable blindness. In this section, I argue that these constitute examples of the postcolonial Gothic which reveal something that had been hidden. The sheer number of headaches that members of the McKinnon family suffer from is revealing. Chofy suffers from "continuous headaches" for the first few days in Georgetown (*VT* 32), as the way of life there is unfamiliar to him. He specifically suffers from having to work in a closed space; it makes him "feel imprisoned and breathless" as well as "diminished" (*VT* 32). So as not to let other people know how he really feels, he puts on his "buck-man face" which is expressionless, suppressing his emotions. Chofy further has trouble adjusting to a work and life routine that includes time for leisure.

Beatrice has a headache that lasts for three days after the aforementioned episode in which she passes out because of the inability to react to the injustice done to her (*VT* 142); Maba develops a "blinding headache" when she learns that an eclipse is approaching (*VT* 181); Wifreda's headache worsens at the mention of her brother and sister's incestuous affair:

All her adult life, she had feared that she would go blind simply because of her kinship with her brother Danny and sister Beatrice. Kinship with them was itself enough to warrant some sort of supernatural reprisal. She ran her hands over her forehead where the headache sat behind her eyes, the thoughts clawing at her brain like crabs in a barrel. Don't say the whole matter was going to re-surface now. She would say as little about Mr Evelyn Waugh as possible – not that he had anything directly to do with it. (*VT* 72-73)

Rosa wants to meet Wifreda in order to find out about Evelyn Waugh's stay with the McKinnons. Yet, the sheer thought of it causes a physical reaction in Wifreda. It is not only "guilt" that makes Wifreda react physically to the mention of Evelyn Waugh because she was "indirectly responsible for Beatrice's final departure" (*VT* 75) and she told Evelyn Waugh about the affair (*VT* 74). It is also the fear of going blind, for Beatrice cursed her for having revealed the affair. When Rosa accompanies Chofy to the St Francis of Assisi home, where Wifreda is staying, at the mention of an eclipse, Wifreda's body reacts:

Suddenly, Auntie Wifreda felt violently ill and hot. She could hear a booming sound in her ears as if someone had struck a heavy bell that vibrated on a long single note. Rosa's face began to melt at the edges and metamorphose into the face of her sister Beatrice. The whole room began to waver. The floor and the walls billowed slowly. (*VT* 87)

Wifreda reacts bodily to the memory of Danny and Beatrice's incestuous affair and the curse that Beatrice spoke which would make Wifreda go blind: "I will make you blind, like a termite" (*VT* 88). While, initially, Wifreda's bad sight seems to be medically grounded in cataracts, Wifreda's blindness after her operation does not have an "organic reason" (*VT* 297). The doctor suggests that it might be triggered by stress, something he refers to as "hysterical blindness" (*VT* 297). What causes this extreme version of stress are her memories and the secrecy she lived with most of her life:

Staring sightlessly straight ahead of her, Wifreda told him [Chofy] for the first time the whole story of his Uncle Danny's affair with Beatrice; Father Napier's madness; the existence and disappearance of Sonny; the eclipse and the threat that Beatrice had uttered to make her blind. (*VT* 297-98)

Only after she shares the story both with Chofy and the reader does her condition improve. The novel thus implies that knowledge or a 'secret' can weigh heavily on someone and can even leave corporeal traits. However, this does not only refer to individuals but can be extended to the national level, as some countries barely engage

or come to terms with their colonial pasts, continuing colonization and their lasting effects.

Some episodes in the novel underline uncontrollable physical reactions that come about as a result of something else. After Beatrice and Danny have run away because their relationship has been revealed, Danny displays an unusual bodily reaction while a solar eclipse occurs. (Solar eclipses and incest are linked in Wapisiana mythology, as Wormoal explains, *VT* 83.) Danny's reaction is described in the following manner:

But then something happened to Danny. He was seized with a terrible icy coldness all through his gut, a coldness indistinguishable from sadness. He gave an almighty shudder that rocked the hammock. [Beatrice] held on to him but he could not control the shivering. She rubbed his back vigorously. The shudders rocked him four or five times more, leaving him helpless. She tried to warm him and soothe him by rubbing and stroking him and holding him tightly in her arms. (*VT* 204)

This ominous attack occurs at the same time as the eclipse. The coldness akin to sadness functions as a prolepsis which shows that just as the myth predicts, Beatrice and Danny will not be able to stay together – the sun and the moon will be separated. Moreover, the coldness alludes to the place where Beatrice will eventually immigrate, which is characterized by coldness: “It was not until her second winter in Canada that Beatrice came to understand that the devil has to do with cold, not heat as most people think” (*VT* 271).

Later still, when Beatrice and Danny have been forced to separate, Beatrice, too, has an uncontrollable bodily reaction, which is described in terms of a fit.

Some distance from the house, she stepped for a moment on to a large flat rock-stone that lay across the path. Standing in the sun, in the full light of day, Beatrice McKinnon underwent some kind of seizure. Her head snapped back. As she stared at the sun, her eyes rolled back in her head. Her arms were flung out in mid-air and remained there quite rigid for several seconds in some sort of fit or spasm. During those few seconds, all the grief turned into violent fury. The hairs on her head bristled with rage. Her face turned dark, her mouth began to work, her features contorted. The wind blew strands of black hair across her mouth. At the same time, a noise erupted from her throat, a long, choking rattle that seemed to have its origins in the base of her spine and shook her whole body. (*VT* 238-39)

Beatrice's eerie seizure is connected to the now broken off relationship with Danny as the allusion to rock-stone and the sun indicate. The mention of the sun evokes

Beatrice's sexual pleasure, which is being controlled, as well as the myth of the solar eclipse, in which the female part is ascribed to the sun. The sadness which turns into rage is not directed at Danny, however, but rather at Father Napier who drove Danny to end the relationship. The anger that is unleashed is important, for anger remains an emotion that is usually suppressed in women. For Tania Modleski, "anger, . . . continues to be, as it has been historically, the most unacceptable of all emotions" for women (24). Beatrice's fury is directed at Father Napier, primarily because he has meddled in her relationship but further because he has come to her community as a missionary bringing with him colonial ideas, including which types of sexual relationships are acceptable and which are not. In fact, later on it is revealed that the education Beatrice received at the convent does not make much sense to her:

Not that Beatrice felt that she had done anything wrong. Whatever had happened between Danny and herself still felt so natural that she could not believe there was anything bad about it. Perhaps in that underwater world that Maba had told her about as a child, she would be united with Danny again. She dipped under the water until she could breathe no longer and was forced to surface. She could not find the entry to it. She and Danny had been expelled into everyday life. Danny had accepted it more easily than she had. Nothing that she learned at the convent ever made as much sense to her as what she had learned at Waronawa. (*VT* 268)

Even after it has been broken off, Beatrice does not feel that there was anything wrong with the incestuous relationship. It felt 'natural' to her because it only becomes unnatural in the context of Christian religion. Moreover, the education she received at the convent did not provide her with much understanding for an Amerindian life; quite on the contrary, it is completely inadequate for her life in Waronawa. Imposing a Christian lifestyle and modes of thought on non-Christian cultures, the novel suggests, is not only inadequate but also harmful to individuals.

The various instances of the postcolonial Gothic not only hint at something that had been hidden on the character plane such as secrets and insidious forms of racism, but it serves also as a reminder of the colonial legacy and what it did and continues doing to bodies. However, these uncanny elements also present a haunting reminder of the unpredictability of bodies. These bodily reactions are disturbing from a dominant western perspective, simply because the mind is thought to control the body. However, as these episode aptly demonstrate, the mind does not have complete

control. Yet, if the mind does not have complete control, what implications does this have for men, especially white men, who have been associated with the mind and rationality?

5.5 “Hot and bitter or cold and sweet:” Polyphonic Entanglements

The polyphonic nature of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* becomes apparent in the coming together of various, often opposed, character's voices.²⁰⁵ According to Bakhtin, a truly polyphonic novel is one in which characters, including the narrator, are on the same level, i.e. no one character is superior to the others. This is why the narrator is merely a “participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself the final word” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 72).²⁰⁶ While there is a narrator in *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, who both opens and closes the narrative and thus, presumably does retain the final word, it is not clear whether or not he is the narrator throughout. In spite of his claim that he is the narrator and that he has to “appear to vanish” in order to “become a realist” (*VT* 9), different parts of the novel are focalized through different characters and it is at least hinted at that the second part of the novel is narrated by Wifreda. However, it might also be narrated by Beatrice, whose memories lead over to the second part.

The second part is Wifreda's flash-back to the past which is more graphic than her current life: “It was odd how memories from so far back were more vivid in her mind than what happened yesterday” (*VT* 73). And “Wifreda told him for the first time the whole story” (*VT* 298). Yet, the text suggests that she does not only tell Chofy but also the reader the ‘whole’ story. Moreover, the narrator from the pro- and

²⁰⁵ The most pertinent intertextual dialogue within the novel is the intertext with Evelyn Waugh's *Handful of Dust* and his travel writing. While it is not the aim of this chapter to disentangle all the intertextual references between Waugh's writing, Melville's family history and *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, because this has already been accomplished by other scholars (see Ness, Jenkins and Wallart), it is important to note that the ironic intertextual references suggest that Waugh misses the important story: “For all that he was looking for material, he missed one story that was under his nose” (*VT* 49). Waugh is not particularly interested in the affair, and “in fact, [Wifreda] detected a certain distaste as he listened” (*VT* 74). While Rosa suggests that his disinterest might have been the result of the story not being “Evelyn Waugh's sort of story” (*VT* 49), it nevertheless raises questions of what counts as ‘proper’ material for an English writer who composes travel pieces. According to Ness, Melville “has laid Waugh's travel book and diary under requisition to help provide several characters and events in her novel” (52). Moreover, McKinnon is based on Melville's ancestor. For more intertextual parallels between Waugh's biographical writing and Melville's novel see Ness, Wallart and Jenkins.

²⁰⁶ Similar to the other novels in this study, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* also displays typical traces of novelistic dialogue by means of “[s]tylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration” and “the stylistically individualized speech of characters” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 262). A case in point is Rohit's idiosyncratic speech (*VT* 30).

epilogue does not intervene or provide metafictional comments that undermine the characters' views. Even more crucially, one of the novel's main questions of whether Amerindians should mix with outsiders or whether they should remain among themselves is approached from exactly these distinct characters' voices and standpoints, without raising any one above the other. Thus, while the narrator is in the position to retain the final word, he does not provide an answer to this much-debated question.

