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“A Mixture of Delicious and Freak”: The Queer
Fiction of Carson McCullers

In April 1963 an aging Carson McCullers made a final visit to the deep South, where she met twenty-six-year-old Gordon Langley Hall at a party in Charleston. At the end of the evening, she pulled him aside as the other guests began to go home and studied him intently for a moment without speaking, then remarked gently, “You’re really a little girl.”¹ Years later, physicians concurred that Hall, who had been sexed male at birth, was biologically female and capable of bearing children. Classified as a transsexual, Gordon Langley Hall underwent gender reassignment surgery to become Dawn Pepita Hall. She subsequently married her black butler, John-Paul Simmons, and gave birth to a daughter.² In a 1971 interview, Hall-Simmons credited McCullers with giving her the courage to acknowledge what were at that time highly unconventional desires: “Carson, her senses sharpened by her own affliction, saw me for what I was in a moment of truth and her heart went out to me. I was a freak, yes, a freak, like one of her own characters.”³ Hall-Simmons attributes McCullers’s uncommon insight to her “affliction,” undoubtedly a reference to the author’s chronic illness but also—in the context of an account concerned with the precise correspondence of sex and gender—possibly to her erotic interest in women as well as men and her preference for triangulated rather than coupled love affairs.⁴ However, it was not only McCullers’s experiences but her position as an author, a creator of freaks, that enabled her to recognize Hall-Simmons’s difference. McCullers’s ability to author deviant bodies has, for Hall-Simmons, a direct relationship to her capacity to recognize the pain experienced by real persons designated as “freaks.”

Likewise, Hall-Simmons's loneliness and marginality become meaningful through the equation of her freakish condition with that of McCullers's characters.

Indeed, as Hall-Simmons's analogy indicates, McCullers's fiction is populated by freaks, characters constrained by corporeal anomalies that defy the imposition of normative categories of identity. These freaks suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others. Repeatedly, critics of McCullers's work have attributed her characters' suffering to an existential anguish inherent in the human condition. Even those who recognize particular forms of race- or gender-based oppression tend to connect them to "the variety and complexity of human isolation and . . . the destructive repercussions of that alienation."⁵ This perspective ignores the historical specificity of McCullers's writing, in which freakish characters point to the untenability of normative concepts of gender and race at a moment when these categories were defined with particular rigidity.

This essay seeks to recontextualize two of McCullers's post-World War II novels—*Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *Clock without Hands* (1961)—by exploring the significance of two interlocking concepts that occupy a privileged position in her writing: the freak and the queer. As McCullers uses these terms, their function depends not upon their correspondence to any fixed identity but upon their opposition to normative behaviors and social distinctions. The queer refers loosely to acts and desires that confound the notion of a normative heterosexuality as well as to the homosexuality that is its abject by-product. Freaks are beings who make those queer tendencies visible on the body's surfaces. Freaks and queers suffer because they cannot be assimilated into the dominant social order, yet their presence highlights the excesses, contradictions, and incoherences at the very heart of that order. Sometimes, as in the case of Gordon Langley Hall, they inhabit its most intimate and selective social circles. Far from the archetypal portraits of human alienation that so many have detected in McCullers's work, this interplay of personal suffering and social critique is situated firmly within the context of historical events: the end of World War II, the paranoia and conformity that characterized the onset of the Cold War, and the brewing dissatisfaction of racial and sexual minorities.⁶ Moreover, the discomfort freaks and queers experience does not take place solely at the level of existential ab-

traction but is concretized in their uneasy relationships to material things. In the postwar United States, consumer spending was linked to an increased emphasis on domesticity and the family. The purchase of homes and durable goods such as cars, appliances, and furniture seemed to herald an unprecedented national affluence that promised to neutralize economic differences among American citizens.⁷ McCullers's characters participate in this consumer economy, but the material possessions they covet are always inappropriate, luxury items that indicate a desire in excess of respectable, family-oriented modes of mass consumption.⁸ Rather than guaranteeing entry into the comfortable anonymity of consumer culture, the ownership of frivolous things instead draws attention to the irreconcilable differences of the freak's body, which provide the visible evidence of queer desires that cannot be domesticated.

