ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	THE MULTISTABLE MATERIAL OF MODERNISM: PERCEPTION, OBJECTS, AND IDENTITY
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This dissertation argues that modernist writers channeled the transformative potential of multistability, a popular concept among twentieth-century theorists of perception, into politically charged literary practices whose goals continue to reverberate in recent antiracist and decolonial theory. In the first half of the twentieth century, psychologists used the concept of multistability to explain human perception and captured this concept in paradoxical images that appear first as one thing and then another, through a shift in what the viewer perceives as figure and ground. Writers as different as H.D., Virginia Woolf, Amos Tutuola, and Wilson Harris adapted multistability into literary practices that sought to dismantle the bounds of patriarchal, imperialist, and anthropocentric hierarchies. These writers infused their representations of perception, objects, and power dynamics with a multistability that ceaselessly troubles the divide between subject and object and its related structures of social exploitation. Moreover, placing these writers' efforts to expand what counts as a subject or agent alongside recent theories of

extrahuman ontologies that seek empowering alternatives to the exclusions of Western subjectivity offers a compelling link between modernist literary experiment and contemporary antiracist and decolonial theory concerning objects, identity, and ecology.

THE MULTISTABLE MATERIAL OF MODERNISM: PERCEPTION, OBJECTS, AND IDENTITY

by

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Introduction:
Paradox and Possibility in Modernist Perception

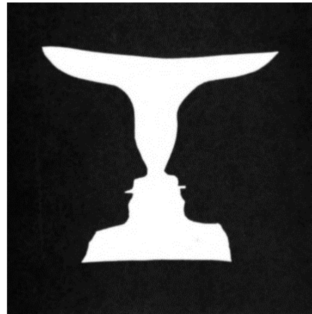

Figure 1.1: Edgar Rubin, Rubin's vase, 1915.

Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin's above figure, a changeable image that variably represents a vase and the silhouettes of two faces, is perhaps the most commonly invoked example of multistability in the study of perception. The figure and its many variations all highlight the curious shift in which a solid figure suddenly melts into an undefined background, and another rises to take its place: where there was an ornate vase against a black background, now there are two faces in silhouette, turned toward each other in front of a white expanse. In the early twentieth century, Gestalt psychologists used such figures to illustrate their theory of perception. Rather than understanding perception as the direct delivery of stimuli to consciousness, Gestalt theorists argued that what we perceive results from the organization of the material environment into distinct, approximated figures.[1] The Gestalt elaboration of the principles that shape this unconscious negotiation of stimuli emphasizes the mutable nature of that interpretative process through ambiguous figures that trigger contrasting organizational impulses. Rubin's vase is one such figure, a multistable image in which two possible figure-ground arrangements are equally dominant, resulting in an unfixed relation between figure and

[1] See Koffka, "Perception" 542.

ground and an image that causes the viewer to vacillate between two perceptual interpretations.

Though Gestalt psychology waned in influence over the latter part of the twentieth century, multistability has remained an important concept in more recent theories of perception and of images. Visual studies scholar W. J. T. Mitchell has used the term not only to describe images like Rubin's vase, in which figure and ground reverse to reveal a new aspect of the image, but also to describe how images that prompt reflection on perception and representation (i.e., "metapictures") implicate the viewer in the disorienting uncertainty of multistability: "If self-reference is elicited by the multistable image, then, it has as much to do with the self of the observer as with the metapicture itself. … If the multistable image always asks, 'what am I?' or 'how do I look?', the answer depends on the observer asking the same questions" (*Picture Theory* 48). The disruptive potential of multistability thus far exceeds the mere interrogation of perceptual formations. The rift multistability simultaneously opens and closes between possible modes of being drives questions not just about how we see things, but about how things are, and how we are as things. As Mitchell asserts, the division between figure and ground is ultimately a boundary that indicates a "contrast between a thing and the environment in which it is located" (*Image Science* xi). Mitchell suggests that, at least in images, this relation is *always* infused with multistability, arguing that the distinction between figure and ground

> inevitably draws attention to three things: (1) the boundary between an inside and an outside that constitutes a figure or form in a space; (2) the frame or support in or on which an image and its surrounding space make their appearance; (3) the

> outline that curves in upon itself, drawing the beholder into a vortex that reverses the locations of figure and ground. Thus, what was marked becomes unmarked, and the previously unmarked suddenly emerges as remarkable: the vase disappears to reveal two faces, or vice versa. (*Image Science* xii)

While Mitchell's claims are specific to the workings of visual representation in images, I argue that there is a significant relation between the principle of multistability as examined by scholars of perception, the persistent troubling of subject/object divisions in literary modernism, and contemporary theories of nonhuman ontologies. Moreover, this relation is not one of mere fortuitous affinity: rather, these three discourses trace progressive phases of a multistable approach to the relation between "a thing and the environment in which it is located."

Rubin's vase illustrates the paradoxical capacity of multistable images to represent in excess of what can be immediately perceived. The faces and the vase can only be encountered in turns, and yet the image remains the same, its flickering possibilities rendered all at once on the page in a static distribution of line, shape, and color. In Mitchell's terms, the boundary as vortex both divides and unites figures that compete for prominence. When one figure emerges as temporarily dominant, the effect is not simply one of reversed places, as in the case of a cloud appearing either behind or in front of the moon. Rather, the boundary between the figures shifts in allegiance, inverting the axis of enclosure that marks one part of the image as a representation of a whole and distinct object and collapses the bounded form of the remainder. When the vase gives way to the faces, what was vase loses its borders, dissolving into an implied larger and undefined white background. When the vase solidifies between the faces, the space

between them evaporates, their profiles melting into a continuous blackness that persists around and behind the vase. The multistable relation between vase and faces is inscribed in the open channel of the boundary between them, which marks their unfixed, contingent status and both privileges and subordinates them to one another.

The paradoxical, contingent, and changeable perceptual forms of multistable images offer a suggestive context for the tendency in literary modernism to figure the subject/object binary as a division that is also a vortex of unification and transformation or, in other words, as multistable. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," writes T.S. Eliot at the close of *The Waste Land* (1922), in a gesture that has frequently been taken as synecdochal of a larger modernist effort to reclaim subjective meaning from the chaos of fragmentation, and thus stave off dissolution (line 430).[2] And yet Eliot does not write that those fragments—the "heap of broken images" comprising snippets of cultural ephemera and litanies of objects that attend a lifetime—will forestall "ruin," but rather that they are shored against "ruins" (22). That is, whereas "my ruin" might be taken as an event that has not yet occurred, "my ruins" firmly refers to remains that have already been ravaged. Thus, while critics often interpret Eliot's fragments as a supporting barrier meant to prevent a state of instability—or, put more politically, a web of appropriations meant to rescue a privileged subjectivity—the poem instead channels what is already unstable into something that is sustained through an interrelation with

[2] For example, T. Hugh Crawford quotes the line as an exemplar of modernist "interest among both poets and psychoanalysts in the function of myth to provide coherent symbols or structures to a fragmented or groundless experience," underscoring the idea that restorative unity could be accessed through "references to mythic archetypes" (515). I also find it suggestive that the line is often colloquially misquoted as "these fragments I have shored against my ruin" in sources including casual blogs, online articles both popular and critical, and a March 2019 tweet by novelist Joyce Carol Oates.

otherness.[3] In other words, despite the poem's obvious racism, antisemitism, misogyny, etc., Eliot's "shoring up" does not defer an impending deterioration through the preservation of a self-contained, white, British subject, but instead posits a shifting alliance among parts making and unmaking the self along a porous boundary. Indeed, in Eliot's pencil manuscript, an earlier version of the line reads, "These fragments I have *spelt into* my ruins" (emphasis added), suggesting that the speaker's act of arrangement transforms (or spells) the incomplete and partial "fragments" into a similarly unmoored structure of self (i.e., the "ruins") (*Facsimile* 80). Rather than constructing an either/or relation in which clinging to the fragments of the object world keeps a battered, yet whole subject afloat, Eliot figures dissolution as the vortex of relation along which subject and object sustain one another. Just as interestingly, in that first draft, Eliot wrote the words "shored against" above "spelt into," without striking out either option, thereby underscoring his effort to capture an open channel of transformation that coexists alongside a reinforced boundary that lends solidity—a process of simultaneous integration and differentiation. I argue that at this unsettled juncture (both "shored" and "spelt") between fragments and ruins, objects and subjects, lies precisely the kind of multistable relation observed in an image like Rubin's vase.

The complex relation between fragments and self in the final section of *The Waste Land* sums up a dynamic between subjects and objects that persists throughout the poem.

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[3] My argument here does not disavow the exclusionary intent of Eliot's curation of cultural fragments. As Paul Douglass has convincingly articulated, Eliot pursues an imperialist raiding of colonial spaces, using "quotations, vignettes, translations, and paraphrase as effective equivalents for physical artifacts" that he then places "in contexts that diagram their relation to a superior, if disintegrating, European culture" (8). However, I am suggesting that, despite Eliot's intent to shore up privileged subjectivity and Englishness as distinct from objectified otherness, his formulation relies on a channel of interrelation that effaces that distinction with the same gesture that draws it.

Objects in *The Waste Land* frequently serve as sources of identity and definition for fractured, unmoored subjects, but they also resist being merely passive vessels for human affect and expression. In particular, the poem tends to depict women through their relation to surrounding objects, from Marie "the hyacinth girl" to the woman in the intricately described boudoir of "A Game of Chess" (36). But if objects mark the borders of these women's subjectivity, they also consistently turn that margin into a site of exchange, a boundary that simultaneously encloses the subject and opens it to permeation and diffusion. For example, the objects in the woman's boudoir are described as more active and agential than the woman who inhabits the room. The woman's presence is registered only through the pronoun "she" in the section's opening line, which begins a succession of thirty lines that describe the objects in the room with only peripheral reference to the woman as the owner of the objects:

> The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne
> Glowed on the marble, where the glass
> Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
> From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
> (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
> Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
> Reflecting light upon the table as
> The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it (77-84)

Eliot draws the eye through the scene via a flurry of material interactions: the chair "glow[s]" against the marble of the vanity, whose mirror is supported by climbing vines inhabited by "peep[ing] and hid[ing] cupids; the mirror "double[s]" the flames of the

candelabra and "reflect[s] light upon the table" in a gesture that reciprocates the rising action of the "glitter of her jewels." This pattern continues, with "ascend[ing]" perfume vapors "stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling" and carrying the verse toward the surfaces of ceiling and walls that delimit the room, where the scenes depicted in paintings are "staring forms" that "leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed" (90-93, 105-106).[4] The insistent agency Eliot attributes to the objects and the protracted delay before the woman speaks position the objects themselves as marking the contours of not only the room, but of the subject therein.[5] Just as the material objects that "enclose" a room in some sense create the room, the objects through which Eliot's human subjects stabilize their identities do not merely reside on the other side of a fixed boundary. Like the simultaneously codependent and competing figures in a multistable image, Eliot's subjects and objects give each other definition by circulating prominence across a boundary of mutual implication and transformation.

The multistable dynamic that troubles the division of subject and object in *The Waste Land* is not unique to Eliot; it is a distinct thread within modernism, and across a range of forms and genres. More importantly, within this thread, many modernists go far beyond Eliot to harness multistability for much more radical ends. As a writer committed to upholding the dominant norms of white patriarchy, Eliot's engagement was relatively conservative, as demonstrated by his tendency to loosen the boundaries of subjectivity

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[4] An earlier typescript version of this line reads "leaned out, and hushed the room and closed it in," even more explicitly attributing the act of enclosing and thus establishing the form of the room to the material objects and visual depictions that populate its walls (*Facsimile* 11).

[5] When the woman does speak, it is apparently to an (either literally or figuratively) inanimate companion. She speaks aloud in statements enclosed by quotation marks, exhorting, "'Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. / 'What are you thinking of? … / 'I never know what you are thinking. Think,'" but is not answered in kind (112-114). Whether the woman is understood as addressing the objects around her or a mute, passive, or absent human, the exchange reiterates the erasure of distinctions between subjects and objects.

only around those who already inhabit socially marginalized identities—women in the case of the above examples, but also racialized and working-class people. *The Waste Land* doesn't, however, ultimately manage to limit instability only to those subjects, because the perceiving reader and indeed the always shifting speaker experience multistability in the poetic encounter and so are caught up in its nonhierarchical implications. The slippage between subject and object roles and the circulation of power in unfixed relations undermines the very structures Eliot would seek to preserve, laying the groundwork for their revision and displacement. This dissertation focuses on those modernists who enthusiastically embraced this challenge—who used multistability to undermine hegemonic power structures and manifest alternative modes of perceiving, relating, and being. I show how the transformative potential of perceptual multistability enabled writers as different as H.D., Virginia Woolf, Amos Tutuola, and Wilson Harris to dismantle and reimagine orders of being outside the bounds of imperialist, patriarchal, and anthropocentric hierarchies. In order to explicate how multistability develops from perceptual theory into a strategic literary practice, it is necessary to situate it within the shifting discourses of reality and experience in the early twentieth century, as well as in relation to the corresponding representational challenges and tactics taken up by literary modernists. To trace this progression is also to clarify the terms of a genealogical relation between modernist negotiations among human subjects, material objects, and environmental assemblages and contemporary theories of ecological and nonhuman ontologies.

The Transformative Potential of Multistability from Modernism to the Present

In the early twentieth century, increased interest in the perceptual multistability demonstrated by figures like Rubin's vase emerged from a wider turn across disciplines toward viewing inherently incomplete and unfixed perceptual models as a viable means of accessing and expressing truths about the nature of self and reality. Indeed, such models were increasingly seen as uniquely suited to rendering the disorienting contours of a modern experience shaped by scientific discoveries that overturned previous assumptions, technology that altered sensory experience, and the material interrelation of global spaces that remained radically disparate in terms of both distance and privilege. A proliferation of theories and thought experiments from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century demonstrate this sustained, international interest in the undecidability of perception and of reality at large. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity is perhaps the most frequently invoked motivating force for the early-twentieth-century embrace of indeterminacy, but as art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson has detailed, speculative theories of a fourth dimension were far more impactful than Einstein's work in the first decades of the century.[6] Henderson argues that before Einstein's theory was widely known, the notion of a fourth dimension that eluded the senses and the problem of how to represent it for a three-dimensional world captured both scientific and artistic imaginations, shaping movements including surrealism, futurism, and cubism. The question of how to represent unvisualizable phenomena also dogged theorists of the ether and the atom. Scholars including Bruce Clarke and Ian F.A. Bell have described the

[6] Henderson discusses the dissemination of Einstein's work and the anachronistic tendency to assume the theory of relativity significantly influenced writers and artists prior to 1919 in *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*.

inherently inaccurate models scientists used to represent their hypotheses of the incomprehensible as “factual fictions,” comparing their efforts to evoke ideas rather than perfectly mimic unknowable or unvisualizable forms and processes to the workings of literary metaphor (Bell 119).

Gestalt theorizations of perception offered a similar narrative of uncertainty and approximation, and drew attention to a wave of visual figures that illustrated the mutability of perceptual structures and gestured toward the transformative potential inherent in that multiplicity.

Figure 1.2: The Duck-Rabbit, 1892.

Figure 1.3: W.E. Hill, "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law," 1915.

Predating Rubin’s vase, the Duck-Rabbit (fig. 1.2), a foundational multistable image that Mitchell discusses at length in *Picture Theory* and elsewhere, appeared in the German magazine *Fliegende Blätter* in 1892, then in American psychologist Joseph Jastrow’s *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900), and again in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (c. 1946). In addition, “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law” (fig. 1.3) was published by British cartoonist W.E. Hill in 1915, and the image of an impossible triangle was created in 1934 by Swedish artist Oscar Reutersvärd before being independently developed by Roger and Lionel Penrose and published in the *British Journal of*

Psychology (fig. 1.4) in 1958.[7] Both Rubin and Wittgenstein, as well as Gestalt psychologists including Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, created additional ambiguous figures of their own design to accompany analytical texts published in the first half of the century, and Dutch artist M.C. Escher made a career of rendering impossible figures during the same period, producing paradoxical illustrations that implied alternative geometries and physics from the 1920s well into the 1960s.[8]

The wealth of well-known images demonstrating perceptual multistability generated from around 1890 to 1960 speaks to a wider cultural interest not confined to a particular scientific discipline or sector of artistic production. Like Rubin's vase, many of these figures express undecidability through the activation of a figure-ground shift in which what appeared as mere background suddenly resolves itself into a previously unseen figure. In both the Duck-Rabbit and "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law," a shift in orientation redistributes emphasis across particular details: rabbit ears become a duck's bill; a young woman's necklace splits open into the crack of an old woman's mouth. The multistable nature of the images manifests in their tendency to shift back and forth between perceptual arrangements that appear as equally plausible, a simultaneity that is reflected in the titles of the images. The hyphen of the Duck-Rabbit and the "and" that joins "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" speak to the insistent inclusivity of the images. A viewer must shift between perceptual arrangements to bring one figure or the other into focus in turns, and yet each image as a whole somehow represents something that is

[7] Hill published "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" in a 1915 issue of *Puck*, but an earlier version of the image appeared on an 1888 German postcard. Psychologist Nicholas Wade discusses the history of both the "young girl/old woman" figure and the impossible triangle in *Art and Illusionists* (152, 91-92).
[8] See *The Graphic Work of M.C. Escher* for representative examples that Escher organizes into categories such as "Relativities," "Conflict Between the Flat and the Spatial," "Unlimited Spaces," and "Impossible Buildings" (3).

neither one nor the other of the alternating figures, but both. As Wittgenstein and Mitchell both note, the figure can be understood “as a composite,” neither duck nor rabbit, but “a curious hybrid that looks like nothing else but itself” (*Picture Theory* 52-53). Like Rubin’s vase, it performs the representational feat of simultaneously depicting two things that can only be encountered in turns, thus calling attention to the limits of human perceptual faculties while also transcending them.

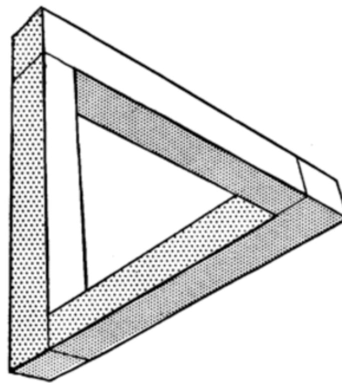

Figure 1.4: L.S. Penrose and R. Penrose, “Perspective drawing of an impossible structure,” 1958.

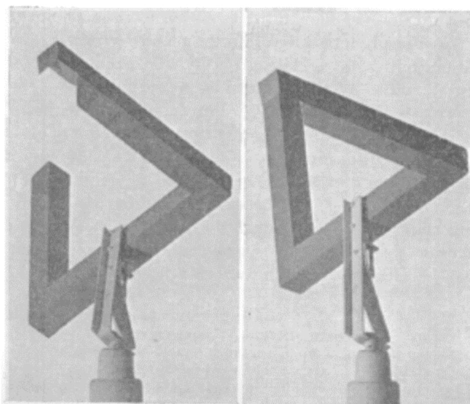

Figure 1.5: R. L. Gregory, "An 'impossible object,'" 1968.

Paradoxical images like the Penrose triangle (fig. 1.4) or Escher’s impossible lithographs enact an even more explicit delivery of extradimensional perception. Like the Duck-Rabbit, the Penrose triangle invites reexamination and reorientation. But no matter how the viewer shifts their perspective, there is no way to make sense of the figure as a

three-dimensional object. The eye becomes trapped in a senseless circuit, pivoting around the triangle's vertices in a vain attempt to find the orientation that unlocks the depicted object's resistance. As R. L. Gregory's 1968 physical model (fig. 1.5) demonstrates, attempts to render the Penrose triangle as a physical object in three-dimensional space can only ever be partial and illusory.[9] The object the two-dimensional image evokes defies Euclidean geometry and exceeds the representational potential of three-dimensional experience. Analysis of such figures has primarily been confined to the study of perception and the visual arts, but I argue that modernist writers frequently turned the possibilities of multistability that these images demonstrate toward politically transformative ends. The tactic of using paradox to represent spatial relations that are incompatible with direct experience was not only a means of rendering theoretical concepts related to physics, mathematics, and perception. It was also essential to the modernist project of expressing the fundamentally unrepresentable material realities of global relations under imperialism.

Literary scholar and Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson suggests that modernist literary practice emerged in response to the paradoxical rift between individual experience and structural reality within an imperialist system. Because the imperial center represses awareness of the marginalized lands and peoples whose exploitation is essential to its functioning, Jameson argues that the empire as a totality cannot be directly encountered or represented. This results in a gap in experience that manifests as distortion and alienation. Jameson asserts that because "these new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness… those fundamental realities are

[9] Gregory 285.

somehow ultimately unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an absent cause, one that can never emerge into the presence of perception" (350). The reality of global interrelation, of the structure underwriting immediate, local experience, becomes an enigma as impossible to directly represent or behold as a fourth dimension or the interior of an atom.

Jameson understands literary modernism as a movement of representational adaptation that expresses the inaccessible "in distorted and symbolic ways," much like the factual fictions of scientific metaphor catalogued by Clarke, Bell, and Henderson (350). However, in Jameson's analysis, modernism does little more than register the problem of unrepresentability "in forms that inscribe a new sense of the absent global colonial system on the very syntax of poetic language itself" and acknowledge the contradictory nature of a social totality composed of irrevocably closed subjective consciousnesses (349). For Jameson, it's postmodernism that develops spatial innovations that directly respond to "our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities," a disorienting experience that he argues exceeds the representational capacities of modernism:

> Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the older modernists, is capable of giving any kind of adequate figuration to this process, which in lived experience makes itself felt by the so-called death of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of this last. (351)

Jameson's division of modernist and postmodernist literature comports with narrative theorist Brian McHale's formulation that modernist fiction is defined by an

epistemological dominant while postmodernist fiction is defined by an ontological dominant. Jameson understands modernists to respond primarily to the rift between structure and lived experience by dramatizing the contradiction of a social totality made up of alienated, "sealed subjective worlds," thus exploring epistemological questions of how experience is encountered and expressed between knowers (350). The "decentering and dispersion" of the subject that Jameson attributes to postmodernism correlates to the inherently ontological questions McHale identifies as related to the nature of self, world, and the multiplicity of those categories (351).

I argue that both Jameson's and McHale's models overlook a significant strain in literary modernism in which approaching epistemological questions through a lens of multistability enables writers to turn perceptual experimentation into a form of ontological revision. As Mitchell asserts, the unfixed relationship between figure and ground in multistable images invites a renegotiation of the "contrast between a thing and the environment in which it is located." It calls the very notion of that contrast into question, opening up the possibility of identification and incorporation with the environment as an alternative to the enclosure of being marked as a bounded object (or subject). The inherent liberatory potential of multistability lies in its capacity to unsettle dominant hierarchies, expanding the field of what is perceptible and agential and redistributing power and prominence across relational boundaries. The modernist texts I examine variously exert this potential of multistability, not only undermining the hierarchies of privilege that follow from anthropocentrism, but locating such transformative potential in extrahuman materiality so that alignment with the extrahuman becomes an empowering alternative to subjective identity. Modernists'

engagement with multistability thus anticipates the work of contemporary theorists studying the intersections of race, ecology, and ontology who have argued that a radical resistance to exploitation is not rooted in seeking inclusion within Western subjectivity, but rather in dismantling that subjectivity through alliance with the extrahuman.

Geologist Kathryn Yusoff argues in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* that Black resistance to the objectifying and exploitative forces of colonialism and enslavement has often taken the form of "a shift of geophysics" that facilitates access to "space-time coordinates that are not already occupied by the authorizing center, Colonial Man" (91). While forced objectification has been used to justify the exploitation of racialized subjects, Yusoff asserts that because the very concept of subjectivity is entrenched in white patriarchy, "intimacy with the inhuman" can actually be harnessed as a source of transformative power that allows marginalized peoples to subvert the hegemony of the "'given' humanist subject" (85). Yusoff explores the ways in which insurgent geologies resist anti-Blackness through the creation of alternative spatial relations, examining artifacts including literature, films, images, and historical accounts. In a geospatial context in which Black bodies are treated as objects and are stripped of futurity, Yusoff argues that creating an extrahuman relation to space and time is a subversive means of accessing freedom. Yusoff's project draws on visual culture scholar Tina M. Campt's concept of a Black feminist futurity that

> strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have* ***had to*** *happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that

> aspiration. It is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future *now*—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present. (Campt 17, emphasis original)

Yusoff applies Campt's Black feminist futurity to her reading of an 1817 image of an enslaved woman who has leapt out of a window and is suspended, "not yet returned to the exposure of her captivity by the forces that would return her to the earth." Yusoff argues the woman "has a different field of gravity that is held by a barely perceptible shift in the allegiances of matter" (93). The woman in the image performs a different kind of relation to space, accessing an alternative futurity by acting as though it has already arrived. Like the Penrose triangle and the multistable images that attended late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century explorations of perceptual relativity, this image performs the impossible, articulating the limits of spatial relation while simultaneously implying their transcendence. It also speaks to the strategic transformation that Yusoff's insurgent geology shares with multistable images and literary practice: a renegotiation of relations among self, objects, and environment enacted in a perceptual paradox.

The remaking of possible relations, worlds, and futures described by Campt and Yusoff illustrates how what starts as an epistemological negotiation among different modes of knowledge becomes a practice of ontological insurgency. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, philosopher Jane Bennett also frames a shift in what is perceptible as a political reordering of ontological structures:

> A political act not only disrupts, it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can "see": it repartitions the sensible; it overthrows the regime of the

> perceptible. Here again the political gate is opened enough for nonhumans (dead rats, bottle caps, gadgets, fire, electricity, berries, metal) to slip through, for they also have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception: what was trash becomes things, what was an instrument becomes a participant, what was foodstuff becomes agent, what was adamantine becomes intensity. (106-107)

Perceptual realignment forms the basis for the redistribution of agency across nonhuman material actors in the work of materialist- and object-oriented ontologists including Bennett, Graham Harman, and Timothy Morton. A shift in epistemological order, Bennett suggests, unveils a multistable ontological realm that troubles prevailing hierarchies of agency or, indeed, animacy. Echoing the political significance Bennett attributes to such revisions, Native Studies scholar Kim TallBear directly links the disruption of anthropocentric hierarchies of animacy to the resistance of colonialist exploitation. TallBear argues that indigenous people are "the others it seems the new materialists—indeed most of Western thought—cannot fully comprehend as living," and advocates for a reclamation of non-Western models of nonhuman animacy and intimacy (198). TallBear takes Bennett's vital materialism as a productive shift that, in "reappraising the importance of materiality to human social and cultural life," might also refute the "de-animat[ion]" of indigenous peoples (190). The empowering possibility TallBear locates in nonhuman animacy anticipates the transformative subversions of Yusoff's insurgent geology, which frames "intimacy with the inhuman as an alliance with freedom" in the context of anti-Blackness, a radical shift that enables one "to think freedom in the earth, outside and against the world of the 'given' humanist subject (and their space-time)" (85).

I see a similar practice at work in modernist texts that reimagine the possibilities of perception and, in so doing, remake spatial and relational realities. I take the representation of multistability in images, visual studies, and theories of perception both as indicative of a larger cultural fascination whose manifestation in literature remains unexamined and as a source of useful models and vocabulary to explicate how literary modernism turned the possibilities of paradox toward subversive and revisionary ends. While the practices and interests at the core of this project can be observed in the work of many modernist writers globally, I focus on a constellation of writers variously connected to and troubled by the perceptual problematic of the British Empire. Doing so allows me to trace a progressive narrative of how modernists used multistability to undermine the hierarchical power structures of colonialism and white, heteropatriarchal normativity. Each of the writers considered in this project—taken in roughly chronological order—used non-normative perceptual and material encounters to convey multistable visions that transcend the representational capacities of sensory experience and transform relations among human and nonhuman objects. Poet, novelist and American expatriate H.D. cycled through varied arrangements of visual details without privileging any as accurate or final to refute patriarchal normativity and claim agency and authorship in her own experience. British novelist Virginia Woolf persistently shifted attention away from the details of material objects and toward chains of extrahuman relational possibility to frame experience as a matrix of presence and absence, a formulation with which she attempted to critique the structures of patriarchy and capitalism. British colonial Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola figured perceptual relation as a mutually transformative channel through which power circulates among the imperial center and colonial margins, while

subordinating human agency and interiority to a complex, changeable material environment. Finally, British-Guyanese novelist and poet Wilson Harris uncoupled perspective from individual subjectivity and distributed it throughout an ecological totality as a means of subverting the enclosed categories of identity that motivate and justify imperialist exploitation.

By theorizing multistable modes of perceiving and relating to objects in their works, H.D., Woolf, Tutuola, and Harris imagine alternative ontological orders that variously subvert the hegemonic hierarchies of imperialism and patriarchy.[10] To align oneself with multiple and extrahuman perspectives is not merely to test epistemological boundaries, but to project possible worlds through transformative perception.[11] Indeed, McHale allows for such movement from epistemological to ontological concerns within a text, acknowledging in *Postmodernist Fiction* that

> intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (11)

In addition to recognizing texts that pursue epistemological questions onto ontological grounds, McHale also establishes the category of "limit-modernist" to describe texts that

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[10] My treatment of perception follows Harman's assertion that "the carpentry of perception is only a special case of the carpentry of things" (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 3). In other words, I treat perception as a form of material relation between objects. While sight has tended to dominate perception studies and is particularly relevant within this project given my use of visual studies as a framework, multistability attends sensory perception more generally. For example, Koffka discusses figure-ground shifts in auditory perception at various moments in *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (43, 220, 433-437).

[11] McHale identifies characters' act of projecting or "improvis[ing] a possible world" as the crucial shift in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* when the novel moves from "problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*" (10, emphasis original).

engage both epistemological and ontological issues, and in which the dominant mode of inquiry shifts depending on how the text is viewed. McHale actually defines this category through an analogous comparison to "the figure/ground paradoxes of the *Gestalt* psychologists," using a multistable "goblet/face" image—a clear reference to a version of Rubin's vase—as an example. Texts in which the dominant is ambiguous, McHale asserts, are "hesitant" in the way an image built around an unsettled figure-ground arrangement remains undecidable (13). Later in his analysis, McHale escalates from applying the language of multistability to a text's interpretive affordances to suggesting further that a text can practice ontological indeterminacy in its representational methods: "Ambiguous sentences may project ambiguous objects, objects which are not temporarily but permanently and irresolvably ambiguous. This is not a matter, in other words, of *choosing* between alternative states of affairs, but rather of an ontological oscillation, a flickering effect" (32). In other words, McHale understands undecidable representation in literary texts, which I would compare to the paradoxical representation of multistable images, as engaging in a form of ontological instability.

Though McHale casts such ontological uncertainty as primarily the domain of postmodernist fiction, this is precisely the effect achieved in the texts ranging from 1910 to 1960 that I consider in this dissertation. The writers examined in this project work from the epistemological uncertainty of multistable perception toward an ontological changeability through which literary objects and the real-world power structures they reflect and negotiate are subject to transformation. I do not seek to collapse distinctions between modernist and postmodernist literature, nor to relabel a particular set of modernist texts as postmodernist. Rather, I argue that a strain exists within modernist

literature that specifically engages perceptual multistability to remake relations in a manner that anticipates not only literary postmodernism but also contemporary analysis of the liberatory potential of nonhuman ontologies by theorists such as Yusoff, Bennett, and TallBear.

Perspective and the Irresistible Current of Interrelation

To thumbnail how the literary modernists discussed in this dissertation use the paradoxical transcendence of multistability to imagine alternative relations among humans, objects, and environments, let me compare two poems—Eliot's "Preludes" (1917) and Wilson Harris's "Fetish" (1951)—to explain how the poets, with their contrasting political stances, embrace or attempt to repress the radical revisionary potential of multistable relations. In both of these poems, the material environment functions as an extrahuman assemblage that is not merely the background that contextualizes particular figures, but a totality within which prominence circulates. "Preludes" uses multistability to decenter human agency, diffuse perspective throughout objects, and distort the permeable boundary of perceptual relation to recontextualize subjective consciousness within a material collective. Composed between 1910 and 1911, "Preludes" is generally read as an early version of the paradigmatic modernist vision Eliot would deliver in *The Waste Land*.[12] Its depiction of urban alienation and listlessness supports a reading of modernist concerns like Jameson's, in which the isolation of closed subjective worlds complicates a search for social and political continuity. But the poem also troubles a solely anthropocentric distribution of animacy, because it folds human

[12] See Behr 5.

presence and agency into a material environment in which human subjects are neither privileged nor distinctive among objects.

The poem begins with nonhuman actors: “the winter evening settles down”; “a gusty shower wraps / The grimy scraps / Of withered leaves about your feet”; and “showers beat / On broken blinds and chimney-pots” (section I, lines 1, 5-7, 9-10). The human “you” is present, but no more active than the leaves that are blown about; “you” exists simply as an object being acted upon by other objects. The second section of the poem similarly foregrounds nonhuman activity, with a more explicit decoupling of anthropomorphic capacities from the subjects they are typically associated with:

> The morning comes to consciousness
> Of faint stale smells of beer
> From the sawdust-trampled street
> With all its muddy feet that press
> To early coffee-stands.
> With the other masquerades
> That time resumes,
> One thinks of all the hands
> That are raising dingy shades
> In a thousand furnished rooms. (II.1-10)

Again, human bodies are encountered only in dismembered and depersonalized pieces: as “muddy feet that press” the street and as “hands / That are raising dingy shades.” The feet are described as an attribute of the street, rather than of particular subjects, or even as features of a seething mass of humanity. Similarly, the hands are depicted as objects to be

found “in a thousand furnished rooms” rather than as markers of human agency. In this context, the pronoun “one” takes on an added level of ambiguity and abstraction. It is not necessarily clear that the “one” that “thinks” is a human figure, because the poem insistently links anthropomorphic acts of cognition with nonhuman actors, as when the morning “comes to consciousness” or, later in the poem, when the street “understands” or is “impatient” (III.11, IV.9).

The general effect, in these lines and throughout the poem, is an effacement of distinctions between subjects and objects. In “Preludes,” human bodies are mere material features of the environment, and human actions, such as the raising of a shade or pressing into the mud, take the same form as interactions between nonhuman objects. Wind, leaves, feet, newspapers, and street impact one another as masses and forces; hands raise shades from one side of windows while the wind beats at blinds from the other side. In both cases, agency is not reserved for human actors, and the poem ascribes no particular privilege or significance to human intervention. The working-class inhabitants of “Preludes” thus do not go about their business against a backdrop of urban refuse, but rather are indistinguishable from that backdrop, which they constitute in the same manner that nonhuman objects do. With this ambiguity, the poem disrupts the ontological hierarchy by which humans are understood as the primary actors, or subjects, of material assemblages. In other words, an anthropocentric distribution of figure and ground falls away as the poem builds a multistable composition that imagines alternative forms of relation between human and nonhuman objects.

Certainly, Eliot only pursues that intermingling so far, as he confines himself to considering a particular kind of underprivileged subject in the poem. The working class,

"Preludes" suggests, are so degraded by the conditions of their lives that they are indistinguishable from the rundown objects that populate the streets and boarding houses alongside them. But for all Eliot may attempt to contain the multistable relation between subjects and objects that he opens up in "Preludes" to a particular form of subjective experience, the poet ends up implicated in the assemblage he comments on, perhaps even more so than in *The Waste Land*. In the poem's last section, an "I" voice emerges for the first time, and seems to narrate the poet's position of aesthetic reflection on the depleted existence of the working class:

> I am moved by fancies that are curled
>
> Around these images, and cling:
>
> The notion of some infinitely gentle
>
> Infinitely suffering thing. (IV.10-13)

But "Preludes" evacuates the notion of a self that is held apart from the collective materiality of objects, undermining the possibility of the speaker reflecting on a material assemblage he observes from a position of ontological privilege. Both the reduction of the agency linked to anthropomorphic pronouns throughout the poem and the decaying association between human actors and cognitive and affective capacities reduce the impact of the "I" speaker's intervention. If the speaker characterizes the working class and the objects of their environment as a collective, "infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing," he fails to extract himself from that material totality. When he professes to be "moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling," the speaker implies a fascination with the material conditions he has described, but fails to recognize

what the poem itself forcefully demonstrates: nonhuman objects also press back, and cling, such that no clear margins can be maintained around subjectivity.

Eliot also attempts to impose limits on the interrelation he initiates in “Preludes” by depicting it as a particular effect of the material conditions of the urban, working-class environment. At various moments, the multistability that Eliot establishes between subject and object manifests in the transgression of the normative order of three-dimensional space. As figures like Rubin’s vase and the Penrose triangle demonstrate, this is an inherent consequence of multistability: it undermines otherwise unassailable assumptions about perceptual and spatial order. In “Preludes,” this results in the intersection of seemingly incompatible planes of experience. Physically distant, oppositional planes mingle, and metaphysical phenomena like thoughts and souls are depicted as interacting with material surfaces and objects:

> His soul stretched tight across the skies
>
> That fade behind a city block,
>
> Or trampled by insistent feet
>
> At four and five and six o’clock; (IV.1-4)

In this image from the poem’s final section, the “soul” takes on physical characteristics; it is pulled taut like a sheet of canvas to conform to the expanse of sky, and possesses volume and density that give way beneath the feet that “trample” it on the street. The subject is so completely reduced to an object-like state that his interiority comes into direct contact with the material environment. The soul also functions to link the oppositional planes of sky and ground, with the objectified subject facilitating the paradoxical intersection of non-coinciding material planes. This arrangement comports

with Eliot's effort to frame the degraded existence of the working class as particularly susceptible to incorporation into a material totality evacuated of subjective privilege. Even as the poem unites the furthest extents of the environment it describes, the context remains local: the sky is bounded by its relation to the "city block," and the ground where the soul is "trampled" is defined by the rhythms of the working day. As Eliot distributes subjectivity throughout the urban environment, he attempts to seal off that space as an enclosed segment of experience.

Despite these efforts, though, the multistable dynamic that Eliot engages in "Preludes" ultimately can't be restricted to unsettling boundaries only around particular kinds of subjects. If the nonhuman objects and working class subjects of urban spaces form an assemblage in which the individual is inseparable from the material system of objects it belongs to, that same relation can be extrapolated to implicate the privileged subjects whose existence is materially dependent on the working class. Followed to its furthest extent, such a dynamic subverts hierarchies of all kinds, including ones Eliot was deeply invested in preserving. As scholars such as Genevieve Abravanel have argued, Eliot not only aligned himself with Englishness by becoming a British citizen and converting to Anglicanism, but also sought to elevate and insulate English culture against the colonial and racialized others he perceived as a threat to English continuity. He was particularly insecure that his speech patterns linked him to Black American culture, and that "he may be too racially American, too savage, to fathom the civilized tradition of the English" (Abravanel 136). In using his poetry to depict the culture of the United States as inherently inferior to Englishness and its people as racially compromised—as he does in *The Waste Land* and elsewhere—Eliot measures access to humanity and privilege in

terms of proximity to the whiteness of the imperial center and makes a bid for that proximity himself. Eliot's engagement with multistability, however, whether in "Preludes," *The Waste Land*, or elsewhere, runs counter to his political intent. Whereas he attempts to mark off the elite, white subjectivity of the imperial center as distinct from and superior to its purported colonial margins, the insistent interrelation of multistability cannot be confined to one part of a system. Invoking the interchangeability of figure and ground in ontological relations divests all possible relational positions of fixed privilege, undermining hierarchies that center human subjects, whether humans at large or limited groups, as possessing particular agency and significance among objects.

Working contrary to Eliot, Harris's poem "Fetish" stands as an instance of those writers who actively pursue the full political potential of multistability. Harris, along with H.D., Woolf, Tutuola, and others used perceptual multistability to enact alternative modes of relation among self, objects, and environment and, to varying extents, to reallocate power and agency within that matrix. "Fetish" encapsulates Harris's more radical and all-encompassing version of the mutual incorporation of subject and object that Eliot attempts to contain. Harris also stages a multistable intersection of opposites in "Fetish," but the terms of that interaction differ significantly from those of "Preludes." This contrast emerges in the role individual perspective plays in the assemblages that the two poems depict, and in their framing of the environment throughout which perspective is diffused.

Across his work, Harris repeatedly uses the paradoxical resolution of oppositions as a symbolic shorthand for the transcendence of cultural divisions that form the

structural basis of hierarchical exploitation.[13] Most basically, he shares an interest in the essential modernist problem as Jameson sees it: the contradictory reality that "a representation of the social totality now must take the (impossible) form of a coexistence of those sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction" (Jameson 470). However, the totality whose representation Harris strives toward is not merely the sum of subjective experience, nor is it limited to human sociality.[14] Rather, "Fetish," the title poem of Harris's first published pamphlet of poetry, centers on the two opposing planes of sky and river, a dynamic he returns to frequently throughout his work. For Harris, the capacity of the river to optically reflect and so paradoxically contain the sky above and apart from it inscribes perceptual uncertainty into the landscape itself, enacting the multistable relation by which opposites are mutually incorporated along a boundary that is also a vortex. The meeting of river and sky, an intersection that transcends the sense of normative three-dimensional space, forms

> a frail entrance and exit for the spirit:
> a channel into the furious sky;
> wings borne beyond the edge of artificial
> raindrops falling from the shop roof of space
> on skeleton clothed and unclothed
> who thrusts a bone into the blinding mirror
> of bright and fantastic river

[13] This is not simply a useful strategy for Harris, but wholly defines his approach to difference, such that in his essay "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror," he asserts "unity then is paradox, the core of paradox" (*Selected Essays* 185).
[14] As Gemma Robinson asserts, in Harris's poems "lyric poetry's complicated relationship to a speaker's sociality is enlarged to incorporate a society that is human and extra-human" (142).

> in pitiful assumption of vision
>
> beside the immense glare of water and sky (lines 10-20)

As in Eliot's "Preludes," the metaphysical "spirit" of "Fetish" simultaneously inhabits these opposing and intersecting planes of the material environment. But this spirit is not necessarily anthropomorphic, nor is the intersection rooted in human intervention or projection. The latter exists in the environment itself—in the ongoing exchange between river and sky. And the "skeleton" is at best an index of the anthropomorphic, a marker of something no longer there. Its engagement is correspondingly both secondary and inconsequential, as it attempts to glean some "pitiful" glimpse of transcendent vision by physically breaking the plane of the water's surface and entering the river's "blinding mirror."

For Harris, transcending the limits of subjective perspective requires embracing individual blindness in favor of an extrahuman, collective perspective. Thus, the "immense glare of water and sky" both negates and eclipses subjective vision. The "artificial / raindrops falling from the shop roof of space" onto the eyeless skeleton similarly perform the exchange of individual perception for a plural, decentered perspective. The reference to raindrops that originate in a dimension beyond normative space appeared first in Harris's earlier poem "Green is the Colour of the World" (1948), which elaborates on the image further:

> Rain-spattered and immense is the world
>
> conjured out of many-sided visions
>
> dripping like tears from the roof of a house (section II, lines 1-3)

In both poems, the raindrops represent a vision that encapsulates (and creates) the totality of the material world, and thus imply an expanded sense of dimensionality, positing alternative forms of spatial relation that recall early-twentieth-century attempts to imagine a fourth dimension. Harris's "many-sided visions" suggest an augmented form of perception capable of comprehending realities that transcend the limits of three-dimensional experience. Yet it's also significant that Harris persistently situates that transcendence as inextricable from the mundane. In both "Green is the Colour of the World" and "Fetish," the raindrops combine human and extrahuman orders, referencing the built, human environment of a "shop roof" or "roof of a house" but positioning that environment beyond human experience. Similarly, by describing the raindrops as "dripping like tears," Harris links their cosmic vision that "conjure[s]" the world to the human eye. Just as the raindrops literalize the optical channel of exchange between river and sky, as they fall from the sky to merge with the river only to make their way back into the sky through evaporation, they also trace a cyclical interrelation between human and extrahuman.

The universal terms of Harris's field of interrelation signal another divergence from "Preludes." Whereas Eliot attempts to treat working-class subjects and spaces in isolation as a collective, dehumanized mechanism that operates within particular boundaries, Harris escalates the ambiguity that Eliot fails to contain to an irresistible current of interrelation. Harris's more radical formulation eclipses subjectivity as a meaningful category entirely, an aim that's also reflected in how he chose to present *Fetish*. The pamphlet was published in Guyana under the pseudonym "Kona Waruk," which Harris drew from the Konawaruk River, a tributary of the Essequibo, the largest

river in Guyana.[15] In stark contrast to Eliot's attempt to reflect on a closed system of urban materiality from the unsullied, distant position of artistic observation, Harris situates the poetic voice in the landscape itself, submitting to the all-encompassing material assemblage of an ecological totality. Harris's strategic resolution of oppositions thus participates in precisely the kind of resistance Yusoff advocates for, in which an intimacy with the inhuman that dispenses with Western subjectivity effaces the very parameters that structure and perpetuate exploitation.

In the following chapters of this dissertation, I examine how H.D., Woolf, Tutuola, and Harris develop transformative and transgressive representations of epistemological uncertainty, and how they variously deploy those representations to upend political and ontological hierarchies. Chapter One analyzes the memoirs and autobiographical fiction of H.D., with particular attention to her roman-à-clef *HERmione* (c. late 1920s), which fictionalizes her adolescence in Pennsylvania, including her brief engagement to Ezra Pound and her overlapping romance with another woman, Frances Gregg. I argue that *HERmione* exceeds the capacities of static representation through its fragmented, combinatory perceptual tableaus that abandon the notion of objective reality in favor of a changeable hypothesis. Such a hypothesis, which parallels Gestalt psychology's prioritization of relations over concrete phenomena, as well as the factual fictions of scientific metaphor, liberates H.D. to view her own perceptual environment as a palimpsestic accumulation of possibilities in which she might intervene. *HERmione* thus uses the mutability of a troubled figure-ground binary to dispel the illusion of enclosed categories of experience or identity, particularly by dissipating boundaries

[15] See Robinson 143.

between self and other in the lesbian relationship at the text's center. In essence, H.D. develops her own theory of perception as a malleable fiction to challenge objective reality and the limits of individual subjectivity and to resist heteronormativity, patriarchy, and even the nation.

Chapter Two functions as a companion and counter to my study of H.D., and considers Woolf's similar commitment to privileging relations over particular objects. Instead of fixating on the multiple possible arrangements of immediate sensory phenomena, as H.D. does, Woolf turns away from the fixed details of material objects to shift emphasis onto a relational, process-oriented depiction of multistable experience. Examining early short stories such as "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and "Solid Objects" (1918), I detail how Woolf fixates on the relational potential of objects that are increasingly abstracted from any fixed qualities, and I show that this focus comports with the model of representation that Woolf claims most closely approximates experience in her famous essays on craft, "Modern Fiction" (originally published as "Modern Novels" in 1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). Just as importantly, though, I argue that this focus on chains of relation ultimately elevates the consciousness that curates those relations, positioning collection and consumption as generative acts—a move that hobbles the liberatory potential of Woolf's multistability. More specifically, while Woolf positions unfixed relational structures as an empowering force for change, and even explicitly critiques both patriarchy and capitalist imperialism, her depiction of the writer as a collector of impressions preserves the curatorial authority associated with imperialism, making H.D.'s the more effective effort to subvert hegemonic power structures and the control they exert through rigid categorization.

Ultimately, though, neither Woolf nor H.D. manages to leverage multistability to radically reimagine power relations in a global context. Both writers progress toward less hierarchical relations among subjects and objects by unsettling fixed perceptual structures, but neither fully rejects anthropocentrism nor seriously engages with categories of identity beyond their own experiences as queer, white women. While H.D.'s *HERmione* does resist the structural categorizations of nation and empire by constantly using Hellenic sources to question the boundaries and authority of modern nations, Hermione nonetheless fails to venture beyond a Eurocentric cultural metric, and struggles to engage with racial difference in relation to the family's Black servants. Both H.D. and Woolf attempt to access a sense of continuity through multistability in response to the rift between structural and lived experience that Jameson identifies, but neither makes full use of the opportunity to transcend and disrupt global power structures and construct alternative forms of futurity. Examining these two writers in the first half of this dissertation establishes how multistable perceptual experience allowed American and British modernists to address anxieties about the perpetually elsewhere "absent cause" Jameson identifies within the machinations of imperialism, as well as to empower themselves as makers and curators of experience. The second half of this dissertation turns to two (post)colonial modernist writers for whom the exploitative practices of imperialism are not merely a source of discontinuity or abstract anxiety, but an inescapable presence in the material conditions that shape their lives and identities. In the third and fourth chapters, I argue that resisting Western epistemology through multistable perception enables Tutuola and Harris to upend the ontological hierarchies through which

imperialism de-animates and disempowers material bodies and resources marked as extractable others.

Chapter Three reexamines Tutuola's critically undervalued novels *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954). I argue that Tutuola inscribes global material relations in the shapeshifting objects and creatures that populate his novels, fusing human with nonhuman and Western technology with the material magic of the African bush. Tutuola radically departs from anthropocentrism by redirecting the complexity novels usually reserve for human interiority into material assemblages. In Tutuola's fictional bush, multistability escalates from a perceptual phenomenon to a material fact, as objects simultaneously take multiple, changeable forms, and perceptual interactions are mutually transformative. Tutuola builds multistable assemblages that parallel global material relations and illustrate through their mutability that power cannot statically reside in one privileged sector of relation but instead continuously circulates among interdependent members. He thus undermines the hierarchical structures of both anthropocentrism and imperialism while reframing the Nigerian bush as a source of technology, innovation, and power.

In Chapter Four, I analyze Harris's first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), in the context of his definition of the "New World epic" as a form of literary reconciliation through which the oppositions and violence of what he calls "singular bias," or cultural "absolutes which polarise humanity irreconcilably," are replaced with a plural, cross-cultural perspective (*Selected Essays* 185, 188, 193). I argue that Harris uses multistability to express the simultaneity of a collective, ecological perspective that disrupts the hierarchical machinations of conquest by dissipating the boundaries that

preserve the illusions of self-contained subjects, states, and cultures. Harris attempts to realize this kind of cross-cultural epic in *Palace of the Peacock,* which distributes identity and perspective across a material totality to reshape the possibilities of perceptual apprehension and confer access to a transcendent dimension of experience that literalizes the entanglement of ecological connection. My analysis of Harris allows me to develop a more nuanced articulation of how literary modernists' use of multistability prefigures contemporary theories of extrahuman materiality. I argue that Harris's work charts a course between object-oriented ontologies and Yusoff's insurgent geology of the inhuman by centering the vitality of the material, including people, landscapes, and objects that have been coded as passive and exploitable. Harris equates the transcendence of hierarchical division with access to a dimension beyond human sensory and representational capacities, and his use of multistability to render that excess in literary form epitomizes the ontological transformations that I argue modernists enact through perceptual mutability.