Some characters in the novel suggest that mixing between Amerindians and 'outsiders' should be avoided. The fiercest defender of this position is ironically an outsider, the anthropologist Wormoal who cautions that "Indian culture is disintegrating these days – contaminated mainly by contact with other races" (*VT* 78). He believes in the "purity of the nation" (*VT* 79), yet is aware of the exploitation he participates in:

I have the entire map of this country in my head. I know about the history and movements of the indigenous peoples here, their kinship structures, occupations, philosophies, cosmologies, labour pattern, languages. We Europeans have access to all the books and documentation that they lack. And what do I do with it? I become a professor and enrich European and American culture with it. (*VT* 79)

Being aware of his own complicity in the exploitation of Amerindians is justified, however, by his notion of knowledge. He believes that he knows "more about the Amerindian peoples than they know about themselves" (*VT* 77-78). However, he is also aware of the influence he has on his 'subjects': "We try just to observe but our very presence alters things" (*VT* 79). This is exemplified when his 'knowledge' of Wai-Wai leads to the accident that costs Bla-Bla his life.

Chofy's cousin Tenga is also opposed to the idea of 'mixing.' "The worst thing," he states, "is when they come and marry us" and he observes how Amerindians are being colonized anew:

We Amerindian people are fools, you know. We've been colonised twice. First by the Europeans and then by the coastlanders. I don't know which is worse. Big companies come to mine gold or cut timber. Scholars come and worm their way into our communities, studying us and grabbing our knowledge for their own benefit. Aid agencies come and interfere with us. Tourists stare at us. Politicians crawl round us at election times. (*VT* 54)

Not only does Tenga refer to the neo-colonialism of big, predominantly US-American companies that exploit the natural resources of economically dependent countries, but he also carves out the role of research in colonial efforts. According to Tenga's position, research is equally harmful as big companies, robbing Amerindians of another kind of natural resource, that is, knowledge. However, Tenga later acknowledges: 'What to do? We're destroyed if we mix. And we're destroyed if we don't' (*VT* 55). Thus, Tenga gets to the heart of the conundrum indigenous communities face in modern times.

Chofy struggles with questions of mixing or staying within one's own community as well. While he believes that "any change was the beginning of disintegration" (*VT* 15), he seems to have feelings of "dissatisfaction" (*VT* 14, 24) with his life and is drawn to a more 'western' lifestyle as a newspaper clipping which shows "millionaire Claus von Bülow and his wife attending a movie première in New York" (*VT* 18) and which he hides from his wife implies. In fact, when he meets Rosa, it is "love before first sight" (*VT* 40) because he is in love with the idea of an affair with a European woman, rather than with Rosa herself. Robert Ness argues accordingly that "Chofy instantly falls in love with Rosa because he was already in love with the exotic idea of Rosa . . ." (62). Chofy is also of the opinion that Amerindians "have to mix. Otherwise we have no future. We must get educated" (*VT* 54). His affair with Rosa, whom he meets in Georgetown, seemingly suggests that mixing is possible as it presents "an endeavor at 'progressive' multiculturalism" (Ness 62).

Even though Rosa differs from Wormoal in many respects as she does not want to be "bracketed with him" (*VT* 80), her position is a fraught one. She is aware of many colonial and neo-colonial practices, as her reaction to Chofy's apologizing indicates: "All words that make you feel inferior" (*VT* 40). However, similar to the anthropologist, she engages in research and, ironically, postcolonial research at that. The title of her work is "Evelyn Waugh – a Post-colonial Perspective" (*VT* 351). Yet, Rosa's perspective is based on very little evidence, for she does not actually collect much information about Evelyn Waugh and his stay with the McKinnons. Ness suggests that "Waugh is not the only cultural outsider who misses the story. Rosa, as

scholar of the post-colonial, also misses the story she is seeking, since Auntie Wilfreda, having little use for anyone outside her own family, refuses to speak about her recollections of Waugh” (57). Moreover, Rosa is so focused on her own research that she loses all attentiveness to other issues. Even though Nancy Freeman advises her not to bring up the relationship between Danny and Beatrice, she mentions the eclipse to Wilfreda, without drawing the connection between an eclipse and incest, which Wormoal writes about and she is aware of because she only recently read about it herself (*VT* 87).

Bla-Bla’s accident, however, seems to suggest, on the narrative level, that mixing with foreigners is harmful. While Chofy is in Georgetown, a group of Americans go to the Rupununi to look for oil, drilling holes and exploding dynamite. Chofy’s son Bla-Bla falls victim to such an explosion because of a misunderstanding. The Americans shout “Chofoye,” which Bla-Bla decodes as a sign that his father has returned instead of the warning the Americans believe it to be. Wormoal had earlier explained to one of the Americans that Chofoye means “explosion of waters” as Rosa had informed him (*VT* 309). The Americans, however, think it is simply an Amerindian word for “explosion” (*VT* 343). One could read Bla-Bla’s death as proof of mixing leading to tragedy. However, it is not the mixing itself that gives rise to this disaster but rather a lack of knowledge or failure of communication. This also problematizes the role both of the researcher Wormoal and Rosa: Wormoal because he provides information or knowledge to the ill-informed Americans, but fails to put this information into context and Rosa because, as a someone who is “a complete rationalist” (*VT* 298) and “preferred a degree of orderliness and rationality in her life” (*VT* 43), she is not aware of Chofy’s belief to never disclose his name or its meaning (*VT* 84, 302) and even if she did, she would probably not pay it much heed due to her rationality. Without giving it much thought, Rosa tells Wormoal Chofy’s name and its meaning. Neither Wormoal, nor Rosa, are simply passive observers, then, who seek or provide information, but set in motion a process that leads to the death of Bla-Bla, the end of the affair between Rosa and Chofy, and Chofy’s return to the Rupununi.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Pierre François interprets “McKinnon’s flight from Rupununi and Chofy’s return to the bush [as] multicultural failures” (47).

In the embedded narrative the conundrum between mixing and staying within one's own community is also addressed. Beatrice is confronted with these questions in Canada. Even though she settles into her new life with ease, as it is "easy and comfortable, if a little unreal" (*VT* 278), she is occasionally reminded of that other 'world' (*VT* 280), especially after she sees the Native American Indian woman from the circus again but ignores her. She wakes up one night and thinks:

How odd, she thought, to be lying here with my head two inches from his [Horatio's] and for my head to be still full of forest and savannah while his is probably full of the Montreal of his youth with its electric trams and toboggan slides. How odd that these two worlds should be lying inches from each other . . . She kept thinking about the woman. Perhaps, after all, the woman had been safer inside the ice coffin at the fun-fair than out of it. She wondered if it was better for her own people to preserve themselves within their own traditions or to allow change. (*VT* 280-81)

Beatrice wonders about the possibility that two lives are closely connected, yet their inner workings seem to be so far away from each other; hers revolves around the forest and savannahs and Horatio's around Montreal. This is also why she thinks that the Native American Woman might have been safer inside the ice coffin, for being inside it does not burden her with thoughts of the kind that Beatrice has, and it prevents her from having to face the question of whether people should stay with their own kind or mix. Nonetheless, Beatrice appreciates her new life: "Life was easy the way she now lived. She had even learned to play tennis. Oh Montreal, Montreal. What was she to do there?" (*VT* 281). While the allusion to playing tennis is humorous, for apparently successful integration entails such practices, her question of what she was to do there ironically echoes Evelyn Waugh's "Nothing appears to happen here. What do you find to do?" (*VT* 288). The novel seems to suggest that neither life style is superior to the other but equally confusing for someone who has not grown up in it. Finally, Beatrice is reminded of her mother saying "[h]ot and bitter or cold and sweet. Everything in the world is divided up like that" (*VT* 281). The novel thus suggests that there is no easy way out or simple answer and that you cannot have it both ways. Either choice will have its advantages and disadvantages, whether it refers to Beatrice's life in the Rupununi versus her life in Montreal, or the questions of mixing versus staying with your own kind. Sonny too addresses the question of 'mixing' in the "Epilogue:"

It was while I was in Europe that I nearly became fatally infected by the epidemic of separatism that was raging there. The virus transmutes. Sometimes it appears as nationalism, sometimes as racism, sometimes as religious orthodoxy. My experience in the rain forests of South America provided me with no immunity to it. It was very infectious. I felt my mouth twitching with unaccustomed fervour. Chameleon-like I marched amongst them. The Serbs, the Scots, the English, the Basques, the Muslims, the Chechens – everybody was at it. I crammed my mouth full of Belgian hand-made chocolates to avoid speaking out and giving myself away. I saw that the desire to be with your own kind exerts a powerful attraction. (*VT* 355)

Sonny is both aware of the attraction of staying with your own kind and the danger it poses. However, the idea of staying with your own kind differs depending on the context. Sonny remarks that his “experience in the rain forests of South America” did not provide him with “immunity,” for even though people stay together there, they are not affected by separatism. Sonny opts for staying with his own kind and returns to the savannahs and to his community, only to be confronted with the other extreme, complete neo-colonial conquest:

I decided to give up my quest for the parrot, temporarily, and head for home – sweet irony – to my own people. Back in my village I debated seriously with myself the appeal of staying with your own kind rather than mixing on equal terms; the virtues of untrammelled nature; the split between magic and science. I was getting nowhere happily when the ear-blasting sound of a helicopter landing brought me from my hammock. Lo and behold! I was confronted by the notorious Cosmetics Queen, the tycoon who frequently drops in on my village searching for recipes from indigenous people. I told her immediately of the wonderful face cream we make from ants’ balls. (*VT* 356)

Even though Sonny does not have an answer to the question “of staying with your own kind rather than mixing on equal terms,” what happens does seem to give an answer. For the Cosmetics Queen coming to the village and exploiting their knowledge and resources suggests that what is at the heart of the problem is not mixing itself, but rather mixing on unequal terms. As the novel illustrates abundantly, mixing does happen, but rarely on equal terms, resulting in the exploitation of Amerindians. Sonny is ultimately “[u]nable to decide whether we should stick to ourselves or throw ourselves on the mercy of the wide world” (*VT* 357) and takes up residence in the stars, opting out, thus, in a truly polyphonic mode rejecting a definite answer, leaving the readers to make up their own minds.