The deviant body is thus a site of extreme constraint in which any attempt to conceal its differences only makes its abnormality more apparent. At the same time, McCullers's freaks are figures of possibility whose queer transgressions of sexed, gendered, and racial boundaries enable a productive reconsideration of normative social relations. While resistance often remains at the level of imagined potential for her characters, the reader open to the queer suggestions of McCullers's fiction is left to consider the possibilities of a world free from the tyranny of the normal. In her most famous and critically acclaimed novel, *Member of the Wedding*, the awkward relationship between bodies and things highlights the limitations of an idealized femininity and facilitates the imagination of a new social order, one that would reject the normal in favor of the queer possibilities of the freak's extraordinary corporeal form. These notions resurface in McCullers's final work, *Clock without Hands*, where the borders of normative masculine identity are threatened by freakish permutations of race, age, and sexual difference. In these novels, the freak and the queer emerge as contradictory figures that haunt the innermost recesses of the normal, where deviant bodies suffer alienation and violence but also where fantasies of remaking the world are germinated, nurtured, and articulated. McCullers thus engages in a project of social criticism that, at its most penetrating, reveals the links between sexual intolerance and racial bigotry, and, at its most hopeful, recognizes—in the gaps between characters' longings and the suffering they endure—the queer inconsistencies and excesses

at the center of the social order that contain the possibility for its refashioning.

Queers, freaks, and racial difference

Before turning to McCullers's fiction, it is necessary to elaborate the relationship between her insistent use of the queer and its current re-deployments, the link between the queer and the freak, and finally, the way that each of these categories is inextricably bound to problems of racial difference. What McCullers means by the queer is vague but suggestive. Her invocation of the term *queer* is frequently associated with her characters' receptiveness to otherwise unthinkable permutations of sex and gender, which are defined in opposition to normative categories of identification and desire. Such a veiled deployment of the queer is unsurprising at a historical moment when it regularly functioned as a shaming mechanism to legitimate discrimination and physical violence against homosexuals.⁹ McCullers's depiction of non-normative gender and sexual identities may be illuminated by reading her fiction through the lens of recent work on queer theory. My point is not that McCullers, writing during an era when the dominant culture was intensely homophobic, anticipated the present revolutionary politics of queer theory and activism but, rather, that contemporary articulations of the queer offer an ideal vocabulary for understanding previously closeted aspects of her fiction. At the same time, her understanding of the conjoined histories of race and sexuality is important to queer theory's interest in exploring interlocking forms of difference. In both *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock without Hands*, sexual difference always functions in relation to the hierarchical relationship between black and white that structures Southern culture. In these texts, the histories of racial and sexual difference cannot be separated from the ownership of material possessions that enable some forms of deviance to be closeted while bringing others clearly into view.

The *queer* of queer theory and social activism is a self-conscious re-deployment of the pejorative connotations that accompanied the term during McCullers's lifetime.¹⁰ Her use of the queer manifests an acute awareness of these connotations as well as the presence of readers who might construe the term differently. The multiple valences of the queer in her fiction derive from her own encounters with the

homophobia of the dominant culture as well as with communities that encouraged a more diverse array of sex and gender identification. Much of *Member of the Wedding* was written during World War II, a period of increased sexual freedom in the United States brought about by the separation of families, the growth and diversification of urban populations, and the disturbance of established social and economic configurations.¹¹ Moreover, in 1940 McCullers and her husband, Reeves McCullers, moved to New York, one of the primary centers for a flourishing sexual subculture. There her penchant for dressing in men's clothing was well received, she fell in love with a series of women, and she lived for a time with a "queer aggregate of artists"¹² that included gay poet W. H. Auden and stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. Yet outside her own heterogeneous circle of acquaintances, *queer* was a shaming appellation used as an accusation of sexual deviance and an excuse for violence.¹³ *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock without Hands* are narratives that understand the dangers of a publicly visible sexual difference while depicting alternative spaces where those differences might be welcomed and explored.

Although McCullers is frequently described as an author who writes sensitively about same-sex desire, the term *homosexuality* does not adequately capture the wide array of erotic identifications and groupings that appear among her characters, and it is a word that rarely appears in her work. Despite the fact that one of her queer characters, Jester Clane, has read about "homosexuals," he resists the association with sexual pathology and is determined to kill himself "if it turned out he was homosexual like the men in the *Kinsey Report*."¹⁴ Unlike the word *homosexual*, *queer* does not suggest an identity-based category, and it more accurately describes the heterogeneity of intimate erotically charged relationships and currents of desire in McCullers's fiction. Mirroring the diffuse proclivities of her characters, McCullers in her own life rejected attempts to link the unpredictable flows of human desire to the type of categorical definitions suggested by homo- or heterosexuality. Like the transsexual Gordon Langley Hall, the author experienced a discrepancy between normative gender roles and her own sexual preferences that led her to declare to her friend Newton Arvin, "Newton, I was born a man."¹⁵ Although this definitive proclamation suggests the popular belief shared by many of her contemporaries that the lesbian was an invert—a woman possessed by male desires—McCullers was at-

tracted to both men and women. She was involved in at least one intense, triangulated erotic relationship that included her husband and composer David Diamond.¹⁶ In addition to sharing her husband's love for Diamond, Carson was also drawn to women such as Greta Garbo, Katherine Anne Porter, and the Countess Annamarie Clarac-Schwartzenbach, with whom she had a passionate affair. Similarly intimate and complex erotically charged relations surface throughout her oeuvre to suggest that, far from being the norm, heterosexuality and its institutions are always threatened by the polymorphous nature of desire itself.