Chapter 1:
Visions and Re-Visions: H.D.'s Shifting Fictions of Perception

Late in her life, while recovering from a broken hip at the Swiss hospital in which she was to die three years later, H.D. wrote of a dream in one of a series of notebooks she kept during her convalescence. She recorded many dreams in these notebooks, treating them as a lens through which she could reflect on her past and decode the significance of her present via a self-orchestrated Freudian interpretation.[16] On January 25, 1958, she describes a dream in which her son-in-law brings her a book: "I open it, and am over-whelmed with happiness. The picture are picture (sic), but seemingly, with an added dimension. The lilies are picture-lilies but glow or grow on the pages. I turn the pages with inexpressible happiness—pictures, pictures…" (*Hirslanden Notebooks* 51). It is suggestive that the ideal book H.D. dreams of receiving is one in which pictures take on "an added dimension," existing simultaneously as visual and literary representations that are both fixed on a page and active, changing sites of possibility that defy the static, two-dimensional medium of the text. The flowers disrupt the paralytic force of imprinted representation while making use of it as a vehicle for expression. The potential for material, sensory encounters to access dimensions beyond the plane of immediate experience and to unify seemingly incompatible states of being or seeing appears in H.D.'s writing throughout her life. The fantasy of this dream, articulated near the end of her life, is an apt illustration of a continual striving in much of her work, including her fiction, poetry, and memoirs. While the most direct echo of the dream book might be the stark, imagist depictions of flowers (including lilies) in her first poetry collection, *Sea*

[16] H.D. was interested in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis for much of her adulthood, and began working with Freud directly as one of his analysands in 1933 (*Tribute to Freud* 3).

Garden (1916), nearly all of H.D.'s major works explore the excess potential of visual encounters as she experiments with distortions of perception, interrogating the limits and possibilities of pictorial and literary images.

H.D.'s understanding of vision in her work consistently privileges the inherent instability of perceptions formed and re-formed on the basis of mutable organizational structures. The view of perception that pervades H.D.'s writing shares a foundation with the basic tenets of Gestalt psychology, the German branch of psychology devoted to the study of perceptual formation. Gestalt psychology traces its roots to earlier theories of perception developed in the late nineteenth century, but formally emerged during the same period in which H.D. became known as an imagist poet, beginning with the publication of Max Wertheimer's foundational paper on the perception of movement in 1912. As I discussed in the introduction, Gestalt psychology examines the structural basis of perceptual formation, analyzing how perceivers organize sensory stimuli into conscious perceptions. One of the central claims of Gestalt theory is that percepts are formed through the distinction between perceptual content that is figural and that which forms the background against which a figure occurs.[17] The organizational impulses that govern the distinction between figure and ground determine what is perceived when stimuli are encountered. Gestalt theorists experimented with and catalogued the cognitive tendencies that shape a perceiver's reception of particular stimuli, illustrating Gestalt principles through examples of stimuli that exemplify particular organizational maxims and others that resist conclusive organization because they tread the line between

[17] For a recent summation of the history and state of Gestalt psychology today, as well as an explication of its basic tenets, see Wagemans et al.'s "A Century of Gestalt Psychology in Visual Perception: I. Perceptual Grouping and Figure-Ground Organization."

perceptual characteristics that activate contrasting organizational responses. These ambiguous stimuli that cause the perceiver to shift from one figure-ground distribution to another demonstrate the phenomenon of multistable perception, and call attention to the inherent multiplicity of perception at large. When a perceptual structure emerges, it is the one of multiple possible formations that best suits a set of organizational principles and the underlying preference for figures that form simple, enclosed, and complete wholes.[18] Thus, perceived content is a product of cognitive negotiations made when a perceiver encounters stimuli, not a natural, final, or uncontested reproduction of the stimuli.

While not a student of Gestalt psychology herself, H.D.'s perspective on perception exhibits many of the theory's assumptions about how the material world is experienced and interpreted by the sensing subject. For H.D., the mediated nature of perception demonstrates the impermanence of the structures that orient vision, distinguish subject and object, and inform socially constructed narratives of normative experience and identity. In her memoir *The Gift* (c. 1941-1943), H.D. interprets this perceptual changeability as a formative component of her childhood experiences. Lenses that augment perception, found in her father's telescope and her grandfather's microscope, play important roles in both *The Gift* and in her romans-à-clef that draw heavily on that memoir and the childhood and adolescence that it chronicles. These memories reveal an important connection between the technological implements of H.D.'s world and her interest in the psychology of perception. The telescope, through which her father observed "something, we didn't know quite what," during the night is made all the more unknowable by the fact that the vision it discloses to her father eludes her and the other

[18] Wagemans et al. 1180.

children when they peer through the lens in the daylight: “there was only a white glare and nothing to be seen and it hurt your eyes” (39). The mysterious optics of the telescope, accessed at the wrong time, negates vision by blinding the eye with glare and pain. H.D. hesitantly connects the ambiguity of her father’s visual pursuits to the similarly secret, but decidedly more sinister, activities of a murderous Bluebeard. Like the secret room that the Bluebeard of folklore forbids his young wife from entering, what her father views nightly is particularly alluring and powerful because it is unrepresentable. Linking this mystery to the potential danger of a masculine figure—in the Grimm brothers’ and other versions of the folktale, Bluebeard murders his wives and keeps their remains in the secret room—emphasizes the dynamics of gender that determine who can access visual technologies and use them to interpret phenomena.

While H.D. describes the augmented sight of her grandfather’s microscope as more accessible than that of her father’s telescope in *The Gift*, the vision remains enigmatic because of the seeming dissonance between the world she encounters through her own unaugmented visual faculties and what she sees through the microscope lens:

> But there was a difference between Papalie’s pressed-moss and the things that shone in the crystal-lens of his microscope, on the glass-plate that a moment ago had been empty and just two pieces of glass, like small empty magic-lantern slides, stuck together.
>
> When Papalie lifted us, one by one in turn, to kneel on the chair by his work-table, we saw that it was true what he said, we saw that where there is nothing, there is something. We saw that an empty drop of water spread out branches, bright green or vermilion, in shape like a branch of a Christmas-tree or

> in shape, like a squashed peony or in shape, like a lot of little green-glass beads, strung out on a thin stem. (42)

While the moss samples can be observed directly, viewing the unknown interiors of the drop of water through the microscope lens requires Papalie's supervision and physical intervention. The difference between the two viewings is not only one of accessibility, but also of knowability. H.D.'s assertion that the plate "a moment ago had been empty" suggests a sense of doubt almost miraculously resolved. Papalie acts as a magician performing an inscrutable trick, for when they look through the microscope, the children see "that it was true what he said … that where there is nothing, there is something." The sudden appearance of something from nothing, the filling of empty space, mimics a magical revelation of an unknown and unfixed dimension of vision that is contingent upon the assemblage of grandfather, microscope, and the secret knowledge of its operation. Even when this visual access is granted, the image within the water drop shifts, or rather is revealed to be inherently multiple, as the plural similes beginning with the repeated syntax "in shape, like" indicate. The transformations of the image do not merely move between likenesses, but fixate on different aspects of the drop's contents, with the overall shape changing as different parts of it are prioritized as the primary figure: the extended lines like branches, the complete shape like a peony, and the smaller nodes like beads on lines that are reduced to connective tissue. Even at the primary level of color, the image is invested with undecidability; H.D.'s description of branches "bright green or vermilion" may indicate the colors contained in different water drops, or contrasting colors simultaneously present, but linking the two dissimilar colors with "or" also offers the possibility that color is also unfixed within the drop. The branches H.D. sees may

appear green at times, and vermilion at others, a transformative leap between distinctly different colors that contradictorily share the same visual origin.

Both of these early descriptions of visual technologies employed by paternal figures in H.D.'s life occur in the first section of *The Gift*, suitably entitled "Dark Room" in a gesture that meditates on the visual production of memory and the process H.D. engaged in while writing the book, which she described as a film-like experience of watching her child self view the events of the past as they happened.[19] H.D.'s comparison of the making and reviewing of memory to the development of film and her fascination with the technologically produced visions that occupied her father and grandfather illustrate how closely linked discourses of vision and technology were, both in H.D.'s personal experience as well as in contemporaneous scientific conversations. Scholarship often portrays science as a primarily restrictive force that H.D. sought to escape, but my reading of her work suggests a more nuanced relationship with visual technologies that H.D. believed challenged rigid definitions of experience predicated on false assumptions of objective reality. Significantly, early-twentieth-century physicists did not negate the instability H.D. attributed to the observation of material reality, but increasingly relied on it to construct meaningful narratives and models of their theories.

The problem of making unvisualizable phenomena accessible not only attended the work of scientists using transformative visual technologies like the telescope and the microscope; it was particularly pressing for those studying the invisible forces upon

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[19] H.D.'s description of reliving memory in *The Gift* calls into question the boundaries of the self by emphasizing the material processes of thought. H.D. applies the material process of developing photographs to the formation of thought in her mind by likening the chemicals of cognition to those of photographic processing. The images produced are "continuous images like a moving-picture," another instance of images that exceed the material boundaries that mark their capacity to represent (50).

which much contemporary scientific thought turned. The atom and its contents, waves of magnetic force imperceptible by all but mechanistic measures, and the much-theorized and ambiguous ether within which all physical interactions were imagined to occur all presented difficulties to researchers attempting to model their findings through graphic images or descriptions suited to visualization, resulting in physical or visual models that metaphorically rather than directly represented opaque scientific concepts (Hunt 107-110). Like H.D., those theorists often turned to a model of perception similar to the one developed by Gestalt psychologists to allow them to account for the indeterminate nature of the material phenomena they studied. Recent scholarship in science studies has described these efforts to render unrepresentable or unfixed relations through apprehensible models as relying on "factual fictions" that served as analogies for imperceptible or multimorphic phenomena.[20]

Literary scholar Ian F. A. Bell connects such factual fictions not only to scientific modeling, but also to the use of analogy in poetry, which he argues engages in a process similar to that of science to make hypotheses about experience. Bell writes that poetic analogies and scientific models depicting the workings of phenomena such as relativity and electromagnetism both attempt to represent that which is "objective and ineffable simultaneously" (119).[21] In both cases, the use of analogy, Bell argues, is a self-

[20] Bruce Clarke used the term "factual fiction" to characterize physicist James Clerk Maxwell's view of the ether in *Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics*. The term encompassed Maxwell's simultaneous postulates that the ether must exist and that it eluded accurate description, thus making any particular conception of its existence fictional. Clarke and others return to the term, and the hypotheses of early twentieth-century physicists, in *From Energy to Information*.

[21] In *Intangible Materialism*, Ronald Schleifer makes a similar argument regarding narrative, suggesting that the organization of events into a comprehensible whole is a version of hypothesis by which an array of parts or observations are organized into a whole on the basis of a guiding rule that establishes a meaningful relation between the parts. Schleifer emphasizes the same function of that relation that Gestalt psychologists prized: "the whole is more than the sum of its parts, more than simply a collection of 'data' added together" (31).

conscious gesture that points to the unrepresentability of an idea while offering a hypothetical representation that embraces its ineffable and unfixed state.[22] This reading of representation draws on the ideas of Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, one of the nineteenth-century thinkers whose work Gestalt psychologists eventually recognized as a precursor to their own theory.[23] Bell argues that the Machian analogy used by writers and scientists alike in the early twentieth century allows "the retention of subjectivity within the relational objectivity of analogy" by maintaining the mutability of analogical relations (119). By using metaphorical models to represent scientific phenomena, researchers made concepts without fixed form representable in depictions that gestured to mutability and multiplicity in excess of pictorial representation. This conception of representation as always merely one expression of a multifaceted, unfixed whole that contains multiple representative possibilities suggestively resembles the Gestalt notion that perception manifests as structures that are products of situational relations rather than the direct experience of fixed phenomena, and thus are selective representations of a larger field of possible relations (Koffka, "Perception" 540-542). While Bell does not discuss Gestalt psychology, the modernist scientific and literary

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[22] Bell's primary example is his reading of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Bell argues that the poem's central point is the failure of fixed definitions, and that it demonstrates an alternative by calling attention to the fictitiousness of its opening analogy, "when the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table" (117).

[23] While Mach's work preceded the development of Gestalt psychology and was not initially referenced by its founders, Gestalt psychologists later discovered his ideas about isomorphism, the relationship between the physiological reception of stimuli and their conscious perception, and acknowledged him as a forerunner of Gestalt theory. In *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, Koffka writes that Mach's isomorphism is "identical" with that of foundational Gestalt thinkers Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler, but that Mach's isomorphism was not incorporated into the development of psychological theory because Mach's underlying philosophy fell short of solving the problems of psychology it identified, and in fact "made it impossible to give fruitful solutions to these problems" (63).

discourses he analyzes make use of the central Gestalt principle that representation arises as a hypothetical model that marks an unrepresentable plurality of relations.

H.D.'s meditations on visual technologies in *The Gift* offer a particularly generative study of how early-twentieth-century scientific, Gestalt, and literary means of hypothesizing reality resemble each other. Working from a Gestalt-like concept of perceptual construction, H.D. understood perception itself as a factual fiction, as the production of one of many possible analogies for visual encounters never entirely divorced from the ineffable, the changeable, and the unseeable. Like the dream book of pictures "with an added dimension" or the shifting surprise of the shapes viewed through her grandfather's microscope, perceptual encounters in H.D.'s poetry and prose are contingent assemblages of myriad forces. H.D. infuses her representations of reality with interchangeable relations that express unfixed, even unvisualizable content that, like the printed flowers growing beyond the page in her Hirslanden dream, compromise the very premises of representation, replacing objective reality with a subjective and changeable hypothesis. Her treatment of perception resembles the factual fictions scientists used to hypothesize reality and Gestalt psychology's mutable perceptual structures, both of which privilege relations over concrete phenomena. For H.D., the premise that perception is a product of a negotiation between perceiver and stimuli is an empowering one. By declining to privilege any one representation as final or incontestable, H.D. makes visible the continual process of re-formation and re-vision that attends perception, revealing a subject and environment that are always engaged in shaping one another, with no fixed, discernable boundary between the two. Thus, H.D.'s perceiving subject is both empowered to intervene in a mutable perceptual environment to make meaning and

simultaneously implicated in that environment, as the illusory boundaries that support notions of enclosed subjectivity, identity, and agency dissipate.

Scholarship on H.D.'s poetry and prose has analyzed her attentiveness to modes of perception and her disorienting descriptions of sensory experience, but the materiality of perception as it shapes and is shaped by subject/object relations has rarely been the focus of such inquiries, and the connection between Gestalt psychology and the shifting structures of perception that characterize H.D.'s work has yet to be explored. Rather, H.D. scholarship has typically read the complexity of visual experience in her texts as an expression of mystic spirituality that is not rooted in material immediacy, but functions as a means of encoding lesbian eroticism, or else is a consequence of her ambivalence toward the physical body as both implement and impediment in her attempts to transcend gender and personality. While visions like those accessed through the microscope and telescope, which appear as multiple and shifting, or as resistant to being perceived at all, undoubtedly participate in the conceptual work identified in previous scholarship, I contend that H.D. engages an underlying theory of perception as a malleable fiction to challenge objective reality, heteronormativity, and the limits of individual subjectivity. Such a theory not only informs and facilitates her forays into mysticism, homoeroticism, and impersonality, but also links them. Scholars writing about each of these topics have argued that H.D. attempts to subvert binary divisions and access a form of simultaneity that normative, mundane experience resists: she melds spiritual and physical planes as a mystic prophetess, substitutes reclaimed feminine love and artistry for heterosexist structures so she can willfully inhabit roles of both object and muse, and paradoxically surrenders to and distances herself from the sensations of the physical, sexual body to

access experiences that both exceed and are rooted in that body. The paradoxical, interchangeable relations necessary to each set of tensions that H.D. uses to access forgotten, forbidden, or unsustainable modes of experience are themselves activated by perceptual processes that are modelled in Gestalt psychology's troubling of the figure-ground binary. H.D. uses this theory of perception as a simulation created through an ongoing process of negotiation to reconcile seemingly contradictory binary components by revealing their mutual mutability, thus dispelling the illusion of enclosed categories of experience or identity.

While I do not claim that H.D. studied and intentionally reproduced Gestalt examples in her work, I argue that her interest in psychology, technologies of vision, and altered states of perception led her to develop an understanding of perception based on many of the same assumptions underlying Gestalt psychology. Analysis of this connection is particularly productive not only because it connects perception in H.D.'s work to a larger theoretical project, but also because H.D.'s application of Gestalt concepts bears out the implications of those perceptual models for identity politics. Whereas Gestalt theorists largely focused on developing explanations for physiological and psychological phenomena, H.D. was invested in how perception relates to subject formation across divisions of gender, sexuality, and race, as well as the subject/object roles involved in artistic performance and reception. Much of the scholarly work on H.D. has been generated in connection with these areas of analysis, but critics have seldom grounded arguments about H.D.'s challenging of boundaries around sociopolitical subjectivities in the unfixed perceptual structures from which that disruption emerges.

Early studies of H.D. were largely defined by analysis of gender and sexuality, offering her work as an overlooked alternative to the masculine aesthetics of contemporaries such as Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence.[24] In contrast, studies produced in the last decade emphasize the importance of moving beyond the limitations of a gender-driven approach that obscures H.D.'s contributions to literary modernism by painting her as the initiator of an isolated gynopoetic that did not participate in the ideas and aims that defined modernist literature more largely.[25] Recent studies of H.D. tend to agree on the primacy of a tension between corporeality and transcendence throughout her poetry and prose. The intention and impact of that tension, however, has been interpreted differently by various scholars. For Lara Vetter, H.D. is ambivalent about being wholly permeated and possessed by forces both scientific and mystic, and utilizes bodily self-possession and sensory awareness in her life and writing to maintain some measure of

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[24] In *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle,* Cassandra Laity argues that H.D. turned to romantic decadence to reconnect with a feminine aesthetic and construct a female modernism as a counterpoint to her male contemporaries (31). Laity traces H.D.'s engagement with Romantic forbears, suggesting that the gender and sexual fluidity of the poetic masks H.D. found in the work of writers such as Algernon Charles Swinburne allowed her to invert heteronormative narratives and to figure the female body simultaneously as artistic subject and muse object. Diana Collecott similarly makes an argument for the continuity of a binary-disrupting feminine aesthetic in H.D.'s work that reaches into the past beyond Romantic decadence to Sapphic imagery and fragmentation in *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism.* Collecott writes that H.D. "transforms negation into assertion, in a poetic that has the makings of not merely a female but a Sapphic sublime," and it is this sense of negation, silence, and exclusion that Collecott emphasizes in the gender dynamics between male and female modernists (39). Susan Stanford Friedman argues in *Psyche Reborn* that H.D. shared an interest in mythology and "transrational modes of perception" with writers including Pound, W.B. Yeats, and Eliot, but that she "*was* 'different' as the only poet in this circle of mythmakers to write from a woman's perspective," and that the female re-vision she brought to mythmaking set her work apart from that of her contemporaries (196, 211, emphasis original). In *Penelope's Web*, Friedman's next book on H.D., she describes H.D. as the originator of a "gynopoetic modernity" (32).

[25] Miranda Hickman, for example, revises the idea that H.D.'s feminine aesthetic is necessarily incompatible with the idealized, geometric body associated with Pound and Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist aesthetic. Hickman argues that H.D. harnesses Vorticist notions of the body to achieve her own aim of accessing an ideal beyond flesh specifically for the female body. By redefining H.D.'s relationship to modernist explorations of mechanistic, technological aesthetics, Hickman counters earlier perspectives such as Laity's, in which H.D. is understood as opposing impersonal and inorganic modernism with a decadence Laity associates with fin-de-siècle "cults of personality" (Laity ix).

control in the midst of being visited by spiritual presences or invigorated by electricity.[26] Vetter argues that H.D. thus complicates power dynamics between the object and subject roles associated with passive reception and active domination, ensuring that agency runs both ways on a continually shifting current (107).

In *Optical Impersonality*, Christina Walter offers a similar argument that, rather than turning away from Poundian imagism, H.D. "begins to work with its ingredients, including a focus on visual art, materiality, and opacity, and she begins to outline a kind of liberating potential in those ingredients, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality" (92). For Walter, impersonality is not a negation of subjectivity, but a recognition of the physiological and extrapersonal forces that shape that subjectivity. [27] Walter's reading of H.D.'s visual impersonality integrates the dynamics of bodily surrender and control discussed by Vetter and others with the authorial cycle between submission and control that scholar Rochelle Rives describes as H.D.'s poetic masochism,[28] connecting tension between autonomy and automaticity to a subjectivity that is contingent on the material world (87). While Walter acknowledges this relation, her attention to impersonality and optics leads her to focus on the bodily experience of perceivers rather than the objects of perception. Rives similarly sketches out the significance of subject/object relations in H.D.'s poetry, arguing that the verse is marked

[26] Vetter distinguishes between electromagnetism's capacity to energize and to polarize, arguing that H.D. is attracted by its potential yet skeptical of surrendering bodily or spiritually to forces that categorize and fix (63).
[27] Walter reads the body in H.D.'s work as increasingly implicated in the production of subjectivity, in contrast to Hickman, who contends that the body is not as a refuge of agency for H.D., but a fleshly burden to escape through stimulation. Hickman argues that H.D.'s writing shows a desire to "discipline and refine the body away from corporeality into something ethereal, rare, and strange that can foster transcendent awareness" through erotic arousal (144).
[28] Rives argues that the poet diminishes herself in order to gain poetic authority, because "the maintenance of poetic authority requires an actual, concrete loss of self at the hands of the contractual partner" (52).

by “the dialectical double movement that [complicates] boundaries between active and passive subject positions,” but her argument prioritizes the dynamics of poetic voice rather than the relations of material phenomena, or the materiality of the poetry itself (53). Like Vetter, Rives focuses on the shifting positions of the artist as an authoritative creator and a consumed performer, and does so without engaging the perceptual mechanics that inform H.D.’s conception of boundaries that do not enclose and divide but rather mark active relations among connected phenomena. Rives acknowledges that H.D.’s theorization of impersonality “extends beyond the realm of poetics to the world of concrete phenomena: real space and real bodies,” yet her analysis of H.D. quickly moves beyond real bodies and real spaces to focus on poetic voice as a channel between active and passive states (48).

Across early and recent analyses of H.D. that range from arguments about collapsing gender binaries and subversive sexuality to theories of impersonality, a pattern persists of turning focus away from the material relations that shape and are shaped by perception in H.D.’s work. In many studies, this is the result of a choice to prioritize other topics rather than an oversight, but the consequence is nonetheless that the mechanics of perception as a form of relation among bodies, objects, and spaces have rarely been privileged in H.D. studies. Critics frequently recognize the dynamics of agency between subject and object as central to H.D.’s ideas about personality, sexuality, and gender, yet have consistently favored arguments that join H.D.’s sensory compositions to political implications upon which the bulk of analysis is concentrated, rather than tracing those implications backward to the underlying hypotheses about the interactions of perceiver, figure, and ground that they share. I propose that such a study is necessary because the

psychology of perception H.D. describes in her memoirs and enacts in her fiction and poetry underwrites the subversion of binaries that is central to both early studies on gender and sexuality in her work and more recent analyses of her engagement with impersonality.

By treating perception as a malleable fiction, H.D. follows the primary Gestalt principles that perception occurs through undivided structural wholes rather than as individual sensations and that the organization of those structures is not fixed. In a 1922 article written to introduce the field of Gestalt psychology to American readers, Kurt Koffka defines perception broadly as "the realm of experiences which are not merely 'imagined,' 'represented,' or 'thought of,'" thus encompassing all sensory experience ("Perception" 532). Though thought, in this definition, is not sufficient to bring a possible sensation into actual perceptual existence, Koffka does assert that what is not noticed cannot be sensed and thus does not have perceptual existence.

Figure 2.1: A multistable image "reproduced from the edging of a tablecloth," "Perception" 559.

Describing a figure-ground shift enacted when the boundary line that closes a figure against its ground is inverted to instead enclose the former ground as the figure, Koffka argues that the first figure seen must become nonexistent for the latter to emerge as perceptually present. In the example he references (fig. 2.1), a pattern of black T-like shapes is transformed into a pattern of white leaves:

> we must recognize that the T's have ceased to exist the moment we see the leaves, and that the T-phenomenon has been replaced by a totally different ground-phenomenon, which corresponds to the same part of the stimulus-complex. We see now what an enormous change has been effected when a figure 'emerges' from its ground." (561)

Ascribing the power to define reality as it is experienced by the perceiver to changeable perceptual structures undercuts any notion of fixed boundaries or truly enclosed forms. Under such conditions, H.D.'s perception-as-fiction model of trying out arrangements of perceived elements and then recombining them as if running through a catalogue of relational possibilities is not merely a disorienting technique, but an attempt to more fully represent the range of potential perceptual compositions. Like early twentieth-century scientists, she manages to represent that which is unfixed and multiple—and thus resistant to the static representation of text—by acknowledging its multiplicity and presenting her representations as transient analogies.

Gestalt psychology, though still practiced by a number of scholars, declined in influence and regard within the scientific community significantly in the second half of the twentieth century. However, its theorization of perception has remained important in contemporary visual studies. As I explained in the introduction, theorist W.J.T. Mitchell has used the phenomenon of figure-ground multistability to explain how viewers encounter images of all kinds, not merely those multistable images that are designed to enact and emphasize shifts in perceptual organization. Mitchell argues that the boundary line that marks an image as enclosed against its surroundings is always "the outline that curves in upon itself, drawing the beholder into a vortex that reverses the locations of

figure and ground" (*Image Science* xii). According to Mitchell, the vortex that unspools stable binary relations of figure and ground also calls into question the relationship between viewer and image, between subject and object. The dynamic relations of perceptual structures that Mitchell describes by drawing on Gestalt psychology are present throughout the material encounters staged in H.D.'s texts. The strategies that Vetter, Rives, Walter, and others have argued H.D. uses to maintain fluidity between performer and audience; male and female; muse and artist; writer, text, and reader; and physiological impulse and conscious mind all derive from a Gestalt reading of perception. Analyzing the function of perception in H.D.'s texts through a Gestalt lens thus offers a continuity of ideas that links her much-commented-on subversion of gender and sexual binaries to the more recently discussed tension between personal embodiment and impersonal transcendence in her work, revealing that both are rooted in a pervading structural malleability of perception that governs relations throughout H.D.'s writing. Like the flowers of the Hirslanden dream that transcend the pages of the dream-text, the sensory experiences of H.D.'s texts constantly defy containment, invoking the vortex of boundaries both marked and implied to initiate exchange and inversion in excess of closed material forms.

Sensory Scales and Slippage in *HERmione*

H.D.'s roman-à-clef *HERmione*, written in the late 1920s, offers a fictionalized retelling of her emergence from adolescence in Pennsylvania, including events she experienced from roughly 1905 to 1911. In *HERmione*, the instability of figure-ground relations manifests in the eponymous and autobiographical character's awareness of the

fictitiousness of perceptual structures, which leads her to frequently dismantle the sensory elements she encounters and recombine them into new formations without ascribing permanence to any. Hermione Gart's experiences in the book recreate H.D.'s departure from Bryn Mawr College, her engagement to Pound, who is rendered as George Lowndes in the text, and her entanglement in a relationship with Frances Gregg, whose fictional counterpart is Fayne Rabb. If the events of the book track with H.D.'s experiences during that period, so does Hermione's tendency to probe the limits and possibilities of her perception echo the hypotheses and experiments concerning perception that H.D. describes in memoirs and nonfiction texts throughout her life.[29]

Indeed, the central crisis at the novel's outset is a perceptual one. Throughout the text, Hermione frequently attributes her failure at Bryn Mawr and exclusion from the scientific achievement valued by her father, Carl, and brother, Bertrand, to her inability to master conic sections:

> Pennsylvania whirled round her in cones of concentric colour, cones . . . concentric . . . conic sections was the final test she had failed in. Conic sections would whirl forever around her for she had grappled with the biological definition, transferred to mathematics, found the whole thing untenable. She had found the [Gart] theorem [of mathematical biological intention] tenable until she came to conic sections and then Dr. Barton-Furness has failed her, failed her . . .

[29] In addition to *The Gift*, texts including H.D.'s memoir *Tribute to Freud* (1956), which reflects on her time as an analysand of Freud, her treatise *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919), in which she describes her method of accessing a plane of perception beyond immediate reality, and fictional adaptations such as *Majic Ring* (c. 1943-1944) and *The Sword Went out to Sea* (c. 1946-1947) that draw on her autobiographical experiences of séances and visions are all concerned with this this goal.

> they had all failed her. Science, as Bertram (sic) Gart knew it, failed her . . . and she was good for nothing. (6)

More is at stake here than one academic course, or even Hermione's enrollment at college: with the problem of conic sections, Hermione's attempt to *see* as her father and brother do, to accede to reality as it has been presented to her, becomes "untenable." While the emphasis of the failure is initially on Hermione's incapacity to succeed on her exam, by the end of the passage it is the professor who has failed her, both literally by giving her a non-passing grade, but also in the metaphorical sense in which science itself, the lens through which her father and brother view the world, has failed to work for her as it does for them. Hermione not only fails "to conform to expectations" and take up the scientific pursuits of her family's patriarchs, but fails to perceive as she is expected to: "Science as Carl Gart, as Bertrand Gart defined it, had eluded her perception" (6). Just as the act of failure operates in two ways, both as Hermione's failure to understand and as science's failure as an adequate channel for her perceptions, so does this resistance to perception apply not only to conic sections and the systematic way of seeing they represent, but also to Hermione herself. Scholar Hilary Emmett argues that an inability to perceive in accordance with scientific and mathematical models makes Hermione herself imperceptible.[30] In the novel, Hermione is unable to grasp a "definition of herself" as she finds "she was no longer anything. … She was not Gart, she was not Hermione, she was not any more Her Gart … Nothing held her, she was nothing holding to this thing: I am Hermione Gart, a failure" (4). Significantly, the crumbling perceptual relations that

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[30] In "Prophetic Reading: Sisterhood and Psychoanalysis in H.D.'s *HERmione,"* Emmett writes that, for Hermione, her failure at conic sections and subsequent choice to drop out of Bryn Mawr is "strangely literal. Science causes her to become similarly imperceptible, to 'drop out' of sight" (265).

isolate Hermione are rooted in an incapacity to sustain the part/whole relationships of conic sections as dictated by patriarchal and institutional authorities. That incapacity in turn causes the dissolution of Hermione's understanding of herself as connected to greater wholes, whether familial, educational, or existential. Thus, from the beginning of the text, the weight of Hermione's perceptual difference is placed on her susceptibility to misreading and slipping out of part/whole relations that are determined by social consensus and authority.

At the beginning of the novel, Hermione frames herself in opposition to the rigid structures she associates with scientific study, and many critics have ascribed a similar position to H.D., portraying her as consistently rejecting the scientific in favor of the spiritual and aesthetic. Indeed, those who see H.D. as unambiguously anti-science might argue that linking her representation of perception to models developed through scientific experimentation in Gestalt psychology conflicts with or disregards her authorial intention. However, I argue that the pattern of intention that emerges across H.D.'s work is in fact an attempt to combine scientific and aesthetic modes of making meaning. Attempting to reconnect with an ancient past in which the visionary encapsulated scientific, aesthetic, and prophetic vision, H.D. forges connections between schools of thought that she believes have only been severed from one another in the modern present, to the detriment of each. Throughout the first act of the novel, Hermione feels constrained by the scientific and mathematical models that she has failed to assimilate and imagines herself "superced[ing]" the Gart theorem associated with her father and brother's technical pursuits with her artistic vision: "mythopoeic mind (mine) will disprove science and biological-mathematical definition" (76). At various points throughout the text, many

of which I will examine, Hermione turns away from oppressive structures that she links to the detached, mechanical operations of entrenched scientific authority. By the end of the text, however, Hermione admits that her relationship to science is significantly more complicated, a contradiction of her earlier position that she is not yet able to fully account for. Arguing with George after their engagement has been broken, Hermione berates him for failing to understand her and repressing her potential: "Why did I go on with [you] … can't you see? Can't you see you've tampered with me like an ill-bred child with a delicate mechanical instrument? You have no respect for science." Here, Hermione associates herself with a scientific instrument, and inverts her earlier identification of herself as the one whose perception fails to grasp the intricacies of science. Now, it is George who can't see properly, not merely in his failure to recognize how he has mistreated Hermione, but, according to her metaphor, as an inadequate operator of technology. Her reference to a child with a delicate instrument recalls the depiction of H.D.'s own childish, failed attempt to access the visual prosthesis of the telescope in *The Gift*. George, surprised by this seeming reversal of Hermione's position, responds, "I thought [science] was the thing you wanted to be rescued from," to which she can only contradictorily answer, "I did want to be rescued—I do, I do" (191). The story of Hermione's relationship with science is thus decidedly more ambiguous than it appears at the outset of the novel, and the transformation of her position from oppressed victim of scientific authority to facilitator of a renewed connection between scientific and artistic vision is central not only to this argument, but also to the larger narrative of H.D.'s relationship to science throughout her life and works.

The choice of conic sections in particular as the initial point of fracture at which Hermione's deviance from accepted models of sensing and interpreting results in her exclusion is significant. Emmett links Hermione's difficulty with conic sections to her loss of identity by examining the work of H.D.'s half-brother Eric Doolittle on calculating binary star trajectories, which required knowledge of conic sections. Given that Eric's position in H.D.'s life correlates to Bertrand's role as Hermione's brother, Emmett suggests that the scientific studies of the real-life Eric and fictional Bertrand are also related. She thus reads Hermione's struggle for individual identity as thematically connected to her inability to differentiate between true and illusory binary stars systems by calculating star trajectories. Emmett argues that Hermione's impulse to find and fixate on twin selves is due to her failure to differentiate herself from others, which Emmett represents as a mistake similar to the *trompe de l'oeil* that occurs when the orbits of two stars overlap such that it appears there is only one present, or when two stars visually appear to be near each other and engaged in binary orbit when they are actually so far apart as to have no impact on each other (266). I would extend Emmett's analysis by reading Hermione's preoccupation with conic sections and, indeed, with an increasingly troubled distinction between real and illusory, as an expression of Gestalt concerns about perception.

In addition to aptly invoking Hermione's discordance with academic, scientific, and familial expectations, the use of conic sections also bears significance as a Gestalt model. In *Visual Thinking*, perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim links visual perception to concept formation, in part through Gestalt principles he learned as a student of Gestalt founders Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler. Arnheim uses conic sections as an

example of the transition from the particular to the general, arguing that the various geometric parts of a cone were initially perceived individually because of their enclosed and simple structures, and "had to be restructured in order to emerge as aspects of one unitary dynamic concept," the cone (185). According to Arnheim, this reformation of individual geometric concepts into sections that belong to a larger whole is a process of abstraction.[31] Further, Arnheim argues that this visual process is reflective of the cognitive process by which concepts are formed more generally, asserting that "static concepts come about when the mind culls structurally simple patterns from the continuity of transformations" (186). As my reading of *HERmione* will demonstrate, the transition between the particular and the general that Arnheim describes is especially problematic for Hermione, who simultaneously struggles to interrupt the "continuity of transformations" of both sensory and conceptual data to access stable phenomena and to abstract the particular into unitary wholes. One notable demonstration of this difficulty is her insistence that the United States of America are too many and too diverse to be understood as a larger whole: "You get no cohesion out of a thing so immense. … This thing that any one can say *united we stand* is all rot. We can't stand united. Divided we would probably stand" (78). Hermione protests the contradictory perceptual structures that the concept of states united, both multiple and one, demands. It is hardly surprising, then, that Hermione's fragmented and protean perception impedes her ability to transition between seeing circles, ellipses, parabolas, and hyperbolas as individual, self-contained concepts and as components of the unified cone.

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[31] Arnheim describes generalization as "an act of restructuring through the discovery of a more comprehensive whole," a process by which multiple ideas can be connected and conveyed in one principle (187).

While vision is the sense most frequently invoked in *HERmione*, other sensory experiences including sound and touch are also integrated into a shifting tapestry of figure-ground play that is registered not only as a distortion of Hermione's experience, but also of her subjectivity as a perceiver. Midway through the novel, Hermione visits her fiancé, George Lowndes, and his mother, Lillian. Hermione fails to engage in conversation with Lillian, but she is enthralled by a figurine of a boy with uplifted hands on the Lowndeses' piano. The figure both commands Hermione's visual attention and, as it emerges as the focus of the room, becomes the anchor of a series of figure-ground configurations that it suggests to Hermione. The dimensions of the room, of material reality in general, shift according to the stance of the figure, the hands of which act as a vortex that reorients the field around it. Hermione first understands the figure to "lift up strange little terra-cotta wrists toward an imaginary deity" and sees "the wall back of the little figure hung with heady blue flowers and twisted blue dragon as background for a tiny little figure," drawing the wall into a figure-ground relationship such that its purpose is to recede against the outline of the statue (104). Hermione registers the reorganization of the structure of the scene as she fixates on the figurine:

> The tiny figure on top of the piano increased, decreased like something seen remote and far at the end of a field glass, like a tiny hawk poised with two exquisite wings against a mottled blue sky. The figure drew nearer, increased in size, became huge, a sort of huge odd beautiful naked tree branch, a sort of holm oak, Chersonese oak branch, a slim heavy trunk with two branching arms . . . the arms of a tree, the limbs of a man . . . (104-105)

The dilation of Hermione's vision and the mutation of the figure from statue to hawk to tree to man illustrate the figurine's status as a focal point that withdraws from fixed form. The exchange of "arms" and "limbs" as parts counterintuitively linked with "tree" and "man" resist the notion of enclosed forms that are not always implicated in one another, even for the instant when they flicker into visible shape before changing. To bring the figurine into focus is not to grasp a stable image, but to access a mutable chain of possible relations. This contradiction is reminiscent of H.D.'s experience of viewing a drop of water through her grandfather's microscope in *The Gift*, and the image of the figure's arms slipping from hawk wings to tree branches to human arms visually rhymes with the transformations of the water drop that shift from tree branches to flower petals to strings of beads. Viewed through a lens that serves to isolate and paralyze material for scrutiny, the drop of water is not trapped and demystified in the microscopic gaze, but rather opens onto a multitude of shifting visual formations.

In *HERmione*, the disruption of boundaries within an object extends to distort its environment, including the perceiver, via the open channel of the boundary-line-as-vortex. Hermione's impression of the statue, with hands upraised as if to gesture toward or uplift the space above it, suggests a body forming an inverted conic shape, with the outer boundary of the cone acting as an unclosed channel of relation to external totality. As an alternative conic model that supplants the rigidly defined, enclosed shape that is incompatible with Hermione's shifting perceptions, the statue is defined not by exclusion that creates an enclosed internal structure, but by an open boundary that allows interpenetration as the statue projects meaning outward and draws it inward. Thus, the praying boy pulls its surroundings into the figure-ground play it initiates. Hermione,

whose fixation on the statue prompts Lillian to remark upon her "odd way … of *seeing,*" seizes on the statue as an anchor for her experience (105).

> Her looked at the praying boy of whoever it was and things whirling in her head, making coloured patterns like frost flowers on windows, became static, but static *in colour* not simply frost flower but the thing in her mind (whirling pinwheel) became fixed, became static.
>
> "I will always remember this afternoon," and someone took up words that she had just whispered—"Is it the *first* time you've seen your fiancé's mother," and fiancé and mother became linked forever with that boy with lifted hands standing on a piano, lifting his hands, holding on his lifted hands all of the universe, slender Atlas, holding and discarding, taking from her the burden of her intellect . . .
>
> His hands seemed to be lifted toward a heaven without edge or end or side or top or boundary. Into that heaven the vultures of her chained thoughts might now fly openly . . . (106, emphasis original)

The figurine shapes Hermione's experience on a variety of scales. It forges a link with the sensory overlap of the overheard words "fiancé" and "mother" and blends temporal states of past, present, and future as a marker that orients Hermione's memory of her experience. Further, it intervenes in the flow of images in Hermione's mind, rendering "the things whirling in her head, making coloured patterns like frost flowers on windows" as "static, but static *in colour*." These "frost flowers" recall the magical dream flowers of H.D.'s Hirslanden dream; changeable representations that are inscribed with an ink that continues to shift on the page, like icy frost that accumulates and melts, presenting a

different image every moment. Rather than paralytic, Hermione seems to find the intervention of the figure clarifying. When she looks at the praying boy, "the thing in her mind (whirling pinwheel) became fixed, became static," suggesting not necessarily a cessation of movement, but a solidification of presence that allows her to see the transforming images more clearly, as with the frost flowers that become "static *in colour*" rather than in pattern.

The figurine attunes Hermione's perception to its own time and space, reorienting the universe of her subjectivity such that her consciousness itself seems to rest in the figurine's hands and can suddenly enter the boundless dimension those hands suggest in their upward gesture. Her identification of the praying boy as an Atlas figure invokes a mythological scale that competes with her own reality. The statue "of whoever it was," blends the myth of Atlas with the fictional figure of George, whose liberating offer to take on the weight of Hermione's life and transport her to another world by marrying her and taking her to Europe is also a stifling attempt to "tak[e] from her the burden of her intellect." By evoking George's fictional arc, the statue also incorporates the autobiographical into the mythical, as H.D.'s romantic relationship with Pound threatened to constrain her as his mute poetic object rather than an artist in her own right.[32] This suppressive potential is alluded to through the incorporation of yet another mythical archetype, as Hermione imagines the statue as allowing her access to a new plane, a "heaven [into which] the vultures of her chained thoughts might now fly openly." This mixed allusion places Hermione's thoughts in the position of the chained

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[32] During their relationship, Pound wrote a book of poetry for H.D., "Hilda's Book," but didn't acknowledge her own poetry as meaningful until years after their engagement had been broken, when he declared her "H.D. Imagiste" in London in September of 1912 (*Louis Silverstein's H.D. Chronology, Part One*).

Prometheus, plagued by a bird of prey that repeatedly devoured his liver, but describes those thoughts as vultures, complicating the dynamics of predator and victim, imprisonment and freedom.[33]

This merging of literary, mythological, and autobiographical scales persists throughout the text, particularly in Hermione's difficulty in distinguishing herself from "Hermione out of Shakespeare," who ends *The Winter's Tale* as an art object come to life, a legacy that is reinscribed when Hermione attends a performance of George Bernard Shaw's theatrical adaptation of the Pygmalion myth (40).[34] A similar confusion adheres in Hermione's frequent references to herself as "Her." The pronoun "her" and the name "Her" are used interchangeably, reducing Hermione's identity from the personal to the general, and often making it difficult to discern whom the text is describing. The fact that Hermione's nickname replicates the object pronoun "her" also means that even in sentences in which Hermione is a subject who is acting rather than being acted on, that agency is negated in the same moment it is conferred. Later in the text, Hermione uses the slippage of the self/other division that her name-as-pronoun engenders to conflate her identity with a woman who is both desired object and desiring other, whom she refers to not merely with the pronoun "her," but also the personal "Her."

The statue of the praying boy thrusts Hermione into another context, reaching beyond the limitations of the room's immediate material environment to gesture toward

[33] The bird in question is translated as an eagle in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, but other translations of ancient sources refer to it as a vulture, as does George Gordon Byron's "Prometheus."

[34] In the Pygmalion myth, sculptor Pygmalion falls in love with a statue he created, which the goddess Aphrodite then brings to life. In *The Winter's Tale*, the dead Hermione is memorialized in a statue sixteen years later, which comes to life at the end of the play, restoring Hermione to her husband. Shaw's twentieth-century adaptation represents a more figurative creation of a female aesthetic object that becomes a desirable love object: Henry Higgins's transformation of the poor and unrefined Eliza Doolittle into a well-spoken and (relatively) well-mannered woman. That Eliza and H.D. bear the same surname compounds their connection.

the undefined space implied by the praying boy's raised hands. Hermione's relation to the unbounded universe suggested by the figurine's gesture is not merely conceptual, but bodily: when George mockingly imitates Hermione's position a few moments later, she appears to have taken on the figurine's stance, "with stoop-forward of shoulders and a hand uplifted as if holding a stiff lily" (107). Significantly, Hermione's imitation is only partial; her stooped shoulders are at odds with the uplifted hands of the figure, and she only raises one hand, "as if holding a stiff lily," not the globe of cosmic weight she imagines the statue holding. She thus only half creates the conic shape that the figure's arms sketch, and which is completed but not enclosed by the open boundary of external totality beyond. In Hermione's posture, boundaries of self and space are even less defined; unlike the praying boy, she does not create a zone of exchange between internal and external, perhaps indicating that she is not yet capable of the balance between self and world that the figurine evokes. While at this point in the novel Hermione can only muster a partial attempt at the stance, both bodily and figurative, from which the statue engages its world, her interpretation of the statue marks it as a figure of prophetic promise. During a frantic, internal reiteration of her frustration with the sanitized, restrictive, and unvarying patterns of her experience of scientific education, Hermione posits that music could be grouped with the techniques of mathematics, physics, and biology, as it too "makes patterns" and "is only another way of predicting things." She then immediately links the continuity of science and art back to the statue of the praying boy: "God who is light, who is song, who is music, is mantic, is prophetic, that is what Helios means, a god who is prophetic . . . I see the god who is prophetic held like a round globe on that boy's hands" (110). Conflating the Greek figures of Helios, god of the sun,

and Apollo, god of light, H.D. emphasizes a link between art, prophecy, and light. This connection and the transformative relationship between self and world suggested by the figurine gesture toward the alternative forms of knowledge that Hermione will begin to access by the end of the novel, forces that ultimately drive H.D.'s reunification of technical and mystical vision.

The encounter with the statue literally as well as conceptually reorients Hermione within her environment, an effect reiterated in Hermione's later contemplation of the object after Lillian insists that she take it home with her:

> the hands of the boy were always lifted toward a heaven that had neither top nor side nor length nor edge nor any end whatever. Heaven, a flat lid, was pressed (in Pennsylvania) over their heads. Heaven pressed down (like Carl Gart, like Uncle Sam pressing things down in test tubes) was lifted by these frail hands. The praying hands of the praying boy sustained her. (112)

The praying boy both illustrates and intervenes in Hermione's environment, enacting her understanding of the space she occupies and eliding the conceptual boundaries between the heaven implied by his hands, the sky above the landscape, and the forces of authority that Hermione experiences as pressures bearing down upon her. Carl Gart, the family patriarch whose scientific pursuits emphasize Hermione's inferiority as a daughter who is expected to perform a domestic role and as a failure in her scientific course of study at Bryn Mawr, is conflated with the propaganda image of Uncle Sam. As a figure that asks young men to take up their patriotic duty, the call of Uncle Sam, like Carl Gart's legacy, both emphasizes Hermione's failure to serve her family or her country and marks her as unsuitable to do so as a woman. Under these connected pressures, Hermione represents

herself in the position of the objectified and passive material forced into test tubes, pushed to conform by a complex of patriarchal, national, and scientific authorities. Hermione integrates these pressures into a network of sensory scales that link the sculpted material of the statue's hands, the implied weight or world above them, the landscape of her geographical context, and her constrained sociopolitical position as a young American woman. This is significant not only as a representation of embodied experience that, like so much modernist literature, acknowledges the unity of cognitive and bodily existence,[35] but moreover because it articulates a continuity of experience across external environment, body, and consciousness such that no boundary encloses one realm from another. The result is a formulation of subjectivity that understands the boundaries of the subject as vortexes of relation, thus making possible the open channel between subject and object or active and passive states that scholars like Rives and Vetter describe.

Hermione's encounter with the figurine of the praying boy demonstrates the power of the boundary-as-vortex to reorient the perceptual field it occupies, a function that drives the dual tendencies in *HERmione* toward fragmentation and unification. Constantly shifting sensory constructions "going (kaleidoscope) round and round in her tight head" interrupt the continuity of Hermione's material environment and thoughts, but the figurine, as the site of the collapsing boundary, also offers the potential of a limitless continuity as binary constituents are drawn into non-oppositional relation by the vortex (106). Throughout *HERmione*, perception is marked by these contradictory functions of

[35] See David Herman's argument that modernist texts "allow the mind to be imagined as a kind of distributional flow, interwoven with rather than separated from situations, events, and processes in the world" (255).

figure-ground organization; at once, the unified may fragment into discordant elements, and the enclosed and particular may slip into the total.[36] These simultaneous potentials shape Hermione's relationship to her environment, to language, and to the ambiguous and compelling figure of Fayne Rabb, with whom Hermione develops a lesbian passion.

Transformative Fragmentation: Unsettled Wholes and Parts

When Fayne and Hermione first meet at a gathering held by Nellie, a Bryn Mawr acquaintance of Hermione's, Fayne suggests that Hermione's "mind seems to have a definite octopus quality," which interferes with her ability to "assimilate anything." This observation is prompted by the fragmented conversation Hermione and Fayne engage in leading up to it, in which Hermione offers distracted responses to Fayne's questions about George and the books Hermione has read:

> "Who is George?" "George—I don't know." "You said he wrote or knew people who wrote or something." "Oh, he knows people who write. He writes." "What does he write?" "He writes about—about Castile, I don't know. He wrote a sort of treatise on something between Castile and Cadiz. I mean he knows languages." … "What then is George like?" "Oh, I don't know—rather like Aucassin and Nicolette. I mean he once said I was." "Like—" "One or the other. Aucassin, you know, and Nicolette, you know." "I don't know." "Well—that sort of thing. He got me the copy from the Portland Maine shop, you know that shop." "Yes, I

[36] I thus suggest that the slippage of boundaries around the self described by scholars of impersonality is linked to a larger current in H.D.'s understanding of borderlines both material and conceptual as sites of inversion and interchange.

> know. What else do you read?" "Read? Oh I read Ibsen, Maeterlinck, all of Bernard Shaw." (61)

From sentence to sentence, Hermione seems startled by Fayne's questions, even though they follow a linear logic. Hermione's responses read as though she is repeatedly reorienting herself to the dialogue rather than engaging in continuous conversation. Fayne ascribes this to a failure to assimilate that interferes with Hermione's experience of continuity, suggesting that Hermione encounters individual ideas and sensory snippets in isolation, and is unable to bring them together into a coherent whole.

Hermione later reflects on Fayne's identification of her "octopus intelligence," connecting it to the way she sees: "Hermione let octopus-Hermione reach out and up and with a thousand eyes regard space and distance and draw octopus arm back, only to replunge octopus arm up and up into illimitable distance" (71). The individual, unassimilable tentacles and the disparate visions of their "thousand eyes" mimic the fragmentation of Hermione's perceptual structures. Instead of perceiving distinct and enclosed sensory objects that can be assembled into a single, consistent whole, Hermione experiences her surroundings as a mosaic with multiple and fleeting combinatory possibilities. This mode of perception characterizes Hermione's conversation with Fayne, in which she stumbles blindly from one topic to the next regardless of whether they are logically related. In Hermione's shifting mosaic of sensory information, ideas and words easily slip away from their contexts and into others. Sitting in Nellie's tea room, Hermione hears one of the women say that Nellie "wrote *brilliantly*" about Henry James at Bryn Mawr. Her internal response follows an associative path that traverses sensory

experiences to lead from the words she heard to the sensation of heat, which she feeds back into the conversation:

> Nellie had written brilliantly about Henry James, done a thesis, taken a degree.
>
> Degree, degree, degree . . . Hermione went up like the mercury in the thermometer. Degrees, degrees . . . she would burst out of the top of herself like the mercury in the thermometer. Mercury in the thermometer rises, rises . . . What does it feel like when it can't rise any higher and is there, pulsing, beating to express degrees beyond the degrees marked carefully in fine spiderweb of silver on the glass tube? Mercury that felt expression . . . beating, pulsing; I am feeling degrees of things for which there is no measure. "It *is* hot. Terribly." (59)

Hermione seizes on the word "degree" which has particular significance given the shame and uncertainty engendered by her recent failure at Bryn Mawr. Comparing herself to rising mercury serves as an apt metaphor for the stress of being reminded of her own failure, but also evasively turns focus away from the university degree by enacting a shift in context, flitting to another meaning of the word: the degrees measured by a thermometer. If the intended meaning of a word in a particular context emerges as figure against the ground of other possible meanings, Hermione's associative turn flips that relation.[37] This exchange exemplifies Hermione's tendency to reflexively cycle through possible perceptual combinations, and it allows her to discard the traditional knowledge associated with a university degree and turn toward alternative modes of knowing, sensing, and measuring.