I would like to suggest that what the text ultimately offers is an ‘ethics of entanglement’ in which indigenous peoples are necessarily entangled with non-indigenous ones. “Entanglements,” according to Barad, “are not intertwinings of separate entities but rather irreducible relations of responsibility. There is no fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future,’ ‘here’ and ‘now,’ ‘cause’ and ‘effect’” (“Nature’s” 148-49). However, the question of mixing is never disengaged from questions of continuing colonization, which complicates matters. Indigenous communities become or rather remain increasingly dependent on corporate companies and national governments, and it is in fact this dependence that makes them in turn reliant on ‘mixing.’ The novel cautions against the unequal positions that members within the process might have, i.e. an ethics of entanglement without the ethics. In the novel’s case, it is the Amerindians who are ultimately in an inferior position socially and economically speaking to the US-Americans and coastlanders. In addition, while the novel’s characters express divergent views in regard to endogamy and exogamy, on the narrative level it is only through mixing and transcultural movement that this story comes to life. If it were not for the Scottish Alexander McKinnon’s marriage to Maba and Zuna, which results in offspring, Beatrice and Danny, who in turn produce offspring, Sonny, this story would not have been told.

5.6 “It takes more than one life to make a person:” Summary of Results

In this chapter, I have shown that *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* calls into question core western ideas of the body, including the gendered body. The novel elucidates both the concept of the grotesque body and phenomenological notions of embodiment by means of its emphasis on various interlinked and transgressive bodies as well as in its emphasis on the unpredictability of bodies. The novel presents a particularly powerful challenge to dominant western forms of feminism. It both defies dominant feminist discourses that sideline indigenous experience and challenges dualistic and simplistic thinking about embodiment.

Beatrice’s body is marked as grotesque because of its immense transgressive potential. Initially, her sexuality is disconnected from other human beings; she experiences sexual pleasure because of the warmth of the sun and the intense colour

of some flowers. Later, she engages in an incestuous relationship with her brother – which reflects the Amerindian myth of two sibling lovers who turn into the sun and the moon. Both Beatrice’s sexual pleasure caused by non-human and inorganic matter and her incestuous relationship undermine dominant western ideals of female sexuality. The novel corroborates stereotypical representations of female bodies as inherently linked to the earth and fertility and thus complicates an essentialized reading of female bodies. The novel further complicates western notions of female bodies and their agency as it illustrates that dominant Western feminism is predominantly based on ideas of female agency as linked to modernity and individuality and thus universalized ideas of female experience as predominantly white, middle-class women (see Grewal and Kaplan 252). Moreover, the novel illustrates that colonial and patriarchal ideas go hand in hand. Beatrice’s incestuous relationship with her brother constitutes an act of agency and a defiance of both colonial and patriarchal ideas.

The incestuous relationship is the central grotesque motif in the novel. Not only does Danny and Beatrice’s relationship pose problems for an understanding of human beings as individuals, separated from each other, but it also ironically subverts anthropological thinking and in particular Lévi-Strauss’s claims. On the one, by way of the figure of the grotesque intertwining of Danny and Beatrice, the novel illustrates that human bodies are always linked to each other and their surroundings, raising questions of belonging and responsibility. On the other hand, the playful hint at Lévi-Strauss questions the validity of ‘scientific’ approaches to Amerindian myths and lifestyles puts into doubt the validity of Lévi-Strauss’s generalizing theory of a universal incest taboo.

The Ventriloquist’s Tale resonates with embodiment theory by exemplifying how race is inscribed into bodies by both psychological and physical violence. During Beatrice’s time in the convent, her body is disciplined in a particular – western, Catholic – way. Moreover, she is taunted because of her indigenous background. Relatedly, Bla-Bla is physically punished by his teacher for using Wapisiana. In both instances, the seemingly superficial violence that is being done to them has a deeper impact on their subjectivity as it forms their body images permanently. The novel also

shows that mental and physical experiences go hand in hand in the creation and transformation of body images. Beatrice faints as a result of verbal harassment and Bla-Bla's physical punishments translates into a mental blockage.

Furthermore, the novel resonates with the grotesque in its representation of uncanny bodily reactions present throughout the novel. Several characters in the novel suffer from headaches and seemingly unexplainable bodily reactions such as blindness, violent trembling or seizures. Not only do these episodes point to the materiality of bodies, but they also represent and transform instances of the postcolonial Gothic which provide haunting reminders, first, of the unpredictability of human bodies, and, second, the colonial legacy. As Adam Roberts argues, "One of the consistent lessons of Gothic is that, though we may try, we cannot escape the past" (33-34). Similarly, the grotesque bodies in *The Ventriloquist's Tale* are reminders of corporeality that is shaped by past and continuing colonization.

The novel also stands out because of its mixing of voices. The novel's polyphony is expressed via the ambivalent role of the narrator who outs himself as the narrator of the story but fails to reappear in the main sections of the narrative as well as the different opinions concerning the question of whether to mix or stay within one's own community. While divergent opinions are expressed, the narrator adds a twist to this dilemma by clearly establishing the unequal forms of mixing, for it is predominantly US-American and European companies and scholars that either come to exploit natural resources or knowledge, without taking responsibility for the traces they leave in the Wapisiana community. The novel thus ultimately suggests that people and communities are entangled, but that ethics need to be involved in order to create an 'ethics of entanglement.'

Similar to *Cereus Blooms at Night*, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* illustrates that the mode of the transcultural feminist grotesque is not limited to representing middle-class, cisgender and white experience. By depicting indigenous experiences and demonstrating that these are marked by racism and by exemplifying that female sexuality is controlled not because of inherent sexism within the indigenous community but because of dominant western and especially Catholic ideas of what constitutes normal sexuality, the novel comments on the intertwining or rather

congruence of colonialism and sexism. Thus, the novel demonstrates that female embodiment cannot be understood without taking into account race, ethnicity and a different, in this case, indigenous Amerindian epistemology. It ultimately argues for an attention to the inherent entanglement of the factors that mark individuals.

Conclusion

This thesis has combined more traditional understandings of the grotesque, in particular Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, with the newer and more critical insights of the field of embodiment theory. Embodiment theory, and in particular feminist phenomenology, has helped to mitigate some of the problems the Bakhtinian grotesque poses (see "Introduction") and has contributed to extending some of the elements present in Bakhtin's theory. These include the positive and active role that is assigned to matter and materiality, the criticism of a mind/body dualism and its effects for non-normative bodies, as well as an emphasis on the inherent connection between the mind and the body by means of the concept of body images. In short, the Bakhtinian grotesque has been extended by the newly established field of feminist phenomenology, which has added a critical and innovative edge to this study of the grotesque. Further, this thesis has put an emphasis on the stylistic characteristics of the grotesque, which are often sidelined. The grotesque is frequently only thought of in terms of theme, yet it is a mode which foregrounds stylistic aspects, such as double-voiced discourse, irony, and polyphony.

I have shown how the novels in this study employ the grotesque aesthetic and style to represent a new conception of the 'body.' This new conception entails primarily two aspects: First, it presents the body and the mind as intertwined entities. All of the novels call into question a clear differentiation between mind and body (as grounded in much of dominant western philosophical thinking and religious beliefs). In Atwood's novel, this is less pronounced, for in fact, Marian's body and mind are at odds with each other for most of the narrative. However, this is due to the inscription of gender into her body. Marian incorporates femininity and is unable to resist these inscriptions consciously and intellectually at first. However, her body actively resists these inscriptions by rejecting food, which her mind is, initially, not able to fathom. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* puts emphasis on a change in body images and shows how the mind and body are inextricably linked; for the traces that are left on the body are ultimately also traces left on the mind. Mootoo's and Melville's texts envision the body as multiple, both in the sense that Bakhtin understands the grotesque body as social body and in feminist phenomenologist terms of a multiplicity of body images.

Cereus Blooms at Night focuses on bodily connections between characters, above all Tyler and Mala's connection. It suggests that bodies are not as individualized as they might appear and that they should be granted characteristics that are usually ascribed to the mind, such as communication. Moreover, Tyler's change in body images indicates a fluidity of gender. *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, too, does not conceive of human bodies as individualized, for they are always linked to other bodies, both human and non-human. This is exemplified in Beatrice and Danny's incestuous relationship which crosses the boundaries between nature and culture, reality and myth, human and plant, and human and animal. The novel also defies a mind/body dualism by means of its challenge to anthropological thinking and continuing colonial practices.

Second, these novels have shifted the focus from 'the body,' i.e. a prediscursive, generalizable, and normative body, to modes of embodiment. Emphasis is given to the singular experience of bodies; to perception, feeling and emotion. Concomitantly, experience of the grotesque, lived body is foregrounded instead of its mere representation. *The Edible Woman* foregrounds embodiedness by demonstrating that the inscription of gender into bodies leaves traumatic traces. The novel exemplifies that it is by having to fit into binary gender and concomitant heterosexuality that femininity is experienced as insidious trauma. Marian's eating disorder and her body's unexplainable and unexpected reactions, then, are symptoms of her trauma, as her increasing alienation from her own body image illustrates. Marian's body has to develop an eating disorder so that she can overcome and redefine the inscription of gender into her body.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers experiences physically what it means to be deprived of agency and bodily freedom. These physical, bodily experiences leave a permanent trace on her subjectivity and become manifest in her broken wing. I have shown that Fevvers's perception and point of view in regard to her own body, i.e. her body image, change throughout the narrative and that, as a consequence, she sheds a view of her body as fetish object by regaining a sense of her lived body. Agency, according to Carter, can only be (re)gained by means of the lived body. However, *Nights at the Circus* also brings issues of embodiment to the fore by commenting on

the mutual construction of the marker female and disabled. The novel exemplifies that both gender and disability, rather than being merely performative identities, are in fact embodied and leave material traces in bodies.

Cereus Blooms at Night puts emphasis on Mala's experience of loss, abuse and social ostracism. It vividly depicts how Mala's mental and physical experience of years of violence lead to a state of grotesqueness, in her case, an intimate connection to the earth, plants and animals, and a rejection of speech. Accordingly, the embodied communication that is established between Mala and Tyler is presented as a viable or in fact better alternative to verbal communication, as it accounts for Mala's traumatic experiences. In addition, the materializing effects of discourse that translate into bodily traces, as they do in Chandin's case for instance, also speak to an embodiedness of language, which is often overlooked. Moreover, the novel comments on gender being embodied by means of the two transgender characters Tyler and Otoh and shows that a body can be moulded defying notions of the stability of biological sex, as is the case with Otoh, or that gender does not have to pursue a specific aim and does not have to conform to binary gender roles, as is the case for Tyler.