Current deployments of queer theory not only allow for a more supple understanding of intimacy but also help to explain how McCullers's fiction resists the regimes of the normal that dominated American culture in her time. Writing of queer activism in the 1990s, Michael Warner has argued that "the insistence on 'queer'—a term initially generated in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence."¹⁷ In other words, the *queer* of contemporary queer politics is conceived not in opposition to heterosexuality per se but as a broader defiance of all kinds of oppressive social norms. If *homosexuality*, and corresponding terms such as *gay* and *lesbian*, describe a same-sex desire grounded in a politics of identity, *queer* counters a range of normalizing regimes and calls into question the knowledge/power system from which identity-based categories are derived. Queer, as McCullers employs it, poses a persistently messy obstacle to any systematic codification of behavior or desire.

McCullers's recognition of the tyranny of the normal produces the link between queer and freak that surfaces repeatedly in her fiction. The freak is defined as such precisely by her visible inability to fit into recognizable social and bodily categories. The freak is associated historically with the sideshow, where, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women, people of color, and those with developmental and physical disabilities were exhibited as "human curiosities" for entertainment and profit. The spectacle of the deviant body, heightened by props and the barker's hyperbolic pitch, was intended to reinforce, by contrast, the normality of the onlooker, who enjoyed the comfortable anonymity of her position as a member of the audience.¹⁸ The difference between the paying spectators and the freak was spatially reinforced by the fairgoers' distance from the

display platform. However, in McCullers's fiction, freak shows fail to cement the distinction between deviance and normality, instead calling the viewers' own normality into question through their identification with the bodies onstage, which remind them of their own lonely, uncomfortable experiences of embodiment. Rather than depicting the sideshow as the exclusive domain of freaks, McCullers suggests that each of her characters is, in some sense, a freak who cannot conform to normative standards of comportment and physical appearance.¹⁹ Thus the sensation of being "caught" that so many of her characters experience is derived not from their status as outsiders but from the fact that they inhabit a repressive social order unable to recognize the queerness at its center.

Finally, questions of visibility and closeting figure prominently in McCullers's fiction in relation to racial, as well as sexual, difference. McCullers's use of the queer is nuanced by an understanding of the way that racial differences have unevenly affected the history of sexual difference within various communities. Delineating the important future projects for queer studies, Judith Butler writes that "queering" must entail a history that considers "the differential formation of homosexuality across racial boundaries, including the question of how racial and reproductive relations become articulated through one another."²⁰ McCullers's fiction offers important insights about the ways in which sex, gender, and racial relations are interconnected without collapsing the distinctions among them. In both *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock without Hands*, the struggle for queer forms of intimacy cannot be understood apart from the racial hierarchies that structure Southern culture in the postwar period.

The gaze of the hermaphrodite

Although the adult McCullers frequently dressed in men's clothing and took pleasure in flaunting unconventional sexual preferences much like those of her freakish characters, as a teenager her odd clothing and awkward body drew the contempt of her more feminine classmates, who threw rocks at her because she was "freakish-looking" and "queer."²¹ The author's own experiences thus attuned her to clothing's dual capacity to normalize and, when worn inappropriately, to transform normality into freakishness. McCullers recognized that in this atmosphere the intentional abuse of fashion could be

used to protest rigid social codes, but she was also aware that others whose differences could not be neutralized by clothing or accessories were unable to engage in such playful experimentation. Instead, they experienced a fearful relationship to their bodies, which subjected them to exclusion and violence. In *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock without Hands*, clothing holds the powerful allure of normalization—the ability to cover over the body’s irregularities—but at the same time it threatens to unveil the characters’ queer tendencies through their inability to wear it appropriately.