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[37] See Ana Margarida Abrantes's discussion of Gestalt theory in relation to frame semantics in "Gestalt, Perception and Literature" (186).

The image of mercury rising in the glass cylinder of a thermometer, unable to escape, evokes the trapped sense of being forced downward into a test tube that Hermione uses to characterize the pressure exerted by the chimeric authority that represents patriarchal, nationalist, and academic constraints. The mercury rising beyond the thermometer's capacity to measure suggests a yet-unfulfilled possibility of surpassing restrictive models, as if the mercury that "can't rise any higher and is there, pulsing, beating" is about to turn the pressure exerted on it into explosive energy to burst from the confines of its glass tube. Like Hermione's reaction to the praying boy, the reactionary series of interpretations triggered by the mention of Nellie's degree also links autobiographical, fictional, and mythical scales. The anxiety of having left college, conveyed in the metaphor of mercury rising in a thermometer, applies to H.D.'s departure from Bryn Mawr as well as Hermione's. Further, the liquid striving to rise in its constrained tube also bears the name of the messenger god Mercury, whose transient and wing-wearing persona perhaps casts its shadow on the page as Hermione lingers on "Mercury that felt expression … beating, pulsing." Before speaking aloud, Hermione runs through another possible meaning, using the word "degrees" in a way that refers to extents of feeling: "I am feeling degrees of things for which there is no measure." Finally, she translates her fixation on the word "degree" to the immediate embodied experience of her environment by saying aloud, "It *is* hot. Terribly." To the others, this must seem a sudden digression from the discussion of Nellie's degree; for Hermione, it is the next figure in a chain of associations that began with Nellie's degree, a consequence of her practice of shifting between all possible contexts and figure-ground combinations available to her.

Like the conversation that she both reacts to and withdraws from, Hermione's visual experience of the room around her during this gathering emphasizes the fragmentation that marks her perception. The text relays Hermione's impression of the room as Fayne commands her attention:

> A face drew out of people grouped like teacups and people bisected by long lines of blue curtain hanging from miles above one's head, from a ceiling miles above one's head to a floor miles below one's feet. The floor was polished and showed diagonals of the blue curtain in space between chairs going down and down. Bits of the floor went down, reflected between table legs; long lines of pure blue.
>
> Think of long lines of pure blue. (52)

Hermione's vision dismembers the objects into simplified geometric forms in collision with each other: "people bisected by long lines;" "diagonals of the blue curtain;" "bits of the floor." Reduced to lines and shapes inhabiting a single plane, the material features of the room interact in unexpected ways. A table's seemingly passive contact with the floor, for instance, is rendered as an active relation in which the table breaks the floor into "bits" that emerge and recede between the table's legs. The curtains, stretching from "a ceiling miles above one's head to a floor miles below one's feet," do not merely adorn, but contain a dilating space: "The wall and the floor were held together by long dramatic lines of curtain falling in straight pleated parallels" (52). Taken for granted as objects contained within a room, these material components gain agency and unpredictability when viewed through Hermione's eyes as shifting sensory impressions rather than circumscribed wholes.

This unusual manner of perception, attached to a fictionalized young adult version of herself, suggestively echoes the unique way of seeing and presenting images that earned H.D. praise as an imagist poet. Pound, who first labeled H.D. as an imagist and spearheaded efforts to define and promote imagism as a poetic style, claimed that imagist poets rely on a pure, objective form of representation not clouded by abstraction so as to make direct perception of the poetic object accessible to the reader.[38] In many imagist poems, including those written by Pound, that direct representation actually takes the form of a metaphor that moves from sensory impressions to a characterization of the sum of those impressions as something other than the object as it was first named. This technique can be seen in the central metaphor of one of Pound's most famous imagist poems, "In a Station of the Metro." The full poem reads: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough." The poem ultimately makes a comparison; the image is evoked through a metaphor that transports its components into a new context. Such a shift rests on the manipulation of figure and ground. Whereas the eye might apprehend a crowd of people as a grouping of individual bodies not suggesting a particular pattern or image, Pound's poem redistributes figure and ground based on contrast, so that faces are no longer accessed as parts subsumed in the larger wholes of bodies, but rise to the foreground as petals against the dark ground of a supporting bough that represents non-facial sensory impressions. Like the poetic analogies that sought to represent the ineffable in Bell's analysis, such a shift is one that turns on the undecidability of perceived content. Pound conveys a fresh image to the reader by

[38] See Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste."

redrawing the lines to recast figure-ground relations, thus inviting his audience to access a different way of looking at the image.

H.D.'s imagist poems often employ this model, rendering an image via metaphors that do not merely add descriptive texture, but shift the image to reveal it as something else entirely. Distilling a supposedly self-contained object into individual snippets of sensory experience allows H.D. to probe the possibilities of figure-ground distribution, making it possible to transmute one thing into another through perception. In *HERmione*, the reader has access to the character's mental rotation through combinations of perceived phenomena; in her imagist poems, H.D. encodes this testing of different combinations in metaphor. Take, for example, "Oread" (1914), a six-line poem often invoked and anthologized as emblematic of H.D.'s imagism. Because the poem begins with an address to the sea, one might read the poem as depicting ocean waves without directly identifying them as such:

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.

By naming the waves as "pointed pines," H.D. isolates the visual impression of swirling, pointed caps and divorces that impression from its context as part of an ocean wave. This allows her to attach the sensory impression to another possible context, that of an encounter with the tops of pine trees. She repeats "whirl," making the seemingly distinct

actors, “sea” and “pointed pines,” meld into one, which she continues to address with a series of imperatives: splash, hurl, cover. By highlighting a particular sensory fragment within a phenomenon that is understood as a unified whole, H.D. disrupts the assumed figure-ground relationship to transform the image and encourage readers to access an alternative perceptual structure. As the imagery of trees is molded into the actions of the sea, water itself is transformed into “pools of fir” by H.D.’s verbal and perceptual alchemy.

Further, it is possible to locate the subject to whom the poem is addressed in the title instead of in the first line, a change in perspective that reverses the transition from seascape to treescape. “Oread” derives from a Greek term for a mountain nymph.[39] Oread has been read as the speaker of the poem, a mountain nymph calling to the sea,[40] but so might Oread, as the spirit of the mountain, be the addressee to whom the pointed pines of the mountain belong. Then, it is the tree-covered mountain that is transformed into a sea of trees, animated by the language of ocean waves to cascade down the slope, perhaps toward the rocks of the sea, such that the two meet at their boundary and merge. In its reversibility and the reflexivity that makes it impossible to separate sea from trees or to be sure which is morphing into the other, the poem replicates the characteristics of the multistable image in which figure and ground are perpetually unsettled.

Figure 2.2: The Duck-Rabbit, 1892.

[39] "oread, n." (*OED Online*). Oxford UP, March 2018.

[40] In one of the earliest book-length studies on H.D., *Psyche Reborn.,* Friedman describes the content of the poem as the “perceptions and emotions of an oread” calling to the sea. Friedman reads the sharing of qualities between ocean waves and trees through Freud’s concepts of dream distortion and condensation (56-58).

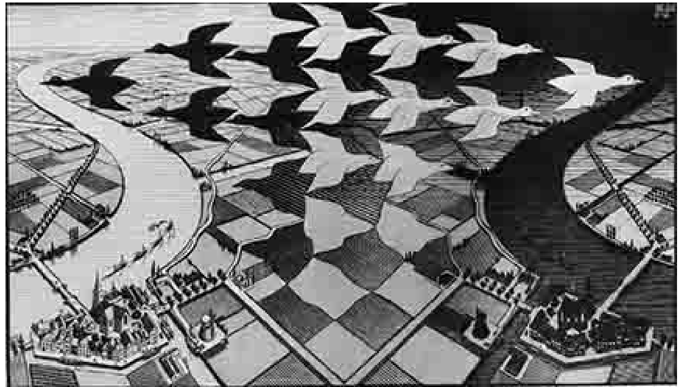

Figure 2.3: M.C. Escher, “Day and Night,” 1938.

For example, the Duck-Rabbit (fig. 2.2) is accompanied by German text that asks its viewer, “Which animals resemble each other the most?” (*Picture Theory* 53-56). As I explained previously, Mitchell asserts that this kind of question is reflexive. Answering it requires viewers to ask the same question of themselves, interrogating their own perspective. Dutch lithographer M.C. Escher’s 1938 woodcut “Day and Night” (fig. 2.3) also challenges the stability of figure and ground as fixed entities. The white birds emerge from the ground into fully defined figures as the eye moves from left to right, while the black birds emerge as the eye moves from right to left. As with “Oread,” the transformations are simultaneous and radiate from a subverted boundary, such that no original figure-ground distribution can be determined. Indeed, the pairing of two towns, mirrored across the center axis of the image, suggests two competing, or paradoxically coexistent, realities. Like these multistable images that encourage observers to look again and to look differently, “Oread” invites readers to engage the poem from different perspectives by staging simultaneous but oppositional transformations. By isolating particular perceptual phenomena, H.D. uses fragmented impressions in “Oread” to unify

the opposing elements of a physical division between land and sea, making them indistinguishable from one another as their traits bleed across a porous boundary.

Fragmentation as a condition for transformative possibility is central to *HERmione* as well as to many of H.D.'s imagist poems. When Hermione, with her octopus-like tentacles of disruptive vision, unmoors the structures of her environment into fragmented sensory impressions, her dissection of forms presumed to be enclosed and continuous also creates the potential for alternative connections. This process is carried out in her relation to the material environment of the tea room during Nellie's social gathering. While Hermione introduces discontinuities among the teacups, table, floor, walls, and curtains so the status of the room as a coherent whole is called into question, she also counters that fragmentation with transformative unity. By representing the material space of the room and her psycho- and physiological interior as equally tangible and immediate to one another, Hermione transitions from breaking things down into fragments to building mosaics of self, world, and other. The most compelling example of this incorporation involves a mirror in the room, which Hermione observes distorting perceptual phenomena in a manner similar to that of her own perceptual lens:

> A convex Victorian mirror above the head of the girl opposite showed Nellie and Hermione tilted sidewise, making an exaggerated puffed out little Dutch group of them, table and cloth and careful lines of the oblong pattern where the folded cloth had been carefully unfolded, making two careful lines, bisecting teacups clustered and teacups scattered . . . (51)

The mirror groups the bodies and objects via framing, but also "tilt[s]" and "exaggerate[s]," simultaneously composing a coherent image and destabilizing it by

calling attention to the constructedness of the image. It offers a dual gesture toward fragmentation and unity, a picture of sensory phenomena that, like the room's floor and ceiling, are at once falling away from each other and bound together. The "girl opposite" whose presence orients the mirror is Fayne, and the distortion and eventual conflation of the mirror with Hermione's perspective are thus linked with her optical and personal connection with Fayne. Initially, the mirror and Hermione remain distinct, though similar in their relationship to their environment. Later, however, when Hermione recalls meeting Fayne at Nellie's, the mirror is not a phenomenon experienced, but is incorporated into an alternative assemblage of self.

In the midst of a rendezvous with George in the forest, Hermione first reaches the thought of the mirror by a chain of associations like the earlier one that proceeded from the word "degrees," then uses the mirror as a lens through which she accesses her memory of the scene at Nellie's. With George looming above, kissing her, Hermione contemplates the contact of her head with the moss below: "The back of her head in the moss was pressed out, rounded out, round marble-polished surface in the soft moss. Polished surface that was the slightly convex mirror hanging above the left shoulder of the creature sitting opposite" (74). Initially, it seems that the shared trait of "polished surface" merely serves as a bridge between the idea of her head, described as smooth and heavy like the head of a marble statue, and the reflective surface of the convex mirror. But, as with the comparison that becomes transformative in "Oread," the common trait does not merely connect two separate entities, but merges them into one, like overlapping lenses collapsing into a single whole. Subsequently, Hermione "recall[s] the tilted mirror that was the back of her head," in which she "[sees] little stark shapes passing" (75).

Hermione struggles to hold connected but distinct concepts apart as often as she succumbs to the need to dismantle received wholes. Her perception inclines toward mutability, resisting the notion of enclosed forms. Thus, she is able to adapt her self-conception to include the mirror, creating an assemblage of self and material environment that can be transported to other contexts. Like the statue of the praying boy, the mirror powerfully reshapes Hermione's conceptions of self and environment, drawing its material surroundings into alternative patterns of relation. The image of the mirror as the back of Hermione's head is simultaneously bodily, environmental, and subjective. The "little stark shapes" evoke not only the material context in which the mirror's reflective surface displayed the contents of the room, but also the subjective context of memory, in which the scene accessed through the mirror figuratively lingers in the back of Hermione's mind.

(Dis)Locating Agency in Acts of Seeing and Being Seen

As a culminating symbol of Hermione's paradoxical inclinations toward fragmentation and unification, the mirror is particularly significant because its incorporation into Hermione's bodily and psychological self illustrates the power of the perceived to actively shape the perceiver in the text. As I have emphasized above, Hermione as a perceiver has clear agency in (de)constructing things as she sees them, a point which comports with any relativist sense of perception as subjective. However, H.D.'s theorization of perception in *HERmione* more precisely accords with Gestalt theory in its recognition of perceived content as an active, organizational force in the articulation of perspective. By representing the mirror as a structural, physical actor in

Hermione's cognition, H.D. illustrates the Gestalt claim that the perceptual environment is not passively apprehended but participates in the perceiver's recognition and organization of forms. Indeed, mirrors have been used in Gestalt experiments to demonstrate this point. Koffka describes an experiment conducted by Gestalt founder Wertheimer to convey how perceptual planes can be disrupted by the environment:

> Put a mirror in an inclined position upon a table. That part of the room seen in the mirror will then look abnormal. Objectively vertical lines will be inclined, and if a person visible in the mirror drops an object, it does not appear to fall vertically. Now hold a tube to your eyes excluding the whole "real" room from your vision and continue looking into the mirror. Let other persons walk about and do things in the visible section of the room. Very soon everything will be all right again; the floor will assume its horizontal position, the chairs will stand vertically upon it and objects will no longer be seen in an angle smaller than 90˚. You can measure the change by executing an apparently vertical line at the beginning and at the end of the experiment, and then determine the angle between these two. ("Perception" 576)

Koffka argues that this experiment demonstrates that, in addition to the visual, head, and standpoint systems (which respectively describe the function of the eyes and positioning of the head and body) that determine how one perceives visual phenomena, "the visible world itself is a concurrent factor" (576). By integrating visual stimuli as an active part of a psychophysical system that produces perceptual impressions, rather than treating them merely as the content that runs through that system, Koffka's analysis effaces the division of not only mind and body, but also subject and object. Instead of a binary system of

enclosed components, he presents a perceptual assemblage in which signal and response cannot be wholly isolated from each other, but are structurally contingent.

Hermione's experience of the mirror in Nellie's tea room models the relations and conclusions of this experiment closely. The angled mirror alters her vision of the room and its contents and is then reimagined as a formative component of her perspective. Further, the mirror suggests perceptual manipulations that are similar to those that mark Hermione's perspective. It possesses the power to interrupt the continuous relations of a visual plane through framing and angle and, simultaneously, to serve as a combinatory ground in which objects separated by physical space can overlap on its two-dimensional reflective surface. The formulation of the mirror in *HERmione* is an apt example of how H.D.'s treatment of perceptual structures directly informs her negotiation of identity politics, because as the lens of the mirror blends environmental and cognitive contexts, it retains the capacity to interrupt and conflate, shaping not only Hermione's perception of visual phenomena, but also her experience of subjective boundaries.

The significance of the incorporation of perceived content into the perceiver is most explicit in Fayne and Hermione's relationship. Fayne herself functions as a lens for Hermione that augments her perception, and the precedent of the mirror entering Hermione's consciousness and shaping her perspective lays the ground for the same interpenetration to occur across subjective lines between Fayne and Hermione. Further, the dynamic between Fayne and Hermione is often represented as a mirror relation as the lines between self and other blur in Hermione's mind and images of sisterhood and narcissism are evoked to describe their relationship. When Nellie writes to Hermione to invite her to the gathering, she insists that Hermione must come because she needs to

meet Fayne, who is “fey with wildness” like Hermione. Nellie’s invitation emphasizes the act of seeing: “Go straight to the telephone—come to see me—to see a girl I want to see you” (34). From the start, Hermione and Fayne’s relationship is rooted in visual phenomena and mirrored gazes. At Nellie’s, when the floor and walls seem to be moving away from each other, Hermione attributes this distortion to Fayne, and recalls the words from Nellie’s letter that position Hermione as an object to be examined by Fayne:

> Across the table, with its back to the little slightly convex mirror, facing Her Gart and Jessie, was this thing that made the floor sink beneath her feet and the wall rise to infinity above her head. … Answer the husky voice that speaks to you. Don’t look at the eyes that look at you. “A girl I want to see you.” The girl *was* seeing Her. (52)

Hermione not only feels the weight of Fayne’s observing gaze, but also understands the distortion of her own perception as an effect of being seen by Fayne. This sense of being looked at impacting one’s own way of looking extends the premise of perceiver and perceived melding to form perspective, as in the case of the mirror. The syntax and emphasis of the last sentence of the passage suggest a mirror relation between the two, not only emphasizing that Fayne’s gaze penetrates Hermione, but also making it possible to read an equivalence between “the girl” and “seeing Her.” Further, the visual proximity between the mirror and Fayne enhances the importance of both, as the mirror helps to enact the reflective identification between the two women, facilitating their relationship that blends self and sisterhood in a way Hermione has long desired.

In contrast to her connections with other people, which Hermione feels are always incomplete because “something crept, always crept between her and everybody,”

Hermione implies that her relationship with Fayne is not subject to this obstruction (69). Her unprecedented closeness with Fayne is an effect of Hermione's willingness to fully identify with Fayne, such that their identities at times become indistinguishable. This connection is expressed through a melding of perspectives both metaphorical and material via the visual interplay of bodies and mirror. As described in the passage above, Fayne sits with her "back to the little slightly convex mirror," such that the back of her head is presumably reflected in it. Thus, when Hermione experiences the mirror as the back of her head, she aligns herself with Fayne as well as the mirror, entering a visual circuit in which Hermione's perception of the mirror, the mirror's reflection of Fayne, and Fayne's visual arrest of Hermione form one multifaceted perspective.[41]

The text frames Fayne and the visual apparatuses she is linked to as allowing Hermione access to new sensory contexts. After her initial conversation with Fayne, Hermione not only feels invigorated, but has the sense that she has discovered a "zone she had not explored." Her contact with Fayne reveals a passage from the mundane reality in which Hermione's eclectic vision jars against the expectations of her family and acquaintances into a plane of experience that is responsive rather than resistant to her shifting networks of impressions: "she had passed out in a twinkling of an eye into another forest. This forest was reality. There, the very speaking of the words, conjured up proper answering sigil, house and barn and terrace and castle and little plum tree. A whole world was open. She looked in through a wide doorway" (62). Hermione experiences this transition in the "twinkling of an eye," an expression that here exceeds

[41] This arrangement also places Hermione in the position of looking at herself through Fayne's eyes, emphasizing the narcissistic overtones of their relationship.

its temporal meaning to evoke the action of Fayne's gaze as well as the distortion of Hermione's vision. Through Fayne, Hermione is transported to "another forest" that parallels the woods near her family's home, which Hermione and George frequently reference as "the forest of Arden" where the bulk of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is set. Looking with and through Fayne enables Hermione to access a shared vision in which her fragmented and associative perceptions are neither deviant nor fanciful, and in which to name one's perception, as by "speaking the words," is to make it real. In contrast to Hermione's experience of disorientation in a world in which competing perceptual structures and the pressure of traditional models of knowledge and identity overwhelm her, the realm Fayne offers is one in which Hermione can control her environment through perception.

While in the woods with George, Hermione struggles to remind herself that she is not "Hermione out of Shakespeare," a connection to literary models that George reasserts as he playfully asks, "Now *is* this the forest of Arden?" (64). The forest of Arden may represent a site of possibility and transformation unavailable in the built spaces of town and castle in *As You Like It*, but for Hermione, George's forest of Arden evokes the suffocating structure of the curated royal forest. This limitation is reiterated through George's quotation of the beginning of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline*: "'*This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks'* (George intoned dramatically; she knew why she didn't love him) '*bearded with moss and with garments green, indistinct in the twilight.*' She knew why she couldn't love George properly" (65). The "primeval forest," an archetypal space that conforms to preexisting models and pastoral tradition, oppresses Hermione rather than allowing her to

encounter the hybridity and mysticism that she finds in Fayne, who is "fey with wildness." With George, Hermione tries and fails to identify herself as Hermione of *The Winter's Tale* and Rosalind, clothed in male garb, of *As You Like It*. In his archetypal forest, she is limited by preexisting models of identity that suffocate her even as they fail to encapsulate or express her experience. The pressure of Shakespearean models, conferred by her name, is similar to that of the patriarchal, institutional authority she links with her father, science, and Uncle Sam.[42] The pressure, both atmospheric and internal, that Hermione imagines forcing things into test tubes is felt in the feminine character tropes and societal roles that threaten to confine Hermione in a traditional and fixed mold, as well as in George's desire to "incarnate Her" (64). But in the new forest of the reality that Fayne makes accessible, the environment is responsive, allowing Hermione to create and "conjure" with the ritualistic "speaking of the words" rather than pressuring her to accept and conform to a received material context. The plasticity suggested by this new reality and the promise it represents relates suggestively to H.D.'s description of filmic representation in this text and others, a connection that I will address in the final section of this chapter.

As the difference between these two forests suggests, George and Fayne not only represent opposite romantic possibilities in offering Hermione hetero- as opposed to homosexual connection, but also respectively epitomize rigidity and freedom. This is reflected in the perceptual possibilities that they offer Hermione. During the forest of Arden encounter with George that immediately follows Hermione and Fayne's first

[42] "Names are in people, people are in names," and "Things make people, people make things" are frequent refrains in the text that often denote Hermione's anxiety about the interpenetration of language, material, and identity (5, 25).

meeting, George is associated with interrupted or immobilized perception. Hermione closely analyzes his face, evaluating her response to it and her general failure to "love George properly." She manipulates his image, envisioning "George back of George, George seen through a screen door, George gauzed over by lizard-film over wide eyes, George seen with perception was wavering tall and Gozzoli-like with green jerkin" (65). Her experiments with George's image fail to penetrate his opacity; indeed, in the series she imagines, he becomes increasingly distant and resistant to perception, facing away from her, mediated by screen netting, viewed through impeded eyes, and finally immobilized as a painted image, both fixed and scrutable and yet withdrawn from perception, "wavering" in his imposing height. When George looks down on her from above, Hermione sees "the nostrils of George the other way round like photographs in the two huge volumes of sliced things on ceilings. Perspective was in sliced things on ceilings" (69). George is thus linked to the patriarchal, paralyzing scientific gaze that severs organic material and fixes it in unchanging representation on a page. The rigidity of this perspective, aligned with the restrictive force of the test tubes, directly contrasts with the sensory fluctuations unlocked with the microscope in *The Gift*.

This distinction between scientific modes of looking, as well as the association of George, a poet and scholar of literature rather than a scientist, with the arresting and hostile authority of classification, illustrates that H.D.'s primary quarrel is not with scientific observation at large or even merely with science, but with the systematic reification and cataloguing of phenomena into fixed forms. In their volume *Objectivity,* Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison chronicle the shift in scientific perspective that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century toward objectivity as a kind of "blind sight"

free of human prejudice (16). Daston and Galison chronicle the history of modes of looking at and representing material phenomena in science, arguing that scientific perspective is always mediated and constructed to privilege particular values. H.D.'s distinction between different ways of looking suggests skepticism toward modes of interpretation that selectively use data to maintain hegemonic narratives about material phenomena. In a similar critique of George, Hermione concludes that "George was out of the Famous Painters' Volume," an observation that suggests he achieves the conformity with traditional models that Hermione cannot. Though Hermione thus associates George with masculine, conventional definitions of high artistry, she also suggests he is consequentially dispossessed of identity, asking, first internally and then verbally, "Was there a George at all? 'Is there a George at all?'" (69).

As if to escape the predetermined forms of the world—or forest—that she inhabits with George, Hermione seems to sink away from him and his physical advances toward the back of her head, resting on forest moss. This is the moment when Hermione first encounters the convex mirror as the back of her head. With the mirror's connection to Fayne established, this recession into her head can be recognized not only as an escape from George and the reifying perspective associated with him, but also a flight into the adaptive and unfixed reality that Fayne is willing to construct with her. Indeed, when she looks at "the tilted mirror that was the back of her head," Hermione is "too astonished to perceive that she could turn, perceive as a mirror the whole fantasy of the world reversed and in that mirror a wide room opening," an image of a different plane of perception accessed through an opening that evokes the "wide doorway" through which she views the new reality that Fayne opens to her (76). This moment with George solidifies the

connection between Fayne and the mirror as mediums that carry transformative perceptual potential. It also indicates that the freedom associated with Fayne and the reflective dynamic of sameness that Hermione associates with lesbian connection counter the rigidity and convention represented by George and a heterosexual marriage contract. Thus, opening perceptual structures to revision is linked to a correspondent disruption of the gendered and sexual binaries that situate identity.

In Fayne, Hermione finds an affirmative response to her unconventional mode of perception, as well as the self-reflexive sisterhood that she has coveted throughout her childhood. After their meeting at Nellie's, Fayne sends Hermione tickets to a production of *Pygmalion* that is being put on by a dramatic arts society that Nellie is involved in, and which Fayne is starring in. Speaking to Nellie on the phone about the invitation, Hermione attempts to gather information about Fayne: "'Do tell me all about it' meant to tell me all about *her*. How to get it across to Nellie for she is HER and I am HER. People are in names, names are in people" (131). Hermione bases her identification with Fayne on the female pronoun, an ambiguous shortening of Hermione's name that can denote both herself and the female other. In Fayne, that otherness is transformed into sameness, a blending of identities that later defines the two women's roles as sisters, lovers, and visionaries who are simultaneously each other's muses, creators, and audiences.[43] While the sameness of two women as romantic partners figures largely in the imagery Hermione

[43] Vetter describes a similar dynamic in H.D.'s *Majic Ring*, which includes a fictionalized telling of a dance H.D. performed for her female long-term partner, Bryher, while in a trance-like state. H.D. and Bryher are represented as Delia and Gareth, respectively. Vetter argues that, while the H.D. character, Delia, dances for the Bryher character, Gareth, "as Delia shifts back and forth between being possessed and reclaiming her body, Gareth alternates between passive audience to Delia's performance (in a similar statue-like trance state) and active participant, responding to Delia's questions and offering her own interpretation" (106-107). The alternating surrender and reclaiming of self correlates to an interchange of object and subject positions between the two women.

uses to describe what makes her relationship with Fayne so transformative, the novel does ultimately move beyond a reductive model of lesbian connection as inherently more egalitarian, intimate, or nurturing than any other romantic bond. Eventually, the relationship between the two is revealed as prone to many of the same pitfalls Hermione associates with heterosexual love, and the closeness that developed between Hermione and Fayne turns out to be less a product of gender, and more one of shared vision.

The initial mutuality of the artistic relationship between Fayne and Hermione, and its contrast to the more conventional dynamic of the male artist and female muse that Hermione experiences with George, can be traced in the performance of *Pygmalion*. Hermione attends the play with George, who directs her around the hall before the play while criticizing her reactions to the art on the walls. Despite his repressive responses, Hermione feels that something is taking shape within her, that the scene before her is "'of *supreme* importance' … something greater that went with planets swirling" (138). As when George's oppressive kisses left her "smudged out" in the woods, Hermione reaches a realization about her mental structure in a moment when she resists and dismisses George, both as an authority on art and as a compelling art object (73). Whereas Hermione previously located the convex mirror at the back of her head and found she could look into it, now she sees that "her head—the bit here, the bit there, the way it fitted bit to bit—was two convex mirrors placed back to back" (138). The image of Hermione's head as composed of outwardly facing mirrors might appear to negate perception by making her sensory faculties reflective rather than receptive. However, this transformation in fact acknowledges the mutual implication of perceiver and world by imagining the mirror not merely as an introspective device through which Hermione can

reflect on her experiences, but as a distorted surface that incorporates the perceptual mechanisms of the head and both receives and projects impressions. The mirror is thus superimposed upon Hermione's perceiving faculties, literalizing Koffka's claim that perceived material objects not only make sensory impressions, but calibrate their reception.

While the mirror's new role as the outward-facing front of Hermione's head emphasizes that her distorted, embodied perceptions are themselves embedded in her environment, as I suggested above, the two mirrors' back-to-back arrangement also gestures toward a disconnection between the images they reflect. There is no sense of communication between the two mirrors; instead, the two opposing surfaces suggest that it would be impossible to access both simultaneously, offering a fragmented perception with no potential for reconciliation. This is immediately rectified with Fayne's appearance: "The two convex mirrors back to back became one mirror . . . as Fayne Rabb entered" (138). I suggest that the two mirrors in this image should be understood as one unified, spherical reflective surface, rather than as a double-sided mirror. The spherical arrangement allows communication between the images perceived by all parts of the mirrored surface, while still maintaining the octopus-like capacity to grasp a multitude of images and perspectives (indeed, to access every possible angle of perception). Hermione's chaos of impressions is brought into focus with this unification, as though two lenses are working in concert to form one picture from their separate visions.[44] Fayne's presence allows Hermione to see clearly, augmenting her perception. Following

[44] Similar images of both two lenses that "perceive separately, yet make one picture" and a sphere centered in the head that takes in and projects energy can be found in H.D.'s *Notes on Thoughts and Vision* (23). In her analysis of the connection between projection and visionary potential in H.D., Adalaide Morris calls this spherical manifestation of energy a "receptive/transmissive eye" (*How to Live / What to Do* 102).

her appearance, Hermione's improved perceptions are distinguished by a mechanical "click" indicating the adjustment of a visual apparatus:

> Affection brought things with a click right, brought odd distorted images, Perseus with great halcyon wings (great white turkey wings, goose wings) on his wide sandals, sandals on his plump heel into perspective. Click . . . George couldn't play this game, not really play this game, for art was what science wasn't. Art was the discriminating and selecting and bringing odd distorted images into right perspective. (139)

Fayne, on display as the muse object Pygmalion, is there both to be seen by Hermione and also to make Hermione see, an echo and inversion of their first meeting, when Nellie described Fayne as "a girl I want to see you." Part One of the text culminates with Hermione gazing at the stage, newly freed from George's restrictive theory of art and ready to receive Fayne's performance as Pygmalion, art object come to life as love object.

Eventually, the relationship between the two women falls short of Hermione's idealized view of it, devolving into competition and betrayal. The name H.D. chooses to represent Gregg perhaps hints at this reversal through wordplay; "Fayne" recalls the word "feign," echoing Fayne's portrayal of Pygmalion as well as suggesting pretense compromises the potential she initially offers Hermione. Even at this optimistic moment when Hermione imagines Fayne remedying her fragmented, incoherent perceptions and the paralysis they cause, Hermione's idea of Fayne is riddled with contradictions. Hermione convinces herself that her relationship with Fayne is a foil for the repressive relationship with George, and that Fayne offers a way of seeing that entirely contradicts

the rigid structures of patriarchal forces, including George's criticism and traditional view of art and the scientific systems that dissect and classify, leaving little room for ambiguity and transformation. Yet the definition of art that Hermione associates with Fayne and contrasts with George and science, as "the discriminating and selecting and bringing odd distorted images into right perspective," represents a false distinction. The definition Hermione gives here could just as easily be used to describe the scientific production and analysis of data, including the operation of visual implements like the telescope and the microscope as described in *The Gift,* and the articulation of conic sections that proved impossible for her at Bryn Mawr. Indeed, "the discriminating and selecting and bringing odd distorted images into right perspective" essentially describes the function of the "epistemologies of the eye" that Daston and Galison argue determined the contents of scientific atlases in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (17-19). While Hermione is unaware of how her definition blurs art and science in this moment, H.D. seems to be anticipating Hermione's later confusion about whether she does, after all, want to be rescued from science, or associates herself with it. This moment of contradiction in the opposition Hermione attempts to create between Fayne and George foreshadows the later dissolution of the notion that Fayne and lesbian connection is a radical and curative alternative to George and heterosexual marriage.

Another of the relationship's pitfalls lies in Hermione's elation that her connection with Fayne allows her to exit the role of noncreative muse object that George places her in. Hermione feels fulfilled in the role of audience for Fayne's performance, and excited by the androgyny and ambivalence of the role Fayne portrays as Pygmalion. In this character, a multitude of dualistic pairs are united. Fayne as Pygmalion is female

and male, statue and living, artist performing and object being consumed. But in their later conversations, Fayne asserts dominance far more often than Hermione, and styles herself as a visionary expert guiding Hermione. When Hermione tries to recapture the aesthetic experience of admiring Fayne as an art object just before the two share a kiss, disagreement arises about which woman is in the position of statue to be animated by the other's artistic agency:

> "I mean you were so exactly right as that Pygmalion." Her bent forward, face bent toward Her. A face bends towards me and a curtain opens. There is swish and swirl as of heavy parting curtains … Curtains part as I look into the eyes of Fayne Rabb. "And I—I'll make you breathe, my breathless statue." "Statue? You-*you* are the statue." (163)

While Hermione clearly speaks the first line to Fayne, recalling her performance, the two women are indistinguishable in much of this passage. The second sentence, "Her bent forward, face bent toward Her," is almost palindromic, emphasizing the equation of the two women, both referred to as "Her." It is not entirely clear whether Fayne or Hermione calls the other "my breathless statue," though since Hermione narrates "a face bends toward me," it seems that Fayne is the one advancing, and perhaps the one who describes the action of bending to kiss Hermione as breathing life into her. Regardless of which woman first asserts that the other is the statue, the other woman contradicts this statement, indicating tension in the relationship about who exerts agency and relegates the other to the role of muse object. Immediately after the kiss, Fayne reveals that George visited her recently, an admission that foreshadows betrayal, as George and Fayne

ultimately develop a romantic connection and Fayne threatens to supplant Hermione as the enigmatic muse elevated by George’s male artistic attention.

While the gaze within which agency fluctuates between seer and seen ultimately proves unsustainable between Hermione and Fayne, the optimism Hermione feels during the Pygmalion performance persists until Fayne’s betrayal is revealed. The second part of the text begins with a series of spiritual-artistic sessions between Fayne and Hermione, in which they speak visions to one another and establish a physical as well as psychical connection. Fayne is both mirror and lens for Hermione, fulfilling Hermione’s desire to see herself as other and calibrating her manifold perceptual structures so that the wholes that crumble and recombine under Hermione’s gaze take on symbolic and even prophetic purpose. Their relationship operates through the visual effects they make possible for each other, suggesting that their mode of perception, unhinged from fixed forms and figure-ground distributions, is what enables them to destabilize the self/other binary. Directed by Fayne, the chain of associations that Hermione traces through shifting figure-ground relations functions as a path leading to spiritual and ecstatic meaning. Fayne “draw[s] things out of” Hermione, and makes her “see the transience in everything,” while Hermione gratifies Fayne by receiving descriptions of Fayne’s visions, following her “into the space beyond space” even as she affirms her own exclusion, agreeing that she “can’t *see* what [Fayne] see[s]” (143, 161). The two convene in Hermione’s sitting room, where “prophetess faced prophetess” in shared Delphic rapture (146). This mirror-like arrangement evokes the tension between sameness and difference that marks their relationship. H.D. uses several Swinburne poems alluding to sisterhood to frame Hermione and Fayne’s connection, one of which explicitly links sisterhood to the visual

twinning of a mirror. "Before the Mirror" reflects on the scene of a Whistler painting of a young girl looking at her reflection.[45] In the novel, Hermione focuses on lines from the poem that emphasize the ambiguity that inheres in the self/other relation of object and reflection: "*art thou a ghost my sister, white sister there? … am I a ghost who knows?"* (126).

In contrast to several other poems that Hermione quotes from memory throughout the text, "Before the Mirror" first appears in the text only after Hermione searches it out in a book at the breakfast table, perhaps looking for an adequate expression of the complex feelings she has experienced since meeting Fayne. Though Hermione reads from the poem aloud rather than quoting it, Swinburne's lines are slightly misrendered in the text. The original lines, "Art thou the ghost, my sister, / White sister there, / Am I the ghost, who knows?" suggest that, of the girl and her image, one is surely mere "ghost," a facsimile of the authentic one (lines 31-33). By asking which of the two images is "the ghost," Swinburne's poem questions the certainty of which image of the girl is the primary one, troubling the line between self and other, subject and object (an apt question given that the girl in Whistler's painting and her reflection are both painted representations). In contrast, by discarding the definite article and replacing "the" with "a," Hermione implies that both of the girls in the image may be ghostly, rather than one or the other. So, too, does her alteration of the lines' punctuation inflect new potential meaning. Hermione drops two commas from the original in her quotation: one that precedes "my sister" and marks it off as a form of address for the image, and one between

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[45] The text of the poem is preceded by the parenthetical note "Verses written under a Picture" and "Inscribed to J. A. Whistler." Laity further discusses the Whistler painting in question, "The Little White Girl" (36).

"am I a ghost" and "who knows?" that indicates "who knows?" is a statement of uncertainty, not a description of knowledge possessed by "a ghost." These changes add further uncertainty and make it possible to read each question in more than one way, casting doubt on the image's status as both sister and ghost in the first question, and linking ghostliness and otherworldly knowledge by asking if the speaker is "a ghost who knows" in the second question.

Hermione's version, whether the product of misreading, misremembering, or deliberate transformation on the part of H.D. or Hermione, discards the presupposition of a stable referent, and with it the notion that one of the two images is real and the other ghostly. In the lines Hermione reads aloud, the questions "art thou a ghost?" and "am I a ghost who knows?" do not posit the either/or relation that Swinburne does. Girl and image, self and other, may both be ghosts, equally present, equally spectral. In this image for Hermione and Fayne's relationship, the directional flow of agency from subject to object is not merely challenged or inverted, but made porous such that the capacity to contain is evacuated from the boundary that links rather than divides them. In this formulation, prophetess faces prophetess across the very boundary line made vortex that Mitchell uses to describe the multistable images that resist any one, final form by calling the viewer's attention to a fluctuating figure-ground relation. When the figure-ground boundary is understood as a vortex continually undermining division, presence itself manifests as a kind of ghostliness marked by a transience and mutability that makes any form a merely temporal phase. Like the T's that are alternately visible and "cease to exist" in Koffka's example (see fig. 2.1), Hermione's perceptual structures are unfixed, always multiple, and contested. Just as perceptible fictions allowed scientists to model

but not capture difficult-to-represent concepts such as the ether, the continually re-viewed and revised images of Hermione's perception serve as molds that sensory impressions morph to fit, but do not maintain. Like the drop of water viewed through a microscope that H.D. describes in *The Gift*, all impressions are multistable images for Hermione, and thus exceed fixed form, shifting figure-ground distribution to present an alternative image as soon as one becomes distinct.[46] By using perception to destabilize the self/other binary in Hermione and Fayne's relationship, H.D. applies figure-ground instability to subjectivity, disrupting binaries that separate subjective content from material context and calling the notion of enclosed identity into question along with that of self-contained or continuous perceptual structures.

Thus, from Hermione's perspective, the conflation of her and Fayne's identities exceeds a mirror relation in which the same object is merely seen again in reflection. As echoes of each other that are equally ghostly, neither is the primary referent with the other as its mere shadow or trace. Their bond as ghostly sisters does not make one of them less than a phenomenological object, but rather reveals both of them as more than self-contained bodies or identities. While Hermione initially believes her relationship with Fayne allows her to access an ideal state of instability and equality that engenders limitless possibility, the creative exchange between the two ultimately degrades into a closed circuit in which the two compete for identity positions. This is because the shared ghostly status that Hermione embraced, a kind of radical equality in which every facet of the two women's identities is shared, is not compatible with Fayne's perception of their

[46] Indeed, the form of *HERmione* itself is kaleidoscopic. H.D.'s syntax, the ambiguity of the nickname "Her," and a tendency to move from descriptions of one subject or event to another without signaling the change result in sentences whose meaning shifts as they are read, and may appear entirely different upon rereading.

relationship. For Fayne, the two have always been separate entities alternating between the positions of object and reflection, not through an unregulated commingling, but in an uneasy supplanting in which one is always subjugated by the other. When Fayne calls Hermione a projection of herself during one of their visionary sessions, her description of their relationship reveals an essential tension between them that is missing in Hermione's image of twin ghosts:

> You aren't firm enough. You are transient like water seen through birch trees. You are like the sparkle of water over white stones. Something in you makes me hate you. Drawn to you I am repulsed, drawn away from you, I am negated. You are not myself but you are some projection of myself. Myself, *myself* projected you like water . . . you are the sort of fountain (to become graphic, biblical) that gushed out of the dead desert rock. I am not Moses. I never could have struck you. I did not strike you. You are yet repressed, unseeing, unseen . . . (145-146)

As a projection, Hermione is neither purely a repetition of Fayne nor wholly distinct from her. She "draw[s]" and "repulse[s]" her as a discrete body, and resists fixed form and even stable perception, as a "transient" and obscured phenomenon that remains "unseeing, unseen." Fayne resents her reliance on their connection, drawn to Hermione against her volition and "negated" without that proximity, but also "repulsed" when they are too close. The polarity that marks Fayne's definition of their relationship reinscribes the dynamics of difference and competition that Hermione sought to leave behind by turning away from her heteronormative relationship with George.

In the biblical image of the rock gushing water after the prophet Moses struck the rock with his staff, the roles Fayne ascribes to herself and Hermione shift throughout the

description, as though Fayne and Hermione's identities cannot be contained in separate positions of agency and passivity even within the space of a single metaphor. Fayne first describes Hermione as the water projected from Fayne, taking on the position of the "dead desert rock," but immediately shifts to saying she "never could have struck" Hermione, moving Hermione to the position of the rock that was struck, or perhaps has not yet been struck, as Fayne then insists, "I did not strike you. You are yet repressed, unseeing, unseen . . ." This last assertion simultaneously plays on the idea of Hermione as the water, unseen because it has yet to emerge from the rock, and as the rock, unseeing and uninitiated by the strike of the staff. Vision is understood as a function of projection in various moments in H.D.'s work, suggesting that the rock's projection of the water might be understood as a visual projection that metaphorically represents the act of seeing. The roles of Hermione and Fayne, water and rock, striker and stricken, are thus hopelessly confused in this image. While Fayne compares herself and Hermione only to the rock and the water, rejecting the patriarchal identity of Moses, she also identifies herself as being in a position to strike Hermione, even as she denies that she has done so. This is in keeping with a pattern in which Fayne is associated with hostility and violence, and her desire for Hermione is linked to a need to dominate or destroy her.[47] The vortex that undermines division allows selfhood and otherness to flow through the two women without fixed origin. For Hermione, this is a liberating experience of more-than-self, an

[47] For example, one of the poems that circulates in conversation between Hermione and Fayne is Swinburne's "Faustine," which describes the dangerous beauty of the eponymous Faustine. Fayne is linked with the figure of Faustine, an association that Laity argues signifies the shift from innocence to destruction in Fayne and Hermione's relationship, as Fayne "transform[s] … from white boy child to lesbian vampire Faustine" (40). At another moment, Fayne tells Hermione, "Your eyes are the eyes that made Poppea furious. If I were a Roman empress, I would put out your eyes," linking desire with the possibility of violence in their relationship (154).

extension of perceptual figure-ground instability that challenges the notion of enclosed subjectivity. Fayne's resentment and her attempts to reassert her own agency disrupt this channel, truncating the possibility Hermione ascribes to it.

Projecting the Multistable Self and World

While the instability of Hermione and Fayne's relationship ultimately proves unsustainable rather than transformative, the ghostly projection they engage in together models the perceptual potential that Hermione seeks throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, after breaking from both Fayne and George following the revelation of a romantic connection between the two of them, Hermione accesses the beginnings of a perceptual entanglement with her environment that offers the changeability and multidirectional agency that foundered in her relationship with Fayne. After confronting George about his betrayal, Hermione falls into an undefined, prolonged illness that results in a period of sensory withdrawal. During this illness, Hermione reflects on her relationships with George and Fayne, articulating their inadequacies and resolving to forge her own path toward perceptual and creative realization. While the novel does not follow Hermione through to the full realization of her potential as a perceiver or a writer, it does close with a presentation of Hermione on the cusp of harnessing the ghostly instability she immersed herself in with Fayne to project her own fictions of perception.

The novel's last pages chronicle a walk that Hermione takes through the Gart property and surrounding area after emerging from her mysterious illness. The walk pairs with one Hermione takes in the first pages of the text to bookend the story and emphasize the difference between the Hermione of the novel's opening and the one that emerges at

its close. In contrast to that first walk, when Hermione cannot "see the way out of marsh and bog," feels "drowned," and is "going round and round in circles" with no notion of how to break out of the place and patterns she feels trapped in, on the walk that concludes the text, Hermione experiences optimism, peace, and direction (3, 4). She walks around the snowy Gart property, through the woods, and to the home of her neighbors, the Farrands, where she speaks with Jimmy Farrand and his college schoolmate before returning home alone. As she leaves the Farrand home, the two men offer to escort her home, and when she declines, Jimmy tells his friend, "Her knows her own way" (233). Hermione's sense of direction, both in terms of physical orientation and personal purpose, has been restored, and is no longer reliant on another person leading her toward a particular end.

Whereas she previously felt that everything around her withdrew from her gaze, shifting so rapidly that she could not fix an image in her mind, by the end of the text Hermione feels "at one with herself, with the world, with all outer circumstance" (234). Rather than trying to access and interpret an "inchoate" vision that is continually changing, Hermione now imagines herself making meaning within her environment by writing her own message as an exertion of her presence (5). The malleability of the perceptual world, which initially dismayed and paralyzed Hermione, is recognized as an opportunity to intervene in that world and shape her perceptual environment. Thus she not only "knows her own way" without being guided by any external source, but *makes* that way: "Her feet … mak[e] the path. Her feet [are] pencils tracing a path through a forest" that mark the space, "leaving her wavering hieroglyph as upon white parchment" (223, 224). At the end of the novel, Hermione exerts herself on the environment rather

than allowing shifting, competing perceptions of that environment to overwhelm and disorient her. She not only projects her own path through the snowy forest, but also projects her own future, imagining self-directed possibilities and resolving to make things happen in her life without sacrificing her agency to the guidance or desires of someone else.

The culmination of Hermione's development as a perceiver is encapsulated in the empowered, generative stance toward the material world that she accesses at the end of the text. Earlier in the novel, H.D. writes that Hermione's "precinematographic conscience" hinders her from extrapolating a coherent scheme from her many fragmented perceptions. Cinema in the novel represents "form superimposed on thought and thought making its spirals in a manner not wholly related to matter but pertaining to it," suggesting that cinematic forms are temporary guises that make thought visible and communicable, and that the logic of cinema is what the disoriented and directionless Hermione is missing (60). It thus follows that the empowered Hermione at the novel's end is moving toward the yet-undiscovered cinematographic conscience that has the potential to make her perceptions expressible and comprehensible. While the novel does not show Hermione reaching the full potential as a perceiver and a writer that H.D. would later demonstrate, its ending links the text to a narrative of progress toward a cinematographic mode of perception as projection that H.D. encodes in much of her work. To understand how Hermione's ability to take command of her perceptual experience relates to an emerging cinematographic consciousness, it is necessary to examine some of these other works, which together offer a portrait of the perspective H.D. envisions as ideally positioned to recognize the constructed and changeable nature

of perceptual reality and conduct that flexibility to achieve creative and spiritual realization.

In the metaphor of cinematographic projection, several threads of H.D.'s philosophy of perception coalesce. Indeed, as early as 1984, poetics scholar Adalaide Morris described projection as "the master metaphor of H.D.'s technique. Its operations connect the material, mental, and mystical realms and enact her belief that there is no physical reality that is not also psychic and spiritual" ("The Concept of Projection" 413). In various texts, H.D. figures perception as a matter of projecting the visible world, a formulation that Walter argues implicates the perceiver in the material environment.[48] The shift from a perceiver taking in preexisting sensory stimuli to shaping perceptual content as it is accessed engages the same foundational questions about perceptual formation that drive Gestalt theory. Further, the transience of projected images that resist any one form as primary, permanent, or objectively correct matches the malleability of perception in *HERmione* and the flowers that are "pictures with an added dimension" that H.D. describes in her *Hirslanden Notebooks*. By the time H.D. was writing *HERmione* in the late 1920s, projection had also become important to her in a technological sense; H.D., her long-term romantic partner Bryher, and Bryher's nominal husband Kenneth Macpherson together launched the film production company POOL, along with the first English-language film magazine, *Close Up*.

H.D. best articulates the significance of cinematographic projection to her mode of perceiving in two poems published in 1927 in *Close Up*, "Projector" and "Projector

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[48] Discussing H.D.'s novella *The Usual Star,* in which H.D. describes characters looking at London as having projected the city, Walter argues that H.D. represents a material body that "is simultaneously her own and the external world of London, a multiplicity that stages how this optics collapses the classical division of interior from exterior" (80).

II." In these two poems, H.D. praises light, both personified as the god Apollo and mechanized in the cinema projector. Particularly in "Projector II," which includes the subtitle "(*Chang*)" in reference to the 1927 film of the same name, H.D. articulates how the projection of light offers a medium that embraces the multistable nature of perception, making meaning out of the superimposition, transformation, and coalescence of images. Cinema projections are ghostly to the viewer in precisely the way Hermione and Fayne are to one another in the image of twinned reflections; they are present in the context in which the viewer accesses them, and yet also draw the viewer into an alternative context of their own. In the poem, H.D. seems to reflect on the experience of watching the projected images of *Chang*, writing that

> our souls are merged with quietness
> or stirred
> by tidal-wave
> or earth quake;
>
> we sleep and are awake,
> we dream and are not here;
> our spirits walk elsewhere
> with shadow-folk
> and ghost-beast,
> we speak a shadow-speech,
> we tread a shadow-rock,
> we lie along ghost-grass

in ghost shade

of the hillock; (section 1, lines 22-35)

As the viewers' "souls are merged" with what appears on the screen, the projected images transfer their instability to the viewers, whose presence also becomes ghostly and uncertain as they access a dimension in which they and the "shadow" objects are equally present. This integration with cinematic forms disrupts individual identity; as the viewer merges with the figures on the screen, "being one with snake and bear, / with leopard / and with panther," the voice of Apollo asserts "you are not any more / … / you have no life who taste / all-life" (3.27-32). The fluid transformations of figures made of light into other objects and scenes pull the viewer into a vortex of changeability, undermining the boundaries that constitute any particular subjective identity and negating the personal "you."