On the one hand, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* foregrounds the, in particular sexual, experience of an indigenous, female character, Beatrice. Her transgression of norms of dominant western sexuality – by having non-human sexual partners and by engaging in an incestuous relationship with her brother – are modes of resistance against the inscription of western femininity via her Catholic schooling. The novel illustrates that colonialism and patriarchy are mutually constituted and mutually rely on each other in exercising control over individuals and communities. On the other hand, the novel focuses on the experience of the wider indigenous community and exemplifies how it is marked by racism. The novel shows that far from being superficial, racist speech and acts leave permanent traces in bodies. However, resistance is conveyed via a wide-reaching unpredictability of bodies which defies western logic.

Furthermore, the novels investigated here all display a particular type of grotesque style, characterized by polyphony, and, first and foremost, the use of double-voiced discourse, humour and irony. In *The Edible Woman*, double-voiced

discourse serves to complicate some of Marian's utterances and thoughts. It ultimately undermines Marian's voluntary acts and thus questions her and other characters' adherence to feminine ideals. In *Nights at the Circus*, humour and irony are powerful tools to put some characters and their opinions into place. Fevvers is frequently 'degraded' by the narrator so that her real motives are revealed and challenged. In both *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *The Ventriloquist's Tale* polyphony plays a major part in creating ambiguity as regards the role of the narrator in the novel. While Tyler is supposedly the narrator in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, several episodes suggest that this might not be the case, complicating notions of them taking over the narration and thus reinforcing colonial modes of storytelling. In *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, the assumed narrator appears in the pro- and epilogue, that is, the frame narrative, but is absent from the embedded narrative. Moreover, the novel's reflection of a coming together of different voices and opinions reflects a truly polyphonic engagement with difficult questions that the novel raises, suggesting that there is rarely a simple or right answer. Not only does this grotesque style of narration result in an undermining of traditionally 'male' genres, narratives and forms of storytelling but it also aptly connects to laughter. Laughter challenges a mind/body dualism like no other phenomenon, because it is a phenomenon that blurs the boundaries between the mental and the bodily.

Due to space constraints, this thesis could not provide a comprehensive review of all possible manifestations of the transcultural feminist grotesque. The current study was limited by its focus on Anglophone literatures with links to Britain and Canada. Thus, this thesis only represents a starting point in the analysis of the transcultural feminist grotesque. Further research is needed to account for the varying manifestations of the transcultural feminist grotesque in other geographical and cultural locations, such as South-Africa, India, New Zealand or Australia, Ireland and other partly or fully Anglophone contexts. Other equally compelling novels for the study of the transcultural feminist grotesque would have been Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1982), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Kathrine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size* (1992), Barbara Gowdy's *Mr. Sandman* (1995), Merle Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting* (1995),

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) and Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* (2007). Moreover, it was beyond the scope of this thesis to examine other literary productions in the area of poetry or drama, even though there exist a variety of examples of the use of the grotesque mode in these genres as well.²⁰⁸ The current study has only examined texts produced in the second half of the twentieth century in order to trace the shift in the use of the mode during this period of intense theoretical, feminist debate. However, further research can trace the occurrence of this mode in more recent, twenty-first-century texts.

The focus on literature from British and Canadian transcultural backgrounds that this thesis pursued, has also implicitly led to a choice of theoretical texts that are predominantly Anglo-European. However, as has been established in the theory chapter, feminist phenomenology, while being predominantly shaped by Anglo-European scholars, can help to reconcile seemingly divergent approaches or forms of activism, such as feminism and indigenous studies. Similarly, Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, even though it goes back, for the most part, to medieval, European cultural productions, is easily applicable to literatures outside of Europe or Canada. Nevertheless, one of the strengths of this thesis is that it looks at the grotesque from a transcultural and transnational perspective. This approach towards reading the grotesque transculturally has revealed parallels in the use of themes and styles that might otherwise not have become so apparent. While acknowledging the differences in the cultural contexts, time periods and approaches in the respective literary works, this thesis has deliberately highlighted similarities. For, to quote Grewal and Kaplan:

Transnational feminist practices require this kind of comparative work rather than the relativistic linking of 'differences' undertaken by proponents of 'global feminism'; that is, to compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender. (Grewal and Kaplan 253)

My approach of a transcultural combined with a grotesque-feminist phenomenological reading has changed the ground of research concerning the grotesque. Not only has this enabled a re-examination of terms such as the 'female'

²⁰⁸ One recent example is Safiya Sinclair's outstanding collection of poetry with the title *Cannibal* (2016).

grotesque and argued for a more engaged type of ‘feminist’ grotesque, which is not based on specific gender or national background, but it has also uncovered a general shift towards questions of embodiment in contemporary writing, irrespective of the place of origin of the literary work. This dissertation suggests that there is a global turn towards (female) embodiment, in particular in Anglophone writings which engage with feminist issues. Thus, this thesis demonstrates that the analysis of literary texts within a national framework is only useful to a certain extent and cannot account for the many similarities that novels in different Anglophone cultures reveal. Moreover, the examination of the transcultural feminist grotesque texts studied here has unearthed that there is a growing understanding of gender being always implicated with other markers such as race, ethnicity and disability.

While the novels analyzed in this thesis elucidate and complicate feminist discourses of their time, they also provide timeless comments on female embodiment within patriarchy. Thus, they also establish a pertinent link to current debates surrounding #MeToo, US-American abortion bans and taxation on sanitary products in Germany and in other countries, to name but the most prominent ones. For these debates illustrate that the female body continues to be devalued. On the one hand, these debates make it abundantly clear that the status of women, or their lack thereof, is connected to their bodies and their ‘biological’ traits, such as menstruation or the, at least for some women, option of bearing children.²⁰⁹ Women continue being characterised by their bodies and, as a consequence, their intellectual capabilities are put into question subliminally. While abortion bans regulate women’s ‘use’ of their bodies and do not grant them basic rights, their existence and prevalence also reveals that women are not deemed capable of taking considerate and independent decisions.

On the other hand, these debates are not simply connected to women’s bodies and their ‘biology’ but to their lived experience.²¹⁰ When women’s pain during their menstrual period is not deemed to interfere with their well-being, when their fears concerning childbirth are belittled, when women with disabilities face difficulties in

²⁰⁹ Contrary to common believes, childbirth remains a potential threat to women’s lives. Even though maternal mortality rates have decreased on average, at least in the ‘developed West,’ the US, to give one example, has the “highest maternal mortality rate of all the world’s wealthy democracies” (Ehrenreich and Quart n. pag).

²¹⁰ This then also includes people, especially transgender, who are marked as female.

accessing health care, and when harassment and abuse are not taken seriously, then the lived experience of women is denigrated. This denigration is particularly pronounced for women who are racialized. Numbers indicate that African American women “suffer severe complications twice as often as white women” do during or after pregnancy (Purnell n. pag.) and native women in the US are up to ten times more likely to be murdered depending on the county (Bleir and Zoledziowski n. pag.). Similarly, the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW) inquiry launched in Canada was supposed to account for the 1,060 indigenous women who disappeared or were killed in the past decade (Simpson 20).

It is not the biology of female bodies that makes individuals, groups and states act in such an unsettling way towards women, but it is the continued devaluation of ‘the woman’s body,’ especially in its leaky, disruptive, ‘grotesque’ form. People respond to a body in a particular way because it is gendered and thus culturally imbued with meaning. Accordingly, it is not bodies themselves that inspire hate but the meanings attached to them. Yet, as the debates mentioned above and the novels examined in this thesis show, these cultural meanings leave material traces in bodies and thus form subjectivities. These material traces take various forms: They range from women internalising objectification and as a consequence not trusting their own capabilities and intellectual capacities to insidious trauma due to having to live up to certain feminine, heterosexual ideals or owing to living in an environment in which suffering sexual assault is a constant threat. In the most disconcerting way, these material traces result in abuse and even death, especially in the case of racialized individuals and groups.

Raising awareness of these links by means of literature – the link between the body and its cultural meaning, the link between the body and femininity, the link between the body and racialization – can provide a form of resistance to dominant narratives, both literary and cultural. Literature and its research articulates and disseminates new epistemological frameworks, new approaches and understandings of gender and the body. It can extend far beyond the publishing and academic establishment to provide a pertinent critique of issues past and present. Hence, the transcultural feminist grotesque is a crucial means of changing the ground in

contemporary discussions of embodiment as it provides more nuanced and more diverse representations of women's relationships to their bodies and their lived experiences.

Bibliography

- Abraham, Anke, and Beatrice Müller, eds. "Einführung." *Körperhandeln und Körpererleben: Multidisziplinäre Perspektiven auf ein Brisantes Feld*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010. 9-37.
- Adair, Gigi. "Indigenous Posthumanism: Rewriting Anthropology in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Weeds and Viruses: Ecopolitics and the Demands of Theory*. Ed. Cordula Lemke and Jennifer Wawrzinek. Trier: WVT, 2015. 175-188.
- Aguila-Way, Tania. "Fraught Epistemologies: Bioscience, Community, and Environment in Diasporic Canadian Literature." Diss. U of Ottawa, 2015.
- Ahmed, Sara. "Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007): 149-168.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Ardila, J. A. G. "Introduction: Transnational Picaresque." *Philological Quarterly* 89.1 (2010): 1-11.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: Key Concepts*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. London: Virago, 1969.
- . "Hairball." *Wilderness Tips*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991. 41-56.
- . "Women's Novels." <https://litvote.com/womens-novels-by-margaret-atwood/>.
- . *The Year of the Flood*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Discourse in the Novel." Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 259-422.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

- . *Rabelais and His World*. 1965. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Baldwin, Thomas, ed. *Reading Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007.
- . "Nature's Queer Performativity." *Qui Parle* 19. 2 (2011): 121-158.
- . "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 801-831.
- Barasch, Frances K. *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.
- Barron, Agnel. "Kanaima and the Oral Tradition in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 7.1 (2011): 1-13.
- Bartky, Sandra. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Bendelow, Gillian, and Simon J. Williams. *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Benessaïeh, Afef. "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality." *Transcultural Americas/Amérique Transculturelles*. Ed. Afef Benessaïeh. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2010. 11-38.
- Berman, Jessica. "Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?" *Modernism/Modernity* 24.2 (2017): 217-44.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (1984): 125-33.
- Bleir, Garet and Anya Zoledziowski. "Hate in America: Native Women are 10 Times more likely to be Murdered." *News21*. 20 Aug 2018. Web. 17 June 2019.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Grotesque*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. Bloom's Lit. Themes.
- Boehm, Beth A. "Feminist Metafiction and Androcentric Reading Strategies: Angela Carter's Reconstructed Reader in *Nights at the Circus*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37 (1995): 35-49.

- Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988.
- Bonnici, Thomas. "Transculturation in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Mimesis* 22.3 (2001): 07-21.
- Booth, Wayne C. "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism." *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*. Ed. Gary Saul Morson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 145-176.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Politics of Protest." *Socialist Review* 242 (2000): 18-20.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993.
- Braz, Albert. "The Other Postcolonial Wars: Amerindians versus Coastlanders in *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Supriya M. Nair. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2012. 29-44.
- Bristow, Joseph and Trev Lynn Broughton, intro. and eds. *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Britzolakis, Christina. "Angela Carter's Fetishism." 1995. *Angela Carter: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Ed. Alison Easton. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. 173-91.
- Bromberg, Pamela S. "The Two Faces of the Mirror in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 12-23.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . "Melancholy Gender." *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 132-150.
- Camayd-Freixas, Erik. *Realismo Mágico y Primitivismo: Relecturas de Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo y García Márquez*. Lanham: UP of America, 1998.

- Cameron, Elspeth. "Femininity, or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa and *The Edible Woman*." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20.2 (1985): 45-69.
- Carman, Taylor. *Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "On the Marvelous Real in America." *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 75-88.
- . "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real." *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 89-108.
- Carroll, Noël. "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes toward a Taxonomy." Ed. Frances S. Connelly. *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 291-311.
- Carter, Angela. *Nights at the Circus*. 1984. London: Vintage, 1994.
- . "Notes from the Front Line." *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*. London: Vintage, 2013. 45-53.
- . *The Passion of New Eve*. 1977. London: Virago, 1982.
- . *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*. 1982. London: Virago, 2012.
- Cataldi, Suzanne L. "Affect and Sensibility." Ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008. 163-173.
- Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Cherniavsky, Eva. "Body". *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York UP, 2007. 26-29.
- Collins, Merle. *The Colour of Forgetting*. London: Virago, 1995.
- Connelly, Frances S., ed. "Grotesque." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Michael Kelly. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. 241-246.
- . *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012.
- . *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

- Cooke, Nathalie. *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood P, 2004.
- Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.
- Cornier Michael, Magali. "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies." *Contemporary Literature* 35 (1994): 492-521.
- Creede, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-1299.
- Crossley, Nick. *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*. London: Sage, 2001.
- Csordas, Thomas J. "Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology." *Perspectives on Embodiment*. Ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber. New York: Routledge, 1999. 143-162.
- . *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- D'haen, Theo L. "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centres." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 191-208.
- Dabydeen, David. "Teaching West Indian Literature in Britain." *Studying British Cultures: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Ed. Susan Bassnett. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Davis, Lennard J. "Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century." *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2006. 3-16.
- Day, Aidan. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. London: Vintage, 2009. 3-7.
- Delbaere-Garant, Jeanne. "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 249-263.
- Dennis, Abigail. "'The Spectacle of her Gluttony': The Performance of Female Appetite and the Bakhtinian Grotesque in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 31 (2008): 116-130.
- Deutscher, Penelope. "Three Touches to the Skin and One Look: Sartre and Beauvoir on Desire and Embodiment." *Thinking Through the Skin*. Ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey. London: Routledge, 2001. 143-159.
- Donnell, Alison. "Living and Loving: Emancipating the Caribbean Queer Citizen in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*. Ed. Faith Smith. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. 168-80.
- Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*. 1989. New York: Vintage, 2002.
- Duggan, Robert. *The Grotesque in Contemporary British Fiction*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013.
- Douglas, Erin. "Freak Show Femininities: Intersectional Spectacles in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*." *Women's Studies* 43.1 (2014): 1-24.
- Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- "Eating disorder." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Edwards, Justin D., and Rune Graulund. *Grotesque*. London: Routledge, 2013. New Critical Idiom.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Alissa Quart. "Let's Call the Pro/Lifers What They Are: Pro/Death." *The Guardian*. 22 January 2018. Web. 26 January 2018. n. pag.
- Enders, Giulia. *Gut: The Inside Story of our Body's Most Underrated Organ*. Trans. David Shaw. London: Scribe, 2015. Trans. of *Darm Mit Charm*. Ullstein: 2014.

- Ette, Ottmar. *Writing-between-Worlds: TransArea Studies and the Literatures-without-a-fixed-Abode*. Trans. by Vera M. Kutzinski. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto P, 1986.
- Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 163-190.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- . "The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 – Sex and Gender." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (2005): 1491-1527.
- "Feminist Phenomenology." *PhilPapers*. 5 Nov. 2016. Web. 20 May 2019.
<http://philpapers.org/browse/feminist-phenomenology>.
- Fernihough, Anne. "'Is She Fact or is She Fiction?': Angela Carter and the Enigma of Woman." *Textual Practice* 11 (1997): 89-107.
- Fisher Fishkin, Shelley. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57. 1 (2005): 17-57.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*. 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1998.
- Francis, Donette. "'Silences Too Horrific to Disturb': Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004): 75-90.
- François, Pierre. "Incest and the Ontology of Memory in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Commonwealth* 21.2 (1999): 37-48.
- Fraser, Miriam, and Monica Greco, eds. *The Body: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2005. Routledge Student Readers.
- Freaks*. Dir. Ted Browning. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932. Film.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976): 619-45.

- Frost, Samantha. "The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology." *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*. Ed. Heidi E. Grasswick. Springer: 2011. 69-83.
- Gallagher, Shaun. "Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification." *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 7.4 (1986): 541-54.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- . "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2006. 257-273.
- Gasiorek, Andrzej. *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*. London: Edward Arnold, 1995.
- Gatens, Moira. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Gershon, Michael. *The Second Brain: A Groundbreaking New Understanding of Nervous Disorders of the Stomach and Intestine*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Gibson, Graeme. "Margaret Atwood." *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973. 5-31.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. "Isla a su Vuelo Fugitiva: Carpentier y el Realismo Mágico." *Revista Iberoamericana* 40.86 (1974): 9-63.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: *Funny Boy* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 161-86.
- Gordon, Edmund. *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography*. London: Vintage, 2017.
- Gowdy, Barbara. *Mr. Sandman*. 1995. London: Flamingo, 1997.
- Green, Joyce, ed. *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2007.
- Greene, Gayle. "Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: 'Rebelling Against the System.'" *Margaret Atwood: Essays on her Works*. Ed. Branko Gorjup. Toronto: Guernica, 2008. 11-41.

- Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity." *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*. Ed. Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt. New York: Routledge, 2008. 251-255.
- Griffith, Margaret. "Verbal Terrain in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 21.3 (1980): 85-93.
- Gross, Robert A. "The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies in a Wider World." *Journal of American Studies* 34.3 (2000): 373-393.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- "Grotesque." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Haffenden, John. *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Hahn, Harlan. "Can Disability be Beautiful." *Social Policy* 18 (1988): 26-31.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland: U of California P, 2018.
- Hall, Stuart. "Representation, Difference and Power." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage, 1997. 259-61.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-181.
- . "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 575-599.
- Hargreaves, Alec G., Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy, eds. *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2010.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

- Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard, and Jürgen Kocka, eds. *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Hayles, Katherine N. "Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments." *Configurations* 10 (2002): 297-320.
- "Helen." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Helff, Sissy. *Unreliable Truths: Transcultural Homeworlds in Indian Women's Fiction of the Diaspora*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- Hevey, David. *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Hillman, David, and Ulrika Maude, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.
- Hollinger, Veronica. "Genre vs. Mode." *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*. Ed. Rob Latham. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. 139-151.
- Hong, Grace Kyungwon. "'A Shared Queerness': Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7.1 (2006): 73-103.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. 1981. London: Pluto P, 1982.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. *The New Moon's Arms*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007.
- Horlacher, Stefan. "A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter." *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*. Ed. Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 17-47.
- Hoving, Isabel. "Moving the Caribbean Landscape: *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a Re-imagination of the Caribbean Environment." *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Ed. DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M., Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley. Charlottesville: U of Virginia Press, 2005. 154-68.

- Howells, Carol Ann. "Changing the Boundaries of Identity: Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 143-165.
- Huggan, Graham. "Derailing the 'trans'? Postcolonial Studies and the Negative Effects of Speed." *Inter- und Transkulturelle Studien: Theoretische Grundlagen und interdisziplinäre Praxis*. Ed. Heinz Antor. Heidelberg: Winter, 2006. 55-61.
- . *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Huhndorf, Shari M., and Cheryl Suzack. "Indigenous Feminism: Theorizing the Issues." *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*. Ed. Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault, and Jean Barman. Vancouver: UBC P, 2010. 1-17.
- Inckle, Kay. "*Writing on the Body?*" *Thinking Through Gendered Embodiment and Marked Flesh*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- "Intertextuality." *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell, UP, 1985. Trans. of *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*. 1977.
- Jay, Paul. *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010.
- Jenkins, Lee M. "'Revenge or Tribute:?' Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* and Evelyn Waugh." *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*. 10.2 (2003): 13-29.
- Jenks, Chris. *Transgression*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Jervis, John. *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- Jiwa, Fazeela. "In Conversation with Shani Mootoo." *CWILA*. n.d. Web. 7 Aug 2018.
- Kay, Jackie. *Trumpet*. London: Picador, 1998.
- Käufer, Stephan, and Anthony Chemero. *Phenomenology: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2015.

- Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. New York: McGraw-Hill Book, Company, 1963. Trans. of *Das Grotteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*. Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1957.
- Kim, Christine. "Troubling the Mosaic: Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Representations of Social Differences." *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*. Ed. Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008. 153-78.
- King, Bruce. "The Ventriloquist's Tale by Pauline Melville." *World Literature Today* 72.3 (1998): 668-669.
- King, Thomas. "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." *World Literature Written in English*. 30.2 (1990): 10-16.
- Kokkola, Lydia and Elina Valovirta. "The Disgust that Fascinates: Sibling Incest as a Bad Romance." *Sexuality & Culture* 21 (2017): 121-41.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Kulperger, Shelley, "Familiar Ghosts: Feminist Postcolonial Gothic in Canada." *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Ed. Sugars, Cynthia and Gerry Turcotte. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. 97-124.
- Lecker, Robert. "Janus Through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels." *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson. Toronto: Anansi, 1981. 177-203.
- Lennon, Kathleen. "Feminist Perspectives on the Body." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2014 ed. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 11 Sept. 2014. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Levitt, Peggy, and Sanjeev Khagram. "Constructing Transnational Studies." *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*. Ed. Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt. New York: Routledge, 2008. 1-18.
- Lewis, Thomas, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon. *A General Theory of Love*. New York: Random House, 2000.

- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (2011): 434-472.
- Lindgren, Kristin. "Bodies in Trouble: Identity, Embodiment, and Disability." *Gendering Disability*. Ed. Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchinson. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004.
- Livingston, Julie and Jasbir K. Puar. "Interspecies." *Social Text: Theory, Culture, Ideology* 29.1 (2011): 3-14.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1979. *The Essential Feminist Reader*. Ed. Estelle B. Freedman. New York: Modern Library, 2007. 331-335.
- Lugones, Maria. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 186-209.
- Lyon, M. L., and J. M. Barbalet. "Society's Body: Emotion and the 'Somatization' of Social Theory." *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Ed. Thomas J. Csordas. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 48-66.
- Mabee, Carleton, and Susan Mabee Newhouse. *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*. New York: New York UP, 1993.
- MacLulich, T. D. "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: LeviStrauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 11 (1978). N. pag.
- Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Matthews, Eric. *Merleau-Ponty: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- May, Vivian M. "Trauma in Paradise: Willful and Strategic Ignorance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Hypatia* 21.3 (2006): 107-35.
- McCormack, Donna. "Intergenerational Witnessing in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 41-76.
- McLaren, Margaret A. *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.

- McNeil, Maureen. "Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin." *Journal for Cultural Research* 14.4 (2012): 427-437.
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York UP, 2006.
- McWilliam, Erica. "The Grotesque Body as a Feminist Aesthetic?" *Counterpoints* 168 (2003): 213-221.
- McWilliams, Ellen. "Margaret Atwood's Canadian Hunger Artist: Postcolonial Appetites in *The Edible Woman*." *Kunapipi* 28.2. (2006): 63-72.
- Melville, Pauline. *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. London: Routledge, 2012. Trans. of *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945.
- . *Sense and Non-sense*. Trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964. Trans. of *Sens et non-sense*. Les Éditions Nagel, 1961.
- Metcalf, Anna. "Small Talk: Pauline Melville." *Financial Times* 12 July 2010.
- Miles, Margaret. "Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque." *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Ed. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997. 83-112.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith. "Amerindian *ante*-coloniality in Contemporary Caribbean Writing: Crossing Borders with Jan Carew, Cyril Dabydeen and Pauline Melville." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.3 (2011): 309-312.
- Modleski, Tania. *The Women who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. 1996. London: Granta Books, 1999.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2000.
- Morris, Pam. *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. London: Arnold, 1994.

- Moss, Laura. "Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question." *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Laura Moss. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003.
- Munford, Rebecca. "Re-vamping the Gothic: Representations of the Gothic Heroine in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*." *Paradoxa* 17 (2002): 235-256.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*. Chichester: Wiley, 2015.
- Ness, Robert. "'Not his sort of story': Evelyn Waugh and Pauline Melville in Guyana." *ARIEL* 38.4 (2007): 51-68.
- Northey, Margot. *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967.
- Ouellette, Grace J.M.W. *The Fourth World: An Indigenous Perspective on Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Activism*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002.
- Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.
- Palmer, Paulina. "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight." *Women Reading Women's Writing*. Ed. Sue Roe. Brighton: The Harvester P, 1987. 176-205.
- . "Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood." *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton. London: Longman, 1997. 24-42.
- Palumbo, Alice M. "On the Border: Margaret Atwood's Novels." Ed. Reingard M. Nischik. *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*. Rochester: Camden House, 2000. 73-86.
- Parkinson Zamora, Lois, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s." *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 1-11.
- Peach, Linden. *Angela Carter*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998. Macmillan Modern Novelists.
- Pease, Donald E. *National Identities and Postnational Narratives*. Durham: Duke UP, 1994.
- Pease, Donald E., and Yuan Shu. *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 2015.

- Pilný, Ondřej. *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Pimentel Biscaia, Maria Sofia. *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011.
- “Polyphony.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Poole, Brian. “What does laughter embody?” *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*. Ed. John Michael Krois, Mats Rosengren, Angela Steidele, and Dirk Westerkamp. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007. 195-218.
- Price, Janet, and Margrit Shildrick. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999.
- Puar, Jasbir. “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, Affective Politics.” *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics*. Jan. 2011. Web. 11 July 2018. N. pag.
- Purnell, Derecka. “If Even Beyoncé Had a Rough Pregnancy, What Hope Do Other Black Women Have?” *The Guardian*. 23 Apr 2019. Web. 24 Apr 2019.
- Riccardi-Cubitt, Monique. “Grotesque.” *The Dictionary of Art*. Ed. Jane Turner. New York: Macmillan, 1996. 699-702.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” 1980. *Feminisms*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. Oxford Readers Ser. 320-325.
- . “Notes Toward a Politics of Location.” 1984. *The Essential Feminist Reader*. Ed. Estelle B. Freedman. New York: Modern Library, 2007. 374-375.
- Roh, Franz. “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism.” *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 15-31.
- Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2011. Routledge Philosophy GuideBook.
- Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1995.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. London: Flamingo, 1997.

- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." 1975. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 770-794.
- Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. 1853. Vol. 3. London: Dent, 1907.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Sage, Lorna. "Angela Carter Interviewed by Lorna Sage." *New Writing*. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke. London: Minerva, 1992. 185-193.
- Saini, Angela. "Epigenetics: Genes, Environment and the Generation Game." *The Guardian*. 7 Sept. 2014. Web. 20 May 2019.
- Sandler, Linda. "Interview with Margaret Atwood." *Malahat Review* 41 (1977): 7-27.
- Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- . "Performance, Identity and the Body." *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*. Ed. Helen Stoddart. London: Routledge, 2007. 82-94. Routledge Guides to Literature.
- Scharm, Heike, and Natalia Matta Jara. *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2017.
- Schulze-Engler, Frank. "Theoretical Perspectives: From Postcolonialism to Transcultural World Literature." *English Literatures Across the Globe*. Ed. Lars Eckstein. Paderborn: Fink, 2007. 20-32.
- Scott, Helen. *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization: Fictions of Independence*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.
- Shapira, Yael. "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque." *Narrative* 18.1 (2010): 51-72.
- Shields, Tanya. "The Amerindian Transnational Experience in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*." *Constructing Vernacular Culture in the Trans-Caribbean*. Ed. Holger Henke and Karl-Heinz Magister. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008. 267-297.
- . "Rehearsing Indigeneity." *Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2014.
- Shute, Jenefer. *Life-Size*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1992.

- Simpson, Audra. "The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Theory & Event* 19. 4 (2016). 1-30.
- Sinclair, Safiya. *Cannibal*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2016.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Magic & Other Realisms*. Spec. issue of *Canadian Literature* 166 (1988): 9-24.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Stoddart, Helen. *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*. London: Routledge, 2007. Routledge Guides to Literature.
- Storr, Robert. *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque*. Santa Fe: SITE, 2004.
- Straub, Julia. *Handbook of Transatlantic North American Studies*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Stryker, Susan. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." Introduction. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Sturm, Jules. *Bodies We Fail: Productive Embodiments of Imperfection*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014.
- Suchland, Jennifer. *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking*. London: Duke UP, 2015.
- Sugars, Cynthia and Gerry Turcotte, eds. *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009.
- Summers, David. "The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque." Ed. Frances S. Connelly. *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 20-46.
- Thieme, John. *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002.
- Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. Ed. John d. Jump. London: Methuen, 1972. The Critical Idiom.

- Tuck, Eve, and K.W. Yang. "Decolonization is not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40.
- Vice, Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.
- Vitruvius. *The Ten Books on Architecture*. Trans. Morris Hickeys Morgan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1914. Trans. of *De architectura*. [fifteenth century].
- Waldschmidt, Anne. "Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool." *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017. 19-27.
- Wallace, Belinda Deneen. "Queer Potentialities and Queering Home in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Cultural Dynamics* 30 (2018): 59-75.
- Wallraven, Miriam. "Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (1984)." *Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Ed. Christoph Reinfandt. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017. 384-402.
- Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009.
- Waugh, Evelyn. *A Handful of Dust*. 1934. London: Chapman & Hall, 1975.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- "Weasel words." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 20 May 2019.
- Wegenstein, Bernadette. *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006.
- Weiss, Gail. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Weiss, Gail, and Honi Fern Haber, eds. *Perspectives on Embodiment*. New York: Routledge, 1999. 143-162.
- Weldon, Fay. *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982.
- Welsch, Wolfgang "Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today." *The Contemporary Study of Culture*. Wien: Turia + Kant, 1999. 217-244.

- Wendel, Susan. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2006. 243-256.
- Wesling, Meg. "Neocolonialism, Queer Kinship, and Diaspora: Contesting the Romance of the Family in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Textual Practice* 25.4 (2011): 649-70.
- Whittle, Stephen. "Foreword." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. xi-xvi.
- Wilkerson, Abby. "Embodiment". *Keywords for Disability Studies*. Ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin. New York: New York UP, 2015. 196-203.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. "Gut Feminism." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15.3 (2004). 66-94.
- . *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Wilson, Sharon Rose. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1993.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Sexing the Cherry*. London: Bloomsbury, 1989.
- Wittig, Monique. "The Straight Mind." 1980. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon P, 1992. 21-32.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.
- Wuttig, Bettina. *Das traumatisierte Subjekt: Geschlecht – Körper – Soziale Praxis*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016.
- . "Der traumatisierte Körper." *Körperhandeln und Körpererleben: Multidisziplinäre Perspektiven auf ein Brisantes Feld*. Ed. Anke Abraham and Beatrice Müller. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010.
- Wykes, Maggie and Barrie Gunter. *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill*. London: Sage, 2005
- Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Younger, Beth. *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature*. Lanham: The Scarecrow P, 2009.