Many of McCullers’s female characters, in particular, are characterized by a bodily excess that obstructs their ability to perform the roles expected of them or to successfully don the required accoutrements of femininity.²² Frankie Addams, the boyish twelve-year-old protagonist of *Member of the Wedding*, worries that her excessive height will eventually render her suitable only for display as a sideshow exhibit, because a summer growth spurt has made her feel that she is “almost a big freak.”²³ Barefoot, wearing “a pair of blue black shorts [and] a B.V.D. undervest,” “her hair . . . cut like a boy’s” (*MW*, 2), Frankie awkwardly attempts to conceal her body’s development beneath the childish androgyny of boys’ clothing. Inspecting herself in the mirror she determines that “according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak” (*MW*, 16–17). Associating femininity with diminutive stature, Frankie anxiously predicts that once a woman reaches a certain height her gendered identity is effectively negated, for she ceases to be “a lady” and becomes instead “a Freak.” Fearful that she will be unable to “stop herself,” Frankie equates bodily size with self-control and excessive growth with moral inadequacy. If bodily shape is indicative of personal worth, a female giant is grotesquely inappropriate simply by virtue of her immensity, which signals desires and aspirations inappropriate to typical codes of feminine behavior. From Frankie’s perspective, the body is a visual signpost indicating perverse desires that could otherwise remain hidden. It is no accident that the imagined outcome of her unprecedented growth spurt will be her transformation into a freak, for at the sideshow, where deviance is represented as a visible quality, the bodies of freaks promise to tell all there is to know about the value of the persons who inhabit them. Throughout the narrative, the adolescent Frankie remains torn be-

tween a queer eroticism that attracts her to the fantastic possibilities of all that is freakish and the social codes that define the appearance and behavior of a “normal” young woman in contrast to the abnormality of the freaks at the sideshow. The novel ends without resolving this tension; however, its conclusion implies that she may be able to transform her experiences of gender confusion into more productive energies, rather than repressing them in favor of a socially acceptable heterosexual femininity.

Frankie’s more conservative fears about her own bodily excess are closely associated with the Freak Pavilion she visits faithfully at the annual Chattahoochee Exposition, where Giants, Midgets, Fat Ladies, and Wild Men are displayed before an audience of astonished onlookers. A particularly heavy crowd surrounds the booth exhibiting the “Half-Man Half-Woman, a morphidite and a miracle of science” (*MW*, 18) whose divided body poses a fascinating challenge to the universality of the binary opposition between the sexes. The Hermaphrodite has the potential to unravel the entire system of sexual categorization based on the distinction between male and female. This disruptive ambiguity necessitates her/his classification as a freak, a designation that places a safe distance between the spectacle of bodily deviance and the normally gendered onlookers in the audience. The threat of hermaphroditism is further distilled by the absolute and visible division between genders, each of which is indicated by costuming that covers one half of the body: “[T]he left side was a man and the right side a woman. The costume on the left was a leopard skin and on the right side a brassiere and a spangled skirt” (*MW*, 18). The Half-Man Half-Woman’s clothing thus creates the appearance of freakishness, while warding off the more dangerous indeterminacy of a third sex in which the difference between “man” and “woman” would be blurred and hybridized. In contrast, the true Hermaphrodite embodies the bisexuality that McCullers saw as inherent in most human eroticism.²⁴ This more indeterminately gendered body surfaces throughout her fiction in characters such as Cousin Lymon and Miss Amelia in *Ballad of the Sad Cafe*; Singer, Antonapoulos, and Biff Brannon in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*; and Captain Penderton and Anacleto in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, all of whom combine qualities of masculine and feminine to suggest a model of sexuality based on a continuum rather than strict binary oppositions.²⁵

For the adolescent Frankie at the beginning of the novel, terrified

by the maturation of her own body and hurt by the cruel rejection of her peers, the Hermaphrodite signals an unwelcome sexual indeterminacy. Instead of exploring the possibilities of multiple sexualities and genders, she attempts unsuccessfully to assert her own femininity through the forced imposition of new behavior and clothing. Replacing the undershirt and shorts of the previous day, which on a more mature woman could be the costume of a butch lesbian rather than that of a tomboy, Frankie dresses “in her most grown and best, the pink organdy, and put[s] on lipstick and Sweet Serenade” (*MW*, 46). This change in clothing is accompanied by a new name, F. Jasmine, intended to herald her metamorphosis into a young woman whose grace and maturity will replace the old Frankie’s tomboy lifestyle. The femininity she so desires is encapsulated in the orange satin gown she buys for her brother’s upcoming nuptials, a garment that holds the promise of adulthood and inclusion, the possibility of becoming a “member of the wedding.” The new dress is an important component in her imagined transformation from gangly teenager to attractive woman, and Frankie repeatedly insists on the beauty of the garment rather than her appearance in it, as if the dress alone had the power to alter or erase the identity of the wearer. Her illusions are challenged by the black housekeeper Berenice, who reflects critically on the juxtaposition of the bargain-basement evening gown with her charge’s boyish appearance: “Here you got on this grown woman’s evening dress. Orange satin. And that brown crust on your elbows. The two things just don’t mix” (*MW*, 84). The excesses of the gown foreshadow Frankie’s subsequent exclusion from the heterosexual bliss of her brother’s honeymoon: its lurid color is inappropriate to the occasion, and it is too large, signaling her unreadiness to assume the part of the mature woman intended to fill out its contours. Instead of transforming Frankie into a woman, the gown highlights the discrepancy between the body’s awkward suspension between youth and adulthood, and the garment’s unfulfilled promise of glamour and sophistication.