For H.D., the revelation of a materially present, communally accessible vision that is not subject to fixed form constitutes the ecstatic possibility of cinema, the magic offered by the god of light:

this is his gift,

light,

bearing us aloft,

enthusiastic,

into realms of magic;

old forms dispersed

take fresh

shapes

out of nothingness;

light

renders us spell-bound,

enchants us

and astounds;

delight

strikes at dark portals (2.10-24)

Unlike the prophetic visions shared by Hermione and Fayne in secretive sessions that draw their families' disapproval, the projections of cinema are available to a collective "us" that can participate in the "magic" transcendence of fixed form. It is significant, however, that this "us" seems to exclude the people of color who are the focus of *Chang*. The film tells a story about a Thai family living in the jungle, including their interactions with the animals that H.D. does reference in "Projector II." Despite the prominence of these people in the film, H.D. chooses to focus on the animals and natural settings that appear onscreen, with which she seemingly more readily identifies than the human bodies of color. The failure to address racial difference in this poem is felt in *HERmione* as well. In the novel, the Gart family employs two black servants, Mandy and Tim, who remain on the margins of Hermione's thoughts and the text. Hermione sometimes uneasily considers the question of difference, but by and large insists that Mandy and Tim are no different than the white members of the Gart family, choosing to look away from race rather than acknowledge its impact on social identity. In other works, H.D. addresses race

more directly, recognizing it as one of the categories of identity that she can challenge by moving beyond enclosed subjectivity.[49]

The “enchant[ment]” and “delight” that “Projector II” describes echoes not only H.D.’s “inexpressible happiness” as she turns the pages of her dream book in *Hirslanden Notebooks*, fascinated by pictures that move, grow, and change, but also her description of operating a projector herself. In response to a questionnaire she completed for the final issue of the *Little Review* in 1929, H.D. describes her current involvement in cinema:

> The work has been enchanting, never anything such fun and I myself have learned to use the small projector and spend literally hours alone here in my apartment, making the mountains and village streets and my own acquaintances reel past me in light and light and light. … All the light within light fascinates me, “satisfies” me, I feel like a cat playing with webs and webs of silver. (*The Little Review Anthology* 364)

The language of H.D.’s response is consonant with “Projector II,” which she published two years earlier. There, too, the layering of light forms a “net / of light on over-light” formed by Apollo, who “knots the light to light” (section 3, lines 52-26, 7). Her depiction of overlapping layers of light emphasizes the fluidity of images created by layers that are not wholly distinct from each other and are thus less easily grouped into the firm figure-ground distributions of static forms.

In *HERmione*, the “cinematographic conscience” that Hermione lacks is presented as the missing perspective that would allow her to fully realize and communicate the

[49] The most significant and explicit example is H.D.’s work on the film *Borderline* and the pamphlet she wrote to accompany the film. See Walter’s analysis of how the film and pamphlet use collage, fragmentation, and embodied vision to disrupt categories of racial division (114-126).

potential of her transient, transformative perception. Despite the fact that Hermione has yet to experience cinema in the novel, she is frequently drawn to imagery that is linked with cinema in H.D.'s later works. Her associative chains of words, images, and symbols evoke the visual transformations of film, in which one image melts into another, and Hermione's identification with material objects in her environment, like the mirror that is incorporated into her head and cognition, recall the experience of becoming one with the fluid images of cinema in "Projector II." While the text does not follow Hermione up to an encounter with cinema, it does anticipate and gesture toward an experience of H.D.'s that occurred on the island of Corfu between the events of *HERmione* and her writing of the novel. This later experience is the culmination of the visionary projection that Hermione begins to wield at the end of the novel, and the fullest demonstration of the potential of the cinematographic conscience that H.D. describes in *HERmione*.[50]

In *Tribute to Freud* (1956), a memoir in which H.D. reflects on her time as an analysand of Freud's, she writes of an experience she had with Bryher while on the Greek island of Corfu in 1920, and that she later discussed with Freud while undergoing analysis in the 1930s. While ensconced in a hotel room with Bryher, H.D. began to see what she calls "picture writing on the wall" (44). The images she describes are as present to her as the material components of the room, and even seem to reference objects in the room, yet she insists that they are not material productions of natural light and shadow. Though no sunlight is shining into their room, she writes that the writing is "dim light on shadow, not shadow on light. … a silhouette cut of light" (45). Just as light is projected

[50] Foreshadowing this revelatory experience, George promises to take Hermione to Corfu just before she falls into her illness (189).

onto a screen in cinema, H.D. wonders "if these objects are projected outward from [her] own brain … or whether they are projected from outside" (45, 46). After seeing a set of three symbols, the last of which recalls the shape of an object present in the room, H.D. tells Bryher about the pictures. Though Bryher has not seen the images, she encourages H.D. to continue observing them, and in fact participates in H.D.'s perception of them, though unseeing, as H.D. admits that she "could not have gone on" without her. This experience seems to recall Hermione and Fayne's sessions, in which Hermione concentrates, trying to "follow Fayne into the space beyond space" but cannot actually see the visions Fayne describes (161). But after seeing a further set of figures in Corfu, H.D. is unable to maintain her focus, and "shut[s] off" before the final picture in the series appears, without which she believes she will "miss the meaning of the whole" (53). It is here that Bryher "carries on the 'reading' where [H.D.] left off," like one eye opening when the other closes.

H.D. and Bryher's perception of the writing on the wall is collaborative to an extent that the individual visionary experiences Hermione and Fayne enabled one another to have never were. Instead of projecting each other, H.D. and Bryher unite in accessing, and perhaps creating, the same projected figures. Like cinematic projections, the images are traced in light, manifest on the walls and objects of the room, and overlap with each other to create new formations and symbols. In her own reflection on the experience, H.D. interprets the vision as foretelling the second world war, and the victory it would conclude with. While H.D. primarily engages with the prophetic possibility of the vision, I am more interested in the manner in which the figures coincide with and orient the material environment. Like the cinematic spirals of thought "not wholly related to matter

but pertaining to it" described in *HERmione*, the images paradoxically engage with the material phenomena around them despite contradicting the physical conditions of the room. Though H.D. insists that the figures could not have been produced by the light and shadow in the room, instead believing them to be projected from another source, they nonetheless have a material basis in the objects of the room that they recall. The vision follows a circuit of referents that is undeniably grounded in the components of H.D.'s immediate material context, but that makes meaning through their simulation. The object that H.D. first connects to the images she sees is a small tripod that functions as a lamp stand. While thinking of how like and unlike a shadow the image that resembles the tripod is, H.D. reiterates that the figure is drawn in light, yet turns back again to its shadow-like quality as an echo of an object in the room: "the exact replica of this pattern was set on the upper shelf of the old-fashioned wash-stand … It was exactly the small spirit-lamp we had with us" (45). H.D. claims the tripod is linked to Delphi, and symbolizes the confluence of "religion, art, and medicine … These three working together, to form a new vehicle of expression or a new form of thinking or of living, might be symbolized by the tripod, the third of the images on the wall before me" (50). Thus the image on the wall repeats the form of the object to extend its meaning, acting as a symbol for the material object itself as well as invoking the greater symbolism of the form shared by the tripod on the shelf and the figure traced in light on the wall.

The description of the tripod as the base of a "spirit-lamp" also recalls the "magic-lantern" of the projector (H.D. also uses the term "magic-lantern slides" to describe the glass slides her grandfather places beneath the microscope in *The Gift*). The tripod thus suggests the moveable base of a camera or a projector, associations that are particularly

significant given that H.D. imagines the phenomena of the images to be one of projection. Finally, the shape of the lamp base, which H.D. describes as "a circle or two circles, the base the larger of the two … joined by three lines, not flat as I say but in perspective," evokes the same shape that is contained within any tripod: that of a cone (45). There are multiple reasons to link the images H.D. sees in Corfu to the conic sections of *HERmione*, as well as to the statue of the praying boy and the mirror that reorient Hermione within her material environment in that text. One is the link between the open, inverted conic shape the praying boy's arms form and the cone of the camera tripod, which in turn supports a projector that casts a cone of light in order to make content visible. At the filmic cone's base, or the largest of the circular shapes within that cone, is the open boundary at which projected content and material surface meet and intermingle, just as in the case of the third side of the conic shape formed by the praying boy's arms, which opens onto an undefined "heaven that had no top nor side nor length nor edge nor any end whatever" (112). H.D.'s vision itself a product of the function of rods and cones within the eye, and the mingling of dimensions reoccurs as the images she hypothesizes that she herself may be projecting onto the wall inhabit the same immediate space as fixtures and objects in the hotel room.

The succeeding images that H.D. sees repeat the process of echoing a material detail of the room, such that the symbolic content of the material is revealed only when it is projected in a manner incompatible with a physical effect produced by the conditions of the room. The next group of figures includes a ladder, an angel-like figure that H.D. refers to as Niké, and "between the ladder and the mirror-frame above the washstand … a series of broken curves." H.D. again acknowledges how very like a shadow thrown by an

object the image seems, writing that the “decorative detail” of the broken curves “is in a sense suggested by the scrollwork of the mirror-frame,” but cannot be a shadow or “replica” of the material pattern, both because it is of light rather than shadow and because it is positioned incorrectly to have been cast by the mirror frame. In these projected curves, H.D. sees an “inverted S-pattern” that she believes “may have represented a series of question marks, the questions that have been asked through the ages, that the ages will go on asking” (54). In the final portion of the vision that H.D. is able to access, the Niké figure ascends the ladder:

> Her back is toward me, she is simply outlined like the first three symbols or “cards.” But unlike them, she is not flat or static, she is in space, in unwalled space, not flat against the wall, though she moves upward as against its surface. She is a moving-picture and fortunately she moves swiftly. Not swiftly exactly but with a sure floating that at least gives my mind some rest, as if my mind had now escaped the bars of that ladder, no longer climbing or caged but free and with wings. On she goes. Above her head, to her left in the space left vacant on this black-board (or light-board) or screen, a series of tent-like triangles forms. (55)

With the film-like “moving-picture” of Niké, the vision culminates with a cinematic manipulation of frames; H.D. writes that the Niké figure moves relative to material surfaces, but exists independently from them, and even reorients the space around it. Though seemingly projected onto the wall, the image of Niké is “not flat against the wall,” but moves in “unwalled space” and redefines H.D.’s relation to the patterns she sees, allowing her to experience a vicarious freedom from the ladder’s restrictive bars,

and perhaps from the physical confines of the room itself, as she follows Niké into an unwalled dimension.

Like the flowers in the dream picture book, Niké appears to be a picture "with an added dimension," one that contradicts the very terms of its representation. Further, the figure's reorientation of the space around it and the viewer's perspective recalls Hermione's encounter with the statue of the praying boy. Like the statue with upraised hands that Hermione sees at the Lowndes home, the Niké figure unites scales both mythical and personal, challenges divisions between planes of existence, and demands physical engagement from its viewer. After seeing the statue of the praying boy, Hermione is left in a partial imitation of its stance, reorienting her body as well as her perspective through the encounter. After Niké ascends the ladder to move among triangles that H.D. interprets as the tents of a future battle, H.D. drops her head, "aching with this effort of concentration," leaving Bryher to take up her surrendered sight and receive the last picture of the series. The final image circles back to the chain of associations linking the conic shape, projection, and the statue of the praying boy in *HERmione*. As reported by Bryher, the last picture is "a circle like the sun-disk and a figure within the disk; a man, she thought, was reaching out to draw the image of a woman ([H.D.'s] Niké) into the sun beside him" (56). The god of light that H.D. addresses in "Projector II" and describes as crowning the upraised hands of the praying boy in *HERmione* emerges as "the picture that contains the whole series of pictures in itself or helps clarify or explain them" in her vision in Corfu (56). H.D.'s interests in mysticism, aesthetics, and technology coalesce in the trinity represented by the Delphic tripod of "religion, art, and medicine" and her sun god figure's unification of art,

prophecy, and light. Here, the metaphor of projection takes on its full significance as the "mythopoeic" alternative described in *HERmione,* countering the limited pathways represented by science, art, and mysticism in isolation from one another that Hermione's father, George, and Fayne respectively offer. In the tripartite metaphor of projection, H.D. develops a means of receiving and shaping one's sensory environment with roots in visionary, creative, and mechanical forms of sight and representation.

H.D.'s memoir foregrounds the writing on the wall, which she writes Freud viewed as "the most dangerous or the only actually dangerous 'symptom'" she exhibited (41). The text of *Tribute to Freud* is composed of two separate parts; H.D.'s note preceding the text indicates that the first, which she titled "Writing on the Wall," was written in 1944 and subsequently published, and that the second, "Advent," was compiled in 1948, drawn directly from the Vienna notebooks she kept while seeing Freud in 1933. Though "Advent" describes Freud expressing both skepticism and concern in response to her vision of the writing, H.D. lingers on the significance of this episode, reflecting on it in 1944 with curiosity rather than concern.[51] According to H.D., Freud "translated" the vision in Corfu as a symbol of "desire for union with [her] mother," while H.D. thought it predicted the coming war (44). Beyond symbolic or prophetic meaning, the writing on the wall has significance as a perceptual phenomenon that is linked to H.D.'s representation of perception as a malleable fiction across many of her works. In H.D.'s vision of writing on the wall, projection is fully realized as a means of intervening in an environment of transient perceptual forms. While describing the triangular shapes that

[51] H.D. writes of Freud asking in detail about the lighting in the room at Corfu, probing for "possible reflections or shadows" that might have caused the images, as well as asking her if she was frightened by them (170).

appear in the moving tableau that Niké inhabits, H.D. refers to the surface the figures appear on as “this black-board (or light-board) or screen.” Whether understood to refer specifically to the wall or more largely to the collective physical space in which the projected images appear, this description suggestively codes the material world as the background against which representation occurs via H.D.’s perceptual projection.

Coming to understand the world as a symbolic surface that she can write on through her perceptual and material intervention is a significant realization within the mythos of H.D.’s development as a perceiver, traced in writings throughout her life. Representing the material environment as a blackboard implies that it awaits inscription, and that the transient message it bears can be wiped away or written over, as in the figure of the palimpsest that H.D. frequently returns to in her work.[52] Further, this formulation applies the implications of Gestalt theory not only to question how a perceiver receives and interprets sensory data, but also to introduce another layer of figure-ground contention. H.D.’s view of the world as a writable, symbolic surface directs attention away from material forms toward the meaning they absorb and reflect, much as the letters of a word appear as figure against the ground of a page, but the truly perceived figure is the idea the letters conjure for the reader.

By the time she was writing about the incident in Corfu, H.D. had encountered the ideas and technologies that she often references in *HERmione* as the missing elements that would allow Hermione to interpret the perceptual anomalies she experiences. In her

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[52] In many of her poems, H.D. drew on the Sapphic practice of writing over a surface that has already been written on, including in translations of Sappho’s fragments. Collecott charts this connection in *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism*. H.D.’s text *Palimpsest* (1926) enacts the concept, presenting three stories that function as layers. Much of her other work also shows a palimpsestic tendency to revisit and build on ancient models, particularly poetic works such as *Trilogy* (1946) and *Helen in Egypt* (c. early 1950s).

reflections on Corfu, H.D. is curious about, but not disturbed by, the phenomenon of the writing on the wall; she has a partner who supports her vision and even participates in it; and she feels a sense of control over what she sees, or perhaps writes, imagining that the projection might come from her own mind. This comports with the shift in agency that Hermione experiences on her walk at the end of the novel. Though Hermione has yet to experience the fascination of playing with "light within light" through the film projector that H.D. would later describe, by the end of the novel she has reframed her relationship to her sensory environment as one that operates according to the logic of projection. As she makes and marks a path, Hermione imagines herself inscribing meaning on a writeable world. Contrasting her current view of the Gart property to how it appeared in an earlier scene in the novel, Hermione reflects that before the "lawn had been black and heat lightning had scarred an irate heaven, but now earth lay flat and was spread with white on white. Everything had been erased, would be written on presently" (221-222). Hermione invokes the very same idea of the material world as a readable and writeable blackboard that characterizes H.D.'s account of her vision in Corfu. The earlier moment that she refers to is one that occurred months before, immediately after she returned from the excursion in the woods during which she began to contrast the perceptual possibilities George and Fayne each offered her. In that scene, Hermione looks out at the property at night and imagines the lawn and sky as blackboards that have been written on, with the house, toolshed, and other features of the property acting as "bits of jotted-down calculations that will be rubbed out presently." The mass of figures is disorienting and "suffocating" to Hermione because the written messages are so many and crowded so as to be incoherent; she compares the material environment to "a blackboard gone grey with

marks and marks," suggesting that the competing messages render one another illegible. She longs for the board to be wiped clean, ready to receive new messages, but does not yet think of herself as capable of inscribing meaning. Instead, she attributes the writing of messages to "some cruel and dynamic unseen hand," a hostile force outside of her own agency much like the generalized pressure that she feels bearing down upon her, pressing things into test tubes (83).[53]

Hermione's progress as a perceiver in the novel is encoded in the contrast between these two visions of the world around her as the surface of a blackboard. In the earlier moment, when the blackboard is full of shapes and figures, the incoherence of messages running into, around, and between one another such that they are unreadable evokes the chaotic mosaic Hermione makes of perceived content early in the novel. A profusion of figures competing for status create a cacophony of meaning as endless possible perceptual arrangements flicker in and out of view, with no way for Hermione to seize and follow any one particular message. In the winter scene at the end of the novel, this chaos gives way to the empty surface of snow, a visual clean slate of "white on white" that Hermione has referenced previously in the text as aesthetically desirable and personally meaningful. This desire for "white on white" suggestively presents an image in which figure and ground are indistinguishable; instead of one part of an image rising to the surface while another is relegated to the background, the homogeneity of "white on white" suggests an uncontested, unfixed commingling of elements in a visual field.[54]

[53] Her vision of a blackboard "smudged" and "gone grey with marks and marks" also recalls her frequent description of herself as "smudged out" by George, further linking the proliferation of writing she sees on the surface of the material world with patriarchal, oppressive forces.
[54] Another example of a composition in which distinct layers cannot be visually separated occurs when Hermione contemplates "the odd green on green that was the green on green daub of a picture by Eugenia," and thinks she would like to paint such a picture herself (147).

Here, Hermione accesses the nonhierarchical balance of subject and object, figure and ground that she attempted to create with Fayne. As she walks through the snow, the power to inscribe meaning is now her own, and the equilibrium between two ghost images that she tested out in her relationship with Fayne returns as she quotes Swinburne once more: "Now the creator was Her's feet, narrow black crayon against winter whiteness. *Art thou a ghost my sister white sister there, art thou a ghost who knows* . . . (223). The quoted lines reappear with another adjustment – instead of "art thou a ghost" followed by "am I a ghost," the question "art thou a ghost" is now asked twice. The collapse of the two pronouns "thou" and "I" into one "thou" suggests that the division between the two images described in the poem has dissolved, leaving an unfixed, multiple presence in its place. In the writeable material world made up of content that Hermione both receives and projects, she finds the fluid exchange of subject/object positions that she tried to capture in her relationship with Fayne by collapsing her own identity and Fayne's into the shared pronoun "Her."

Taking the preexisting perceptual messages of her environment as background or page for her own message, Hermione herself is finally the writer of meaning, rather than the victim of incoherence.[55] In contrast to the beginning of the novel, when Hermione's exclusion renders her both unseeing and unseen, her steps at the end of the text "leav[e] her wavering hieroglyph as upon white parchment," making her a proliferator of symbols. Hermione no longer falls beneath a rising tide of possible readings of her environment, but views the material phenomena around her as surfaces on which she can write,

[55] This is empowering not only in terms of how Hermione imagines agency to be distributed when she accesses and interprets sensory experience, but also in relation to the ongoing struggle in the novel for Hermione to assert herself as a writer against the domineering voices of Fayne and George, who dismiss her writing as "nothing really" and "rotten" (161, 167).

comparing a meadow to "a piece of outspread parchment" and an embankment to "the roll from which more parchment might be shaken," suggesting she now sees her perception of the material world as a resource she can control, marking, reviewing, and re-inscribing so that she might re-view it anew (224). The responsive dimension of "another forest" in which perception conjures reality is no longer merely a vision Hermione accesses through the channel of Fayne, but rather is manifest in the immediate material environment.

The novel's resolution is ultimately threatened by the return of Fayne, who is waiting in Hermione's workroom when she returns home, and the story of Gregg's influence on H.D. is continued in a subsequent novel, *Paint it Today* (1921). However, H.D. ends the novel before Hermione faces Fayne again, choosing instead to emphasize the way Hermione positions herself as a perceiver at the novel's close. While the fictionalized chronicle of *HERmione* ends before H.D.'s emergence as a celebrated poet or her engagement with filmic projection, it culminates with Hermione's epiphanic recognition of her fragmented and transient practice of re-vision as a mode of projecting her own perceptual reality. The shifting, fragmented perceptions that distance Hermione from immediate experience and hinder her early in the text are reframed, not as a defect of her sight, but as Hermione's powerful visual capacity to recognize the mutable perceptual structures that govern sensory experience. Treating perception as a malleable fiction allows Hermione to renegotiate the boundaries of personal identity that she finds oppressive, and to understand herself as implicated in and actively creating the material environment she perceives, thus dismantling the binary of unmovable subject and object positions.

For H.D., the logic of cinematic projection was essential to visualizing a reality premised on the unfixed relations of perception. The next chapter discusses Virginia Woolf's similar interest in capturing the multiplicity of experience. Like H.D., Woolf shifts emphasis away from fixed material structures and introduces an element of changeability that she views as essential to authentically representing perceptual experience. However, Woolf does this not by honing in on immediate material details and then recombining them in multiple possible perceptual arrangements as H.D. does, but by focusing on chains of relation among objects as an alternative to their immediate properties. Doing so affords Woolf the opportunity to recognize and critique the exploitative networks of patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism. However, she also compromises the effectiveness of that critique by framing her own intervention not as a subversive act of rewriting like that of H.D., but as an act of curation that actually reinscribes imperial authority by implying that the collection and consumption of cultural artifacts is an ethical and productive mode of relation.

Chapter 2:
"Some real thing behind appearances":
Virginia Woolf and the Relational Reality of Objects

Contemplating the residual power of memory in her 1939 memoir essay "A Sketch of the Past," Virginia Woolf proposes the idea "that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds." If this is the case, Woolf argues, it can only be a matter of time before "some device will be invented by which we can tap" the impressions of the past:

> I see it — the past — as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (67)

The language Woolf uses in this prediction casts the past as a physical phenomenon that exists within one's material experience, but can only be accessed if captured and translated by a properly calibrated apparatus. Like an electromagnetic wave, Woolf's idea of the past lurks outside the register of human sensory capacity, but can be "tap[ped]," tuned into and "turn[ed] up" like a radio signal. Rather than treating the past as mere absence that gives context to the present moment, Woolf destabilizes the primacy of the present by suggesting that what we think of as *here* and *now* are only the most readily perceptible components within a more comprehensive array of ongoing material experience. Though Woolf paints a seemingly linear image of the past "as an avenue" or

"ribbon" extending behind, she's actually suggesting her earliest memories are contemporaneous with the present even as they are of the past. When Woolf intentionally steps into her impressions of the past, they become more immediate to her than the present, an enveloping mixture of sights, sounds, and smells that she can reencounter.[56] She writes of "test[ing]" this facility by immersing herself in her earliest memory, of a visit to St. Ives, and then walking through her garden in the present, where a gardener and housekeeper are at work. Woolf observes their activities in the present, but writes, "I was seeing them through the sight I saw here — the nursery and the road to the beach." The past thus functions as an ever-present elsewhere that Woolf writes "can still be more real than the present moment" (67).

The multistable mingling of present and past in "A Sketch of the Past" typifies a persistent pattern of ambivalence in Woolf's work about the nature of reality and how to best represent it. Woolf's sense that the past attends the present in a tangible way rather than as mere echo in the mind engenders a corresponding doubt that the immediate present can be considered the direct equivalent of reality. This uncertainty frequently emerges in her fiction in the form of characters contemplating their own existence as well as narration that remarks on the difficulty of pinpointing the truth of experience, or the core of a person. But it's in two of Woolf's most renowned critical essays on fiction that she most explicitly addresses the gulf between how reality is experienced and how it is represented. In both "Modern Fiction" (1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Woolf attempts to articulate what she feels is lacking in the bulk of contemporary novels.

[56] For example, Woolf describes the experience at St. Ives of "smelling so many smells at once ; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop—as I stopped then going down to the beach," depicting a reaction in the present that suggests the sensory experience is not merely recalled, but reactivated and relived in a literal sense (66).

While she approaches the task differently in each of these essays, the shortcoming that drives her critique and the group of writers she takes as representatives of this unsatisfactory method of fiction remain the same. In both essays, Woolf's essential complaint is that the class of English novelists whom she labels as "Edwardians" practice a form of realism that fixates on the wrong details, resulting in novels that fail to render experience authentically on the page ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 4).

In "Modern Fiction," Woolf describes novelist Arnold Bennett and his fellow Edwardians as having failed to approximate life because they are "concerned not with the spirit but with the body" (158). Woolf argues that the Edwardian devotion to "the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story" results in depictions that don't resemble life at all. Though Woolf refers to the writers she critiques as "materialists," setting up a dichotomy that might seem to cast her as a writer only interested in a character's thoughts and feelings, she seems to understand the "spirit" of life as very much caught up in material phenomena:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old... (160)

Woolf represents the "impressions" of cognition as reactions to contact with a varied configuration of base material units, the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" that constitute visible objects and shape one's experience. Declining to either root experience in a solipsistic consciousness or reduce experience to particular material phenomena,

Woolf instead privileges relation as the best approximation of reality. Rather than laboring over the details of particular objects as the Edwardians do, Woolf insists that the novelist attempting to write life as it is must focus on this material but invisible interaction between consciousness and stimuli.

> Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (161)

Woolf's emphasis on a pattern of interaction, a record of "the order in which [atoms] fall" on and are received by consciousness, clarifies that the shift from "what is commonly thought big" to "what is commonly thought small" is not merely a matter of replacing a materialist fixation on objects with a humble, humanist care for personality and emotion. Indeed, by depicting impressions in terms of atoms that physically impress themselves on the mind, marking and changing consciousness in the encounter, Woolf renders experience as a product of material interactions. Further, while Woolf's fictional works express an undeniable interest in human self-conception, they also treat objects as far more foundational to that self than do the "materialist" works she critiques. In Woolf's view, the Edwardian deficiency is not so much that those novelists write about material objects, but "that they write of *unimportant* things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (159, emphasis added). As she emphasizes elsewhere, individual objects are fleeting and flighty; the particulars of their forms are not of primary importance, and Woolf often

declines to describe those details at length.[57] But what endures, ceaselessly, incessantly, is the pattern of relation that can be traced in consciousness, an ongoing encounter wherein that which is sensually immediate and that which is not continually refer to and elucidate one another.

That dynamic is at the center of the curious collision of past and present in "A Sketch of the Past" that leaves Woolf questioning which temporal realm is more real, or which one constitutes the primary context that her consciousness inhabits. In the essay, Woolf follows this reflection on the concurrence of past and present with the suggestion that there is "some real thing behind appearances" that only comes into full being through her articulation. Woolf describes this reality behind appearances as a "pattern," a network of connections involving not only "all human beings" but all things: "the whole world is a work of art … we are parts of the work of art … we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself." By redirecting attention from individual objects or appearances to the pattern that arises amongst them, Woolf recasts relation as the primary "thing itself" above particular phenomena. That which is immediately present, whether a nonhuman object or a perceiving consciousness, is thus chiefly significant for its capacity to register those relations, as Woolf herself does, "mak[ing] [the pattern] real by putting it into

[57] For example, in "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf writes of the "perpetual waste and repair" by which objects are stripped away, comparing life "to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour – landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair!" Indeed, the story's narrator catalogues a litany of objects lost over the course of a life, and remarks that "the wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment" (*The Complete Shorter Fiction* 78). In *Orlando* (1928), Woolf stages an even more vivid illustration of this uncontrollable current by which objects continually pass out of reach when the previously frozen waters of the Thames, on which a festival city had sprung up, suddenly break into loose chunks of ice that carry away all manner of objects and bodies: "Many perished clasping some silver pot or other treasure to their breasts; and at least a score of poor wretches were drowned by their own cupidity, hurling themselves from the bank into the flood rather than let a gold goblet escape them, or see before their eyes the disappearance of some furred gown. For furniture, valuables, possessions of all sorts were carried away on the icebergs" (47).

words" (72). Woolf casts herself as a conduit by which the reality beyond appearances is made legible, much as the mind receiving impressions in "Modern Fiction" makes visible a pattern that Woolf believes "come[s] closer to life" than the depictions of realist novels (161). Consciousness as a register of relation thus functions similarly to the apparatus Woolf imagines in "A Sketch of the Past" that will make the whole of the past directly available. In both instances, moving beyond immediate appearances to focus instead on a pattern of relation delivers the continued presence of that which seems absent, but is merely suppressed to the unattuned senses.

The relational theory of experience Woolf articulates in these essays has important implications for her engagement with objects and material culture throughout her work. Prioritizing relational patterns over objects themselves accords creative and ethical significance to the consciousness that curates impressions, not only elevating Woolf's role as the writer enacting those patterns, but also positioning consumption more generally as a productive act. In her essays and fiction, Woolf frequently frames that consumption within the context of the British Empire's accumulation of material and the concentration of objects from disparate global spaces in the imperial center. While Woolf's emphasis on relations offers a potentially liberating alternative to fixed material forms, she ultimately uses this model to reinscribe imperial authority in the guise of ethical and aesthetic enrichment.

Critics generally have viewed Woolf's treatment of material objects as either preserving objects outside of use-value in service of aesthetics, or else as diffusing subjectivity and agency over a wider, less anthropocentric field of being. In the former camp are scholars such as Douglas Mao, who argues in *Solid Objects* that Woolf fixates

on "discarded things with no exchange value" as a means of reclaiming the import of aesthetic goodness independent of commodity worth (30). Mao also recognizes that Woolf "recuperate[s] certain forms of consumption by rewriting them as artistic production," referencing the ways Woolf's novels cast acts of shopping and selecting as productive aesthetic work (40). But while Mao's analysis focuses on the reception of individual objects rather than the curation of relations among objects, it's the latter that figures significantly in Woolf's redemptive portrayal of imperial accumulation. Critics interested in Woolf's extension of anthropomorphic capacities for affect and memory to nonhuman objects similarly overlook the emphasis Woolf places on relationality above material particularity. Scholar Graham Fraser reads the objects Woolf depicts as abandoned or decaying as accessing "a kind of autonomous subjectivity" (91). Fraser argues these objects that have passed beyond human use or interpretation are compelling precisely because of their total "indifference to the human collector" (93). But even as particular material objects recede from human comprehension in Woolf's work, they continue to confer access to the pattern of relation between impressions and consciousness that Woolf takes as the superior rendering of reality.

Rather than applying a lens that privileges the immediate present of material experience to read Woolf's objects as markers of either aesthetic potential or nonhuman agency, I follow Woolf's emphasis on relation to examine how she frames the collecting of material impressions as a form of ethical action. In this chapter, I analyze a constellation of Woolf's shorter works that stage oppositional encounters between what Woolf presents as the mundane immediacy of social and political realities and the unfixed and infinitely generative relational potential of skillfully curated impressions.

This dynamic informs the prospecting gaze that roams London in Woolf's narrative essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" (1927), and it motivates characters who fixate on the networks accessed through objects as a refuge from the pressures of political engagement in two of her early short stories, "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and "Solid Objects" (1918).[58] Across these readings, I examine Woolf's emphasis on objects abstracted from their material properties as a shift that not only destabilizes the primacy of immediate presence, but also performs redemptive work for the imperial project by abstracting its impulse toward consumption from the violence and exploitation it enacts.

Ennobling the Appropriative Gaze in "Street Haunting"

Throughout her work, Woolf demonstrates a repeated interest in the tension between what is sensually immediate and what is not. In "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," she explores this tension not only in terms of the temporal distance between past and present, but also as it occurs between immediate and imagined experience. "Street Haunting" chronicles an evening spent wandering the streets of London in search of material novelty. The essay is delivered in a form that follows the guidelines Woolf laid out in "Modern Fiction," offering a record of the impressions that objects found in London's streets make as they are encountered.[59] Woolf's narration follows the elaborate digressions that these objects provoke, situating just such stimulation as precisely the point of the excursion: stripped of the shell of familiarity, Woolf conceives the street

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[58] First published in 1920, but written two years prior according to Woolf's letters (*The Complete Shorter Fiction* 292).
[59] Published as an essay, "Street Haunting" nonetheless reads similarly to many of Woolf's short stories. Woolf narrates the essay in a collective "we" voice, and doesn't necessarily suggest that the events described in the text are strictly autobiographical so much as hypothetical.

adventurer as "a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" hungrily taking in the treasures of the streets and enjoying the opportunity to imagine alternative lives (20).

Immersed in the vivid detail of one such imagined scene, conjured by a string of pearls observed in the jeweler's window, Woolf's narration abruptly registers the seeming contradiction between the immediate environment and the imagined one, observing that "it is, in fact, on the stroke of six ; it is a winter's evening ; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June?"[60] Woolf acknowledges the mundane truth of her material environment ("it is, in fact … a winter's evening"), but she presents no less forcefully the imagined environment, writing not that the narrator "seems to be" or "feels as though" but is simply, undeniably "*also* on a balcony, wearing pearls in June" (emphasis added). By calling attention to these contrasting spheres of experience, Woolf aims not to privilege one as more legitimate than the other, but to emphasize that both are equally real and unreal, and that it is in fact the tension between the two that best approximates the variation of experience she views as authentic to life:

> Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? (24)

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[60] A further layer of abstraction applies given the implicative "we" address by which Woolf invites the reader to imagine themselves in the positions described, as well as the writer's distance from events that may have been experienced or perhaps merely imagined, and are now recounted in the essay. In the context of the essay as it is written or read, the scene on the street and that on the balcony are equally (un)real, as both are called up by the text, rather than experienced directly.

For Woolf, the concepts of self and reality do not designate concrete, circumscribed phenomena, but express the "varied and wandering" summation of relations among many possibilities. Contrary to the response to multiplicity discussed in the previous chapter of this study, in which H.D. cycles through the fragments of individual perceptual possibilities, Woolf emphasizes continuity and devotes herself to the problem of how to represent apparently disparate realms of experience as concurrent. Whereas H.D. treats the figure-ground boundary as a vortex upon which relations could be inverted and reconfigured, Woolf declines altogether to privilege any particular arrangement of context and content, even temporarily. By shifting emphasis from experienced phenomena to the relations among them, Woolf maintains simultaneity rather than conferring primacy on a particular form of presentness.

Understanding Woolf's conceptions of both self and reality as expressions of relation rather than as discrete or fixed offers a means of resolving multiple forms of tension in her work, as well as addressing its political implications. This model accounts not only for the contemporaneous existence of past and present in "A Sketch of the Past" and for the self that is neither solely here in the material present nor there in the imagined scene in "Street Haunting," but also for the seemingly contradictory impulses with which Woolf rejects material objects as suitable markers of personality in "Modern Fiction" and yet embraces them as foundational to identity in so much of her other work. Indeed, Woolf launches "Street Haunting" with a purported central object that spurs the action: a lead pencil that the narrator must venture out to obtain. Yet Woolf immediately undermines the pencil's importance by admitting it is mere "pretext," an "excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner" (19). The pencil, it would seem, is

not the point—and yet this is not a simple dismissal of objects as hollow receptacles for human impulses. Woolf's street haunter's purpose is the encounter with varied objects or, more precisely, with the relational potential those objects represent. As an object that invokes the writerly impulse to record those impressions, the pencil enacts the shift in attention from any particular object, itself included, to the articulation of relations that emerge from a chain of impressions.

The consumption Woolf depicts in "Street Haunting" is couched in social and political privilege that allows the narrative voice to slip in and out of relation with varied objects without being sullied by genuine engagement or burdened with responsibility. Immersing oneself in the unknown objects of the city, Woolf writes, offers the opportunity to emerge from the familiarity of one's own lodgings and the "objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience" (19). The change in scene, then, equates to a change in self, as "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves" is peeled away, exposing that "central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" to the raw potential of novel objects (20). Woolf describes the perusal of objects and the possibilities they represent as an act of collecting impressions, which requires a certain curatorial expertise to flesh out the relations between objects to their fullest potential:

> For the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty … it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships. (21)

This accumulative impulse, framed as an act of extracting geological resources, parallels the rationale of the British colonial project, in which othered peoples and places exist only as objects to be mined for economic or aesthetic value. In "Street Haunting," the prospecting eye views all it encounters as goods to consume without consequence or obligation; it takes things up only figuratively, and thus can discard them at will, having never truly engaged with them.

For all the emphasis Woolf places on beauty as what attracts the eye, many of the phenomena the essay fixates on are depicted in terms of the grotesque, and serve to complement the "simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed" (21). This contrast further accentuates that the narrative perspective is less interested in the particular traits of objects than in the aggregate product that emerges in the flight from object to object, a chain of associations that illuminates those "obscure angles and relationships." Thus, having consumed the beautiful surfaces of the streets to a point of "satiety," Woolf's narrative voice seeks contrasting flavor by shifting focus to the objectified body of a woman she describes as a dwarf, and enjoys the imaginative affordances of being able to ask, "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?" Woolf describes watching the woman in a shoe store, where she displays "the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman" and tries on a series of shoes in front of a mirror that "reflect[s] the foot only" (21). The woman isolates the normative parts of her body to imagine a different set of social and bodily relations for herself, indulging in the fantasy of being a "whole person" in a manner that parallels Woolf's refashioning of the self through the imaginative possibilities of the objects of the street (22). But for Woolf, the woman is merely another object to be appropriated for imaginative ends.

Upon leaving the store, the woman reverts to being "a dwarf only," more object than human, and her presence "seem[s] actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed," leading Woolf to consider a new litany of objects in the form of marginalized human flesh. She wonders "in what crevices and crannies … this maimed company of the halt and the blind" might lodge, and imagines the material objects and environs that attend their existence in an extension of her appraisal and consumption of the attractions of the street (22). In the essay's collective narrative voice, Woolf acknowledges the naïveté and insufficiency of this engagement with the destitute:

> They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity ; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery, or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect ; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes ; a question is asked which is never answered. (23)

The arresting confrontation with bare suffering serves to emphasize the juxtaposition between the "world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs" and the gleaming commercial luxury that exists alongside them. The disparity is disruptive, halting the current of consumption within the essay with a stark view of inequality that the narrative voice is unable to resolve. But the pause is brief, as Woolf leaves behind the unanswerable question of the relationship between such inhumane conditions and capitalist excess to refocus the essay's gaze on the commodities that contextualize the deprivation of the poor. Indeed, Woolf suggests that this proximity is

not accidental or merely practical, writing that “these derelicts choose to lie not a stone’s thrown” (sic) from wealth and entertainment. Framing this contrast as strategically produced, Woolf suggests the poor actively participate in staging accusative scenes that emphasize the disparity between their lives and the luxury that surrounds them. The comparison redirects the essay’s gaze toward the shop windows and the attractions they display, passing easily from the discomfiting examination of deprivation back into a lush atmosphere of uncomplicated novelty, and rendering the arresting contrast between the two as mere aesthetic diversion.

Certainly, Woolf’s catalogue of London’s destitute is not offered uncritically; the inadequacy of the collective “we” to account for suffering and the possibility of responsibility that resonates in the unanswered question both implicate the reader in condoning gross inequality. And yet the essay figures ethical intervention as a matter of capturing and arranging these contrasting impressions, allowing Woolf to imagine she somehow serves the marginalized inhabitants of London by including them in the assortment of impressions she consumes. Woolf’s contemplation of suffering occurs within the context of an appreciative, accumulating gaze for which the “grotesque” merely accentuates the novelty and appeal of the collected impressions of the city. Immediately following her description of the poor, she reiterates the aesthetic allure of the streets they inhabit: “Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure” (23). Again, Woolf invokes networks of colonial exchange, recognizing the wealth of impressions found in London as a product of imperial intervention without

interrogating the terms of that relation. As the inner hub where those "treasure[s]" are absorbed and displayed, the imperial center itself functions as a collection of spoils that brings "obscure angles and relationships" into focus, just as the narrator's eye gathers and arranges impressions. Despite making some attempt to bring social inequality within London to the fore, Woolf makes no corresponding gesture to acknowledge how her emphasis on curating relations among objects serves to justify the exploitative practices of colonialism. "Standing out in the street" amongst this hoard of imported treasure, Woolf writes,

> one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. … But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it ; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses. (23)

This cursory engagement with objects that become the building blocks of desire and imagination without the responsibility of actual stewardship or recognition offers a striking metaphor for the imperial project and the compulsion to conquer, consume, and collect lands and resources. But whereas Woolf plainly casts the narrative "we" as ignorant of the reality of disadvantaged Londoners' suffering to make a point about social inequality, Woolf's references to imperial extraction are offered without such critique. Instead, her emphasis on curating relations among objects as a productive form of intervention functions as a redemptive interpretation of colonialist accumulation.

"Street Haunting" ends with a return to the pencil that, as the excuse for the outing, launches the chain of relations encountered and, as a writing implement, enables

Woolf to record them. After the narrator purchases a pencil and returns home, Woolf closes the essay in contemplation of this pencil, yet declines to actually make any attempt to render the sensory experience of its presence on the page: "And here—let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence—is the only spoil we have retrieved from all the treasures of the city, a lead pencil" (29). Isolating the writing tool as the one "spoil" that Woolf physically claims and retains from the surfeit of "treasures" that practices of extraction and exclusion deliver to London underscores Woolf's preference for recording a pattern of impressions above capturing particular phenomena. Despite the importance accorded to the act of engaging with the pencil, its particular aesthetic qualities need not be mentioned to capture what Woolf finds significant about it. Perhaps an Edwardian version of "Street Haunting" would meticulously describe the pencil, rendering its features in such precise detail that the reader might almost feel its length pressed in their own fingers, and thus be convinced of the reality of the scene. But for Woolf, the reality of objects lies not in the particularities of appearance or in some kernel of inaccessible thingness, but in the array of relations by which they deliver the not-present into the present.[61] This practice of deliberately framing objects as central only to direct attention away from the object itself and toward the relations it indexes recurs throughout Woolf's

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[61] Woolf explores this capacity of objects several times throughout the essay, with suggestive implications. As an example of the way personal possessions emit one's memories and tendencies, Woolf describes a "blue and white china bowl" bought in Italy. The memory of the place, the weather, aesthetic impressions, and people met on the trip all "rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece," facilitating a physical persistence of the past in the present (19-20). In contrast, encountering unfamiliar objects offers the opportunity to make contact with another's past. Woolf writes that when browsing at a secondhand bookstore, "we may rub against some complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend we have in the world." One comes into contact with this stranger not in the shape of another person browsing the shop, but in the books themselves, which deliver "the unknown and the vanished" into the immediate present (25). Critics including Mao and Lorraine Sim have commented on how objects in novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927) similarly act as conduits between characters separated by time and space (see Mao 55 and Sim, *Ordinary Matters* 83).

essays and fiction, but is particularly stark in "The Mark on the Wall" and "Solid Objects," two stories that present themselves as object-driven narratives. By prioritizing relations among objects over material particularity in these stories, Woolf dispels the primacy of immediate experience, just as she does by insisting that past and imagined experiences are equally as potent as those of the immediate present in "Street Haunting" and "A Sketch of the Past." Much as in "Street Haunting," the focus on relationality in both "The Mark on the Wall" and "Solid Objects" not only subverts the presumption that reality correlates directly to the visible experience of the present, but also preserves the possibility of reading colonial collection as generative rather than exploitative.

Reading Objects as Archives in "The Mark on the Wall"

In "The Mark on the Wall," an unnamed and ungendered narrator who reads very like a proxy for Woolf herself contemplates a hitherto unnoticed mark on the wall of their sitting room, variously forming thoughts around it and using it as a launching point for digression. Throughout the story, the narrator considers inspecting the mark more closely to definitively ascertain what it is, but declines to do so. "The Mark on the Wall" ceases abruptly with the entrance of a second unnamed and ungendered character, often interpreted as a proxy for Leonard Woolf, who declares the mark to be a snail.[62] The narrator restates this declaration, apparently accepting it as correct, and the story ends. As other scholars have observed, "The Mark on the Wall" playfully treads the line between

[62] Though the story provides no concrete detail about the gender of either character, nor the relationship between them, critics generally have presumed the narrator is female and treated the second character as the narrator's male companion. For example, critics such as Sim and Christina Alt both use feminine pronouns in their analyses of "The Mark on The Wall," even while reading the story as "a deferral of classification" in which "conclusive categorization is presented as inimical to the creative process" (Alt 171).

resolution and uncertainty.[63] There's no real reason to take the second character's conjecture that the mark is a snail as truth; the narrator offers multiple guesses at the nature of the mark throughout the story, variously thinking of it as a hole, a rose leaf, the head of a nail, and a crack. Rather than taking action to ascertain which, if any, of these notions captures the truth of the mark, the narrator emphasizes that inspecting it more closely would be pointless. They suggest that direct experience is, after all, not a reliable source of information, because however meticulously they might examine the mark to try to determine its cause, "ten to one [they] shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened" (*The Complete Shorter Fiction* 77-78).

Further, the narrator views the goal of obtaining certainty about the mark's physical form as an empty pursuit, suggesting that it would make no difference if they did successfully determine the origin of the mark: "What should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up" (81). Woolf's narrator thus puts aside entirely the idea that the exact form of the mark, as a diverting physical object, residue, or feature, is of particular importance. The mark may be the matter under the narrator's consideration, but it is not the exact physical *matter* of the mark that is of interest. Rather, the undetermined nature of the mark is precisely what makes it a productive object of thought. Similarly, the unfixed gender of the story's characters preserves a wider scope of possibilities, even while offering cues that suggest the characters' social identities. The refusal to precisely name and settle on those

[63] See Cyr, "A Conflict of Closure in Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall,'" Magdalen Wing-chi Ki, "Structure and Anti-Structure: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Politics and 'The Mark on the Wall,'" and Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (43).

identities parallels the disinterest in the exact nature of the mark, reiterating that fixed details are not what the story privileges as useful or suggestive. As the narrator contemplates the mark, its varied possibilities escort them through a meandering catalogue of reminiscence, contemplation of historical and political figures, and speculation on the nature of identity and reality. The narrator registers their exploration of these various digressive paths as a process of accumulation; engaging with the shifting possibilities of the sensually immediate mark is to assemble a collection of objects that are not present, the gravitational center of which is the simultaneous presence and absence of the mark.

By choosing to label the novel object at the center of the story as a mark, Woolf underscores that its most salient feature is its unfixed state. In designating it as a mark, the narrator conveys uncertainty as to whether they are viewing a particular object on the wall, or merely the residue of the impact an absent object had on the wall previously. But so, too, does the use of the word "mark" link the phenomenon to the representational realm, suggesting not an object or referent directly encountered, but an inscribed sign that refers to something not present, and which is subject to interpretation and revision. Further, the narrator spends the entire story looking at the mark from across the room, a dynamic that highlights the sense in which "to mark" can mean "to look or to notice" and thus casts the mark as something the narrator creates or shapes by directing attention toward it.[64] Yet despite the insistently mutable terms in which the narrator describes the mark, they also celebrate it as a concrete contrast to the abstraction of thought:

[64] In this sense, the mark is similar to the writing on the wall that H.D. describes in *Tribute to Freud*, which is only visible to the augmented sight of a perceiver who is essential to the creation and interpretation of the message.

> Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality … Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours. (82)

Given the pains Woolf takes to represent the mark as vague and unfixed, the narrator's identification of it as steeped in the solidity of reality suggests that the anchoring, impersonal quality of objects is not captured in their material particularities. Instead, it's the object's relational potential, its capacity to deliver that which is beyond immediate experience, that constitutes a powerful intervention.

With its shift in emphasis from the material presence of an object to the absent presences it evokes, "The Mark on the Wall" offers a prototype of the argument about representing reality that Woolf would offer two years later in "Modern Fiction." Indeed, the story's narrator speculates on the future of fiction much as Woolf does in that essay, predicting a waning of Edwardian enthusiasm for rendering the material details of reality. After insisting that one doesn't really *see* the people and objects encountered in public spaces, but rather sees reflections of self in them, the narrator ventures that

> novelists in the future will realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories. (79-80)

The infinite reflections that can be encountered in the diverse surfaces of the material world function similarly to the alternative lives that can be accessed through objects in "Street Haunting." In keeping with Woolf's notion that the Edwardians linger on the wrong details, the immediate is repeatedly supplanted by the implied. Even the depiction of a dreamer "worshipping the chest of drawers" as a concrete link to reality gives way to contemplation of relational rather than material substance. The narrator proceeds from the comforting thought of the solidity of the chest of drawers to considering wood itself, a shift that initially reads as an escalation of attention to the materiality of the object, but instead plunges into a network of imagined objects that might occur near a tree. The narrator thus considers cows, rivers, fish, beetles, storms, sap, the moon, and birds, "all things one likes to think about" (82). This litany of related material phenomena forms a catalogue of images the narrator flips through, all before imagining the tree being felled and incorporated into other chains of relation as the wood takes its place "in bedrooms, in ships, on the pavement, lining rooms" (83).

The capacity the chest of drawers has to comfort and ground thus cannot merely be an expression of its immediate material presence, for to encounter the chest of drawers is to encounter wood, is to encounter trees, is to encounter the infinite affiliations of the "million, patient, watchful lives [there are] for a tree" (83). For all the narrator claims to find stability in the fixed, material reality of objects, they depict those objects as most comforting and generative when they are abstracted from particular physical features. It's also significant that the afterlives for a tree that so compel the narrator represent the incorporation of a material resource into chains of production, conquest, and commerce. The suggestion that objects access even more expansive lives in the possibilities of

human use-value casts resource extraction and the accumulative tendencies of empire as generative acts. It also stands in opposition to the view that Woolf ushers objects toward an autonomy rooted in wholly repelling human use and comprehension.

"The Mark on the Wall" ultimately treats individual objects as archives of relation, and human consciousness as a register of those connections. Like the tree, bearing witness to shifting material networks, the narrative perspective catalogues and explores the varied possibilities afforded by objects, without seeking to intervene in or arrest that multiplicity. When the second character interrupts the narrator's thoughts at the end of the story, the effect is "a vast upheaval of matter" as the narrator emerges from the collection of possible objects amassed in contemplation of the mark on the wall. The second character's matter-of-fact assertion that the mark is a snail abruptly effaces the accumulation performed throughout the story, fixing the mark as a particular object rather than a representative site of possibility, and causing the narrator to observe that "everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing." The narrator's concluding statement, "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail," might be taken to mourn the loss of the mark, with the "ah" and exclamation point of the first sentence placing affective emphasis on the previous, unknown state of the mark rather than on the discovery of its purportedly true nature (83). The story's end thus not only underscores that the text is not particularly interested in the fixed reality of the mark, but depicts the closure of possibility as a loss that severs the connective energy traced by the narrator, and which can only be followed by silence.