German Summary

Meine Dissertation mit dem Titel „The Transcultural Feminist Grotesque: Embodiment in Contemporary Anglophone Literatures“ befasst sich mit der Darstellung von grotesker Körperlichkeit in zeitgenössischen anglophonen Literaturen. Anhand der Analyse von vier repräsentativen Romanen, *The Edible Woman* (1969) von Margaret Atwood, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) von Angela Carter, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) von Shani Mootoo und *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997) von Pauline Melville, zeichnet die Arbeit eine Veränderung in der Benutzung des Modus des Grotesken nach. Es wird herausgearbeitet, dass das Groteske am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts nicht mehr nur als Repräsentation von Körpern, und insbesondere von weiblichen Körpern gelesen werden kann, sondern dass sich der Modus auch im Sinne eines phänomenologischen Verständnisses von Körperlichkeit interpretieren lässt. Körperempfinden, Wahrnehmung und taktile Erfahrungen werden in diesen Romanen in den Vordergrund gerückt. Somit spiegeln diese literarischen Werke die Entwicklungen aber auch Problematiken in feministischen Diskursen zu der Zeit ihrer Publikationen wider, in denen Materialität, Körperlichkeit und Einschreibung von Geschlechterstrukturen in Körper an Wichtigkeit gewinnen. Dies bezieht sich zwar hauptsächlich auf die Debatten der 1990er Jahre, wird aber auch schon in früheren Romanen aufgegriffen. In diesem Zusammenhang lässt sich auf die theoretischen Arbeiten von Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens und Iris Marion Young hinweisen. Darüber hinaus verdeutlichen die Romane und deren Veränderungen des Modus des Grotesken, dass Geschlecht immer auch in Verbindung zu anderen Markierungen („disability“, „race“ und „indigeneity“) gelesen werden muss.

Die vier Romane, die den Korpus meiner Arbeit bilden, stammen aus diversen anglophonen und transkulturellen Kontexten: England, Kanada sowie der Karibik. Diese Auswahl soll einerseits gewährleisten, dass die Analyse der Werke sich von einem nationalen Kontext abhebt, der in vorherigen Studien zur Groteske überwiegend im Vordergrund stand. Darüber hinaus situiere ich meine Analyse in Bezug zum „transnational turn“, der seit einigen Jahren in den Literaturwissenschaften identifiziert und praktiziert wird. Ich setze meine Analyse ferner in Kontext zu dem Konzept der Transkulturalität und einer transkulturellen

Lesart, die eine postkoloniale Lesart zwar nicht vollständig ersetzt, aber eine andere, m. E. inklusivere Lesart dieser Werke ermöglicht. Andererseits soll die Auswahl des Korpus die Parallelen in den feministischen Diskursen und Problematiken in den Werken unterschiedlicher kultureller Kontexte widerspiegeln. *The Edible Woman* (1969) von Margaret Atwood, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) von Angela Carter, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) von Shani Mootoo und *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997) von Pauline Melville bilden eine Auswahl an Werken, die nicht nur die zeitliche Entwicklung des Modus abbilden, sondern trotz ihrer immensen Unterschiede, Gemeinsamkeiten in der Wende hin zu einem Verständnis von Diversität weiblicher Körperlichkeit erkennbar werden lassen.

In der Einleitung wird das Themenfeld der Arbeit und die Hauptproblematik in philosophischen Diskursen und somit auch im Umgang mit dem Grotesken eingeführt, die aufzeigen, welche Einschränkungen ein Verständnis des Körpers als Projektionsfläche mit sich bringen kann. Dabei wird ebenso auf die feministische Kritik an dem bachtinischen Konzept des Grotesken eingegangen, wie teilweise eine Verbindung zum Diskurs von Körpern erläutert. In diesem Zusammenhang wird sowohl das Potential des grotesken Modus dies zu umgehen, als auch das phänomenologische Verständnis von Körperlichkeit, welches eine kartesische Unterscheidung zwischen Körper und Verstand deutlich unterläuft, thematisiert. Die Einleitung dient darüber hinaus der Vorstellung der Romane und einer Übersicht zu Aufbau und Struktur der Arbeit.

In dem der Textanalyse vorangestellten Theorieteil meiner Arbeit werden zuerst transnationale Theorien und eine transkulturelle Lesart als relevante Überkategorien vorgestellt. Hier nehme ich unter Anderem Bezug auf die Schriften von Wolfgang Iser, der die Definition des Begriffs der Transkulturalität maßgeblich geprägt hat. In einem nächsten Schritt wird die Veränderung eines Verständnisses von Körper zu Körperlichkeit nachgezeichnet. In diesem Teil nehme ich Bezug auf die Phänomenologie und die *New Feminist Materialisms* und wie sie maßgeblich dazu beigetragen haben, dass sich das Verständnis des Körpers (the ‚body‘) und vor allen Dingen einer vom Körper/Geist Dualismus geprägten Auffassung des Körpers zu einem Einblick in Körperlichkeit (‚embodiment‘)

gewandelt hat. Die feministische Kritik an einem alle Menschen stellvertretenden weißen, männlichen, heterosexuellen, leistungsfähigem Körper, wurde zum Anlass genommen ein Verständnis von Körperlichkeit zu entwickeln, das die Erfahrungen unterschiedlicher Menschen, vor allen Dingen Menschen, die dem beschriebenen Ideal aufgrund ihres Geschlechts, ihrer Hautfarbe, ihrer Herkunft, ihrer sexuellen Orientierung oder ihrer körperlichen Fähigkeiten kategorisch nie gerecht werden können, einschließt.

Eine Alternative zum traditionellen Körperbegriff bietet die Phänomenologie von Maurice Merleau-Ponty, der in seiner Schrift *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) nicht nur das kartesische Verständnis von Körper und Geist kritisiert, sondern auch seine Auffassung des objektiven (‘objective body’) und des gelebten (‘lived body’) Körpers, oder des Körpers und des Leibes entwickelt. Des Weiteren arbeitet Merleau-Ponty die soziale Komponente des Leibes, in anderen Worten gefasst, ein den individuellen Leib übergreifendes Verständnis zwischen Menschen, heraus. Jedoch muss auch Merleau-Pontys Deutung auf Grund des beinhalteten Androzentrismus kritisch reflektiert werden, weshalb sich ein Teil des Kapitels mit der feministischen Phänomenologie und deren Erweiterung der Merleau-Pontyschen Interpretation beschäftigt und diese dadurch für eine feministische Analyse fruchtbar macht. Die feministischen Phänomenologinnen Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens und Gail Weiss zeigen wie anhand des Körperbildes (‘body image’) Merleau-Pontys phänomenologisches Verständnis des Leibes für eine feministische Analyse von Körperlichkeit eingesetzt werden kann. Überdies ist ein Unterkapitel dem Thema gewidmet, wie Geschlecht in Körper eingeschrieben wird. In diesem Teil der Arbeit gehe ich auf Iris Marion Young und Bettina Wuttigs Ausführungen diesbezüglich ein. Ein Teil des Kapitels beschäftigt sich außerdem damit wie die westlich zentrierte Theorie der feministischen Phänomenologie mit indigenen Theorien (*Indigenous Studies*) vereinbart werden kann.

Im Übrigen befasst sich das Theoriekapitel mit dem Grotesken als literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichem Konzept. Dabei wird der Ursprung des Begriffs in der Kunstgeschichte verankert und Bedeutungsveränderungen, insbesondere die Entwicklung von zwei Strängen des Grotesken, werden kurz thematisiert. Das

Verständnis des Grotesken, das Michail Bachtin in der Mitte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts entwickelte und dass von feministischen Kritikerinnen in den 1980er und 1990er Jahren stark kritisiert wurde, wird unter Hinzunahme der feministischen Phänomenologinnen erweitert und somit für die Analyse meines Korpus anwendbar gemacht. Hier werden Ähnlichkeiten in den Theorien nachgezeichnet, aber auch aufgeführt in welcher Hinsicht Phänomenologinnen Bachtins Verständnis des grotesken Körpers noch kritisch ergänzen. Dieses Kapitel beschäftigt sich außerdem mit stilistischen Eigenheiten der transkulturellen feministischen Groteske, die sich durch den Gebrauch von anti-realistischen Elementen, ‚double-voiced discourse‘, Humor und Ironie auszeichnet.

Das erste Analysekapitel ist Margaret Atwoods *The Edible Woman* (1969) gewidmet. Da der Roman ein frühes Beispiel der transkulturellen feministischen Groteske darstellt, treten bestimmte Thematiken noch nicht so deutlich hervor wie in späteren Romanen. Nichtsdestotrotz ist dieser Roman von Bedeutung, da er verschiedene feministische Diskurse der 1990er Jahre vorwegnimmt, in dem er die agentische Materialität des Körpers herausarbeitet. Der Roman veranschaulicht durch seine Darstellung des grotesken, unkontrollierbaren Körpers der Protagonistin die Einschreibung von Weiblichkeit in Körper und legt dar, dass Geschlecht traumatische Spuren in Körpern hinterlässt (siehe Wuttig). Im Laufe des Romans entwickelt die Protagonistin Marian ein subversives Körperverhalten, durch das sie allem Anschein nach die Kontrolle über ihren Körper verliert. Darüber hinaus entwickelt ihr Körper eine Abneigung gegen Nahrung, was bestimmte Ereignisse in ihrem Leben, in denen sie sich oder andere Frauen als verdinglicht empfindet, reflektiert. Der Roman zeichnet somit nach, wie Marian zunehmend eine Sichtweise des Körpers (‚objective body‘) internalisiert, ihr Leib (‚lived body‘) dieser Internalisierung allerdings entgegenwirkt. Dadurch wird deutlich, dass Marians Essstörung auch als Symptom des ‚insidious trauma‘ gelesen werden kann, das sie erfährt, da sie ein Ideal von Weiblichkeit verfolgt, welches eine Illusion bleibt und das Scheitern an diesem Ideal Spuren in ihrem Körper hinterlässt. Das Verschlingen des Kuchens am Ende des Romans kann somit als erlösender, grotesker Akt interpretiert werden, der Marian ihrem Leib (‚lived body‘) näherbringt. Der Roman fällt stilistisch sowohl durch eine

veränderte Erzählperspektive im Hauptteil auf, der die Verdinglichung und somit die Entfremdung vom Leib, die Marian erlebt, widerspiegelt, als auch durch den Gebrauch von „double-voiced discourse,“ der Marians offensichtliche Zustimmungen und Konformität untergräbt.