Although the misfit between dress and body proclaims Frankie’s failure to acquire a more conventional femininity, other characters in *Member of the Wedding* purposefully manipulate the trappings of one gender or the other to signal a queer identity that resists the normative logic of heterosexual categorization. Unlike the orange satin gown, which cannot enable Frankie’s transformation into a mature

woman, the pink satin blouse is instrumental in Lily Mae's ability to accomplish a similar metamorphosis. Berenice entertains her incredulous charges with the tale of the effeminate male Lily Mae Jenkins, who "fell in love with a man named Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl" (*MW*, 76). Lily Mae, who "prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo," wears the cues of an intentionally performative homosexuality. Berenice criticizes Frankie's attempt to become a woman simply by putting on more mature feminine clothing, but her account of Lily Mae reinforces the idea of sexuality as a continuum by suggesting that a man who desires another man can voluntarily change from one sex to the other, a change that is heralded by the exaggerated assumption of feminine performance and clothing. In Berenice's queer story gender is a matter of preference, and sexual identification is defined through one's choice of erotic attachments; the body literally evolves in conformity with the desires of its inhabitant and the garments that clothe it. "Nature," as Berenice uses the term, refers to one's erotic tendencies rather than, as in the word's more conventional usage, to those aspects of self that are static and unalterable.

Berenice's story is one example of the instructive range of positions on the relationship between sexuality and gender articulated by the three central characters in *Member of the Wedding*. The impossibly frequent repetition of the word "queer" throughout this text leaves traces for a reader open to its suggestion that, rather than occupying any singular or normative position, sexuality is composed of multiple identifications and erotic possibilities. Although it would be difficult to argue that *Member of the Wedding* is a novel about homosexuality, the repeated use of the queer functions as an open secret. For those who wish to explore its possibilities, the queer reinvests unconventional erotic relations, both real and imagined, with positive valences.²⁶ Lori Kenschaft has described as lesbian the imagined community of readers the novel creates; however, as I have argued, *queer* seems a more accurate term because it is generated by the vocabulary of the novel itself. Moreover, it accounts for the wide array of erotic groupings that appear in McCullers's work, many of which do not involve the same-sex desire or intimacy between women that the term *lesbian* connotes.²⁷

For Frankie, the queer is often associated with unpleasant, tenta-

tive forays into the world of heterosexual romance, such as the “queer sin” she commits with Barney MacKean, a neighborhood boy, and the attentions she receives from a drunken sailor in a smelly hotel that make her “feel a little queer” (*MW*, 68). Such uses of the term work to queer heterosexuality by revealing that it is neither natural nor universally pleasurable. At more affirmative moments, the queer accompanies various characters’ attempts to reimagine the world as a space more accommodating to sexual difference. The kitchen, where the novel’s primary action takes place, is “hot and bright and queer” and decorated with “queer drawings of Christmas trees, airplanes, freak soldiers, flowers” (*MW*, 7); there, Berenice entertains Frankie and John Henry with stories of “many a queer thing” (*MW*, 75).²⁸ Perhaps it is the tale of Lily Mae and the pink satin blouse that inspires Frankie’s fantasy of remaking the world to allow for a better correspondence between gendered identification and biological sex, which then leads to a heated, unresolved debate between the kitchen’s three occupants:

[Frankie] planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted. But Berenice would argue with her about this, insisting that the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved. And then John Henry West would very likely add his two cents’ worth about this time, and think that people ought to be half boy and half girl, and when the old Frankie threatened to take him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion, he would only close his eyes and smile. (*MW*, 92)