The ambiguity of the affective note on which "The Mark on the Wall" ends is particularly significant given the political context the narrator uses the mark to hold at

bay throughout the story, only for the second character to dispel the diversion offered by the mark and wrest attention back onto the political concerns of the present. The narrator characterizes the mark, in all its unfixed possibility, as a useful distraction from the immovable realities of politics, suggesting that an instinct for "self-preservation" redirects their thoughts from the "reality" of political authority to the mark on the wall (82). When the second character announces plans to buy a newspaper, that political reality reasserts its primacy in the continuation of their statement: "Through it's no good buying newspapers. . . . Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war! . . . All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall" (83). While it remains unfixed, the mark offers the narrator "a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades," but when the mark resolves into the solid material form of a known object, its power to divert from the concerns of the immediate present is lost (82). This tension between the immediate reality of human political concerns and objects as archives of relation that function as unfixed sites of possibility is one that Woolf revisits frequently in her fiction, though never more directly than in "Solid Objects," a story written in close proximity to "The Mark on the Wall."

Curating Presence and Absence in "Solid Objects"

Of the many instances of attention paid to objects in Woolf's work, there is perhaps no example more explicit than "Solid Objects." As the title suggests, here would seem to be a story that elevates material immediacy and fixates on objects as they appear to the senses. Indeed, the titular objects are figured as the most solid, distinct entities in

the story, as though they are experienced more directly than other material phenomena. "Solid Objects" begins with a hazy view of a beach and "one small black spot" that moves on it, an unknown object that eventually resolves itself into the bodies of two men, John and Charles, arguing about politics. Seeking solace from the heat of their discussion in their physical environs, each man turns to the sand and its attractions, prepared to busy himself with "whatever it may be that comes next to hand" (*The Complete Shorter Fiction* 96). For Charles, utility rules: he takes up flat stones and skims them on the water, flinging the objects away from him as quickly as they are determined suitable to the action he wants to carry out. But John engages in a more aimless form of tactile exploration, submerging his hand in the sand and enjoying the sensation of water rushing into the gaps made by his fingers. Before John can direct this play toward a structured aim by imagining the hole as "a moat; a well; a spring; [or] a secret channel to the sea," his fingers meet "a full drop of solid matter" that arrests his attention and dispels any residual interest in either political arguments or shaping loose sand into representative forms. The mass, which John determines is a smooth lump of glass, consumes his intentions and imagination. He is fascinated by the object's unknowable origins and undiluted material features, as if encountering pure matter for the first time in this lump that is "so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore" (97). The remainder of the story, which spans only six pages in all, details the passage of months and years in which John comes to be fully possessed by a collection of objects that begins with the lump of glass and ultimately supplants his political career and displaces him from human society. Yet for all its emphasis on the allure of objects, "Solid

Objects" becomes less about the objects that possess John as it proceeds, and more about the impulse to collect objects in the interest of bringing their relations into focus.

Among Woolf's short fiction, "Solid Objects" is one of the stories most frequently discussed in scholarship, forming a requisite landmark in any argument about her treatment of objects. While the story can be interpreted as a warning against submitting oneself entirely to aesthetic pursuits, more recent analyses have argued that Woolf presents John's fixation at least somewhat in earnest, allowing that if she doesn't necessarily endorse John's pursuit of objects as an ideal to imitate, neither does she condemn it. In contemporary criticism, the general view is that "Solid Objects" expresses a devotion to matter itself, elevating objects removed from the human context of use-value as sources of aesthetic wonder. For example, Mao, who takes up the story's title to name his own study of modernist writers' engagement with objects, reads John as "a doomed devotee of beauty" whose actions affirm a commitment to art for its own sake in resistance to the pressures of commodification and production (26). In *Other Things,* thing-theory-originator Bill Brown takes the title of "Solid Objects" less prescriptively, arguing "it is in fact a story not about solidity, but about the fluidity of objects, about how they decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination" (55). The tension Brown observes between the purported focus of the story and its actual engagement with objects is significant: As in "The Mark on the Wall," there are illuminative contradictions to be found in the way "Solid Objects" discusses the objects at its center. However, considering these contradictions in the context of Woolf's theory of experience reveals that the shift she makes is not merely from solid to fluid objects, but from the material particularity of individual objects to the relational potential

accessed by collecting and curating objects. Rather than passively receiving objects in their impenetrable state as extrahuman substance and thus "grant[ing] them a kind of agency" as Brown suggests, John intervenes as a conductor of relations, drawing resonance and response from objects by bringing them into contact with one another (59).

John's progression from an initial fascination with the lump of glass to a preoccupation with incorporating it into an ever-expanding network of relation is attended by a declining emphasis on the sensory qualities of the object. When he first unearths it, the lump of glass strikes John as something "precious" in its undiluted, unknowable state as raw material. He wonders at the object's origins, imagining it may have been a gem "worn by a dark Princess trailing her finger in the water as she sat in the stern of a boat and listened to the slaves singing as they rowed her across the Bay" or perhaps an emerald that emerged from "a sunk Elizabethan treasure-chest." John's speculations position the lump of glass as a spoil of colonial exchange, much like the objects of trade washed up on London's shore in "Street Haunting." But the inscrutable object itself betrays nothing of its former lives and uses: "it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass" (97). As Brown and others have remarked, the immovability with which the lump of glass represents and embodies nothing but itself marks a crucial feature of Woolf's treatment of objects in the story, "a difference that comes from dislodging objects from a history of their proximity to subjects…from rendering a life of things that is irreducible to the history of human subjects" (Brown 66). While Woolf certainly locates the significance of the lump of glass outside of its relation to human aims and interests, the true potency of

the object lies not in the direct encounter with its physical form, but in its capacity to relate to other objects.

John's enchantment with the glass is expressed not through admiration and study of the object itself, but as an impulse to collect more objects. At first, it seems like John's pursuit may indeed be motivated by an aesthetic interest in the object's form, as he searches for objects that "reminded him of the lump of glass." But as she describes John's quest for these objects, Woolf repeatedly redirects focus away from the material properties of the lump of glass. The shape that John finds himself drawn to does not correspond exactly to the lump of glass, but to a hybrid form that emerges from his interrelation with the object. When encountered "again and again half consciously," Woolf writes, "any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it." So when John searches for objects that recall the lump of glass, his requirements are relatively loose: "Anything, so long as it was an object of some kind, more or less round, perhaps with a dying flame deep sunk in its mas, anything — china, glass, amber, rock, marble — even the smooth oval egg of a prehistoric bird would do." For someone obsessed with an object, John's interests are curiously removed from its material properties. The features of shape, material composition, color, and size that distinguish the object are apparently beside the point. The degeneration of specificity in John's search for objects suggests that what interests him about the lump of glass cannot be reduced to its material qualities. Indeed, as John expands his search, he pursues objects that are "thrown away, of no use to anybody, shapeless, discarded" (98). Despite initially presenting John's collecting impulse as linked to an abstracted notion of shape,

Woolf swiftly undermines even that link to material specificity by labeling these objects, stripped of use-value, as "shapeless."

Counter to those who have read John's fixation as an expression of aesthetic devotion and against the general critical sense that "Solid Objects" unironically names an interest in objects, I argue that what obsesses John is not any particular object, but rather relations among objects. By staging increasingly suggestive juxtapositions through curation, John shifts emphasis further away from the particularity of immediate experience and toward the tension of those relations. Accordingly, John is described as collecting "four of five specimens" over the course of a few months, an account that is so disengaged in the details of those objects that even the number of objects collected is uncertain (98). By referring to the objects as "specimens," Woolf evokes the naturalist practice of collecting representative examples of species, an act of archival construction that is as much or more focused on elucidating the principles of a system as on recording the details of particular specimens. Yet the undecided quality of the description actively resists the specificity of naturalistic collection, which Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison schematize as split into three approaches driven by distinct "epistemic virtues": truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgment (19). John's collecting practices conform to none of these models, suggesting that Woolf offers the collection of "Solid Objects" as an alternative form of curatorial intervention that privileges relationality over direct representation. Against the paralytic and destructive lens often associated with naturalistic specimen cataloguing, John's collection does not arrest and dissect objects, but preserves the unfixed possibilities they contain.

The next object of note that John encounters is described in precise detail, but his enthusiasm for this object, like the others, is riddled with contradiction that directs attention away from the object itself and toward its relational potential. Contrary to the abstract notion of "shapeless" objects that attract him, it's the "remarkable shape" of a broken piece of china glimpsed by chance that compels John to possess it, a need so great that it leads him to miss an important political meeting, inaugurating the decline of his career. "As nearly resembling a starfish as anything," the china is "shaped, or broken accidentally into five irregular but unmistakable points." Its initial appearance is infinitely undecidable: it's either intentionally or organically "shaped," or else "broken." Its coloring is similarly capricious, a mélange of overlapping hues and patterns that are difficult to visualize simultaneously: "It was mainly blue, but green stripes or spots of some kind overlaid the blue, and lines of crimson gave it a richness and lustre of the most attractive kind" (98). In every sense, the object resists John even as it attracts him; when he tries to reach it, "the more he pushe[s], the further it recede[s]," withdrawing from John's physical grasp as well as his attempts to comprehend its appearance or origins (99).

Surrendering himself completely to the task of reaching the object, John succeeds in obtaining it, but this triumph comes at the expense of missing the meeting he had been on his way to when the object arrested his attention. Physical possession lends itself to an illusion of comprehension, as John concludes that "examination put it beyond doubt that the star shape was accidental," an assumption that convinces John the object is unique. Yet the reward of capturing the object lies not in the aesthetic pleasures it offers, but in its contrast to the lump of glass:

> Set at the opposite end of the mantelpiece from the lump of glass that had been dug from the sand, it looked like a creature from another world—freakish and fantastic as a harlequin. It seemed to be pirouetting through space, winking light like a fitful star. The contrast between the china so vivid and alert, and the glass so mute and contemplative, fascinated him, and wondering and amazed he asked himself how the two came to exist in the same world, let alone to stand upon the same narrow strip of marble in the same room. The question remained unanswered. (99)

This unanswered question that emerges from the tension between these two otherworldly objects forms the urgent, driving force of John's collecting impulse. Just as the lump of glass, when first unearthed, makes everything else seem less solid and definite by comparison, the juxtaposition of the glass with the china shifts focus away from the immediate present. The mantelpiece, the room, and the very moment in which these two objects coincide are merely incidental, like the unnoticed glass of a curio case. Nor does the power to fascinate reside in the individual objects themselves, but in the potency with which they deliver that which is other than the material present. John's reference to the piece of china first as a starfish and then as a star "pirouetting through space" conveys this radical collision of worlds, as the object simultaneously evokes the unknown depths of the sea and the vastness of space beyond the sky, despite being present in neither of those realms.

Woolf stresses this contrast again in the next important object John adds to his collection, a "very remarkable piece of iron" that he describes as a "meteorite." The iron is "almost identical with the [lump of] glass in shape, massy and globular, but so cold and

heavy, so black and metallic, that it [is] evidently alien to the earth and had its origin in one of the dead stars or [is] itself the cinder of a moon." By emphasizing the similarity of form between the lump of glass, which John imagines as emerging from the sea, perhaps after centuries, and the iron, which he takes as extraterrestrial, Woolf renders their striking contrast as more than a matter of material properties. Like the lump of glass and the china, the meteorite is not merely otherworldly in appearance; it brings another world to bear on the immediate present: "It weighed his pocket down; it weighed the mantelpiece down; it radiated cold. And yet the meteorite stood upon the same ledge with the lump of glass and the star-shaped china" (100). Again, the concurrent presence of these objects mesmerizes John more powerfully than the features of any individual object. Rather than seeking some ideal object, John's primary goal is a curatorial one, in which he links radically different places and times by assembling objects and thus erodes the illusion that immediate experience is all.

Woolf encodes John's uncoupling from immediate reality in his forfeiture of his former political ambitions, which are replaced by a drive to collect. Indeed, whereas the abstracted form of the lump of glass is initially depicted as "haunt[ing]" John, it's John who becomes ghostlike as he "haunt[s] the places which are most prolific" of the discarded objects that fascinate him (98, 99). Like the objects he collects, John becomes "absentminded," "silent," and inscrutable as he drifts beyond the uses and interests of human society (99, 100). Meanwhile, the relations among his objects and the potential to further expand the network of the collection compel John to continue his search. It's in the very act of tracing those relations, "as his eyes passed from one to another" of the objects, that John finds himself seized by "the determination to possess objects that even

surpassed these." As the collection grows, John's "standard bec[o]me[s] higher and his taste more severe," but the standard in question is not one of aesthetic value (100). When Charles visits John one last time in an attempt to understand why his friend gave up a promising political career to comb through rubbish heaps, his parting words disingenuously compliment John's collection, calling the objects "pretty stones" (101). These words convey how vastly Charles misses the point. His statement is not merely a throwaway comment that demeans a noble pursuit of aesthetic goodness; rather, Charles reveals his utter lack of comprehension by failing to see the aim of the collection as anything other than aesthetic.

The inexplicable concurrence of John's objects and the worlds they invoke prompts an unanswerable question in the same vein as those Woolf asks in "Street Haunting" and implies in "A Sketch of the Past" as she considers the equal force with which experiences immediate and imagined, present and past, are encountered: "Am I here, or am I there?" The answer Woolf provides in "Street Haunting" takes multiplicity as an inherent quality of humanity. Woolf writes that nature, making man, "should have thought of one thing only" but "instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture" (24). This bifurcated quality applies not merely to the question of "the true self" Woolf raises in "Street Haunting," but to knowable experience at large. Just as Woolf suggests the self is "neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering" that the most accurate representation of it lies in the unsettled tension of the possibilities it traces, so does she represent the urgent reality that objects deliver as an expression of relation.

Significantly, this pivot to relation also effects a strategic evasion reminiscent of Woolf's turn away from the other question "asked" but "never answered" in "Street Haunting," when the narrator is confronted too directly with the deprivation of the poor and retreats to contemplating the dazzling surfaces of the varied objects collected in the imperial center (23). Even as Woolf seizes on the material that flows into London from overseas as a distraction from difficult questions about socially othered Londoners in "Street Haunting," she declines to raise similar questions about the inequality inscribed in the relations of colonialism.

The same omission can be observed in John's collecting practices. The objects that John finds washed up on England's shores or scattered in the detritus of war are consistently depicted as having origins elsewhere: the precious gem worn by a "dark princess" or transported as captured treasure; the fine china that names its cultural, if not material, origins outside of Europe; and the purported meteorite, which exaggerates the alien quality of the objects John collects to an extraterrestrial extreme. John marvels at the suggestive contrasts and affinities among the objects, but even as the imagined elsewhere he associates with them increases their fetish value, their absolute removal from the contexts of production and use excuses John from interrogating the political forces that brought these objects into his reach. By depicting John as the devoted collector who derives meaning from the act of stringing alien objects together, Woolf positions the imperial impulse toward material accumulation as both a means of recapturing diffused substance and as a productive rather than exploitative form of intervention. While panic over imperial decline would continue to build in succeeding years, Woolf's 1918 story, written in the context of war on the home front, begins to

metaphorize the anxiety that attended the dissolution of imperial glory.[65] In John, reduced to a husk of himself and bereft of his former ambitions yet animated and fueled by the relational potential of the objects he curates, Woolf charts a transformative shift that locates the British Empire's influence and import in the relational network it has assembled.

By declining to confer primacy on fixed forms or particular points in time or space in her work, Woolf develops a model of presence as a shifting array distinct from and in excess of the merely immediately present. For Woolf, emphasizing relation over phenomena offers a means of dissipating anxiety in a context in which British political and cultural authority were increasingly in question. In the face of a declining British Empire and mounting disquiet about whether the imperial center merely functioned as a hollow consumer of cultural and material substance drawn from its colonial margins, framing relation as primary allows Woolf to sidestep the troubling matter of dissonance between the imperial center and periphery. The next two chapters of this study turn to those purportedly peripheral spaces of former British colonies, examining how writers understood as external to the imperial center theorize perception and relations among objects to serve their own political ends. For Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola and Guyanese novelist, poet, and essayist Wilson Harris, material relations offer a means of not simply mitigating political anxiety, but subverting the hierarchical epistemologies that facilitate the marginalization and exploitation of the British Empire's colonial others.

[65] See Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island* and Peter Kalliney's *Commonwealth of Letters*.

Chapter 3:
Multistable Matter: Global Object Relations in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

Since the 1952 publication of Nigerian author Amos Tutuola's first novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, critical responses to Tutuola's work have largely offered a chronicle of the author's inadequacies. Apart from the early, enthusiastic responses *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* received from Western readers who exoticized the novel as an anthropological artifact that offered an undiluted portrait of colonial African naïveté, much of the scholarship that has seriously engaged Tutuola's texts as literary works has done so through a lens of failure. Variously, scholars have argued that Tutuola's novels do not innovate, but are merely flawed repetitions of preexisting Yoruba tales; that Tutuola fails to preserve the moral content and structural logic of those Yoruba models; that his most compelling plot elements were plagiarized from fellow Nigerian novelist D.O. Fagunwa; that his characters are underdeveloped shells; and, in perhaps the earliest and most persistent of these criticisms, that his use of the English language obstructs rather than facilitates meaning. Yoruba scholar Okeyan Owomoyela chronicles all of these failures in *Amos Tutuola Revisited*, offering a corrective response to earlier portrayals of Tutuola as a naïve genius. Owomoyela argues that nearly all of the praise Tutuola received in the half-century since his first publication was misguided, resulting from primitivism, poor understanding of Yoruba cultural structures and folktale models, and generous attributions of thematic intention to Tutuola that are not supported by his texts.[66]

[66] One exception to Owomoyela's primarily critical view of Tutuola is his recognition that Tutuola productively inverts Yoruba gender norms in certain of his texts. Novels such as *Simbi and the Satyr of*

The residual exoticism in Tutuola scholarship that Owomoyela attacks greatly informed early assessments of Tutuola, which tended to exploit him in service of justifying the colonial project, glorify him as a primitive genius, or reductively single him out as the authoritative voice of Yoruba culture. Responding most strongly to criticism that echoes the patronizing praise of the earliest reviews of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, such as poet Dylan Thomas's review that lauded Tutuola's "grisly and bewitching story … written in young English," Owomoyela admirably refutes praise of Tutuola that fails to engage the text seriously. But in his commitment to resituating Tutuola's novels within their Yoruba context, Owomoyela limits himself to evaluating Tutuola according to metrics of success that Tutuola only perfunctorily attempts to satisfy. Owomoyela argues that Tutuola's adaptation of material from Yoruba stories often dispenses with the logic of the original plots, thus negating the moral messages the stories were crafted to convey.[67] Citing "the general absence of causative continuity in most of Tutuola's novels," Owomoyela argues that the novels fail to hold characters accountable for their actions, both in that logical consequences are not applied as consistently as they are in the original tales and because causation is

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the Dark Jungle (1955) and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958) feature strong female characters who take on the traditionally masculine role of hunter and even rescue their male relatives from peril (Owomoyela 130-131).

[67] Tutuola himself claimed that he wrote his novels in an effort to preserve Yoruba folktales, though his explanation of his motivation for writing has been inconsistent. In his earliest responses to editors asking why he wrote his novels, Tutuola essentially claimed to have done it for entertainment (see Claude Wauthier's explanation of a 1956 interview with Tutuola in his June 15, 1961, letter to Bernth Lindfors). As he gained more recognition and was asked by publishers and interviewers whether he was writing to share his cultural traditions with the world, Tutuola started repeating this narrative himself, explaining that storytelling was going out of fashion as people turned to radio and television for entertainment instead, and that the exigence for his writing was the preservation of an earlier version of a developing culture for readers around the world (see Tutuola's "A Short Biography," his letter to Lindfors dated May 16, 1968, and transcripts of interviews with Tutuola in February 1975 and July 1978). It is of note that this narrative comported with what Tutuola came to learn was expected of him, as well as with the early excitement about his novels as anthropological artifacts.

seldom attributed to the characters (72). Owomoyela points out that much of the movement of the plot in Tutuola's novels is exerted on his characters by chance, the bush itself, and the creatures that inhabit it. The characters themselves often run from one problem to another, seemingly more subject to the whims of the environment than to the effects of their own choices. Because Tutuola "substitutes good luck and good chance for resourcefulness" in his characters, Owomoyela argues that the series of challenges they overcome to progress on their journeys fails to constitute character development.[68]

But as Owomoyela acknowledges, Tutuola's gestures toward didactic moralism and the proverbs of Yoruba storytelling feel like "afterthoughts" rather than principles that influenced Tutuola's construction of his stories, particularly in his earliest novels (72). Thus, I suggest that judging the success of Tutuola's texts through the lens of traditional Yoruba morality is a misapplication of a standard that Tutuola never intended to meet. Owomoyela does briefly entertain the idea, as posited by Chinua Achebe, that Tutuola's discordance with traditional Yoruba values is an intentional departure from that value system, in which Tutuola centers *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* on a lazy, indulgent character to explore the ramifications of subverting social structures that reinforce the high moral estimation of work to instead privilege pleasure. Rightly, Owomoyela dismisses this suggestion, arguing that the novel offers

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[68] According to Owomoyela, Tutuola redefines the parameters of what constitutes a hero, because though his characters face great trials, "he never abandons them to their own resources, contriving instead to extricate them almost magically, and no thanks to their own endowments" (135). Owomoyela makes clear that he views this as a degenerative adaptation, though scholar Ato Quayson suggested in his *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* that stripping the characters of the "natural advantages" associated with hunters in Yoruba folklore allows Tutuola to present more complex anti-heroes who can develop throughout the novels as a consequence of "the processes of adventure and the confrontation of challenges" (51,52).

no opportunity to examine the value of work and pleasure, such as by presenting characters with “choices to work or not to work, whose consequences would be fraught with weighty moral implications” (57). Owomoyela is correct that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* makes no effort to problematize or venerate the narrator’s indulgent nature, but Achebe’s insight that the moral grounds on which Tutuola’s work has been judged are not properly calibrated to his project is an important one that should not be discarded along with Achebe’s suggestion that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* engages in moralizing on pleasure. Following the spirit of Achebe’s rearticulation of the moral interests of Tutuola’s work, I argue that the lens of failure through which many have approached Tutuola’s novels should be replaced with one that meets the work on its own terms. While evaluating Tutuola in terms of anthropocentric morality and causality has highlighted a lack in his work, approaching his novels with an eye toward what is present rather than what is missing reveals an expansive system of global material relations in excess of human agency. Instead of featuring the rich subjective interiority associated with the novel form, Tutuola focuses on the complexity of material networks, infusing individual bodies, commodities, and landscapes as well as the compound objects that they form together with all the agency, changeability, and inaccessible depth usually reserved for human subjects. It is through these means, rather than the more familiar methods of novelistic characterization or folktale proverbs, that Tutuola offers suggestive social critique.

To capture how Tutuola inscribes in material complexity the political and philosophical commentary that scholars have unsuccessfully looked for in his characters, I will turn to an example from Tutuola’s second novel, *My Life in the Bush*

of Ghosts (1954), that illustrates how issues of identity, power, technology, embodiment, and perception converge in the surreal material formations that populate his stories. Midway through the narrator's chain of misadventures in the bush of ghosts, he encounters a community of "short ghosts" that is centered on a fearsome ghost called the flash-eyed mother. So large that she cannot be seen all at once, the flash-eyed mother sits immobile, constituting a town with her immense body, which "alone filled the town as a round vast hill" (97). Her body is covered with "millions of heads" which each have "two very short hands which were used to hold their food or anything that they want to take." The flash eyed mother takes care of these smaller heads, acting through her "special long and huge head" with powerful, flashing eyes that produce fire and a mouth that is filled with one thousand two-feet-long teeth and is so large she "could swallow an elephant uncut" (98, 99). When the narrator is first brought before the flash-eyed mother, his vision is temporarily negated by the singularity of her appearance: "When I saw her clearly, I closed my eyes tightly at the same moment, I could not open it till I was forced to open it by these short ghosts who escorted me before her and still I was unable to open it in full, because of her fearful, dreadful, terrible, curious, wonderful and dirty appearance" (97). The flash-eyed mother strains the narrator's perceptual faculties, but she also invites and arrests his attention as a spectacle that is "curious" and "wonderful" as well as "dreadful" and "ugly." Her material presence is so potent that it destabilizes the narrator's physical state; he describes being brought before her and paradoxically feeling that he "stood before her as if [he] had been dissolved into vapour" or else was "no more alive and also dreaming of her terrible, dreadful, ugly, dirty appearance without sleeping."

Sensory perception of the flash-eyed mother is not only difficult, but hazardous; her laugh "was just as if a bomb explodes," and when she laughs at the narrator several trees around the town fall down and the narrator "[sinks] into the ground to half of [his] body" (100).

Even as she proves impactful as a sensory excess that simultaneously commands and suppresses perception, the flash-eyed mother also powerfully wields her own gaze. That gaze literally acts on whatever she turns it on, for her eyes are "always flashing or bringing out fire whenever she was opening them" (98). The flash-eyed mother's gaze is used to cook food, to light the town that surrounds her "as electricity lights," and to modify the bodies of the ghosts who serve her by grooming, lashing, and burning them (99). It is even commodified as a resource that ghosts from other towns seek out for purchase; the narrator affirms that significant income can be generated this way, because "a flash was worth a heavy amount of ghosts' money" (106). In fact, the flash-eyed mother's entire body is described in terms of commodification and utility. The narrator reports that her hair "could weigh more than a ton if cut and put on a scale" and that it functions to shelter her from the rain and sun, depicting it as a resource that serves a purpose and could be harvested and measured much like a product for sale. Her hands are likened to spoons, which she uses to stir hot soup because "she did not feel the pain of fire or heat." Her fingernails are similarly described in terms of the tool function they replicate; the narrator explains they are "just like shovels," while her short feet, "thick as a pillar," function as a stool that she sits on (99). The heads covering her body reinforce the flash-eyed mother's connection to the tools and technologies of production and exchange. The

narrator explains that when the heads speak, their voices sound "as if somebody strikes an iron or the church bell," and if they all speak at once, it sounds like "a big market's noises" (98). When the heads eat, it sounds "as if one hundred winches are working together" (101). The flash-eyed mother is simultaneously individual and multiple in body and identity; embedded in the African bush and linked to the mechanics of industry; undeniably local in her immobility, and yet far reaching as a site of exchange that parallels global interconnection.

Layers of symbiotic relation disperse the flash-eyed mother's presence throughout multiple material bodies. The short ghosts are fed and protected by the flash-eyed mother, but they also sustain her by hunting animals that she cooks and distributes among the smaller heads on her body, herself, and the short ghosts. Both entirely dependent on the flash-eyed mother and entirely necessary to her, the short ghosts function like appendages of her body even though they are physically distinct from her. The symbiotic relationship between the flash-eyed mother and the short ghosts is repeated in the flash-eyed mother's relationship to the heads on her body, for whom she truly acts as a mother: both ruler and servant, possessor and possession. She chastises the heads when they argue with one another, but she also serves them before herself, and their comfort appears to be her first priority. The heads eat "greedily," always asking for more and thus reducing the portion of food the flash-eyed mother accords to the short ghosts and the narrator, "because she [does] not want [the heads] to be hungry at any time" (101, 102). The flash-eyed mother bears the heads' complaints, and she also bears their waste, as her body is covered in their urine, excrement, and spit, making her both the abode and the trash heap of a population. In turn, each of the heads bears their own

ecosystem of inhabitants, resources, and waste. When the heads on the flash-eyed mother's body have their hair cut on an appointed barbing day, the narrator discovers that "uncountable beetles, bees, wasps and many other kinds of biting insects were living inside the hair of these heads as their home and also their mother's head was full up with numerous small birds which built their nests inside the hair of her head as on the trees" (106). The heads react to the barbing with "joy," apparently relieved to be shorn of the burden of miniscule life they have carried for the century since their last barbing (105).

In the body of the flash-eyed mother, Tutuola inscribes material relations that distribute agency across communities, individuals, and objects. The individual is multiple, is mechanized, is an accumulation of identities, objects, labor, and detritus. The body that appears to be a unified object so vast it is beyond comprehension fragments into regressions of increasingly smaller scale. The authority of the one who distributes sustenance and punishment is undermined by the fact that she in turn is sustained by those she rules, and subject to their demands. In this material network that downplays interiority, Tutuola sketches out the defining tensions of global modernity. The flash-eyed mother metaphorizes the coalitions of bodies that form national and global totalities, while also invoking collisions between bodies and machines, suggesting multiplicity is an inherent quality of embodiment. Her potent gaze and the difficulty of turning one's gaze upon her literalize the force of perception as a physical engagement between objects, demonstrating the powerful effects material relations incite even when conducted over distance.

The flash-eyed mother brings together threads of suggestive imagery that Tutuola consistently invokes throughout both *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The*

Palm-Wine Drinkard. In these novels, Tutuola builds networks of material relation that echo global systems of exchange while undermining narratives that suggest exertions of power and influence flow exclusively from one part of the world to another. I argue that in these networks, Tutuola strategically decenters human agency and interiority to assert that all kinds of objects have equal status, thus simultaneously disrupting ideologies that privilege humanity and those that privilege particular human groups. In the system of objects that Tutuola creates, relations between objects must always be partial, as objects exceed the access conferred in any particular relation or the sum of those relations. Tutuola's objects are thus multistable, inclined to express multiple states and forms even as one of those forms emerges and others withdraw in particular relations. The changeability of Tutuola's objects precludes the enduring positions of dominance and subordinance that support hierarchical power structures. Tutuola thus refutes both anthropocentrism and imperialism through a series of multistable objects and assemblages like the flash-eyed mother that evade definition, continuously circulate power, and illustrate that relation is always mutually transformative.

Objects Among Objects: Countering Anthropocentrism with Material Agency

Owomoyela is right that Tutuola's human characters rarely drive the action of his novels or determine their own fates. While critics have previously labeled this as a failure in character development or else tried to translate it into a moral model that affirms the limits of human control, I instead argue that the minimization of human agency in Tutuola's work is part of a larger ontological flattening that dispenses with

distinctions between human and nonhuman objects.[69] In Tutuola's novels, material intervention is the primary mode of causation. His characters are not entirely without agency, but that agency is consistently transmitted through material intermediaries. Further, as Owomoyela asserts, Tutuola's heroes rarely directly impact the action of the plot through their own qualities, whether positive traits of bravery, skill, or cleverness or negative ones of cowardice, ineptitude, or foolishness. Instead, the affordances, resistance, and complicity of material phenomena unleash effects on the characters, propelling them into and out of danger and dictating their movements. Tutuola turns away from the abstract traits of subjective interiority to treat human characters as objects interacting with other objects. In Tutuola's system of objects, the manner of interactions a character might have with a rock are no more varied, complex, or meaningful than the interactions that rock might have with a patch of ground, a bird, or a log. The material environment itself is both active and reactive, intervening in the plot in excess of characters' expectations and intentions.

Both of Tutuola's first two novels are quest narratives that repurpose folktale elements, elaborating on, combining, and transforming various characters and patterns from Yoruba sources. Tutuola's first novel is narrated by the titular palm-wine drinkard, who indulges so heavily in the drink that no one but the particularly productive palm-wine tapster his father employs for him can satisfy his needs. When the tapster unexpectedly falls from a tree and dies, the narrator resolves to venture to Dead's Town, which can be accessed by traversing the bush the same way any other far-flung village

[69] One of the flawed defenses of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* that Owomoyela cites is that of John Coates, who praises how Tutuola's text "accepts with an easy grace the existence of events absolutely beyond human control" (qtd. in Owomoyela 138).

might be, to find the tapster and bring him back in order to enjoy his services again. Early in the novel, the drinkard acquires a wife, who becomes his constant traveling companion and suffers a series of dangers alongside him. From the beginning of the story, Tutuola consistently emphasizes his characters' experiences as the product of material conditions. The palm-wine drinkard is described as having been unable to drink "ordinary water" or to "do any work more than to drink" since he was ten years old (191). Rather than revealing a desire for intoxication or indolence based on poor character, his extreme predilection for palm wine emerges as a material property of the drinkard. To blame or criticize him for it would be like chastising a magnet for its attraction to metal.

In this first characterization, Tutuola situates the drama of the text not in the subjective development that usually anchors the novel form, but in object relations, framing his narrator as no more or less than one object among others. The shift persists throughout the novel, as human action itself proves no more, and often a great deal less, efficacious than material intervention from non-anthropomorphic objects. In one notable example, the drinkard and his wife find they are "unable to branch or to stop, or to go back" from the road they have been following (239). Despite their efforts, they continue to move forward toward the "Unreturnable-Heaven's town" to which the road leads as if impelled by a physical force. When they arrive in the town, they are brought before its king, who asks how they got there. In the narrator's answer, he attributes causation to the road, which acted without any reference to the characters' will: "I replied that it was their road brought us to the town and we did not want to come there at all" (241). The narrator and his wife ultimately suffer severe torments at the hands of the town's

inhabitants and are nearly killed, a series of events that the road that brought them to the town participates in as actively as the people who seize the narrator and his wife and bring them before the king. In the case of the road to Unreturnable-Heaven's town, Tutuola places the dispositions of subjects and objects in contention with each other, much to the characters' detriment. However, the opposite is just as frequently the case in his novels; in many episodes, material intervention aligns with characters' wills and benefits them greatly. For example, when the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is wrapped tightly in spider webs and about to be burned over a fire by a ghost who wishes to eat him, he is saved not by his own intervention or another character's, but because "the spider web which wrapped [him] could not catch fire as it was very wet from the rains" (93). While the road in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* overruled the drinkard and his wife to deliver them into a perilous situation, here the web's material properties work in favor of the immobilized narrator without his intervention.

When Tutuola's characters do attempt to exert their intentions, they are frequently only able to do so through collusion with objects. This occurs not in the taking up of a passive tool, but in joint efforts that recognize the object as equally essential and active as the character in bringing about a particular result. Throughout both *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, juju objects loom large as sources of power and possibility. Tutuola's characters might possess ancestral juju, but they also might steal them or receive them as gifts from benefactors they encounter on their journeys. The juju objects are never described in the text, but clearly have physical form as they can be held, placed into a pocket, and taken from one character by another. The lack of description allows the juju to take almost any form in

the reader's mind, a fitting ambiguity given that Tutuola's characters primarily use juju objects to enact transformations with seemingly limitless possibilities. The narrators of both novels frequently use juju to solve problems or escape danger, further illustrating Owomoyela's point that the characters' successes often have little to do with their own ingenuity. In juju, power is externalized and kept separate from the characters themselves, so impersonal that it can be taken up and used against them by another character. This formulation of human access to power as contingent on variable material conditions negates the idea that particular people are uniquely suited to power, or that their possession of it is permanent.

Tutuola does not simply overturn the status quo by relocating agency from powerful persons to supernatural objects. In a further, more nuanced shift, he recontextualizes humans as agential to the same extent as any other material object, collapsing the distinctions that hold subjects apart from objects. The relationships between Tutuola's characters and juju therefore do not involve exertions of unidirectional power from either participant. Rather, the relation is one of mutual submission and modification. Throughout *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the narrator can only perform magical acts through juju objects. He sometimes encounters objects that possess magic of their own and learns how to benefit from their operation without being able to change or control it, but the particular phenomenon that allows him to make his intentions reality only occurs when man and juju come together.[70] At no point in the novel does a juju object exert power without being activated and directed

[70] Magical objects that act out preset responses in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* include an egg that produces limitless food during a famine and then, when broken due to carelessness, produces millions of whips that flog the people expecting food. Yoruba folktales contain parallel objects that offer limitless food or violence when asked.

by a character, nor does a human character transform one thing into another without the aid of juju.[71] When Tutuola's characters wield the power of juju, the narrators say that they "use" the juju or sometimes that they "perform" it. The latter phrasing is particularly interesting, in that it turns away from the typical relationship between a person and an object used as a tool to instead suggest that a character and an object come together in an action that requires and exceeds them both. In a sentence that describes a character as performing a juju, the character is still semantically positioned as the subject that acts, but there is also a sense of subordination, as the character gives himself to a performance that dictates his actions.

The sense of a fusion in which man and juju both submit to and are modified by each other also marks the palm-wine drinkard's description of himself as "a juju-man."[72] Before undertaking the dangerous task of recovering the woman who later becomes his wife from a strange and unknown creature that she followed away from the market, the narrator sacrifices a goat to his juju, providing both spiritual and material currency to activate its power. Then, when he surveys the market, it is the narrator's status as "a juju-man" that enables him to recognize the creature at once, though it is disguised (206). By the narrator's own terms, he is already part man and part something else, augmented by the transformative power of the juju even before he has exercised it to change his form. To conflate oneself with an object is

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[71] While this is the case in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, one exception occurs in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. In that novel, the narrator gains the ability to perform magic without the aid of juju after "a ghost friend of [his] taught [him] the art of magic" (157). According to the narrator, the ghost would have withheld this knowledge had he known the narrator was a living person.

[72] In the manuscript of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola's cursive literally connects "juju" and "man" as one word, one phenomenon, by joining the "u" and "m" (18). Tutuola's cursive is quite regular throughout the manuscript and always includes clear spacing without any connection between the letters of distinct words. Nor does his rendering of "jujuman" resemble other instances in which he linked two distinct words with a hyphen in the manuscript, as in the case of "black-smith" or "human-being" (5, 20).

necessarily no mere absorption of a subordinate; it requires ceding some portion of identity and agency to the material thing that commands as well as serves the subject.

The coalition of juju and narrator ensures that characters are defined by their engagement with objects from the beginning of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, undermining anthropocentric emphasis on the category of human and redistributing its privilege throughout a network of material forms. That network includes the bush itself, which, as scholar Peter Kalliney notes, often manifests as a more nuanced personality in Tutuola's novels than his characters.[73] Where Kalliney and others have seen an inattention to character development or an expression of colonial abjection, I see a pattern of choices that intentionally decenter human experience. This is especially apparent in encounters that prompt Tutuola's characters to ponder their relationship to the environment. During their travels, the palm-wine drinkard and his wife find themselves in a bush where the trees do not drop dried sticks and leaves, thus denying them the materials they would need to build a cooking fire. Though they cannot make fire, the narrator and his wife find that there is a "sweet smelling in every part of the bush … just as if they were baking cakes, bread and roasting of fowls or meat" (233). Rather than exacerbating the characters' hunger, the smell alone satiates it. When the narrator and his wife attempt to rest beside a tree in this bush, the ground beneath them becomes so warm that they cannot bear to sit on it. When they attempt to drink water from a pond there, "the water drie[s] away from

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[73] Kalliney argues that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* "reverses the conventional fictional hierarchy of characters over setting" and that "Tutuola's characters are uniformly free of substantive interiority" (169). Drawing on Achille Mbembe's bare life reading of Tutuola's characters, Kalliney asserts that the lack of interiority expresses the characters' reduced situation as colonial subjects who are exposed to great hardship in the bush and whose "subjectivity has been annihilated by the immediacy of physical and psychological torture" (170).

[their] presence," preventing them from consuming any of the bush's resources. They notice that there are no living creatures in the bush and find that the ground has become too hot for them to even stand on for a prolonged period. Forced to move on, they conclude that this is a "greedy" bush that "[does] not like anybody to remain there any longer than necessary" (233). The greedy bush forces the characters to consciously acknowledge the impact their presence has on their environment, and to understand their very existence in the world as a continuous engagement with and use of material phenomena. As the satiating sweet smell demonstrates, a sensory encounter with the bush constitutes consumption, even if the characters do not intentionally gather its resources. Further, the withdrawal of the water from the characters suggests that the environment actively resists human access, revealing a capacity for material phenomena to reject the subordinate position accorded to them in an anthropocentric ontology.

As they travel further through the greedy bush, the palm-wine drinkard and his wife find that they are being laughed at by a row of palm trees. Just as the heat of the ground drove them forward previously, the deafening laughter forces the narrator and his wife to continue, leaving the greedy bush behind. But before they depart, the narrator examines the trees further, explaining:

> But when I rose up my head and looked at the top of them I noticed that they had heads, and the heads were artificial heads, but they were talking as human-beings, although they were talking with curious language, and the whole of them were smoking very big and long smoking pipes as they were looking at us, of course, we could not say where they got the pipes. We were so very curious

> to them as they had never seen human-beings before. (234)

The narrator's description of the artificial heads paints a strange picture for the reader, yet the passage ultimately emphasizes the strangeness of the narrator and his wife from the trees' perspective. Tutuola treads a careful line between anthropomorphizing the trees and challenging the assumption that the human form is a normative standard. The trees speak "as human-beings" and possess "artificial heads" that, lacking an alternative description and equipped with smoking pipes, are most easily imagined as taking the form of human heads. However, rather than suggesting a likeness between the trees and the human characters, the episode dissociates the humanlike traits and behaviors the trees display from human bodies. Tutuola perhaps means to make clear that these are not literally heads removed from human bodies and placed in the trees when he writes that the heads are "artificial," a distinction that strives to make the reader view the heads as wholly other, beyond the scope of familiar experience. The inexplicable presence of the pipes and the narrator's comment on their unknown origins also gestures toward material circulation and interactions beyond human purposes and access. By dismantling and distributing forms that are understood as intimate to humanity among creatures and objects that have no relationship to or even experience of humans, Tutuola suggests that what is prized as particular to humanity may not be so, thus disrupting the sanctity that holds humanity as a category apart from all other material existence. A similar effect is at work in Tutuola's description of the bush as "greedy." While it might appear that Tutuola is personifying the bush by attributing human affect to it, I argue that he is in fact stripping the concept of greed of its anthropomorphic associations. By asserting that greed is equivalent to withdrawal, to a disinclination to fully disclose

oneself or one's material recesses, Tutuola presents this supposedly human impulse as one that can be observed in all manner of material things.[74]

That Tutuola's project includes a reconsideration of human centrality is made even more explicit through encounters between human and bush in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Tutuola's second novel chronicles twenty-four years in the life of his narrator, who begins the novel as a young boy and unknowingly enters the bush of ghosts after being separated from his brother during an attack on their village. In the bush of ghosts, the narrator undergoes a series of perilous encounters with ghosts who wish to enslave, eat, or worship him. At times, he attempts to settle in the bush, marrying twice and passing as a dead man so the ghosts will accept his presence even though living persons are not permitted to live among them. Ultimately, his hybrid status prevents him from belonging in the bush of ghosts, so he resumes searching for a way to return to his own village, a goal he finally achieves at the end of the novel.

In the course of his travels in the bush of ghosts, the narrator ventures into areas of the bush that surprise him with acts of resistance, much the way the greedy bush does the palm-wine drinkard. While fleeing from a horde of ghosts intent on catching him, the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* suddenly finds that the ground he is running on is no longer a mute surface receiving his actions, but an animated entity that reacts to his steps as if they were blows.

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[74] In scenes like this, in which characters only become truly aware of objects when those objects resist the characters' attempts to use them, Tutuola offers a reading of human relation to objects that closely resembles philosopher Martin Heidegger's tool analysis, though Tutuola almost certainly never read Heidegger or directly encountered his ideas.

> I was still running away faster until I stepped into a part of the ground of this bush. But to my surprise at the same moment that I put my left foot on it to be still running away it was saying thus with a loud voice—"Don't smash me! oh don't smash me, don't walk on me, go back to those who are chasing you to kill you, it is paining me too much as you are smashing me." (84)

The bush's plea reorients the narrator's conception of himself and his environment; he becomes aware of the force he exerts on the ground as violence directed toward a sensing object. Indeed, his initial reaction is to withdraw his foot and test another patch of ground for reactivity, and now instead of perceiving his action as a step, he describes himself as "smashing" the ground. This reframing of the impact his body has on its environment centers around the bush's experience rather than his own. When the second area of ground protests in the same way, the narrator reflects on the sensitivity of the material consciousness he has discovered: "I stopped there and asked myself this question—'can land talk like a human being, or can land feel pain if somebody smashes it?'" The narrator asks the question "with a dead voice," as if his own animation pales in comparison to the ground that loudly cries out against him. While debating his next steps, the narrator sees the army of pursuing ghosts approaching, and "without hesitation … jump[s] onto this 'talking-land', running away" despite his newfound empathy for the bush. His flight leads him to another bush that, as if residing in thematic as well as geographic proximity to the talking bush, reacts to his presence by sounding an alarm "as if enemies are approaching a town" in direct response to his movements (85). The alarm forces the narrator to reconsider his movements, as the sound places him in further jeopardy by announcing his path to his pursuers.

These two bushes make perceptible the constant interplay of material phenomena that is rarely present to human consciousness. Tutuola not only foregrounds the potential of the physical environment to intervene in human experience, but also acknowledges the perpetual processes of intervention that are always occurring among bodies, objects, and substances in contact with one another. The bushes that talk and sound alarms make audible the impact Tutuola's narrator has on his environment, and allow that environment to push back, interrupting the narrator's efforts to flee and even prompting him to shift from thinking about his own peril to contemplating the perspective of material that he previously viewed as passive. The notion of a magically animated bush that can help or hinder human efforts is not Tutuola's invention, but his cultivation of a system of relations that treats all material objects, human or nonhuman, living or acellular, as equally viable participants sets him apart from his literary forbears. For example, Fagunwa's 1938 Yoruba novel, *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ̀*, translated into English by Wole Soyinka as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* in 1968, also features a scene in which the bush appears to rise up to intervene in the novel's events. However, there are important divergences between Fagunwa and Tutuola's portrayals of material reactivity that reveal the two authors' very different views of how agency is distributed and expressed in relations among human and nonhuman objects.

Fagunwa draws on plots and figures from Yoruba folktales in his novel; according to Owomoyela, he preserves the character of those plots much better than Tutuola does. Owomoyela and others argue that Tutuola plagiarized Fagunwa, reproducing images and situations from *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ̀* in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, then publishing his own novel in English before Fagunwa's had been

translated. Owomoyela sees Tutuola's imitation of Fagunwa as a poor one, making it all the more deplorable in his eyes that Tutuola has always been the more famous of the two, so much so that critics have sometimes described Fagunwa as being like Tutuola, even though Fagunwa's novel preceded Tutuola's by more than a decade.[75] In Fagunwa's novel, the brave hunter Akara-ogun travels through a wilderness teeming with strange creatures. During one encounter, Akara-ogun commands the material features of his environment in battle against Agbako, a sixteen-eyed monster whose body is a hybrid of palm leaves and metal. However, instead of the directed manipulation of the environment that he intends, Fagunwa's hero finds that his commands result in attacks that are wielded against him as well as his foe:

> I ordered the road to seize him, and it seized him and cast him in the bush. But even as the road obeyed me, so did it heave me also, and I found myself right in front of Agbako. I was terrified and conjured earth to return me to the road, and so it did. But even as I emerged on the road, who should await me there but Agbako! This time I invoked *ogede and* commanded the road to return him to the bush where the ropes of the forest would bind him. And the road obeyed and the forest bound him.
>
> But just as he was flung into the bush even so I was served, and I found myself face to face with him and the ropes began to bind me. When the thongs began to strangle, I yelled on the forest to release me and set me back on the road. It obeyed. Needless to say, Agbako was there to welcome me. (23)

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[75] Owomoyela reads critics' tendency to liken Fagunwa to Tutuola as symptomatic of the prominence that, in his view and that of critics such as Abiola Irele, has unduly been afforded to Tutuola "at Fagunwa's expense" (Owomoyela 123).

Akara-ogun initially implies that he has mastery over material phenomena that "obey" him, but he finds that his control is merely illusory, as the material effects he elicits do not discern between him and Agbako.

This dissonance between human will and material response might have been used to critique Akara-ogun's assumption that the environment is a passive object he can control, much the way Tutuola's narrators are forced to consider whether affects and impulses they think of as exclusively human might also exist in nonhuman forms of experience and expression. But it turns out that the road, vines, and bush are not active participants in Fagunwa's scene at all. Rather, as Akara-ogun's statement that he "conjured the earth" and his more explicit statement that he "invoked *ogede* and commanded the road" make clear, Akara ogun is performing spells that animate the environment. In the glossary of "Yoruba and unfamiliar words" that Soyinka provides in his translation of Fagunwa's text, *ogede* is defined as "a spell for paralysing an enemy." Thus, when Akara-ogun "commands" parts of his environment, he is in fact performing spells that translate his will into material effects, mediating his relationship to the environment and foreclosing any possibility of the kind of material intervention that occurs in Tutuola.[76] The environment as Fagunwa writes it expresses only a neutrality that places it beyond meaningful intervention in Akara-ogun's conflict. Instead of exploring the complexity of material relations, Fagunwa attends to the unpredictable nature of magic, an emphasis that comports with both Akara-ogun's earlier experience with magic in the novel and the Yoruba tendency to use stories to

[76] Nor are these spells linked to objects that one might carry in a pocket or hold like those described by Tutuola, a further material absence in Fagunwa compared to Tutuola.

deliver morals that often promote caution and good sense.[77]

Whereas Tutuola uses material intervention to collapse the comfortable distance between human and nonhuman categories, Fagunwa affirms that distance by depicting the material environment as a passive substance that is shaped by the spells Akara-ogun invokes. Fagunwa and Tutuola are working with many of the same folktale elements, some of which Tutuola very likely sourced directly from the pages of *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ̀*, but Tutuola is using these borrowed pieces of Yoruba stories to far different ends than either Fagunwa or the Yoruba folktales that preceded both writers.[78] If Tutuola fails to adhere to Yoruba patterns and ideals to the extent that Owomoyela suggests, he also introduces an alternative set of priorities and ideas through that revision. By disrupting human primacy, Tutuola directs fragments of Yoruba folktales toward a critique of anthropocentrism as well as colonialism. To do so, he not only recasts the material world as an active participant in the drama of his novels, but also reimagines how objects, including humans, interact with other objects, drawing provocative conclusions about how objects are transformed, created, and linked through those relations.

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[77] When Akara-ogun first uses a spell in the novel, he invokes *egbe*, which returns him from the bush to the safety of his home. Shamed by his hasty retreat, Akara-ogun uses *egbe* to return himself to the bush, but instead of returning him to the exact spot he was in when he used the spell to flee the bush, he finds himself atop a palm tree that is "punctured by a hundred spikes" (17). The unexpected results that his spells produce, both when Akara-ogun uses *egbe* and when he attempts to defeat Agbako through enchantment, resonate thematically with the edifying Yoruba proverbs that Fagunwa uses throughout the novel. For example, later in the novel, Akara-ogun reflects that "whatever it is that man attempts by gentleness does not come to grief, but that which we handle with violence rebounds on us with equal toughness" (85). As Owomoyela notes, this observation is a direct translation of a "well-known Yoruba proverb" (91).

[78] Tutuola took great pains to emphasize his limited contact with Fagunwa's novel, while also acknowledging that he had read at least parts of the text. In his July 1978 interview with Lindfors, Tutuola said he encountered Fagunwa's novel when he was in school in 1938. Lacking the money to buy the book, he asserts that he borrowed it from a classmate and only read it for "about thirty minutes" before returning it, then had no further contact with Fagunwa's novel before writing his own early novels.