Das zweite Analysekapitel beleuchtet den Roman *Nights at the Circus* (1984) von der Autorin Angela Carter. Der Roman, wie Carters Oeuvre allgemein, wurden in der Vergangenheit oftmals mit Judith Butlers Theorie zur Performativität in Zusammenhang gesehen. Ich argumentiere in diesem Kapitel allerdings, dass der Roman dem Denken der feministischen Phänomenologinnen näher ist und daher aufzeigt, dass Geschlecht materielle Spuren in Körpern hinterlässt und somit eine Butlerische Lesart erweitert. Dies stellt auch eine Verbindung zu dem Aspekt der „disability“ dar, der bisher kaum in Analysen des Romans thematisiert wurde. Das Kapitel geht daher einerseits dem Zusammenhang zwischen dem Grotesken, dem „freak“ und „disability“ und Behinderung als sozialem Konstrukt nach, das Spuren in Körpern hinterlässt. Außerdem verfolgt meine Analyse die Darstellung von Sexualität und arbeitet heraus, wie der Roman die asexuelle Verdinglichung von Frauen durch Bezugnahme zu „disability“ in Frage stellt. Andererseits beschäftigt sich der Roman damit wie Objektifizierung bleibende Spuren in Körpern hinterlässt. Carters Hauptcharakter Fevvers wird größtenteils von Männern verdinglicht, da sie als Frau mit Flügeln einem „freak“ entspricht und ihr daher menschliche Züge versagt werden. Sie verdinglicht sich aber auch selbst, da sie, unter anderem in einem Bordell, diese Objektifizierung internalisiert, indem sie sich idealer und mythologischer Frauenideen in ihrer Konstruktion als Trapez-Künstlerin bedient. Nichtsdestotrotz zeichnet der Roman auch ein erweitertes Körperverständnis von Fevvers nach. Somit wendet sie sich zunehmend von einem Verständnis ihres Körpers als Körper („objective body“) ab, hin zu einem Verständnis des Leibes („lived body“). Dies spiegelt sich auch in der Erzählperspektive wider, in der Einblicke in Fevvers Gedanken und Empfindungen, wie Schmerz, hervorgehoben werden. Als Beispiel der feministischen Groteske sticht der Roman auch sprachlich hervor. Das Groteske, in der bachtinischen Bedeutung, ist stark an Degradierung gebunden, was sich stilistisch in der konstanten Herabsetzung des Hauptcharakters ausdrückt, wodurch Humor generiert wird.

Das dritte Kapitel analysiert Shani Mootoos *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Obwohl der Roman sich vordergründig mit Mala und ihrem grotesken Körper beschäftigt – sie hat eine enge Verbindung zu ihrer Umwelt, den Pflanzen, Tieren und Insekten in ihrem Garten und lässt ihren körperlichen Prozesse freien Lauf – die von Jahren von Missbrauch und sozialer Ausgrenzung herrührt, schafft der Roman es auch eine Verbindung zu *transgender* Subjektivität herzustellen. Die Erzählung von Malas Geschichte wird nur durch Tyler, dem Erzähler des Romans und Malas Pflegekraft, ermöglicht. Obwohl Tylers Charakter generell als homosexueller Mann verstanden wird, argumentiere ich in diesem Kapitel, dass Tyler tatsächlich *transgender* ist. Durch die körperliche Verbindung, die Tyler und Mala aufbauen, – Mala kommuniziert nicht mehr mit Worten – wird einerseits auf den Körper als Kommunikationsmedium verwiesen. Andererseits wird durch die Verbindungen, die der Roman zwischen unterschiedlichen Erfahrungen schafft, verdeutlicht, dass die Arten von Unterdrückungen, die diese Charaktere erfahren, Teil des „modern/colonial gender system“ ist, so wie Maria Lugones es definiert. Somit geht die Unterdrückung von Frauen und Personen, die nicht in ein binäres Geschlechtskonstrukt passen, auf dieselbe Quelle zurück, nämlich die gegenseitige Konstituierung von Kolonialismus und Sexismus.

Jedoch können auch die beiden *transgender* Charaktere Tyler und Otoh als grotesk gelesen werden, aber in einem Verständnis des Grotesken, das den *New Materialisms* sehr nah kommt, da sich ihre Körper in einem konstanten Wandel befinden. In diesem Kapitel zeige ich, dass sich Tylers Körperbild verändert, ohne ein genaues Ziel, im Sinne einer binären Weiblichkeit oder Männlichkeit, zu verfolgen, und dass Tyler daher als *transgender* Charakter gelesen werden kann. Otohs Charakter deutet auf die Wandelbarkeit von biologischem Geschlecht („sex“) hin. Otoh wird zwar als Mädchen, Ambrosia, geboren, schafft es jedoch seinen Körper insofern zu formen, dass er einem weiblichen entspricht. Dies veranschaulicht im Sinne des *New Feminist Materialism*, dass biologisches Geschlecht ebenso formbar und veränderlich ist wie soziales.

Darüber hinaus verdeutlicht der Roman die materialisierende Macht von Diskursen, indem er demonstriert, dass es sich selten um ‚bloße Worte‘ handelt,

sondern dass Worte Spuren in Körpern hinterlassen, die zerstörerisch wirken können. Auch dieser Roman weist formale Merkmale auf, die ihn als grotesk ausweisen lassen. „Double-voicedness“ wird verwendet, um Ambivalenz in Bezug auf die Rolle des Erzählers zu generieren. Trotz Tylers Erzählerrolle bieten einige der Episoden einen Einblick, den Tyler nicht haben könnte oder lassen vermuten, dass Tyler diese nur nacherzählt. Somit schafft der Roman es sich von androzentrischen und dominant westlichen Erzählformen zu distanzieren.

Pauline Melvilles *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997) bietet die Grundlage für das letzte Analysekapitel. Der Großteil des Romangeschehens ist in einer Gemeinschaft der indigenen Wapisiana in Guyana angesiedelt. Obwohl der Roman zwei Erzählstränge beinhaltet, die von einer Rahmenerzählung umschlossen werden, wird der Hauptteil der Narration durch die inzestuöse Beziehung zwischen den Geschwistern Danny und Beatrice dominiert. Die inzestuöse Beziehung stellt in vielerlei Hinsicht das zentrale groteske Motiv des Romans dar, in dem zwei Menschen zu einem zu werden scheinen und in ihrem Umfeld aufgehen. Dadurch wird einerseits die Auffassung eines stark abgetrennten, in sich kohärenten Körpers, in Frage gestellt und andererseits Kritik an einem westlich-anthropologischen Verständnisses des Körpers und des Subjekts geübt. Denn die Beziehung verbildlicht, wie sich der amerinidische Inzestmythos der Sonne und des Mondes in den Geschwistern Beatrice und Danny materialisiert und wie eine anthropologische und christliche Herangehensweise an diese Beziehung zum Scheitern verurteilt ist. Beatrice ist überdies ein weiblicher Charakter, der durch die Affäre mit ihrem Bruder und nichtmenschliche und anorganische Sexualpartner dominanten westlichen Ideen von weiblicher Sexualität entgegenwirkt. Ähnlich wie Mootoos Roman verdeutlicht auch Melvilles Roman, dass Kolonialismus und Sexismus sich gegenseitig bedingen. Der Charakter Beatrice wird aber auch als Kritik an einem westlichen Feminismus gelesen, der Individualität und ein universelles Model der Befreiung von Frauen, das oftmals auf den Erfahrungen weißer, mittelständischer und somit privilegierter Frauen basiert, interpretiert.

Der Roman zeigt im Übrigen auf, wie durch verbale und physische Gewalt Rassismus in Körper eingeschrieben wird. Der Text ist mit Kopfschmerzen,

unerklärbarer Blindheit und unheimlichen Anfällen durchsägt und lässt sich daher im Sinne das Genres des ‚postcolonial Gothic‘ lesen. Somit wird einerseits verdeutlicht, wie vergangener, aber auch fortlaufender Kolonialismus Spuren hinterlässt, die über das Oberflächliche hinausgehen und andererseits, wie der Körper einen Agens entwickelt, der mitunter von einer dominanten westlichen Sicht als unheimlich wahrgenommen wird. In dem polyphonen Zusammenspiel von unterschiedlichen Stimmen und Sichtweisen, entfaltet der Roman das stilistische Potential des Grotesken. Obwohl es einen Erzähler gibt, der allem Anschein nach ‚das letzte Wort hat,‘ bleibt der Roman ambivalent bezüglich einer seiner zentralen Fragen, ob indigene Gemeinschaften unter sich bleiben sollten oder sich mit anderen Gemeinschaften oder Außenseitern verbinden sollten.

Im Fazit meiner Arbeit gehe ich auf die Forschungsergebnisse, den Beitrag, den die Arbeit in dem Forschungsfeld leistet, Einschränkungen des Projektes und die Möglichkeiten die Forschung auszuweiten ein. Bezüglich des Forschungsbeitrags lässt sich sagen, dass diese Studie dazu beiträgt, das Groteske in ein neues und positiveres Bild zu rücken, das nicht binären Konstrukten von Geschlecht und damit teilweise misogynen Verständnissen von Weiblichkeit unterliegt und daher durchaus für feministische Analysen fruchtbar gemacht werden kann. Die Analyse hat überdies Lücken bezüglich der Forschung einiger Romane aufgezeigt, die noch nicht unter dem Aspekt des Grotesken durchleuchtet wurden, wie beispielsweise Mootos und Melvilles Romane. Durch die geleisteten Analysen wurden allerdings auch frühere Forschungsergebnisse zu Atwoods und Carters Romane in ein neues Licht gerückt, was einen Beitrag zum Umdenken in Bezug auf den Feminismus dieser Texte leistet. Die Ergebnisse der Analysekapitel werden in Bezug auf thematische Überschneidungen zusammengefasst und in einen größeren Zusammenhang in Bezug auf ähnliche Texte gestellt. Des Weiteren geht das Fazit darauf ein, welche weiteren Aspekte im Bereich der transkulturellen feministischen Groteske beleuchtet werden könnten und es werden Romane genannt, die hierfür von Wichtigkeit und Interesse sein könnten.

Meine Dissertation stellt heraus, dass die Primärtexte eine transkulturelle Veränderung des Verständnisses des Körpers hin zum Leib nachzeichnen, die über

nationale Grenzen hinausgeht und Anhand der Verwendung des Grotesken sowohl thematisch als auch stilistisch ihren Ausdruck findet. Somit kann in den Romanen auch eine Auseinandersetzung mit und teilweise Infragestellung der dominanten feministischen Diskurse ihrer Zeit erkannt werden, insbesondere in Bezug zu Markierungen wie „disability“, „race“ und „indigeneity“ angeht. In dem Modus der transkulturellen feministischen Groteske werden daher auch nicht westliche, nicht weiße und nicht hegemoniale Subjektivitäten, kurz gesagt, die Diversität (weiblicher) Körperlichkeit dargestellt, insbesondere jene, die durch Sexualität, Geschlechtsidentität, Hautfarbe, Ethnizität und Indignität kategorisiert werden können.