In contrast with the tenor of her previous story, Berenice responds negatively to Frankie’s proposal by arguing for a fixed and impermeable “law of human sex.” While Frankie holds out for a world where erotic desire would remain open to reconfiguration “whichever way they felt like and wanted,” her plan affirms the necessity of a correspondence between sex and gender when she makes the conservative assertion that a body must occupy only one side of the binary divide at a time: “boys” or “girls.” John Henry offers yet another alternative, in which individuals would be a strange mix of tendencies—“half boy and half girl”—precluding the polarized opposition between male and female. Frankie’s threat to take him to the Freak Pavilion reflects her conviction that one cannot be at once male and female

without being a freak, suitable only for display before an astonished audience of normally sexed people. Her classification of the Half-Man Half-Woman as a freak, based on her own anxious experiences at the carnival, confirms the official message of the Freak Pavilion by asserting the Hermaphrodite's difference from the viewer. Instead of the embodiment of sexual possibilities, the Hermaphrodite's queer mix of male and female is transformed into a spectacle at the freak show, affirming the normality of the audience and the clear discernability of sexual differentiation, as evidenced by stereotypically gendered clothing. Although Frankie's anxieties about her own queer desires force her to repudiate John Henry's vision, by the end of the novel she is more receptive to the possibility of sexual indeterminacy. Her assumption of the adult name Frances may signal her acceptance of a typical adolescent femininity, but it may also indicate her openness to a more unconventional identity, for, as Kenschaft has argued, "'Frances' may be less aggressively boyish than 'Frankie,' but it is nevertheless androgynous when spoken."²⁹

Frankie is thus torn between the excitement of awakening sexual possibilities and her desire to pass from the queer sexual indeterminacy of "that green and crazy summer" into a more typical relationship between her body and the things that surround it. Her experiences are echoed in the story of Jester Clane, the teenage protagonist of *Clock without Hands* who is tormented by anxiety over his developing erotic attraction to other men. While both feel alienated by rigid codes of gendered comportment and imperative heterosexuality, as a male, Jester enjoys a larger degree of freedom and social mobility than Frankie. But as a gay male he also occupies a more dangerous position because of the threat he poses to the rabidly homophobic patriarchal order of his small Southern town.³⁰ As Gayatri Spivak has written of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, "although women and male homosexuals are both marginal as 'non-serious' versions of the male norm, the woman has a recognized use in the male economy of reproduction, genealogy and the passage of property. The male homosexual, on the other hand, has only the unrecognized use of sustaining as criminal or monstrous the tremendous force of the repressed homoeroticism of the patriarchy."³¹ Because McCullers names homosexuality more directly in *Clock without Hands*, the queer secret that cannot be articulated in the earlier novel can be mobilized for more direct criticism of the particular social and historical

circumstances that generated such an atmosphere of terror. However, the invocation of such a clinical term also has the opposite effect of diffusing the capacious possibilities of the open secret posited by the queer.

Jester, like Frankie, is a teenager plagued with doubts about his sexuality. More conventionally attractive than his female counterpart, Jester's body still bears an awkward relationship to the clothing that covers it. Initially he is described as "a slight limber boy of seventeen . . . [who] wore blue jeans and a striped jersey, the sleeves of which were pushed back to his delicate elbows" (*CWH*, 24). Dressed in the typical costume of a teenage boy of the 1950s, Jester's queer difference is implied by his effeminate slenderness and delicacy, a suggestion that is furthered by his grandfather's affectionate references to him as "Lambones" and "darling." In the company of Jester and his overly solicitous grandfather, the town pharmacist Malone observes that something about Jester makes him seem "a 'stranger'—he had never been like a Milan boy. He was arrogant and at the same time over-polite. There was something hidden about the boy and his softness, his brightness seemed somehow dangerous—it was as though he resembled a silk-sheathed knife" (*CWH*, 25). What Jester's conventionally boyish clothing and respectful behavior conceal is the intense shame of his unrequited and deeply queer love for his classmate Ted Hopkins, "the best all-around athlete in the school" (*CWH*, 42), and his mannish English teacher, Miss Pafford. In a small Southern town that adheres to strict codes of racial, gender, and class distinction, the affluent white Jester is indeed a "stranger" who will ultimately transgress all of these boundaries in his secretive passion for a black man. Rather than being dangerous to others, the softness of his body, the visible evidence of sexual perversion, in fact puts him in danger of the violence that will inevitably accompany the detection of his secret.