Perceptual and Material Multiplicity in Object Relations

Recontextualizing humans within a wider field of variously animate and agential material objects allows Tutuola to treat human perception as a form of material relation. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts,* Tutuola frequently depicts potent interactions between objects through the register of visual perception. Using perception as a representative mode of relation between objects, Tutuola presents episodes in which objects command, capture, and change one another through acts of seeing and being seen. Making perception a fulcrum upon which relational shifts between objects occur allows Tutuola to take advantage of the mutability associated with subjective perception to posit a similar instability in objects. In doing so, he dramatizes the changeability of perception articulated by Gestalt psychologists, thus engaging ideas that shaped global aesthetic and philosophical discussions in his moment. However, Tutuola goes further, using those ideas to offer a reading of materiality that anticipates late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century object-oriented ontologies. Ultimately, Tutuola's novels suggest that the multiplicity that marks objects is not a product of human perceptual complexity, but of the dynamics that shape material relations at large. This assertion furthers his project of disrupting human exceptionalism, supporting a material ontology that not only rejects the idea that some objects take precedence over others, but also undermines colonialist narratives predicated on the idea that immovable hierarchical structures dictate relations between objects.

Tutuola frequently calls attention to the material efficacy of perception, treating

it as an exertion both of the body's sensory faculties on the environment and of perceived phenomena impressing themselves on the sensorium. In both novels, acts of looking and being seen effect transformation, violence, and deliverance, compelling Tutuola's characters and propelling plot. In the following discussion, I use examples from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* to illustrate how perceived phenomena compel viewers, while episodes from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* offer the inverse model, in which the force of perception captures that which is seen. At several points in My *Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the narrator functions as a spectacle for the ghosts who torment him. In these scenes, the narrator describes the ghosts' motivations entirely in terms of their desire for and response to visual spectacle. During the narrator's first captivity, in which he is held by a group of "smelling-ghosts," he is brought into a circle of ghosts who surround and examine him "with much astonishment." The king smelling-ghost then performs a series of transformations upon the narrator, forcing him to take the form of various animals while the ghosts watch. The narrator explains that the ghosts were silent and "motionless as dolls" as they looked at him, "because none of them had ever seen an earthly person in his or her life" (36). As in the encounter between the narrator and the noisy bush later in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in which the narrator contemplates the sentience of the bush with a "dead voice" as though his own agency and vitality decline while something he viewed as passive emerges as sensing and responsive, the spectacle of the narrator transfixes the smelling-ghosts and renders them more object-like in their compulsive observation.

Though seemingly powerless and subject to the whims of his captors, the narrator nonetheless accesses a position of power in his unwilled command of the

ghosts' attention and, consequently, their bodies. In the following days, the king of the smelling-ghosts transforms the narrator into a horse and rides him to visit other towns, where the ghost inhabitants are eager to imbibe as much sensory experience of the narrator as possible.

> But within an hour that he entered and left the attendants with me all the rest of the young ghosts and old ghosts of that area would surround me and look at me with great surprise. Sometimes these young or children ghosts would be touching my eyes with their fingers or sticks, so that perhaps I would feel it or cry and they would hear how my voice would be. He spent almost one hour in any house he was entering, because he would eat and drink together with everyone that he was visiting to their satisfaction before the whole of them would come out and look at me for about half an hour. (38)

The ghosts apparently recognize the narrator as an earthly person even though he is in the form of a horse, as though the transformation is merely a costume beneath which they can still distinguish the novel form of a living human among them. Just as the ghosts satisfy their appetites by feasting, they demonstrate an appetite for the sensory experiences of seeing, touching, and hearing the narrator. The visual spectacle of the narrator becomes a desirable commodity that draws praise and celebration for the king of the smelling-ghosts and prompts actions within the ghost community. Later, the smelling-ghost is invited to a conference of ghosts because "all of them wanted to see [the narrator] as a horse," a novel spectacle that relies on both the narrator's human state and his transformed one even though he will only be displayed in the

form of a horse (40).[79] It is just before they set out for the conference that the narrator steals a juju and escapes from the smelling-ghost, leading the ghost to lament that "all the ghosts who invited [him] are waiting to see [him] on a horse" (41). The smelling-ghost understands the loss of the narrator primarily as a loss of an image he longed to present, rather than a loss of the narrator's labor or his flesh, a resource that he once considered eating before recognizing the narrator's potential as an object for exhibition. The smelling-ghosts' sensory fascination with the narrator dictates their actions as they anticipate, extend, and surrender their attention to perceptual encounters with him.

The narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* frequently finds himself serving as a spectacle for ghosts' enjoyment, and being seen often activates the next event in his story.[80] But so does the narrator experience the phenomenon of being compelled into action by visual spectacle. When he is fleeing a ghost army and encounters the bush that sounds alarm whenever he moves, he initially stops moving in surprise and fear, and finds that the alarms do not sound as long as he is still. Despite his desire to prevent the alarms from revealing his location to the ghosts pursuing him, the narrator decides to risk revealing himself when he sees a "very ugly ghostess" whose appearance is as

[79] In other words, the repressed image (of the narrator's human form) is as essential to the perceptual phenomenon he presents as the dominant image (of the narrator as a horse). In this regard, the undecidability of transformed bodies and objects in Tutuola's novels evokes the hybridity of multistable images like the Duck-Rabbit, which I discussed earlier in this study, and Rubin's vase, which I will return to later in this chapter.

[80] One example in which sight seems to almost mechanically prompt action in the text occurs when the narrator is confined in a dark room while held captive in the ninth town of ghosts. The room is filled with "about a thousand snakes," the largest of which "vomit[s] a kind of coloured lights" that illuminate the room, allowing the narrator and the snakes to see each other. The narrator explains, "after all of the snakes saw me clearly through the lights then they disappeared at once with the lights and then the room became as dark as before," suggesting that the snakes' perception of the narrator has a causal relationship to their disappearance and the continuation of the series of procedures the narrator is subjected to (67).

novel and compelling to him as his own was to the smelling ghosts:

> Her ugly appearance was so curious to me that I was chasing her as she was running away to see her ugliness clearly to my satisfaction, because I had never seen such a very ugly creature as this since I was born and since entered the Bush of Ghosts.
>
> Again, at the same moment that I left the place that I stood behind this tree the alarms started to blow according to how I was chasing this ugly ghostess and I was unable to stop in one place so that the alarms might stop, my aim was only to see the ugliness of this ugly ghostess clearly. (86)

Like the smelling-ghosts before him, the narrator cannot resist his sensory appetite for the spectacle of the ugly ghostess. He pursues her in hopes of the opportunity to view her clearly and without interruption, a prolonged perceptual consumption that will bring about satisfaction. Despite the peril that chasing the ghostess puts him in, the narrator is "unable" to stop, suggesting that the spectacle literally captivates the narrator and limits the actions available to him. Even when the narrator realizes the ghosts who are chasing him are following the alarms and are now so near that they can see him, he consciously prioritizes his need to view the ugly ghostess over his safety, and remarks upon the irregularity of that choice.

> I determined to see or to look at the ugliness of this ghostess to my satisfaction and said— "It is better for me to die than to leave this ugly ghostess and run away without seeing her ugliness clearly to my entire satisfaction.
>
> "This will be a great surprise to everybody to hear that I see

something which is more interesting for me than the 'death' which is coming behind to kill me." (87)

The aesthetic draw of an anomalous sensory experience is so great that it supersedes the narrator's impulse toward self-preservation.[81] In a narrative largely built on the narrator's flight from a series of dangers as he tries to survive the bush of ghosts, this departure calls attention to perception as a form of enchantment that Tutuola treats as more powerful than the supernatural abilities of ghosts and juju.

For Tutuola, the captivating force of perception can originate both from perceived phenomena and from the subjects and mechanisms accessing sensory content. A viewer might be transfixed by a fascinating object, but so might an object (or subject) be seized by a gaze. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, looking functions as an action that exerts control and even violence on those who are seen. One of the most direct examples of this efficacy is the Spirit of Prey, a creature that embodies the concept of a perilous gaze. The Spirit of Prey's fearsome form, featuring the head of a lion and a body that is the size of a hippopotamus and covered in large, hard scales, appears well-suited to subduing prey through physical contact. However, the creature need not use these attributes at all to capture and kill. Instead,

if this "Spirit of Prey" wanted to catch his prey, he would simply be looking at it

[81] As is particularly evident in the manuscript of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola tends to use quotations both to denote speech and to emphasize important statements, even if no character is voicing them aloud. In this instance, both functions seem to be at play; the narrator specifies that he spoke the quoted words, and also calls attention to how unusual he expects his audience will find his statement. When the narrator expresses that it "will be a great surprise to everybody to hear" that he would risk death to look at the ugly ghostess, there are two levels of audience that may be invoked: the reader receiving the statement in the text, and the immediate environment that hears his statement as it is spoken. This apparent mixing of immediate and mediated audiences also emphasizes the text's transformation of oral storytelling forms.

> and stand in one place, he was not chasing his prey about, and when he focused the prey well, then he would close his large eyes, but before he would open his eyes, his prey would be already dead and drag itself to him at the place that he stood. (235)

The Spirit of Prey's gaze is striking in its specifically material consequences. The gaze is not merely intimidating and thus paralyzing, nor is it a hypnotic stare that captures its object psychologically and influences its actions. The fatal gaze apparently seizes matter rather than consciousness, such that dead prey and even inanimate objects, such as the bags that hold the narrator and his wife's belongings, drag themselves toward it. Looking is here a violent and irresistible exertion of the viewer on whatever is seen, a seizure that not only enables but physically carries out the collection and consumption of prey.

Medusa- or basilisk-like in its ability to alter an object's material state, Tutuola's Spirit of Prey blends the power of a magical gaze with the function of a technological apparatus. The necessity of closing its eyes to capture prey recalls the motion of a camera shutter, a closure that enacts the material impression of an image. The moment the perceived prey's image is irretrievably recorded in the mechanism of the Spirit of Prey's eyes, the prey is captured, and a process of consumption begins. The Spirit of Prey projects itself onto its environment through the bodily act of perception, and that act has tangible effects on whatever is subjected to its gaze. The weight of exposure to that gaze, too, is not merely figurative; the narrator describes the Spirit of Prey's eyes as projecting "a flood-light like mercury in colour" onto the objects it targets. As the Spirit of Prey looks at the narrator and his wife, they feel "heat as if [they] had bathed with water," so much so that the narrator admits he "nearly fainted with suffocation" (236). To be

subjected to the Spirit of Prey's sight for any amount of time is to undergo physical pressures. As with its camera-like method of capture, the force of the gaze is described in terms reminiscent of technological processes. The description of a floodlight that shines with a color like mercury and produces heat links the Spirit of Prey's eyes to electrical lights, as well as to the dangers of technology that engages chemical power. Tutuola folds that power into his formulation of the body and its perceptual faculties, treating perception as an exertion of calibrated energy. In this case, the act of looking has a measurable efficacy that is determined by the quality of focus. The narrator explains that it is only once the Spirit of Prey has "focused the prey well" that it can execute the process of capturing the prey by closing its eyes. Focusing on the prey such that a clear image is available to seize is apparently essential to the spirit's hunting process, further establishing the creature's similarity to a camera in function. According to the narrator, he and his wife escape the Spirit of Prey because the creature "did not remember to close his eyes" after paralyzing them with the heat of his floodlight gaze, and instead switches his focus to a buffalo, giving the characters time to hide (236). The Spirit of Prey does not re-emerge from the bush following this escape, but the exertion of focus as a grasp that seizes both the characters and their images does return in a subsequent encounter.

At a later point in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the narrator and his wife find their journey impeded by a river they cannot cross. While following the river's bank in hopes of finding a way around it, they come upon an enormous white tree, described as "one thousand and fifty feet in length and about two hundred feet in diameter." As soon as the characters have taken in the tree's appearance, however, the striking object looks back, and danger emerges once more in the form of a physically captivating gaze:

> As we were about forty yards away from it, there we noticed that somebody peeped out and was focusing us as if a photographer was focusing somebody. So, at the same time we saw him focusing us like that, we started to run to our left, but he turned to that place too, and we turned to our right again, and he did so, and still focusing us like that and we did not see who was focusing us, but only that tree which was turning as we were doing. (246)

This time, Tutuola makes explicit the connection to the working of a camera and describes the focusing that the tree facilitates as a peril from which the characters must flee. They attempt to interrupt the focusing process before they or their images can be captured, but the tree tracks their movements and shifts accordingly, like a head obligingly turning toward an object that draws the eye. Visual arrest progresses to bodily seizure when a loud voice commands the narrator and his wife to enter the tree, then large hands extend from the tree to pick them up and draw them into it.

Once inside, the characters are welcomed by an old woman who calls herself the Faithful-Mother. The woman leads them into a grand hall inside the tree that is richly decorated, where the characters discover that before their bodies were transported into the tree, their images were captured and reproduced. In the center of the hall are "many images," including those of the narrator and his wife. Based on Tutuola's usage of the word "image" elsewhere, he almost certainly refers to graven images or statues here, though critics have sometimes read this moment as representing other forms of visual likenesses of the characters.[82] Regardless of the medium of the images, the narrator

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[82] Matthew Omelsky, for example, describes the images the characters encounter in the white tree as "photographs of themselves displayed on the wall" (85). At other moments in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, it is more obvious that Tutuola uses the word "image" to refer to statues, such as when he describes "an image which sat down on a flat stone, it had two long breasts with deep eyes," and "another image with a

wonders how such precise reproductions of him and his wife could exist in the tree at the very moment they have arrived in it, and links the images' formation to the focusing that captured the characters before the tree seized their bodies: "our own images that we saw there resembled us too much and were also white colour, but we were very surprised to meet our own images there, perhaps somebody who was focusing us as a photographer at the first time before the hands drew us inside the white tree had made them, we could not say" (248). The immediacy of the reproduction suggests the instantaneous capture of an image, like that of the Spirit of Prey's shutter-like blink. So, too, does the progression from focusing on a sensory impression of an object to physically drawing it nearer and capturing it follow the operation of the Spirit of Prey's irresistible gaze. The exertion of focus from the tree, or someone within it, apparently assured the characters' capture before it was carried out, such that their images preceded their bodies into the tree. When asked about the images, the Faithful-Mother explains that she keeps them "for remembrance and to know those she was helping from their difficulties and punishments" (249). Thus, the focused looking that pursued the narrator and his wife seems to have not only shaped their actions as they attempted to flee, but also activated their relationship with the Faithful-Mother. Before the hands of the tree made physical contact with the characters, and before they passed into the tree, their images were inscribed as those of two more beneficiaries of the Faithful-Mother's kindness. By

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full basket of colas on its front," from which the narrator takes a cola nut (237). This distinction is an important one not only because the white tree thus combines the photographic focusing with the production of a more tactile, embodied representation of the characters, but also because graven images bear particular significance within Yoruba culture. According to Owomoyela, it is Yoruba practice to "[set] up carved images (*ère*) as the ultimate standard of beauty" (17). Thus, the graven images represent an intersection of modern technology and Yoruba aesthetics, while also concretizing the Faithful-Mother's benevolence as an entity who will restore and improve the beleaguered characters.

reproducing the characters as statues, the Faithful-Mother engages in memorializing aid she has not yet rendered, a premature remembrance that writes the characters' relation to her in stone and affords her a doubled possession of the characters. Looking here does not merely foretell, but rather launches a chain of material interactions.

Like the Spirit of Prey's gaze, the focusing that originates from the white tree acts directly on material bodies and objects. In this and numerous other interactions in both *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, seeing and seen bodies act on each other through perception as a channel of relation. These effects include psycho- and physiological compulsions to action as well as observable alterations of material bodies and environments. The seizures that the Spirit of Prey and the white tree carry out by focusing on objects mimic and extend the mechanical functions of a camera, but these novels also feature moments when perception facilitates interactions between objects that result not only in compulsion and capture, but transformation. Tutuola makes use of the mutability of perception in these episodes, extending the way an image might seem to abruptly shift before one's eyes to total transformations where a material object radically changes form. Given that Tutuola does away with the presumption that human perception of objects differs meaningfully from any other kind of material relation, Tutuola's relocation of mutability from the mechanism of human perception to material objects themselves significantly revises the anthropocentric perspective from which early-twentieth-century psychologists studied the perception of objects. Rather than assuming that the complexity of subjective cognition renders human access to objects multistable, Tutuola's treatment of perception suggests that the instability is inherent in material relations in general, and thus turns toward the object as the source of complexity. In

doing so, he surpasses the scientific and aesthetic discussions of his time concerning the perception of objects and prefigures the shift to object-oriented ontologies that would emerge in the following century.

While many episodes from Tutuola's first two novels link perception with transformation, two examples in particular best illustrate the movement Tutuola makes from perceptual to material changeability. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, after the narrator and his wife have enjoyed the Faithful-Mother's hospitality for more than a year, they are told they must leave the white tree and continue their journey. The Faithful-Mother escorts them out, where they face once again the river that prevented their crossing when they first encountered the tree. Still without a means of crossing, the characters look to the Faithful-Mother for direction.

> After a while, she picked up a small stick like a match stick on the ground and she threw it on that river, but at the same moment, there we found a narrow bridge which crossed the river to the other edge. Then she told us to cross it to the other edge or the second side, but she stood in the same place, at the same time that we reached the end of the other edge, she stretched out her hand and touched the bridge, but it was only that stick we saw in her hand. (252)

The immediacy with which the stick shifts to a bridge and back leaves no room for a visible process of change. Rather, the effect produced reads more like an optical illusion, a tweaking of perspective that reveals a phenomenon that appeared as one thing has in fact been something else, too, all along.

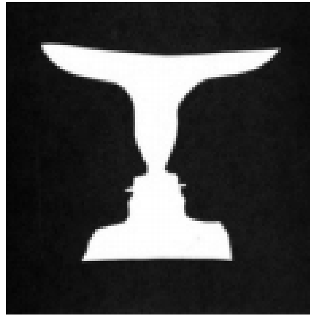

Figure 4.1: Edgar Rubin, Rubin's vase, 1915.

This is the shapeshifting magic of multistability, as demonstrated in figures cited by Gestalt psychologists and discussed earlier in this study, including the Duck-Rabbit and Rubin's vase (fig. 4.1). But the object that is both stick and bridge is not merely an illusion or an image that the eye can be coaxed into perceiving, nor is it an object that transforms merely through application, such as a stick used as a tool or a suitably sized piece of wood implemented as a bridge to cross a small stream. It is physically accessible, manifest to all the senses, and able to function as a bridge that allows the narrator and his wife to cross the wide river that halted their progress.

Tutuola's transformation of the stick into a bridge and back invokes multiplicity beyond appearance, investing the material world with the changeability of shifting images. The object that shifts between stick and bridge is a multistable composition that exceeds the collaboration of individual objects that jointly produce an effect. The tiny stick and the bridge large enough to cross a wide river are radically different manifestations of one unified thing. Both are present in the sensory stimuli of a bridge that the narrator knows to have been a stick a moment ago, and the stick in the Faithful-Mother's hand that was a bridge when she touched it, yet only one of these two expressions of the object can be sensually accessed at any given moment. There is no transitional phase of morphing, in which the object lengthens or shrinks; it simply is

observed as one thing, and then as another.

This perceptual process is strikingly similar to the one that an image like Rubin's vase induces, in which the viewer's perspective shifts between seeing the figure of a vase against an empty background and the figure of two faces, with the part of the image that was the vase now mere empty space between them. Try as one might, it is only possible to access one of the available arrangements of the image at a time. One can know that the image can be construed as either the vase or the faces, can imagine the two faces and the vase together when they think of the image, but when it comes to the visual encounter, only one of these figural arrangements can emerge as dominant at a time. As Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka wrote in reference to a similar image, the part of the image that recedes as ground for the other figure to emerge ceases, in that moment of viewing, to exist. Yet, insofar as the whole image remains unchanged, and the alternative figure's latent presence might at any moment reemerge, the figure of the vase and the figure of the faces both exist, are both contained in the image. Like the stick and the bridge, the paradoxical figures exist in both simultaneity and alternation, unified as a single whole, but sensually immediate only in turns. As in the example of the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* being transformed into and displayed as a human in the form of a horse for ghosts who did not witness the transformation, the form that is repressed is equally present and significant even as the object manifests as something else entirely. In Tutuola's novels, the plasticity of perception is extended to the sensory totality of objects. When a stick suddenly presents as a bridge, it's not because the perceiver has seen through an illusion and recognized the true bridge form that was hiding beneath the stick all along. Instead, the stick-and-bridge object extends

the phenomenon in which one perceptual organization recedes into nonexistence in favor of another, bringing the changeability of perspective into the realm of physical transformation.

By translating multistability into a property of material phenomena, Tutuola preserves the active, responsive nature of the objects that make up his bush environment and emphasizes the efficacy of perception as an actuating force on those objects. When other objects change form in The *Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, their alteration is described in similar terms to that of the stick-bridge. Transformation is immediate and unobservable; there are no intervening phases in which an object is partly one thing and partly another. Rather, change is announced in the same moment it occurs, and is often marked primarily as a change in visual stimuli. What the narrator saw as one object suddenly appears as another, as when the narrator and his wife watch the Faithful-Mother reach out and touch the bridge, "but it was only that stick [they] saw in her hand." A second example, drawn from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, further illustrates that Tutuola's emphasis on perception in transformations is no mere accident of language, but a repeated figuration of perception as intervening in the material expression of multistable objects.

When the narrator is held captive by the king smelling-ghost, he endures a cycle of transformations in which the ghost uses juju to change the narrator into a horse to ride and a camel that he can loan out to perform labor. These routine transformations provide the narrator with a chance to escape when he manages to steal the juju that the smelling-ghost uses to transform him. The narrator flees from the smelling-ghost, and when he realizes he cannot outrun the ghost, he uses

the juju to transform himself into a cow, which enables him to escape the smelling-ghost. However, after escaping, the narrator realizes he has no way to change himself back into a person, as he does "not know another juju which [the smelling-ghost] was using before [to change him] back to an earthly person" (42). Trapped in cow form, the narrator is seized by a group of cow herders who put him among their herd.[83] Eventually, the herders sell the narrator to a woman who intends to sacrifice him in the hopes of enticing a god to heal her daughter's blindness. Right before the sacrifice, the narrator narrowly escapes from the group of villages who were preparing to kill him. The narrator remains in danger after fleeing the scene of the sacrifice, however, as the villagers pursue him. Knowing the villagers are seeking him with weapons, the narrator, still in cow form, attempts to evade them:

> As I was running helter-skelter in that bush for my life I mistakenly fell into a very deep pond which was full of water as it was in the rainy season and also covered by the weeds which disallowed me from seeing that there was a pond. But to my surprise, immediately I saw my shadow in this water that I was a cow in form I changed to a person as before I used the smelling-ghost's juju which changed me so. (48)

The narrator's encounter with the pond stages two significant transformations. In the first, perception is displaced as what the narrator took for solid ground asserts itself as something else, revising the narrator's perception in the process. The second

[83] The narrator in fact exclusively refers to the herders as "cow-men," a descriptor of their livelihood that mirrors the narrator's own hybrid relation to cow and human forms (42).

transformation occurs in reverse, as perception initiates material change in an apparent alignment of the narrator's understanding of himself and the physical form he occupies. According to the narrator, the key to transformation is in seeing himself as a cow, a vision that causes him to instantaneously revert to his human form. The abrupt shift recalls the multistable images in which a viewer's examination enacts the exchange of one figural arrangement for another, but instead of a recalibration that merely occurs in the viewer's interpretation of an unchanged stimulus, this change locates malleability in the material stimulus itself. This application of multistability to material objects rather than to human cognition is particularly important because it is not merely a byproduct of enchantment used as a plot device. Rather, the plasticity Tutuola accords to material objects is accompanied by a tension between mutually exclusive and yet simultaneously present forms that persists beyond moments of magical transformation.

The concurrent estrangement and recognition in the vision of his reflection that returns the narrator to his human form are grounded in the narrator's relationship to cow and human forms during and after his time as a cow. Though the herders mistake him as one of their own cows, the narrator clings decisively to the knowledge that he is in fact a person. Despite inhabiting the body of a cow, he asserts that he is physically unable to eat grass, because he is "not a real cow" (44). He repeatedly makes this distinction, suggesting that the men and the other cows are merely deceived by an appearance that conceals his nature. Eventually, his failure to behave or eat like a cow leads the herders to sell him, believing that he is sick. This dissonance between his physical form and identity is fitting enough, given that the narrator retains his human consciousness while a cow, but it is more remarkable that the notion of an appearance that conceals the whole

remains once he reverts to human form. While he is still in the pond, newly returned to his human form, the group hunting the escaped cow approaches. The narrator feigns ignorance and asks what they are looking for, then claims to have seen the cow, directing them further into the bush. The narrator reports that the pursuant villagers believe him and continue their chase in the direction he indicated "because they thought [he] was one of them" (49). Significantly, the deception this statement suggests links the narrator to his cow form. The villagers could not have thought the narrator was a member of the party searching for the cow; his own inquiry as to what they are looking for negates such a possibility. Rather, when the narrator suggests that he has fooled the villagers into thinking him one of them, he refers to having convinced them that he is only a person, rather than a cow. As indicated above, the narrator is adamant throughout his time in cow form that he remains a person rather than a cow, and yet compared to the villagers, he is something in between; not a real cow, but not merely a person either.[84] As with the stick that becomes a bridge and then a stick once more, transformation is not an erasure of a previous form, but a setting aside of one form so another can be accessed. The displaced form remains; it continues to be expressed as part of the totality of the object, and it may reemerge at any moment.

Indeed, throughout both novels, Tutuola's persistent efforts to reassert the links between pronouns and particular objects in his prose gestures toward the ease with which things can slip in and out of particular relations and forms in his texts. He does

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[84] Indeed, when the description of these events concludes, and the narrator begins to describe his next misadventure of note, he introduces it as occurring "when it was about three months that I left them or changed from a cow to a person" (49). By measuring time with reference to his change in forms, the narrator asserts the continued relevance of the cow form to his current state, and deemphasizes the supposed primacy of his human form.

this by referring to a thing or person, and then immediately following the word with an alternative identification in parentheses. This practice exceeds the need to clarify grammatical ambiguity, sometimes to the point of inane redundancy. In one instance in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the narrator uses a charm to change himself and his wife into a fire to avoid harm from a group of inhuman creatures that resemble white pillars. The narrator's description of the encounter includes repeated parenthetical assertions of the correlation between the narrator and his wife and the fire they have transformed into: "all of them were coming toward us (fire) and when they reached the fire (us) the whole of them surrounded it … although they could not do anything to that fire (us)" (224). This example recalls the care the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* takes to assert his status as a person while he is in cow form, and marks yet another occurrence of a thing that has been supernaturally transformed being recognized as multiple. At another moment in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the narrator restates the nouns he is referring to though no transformation has occurred and little room for misinterpretation resides in the sentences. In the course of describing a scheme by which a stranger met on the road blames the narrator and his wife for the murder of a prince, the narrator repeatedly offers parenthetical clarification:

> he (the killer of the Prince) knew that if the king realised who killed his son he (king) would kill the man. … When we reached the palace, they loosened the bag and saw it was the dead body of the king's son (prince) … early in the morning, the king told the attendants to wash and dress us with the finest clothes and put us on horse and they (attendants) must take us around the town for seven days … after that he (king) should kill us as we killed his son. (272)

Without the parenthetical additions, the above text would remain less ambiguous than any number of sentences throughout *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in which clarification is needed and not provided. As the manuscript of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* illustrates, Tutuola originally used these parenthetical clarifications even more frequently; his editors removed many of the parentheticals they apparently deemed unnecessary.[85]

Tutuola's use of parenthetical identifications suggests an anxiety that the reader may not understand his meaning, but the redundancy also emphasizes the slippery tendency of objects to become other objects at any time. Tutuola uses language to doubly pin down his objects in these examples, training his reader to attend to shifting relations and keep the object in mind even if it should undergo a transformation that removes it from view. A similar awareness can be discerned in his tendency to describe objects as being "used as" a particular implement or resource. When the drinkard travels to Death's home shortly after beginning his series of adventures, he sees that Death is "using skeleton bones of human-beings as fuel woods and skull heads of

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[85] At least once, this alteration shifted the meaning of a sentence, allowing one pronoun to shift to another referent. In the manuscript, Tutuola writes "I rolled up the net with him (Death) and put him on my head and I kept going to the old man's house who told me to go and bring him (Death)" (9). In the published text, the editor removed the first parenthetical reference to Death entirely, and removed the parentheses from the second, making the "him" at the end of the sentence refer to the old man instead of to Death: "I rolled up the net with him and put him on my head and I kept going to the old man's house who told me to go and bring him Death" (198). This alteration is trivial, but illustrates a larger pattern in which even minimal editorial intervention sometimes shifted Tutuola's meaning, or created meaning where none was intended. More significantly, many senseless parentheticals were retained in the text that appear to have merely been the result of Tutuola rewriting the same word more clearly when he was concerned his cursive was not sufficiently legible. This is apparent because Tutuola specifically rewrites the exact same word in capital print letters in these cases, rather than presenting a clarifying or alternative term (see examples on manuscript pages 48 and 55, where Tutuola rewrites the words "houses" and "scratch" in capital letters in parentheses).The intentionally lax editing thus not only retained errors Tutuola asked be corrected, but also introduced further unusual repetitions through careless interpretation of Tutuola's amendments and clarifications in the text, potentially making Tutuola's use of the English language seem more alien and less competent.

human-beings as his basins, plates and tumblers etc." (197). Later, the drinkard gives his wife a paddle he carved from a tree, then uses juju to transform himself into a canoe. Over the next month, the drinkard's wife "use[s] the canoe as 'ferry' to carry passengers across the river," earning money they can exchange for resources (222). In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the narrator explains that the smelling-ghost's sons "were using [him] as transport to carry heavy loads" when he was in the form of a camel (40). When the narrator later meets his dead cousin in the tenth town of ghosts, he learns how his cousin has worked to establish a Christian church and school there. Lacking paper, slates, and chalk, the dead cousin "cut a 4 ft. sq. flat bark of a tree as blackboard and also cut 1 ft. sq. for each of the scholars as slates and all were using coal as chalks" (148). Rather than solidifying an object as becoming what a person uses it for (i.e., a blackboard made of bark), Tutuola maintains the distance between the manifold thing and the particular use it might be put to, keeping its prior role in view and leaving room for it to morph into something else. The same way the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* clings to a human identity that exceeds any particular use he might be put to by the smelling-ghosts, Tutuola's objects also retain a complexity that is not absorbed by any use, modification, or label that might be applied to them.

In this treatment of objects as manifold beyond the access conferred in any particular relation, Tutuola shares much with contemporary theorists of object-oriented ontology. Though it emerged in the early twenty-first century, object-oriented ontology represents a response to and evolution of ideas about material phenomena that were of great interest throughout the prior century, when vast innovations and revisions of knowledge challenged notions of one unchanging and indisputable reality. By infusing

material objects with multistability, Tutuola builds a fictional world that models concepts object-oriented ontologists would not theorize for another fifty years. Tutuola's representation of objects in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* comports with object-oriented ontology as defined by one of its founders and main proponents, Graham Harman, in several major ways. Tutuola treats all objects, including humans, as equally object-like. Human perception functions as a form of material relation because it is an interaction taking place between material objects. All objects are subject to transformation through relations with each other, and all are empowered as potential initiators of transformation. Yet objects are also inaccessibly more than the phenomena they might be accessed as in any particular relation. In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman emphasizes that because things are never fully accessible to each other, "any object, at any level of the world, has a reality that can be endlessly explored and viewed from numberless perspectives without ever being exhausted by the sum of these perspectives" (76). In Harman's object-oriented ontology, all relations are partial, and thus "relationality in general" must always "reduce things to mere caricatures of themselves" (74). One perception of a thing can never fully encapsulate its whole being, nor can all the possible perceptions of the thing add up to the thing itself. Further, Harman asserts that this quality of relation is not at all specific to human perception, but applies to all the modes by which things relate to one another. Human perception is one way of relating to an object, no more or less impactful than the interactions entailed in a meteor colliding with a planet, a spark igniting combustible gas, or a cow consuming grass.

I argue that Tutuola depicts the material expression of things as contingent upon

the relations engaged, resulting in the changeability that marks objects in his novels. In doing so, he comes near to suggesting objects are composed of nothing but relations, an idea that Harman strongly opposes.[86] However, Tutuola's commitment to the multiplicity of things keeps him from falling into what Harman considers a reductive position; what makes Tutuola's transformed objects so unique is the persistence of multiple versions of a thing within any given relational context. The nexus of possibility that links the expressions of a thing and allows them paradoxical concurrence is the thing withdrawn, an excess that cannot be captured by any particular representation of it, nor by the sum of all its possible representations or relations. Tutuola's layered transformations suggest that multistability always attends relations between things that are withdrawn.

A metaphorical representation of this dynamic can be observed in a juju transformation from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Early in the novel, the drinkard is tasked with rescuing the woman who later becomes his wife from a strange creature that she followed away from the market. The creature had the appearance of "a beautiful 'complete' gentleman," but is revealed to be a mere skull masquerading as a man using

[86] Harman contrasts object-oriented ontology to other materialist philosophies that dismiss the object in favor of its components, qualities, or effects. Harman argues that these materialist reductions take two forms: undermining, which rejects objects as "too shallow to be the fundamental reality in the universe" and focuses instead on ever smaller, basic components of matter, and overmining, which posits that objects are only real and accessible insofar as they affect other objects, such that the object itself is merely an abstraction (*The Quadruple Object* 10). Harman's primary objection to premises that rely on undermining, overmining, or the two in combination, duomining, is that they fail to explain objects in a manner that accounts for both their independence and their capacity for change. Harman refutes undermining by arguing that objects must be more than their components, because those components can be altered significantly without disrupting the continuity of the object (as when time degrades the surface of a stone, or a portion of the cells composing a human body are replaced). He opposes overmining by pointing out that objects logically cannot be determined by their relations to or impacts on other objects, because those relations and impacts can change, or dissipate entirely, and yet the object persists (*Immaterialism* 9-11).

body parts rented from various owners, which the skull returns while the woman follows it back to its home (201). There, several of these skulls hold the woman captive, and they tie a cowrie shell around her neck that makes loud noise to alert them if the woman tries to escape. To spirit the woman away from the skulls, the narrator calls on his juju. He explains, "I changed the lady to a kitten, and put her inside my pocket and changed myself to a very small bird which I could describe as a 'sparrow' in English language" (211).[87] These transformations happen in layers; the narrator first changes the woman's form, then absorbs her into his own person by placing the kitten that is the woman in his pocket. Then, when he changes himself into a small bird, the kitten is displaced along with the narrator's human form. The woman herself is thus put entirely beyond access as she no longer occupies a distinct physical form outside of the bird. Yet her doubly deferred form continues to assert itself: as the narrator flees in the form of a bird, "the cowrie which was tied on that lady's neck [is] still making a noise" that alerts the skulls in pursuit (211). As in previous examples, both the form that is immediately present to the senses and the form that has been displaced assert themselves. The cowrie, tied on the neck of the woman's body, persists in its noise despite the woman having become a kitten and the kitten part of a grouping of objects (man, clothes, pocketed items) that have transformed into a bird. Thus, the withdrawn object manifests multiply; though it can only be accessed in one particular form at a given moment,

[87] Tutuola frequently offers British approximations in the text, as when he includes the monetary value in pounds, sometimes as a conversion of an alternative value. His qualifying of the word "sparrow" as a label for the bird, however, is unique in that it is the only moment when he acknowledges a failure of the English language to adequately render his meaning. Treating the word "sparrow" as a mere approximation of the bird illustrates not only a lack in translation, but a recognition of the inability of language to fully account for things. Just as an object may only be "used as" a particular implement rather than absolutely equated with it, language offers terms that objects might be described as approximating, not direct equivalents that fully encapsulate their being.

echoes of other forms remain present even while they are not directly engaged.[88]

Tutuola's multistable objects offer an amplified version of object-oriented ontology's withdrawn objects that can only ever be accessed through partial relations. Working from an assumption that immediate objects exist across multiple levels of presence and access and are never fully expressed in any one relation, Tutuola composes assemblages that figure relation as a state of multiplicity. Objects linked by transformation, proximity, and interaction infiltrate and catalyze one another, producing compositions of more-than objects that cannot be severed from the alternative expressions conferred in their relations, and are thus simultaneously themselves and other than themselves. In Harman's object-oriented ontology, this simultaneity is a basic fact of material existence that emerges from philosophical inquiry; in Tutuola's novels, it is a quality of materiality that is encountered through the logic of relations between objects. Tutuola's assemblages come in manifold forms: he not only welds object forms together like the opposing faces of a coin, as in the case of the stick-bridge, but also consolidates bodies and objects through juju transformations and brings distinct actors together into machine-like systems of reaction and reception. Common to all of these object formations is the multistability that ensures power and identity remain unfixed, circulating among relational objects that are themselves in flux.

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[88] Harman roots this idea in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, and illustrates the point with the example of a water tower viewed from various positions. Whether viewed from above or below, North or West, with a tree partially obscuring it or a shadow falling across it, at dusk or at dawn, the tower remains recognizable as a unified thing. Yet none of those infinite possible views of the tower constitute exactly what it is, nor would the combination of all possible views constitute the thing itself. The unified thing remains withdrawn, always in excess of any possible access to it (*The Quadruple Object* 24).

Transformative Relations and Colonial Perception

The circulation of power that attends relations among multistable objects is the key factor that shapes Tutuola's material ontology into a critique of hierarchical systems like the British Empire. Recent scholarship in ethnic and ecological studies articulates the significance of efforts like Tutuola's, even if he has yet to be recognized as directly engaged in dismantling colonial power structures. Following Mel Chen's definition of "animacy as an often racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate," Native studies scholar Kim TallBear argues that hierarchies of animacy have been used to support the exploitation of indigenous peoples throughout the history and afterlives of colonialism (Chen 10). TallBear proposes an Indigenous Metaphysic that disrupts hierarchies of animacy to recognize the "co-constitutive entanglements" through which all things are linked beyond binaries of human and nonhuman, material and immaterial, or living and not living. Resisting hierarchies of animacy is for TallBear not only a means of reasserting indigenous philosophies that have been suppressed by Western forces, but also a vital means of countering the de-animation of indigenous peoples that "enables their domestication and control" by marking them as less living and thus dispossessed of agency and relevance (199). TallBear calls for "bridging and reconstituting the relationships between sociality and materiality" to empower both indigenous peoples and exploited material resources and environments, directly linking the revision of anthropocentric ontologies to the ongoing resistance of colonialist ideology (198). Tutuola participates in just such an effort by consistently decentering human perspective and will to instead distribute relational agency throughout a totality of material objects

that resist stratification both individually and within networks of linked effort and influence. He thus resists the colonial system through a revision of object relations more generally, which applies to relations between England and Nigeria as much as it does to relations between humans, animals, and the bush, or between electricity lines and the machines they animate; the workers they necessitate; the dirt they displace; and the birds they attract.[89]

Tutuola's emphasis on the circulation of power through networks of relation is most evident in the assemblages of objects he creates in his texts, which parallel the close relations between peoples and places that comprise a unified group, nation, or empire. As in the case of the flash-eyed mother, these assemblages often directly invoke colonial authority and global exchange through reference to Western cultural artifacts and technology. The significance of what may seem like casual or even coincidental references to Western commodities that Tutuola may have seen, used, or heard about should not be overlooked. Even before he began submitting manuscripts for publication overseas, Tutuola was already fixated on obtaining and using technological objects produced outside of Africa. In a July 1978 interview with Bernth Lindfors, Tutuola describes attempting to pursue photography as a profession in the late 1940s. He explains that he had a small studio in Lagos, with "a camera, printing paper, and so on." In 1949, he submitted his first manuscript (*The Wild Hunter in the Bush of*

[89] Indeed, similar efforts can be observed in animal studies as well as in object oriented ontology, where scholars have argued for the recontextualization of behaviors traditionally identified with humans as broader categories of being that humans participate in alongside animals and objects. Biological anthropologist Barbara J. King has resisted an impulse in the scientific study of animals to dismiss studies that seem to anthropomorphize animals. King argues that studying animal behaviors that are similar to those of humans, such as grieving, does not represent anthropomorphizing, but a recognition that behaviors we imagine are particular to humans may not be so (see *How Animals Grieve* 13-14, 138).

Ghosts) to Focal Press, a technical publisher of photography books, some of which Tutuola had apparently purchased.[90] Focal Press purchased the manuscript from Tutuola for £5; in a letter to Faber and Faber in 1952, Focal Press founder Andor Krasznor Krausz states that this was done "just to keep the author happy" though the press had "no use for" the manuscript. Since the manuscript was neither returned to Tutuola nor published, he wrote a second manuscript, that of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, and sent it to the United Society for Christian Literature after seeing an advertisement for religious texts in a magazine.[91] The letters that Mary Senior of the United Society for Christian Literature sent in reply to Tutuola indicate that Tutuola's initial letter listed a return address of "Mr. Amos Tutuola, Photo Service."[92] Further, he apparently asked Senior to assist him in obtaining "a second-hand camera," a request he repeated in his correspondence with Faber and Faber.[93] In a letter to editor Alan Pringle dated Feb. 24, 1952, Tutuola writes, "I shall be glad too if you can help me to get a secondhand camera box or folding with lens f. 4.3 etc."[94]

The progression of Tutuola from a consumer of photography books and founder

[90] In an April 10, 1976, letter to Lindfors, Tutuola writes, "I was ordering the photographic books from this firm. … You know, the manuscript was wrongly sent to them because I did not the right publishing house to whom such this type of the manuscript could be sent." The manuscript of *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* was submitted to Focus Press in 1949, then delivered to Faber and Faber by Focal Press in 1952, but was not published 1982. In a Sept. 11, 1978, letter, Tutuola insists that he be allowed to rewrite the text before it's published, emphasizing that he composed the original manuscript in collaboration with another person: "Again, I was not only the person who wrote it but my frien (sic) and I joined hands together to write it."
[91] The United Society for Christian Literature functioned to "contribute to the publication and distribution of Christian literature by supporting magazine and bookshops." The society published Christian texts through Lutterworth Press, according to a May 10, 1968, letter from Lutterworth manager Michael Foxeli to Lindfors. Though Mary Senior of the society replied to Tutuola and ultimately helped his manuscript find a publisher in Faber and Faber, she writes that she had tried but was "unable to get [*The Palm- Wine Drinkard*] included in [the society's] publishing programme" (see Senior's July 1, 1968 letter to Lindfors).
[92] March 10, 1950, letter to Tutuola.
[93] Senior's Feb. 19, 1951 letter to Tutuola references the request and indicates she cannot help.
[94] See also Pringle's Feb. 28, 1952, reply. Tutuola ultimately rejects the price offered, writing in a March 21, 1952, letter to Pringle that he can get a cheaper used camera in Nigeria.

of an independent photo service to a writer submitting manuscripts to publishers whom he asks to help him acquire a particular camera suggests that his interest in publishing his work began as a potential means of generating revenue and advancing his photography business. From the very start of his literary career, Tutuola used his manuscripts to establish channels of exchange that would allow him to access a global market of technology. In addition to frequently asking his editors to help him obtain these products, he would later direct the royalties department at Faber and Faber to make payments to electronics companies to purchase items that would be sent to him in Nigeria. He wrote a number of letters to manufacturers in England, the United States, Germany, and Japan throughout his career requesting price lists or catalogs for their products. Tutuola's correspondence includes letters that demonstrate his attempts to obtain objects including radios, tape recorders, microphones, loudspeakers, a television set, parts for his Ford Cortina, typewriter ribbon, and a stereo deck. In addition to seeking items for his personal use, Tutuola wrote to manufacturers about ordering clocks and batteries for distribution in Nigeria, inquired with multiple companies about automatic paperclip-making machines in an apparent bid to start his own business, and profusely thanked his editors for gifts including a small battery-operated alarm clock and an electronic calculator. Tutuola's letters suggest that Western technology was what he most greatly desired access to, and his manuscripts secured him that access, even if it was often imperfect.[95]

[95] In his correspondence, Tutuola complains frequently about faults in the technology he receives. He writes that the radio doesn't work properly and isn't suited to resources in Nigeria, because he can't obtain the correct batteries and the voltage isn't compatible with the A/C power he has access to. Further, the machine sparks and shocks him and the display cannot be read in the dark. Similarly, he writes that the TV doesn't work correctly, and the car parts he was sent are the wrong ones (See Dec. 7, 1953, letter from

Technology for Tutuola was synonymous with the access and privilege he associated with the West and felt he lacked in his own country; obtaining it allowed him to extend his own global reach by listening to radio broadcasts and making recordings of his stories that he could broadcast himself or send overseas to be broadcast in England and the United States.[96] Throughout his recorded correspondence, Tutuola demonstrates a vested interest in technology as a means to expand his network of global connections, a priority that preceded and informed his literary efforts. Thus far, I have primarily analyzed Tutuola's integration of technology into his novels in terms of perception in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Now, I will examine how Tutuola locates technological power in the organic material of the African bush in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts,* arguing that in doing so Tutuola doubly inscribes the multistability that prevents power from settling in any particular relation between objects on both individual and global scales.

After the narrator of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* has simultaneously seen and escaped his cow form through his reflection, the text shifts precisely from one multistable assemblage to another, which begins with a hollow log.

> But when it was about three months that I left them or changed from a cow to a person, one night, as I was wandering about in the bush I saw a dead wood which was about six feet long and three feet in diameter and there was a large hole inside it which was not through to the second end, which means it has

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Barney Resset, Tutuola's March 23, 1954, letter to Webbs Radio, and his Nov. 4, 1971, and Feb. 2, 1981, letters to Rosemary Goad).

[96] Tutuola frequently sent stories abroad for radio broadcast or magazine publication, particularly in his early career. He also kept a radio broadcasting license that permitted him to establish his own short-wave broadcast station (see The Amos Tutuola Collection, Box 10, Folder 9. Harry Ransom Center. The University of Texas at Austin).

only one entrance. (49)

The narrator enters the log, using it as shelter for the night. But after he has fallen asleep, a ghost happens upon the log and intends to use it in the same way, until he discovers the narrator inside. The ghost instead repurposes the log as a cage by sealing the opening and carrying it away with the narrator inside. Unbeknownst to either the narrator or the ghost, these actions have not merely resulted in the narrator's captivity, but have created a new object that approximates Western technology through purely organic means. When the narrator awakens, he is dismayed to find himself trapped once again, and reacts to his wooden prison by imagining that whoever is carrying the log might cast it into a fire or a river. Thus distressed by the dangers that the properties of the log expose him to, the narrator succumbs to despair:

> I began to cry with a lower voice, not knowing that there was already a big snake inside this hole before I entered it. But at the same moment that the snake heard my voice when crying which was fearful to him, so he was coiled round me instead of running out of the hole as the entrance had been corked before by this 'homeless-ghost' who was carrying it about. But as this snake was also fearful to me too, then I was crying louder than before, and when the 'homeless-ghost' was hearing my voice inside this wood, it was a lofty music for him, then he started to dance the ghosts' dance. (50)

By a series of interactions, ghost, narrator, snake, and log form a compound object that transforms its components.[97] The narrator's present circumstances, including the

[97] Rather than reducing objects to products of relations, Harman argues for treating objects produced through relations as new compound objects that combine the objects that interact with each other, even if the compound object is referred to by only one of its constituents. According to Harman, "this way we

ghost's sealing and seizure of the log and the log's vulnerability to burning in fire or sinking in water, provoke the narrator's cries, which in turn agitate the snake, further exacerbating the narrator's distress and augmenting his cries. The sound of the narrator's voice is mediated by the wood itself, and together all of these interactions function as a hidden internal mechanism to produce music.

The ghost receives the sum of these relations as a unified, given object. Despite having sealed the narrator inside the log himself, the ghost "thought that it was this wood which he was carrying away that was playing the lofty music. But as he was carrying the wood away, dancing and staggering on, he met over a million 'homeless-ghosts' of his kind who were listening to [the narrator's] cry as a radio" (50). The narrator and the snake are made into components within the black box of technology, unseen but relied upon to produce a desired effect. As effectively as various actors and objects are collapsed into new ones through juju transformations in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, relation here causes the narrator, snake, and log to coalesce into a ghostly radio. Like the stick-bridge or the narrator in cow form, the various actors exist in dual states as individuals and as an assemblage used as a particular object.

The ghosts themselves become part of the mechanism of the radio as both instigators and captives of its functioning. The ghosts develop the habit of hitting the radio to activate it, which causes the snake to resume its attempts to escape the log, coiling around the narrator "in such a fearful way which would make [the narrator] cry more bitterly" (51). When the narrator ceases crying in exhaustion, the ghosts develop a

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are able to do justice to the effects of humans on the objects they contend with by treating such relations as new objects, however fleeting" (*Immaterialism* 43).

trick for making the resistant radio work by placing it near fire, which causes the narrator "to cry louder by force" and the snake to beat so rapidly at the log that it sounds "as if ten persons are beating different kinds of drums to [the narrator's] cry" (51). The sounds the radio produces are so compelling to the ghosts that they elicit a frenzied dance, apparently beyond the ghosts' control. When other ghosts encounter the homeless-ghost with the radio, the narrator explains that after listening for a few minutes, "if they could not bear the music and stand still then the whole of them would start to dance at the same time as a madman." The music commands the ghosts as effectively as irresistible spectacles like that of the ugly ghostess draw the narrator; all of the ghosts who hear the radio join the dance, and in the thrall of its music "all of them dance[d] for three days and nights without eating, resting or being tired" (51).

The narrator compares the effect the radio has on the ghosts to that of the intoxication caused by "a kind of their drink which was the strongest of all their drinks and which was drunk only by 'His Majesty' the king of the 'Bush of Ghosts,' the royal and prominent ghosts" (50). The interaction between the assemblage of narrator, snake, and log that approximates a radio and the homeless-ghosts evokes the earlier moment when the narrator, displayed in the form of a horse, was so compelling as to physically seize the ghosts, allowing the narrator to function simultaneously as captive and captivator. But the episode of the radio also further complicates power dynamics, as the homeless-ghosts ultimately access a form of luxury through the narrator's arresting cries. Their possession of (and by) the radio enables them to transcend ghostly class divisions to experience a level of intoxication usually reserved for privileged ghosts, further illustrating the potential for multistable material and perceptual interactions to

subvert hierarchies of power and exclusion.

The homeless-ghost thus achieves social notoriety through his possession of the radio, and plans to host a celebration for his mother's birthday, in which the radio's music will feature as "the most important part." Much as the smelling-ghost drew great interest by presenting the narrator, transformed into a horse, at gatherings of ghosts, anticipation of the radio's music brings many guests to the homeless-ghost's party. The ghost activates the radio by knocking on the wood and the narrator begins to cry, but during the party his voice fails due to hunger and fatigue:

> I was unable to cry any more, and as all these invitees had eaten and drunk to excess, and still eager to hear my cry, so after the whole of them with the 'homeless-ghost' who carried me to that town had tried all their efforts to make me cry and failed, then he started to split the wood into two with an axe. (52)

When the ghosts' attempts to force the radio to resume fail, their attention is drawn to the material composition of the nonfunctioning thing. What they had previously taken for granted as a seamless object serving a particular use is now subject to scrutiny.[98] The ghosts display an instinctive desire to penetrate further into the thing to observe its now resistant inner workings, even if that access must cause irreparable damage. Significantly, this recognition of the thing as opposed to its use is transformative: splitting the radio open does not merely expose its components, but also severs their forced coalition. Log, snake, and narrator resume their status as individual objects and cease to collaboratively conjure a radio. The snake and the narrator both flee, leaving

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[98] Just as in the case of the broken hammer in Heidegger's tool analysis, the noisy bush the narrator encounters and then ponders in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and the unexamined background of a multistable image that suddenly asserts itself as an alternative figure.

the empty shell of the log behind. While nothing more than plain physical force is needed to bring about this change, the sudden dispersal of a unified object into multiple components that were always present despite having been displaced from access recalls the juju transformations that can collapse multiple objects into one and just as quickly return them to their original forms. That the transformative power of juju can be replicated in the physical interaction of objects without supernatural intervention suggests the magic that Tutuola draws on in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* has been relational all along, just like that of multistable images.

Tutuola's merging of narrator, snake, and log into a technological apparatus that mimics the function of a radio is significant for multiple reasons. First, it represents one of the ways in which Tutuola diverges from the material he encounters in Yoruba folktales. Rather than merely preserving the stories of his people, Tutuola's retellings register the impact of Western technology and culture on the perspective of a Nigerian reaching adulthood in the mid-twentieth century. Further, the use of a radio to illustrate the genesis and dissolution of a multistable assemblage is doubly significant in that the radio itself serves as a marker and a key facilitator of relations within the colonial assemblage. The radio assemblage of narrator, snake, and log that originates within the African bush in the absence of Western materials and industry reflects Tutuola's circulation of power within unfixed object relations back onto the colonial complex. Tutuola's narrators frequently encounter functioning technology that uses naturally occurring elements of the African bush to replicate products known to Western readers. The simulated technologies that appear in these novels are generated from the bush, with no provenance tracing back to networks of exchange with colonial powers,

suggesting that colonized spaces like Tutuola's Nigeria do not merely passively receive or reject the colonizer. Rather, the bush much more dangerously transforms, recreates, and replaces the cultural and technological artifacts it encounters.[99]

Working on two levels of relation, one on which a multistable assemblage simulates the radio and one on which the radio as a technological artifact invokes an equally mutable and mutually transformative relation between colonies like Nigeria and the imperial center, Tutuola uses the relational logic of his system of objects to suggest that colonial and imperial spaces are not only structurally immediate to each other, but that their positions may be interchangeable. This idea is rendered even more directly through the integration of another Western technological artifact that mediates cultural exchange and access between colonial and imperial spheres: the television. The narrator's long journey in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is eventually resolved through an encounter with a television-handed ghostess, a figure that illustrates the power of Tutuola's model of relations to efface distance, both literal and figural, between poles of alterity. The ghostess approaches the narrator while he is resting from his continued efforts to find the way back to his village. The ghostess is covered in painful sores, which she tells the narrator have afflicted her since her birth more than two centuries before. She informs him that she was told by multiple sorcerers that her sores would one day be healed by "an earthly person who had been lost in this

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[99] See also Homi K. Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, Spring 1984, pp. 125-133. Tutuola not only replicates and transforms Western technology in the bush, but also parodies the bureaucratic systems that attend colonization. At one point in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the narrator meets his dead cousin, who has established churches and schools in the bush of ghosts to spread Christianity and education to the ghosts. The dead cousin explains in detail his efforts to convert the ghosts, and in the only numbered list in the text, the narrator asks several detailed questions about the supply lines that enable this system. The dead cousin answers each question, and his responses are also numbered. (146,150).

Bush of Ghosts," and that he would cure them by licking the sores daily for ten years (162). The narrator initially refuses this request, but the ghostess secures his attention by insisting that he look at her palm, which is "exactly as a television" when placed before the narrator's eyes and shows him his family in his home village (163). The Bush of Ghosts and the realm of earthly people exist in opposition to each other, a relation characterized by otherness that is much like the dynamic between imperial center and colonial margin. As the narrator's tribulations demonstrate, it is extremely difficult to intentionally travel between the two realms, and his presence in the Bush of Ghosts as a living person is variously met with disbelief, fascination, and antipathy. Yet the television-handed ghostess asserts that the narrator, though he has been "struggling for many years" to find his way home, is in fact "seeing the way every day, and [does] not know it, because every earthly person gets eyes but cannot see" (162). Thus, when she reveals an open channel to his elusive home through the television of her palm, she offers her body as a lens that augments the narrator's capacity to access that which withdraws from him but is immediate to the ghostess.

The television allows the narrator to see and hear his mother, and he fortuitously observes her prescribing a remedy for sores that he is then able to use to heal the television-handed ghostess's sores within a week and without resorting to licking the sores. In exchange, the television-handed ghostess agrees to show him how to reach his home, which she does with a literal act of showing. The narrator explains, "she opened her palm as usual, she told me to look at it, but to my surprise, I simply found myself under the fruit tree which is near my home town" (166). The television on the ghostess's palm, which before allowed the narrator sensory access to the home he

believed was distant, now escalates from offering simulated immediacy to granting total physical access. The act of looking collapses distance as effectively and instantaneously as juju merges bodies and objects, suggesting that nothing more than an adjustment of perspective makes the remote immediate. Invoking the television, a technological apparatus like the radio that both symbolizes and enacts colonial networks of exchange, heightens the sense that the relation between the Bush of Ghosts and the earthly realm parallels that of imperial and colonial spaces.[100] That the television-handed ghostess does not merely show the narrator how to get home, but rather reveals that he already is home in the same instant that he looks for it suggests that these two seemingly disparate and opposed realms in fact occupy a shared space. Tutuola thus creates a metaphor for British colonialism that positions the imperial center and the colonial margin as the overlapping constituents of a shared whole that modifies both equally.

When asked about the television-handed ghostess in a 1975 interview, Tutuola stated that at the time when he was writing *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, he had not yet seen a television set.[101] The idea of a ghostess whose palm was a television that showed the narrator his family in their village, Tutuola explained, was based on the notion "that the palm showed your life" ("Talking with Tutuola"). With this

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[100] In his analysis of its significance, Omelsky asserts that "beyond the TV's ontic materiality are flows of global capital and histories of social relations" (81). Kalliney's project on the role of BBC radio programs in disseminating African and Caribbean literary voices throughout the Commonwealth also reiterates the significance of media and technology in forging aesthetic and cultural connections within a crumbling empire. Throughout his career, Tutuola submitted short stories to both the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, many of which were included in radio programs. Later, interviews with Tutuola would also be recorded and broadcast by both companies.

[101] In the interview, Tutuola says that he wrote *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in 1956 (this is an error, as the text was published in 1954), and that at that time he had only seen television sets with no picture on display in a store ("Talking with Tutuola").

explanation, Tutuola links the potential of technology to that of the body, suggesting that the magic of modern technology is somehow prefigured or already present in the body. Tutuola thus reverses the channel of influence, treating the television not as the progenitor of his ghostess's unusual power, but merely as a comparable apparatus. Rather than the ghostess's hand simulating a television, the television might be said to simulate the visionary access of the palm. Further, by associating the access a television provides with that of palmistry, Tutuola again uses perception to dramatize the complex circulation of agency in relations among objects. The television-handed ghostess acts as an authority conferring access to the narrator, but she also subjects herself to the narrator as a tool. Though the palm in question belongs to the ghostess, under the narrator's eyes it becomes a channel to the home and people that he wants to reach. Thus, the figure of the television becomes one that allows the narrator to lay claim to what he would otherwise be alienated from, finding what is intimate to himself in the ghostess's body and gaining immediate access to what seemed inaccessibly distant.

In Tutuola's material relations, power and influence are not unidirectional forces, and thus there can be no passive anthropological object that receives a gaze without exerting itself on the gazing subject. As the access conferred by the television-handed ghostess illustrates, when the imperial center engages the colonial object, it enters a multistable assemblage in which prominence circulates between members and whatever is suppressed haunts that which is immediate. By particularly emphasizing perception as a material interaction that draws perceiver and perceived into transformative relation, Tutuola reveals that the objectified state confers the power to

command and remake the objectifier. I have argued throughout this chapter that Tutuola uses human perception to illustrate the multistability that inheres in all relations, including those among nonhuman objects. Tutuola's equation of perception to material interactions more generally and his attribution of a multistability that overturns rigid power structures to those relations are made abundantly clear in one of the most frequently cited incidents from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, in which the drinkard reflects on the beauty of the complete gentleman guise that the skull has created. Though the drinkard, augmented by his juju, is able to discern the trickery behind the complete gentleman's appearance, he is still deeply affected by the aesthetic impression it makes:

> I could not blame the lady for following the Skull as a complete gentleman to his house at all. Because if I were a lady, no doubt I would follow him to wherever he would go, and still as I was a man I would jealous him more than that, because if this gentleman went to the battle field, surely, enemy would not kill him or capture him and if bombers saw him in a town which was to be bombed, they would not throw bombs on his presence, and if they did throw it, the bomb itself would not explode until this gentleman would leave that town, because of his beauty. … After I looked at him for so many hours, then I ran to a corner of the market and I cried for a few minutes because I thought within myself why was I not created with beauty as this gentleman, but when I remembered that he was only a Skull, then I thanked God that he had created me without beauty, so I went back to him in the market, but I was still attracted by his beauty. (207)

The drinkard's reflection on the unattainable beauty of the complete gentleman is perhaps the longest digression in the text that, rather than merely describing a creature's appearance, expands on a character's response to that appearance. In *The Rise of the African Novel*, Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ argues that the passage contains a sophisticated idea that is impeded by the unfamiliarity of Tutuola's expression. Ngũgĩ reads the passage as depicting a "sublime beauty" that "is so visceral that it can stop a war while undermining masculinity," but suggests that readers, conditioned by Tutuola's tendency to misuse words and phrases, overlook that complexity and assume Tutuola merely means to say the gentleman is handsome (81).

While I agree with Ngũgĩ's claim that Tutuola's meaning is often misread as readers struggle to differentiate between authorial emphasis and linguistic confusion, I would redirect focus from the narrator's internal response to the gentleman's beauty to the aesthetic response the narrator accords to a nonhuman object. If this passage represents one of the novel's most complex depictions of human feeling in the narrator's jealousy and awe of the complete gentleman's beauty, it is significant that human internal complexity is represented as no greater than that of material objects. The drinkard offers a series of reactions, both immediate and imagined, to the aesthetic impression the complete gentleman makes, claiming that his beauty is striking enough to attract women, make men envious, stay the hands of enemy combatants, and cause a bomb to refrain from exploding. That Tutuola places the bomb alongside his human reactors suggests that human and nonhuman objects are equally susceptible to the gentleman's beauty, making aesthetic quality not a matter of subjective judgment but of material call and response. That the gentleman could temporarily negate the chemical

reactions and violent effects of bombs dropped in an air raid, which Tutuola surely associated with the Western powers of World War II, illustrates the potential of material and perceptual relations to overturn structures that attribute dominance to imperial authority.[102] Instead of an unstoppable force that a more technologically advanced power exerts on its colonial inferior, the bomb is positioned as a material actor with fluctuating power status, a composite object that might be absorbed, redirected, or halted by a number of material interactions beyond the brute and anthropocentric forces of political and military entities. The narrator asserts that the complete gentleman, whose form is composed of a set of rented objects, would influence the bombs not through action, authority, or cleverness, but through the ongoing material call and response that is common to all objects. This mutual exertion of material influence demonstrates that the presumption that power can stagnantly reside on one side of a relationship is based on an incomplete and anthropocentric notion of object relations.[103] Once humans are incorporated into a wider system of objects in which they have equal status with all other objects, the myth of stable hierarchies is dispelled.

This is much the point that Tutuola makes with his metaphorical representation of global material relations in the body of the flash-eyed mother, which I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. In that earlier discussion, I focused on how the flash-eyed mother's body concretizes the potency of material interactions through her negation of the narrator's perception and the application of her own gaze as weapon, tool, and

[102] Tutuola began writing shortly after completing his service as a blacksmith for the Royal Air Force through the West African Air Corps in Nigeria ("A Short Biography").

[103] Indeed, that material call and response is the mode of relation that consistently motivates action in Tutuola's novels.

resource. Further, I argued that the flash-eyed mother is rooted in multiplicity, as Tutuola layers metaphors and details to emphasize that she represents an accumulation of identities, voices, commodities, labor, and detritus. To close this chapter, I will return briefly to the flash-eyed mother to examine further details that directly link her multistability as a material and sensory totality to the British Empire. In her physical shape, the flash-eyed mother parodies a global distribution of subjects; the millions of heads, each with their own voice, wants, and grasping hands, are so numerous and spread about her body that it is impossible to take in all of them at once. Like a population spread throughout a global empire in which the sun proverbially never sets, some portion of the heads are always awake and active, "because if some of them sleep, the rest would be talking until those who were sleeping would wake." The flash-eyed mother is both the body of the populace and the governing body that manages resources, defense, and civil code. When she distributes food to the heads of her body and to the short ghosts, the narrator compares it to "when soldiers are receiving their rations before an officer," a description that particularly highlights the military relationship between England and its colonies that Tutuola experienced as a member of the West African Air Corps in World War II (103).

The comparison to England as a martial power continues when the flash-eyed mother receives a letter demanding the narrator be returned to the ghost town he escaped from before becoming a subject of the flash-eyed mother.[104] Refusing to surrender the narrator, the flash-eyed mother prepares to go to war over the matter. She

[104] The narrator calls this the twelfth town of ghosts, though by the logic of the narrative, it seems more likely to be the twentieth town, from which the narrator escaped previously (81). The narrative does not explicitly describe any contact the narrator may have had with the twelfth town of ghosts.

successfully defends her right to possess the narrator in the following battle, though many short ghosts are killed, a number of the smaller heads are cut off of the flash-eyed mother, and even the narrator is decapitated. But to the flash eyed mother, the loss of individual life is unimportant; the "Invisible and Invincible Pawn," a figure that appeared in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and here fights alongside the flash-eyed mother in the battle, restores the severed heads to the flash-eyed mother's body and "[wakes] up all the dead soldiers and replace[s] their heads which were cut off by the enemies to their necks" (109). In doing so, the pawn puts a ghost's head on the narrator's body instead of his own; when the narrator appeals to the flash-eyed mother to rectify the mistake, she refuses and tells him, "Every head is a head and there is no head which is not suitable for any creature" (110). While the narrator later has his head restored by another of the flash-eyed mother's allies,[105] the flash-eyed mother's indifference suggests that while she is willing to fight to retain control over her subjects, those subjects primarily function as resources, such that individuals are interchangeable. After the battle, the narrator discovers that the flash-eyed mother is in fact the mother of the pawn, "who is the ruler of all the animal creatures and non-living creatures which he could command to become alive in all bushes of the curious creatures" (110). Like England, the flash-eyed mother is enmeshed in lines of ancestral rule, and other powers that wield authority over material objects, both living and not, have sprung from her.

But if Tutuola's depiction of the flash-eyed mother inscribes imperial authority, it also emphasizes that an imperial power is continuously modified by and contingent on

[105] In fact, it is the entity referred to as the Faithful-Mother in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* who reappears in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* to perform this service (110).

its subjects. The flash-eyed mother is not only literally a composition of symbiotes, such that she does not exist independently from them, she also submits herself to those symbiotes, acting "according to the rule and regulation given to her by the heads" (103). Further, she is sustained by the care of the short ghosts, who provide her with resources in return for her protection and the benefits of her flash-eyed gaze, a technological advantage they cannot obtain otherwise, and which can be used to both aid and discipline them. The relationship Tutuola describes between the short ghosts and the flash-eyed mother suggests that the short ghosts parallel the less privileged role of subjects in the British Empire's colonies; unlike the heads that are directly attached to the flash eyed mother's body, the short ghosts are treated as second-class subjects who do not exercise as much influence over her. Despite this distinction, the flash-eyed mother remains reliant on the short ghosts to care for her and profits from the resources they provide.

The extended metaphor of the flash-eyed mother crystallizes the work that Tutuola's revision of material relations achieves throughout *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. In these novels, Tutuola simultaneously critiques anthropocentric materialisms and dismantles the logic that informs human political hierarchies within colonialist ideology. Tutuola demonstrates that imperial power is in fact distributed throughout material connections, a condition that applies to any relation between objects. Many of Tutuola's earliest readers praised him for offering what they viewed as a purely African perspective, but *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* illustrate that there are neither purely colonial nor purely imperial positions, thus effacing the boundaries necessary to maintain hierarchical power

structures. That Tutuola inscribes this point within a larger philosophy of material relations makes his contribution all the more significant. Rather than solely making an important anti-colonialist argument, Tutuola depicts a system of relations that intervenes in the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of global modernism. Though he has not been sufficiently integrated into those conversations and has instead frequently been bracketed as a writer of primarily anthropological interest, his voice remains relevant to the ongoing revision of materialist theory and colonialist ideology in contemporary scholarship.

This relationship between postcolonial writers' subversion of exploitative hierarchies and contemporary conversations at the intersection of identity, politics, and ontology is even more apparent in the next chapter's examination of British-Guyanese novelist and poet Wilson Harris. In his work, Harris seeks to distribute agency through a material totality much like Tutuola does, but his submission of subjective identity to an ecological assemblage is even more radical. Harris depicts a multistable relation between self and environment through visual perspective, representing individual sight as an illusion that must be negated to access the transcendent vision of an ecological perspective rooted in the landscape of his native Guyana.

Chapter 4:
Ecological Perspective and Epic Plurality in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*

In his 1994 essay "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror: Reflections on Originality and Tradition," Guyanese novelist, poet, and essayist Wilson Harris suggests the key to reconciling the trauma of conquest in the Americas lies in the apocalyptic vision that the mythical part-bird, part-snake god encounters in the Smoking Mirror. Quetzalcoatl, whose compound body unites the opposites of sky and earth, sees in the Smoking Mirror "a prophecy of the death of gods" and realizes that those gods "constituted a succession of densities or veils between humanity and an everlasting, unfathomable creator." Harris explains that "the Smoking Mirror symbolized those veils," which "were everywhere, in a tree one took for granted as passive or lifeless furniture, in landscapes, riverscapes, creatures, natures, one took for granted." Seeing these overlapping veils and glimpsing the end of self that the death of gods represents to Quetzalcoatl transforms his relation to the world. Confronting the vision of the veils in the Smoking Mirror causes Quetzalcoatl to feel "a wholly different compassion for the world," a sense of connection that exceeds the relation of self and other (*Selected Essays* 184). The Smoking Mirror delivers "a sensation of being plural, of a capacity within ourselves to wear many masks, each mask possessing its *partial* eye" (185, emphasis original). Harris argues that the absolutism of individual perspective must be replaced by this plural and partial vision as an antidote to the violence of hierarchical power structures. In contrast to the "singular bias" that fuels hegemonic power structures, the revelation of plurality has the potential to "break a hubris or proclivity to enslave others whom we deem inferior creatures" (185, 189).

In Harris's reading of the Quetzalcoatl myth, access to transcendent plurality, which he also calls the "rebirth of original epic," lies in the immanent objects of the material environment. In his literary practice, this means engaging with living landscapes past and present to write fiction that departs from realism to instead function in "parallel with profound myth that lies apparently eclipsed in largely forgotten so-called savage cultures," animating the "buried or hidden curiously live fossils of another age" ("A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*" 7). Epic, as Harris defines it, borrows elements from the literary genre, but even as he references the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* the legend of Orpheus, and the *Divine Comedy*, Harris also aims to surpass them. He writes that "the promises of ancient epic, like ancient scriptures, remain unfulfilled" because they emerge from traditions marred by the "deep-seated inequalities" of singular bias (*Selected Essays* 192). In Harris's version of epic, the absolutes of singular bias are transformed into "numinous inexactitudes" that bridge differences among partial perspectives (194). As postcolonial literature scholar Erin Fehskens argues, "for [Harris], epic expresses resistance to colonial and neocolonial ideology at a formal level." Fehskens also notes the ecological basis of Harris's epic, through which he seeks "to imagine a socio-cultural plurality grounded in human relations to non-human matter" (Fehskens 91). Harris's epic counteracts the absolutism of singular bias through both formal and ontological shifts, dispensing with the linear, classificatory structures that haunt realism, colonialism, and anthropocentrism and which cultivate power and legitimacy through exclusion and negation.[106]

[106] For Harris, linear narrative and hierarchical exploitation share the "hubris" of absolutism, and a culture's commitment to linearity inscribes and preserves its exploitative practices (*Selected Essays* 189, 206). Disrupting the stability of divisions between what is real and what is not in narrative thus correlates to the subversion of opposing categories of self and other, civil and savage, and possessor and possessed.

This model persists throughout Harris's literary works and his reflection on them. Harris began his career as a geographical surveyor in Guyana, and frequently describes that experience as awakening him to voices in seemingly passive material phenomena. In his 1996 essay "The Music of Living Landscapes," Harris suggests that the material environment speaks in a language "threaded into space and time, which is prior to human discourse," and to which one may become attuned:

> I sensed, over the years, as a surveyor, that the landscape possessed resonance. The landscapes possessed a life, because, the landscape, for me, is like an open book, and the alphabet with which one worked was all around me. But it takes some time to really grasp what this alphabet is, and what the book of the living landscape is. (*Selected Essays* 40)

Rediscovering those resources and recontextualizing the self within a constellation of active, partial lenses facilitates access to an ecological perspective; a collective awareness that disrupts the hierarchical, destructive machinations of conquest by dispelling the illusion of self-contained subjects, states, and cultures.[107] As Hena Maes-Jelinek argues, Harris reaches back to Mesoamerican mythology in an effort to access "a kind of ontological cross-culturalism" that refutes the premise that colonial authority imposes meaning and order on the unruly, raw material of bodies and landscapes in the Caribbean ("'Latent Cross-Culturalities'" 37).

But while the pre-Columbian cultural roots of the Quetzalcoatl story resonate with Harris's aims, he focuses far more attention on its portrayal of the material environment

[107] It is important to note that this does not mean Harris does away with difference; rather, the coexistence of varied cultures is at the heart of his model.

as a series of overlapping veils or masks, drawn together in the "transitive density" of the Smoking Mirror (186). The particular transformative power of Quetzalcoatl's encounter with the Smoking Mirror resides in its potential not only to resist Western cultural hegemony, but to subvert the anthropocentric premises that inform it, a revision that Harris takes as a prerequisite to interrupting patterns of territorial and ideological conquest:

> For a breakthrough from conquest-driven imperatives is a task for which a fallible humanity is scarcely equipped. Let us remember however that epic sustains an engagement with extra-human parents who may resemble feuding and warring commanders but are intrinsically sponsors of diversity that may assist us to free ourselves from apparently incorrigible bias. (195)

It is with this reminder of the paramount necessity to incorporate the extrahuman, what he calls elsewhere "the living text of the landscape," into a plural perspective that Harris closes "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror" (*Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination* 38). Harris thus underscores his claim that the degenerative effects of conquest on an ecological totality cannot be resolved without surpassing the limits of an anthropocentric perspective to engage that totality.

In asserting the indispensability of the extrahuman to reckoning with the colonialist exploitation of resources that spans bodies, landscapes, and cultures, Harris frames the goals of his creative work in terms very like those that geographer Kathryn Yusoff outlines in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, where she calls for a radical revision of the concept of the Anthropocene. Yusoff argues that the classificatory impulses and biocentrism that define the Anthropocene enshrine and perpetuate racist

hierarchies, asserting that "the organization and categorization of materiality enact a praxis of colonialism or a taxonomy of race that is productive of racial logics that extend through and beyond mineralogy and its extractions" (80). It is through "intimacy with the inhuman," Yusoff argues, that it becomes possible "to think freedom in the earth, outside and against the world of the 'given' humanist subject" (85). A significant aim of Yusoff's project is identifying art and literature that not only demonstrates her claims, but performs the work of theory beyond the scope available to criticism. Yusoff frames this engagement with creative work as a means of countering the entrenchment of the intellectual structures of critical theory in the exploitative and extractive logic of colonialism. While Harris is not one of the artists Yusoff draws on as she "plots the course of a black geophysics crafted in the indices of fungibility and fugitivity, an aesthetics made in the provisional ground of slavery and its continuing afterlives," Harris's literary work resonates meaningfully with Yusoff's aims (87). Considering Harris alongside Yusoff offers a useful frame for understanding how ecological perspective and the role of material objects within it operates in Harris's work, particularly his fiction.

Harris's novels, together with his essays and talks, offer a productive model for charting a course between the inhuman intimacies that revitalize dehumanized subjects in Yusoff's geology and the flat, object-oriented ontologies that Yusoff regards with skepticism. Yusoff criticizes non-anthropocentric ontologies that naively presume that the privileges of human subjectivity are universally and equitably conferred to all humans, arguing that such an approach obscures inequity while carrying it forward into purportedly post-racial structures of thought:

> To be included in the "we" of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations, taking part in a planetary condition in *which no part* was accorded in terms of subjectivity. The supposed "we" further legitimates and justifies the racialized inequalities that are bound up in social geologies. (12, emphasis original)

The erasure of racialized experience in conceptions of the Anthropocene, Yusoff asserts, results in analysis that attends to how exploitative geologic practices "deform the earth in various ways," but not how they impact subjects or how humans have unevenly contributed to those exploitative practices. Yusoff's project pushes back against this omission and emphasizes how "rarely are these twinned structural deformations thought together as an epistemic praxis that finds its resolution in inhuman relation" (105).

Though Yusoff does not list particular expounders of the universalizing tendency she critiques, this impulse can be found in the work of theorists including Timothy Morton, Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost, who have all discussed the merits of a flat ontology that understands all existence to be made up of equally ontologically complex objects. Applying Yusoff's claims to object-oriented ontology more generally, it appears that in their haste to treat humans as "one *type* of object among many," these scholars presume that full subject status has already been granted to all of humanity, and that a categorical shift from subject to object represents the same hierarchical movement for all humans (Bryant 249, emphasis original). Yusoff's critique of planetary thinking, namely, of its failure to attend to the preexisting association of marginalized peoples with inhuman matter while incorporating humanity into a nonhierarchical system of objects, represents an important divergence between the "insurgent geology" of *A Billion Black*

Anthropocenes or None and the flat ontology that someone like Morton takes as a basis for thinking ecological connection (101). Yet placing both Yusoff and Morton in conversation with Harris's work foregrounds many fundamental similarities in their approaches, while also illustrating Harris's ongoing relevance to contemporary critical theory. Indeed, by framing engagement with the extrahuman as a corrective to the oppressive habits of singular bias, Harris develops a proto-object-oriented ontology that doesn't merely attend to the linked exploitation of colonized landscapes and peoples, but specifically emerges in response to it.

With his rejection of the binary that treats nonhuman matter as passive and his location of transformative potential in a restored ecological connection, Harris prefigures notions at the core of both Yusoff's and Morton's arguments. Like Harris, both theorists view intimacy with the inhuman as a resource to restructure being and ethics in (or after) the Anthropocene. Both also make claims about the harmful consequences of failing to examine this relation. Morton uses the concept of ecological awareness to refer to "the thinking of interconnectedness," a praxis of relation that involves not only contextualizing the human self as an object among objects, but also of striving to grasp the incomprehensible extent of one's intimate, indelible connection to other objects as an ecological whole (*The Ecological Thought* 7). Morton suggests that "humans are traumatized by having severed their connections with nonhuman beings," and that such a false division perpetuates a disgust toward the other that manifests as a disgust toward the self because "we are literally covered in and penetrated by nonhuman beings, not just by accident but in an irreducible way, a way that is crucial to our very existence" ("… and the Leg Bone's Connected to the Toxic Waste Dump Bone" 138). A restored ecological

awareness, Morton argues, not only reconciles the loss embedded in the illusion of disconnected, individual existence, but facilitates a more ethical relation to the environment. Yusoff similarly attends to the overlooked affiliation of human subjects with nonhuman matter, but not merely to raise the universal point that human bodies are heaps of matter, objects upon objects. Rather, she insists that to theorize humanity's relation to its environment without confronting the way alignment with inert matter has been weaponized to code Black and brown bodies as exploitable is to "reproduce those arrangements of power in the telling" (105). In Yusoff's insurgent geology, she traces how marginalized peoples have used "forced alliances with the inhuman" to reshape the modes of being available to them, charting alternative relations to space, time, and physical forces and transforming a disempowering link to inert matter into a subversive tool (19).

Harris's critical and creative work engages the lines of potential that both Yusoff and Morton locate in intimacy with the inhuman, centering the vitality and complexity of people as well as landscapes that have been coded as passive, consumable resources and resisting the divisions that parse matter along those lines. This effort is a central project of Harris's literary career, and can be traced from his earliest literature to the essays, talks, and interviews completed late in his life. While he continued to expand his ideas and experiment with narrative methods of depicting perceptual transcendence in later works, Harris's first epic novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), contains the core of the project he would pursue throughout his career. In essays written decades later, including "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror," Harris frequently returned to *Palace* as an example of the epic vision he strove to realize across his oeuvre. In *Palace*, Harris

disrupts the supremacy of individual subjectivity, distributing identity and perspective first across multiple individuals and their environment and then throughout an all-encompassing ecological totality. In an undertaking that anticipates the potential both Yusoff and Morton locate in attunement to nonhuman material, Harris cultivates a plural perspective that fundamentally reshapes the possibilities of apprehension, remaking relation to manifest a dimension that literalizes the omnipresence and entanglement of ecological connection.

At the barest level, Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* chronicles the journey of a crew of ten men, led by the conquistador figure and plantation master Donne, as they travel upriver in pursuit of a group of indigenous laborers fleeing Donne's tyranny. To discuss the narrative in further detail is to invoke a proliferation of complexities: The crew members know that they are retracing steps they have taken before, in a journey that ended with their deaths, and that they are both living and dead, trapped in a cyclical repetition of their demise. The members of the crew are initially described as individuals, linked by an intricate web of relation, but as the novel proceeds, they increasingly participate in a shared identity and lose individual distinction. This is most apparent in the case of the novel's narrator, an unnamed "I" voice who identifies Donne as his brother and is initially present as a character within the narrative, but disappears entirely for nearly the second half of the novel, during which narration is delivered in a "we" voice and the other crew members neither interact with the narrator nor reference his absence.[108] When the narrator reemerges in the novel's last pages, it is to usher in the

[108] Narrative theorist Brian Richardson has commented on the rich history of "we" narration as a nimble and often politically subversive technique, particularly in texts "that emphasize the construction and maintenance of a powerful collective identity, including feminist and postcolonial works" (56). Specifically, this kind of narration has played an important role in Caribbean literature, such as in works by

transcendent coalescence of the crew into the eponymous palace of the peacock, a body that unites all in "the undivided soul and anima in the universe" (152).

This chapter examines the surreal narrative of *Palace of the Peacock* in phases that roughly follow the novel's chronological events, ultimately showing how Harris prefigures and goes even further than either Morton's or Yusoff's theories. I begin by tracing how, in the first leg of the crew's journey, perspective is gradually unmoored from individual consciousness, loosening the crew's grip on subjective identity and directing their awareness toward the material environment. I then outline the growing presence in the novel of a perspective emanating from the landscape itself that is neither merely anthropomorphic nor a channel for the characters' identities, but rather is an extrahuman otherness with which the characters are drawn into dialogue. Before discussing the transcendent conclusion of the novel, I delve more deeply into the mythology Harris draws on in "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror" as a needed context for understanding the reflective and procreative capacities of the ecological perspective that *Palace* steadily builds toward. Such a perspective is central to Harris's vision of the unrealized promise of epic in that essay. Returning to the novel's conclusion, I then show how the blindness of individual identity negated confers access to a collective, ecological perspective that reconciles the rupture of opposition through the structural unity of a plural totality. Finally, I reflect on how the integrative potential Harris ascribes to ecological being anticipates the transformative reorientation toward the

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the Martinquais writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant. However, what is particularly interesting about Harris's use of "we" narration is that it not only effects "the collapsing of the boundary between the first and third persons" and serves to build "a collective memory" among human characters, but facilitates unification with the extrahuman (Richardson 48, 49).

extrahuman in Yusoff's and Morton's projects, and how Harris exceeds these theorists' ambitions with his view of the true work of epic.

Intermingling Identities and Shared Sight

Paralleling and distorting a biblical creation narrative, the bulk of the crew's journey in *Palace of the Peacock* unfolds over seven days.[109] Indeed, those seven days enact the regressive movement of a creation myth in reverse, as venturing upriver brings the crew closer not only to the source of the river, but to the source of all things. At journey's end, the remaining members of the crew literally encounter not only Christ but also other divine creator figures before entering the current of universal joining represented in the palace. Throughout the novel, the characters' march through time and space amounts to an ongoing procession from individual forms and identities to an originary and plural unity.[110] Harris primarily articulates the dissipation of the "singular bias" of identity through exertions and affiliations of perception, particularly sight, though shared ancestry and memory also facilitate fusion among the characters.

The progressive dislocation of perspective from the seat of individual consciousness anchors the novel from the start, precisely by robbing the reader of the

[109] The first portion of the journey, which takes the characters from Donne's property to the Mission of Mariella, unfolds over an unspecified number of days. But from the time the crew leaves the Mission to journey upriver, the novel marks each of the seven days with reference to their departure and links them to a creation cycle: "The fantasy of the fourth day dawned—the fourth day of creation—since they had all set out from Mariella" (117). Significantly, Harris does not simply replicate Christian mythology, but integrates it with figures and symbols from non-Western traditions, thus resisting the singular bias of monotheism on an epistemological level.

[110] The narrative's drive toward the unmaking of individual forms is also announced in the epigraph to the second book of the text, "The Mission of Mariella." Harris fronts Book II with a fragment drawn from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland": "the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps" (*Palace of the Peacock* 35). The line foreshadows the crew's cyclical progression toward capsize and death, but also evokes the progressive dismantling of individual identities throughout their journey.

sense of grounding they might anticipate in a novel delivered by a first-person narrator. *Palace of the Peacock* opens with a sequence of dreamed events that repeatedly masquerade as reality. The unnamed narrator first witnesses the shooting of a horseman who is soon revealed to be his brother, Donne. While the narrator is "blinded" by the shining sun, the now dead Donne stares at the sun with an "eye [that] remained open and obstinate and clear" (13). In his blinded state, though, the narrator begins to denarrate, to refute the reality of his previous description; he suggests that Donne's murder was actually just part of a dream: "I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye" (14). Yet the narrator's description of this first awakening is ambiguous, because it's seemingly an awakening within another dream such that events both before and after he "awoke" are dreams, even as the latter simulates an emergence from the disreality of the dream. The narrator rises and speaks with the man who was killed in his dream, a contrast that conjures a clear barrier between the events before the narrator "dreamt [he] awoke" and those immediately afterward. The narrator, however, then announces that he "half-woke for the second or third time," thrusting the reader onto yet another level of narrative action, in which he speaks with Mariella, the woman who killed Donne in the novel's first dream. The conversation with Mariella is in turn torn away when the narrator wakes yet again, "in full and in earnest," to Donne's (re)arrival (17). By the end of this sequence of awakenings, which constitutes the first chapter of the novel, there can be no clear demarcation between what is real and imagined in the text. The ground has been whisked out from under the reader so many times that it can no longer be taken for granted that there is an absolute real within the novel's fictional world.

Indeed, to complicate the matter further, as the narrator progresses through levels of simulation, the effects of dreamed events persist, such that there can be no waking that will cast off the reality of the dream entirely. When Donne arrives in the narrator's room immediately after the narrator dreamt of his murder, the narrator is surprised to see the brother whose death he just witnessed alive, "tall and spare and hard-looking as ever," yet he also describes Donne's leg and eye as "dead," as though the events of the dream coexist with the contradictory events of waking experience (14). Donne died on one level of consciousness but lives on another, and so he is both living and dead, because it is not immediately clear that any one plane of events supersedes the others. Similarly, when the narrator awakens again, this time to the sound of Mariella knocking on the door instead of Donne, the two walk together outside until the narrator is "looking down upon the very road" where he saw Donne killed in his first dream. Though the narrator is now two levels of wakefulness removed from the violence of that dream, he asserts its continued truth: "Mariella had killed him" (16). The next awakening further extends the confusion. On the one hand, the narrator seems to disavow the reality of all he had dreamed. Donne arrives in the room once again, and the narrator expresses relief that Donne is "still alive"; he explains that he "dreamt Mariella ambushed and shot [Donne]," and then "start[s] rubbing the vision from [his] eye," like an illusion to be dispelled (17). Yet Donne's "dead seeing eye," which dominated the narrator's vision in the first dream, persists in their waking discussion of the dream.[111] Though both men are apparently alive and the events of the dream dismissed, their interaction culminates in a repetition of the

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[111] In general, the relationship between Donne and the narrator is defined by the former's domination and overshadowing of the latter. The narrator frequently seems to lack an identity distinct from Donne, is both "fascinated and repelled by his company," and is subject to his desires and decisions.

circumstances of the dream. Donne commands his brother to look at the sun, and "his dead eye blind[s]" the narrator's eye (19). In other words, dreaming and waking realities, like living and dead sight, are positioned not as oppositional realms of experience that are sealed off from each other, but as interchangeable lenses that mediate the narrator's and the reader's access to events.

In this first chapter, Harris not only renders it impossible to separate fictional dream from fictional reality, he also establishes the narrator's perspective as a multiply composed lens that does not correspond to the experience of a single fixed and contained subject. Whether dreaming, awake, or somewhere in between, the narrator inhabits (or is inhabited by) multiple perspectives simultaneously, combining sight and blindness to exert a vision that accesses and fuses contrasting realities. This multiplicity blurs the narrator's perspective with that of other characters, but also invokes a more complicated arrangement of gazes. For instance, when the narrator witnesses Donne's murder at the beginning of the sequence, he approaches Donne's body with an awareness that "someone [is] watching [them] from the trees and bushes that clustered the side of the road" (13). Calling attention to this watching gaze presents the scene from two perspectives. The reader follows the narrator's gaze as he looks at Donne's body, but must also follow the unknown gaze that watches the narrator. Further, when the narrator views Donne's dead eyes, his own gaze splits. Looking at Donne's eyes staring at the sky, the narrator's own eyes are blinded by sunlight as though to view the dead eyes is to look *with* them. The narrator then dreams of awakening with eyes that combine the two gazes, "one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye" (13-14). Plus, the sense of a third, watching gaze persists, because he feels "oppressed" by the room he wakes in, as though

it were "the glaring cell of a prisoner who had been sentenced to die." When Donne arrives, the two men align as one gaze, "look[ing] through the window of the room together as though through [Donne's] dead seeing material eye, rather than [the narrator's] living closed spiritual eye" (14). They survey Donne's property together, including land, livestock, and Mariella, whom the narrator apprehends through a split gaze, simultaneously noticing "the fine beautiful grain of her flesh" and that Donne "looked at her as at a larger and equally senseless creature whom he governed and ruled like a fowl" (15).

Yet the narrator also (re)awakens from this shared survey to a visit from Mariella, whose gaze both negates and multiplies his vision: "She was staring hard at me. I turned away from her black hypnotic eyes as if I had been blinded by the sun, and saw inwardly in the haze of my blind eye a watching muse and phantom whose breath was on my lips" (16). In blindness, the narrator accesses not only another kind of vision, but a ghostly identity beyond self. Moreover, when he later wakes again and relates his dream to Donne, the narrator explains that his dreaming blindness inverts his real optical capacity, for the narrator's "left eye has an incurable infection" causing blindness, but in his dream, it is his healthy right eye that is blind, such that "[Donne's] vision becomes the only remaining window on the world" for the narrator (18). This image of the narrator looking through Donne as a medium of vision creates an overlapping set of perspectives that merges blindness and seeing, death and life, self and other, an amalgamation that encapsulates the ongoing shifts I've described.

This merging of perspectives and identities persists throughout *Palace of the Peacock*, both in linked pairs like Donne and the narrator and across the members of the

doomed and drowned crew of Donne's ship. Ostensibly comprising ten men who, excepting Donne, are referred to by last name only, the crew shifts between being presented as a singular, united noun and as individual members.[112] This instability has led scholars to analyze the characters as the various personas of a single mind, represented by the boat that contains them all during the first days of their journey.[113] Treated as individuals, the interrelations and parallels among the crew members frequently render them almost indistinguishable. The crew includes brothers Donne and the narrator, whose perspective and identities often merge; Wishrop, who also blurs into Donne at various moments; a set of twins called only daSilva, who function as an interchangeable set until one vanishes entirely for a long stretch of the text; Jennings, who is described as one with the boat engine he operates and that often draws the rest of the crew into its mechanical being; and four individuals who are complexly related: Schomburgh, Carroll, Vigilance, and Cameron. The entire crew calls Schomburgh "Uncle," though for most of them this does not mark any familial relation (40). The text notes that Cameron shares an unspecified familial relation with Schomburgh, and also reveals that Schomburgh is Carroll's unknown father. Carroll and Vigilance are stepbrothers, but are also referred to as cousins, perhaps suggesting that Schomburgh is truly Vigilance's uncle, in which case

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[112] The text states that using surname only is "the curious custom amongst most families in the enormous dreaming forest who dreaded mislaying and losing each other" (82). But Donne breaks with this tradition as "the only one in their midst who carried on his sleeve the affectation of a rich first name. Rich it seemed—because none of his servants appeared at first to have the power to address him other than obsequiously" (84). Were Donne referred to by his surname, that name would indistinguishably mark both him and his brother, the narrator, emphasizing their mingled identities. Instead, neither Donne's surname nor the narrator's name are ever given.

[113] For example, Paget Henry argues that not only are the narrator and Donne "personas of the same self," but that the other crew members "too are personas of this larger self, here represented by their boat" (216). Such interpretations likely stem in part from the novel itself making a similar comparison when it references "the eccentric emotional lives of the crew every man mans and lives in his inmost ship and theatre of mind" (*Palace of the Peacock* 48).

his nephew, Vigilance, and unacknowledged son, Carroll, would be cousins as well as stepbrothers (22).

The difficulty of distinguishing between the characters and parsing their relations reinforces the sense that the crew inhabits a shared, plural identity. Harris articulates this bond in terms of an ancestry and history that evoke the intertwining of conquering and conquered peoples in the Americas. Harris writes that the daSilva twins are "of Portuguese extraction," a phrasing choice that here not only conveys their heritage, but resonates with the colonial project that drives the group in their effort to help Donne continue to extract labor from the people whose native land he occupies (22). Vigilance is Indian (presumably Harris refers here to South Asian descent), Schomburgh's family line results from the union between a German and an Arawak woman, and Cameron is described as the descendant of a Scotsman and his "African slave and mistress." The inevitability of the crew's interrelation emerges from the violence and irreversibility of that intercourse:

> The whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grave out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were. They were all knotted and bound together in the enormous bruised head of Cameron's ancestry and nature as in the white unshaven head of Schomburgh's age and presence. (40)

Harris includes colonizing, indigenous, and enslaved peoples in his characters' heritages, reiterating through the crew's unity the integration that already defies binary opposition

in the Americas.[114] In his essay on Quetzalcoatl, Harris writes of the people of the Americas, "our antecedents were the victims of conquest, our antecedents were paradoxically also victors who gobbled up land and gold. We are all, in that sense, dialectially (sic) mixed and impure" (189). His willingness to bridge the distance between victors and victims, indeed, to assert that it was irrevocably bridged long ago, is mirrored in the heterogeneity made unity in the crew of *Palace*. Rather than effacing their differences, Harris binds them into a whole that is inherently multiple, yet unbroken.

Just as optical superimposition attends the conflation of the narrator's and Donne's identities, a collective perspective emerges from the crew's shared identity. Vigilance, the crew's lookout, alerts the others to dangers in the river such as rapids and rocks. Throughout the novel, Vigilance is defined through his discerning sight, an equation of character and the function encapsulated in his name. But while it is Vigilance as an individual who occupies the role of lookout, his performance of the act of looking incorporates the others, who look through Vigilance as a lens. The narrator explains that it "was Vigilance who *made us see* how treacherous [the rapids] still were" (32, emphasis added). After Vigilance draws their attention to a stretch of churning water that the others did not recognize as dangerous, the crew moves on with "every eye now peeled and crucified with Vigilance," a looking-with that is not merely a repeated watchfulness among the various crew members, but a focusing that occurs through the lens of the lookout. Considering "vigilance" as a noun, the narrator's statement evokes the quality of

[114] Harris has said that the only "entirely fictional" character in the novel is Donne, and that the others are based on men he worked with as a surveyor in Guyana ("Michael Gilkes Interviews Sir Wilson Harris"). Notably, the crew's origins also correspond to Harris's understanding of his own heritage. In "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" he writes that his "ancestry was mixed: Amerindian; European; African; and on [his] father's side, perhaps Asian as well" (*Selected Essays* 237).

vigilance covering each eye and augmenting its sight; the crew members' individual gazes are exerted through the medium of Vigilance. By looking, Vigilance infuses objects with a vision that sees beyond immediate material phenomena. As Vigilance navigates the boat away from dangers, "his penetrating trained eye [sees] every rock, clothing it with a lifelikeness that mirror[s] all past danger and design. His vision of peril meant an instantaneous relationship to safety." Importantly, though, Vigilance preserves the crew not merely in terms of their physical safety, but also as a current that binds and sustains their collective identity, "offer[ing] himself to the entire crew … a lookout to prove their constant reality" (81).

Vigilance's gaze functions as a channel through which the crew members are integrated into a totality beyond individual perspectives and bodies. The text frequently reiterates this sense of oneness, playing on "crew" as a noun that collapses the characters into one body and using language that emphasizes their status as a collective and singular entity. Common position in the boat initially draws the crew together, a connection that is reflected in references to "our bow," "our course," and "our vessel" (21, 22, 24). But as the journey continues, the collective language instead penetrates and fuses the bodies of the crew, describing "our heart" and "our eye," all while the narrator's first-person voice dwindles (74, 76). The coalition of identities expresses itself through the masks of individual personae, but always exceeds the individual. Both Vigilance and Wishrop, the latter's name conveying both the wistful longing he embodies for the crew and the

reflective surface of a "wishing glass,"[115] become receptacles for the perceptive and affective sums of the group:

> A lull fell upon the crew, transforming them, as it had changed Donne, into the drumming current of the outboard engine and of the rapid swirling water around every shadowy stone. All understanding flowed into Wishrop's dreaming eternity, all essence and desire and direction, wished-for and longed-for since the beginning of time, or else focused itself in the eye of Vigilance's spirit. (34)

Significantly, the focusing of the crew into one perspective not only links them to each other, but attunes them to a beyond-the-self that exceeds the personae within the boat. The effacement of boundaries that allows the crew members to slip into a collective identity also opens them to identification with the nonhuman material phenomena around them. While the boat engine and the rapids the crew navigates may be understood to function more as extensions of the crew's collective efforts than as alien objects, their alignment with these pieces of a material assemblage launches a far more comprehensive interrelation between the crew and the objects of their environment.

The potential of registering and intermingling with extrahuman otherness builds as the text more drastically removes characters' perception from individual perspectives. This progression is evident in an incident in which Carroll, whom the novel persistently links to music and sound per the pun of his name, begins laughing at the ambivalence and futility of the crew's situation:

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[115] Harris makes this connection explicitly in the novel's concluding pages, writing that Wishrop's "eye still sparkled as a wishing glass in the sun" (150).

> Carroll had begun laughing and the fresh ringing sound of his voice made everyone forget himself and turn in involuntary surprise. The laugh struck them as the slyest music coming clear out of the stream. It was like a bell and it startled away for one instant every imagined revolution of misery and fear and guile. It was an ingenuous sound like the homely crackle of gossiping parrots or of inspired branches in the leaves, or the slicing ecstasy and abandonment of the laughing wood when the hunter loses and finds his game in the footmark he has himself left and made. (63)

Carroll's laughter prompts each member of the crew to "forget himself," not only in the sense that they forget their restraint and turn to look at Carroll, but also in terms of the forfeiture of individual identity and experience that marks the crew's relation. But rather than drawing the crew into a fusion of their perspectives like Vigilance's gaze, or even toward the engine that drives them or the rapids they must avoid in pursuit of their shared goal, Carroll's laughter instead leads the men into the depths of their environment. The laugh, a "ringing sound … like a bell," is musical, but not merely or even primarily in the human sense of music. Rather, it is "music coming clear out of the stream," emerging as a voice of the landscape itself rather than from Carroll. Compared to the sounds of parrots, branches, and a "laughing wood," the laugh transforms from a human utterance into a vehicle for ecological expression. It brings to the crew's attention the resounding current of extrahuman voices that swallow up Carroll's laughter, not merely echoing it, but bespeaking a perspective both alien and intimate to the crew.

The insistent slippage, first from individual to collective identity and then toward an ecological grounding that negates any semblance of containment, recurs in moments

when the crew members' sense of self fractures and dissipates. On the second day of their journey, the crew are struck by "the monstrous thought … that they had been shattered and were reflected again in each other at the bottom of the stream," a formulation that not only disrupts the continuity of subjectivity to reframe identity as a communal, circulating phenomenon, but also anchors the characters' intermingling in the landscape itself (99). As the crew members' static self-conception evaporates, they begin to see themselves in the environment as well as in each other: "The unceasing reflection of themselves in each other made them see themselves everywhere save where they thought they had always stood" (100). This re-vision transports identity from the supposed confines of the individual to the diffuse reaches of an extended ecological body. Further, it positions the characters as sensing nodes that are fully integrated into an ecological totality, rendering the characters themselves as partial lenses among many; veils that can be taken up or cast aside, but cannot individually disclose the entirety of the sensory tapestry they inhabit.

Extrahuman Perception and Expression in "the dreaming forest"

While weaving the crew members into one collective perspective introduces an instability that thrusts them into more intimate relation with a totality beyond the self, it is important to recognize that Harris does not merely superimpose human perspective on the environment through a dissolution of boundaries around the self. Rather, the collective identity that the crew members form not only enables their identification with the landscape, but facilitates their attunement to a manifold and omnipresent perspective emanating from the landscape itself. The narrator is haunted by a nameless presence in his dreams at the outset of the text, a "watching muse and phantom" that simultaneously

observes him from outside and from within, “whose breath [is] on [his] lips” (16). This sense of an alien presence stays with the narrator, and is increasingly linked to a conscious landscape that sees, dreams, and creates.

The novel transitions from the narrator’s opening dreams and conversation with Donne to the river, where the crew is already on their way to “the Mission where Mariella lived.”[116] But this change in setting is not conveyed with explanatory statements to ground the reader in narrative events, but instead through the vivid imagery of a map coming to life around the narrator (23). Donne’s command that the narrator “look at the sun” while his “dead eye” blinds the narrator is immediately followed by the narrator’s contemplation of a map of the land that he also calls “the map of the sun [his] brother had given [him]” (19, 20). The features of the map are described with active language that often implies an animate awareness:

> The river of the savannahs wound its way far into the distance until it had forgotten the open land. The dense dreaming jungle and forest emerged. Mariella dwelt above the falls in the forest. I saw the rock bristling in the legend of the river. On all sides the falling water boiled and hissed and roared. The rocks in the tide flashed their presentiment in the sun, everlasting courage and the other obscure spirits of creation. (20-21)

[116] This setting is originally introduced as the place where Donne hopes to find Mariella, but is frequently referred to as “the Mission of Mariella,” as if that name belongs to the location as much as the woman. Later in the novel, the narrator marks the progression of their journey in the number of days since they left “Mariella,” reinforcing the association of the name with a physical location rather than a woman. This comports with Harris’s assertion that, just as Donne “embodies a plurality of voyagers…so Mariella (whom he abuses) embodies a plurality of women” (*Selected Essays* 56). Indeed, Mariella seems to represent the exploited peoples and landscape of the Americas more generally; in “A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*,” Harris calls her “the woman Mariella of the moon and the sun, the rapids and the forests, [Donne] had abused” (8).