If the freak-loving public in *Member of the Wedding* is fascinated by the Half-Man Half-Woman's challenge to strict gender divisions, sexual panic in the predominantly male world of *Clock without Hands* crystallizes around arguments over the *Kinsey Report*, which documented the sexual practices of postwar Americans in unprecedented scientific detail. Assuming the unbiased tone and methodology of science, Kinsey was able to discuss America's sex life with explicit candor, shocking the reading public by revealing the pervasiveness of

same-sex desire and practices among men.³² While the Freak Pavilion in *Member of the Wedding* makes the difference between deviance and normality visible, the *Kinsey Report* in *Clock without Hands* suggests that freaks have infiltrated the normal world. Kinsey's study comforts Jester by assuring him that he is not alone in his desire for other men but disturbs him by classifying his desire as "homosexual," an appellation laden with connotations of medicalized deviance. In an argument with his grandfather, the reactionary Judge Fox Clane, Jester defends the *Report* as "a scientific survey of the sexual activities in the human male," while the hypocritical Judge, who "had read the book with salacious pleasure, first substituting for the jacket the dust cover of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*" (CWH, 83), declares it "pornographic filth" (CWH, 84).

Significantly, the debate over whether the *Kinsey Report* is science (derived from empirical evidence) or pornography (the product of deviant fantasies) hinges on the question of whether the offenses in question are visibly apparent. When Judge Clane objects, "Science my foot. I have been an observer of human sin for close on to ninety years, and I never saw anything like that," Jester's impudent retort questions the accuracy of his vision: "Maybe you ought to put on your glasses." Like the audience at the Freak Pavilion, the Judge assumes the position of an impartial observer, a distancing strategy that affirms his normality in contrast to the spectacle of deviance he views before him. In a society conditioned by such spectacles, the Hermaphrodite displayed in the House of Freaks is a "miracle of science," an object that can be observed and classified according to its qualitative difference from the viewer. Participating in the logic of the freak show by insisting that deviance must be visible, Judge Clane shrugs off the threatening possibility of covert homosexual activity as the fantasy of "an impotent, dirty old man" (CWH, 83). Ironically, this hidden desire is precisely the strangeness that Malone perceives in the youthful Jester at the beginning of the novel. It is a secret that is repeatedly intimated in the dialogue between Jester and his grandfather, a conversation that flirts with the possibility of disclosure but is rendered ineffectual by the Judge's panicked inability to listen to what his grandson is saying and Jester's lack of a vocabulary that would enable him to reveal his concerns with honesty and purpose.

For Jester, the *Kinsey Report's* scientific validity is crucial to the affirmation of his normality, for he "was afraid, so terribly afraid, that he

was not normal . . . [because] he had never felt the normal sexual urge and his heart quaked with fear for himself, as more than anything else he yearned to be exactly like everyone else" (*CWH*, 84). Jester's desire "to be exactly like everyone else" reflects a typically adolescent self-loathing; at the same time, it participates in a larger cultural obsession with conformity that is characteristic of the Cold War United States, with its insistence on a definitive opposition between queer desires and the normal sexual urge indicative of authentic masculinity. For a public particularly concerned with normality, the queer signifies a dangerous refusal to foreclose one's options by accepting a monolithic understanding of sexuality and identification.³³ However, the irony of Jester's longing "to be exactly like everyone else" is that nearly "everyone else" in McCullers's fiction is plagued by queer tendencies that cannot be classified within a system of normative heterosexuality. Despite the fact that the story of Jester's failed love for the mulatto Sherman Pew ends with the promise of closure—"his odyssey of passion, friendship, love, and revenge was now finished"—his future remains as unfinished as that of the androgynous Frances. For a mainstream audience, this conclusion may imply that Jester has moved from a childish homoeroticism to mature heterosexuality; for the queer reader, however, it suggests that he has begun to accept desire and identification as "crazy and complex" (*CWH*, 202) rather than conforming to predetermined social norms.

The possibilities of this more diffuse sexuality are multiplied by a profound connection in McCullers's work between sexual and racial oppression, both of which operate by turning some persons into freaks in order to confirm the normative (white) heterosexuality of others. As Thadious M. Davis has argued, "[W]ithout collapsing the difference of race and gender, McCullers attends in her literary production, with varying degrees of intensity, to race in the representation of women in the South. She assumes the intricate connections of race and gender, particularly in conjoining the two categories and inscribing race in gender."³⁴ Despite her awareness of this connection, McCullers also is sensitive to important distinctions between racial and sexual discrimination, for often the empathetic attraction of queer white characters like Frankie and Jester to black characters results in misunderstanding and further alienation. The crucial distinction between racial and sexual difference is that queer sexuality has the potential to remain dangerously undetected, whereas race in

McCullers's fiction is the visible signifier of difference in spite of her characters' attempts to alter or conceal bodily attributes that make them the targets of discrimination and abuse.