Despite the narrator speaking as though studying illustrations on a two-dimensional map, it gradually becomes clear that he is describing the living map of a seething landscape that surrounds him. His depiction of those features shifts from a removed point of surveillance to total immersion on the river in a boat that "shudder[s] in an anxious grip and in a living streaming hand that issued from the bowels of earth" (21).

Almost as soon as this setting becomes apparent, the crew lands, planning to cut through the jungle and carry the boat to another part of the river to cross the falls and reach the Mission. As the narrator explores the land with the rest of the crew, features of the landscape are variously said to "ambush," "swarm," and "emerge," advancing on the crew even as the men penetrate and prune the jungle's depths. The trees "whisper," "sp[i]n their leaves," and wear "masks of living beard." And as the crew moves away from the "voice" of the river, that sense of powerful otherness escalates:

> A sigh swept out of the gloom of the trees, unlike any human sound as a mask is unlike flesh and blood. The unearthly, half-gentle, half-shuddering whisper ran along the tips of graven leaves. Nothing appeared to stir. And then the whole forest quivered and sighed and shook with instantaneous relief in a throaty clamour of waters as we approached the river again. (26-27)

The sound is like an exhalation collectively produced by the forest as a body. Indeed, Harris frequently uses bodily language to describe the landscape, not to liken it to human existence, but to assert its persistent otherness. The environment is as active and expressive as the novel's human characters, and the presence it discloses is all the more unsettling because it does not derive from the human. While Harris's use of the language of human expression may suggest personification, his insistence on the radical difference

inverts the familiar pattern of anthropomorphizing nonhuman phenomena. The forest sighs, but in a way as "unlike any human sound as a mask is unlike flesh and blood," a difference so fundamental that there can be no confusion of the two. Similarly, rather than suggesting that the river speaks with a human throat, or that the trees sigh like a weary man, Harris asserts that river and forest speak in their own manner, disrupting the link that characterizes those modes of expression as primarily human.[117] In the face of this difference, the narrator is "overwhelmed by a renewed force of consciousness of the hot spirit and moving spell in the tropical undergrowth," a sense of active otherness that inhabits this space with a potency equal to or in excess of his own. (27)

As the narrator ventures away from the river again to carve a path through the trees, "blind almost" in the dense vegetation, he leaves the others behind, only to find that he is not alone. The forest around him "rustle[s] and ripple[s] with a sigh and ubiquitous step." When the narrator stops in fright, the step also halts, not indicating that the presence has dissipated, but that it waits for him, "near" and "still." The narrator "stare[s] around wildly, in surprise and terror," looking for what follows him, and utters "a loud ambushed cry" before fainting (28). The suggestion of being "ambushed" recalls the earlier description of "the ambushing forest and wood," and indeed, when Schomburgh and Carroll find him, the narrator struggles to articulate any particular source of his terror distinct from the environment at large (26). Though Carroll insists that the narrator must have been startled by something he saw and the narrator ultimately agrees with this "excuse," the text makes clear that it is only in pretense that the narrator

[117] Similar to the way seemingly anthropomorphic acts and affects are uncoupled from human actors in Tutuola's novels, discussed in the previous chapter, or in T.S. Eliot's "Preludes" and Harris's "Fetish," as discussed in the introduction.

"stifle[s]" his words of denial and "lean[s] over the ground to confirm the musing footfall and image [he] had seen and heard in [his] mind" only (29). In this encounter, the extrahuman not only asserts itself, but overrules the narrator, paralyzing him in its palpable presence.

This reading of environmental presence in *Palace* is consistent with how Harris described learning to access the linguistic resources of the landscape throughout his career. Harris discussed listening to the voices of trees and rivers as not an anthropomorphic process of attributing human language to the environment, but one of treating sensory impressions exuded by the material world as a form of meaningful expression. Such voices not only convey nonhuman impressions, but also express an accumulation of past material interactions. As Harris puts it, "When the tree shakes, it addresses us. When the river runs, there is a voice in the river speaking to us. There are people who have drowned in the river and it is as if their voices are coming through, but there is also the voice of the water, there is the rhythm of the water" (*Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination* 38). For Harris, accessing the voices of living landscapes is not merely a way to relate to particular local spaces, but a means of recovering a suppressed vitality that manifests as an absence in human subjectivity. The anthropocentric excision of nonhuman perspective represents a rupture that divides self from an otherness that might otherwise be coded as an extension of self, circumscribing identity and experience to collective ecological detriment. Rectifying this exclusion is central to Harris's aim of resolving binaries of difference that result in human and nonhuman exploitation and conflict. Harris explains:

> I am intent on repudiating a dumbness or passivity with which we subconsciously or unconsciously robe the living world. Living landscapes have their own pulse and arterial topography and sinew which differ from ours but are as real — however far-flung in variable form and content — as the human animal's. I am intent on implying that the vibrancy or pathos in the veined tapestry of a broken leaf addresses arisen consciousness through linked eye and ear in a shared anatomy that has its roots in all creatures and in everything. (*Selected Essays* 44)

Harris's larger project strives toward a reunification of human and extrahuman in a perspective that accesses the whole of an ecological totality. But before the rupture between human and extrahuman can be bridged, the reality of that otherness must be acknowledged, ensuring that the dynamic is not misunderstood as a matter of merely incorporating the material world into human awareness, but of bringing two radically different, equally real, perspectives into contact. In *Palace*, the narrator's dis-ease in the grip of the forest's undeniable presence and agency depicts this meeting of equals that are immediately present to each other but also separated, as by a language barrier. And yet *Palace* also persistently draws these others into dialogue through the same means of translation that transforms Quetzalcoatl's perspective in Harris's later essay: the reflective intervention of a mirror in which plural lenses coalesce.

When Schomburgh and Carroll find the narrator and ask what caused him to faint, Schomburgh looks for the answer in the narrator's eyes, "glar[ing]" into them "as if he peered into a stream and mirror" (30). This image encapsulates an important cluster of associations that are repeated throughout the text: eye, water, and mirror are essentially interchangeable in the novel, collectively invoking the lenses that frame, reflect, and

transform perspective. The narrator's eye is both stream and mirror, just as the streams and rivers of the novel are mirrors that reflect the characters and their surroundings, lenses that open onto the world, and eyes that hint at the workings of consciousness. In the next stage of their journey, when the crew encounters the hazard of a whirlpool in the river, the narrator describes its appearance in terms of human facial and bodily features that perform all of these functions: "The river hastened everywhere around it. Formidable lips breathed in the open running atmosphere to flatter it, many a wreathed countenance to conceal it and half-breasted body, mysterious and pregnant with creation" (32). Not merely a metaphorical expression of visual similitude, the comparison extends to how the rapids confront the crew. "The silent faces and lips raised out of the heart of the stream glanced at us. They presented no obvious danger and difficulty once we detected them beneath and above and in our own curious distraction and musing reflection in the water" (33). The water looks back at the crew, even as it reflects their images. The faces in the water—both the watery faces of rapids and the reflected faces of the crew—commingle, "beneath and above and in" one another. The "musing reflection in the water" is simultaneously the image of the crew members in the water; their internal reflection as they consult the water, "reading the river's mysterious book" with Vigilance; and the water's own transformative contemplation (22).

Reflection is further connected to rumination upon the crew's arrival at the Mission of Mariella. As their boat approaches the shore, the crew's presence filters through a series of extrahuman mediums as it is dispersed through the ecological totality of the Mission community:

> Our arrival at the Mission was a day of curious consternation and belief for the colony. The news flew like lightning across the river and into the bush. It seemed to fall from the sky through the cloudy trees that arched high in the air and barely touched, leaving the narrowest ribbon of space. The stream that reflected the news was inexpressibly smooth and true, and the leaves that sprinkled the news from the heavens of the forest stood on a shell of expectant water as if they floated half on the air, half on a stone.
>
> We drove at a walking pace through the brooding reflecting carpet unable to make up our minds where we actually stood. We had hardly turned into the bank when a fleet of canoes devoured us. Faces pressed upon us from land and water. The news was confirmed like wild-fire. We were the news. It was ourselves who were the news. (37)

Here, the entire environment conspires in the reception and passage of information in an extended act of reflection. Sky, trees, leaves, and stream both reflect and project the crew's presence, disseminating it throughout the whole. The looming faces "from land and water" could be attributed to the watching environment as easily as to the human inhabitants of the Mission. By describing the reflection of leaves upon the water as a "brooding reflecting carpet" that the boat passes through in its progress toward the bank, Harris links the water's production of reflective images to the contemplative reflection of the leaves and forest. As with the watery faces that appear both alongside and within the crew members' reflections on the water's surface, Harris uses the reflective space in which leaves and water meet as a transformative intersection that allows physically discrete phenomena to merge and participate in one another. The optical sense of

reflection mingles with the interiority of rumination in an ecological perspective that encapsulates the Smoking Mirror that Harris would later describe in his Quetzalcoatl essay as a perceptual apparatus that is simultaneously veil, lens, window, eye, and mirror.

Smoking Mirrors: Reflection, Blindness, and Perceptual Transcendence

To demonstrate the full significance and potential of the ecological perspective in *Palace*'s conclusion, I must first more thoroughly examine how Harris joins the plural masks of an ecological totality with the mythological Smoking Mirror in "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror." As a functional mirror, the Smoking Mirror represents a passive surface that reflects the one who looks at it. But the mirror is also transformative: it disrupts the partial lens of subjectivity, forcing one's perspective to break into the plurality of masks that are represented in the mirror. Taking the image literally, the smoke that emerges from the mirror represents a radical break with the function of a passive mirror: the Smoking Mirror projects as well as reflects. Given that Harris explicitly states that the Smoking Mirror symbolizes the veils or lenses of the seemingly passive material environment, the mirror's role—as not merely a reflective surface but a lens that projects—can be extended to the landscape. This much can be derived from Harris's Quetzalcoatl essay itself, but the link between the Smoking Mirror and ecological forms of expression actually runs deeper than Harris's retelling of the Quetzalcoatl story, right to the original myths themselves. Quetzalcoatl's encounter with the Smoking Mirror in Harris's account must also be understood as a confrontation with

another Mesoamerican deity: Tezcatlipoca, the Lord of the Smoking Mirror.[118] Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl are both important figures in the Mesoamerican pantheon, and frequently occur in connection with each other. Historian of indigenous peoples Guilhem Olivier has referred to the dynamic between the two deities as one of "inverted reflection," suggesting that their adversarial relationship is also marked by "twin-ness" ("Enemy Brothers or Divine Twins?" 59).[119] While the rich lineage of these figures in Mesoamerican culture exceeds the scope of this chapter, a reading of Harris's invocation of the Smoking Mirror is enriched by calling Tezcatlipoca by his proper name and bringing the deity's associations to bear on Harris's reflective ecological perspective.

The Smoking Mirror of Tezcatlipoca's name is an obsidian mirror, sometimes depicted with plumes of smoke emanating from it, and the symbolic significance of this object has been explored by scholars of Aztec and Mayan culture, though consideration of this important context is missing in Harris scholarship.[120] According to scholars of Mesoamerican culture, the obsidian mirror consistently appears in representations of Tezcatlipoca; indeed, "such was the semantic proximity of material and deity that obsidian was considered a manifestation of Tezcatlipoca" (Saunders and Baquedano 3). In the Mesoamerican tradition, obsidian mirrors offer "access to the intangible world of

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[118] In "the most commonly accepted etymology of Tezcatlipoca," the name is translated as "smoking mirror" (Smith 13). Other variations, such as "his mirror smokes" convey a similar set of associations (*Mockeries and Metamorphoses* 15).

[119] Further, Olivier points out that Quetzalcoatl is "sometimes translated as 'Precious Twin'" ("Enemy Brothers or Divine Twins?" 72). The ambiguous relation of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca as deities associated and in conflict with one another as brothers or twins resonates in the dynamic between Donne and the narrator in *Palace*.

[120] Michael E. Smith provides several examples of Aztec figures containing obsidian mirrors. Some of these illustrations are of Tezcatlipoca himself, while others are of mirrors in other contexts. As Smith explains, "there is abundant evidence in the [Aztec] codices that mirrors in Aztec central Mexico—both those associated with Tezcatlipoca and other mirrors—were black and circular in form" (14). In illustrations, these mirrors were represented by "a circular black object, sometimes with plumes of smoke and sometimes with balls of down" (15).

reflections, where souls, spirits, and the immanent forces of the cosmos dwell (Saunders and Baquedano 2). Obsidian itself, as volcanic glass, represents "transformed matter which bridged physical and spiritual worlds," linked to the geologic spaces it emerges from as well as the transcendent realms it can disclose in glimpses (Saunders 224). As the Smoking Mirror of obsidian, Tezcatlipoca combines the associations of visual power, including the brilliance of surfaces that reflect or project light; the suprasensory dimensions beyond material immediacy; and the sacred matter at the "heart of the earth" (Saunders and Baquedano 4). Just as the Smoking Mirror Harris describes projects content as well as confers visual access to its transformative depths, Tezcatlipoca is linked to the volcanoes that produce obsidian, and specifically to Popocatepetl, a volcano "whose Aztec name means 'smoking mountain'" (Saunders 225). The smoke of the volcano is a literal expression emanating from the earth, "signifying its presence as a spiritually alive entity" (Saunders and Baquedano 5). This procreative gesture, by which the earth speaks in material signs, parallels the function attributed to obsidian mirrors and to the eye more generally in Mesoamerican culture: "[the eye] not only receives images from the outer world, but positively affects and changes that world through the power of sight—in short, it behaves as an 'emanating eye' that establishes communion between internal will and external result" (Houston and Taube 281).

Though Harris does not fully explicate this context in "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror," the chain of associations he nonetheless invokes flourishes in *Palace of the Peacock*. Living landscapes speak in a language of material utterances, reflective surfaces draw human perception into a proliferation of extrahuman perspectives, and the material resources of the environment unleash transformative potential. As Harris argues

in the Quetzalcoatl essay, submitting "singular bias" to the plurality of an ecological perspective induces a shift in perception that facilitates the reconciliation of contrasting cultural forces and the recuperative integration of violent rupture, capacities that he associates with the writing of epics. Harris articulates this process first through the metaphor of architectural design that anticipates the rupture of an earthquake through awareness of the geological forces of the earth. He describes a structure built with such consideration as "hinged … to a primordial cradle" and explains that when such a structure is in the throes of a quake, "a new space or dimension in the mind of architecture is realized that unravels and absorbs the energies in the living earth" (187). A communion occurs between these material forces that awakens previously inaccessible resources, or "transitive densities," in the building, and the object transcends itself through attunement that allows it to incorporate, rather than resist, what registers as external or not-self. Harris directly links those transitive densities to engagement with living landscapes in his fiction:

> Transitive densities may instill themselves in fiction that is shaped in 'the mind of the imaginative writer who has been deeply affected by the life of primordial landscapes, tall rapids, burning savannahs, rain-forest rocks imprinted with the markings of ancient cultures, markings that resemble extra-human messages from the gods who write in fire and wind and water.' (186)

Just as he depicted the expressions of the landscape as linguistic resources that allow fuller expression of self, history, and environment, Harris here claims that what emerges from the integration of not-self into self are "transitive dimensionalities that unlock doors within the body of language itself" and which are required to articulate the "multi-

dimensionalities of epic," literature that reckons with and reconciles dissonance across the historical and contemporary; global and local; overt and subliminal (187).

In his discussion of epic, Harris interlinks multidimensional perception, engagement with the extrahuman, and a revised relation between past and present as well as colonizing and colonized peoples:

> Epic is an *arrival* in an architecture of space that is *original* to our age, an *arrival* in multi-dimensionality that alerts us to some kind of transfiguration of appearances – in parallel with science and architecture – that implies energies akin to extra-human faculties inserted into the fabric of history. …
>
> To arrive in a tradition that appears to have died is complex renewal and revisionary momentum *sprung from originality and the activation of primordial resources within a living language.* We arrive backwards even as we voyage forwards. …
>
> We *arrive* in New World epic when we experience or re-imagine the earthquake of conquest as if conquest is native to our very bones. (187-188, emphasis original)

Harris strives to write epic fiction that rehearses and reconciles the past while performing the future, and views the resources of living landscapes as the crucial lenses through which he might enact the multidimensional vision of epic. He also sees epic literature as the culmination of his efforts to reconcile the violence of binary oppositions and exploitative hierarchies.

Harris's definition of epic prefigures Yusoff's identification of works that reject the colonial classification of inhuman matter as property and instead "create an insurgent

geology of belonging, one that refuses capture by geologic forces and redirects their nonstratified forces as a sense of possibility" (Yusoff 88). Drawing on the idea of "Making a Way Out of No Way," Yusoff argues that reclaiming the exchangeable and mutable qualities attributed to Black bodies as property "opens and realigns the property-properties relation to speak to time-space coordinates that are not already occupied by the authorizing center, Colonial Man" (91).[121] This practice of creating space outside of exploitative structures through a revision of relation to the inhuman marks the possibility of resistance through a transcendence rooted in the immanent that Yusoff traces. As the concluding section of this chapter argues, the end of *Palace* enacts exactly this kind of dimensional procreation to allow the characters to pass into a mode of relation that fully realizes the diffusion of the individual into an extrahuman ecological totality.

The perspective that attends Harris's epic literature also marks a significant point of divergence between Harris's ambitions and those that Morton articulates in his scheme for contemporary ecological awareness. While Morton largely takes the pragmatic position of sketching the premise of ecological relation while acknowledging that infinite interconnection is beyond human comprehension, Harris seeks to approximate a model of that relation in his creative and critical work. Recognizing the difficulty of comprehending the extent of an ecological system and imagining one's role within it as a potentially alienating and paralyzing barrier to ethical action, Morton downplays the importance of accessing that vision in favor of accepting it as a condition of existence and focusing on how it should impact behavior:

[121] Yusoff adopts the phrase "Making a Way Out of No Way" from an exhibition at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Yusoff 91).

> Being-connected-to is not as big of a deal as the very high-minded eco people make it out to be. When they make it out to be a big deal, they are setting the bar for ecological awareness really high. Having it would be like being enlightened, or purified of one's sins, or capable of seeing everything and everywhere all at once. I hope we've put to rest the oppressive possibility that you *can* see everywhere at once. Because you can't see everywhere at once, you can't ever grasp the whole, because wholes aren't actually like that—they aren't everywhere, they don't fit over everything. The members of wholes are always in excess of those wholes. ("...and the Leg Bone's Connected to the Toxic Waste Dump Bone" 141-142)

If Morton and Harris are both articulating a phenomenon that is unobservable in immediate experience, Morton offers an informational description without trying to actually represent it, while Harris theorizes access to that vision in his essays and attempts to build a working model of it in his literature, particularly his fiction. The unattainable total perspective that Morton figures as beside the ethical point is precisely what Harris strives toward. Harris uses his fiction to model a truly plural perspective, one that not only registers the partial nature of any one lens (or any object's relation to other objects), but performs the alchemical feat of combining an ever-expanding multiplicity of perspectives into a many-eyed vision that can approximate the unity and simultaneity of an ecological totality.

Significantly, Harris's transcendent access is rooted not in moving beyond the immediate material environment, but in aligning one's perspective with that environment, an adjustment that allows one to recognize the transcendent in the immanent. Morton

dispenses with the fantasy of an individual perspective being able to "see everywhere at once" based on the premise that there is no summative object that contains everything and can be apprehended as one whole; rather, there are only ever more interconnected objects (142). But Harris's total vision isn't the product of zooming out so far that a unified object containing everything can be seen at a remove, as though viewed from the individual and remote perspective of a god. Rather, Harris's multifaceted vision, a vision that approximates content on a dimensional scale beyond humans' perceptual capacity, emerges from the proliferation and collusion of partial lenses that make up systems of objects. Harris surpasses the limits of human perspective not by augmenting or perfecting that vision, but by relinquishing individual sight altogether.

By embracing ecological intimacy with the extrahuman, Harris positions individual perspective as an illusory effect that merely obscures the fuller range of perceptual possibility. The promise of accessing a "view from everywhere" by submitting individual perspective to the reflective and emanative potential of material objects is explicitly rendered in both "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror" and *Palace of the Peacock.* In the former, it is especially appropriate that it is from the field of a smoking, obsidian mirror that Harris's coalescing vision of epic springs. Not only does the mirror represent the union of spiritual and material, of the penetrative and procreative eye and the projective environmental object; it also emphasizes the potential ascribed to a plural, reflective lens to activate transformative perception. Harris suggests this in his reading of Quetzalcoatl's mirror as one in which the varied veils of natural entities are combined before his eyes, and that connection is prefigured in the Mesoamerican medical practice of "the application of obsidian powder to the eyes of those suffering from cataracts," an

intervention that underscores the visual potency associated with Tezcatlipoca and obsidian (Saunders 224). Moreover, the plurality of Harris's ecological perspective resonates with the material reality of this treatment, in which the reflective surface of obsidian is ground into a profusion of fine shards and applied to the individual perspective rooted in the eye.

In *Palace*, the progressive detachment of perspective from the individual is expressed at various levels of the text, ranging from shifts in the narrative voice to the routing of identity and will through features of the landscape. But Harris also explicitly articulates the necessity of ceding individual sight to access ecological perspective in scenes in which the narrator and Donne approach epiphanic states. In the earliest of these instances, as the narrator wakes after a night spent at the Mission, his closed eyes are visited with an "illusory reflection" of dewdrops in the forest, emerging like thousands of tears from the eyes of an ecological body that is plural and all-encompassing.

> The leaves dripped in the entire forest the dewy cold tears of the season of drought that affected the early tropical morning and left me rigid and trembling. A pearl and half-light and arrow shot along the still veined branches. The charcoal memory of the hour lifted as a curtain rises upon the light of an eternal design. The trees were lit with stars of fire of an unchanging and perfect transparency. They hung on every sensitive leaf and twig and fell into the river, streaking the surface of the water with a darting appearance crimson as blood. It was an illusory reflection growing out of the strength of the morning light on my closed eyelids and I had no alternative but to accept my eye as a shade between me and an inviolate spirit. (47)

The imagery of tears, "veined branches," and water drops resembling blood as they drip into the river render the landscape in terms of fleshly relation, evoking a circulatory system that connects all parts of the environment to one another. The narrator slips into this collective body, much as the falling dewdrops are incorporated into the larger body of the river. The innumerable dewdrops are both "stars of fire" that brilliantly reflect light and "tears" that possess the "perfect transparency" of lenses. In their abundance, lens-like depiction, and malleability as individual manifestations that also commingle as one entity, the drops evoke the multiplicity of perspectives that come together in the obsidian mirror. Indeed, the vision is interpreted by the narrator as a "reflection" that he accesses with his eyes closed, a phenomenon that prompts him to "accept [his] eye as a shade between [him] and an inviolate spirit." This observation anticipates Harris's reading of the Quetzalcoatl legend, designating the narrator's eye as one of the many veils that divide him from what is "everlasting" and "unfathomable" (*Selected Essays* 184). The narrator's own perspective thus does not penetrate the veils of the natural world to seize the incomprehensible truth beyond those layers; rather, it forms yet another layer, another obstacle to true sight.

The novel emphasizes the individual eye's inadequacy to access the kind of vision Harris strives toward by specifying that the narrator is not looking with his eyes when he glimpses this revelatory vision in which the receding darkness is compared to "a curtain ris[ing] upon the light of an eternal design." Much as in the novel's opening dream sequence, the narrator's own eye occludes the truth he aims to grasp. From the beginning of the novel, it is only by joining his own perspective with that of otherness that the narrator can see at all, as Donne's "dead seeing material eye" eclipses the narrator's

"living closed spiritual eye" (14). This hybrid perspective privileges ceding the "spiritual" perspective of the subject in favor of material plurality that marks the self as partial, incorporating it into a composite that nullifies the "singular bias" that Harris critiques in his Quetzalcoatl essay (185). For Harris, the eye that sees beyond the illusion of autonomous subjectivity brings together many partial lenses or masks, exploding the individual to access an extrahuman reservoir of manifold perspectives. When he receives his vision of the jungle through closed eyes, the narrator circumvents the limits of his own perspective by not looking with his eyes, achieving a kind of blind or negated vision that surpasses his living sight. It's also significant that the vision is referred to as a "reflection," repeating the model that locates transcendent vision in a reflective surface that overrules individual sight.

Even the blindness of the narrator's early dreams evokes the reflective brilliance of the obsidian mirror. Initially, the narrator looks down at Donne's open, dead eyes, and is blinded by the sun as it is reflected in those eyes. The association is repeated in even starker terms in the narrator's dream conversation with Mariella, when he "turn[s] away from her black hypnotic eyes as if [he] had been blinded by the sun." This depiction of Mariella's eyes as black and blinding functions as an insertion of obsidian mirror iconography into the text, and as he is blinded by the mirror of her eyes, the narrator glimpses "a watching muse and phantom whose breath was on [his] lips," briefly gaining access to what is veiled to his own sight (16).

Literal blindness that obscures individual identity also facilitates Donne's later penetration of the threshold that divides the characters from the transcendent realm they seek at the end of the novel. Before he can pursue the indigenous people he calls "the

folk" to the realm of their ultimate escape, Donne must cede the individual sight and self that makes him their other and pursuer, becoming "truly blind" in "the unselfness of night" (140).

Shedding Singular Bias and Entering the City of Go(l)d

As the crew's journey and so the novel draws to a close, the crew are reduced in number and means until the only path forward requires that they learn how to follow the folk beyond the limits of individual subjectivity and the linear space and time in which it is grounded. The crew's progress upriver halts when they reach "the highest waterfall they had ever seen" at the source of the river (128). Left with little other choice, the men attempt to scale the cliffs that have surrounded them on the river for days, leaving them nowhere to land. In this ascent, the crew seek to pursue the native folk beyond a threshold that withdraws from their attempts to access it. Over the previous days, surrounded by steep banks, increasingly in peril, and losing their grasp on reality, the crew begin thinking of the folk not merely as quarry, but as their own salvation. They imagine the folk will "lead [them] home safely," and look desperately for any sign of their presence. One purported sign arrives when a herd of tapirs appears to emerge from "an archway and gate in the rock" of the cliff to rush into the river (104). Donne suggests that the herd has been chased there by the folk and that it indicates their nearness. The next day, in increasing desperation, Jennings suggests that the crew should "look for the hole where the wild tapir pass through the cliff" so they might "pass through the same door to the land," though he struggles to remember when, exactly, they saw the herd (119). But daSilva laughs at this suggestion, insisting they saw no tapir, and that "the hole close up

for good for you a million year ago. You is a prehistoric animal" (120). The promise of the door belongs to another time, and what the crew might have seen "yesterday? Or day before yesterday?" is as distant to them as an irretrievably ancient past. The folk, it seems, have eluded them by passing through a door that may or may not exist, that may as well belong to a landscape a million years past for all it can be accessed by Donne and his crew. Thus, when the men clamber up the cliff face looking for a way out, they seek something more than a mundane feature of the landscape. This final ascent dramatizes the surrender of self as a ritual act that opens "spiritual eyes" and facilitates the penetration of occluding veils to not only see beyond immediate reality, but to enter the transcendent dimension of ecological relation (132).

In this ascent, the novel returns to the central, often indistinguishable, characters of Donne and the vanishing narrator to navigate the final passage to the eponymous palace of the peacock. For the first time, the narrative centers Donne as a focalizer for a full chapter, following him up the "steps and balconies… making hazardous ladders against the universal walls" of the cliff (129). As he climbs, Donne not only traverses a physical feature of the landscape, but surpasses immediate reality to ascend a cosmic ladder that bridges dimensions.[122] In the liminal space of the ascent, Donne might access all times. Simultaneously immersed in the memory of his domination of the savannah and suspended on the cliff for "an eternity," he longs to retrace experience to its "beginnings"—not only to return to the origins of his own story, but "to see the

[122] Harris went on to link his first four novels (*Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour*, and *The Secret Ladder*) as a sequence, which was later released as *The Guyana Quartet* (1985). As its title suggests, *The Secret Ladder* (1963) also uses the metaphor of a ladder to represent a character's ascent to divine revelation over a period of seven days, drawing not only on the creation cycle but also on the biblical image of a ladder or steps ascending to heaven (Durix 27).

indestructible nucleus and redemption of creation … he longed to see, *he longed to see* the atom, the very nail of moment in the universe" (130, emphasis original). As if in answer to Donne's desire for a vision that could penetrate to the source of all things, his climb leads him to a "veil and window" in the cliff through which he sees a "craftsman of God" carving forms out of wood (131, 132). The carpenter is engaged in timeless creation; his "every movement and glance and expression was a chiseling touch, the divine alienation and translation of flesh and blood into everything and anything on earth" (132). Donne observes living images in "picture[s] [the carpenter] had framed on the wall," pictures that are also passages, or windows, that allow the carpenter's creations to come and go. In one such picture, Donne sees an animal "bounding towards" the carpenter "through the prehistoric hole in the cliff Jennings had dreamed to find" (134). The carpenter's room is a nexus of times and spaces, simultaneously coinciding with the prehistoric and the present in a room "as old as a cave and as new as a study" (133).

But though he pounds on the wall and window, Donne cannot penetrate the expanse of time and space that divides him from the carpenter, who "look[s] through him as through the far-seeing image and constellation of his eye—clouds and star and sun on the window-panes." Despite his efforts and desperation, Donne cannot capture the carpenter's attention, nor penetrate the walls, which represent the division not merely of a material barrier, but of separate planes of existence:

> The walls—whether of glass or stone or wood—were thicker than the stratosphere. All sound had been barred and removed for ever, all communication, all persuasion, all intercourse. It was Death with capitals, and when he saw this he felt too that it was he who stood within the room and it was the carpenter who

> stood reflected without. This was a fantasy, this change of places, and he hammered again loud. (133)

The separation between Donne and the carpenter is the distinction between life and death, a border Donne cannot cross through individual will, though he continues to sense their potential interchangeability. Only once Donne accepts that he is "truly blind" and relinquishes his individual perspective does this threshold become open to him:

> He had entered the endless void of himself and the stars were invisible. He was blind. He accepted every invisible light and conceived it as an intimate and searching reflection which he was helping to build with each step he made. His unique eye was a burning fantasy he knew. He was truly blind. … It was his blindness that made him see his own nothingness and imagination constructed beyond his reach. (140)

Accepting the "unique eye" of his own perspective as illusory and recognizing the self as a void that is open to everything else enables Donne to shift from the impotency of individual identity to a "creation and reflection he shared with another. … They were a ghost of light and that was all. The void of themselves alone was real and structural" (141). As a "they," this more-than-Donne continues hammering, until a door that is "the face of the earth itself where they lay" swings open to reveal daSilva, who names himself "a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord" even as Donne sees daSilva as a dead body that he steps over to enter (142). Donne perceives this entry as a final access to the belonging he has been chasing, realizing that "the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk" (143). It is the surrender of individual perspective that enables Donne to cross the threshold into a collective mode of being.

In Donne's ascent of the cliff, access to a realm associated with the transcendence of death and divinity is depicted as gained through a transformation of perspective. Harris also embeds this revelation in the novel's structure through the epigraphs that precede the last two sections of the text. Book III of the novel, entitled "The Second Death," bears as epigraph an excerpt from John Donne's "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness," in which the poem's speaker reflects on preparing to be transmuted into God's music in the afterlife while standing at the door of death: "I tune the instrument here at the door / And what I must do then, think here before" (lines 4-5). Book IV, entitled "Paling of Ancestors," begins with an excerpt from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Starlight Night" describing the stars as the barrier separating man from God: "This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse / Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows" (lines 13-14). Together, these two epigraphs sketch the conclusion of the novel, in which the crew members reach the end of their journey and encounter a barrier that divides the realm of earthly existence from divinity.

While Hopkins's poem does not depict the "piece-bright paling" as anything but an impassable boundary viewed from afar, John Donne's contemplation of approaching death not only suggests the barrier is surmountable, but represents the rupture between these divided realms as one that is resolved through dimensional adjustment.[123] Comparing himself to a map throughout the poem, the speaker of "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness" calls death his "southwest discovery," but as he moves on "straits"

[123] To distinguish between the character Donne in *Palace of the Peacock* and the poet, I refer to the latter by his full name. In addition to the link to the poet that Harris's choice of name for the character Donne implies, Harris has also connected Donne's name to the legendary city of El Dorado sought by conquistadors, referring to the character as "the Eldora*Donne* fugitive of time" (*Selected Essays* 55, emphasis original).

that lead to the western horizon of death and whose "currants yeeld return to none," he takes comfort in the knowledge that these seemingly oppositional planes must also be linked: "As west and East / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So Death doth touch the Resurrection" (9-15). The metaphor of a two-dimensional map allows the poem to elide seemingly irrevocable opposition by introducing a third dimension, in which the two disparate realms coincide. John Donne imagines a universal self through divinity, not only linking life and death, but positing that the individual bears an immediate, bodily relation to the entirety of human existence, asserting that "both Adams met in me; / As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face, / May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace!" (24-26). All of the epigraphs Harris inserts throughout the novel invoke liminal states between life and death or the complexity of locating the divine in some way, but the John Donne epigraph stands out as particularly significant, not least because *Palace's* central figure shares the poet's name. Ultimately, "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness" and *Palace of the Peacock* share an approach to dimensional transcendence through perspective, though John Donne's divinity explicitly correlates to nearness to a Christian God, whereas Harris's transcendent perspective emerges from an ecological convergence of self and other.

By making the novel's ultimate destination one that cannot be penetrated by the force of conquest but rather opens only to those who cede individual subjectivity to ecological being, Harris centers a reorientation toward the extrahuman as the transformative crux of his characters' journey. With this shift, Harris participates in a revisionary impulse that continues to figure prominently in contemporary ontologies of the inhuman, including both Yusoff's and Morton's projects. For Harris, turning away

from the illusory absolutism of individual subjectivity affords an alternative mode of relation that dispels the spatial and temporal bounds that limit what is accessible or real.

This reorientation, an adjustment of the very terms of being, is echoed in the strategic practice Yusoff traces in her insurgent geology. By choosing the collective being of intimacy with the inhuman and rejecting "the autonomous and individuated subjectification of Whiteness," Yusoff posits that marginalized, exploited, and enslaved peoples create a form of being that exists "outside and against the world of the 'given' humanist subject (and their space-time)" (84-85). This resistance culminates in a refashioning of the terms of bodily relation to the objects constituting the material environment, "a shift in geophysics" that enables bodies marked as inert, exchangeable property to access "time-space coordinates that are not already occupied by the authorizing center, Colonial Man." Yusoff illustrates this intervention by examining depictions of Black physical resistance that "presented a possibility of 'Making a Way Out of No Way'" (91). Among other examples, Yusoff considers an 1817 print of an enslaved woman who has leapt out of a window and is suspended in the air:

> The wind catches and balloons her dress, but she is not falling. She has a different field of gravity that is held by a barely perceptible planetary shift in the allegiances of matter: "The problem was gravity and the answer was gravity" (Brand 2014, 157). She both escaped out the window and is not yet returned to the exposure of her captivity through the forces that would return her to the earth. (93)

Yusoff explains that the woman in the print accesses freedom by not resisting, but embracing, proximity to the inhuman, arguing, "she has unbound herself in the very same

language of matter that would make a person into a thing, defying the weight of her flesh arranged in the matter of anti-Blackness" (95-96). In Yusoff's proposed geopoetics, "making a way out of no way" is an exertion of the resources of recalibration and invention available to those who reject the terms of a humanity that "was never for the whole of humanity" and choose to embrace the transcendent possibilities of being that reside outside of Western subjectivity (96).

Similarly, Morton views the intimacy with the inhuman that attends ecological awareness as an alternative mode of being that operates on a dimensional scale beyond immediate, perceptible reality. Engaging in ecological thought, Morton argues, enables one to think "hyperobjects," inconceivably large-scale phenomena that can only be glimpsed in small pieces that often appear disconnected. As Morton argues in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, hyperobjects "occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis" (70). Attuning oneself to the scale of hyperobjects through "ecological vision" undermines several basic assumptions about experience, the most significant of which is the idea of world, "of gaps and backgrounds between and behind things." On the dimensional level of hyperobjects, Morton writes, "the gaps and ruptures are simply the *invisible presence* of the hyperobject itself, which looms around us constantly" (76). For Morton, the important conclusion here is that there is no world, no background medium in which objects are distributed; there are only objects enmeshed with objects as far as the eye can see and beyond. And in that view, locality is merely "an abstraction" and "a false immediacy" (47, 48). On the scale of hyperobjects, everything is simultaneously present and connected; each part of an

ecological totality is equally local, or relevant, to every other part, and thus the category of the local is emptied of meaning.

On the surface, Morton's dimension of atemporal, nonlocal hyperobjects may seem incompatible with Yusoff's emphasis on the particularity of material alliances, or Harris's deep engagement with the local in the Guyanese landscape. However, when Morton describes hyperobjects as nonlocal and atemporal, he means that the scale on which they exist exceeds definitions of what it means to be locally or temporally present. As Morton puts it, "such gigantic scales are involved—or rather such knotty relationships between gigantic and intimate scales—that hyperobjects cannot be thought as occupying a series of now-points 'in' time or space" (*Hyperobjects* 47). While Morton doesn't provide all that Yusoff asks of ontologies of the extrahuman that recognize and resist the exclusions built into the category of humanity before theorizing transformations of that category, he does gesture toward a more nuanced interpenetration of the local and the universal, and the individual and the ecological. Just as Morton references the potential of a plural, ecological perspective while setting it aside as unattainable, he similarly remains on the periphery of the problem of maintaining local and temporal specificity on a scale that collapses the distinction between points that appear disparate from a less expansive perspective.

The epic culmination that Harris strives toward in *Palace of the Peacock* resolves some of the tension between Yusoff's and Morton's approaches because it offers a means of thinking ecological relation that is grounded in the reality of historical exploitation. Yusoff argues that "the semiotics of White Geology creates *a*temporal materiality dislocated from place and time—a mythology of disassociation in the formation of matter

independent of its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations" (4-5, emphasis original). Harris seeks to reconcile the violence of that semiotics, a pattern of rupture that derives from what Harris calls "singular bias." When Harris's characters cede individual subjectivity to a sense of self that encompasses more than self, they shift the terms of relation, creating space and accessing possibility beyond immediate reality as in Yusoff's insurgent geology. They attain a perspective that operates on the level of hyperobjects, a dimension on which all things in some sense coincide. Crucially, Harris's version of ecological connection is attended by the multitemporal potential he ascribes to the writing of epic. As Harris explains in "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror," epic not only requires the extrahuman resources of landscape, but also draws on the reservoir of a temporal totality:

> To arrive in a tradition that appears to have died is a complex renewal and revisionary momentum *sprung from originality and the activation of primordial resources within a living language.* We arrive backwards even as we voyage forwards. This is the phenomenon of simultaneity in the imagination of times past and future, a future that renews time in its imaginary response to gestating resources in *the womb of the present and the past.* It is unlike the linear biases that prevail in conventional fiction. (187, emphasis original)

Epic literature overturns the notion of linearity, which preserves the illusion of distance between points in time. Like the dimensional transformation that occurs in "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness," where the opposing edges of a flat map must in fact reference the same space, Harris's epic simultaneity removes the perceived distance separating events. The result is "an orchestration of ancient and modern histories and

characterizations and imageries" working in concert and in shared tune, "revolving, so to speak, around a transitive principle or musical chord" (185). The ambition of epic that Harris works toward in *Palace* is to express a totality that is not merely so vast and comprehensive as to be atemporal and nonlocal, but that resists linearity to instead render the simultaneity and co-presence of its components. And just as the lens of "the suppressed fire of the Smoking Mirror" enacts the rebirth of epic in the Quetzalcoatl essay, the revelatory mechanism at the end of *Palace of the Peacock* takes the form of a lens or window that augments the narrator's perspective (186).

In the final pages of the novel, immediately after the door in the earth opens for Donne, the text announces the culmination of the novel's creation sequence: "It was the seventh day from Mariella. And the creation of the windows of the universe was finished" (111). The I-narrator reemerges, now at the top of the cliff, participating in a shared vision and body that integrates him into an ecological totality. Fittingly, the first-person voice that speaks at the end of the novel no longer represents an individual, but flouts the convention of an "I" that correlates to one speaking, sensing body. From the top of the cliff that Donne ascended, the I-narrator initially looks on the savannahs "over [Vigilance's] dreaming shoulder" and through an "eye and window" that "stood now in the dreaming forehead at the top of the cliff in the sky" (144). But these external reference points that orient the narrator are next referred to as part of the narrator, as his gaze and body fuse with Vigilance and with the environment:

> We stood there—our eye and shoulder profound and retiring—feeling for the shadow of our feet on the ground. The light rolled and burned into quicksilver and hair shining in the window of my eye until it darkened. I found the courage to

> make my first blind wooden step. Like the step of the tree in the distance. My feet were truly alive I realized, as were my dreaming shoulder and eye; as far flung and distant from me as a man in fever thinks his thumb to be removed from his fingers; far away as heaven's hand. It was a new sensation and alien body and experience encompassing the ends of the earth. (145)

The passage begins with "we" and "our" pronouns to emphasize the multiplicity of the narrator's perspective, but the narrator subsequently refers to the same shared body parts as "my dreaming shoulder and eye," assimilating what was external as part of himself. Further, the self that emerges as the passage continues is one that also incorporates the landscape, expanding toward a comprehensive, ecological perspective. The "dreaming forehead at the top of the cliff" may describe Vigilance's forehead, matching what is first referred to as his "dreaming shoulder," but so, too, might it refer to a dreaming sight that is part of the cliff itself. Indeed, when the narrator describes "feeling for the shadow of our feet on the ground," the body implied could be that of the cliff, casting its shadow on the savannah. The narrator's step is "wooden" and resembles "the step of the tree in the distance," and the "alien body" he is now intimately aware of is an ecological totality "encompassing the ends of the earth." The disorientation the narrator experiences in relating to this body, which he compares to the confusion that makes a feverish man perceive great distance between parts of his body that are immediate to one another, illustrates the shift in scale that attends ecological relation. The narrator's own extremities are as "far flung and distant" as an inaccessibly remote heaven, and yet heaven and "the ends of the earth" are immediate and intimate to him. The truly collective perspective the narrator finally accesses operates on a higher dimension,

recontextualizing what appeared to be disparate as parts of the same linked body and collapsing the illusion of distance.

Seeing from the perspective of an eye "shared only with the soul, the soul and mother of the universe," reveals the structural unity of an ecological totality (146). When the narrator looks again at the tree "through the spiritual eye of the soul," he sees it "wave its arms and walk" before transforming into an assemblage that encompasses the entirety of existence, from the cosmic to the immediate:

> The bark and wood turned to lightning flesh and the sun which had been suspended from its head rippled and broke into stars that stood where the shattered leaves had been in the living wake of the storm. The enormous starry dress it now wore spread itself all around into a full majestic gown from which emerged the intimate column of a musing neck, face and hands, and twinkling feet. The stars became peacocks' eyes, and the great tree of flesh and blood swirled into another stream that sparkled with divine feathers where the neck and the hands and the feet had been nailed.
>
> This was the palace of the universe and the windows of the soul looked out and in. The living eyes in the crested head were free to observe the twinkling stars and eyes and windows on the rest of the body and the wings. Every cruel mark and stripe and ladder had vanished. (146-147)

The palace is Harris's interpretation of El Dorado, an elusive, mutable destination that is simultaneously a perceptual structure, a living body, and a physical aggregate of disparate

times and places.[124] As an amalgamation of eyes and windows, it evokes the many partial lenses that come together in the visual apparatus of the Smoking Mirror. The erasure of every "mark and stripe and ladder" links the palace to the landscape, recalling the ladders that littered the cliff the characters ascended, as well as connects it to bodies both divine and indigenous. The imagery of stripes and "nailed" hands and feet evoke the crucifixion, but the reference to "every cruel mark and stripe" also recalls the abused flesh of Mariella, who lifts her dress to reveal the marks of Donne's whip in the narrator's dream at the beginning of the novel. It's particularly apt that the living figure that emerges as one whole composed of the many parts and perspectives of the universe is a peacock, given both the animal's Amerindian mythological associations and the imagery of repeated eye-like markings on a peacock's feathers.[125] In its incomprehensible enormity, spanning dimensions beyond human access, the palace of the peacock is very like what Morton defines as a hyperobject. With the palace, Harris presents his hypothetical total perspective, depicting the transcendent phenomenon of seeing everything and from every

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[124] Harris frequently refers to the palace of the peacock as El Dorado in interviews and essays; for example, see "Michael Gilkes Interviews Sir Wilson Harris." In "A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*," Harris writes that the collective unity found in the music at the end of *Palace* "breed[s] a gateway or intangible architecture when El Dorado, or the city of gold, secretes a resemblance to the city of God" (8).

[125] In Harris's essay "The Amerindian Legacy," he explains the alchemical symbolism of the "Carib 'immortal child' of dreams," in which the peacock figures significantly. A specter summoned by the ritual cooking of enemy flesh, the immortal child has three phases that Harris characterizes as follows: First, blackness associated with an "undiscovered realm;" second, whiteness or illumination of "inner perspective…the dawn of a new consciousness;" and third, "cauda pavonis or the colors of the peacock, which may be equated with all the variable possibilities or colours of fulfilment we can never totally realise" (*Selected Essays* 169). As a body that comprehends all possibilities, the peacock also joins masculine and feminine imagery. While the peacock that emerges at the end of *Palace* is referred to with male pronouns (and a peafowl with the vibrant plumage Harris describes would necessarily be male), the echo of Mariella's flesh is not its only feminine aspect. Harris's description of a "starry dress" that becomes a "majestic gown from which emerge[s] the intimate column of a musing neck, face and hands, and twinkling feet" introduces further feminine associations, and recalls the shining gown worn by a Virgin Mary figure that Donne glimpses in the cliff's unreachable chambers (146). So, too, does the peacock's cry weave masculine and feminine into one expression, speaking "with the inner longing of woman and the deep mastery of man" (148).

perspective at once as an all-encompassing object or structure on a dimension that incorporates all possible experience.

Looking now with eyes attuned to its presence, the narrator is able to register his position within the palace that he has inhabited all along. He also sees his companions in the windows of other towers of the palace, and they intermingle with one another through "the cry of the peacock," a timeless music that reveals that the variations of difference and individuality perceived by humans are "outward and unreal and illusory…induced by the limits and apprehensions in the listening mind of men" (148-149).[126] From the vantage point of the transcendent destination reached through the negation of individuality, the narrator recognizes the falseness of the divisions that drive Donne's conquest and the crew's pursuit of the folk throughout the novel:

> Indeed this was a unique frame I well knew now to construct the events of all appearance and tragedy into the vain prison they were, a child's game of a besieged and a besieging race who felt themselves driven to seek themselves—first, outcast and miserable twins of fate—second, heroic and warlike brothers—third, conquerors and invaders of all mankind. In reality the territory they overwhelmed and abandoned had always been theirs to rule and take. (149)

With this shift in perspective, Harris dismantles the binary oppositions of self and other as well as the notions of variation and change that structure a linear view of history. The

[126] The cry of the peacock is initially delivered through the mouthpiece of Carroll, whistling, and is affiliated significantly with another Amerindian object Harris returns to frequently, the Carib bone flute. This music, which other scholars have analyzed in further detail, also echoes John Donne's representation of becoming one with divinity through transmutation into heavenly music in "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness." For explications of Carroll's whistle in connection with the bone flute, see Harris's "A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*" and Fehskens's "The Epic Hero in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock.*"

increasingly oppositional stages of twins, brothers, and conquerors parallels the dynamic of Donne and the narrator, as well as that of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, but here Harris extends that relation to speak to the illusory division between the victors and victims of conquest.

For Harris, the ecological totality of the palace is unifying, though not homogenizing. The peacock models the ideal of being able "to know and to hug to himself his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire" (152). In other words, otherness is accepted as internal to the self, though not identical with it, a paradoxical balance that preserves difference while also marking what is alien as always-already intimate. It is in the spirit of this reconciliation of self and other that the novel closes, allowing the individual personae of the crew to dissipate into a whole to which they all belong:

> I felt the faces before me begin to fade away and part company from me and from themselves as if our need of one another was now fulfilled, and our distance from each other was the distance of a sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one undying soul. Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been forever seeking and what he had eternally possessed. (152)

Significantly, the sacramental distance does not suggest a total admixture of identities into one unvaried mass, but the incorporation of individual, partial lenses into a unified structure. This is the epic realization by which rupture is experienced not as a violent break, but as a preexisting facet of the whole or, as Harris puts it in "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror," as "native to our very bones" (188).

The visionary tactics by which Harris aims to resist the divisions in which exploitative practices are embedded represents an earlier version of the intimacy with the inhuman that Yusoff traces as a praxis for remaking material relation outside of exclusionary definitions of subjectivity. The reconciliation of self and other represented in *Palace of the Peacock* and repeated throughout Harris's later work occurs through a refashioning of the terms of humanity to incorporate extrahuman resources. The unity at the end of the novel is thus not the silencing "we" that Yusoff cautions against, a universal collective that entails "a deformation of the differentiation of subjective relations made in and through geology" (Yusoff 107). Rather than failing to attend to the differentiation of subjective relations in constructing his ecological perspective, Harris specifically develops it as a restorative adjustment of those relations. Though Donne sets out with the intention of recapturing Mariella, the possibility of possessing either her or colonized territory is removed by the negation of self that Donne must undergo to arrive in the transcendent domain of the folk. The body of the peacock, which encompasses all flesh, from that of Mariella, to Christ, to the landscape itself, cannot be catalogued, divided, or claimed. As Harris emphasizes in the Quetzalcoatl essay, he resists classificatory and oppositional structures not to advocate for a homogenous unity that sees diversity "conquered and unified," but to facilitate the convergence of varied perspectives:

> That difference rests on diverse cultures, a capacity within diverse cultures to create and re-create windows into the enigma of truth. Each window's susceptibility to rigidity, rigid commandment, breaks, turns, I am suggesting, into a transitive architecture, a transitive medium into other dimensions within the

> unfinished genesis of the Imagination. Diversity then sponsors the liberation of the orphaned Soul within re-visionary and plural masks. (194)

The extrahuman plurality of ecological perspective, as realized in the hyperdimensional architecture of the palace of the peacock, negates the violent rupture of opposition by offering an alternative to the singular bias that Harris identifies as integral to Western subjectivity. Harris brings his cast of characters, led by a conquistador, home to a collective unity in which divine transcendence emerges from intimacy with the vast reaches of material immediacy. It is thus only when the characters have relinquished the oppositional thinking in which the roles of oppressor and victim originate that they are able to gain access to the elusive object of colonial extractive desire, awakening to an El Dorado that is a multistable perspective as much as a place.

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