Why Berenice wanted a blue eye

Besides the Half-Man Half-Woman, another Freak Pavilion exhibit described in some detail in *Member of the Wedding* is the "Wild Nigger . . . from a savage island . . . [who] squatted in his booth among the dusty bones and palm leaves and ate raw living rats." Unlike the other freaks, the black man's exoticism is undermined by the rumor that "he was not a genuine Wild Nigger, but a crazy colored man from Selma" (*MW*, 17). This speculation implies that "freak" is not an inherent quality, but an identity imposed on certain bodies to justify their exclusion from the privileges of an anonymous normality. The grotesque spectacle of the wild man is made possible by drawing on the familiar equation of blackness with savagery, deviance, and exoticism.³⁵ His prominent presence in the account of the Freak Pavilion, where the audience's anxieties about sexual normality are provoked and assuaged by the spectacle of the Half-Man Half-Woman, draws attention to the intimate relationship between racial and sexual difference in McCullers's fiction. In *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock without Hands*, black characters must negotiate, with varying degrees of success, the complex diversity of their own communities and a society that views them as one-dimensional types like the "Wild Nigger" at the Freak Pavilion.

The connection between racial and sexual otherness is reinforced by Frankie and Jester who, in their struggle to come to terms with unconventional erotic urges, are drawn to black characters who have extensive experience with discrimination and bigotry. Frankie, who is attracted to the "stir of company" (*MW*, 124) in Berenice's crowded home, identifies particularly with the homosexual Honey Brown, "a sick-loose person" (*MW*, 35) who "feel like he just can't breathe no more" (*MW*, 114). Initially Frankie "did not understand the hidden meaning" in his family's description of him as "a boy God has not finished. Such a remark put her in mind of a peculiar half-boy—one arm, one leg, half a face" (*MW*, 122). The image of a freakish half person gives way to sympathetic identification as she becomes aware of Honey's plight as a black, homosexual man. Imagining a

world where race, like gender, is fluid and shifting, Frankie replaces her fantasy of deviant corporeality with one of racial transgression, in which the light-skinned Honey leaves the South and “change[s] into a Cuban” (*MW*, 125). While this is a moment of enlightenment for Frankie, her suggestion is untenable for obvious reasons, and the end of the novel finds Honey incarcerated after a drug-induced crime spree. Likewise, Jester falls passionately in love with Sherman Pew, his grandfather’s young mulatto secretary. Although Sherman showers the white boy with physical and verbal abuse, Jester feels a “creepy thrill” (*CWH*, 67) when he listens to Sherman’s singing. He responds to Sherman’s fabricated tales of collective black protest with envious admiration. If Jester’s sexual shame comes from his inability to experience “passion,” his feelings for Sherman assure him of his capacity for desire, and fantasizing about the black boy allows him “to become a man” by having sex with a female prostitute. As we will see, while Jester derives personal satisfaction from his love for Sherman, the white boy’s affections cannot counteract the pervasive discrimination that thwarts Sherman’s attempts to improve his social and economic situation.

Part of Berenice and Sherman’s appeal to white teenagers confused about their sexual identities is that their bodies, like that of the Hermaphrodite, resist classification into neatly opposed categories. Berenice’s tales of “many a queer thing” involve the transgression of racial as well as sexual boundaries, suggesting that the queer in McCullers’s fiction encompasses multiple and intersecting forms of difference. With one blue glass eye that “stared fixed and wild from her quiet, colored face” (*MW*, 3), Berenice herself is a freakish mix of the natural and artificial.³⁶ Although the narrative voice proclaims the eye as the “only . . . thing wrong about Berenice” and professes bemused ignorance—“why she had wanted a blue eye nobody human would ever know” (*MW*, 3)—as the story unfolds it becomes clear that Berenice’s body mirrors her rejection of white notions of beauty and her delight in situations of racial and gender transgression. While the appeal of the prosthetic eye itself is aesthetic rather than functional, its color is treated as an excessive luxury much like the lurid orange material of Frankie’s bargain-basement gown or Lily Mae’s pink satin blouse. For Berenice, “who always spoke of herself as though she was somebody very beautiful” (*MW*, 79), the blue glass eye raises the

possibility of moving beyond normative standards of appearance and the damaging racial hierarchies that accompany them.

In *Clock without Hands* a similar hybridity characterizes Sherman Pew, whose startling blue eyes subject him to repeated analysis by the white men he encounters. The visible evidence of miscegenation, Sherman's body is perceived differently by various characters whose responses to him delineate their own fantasies and anxieties about racial mixing. Jester, who is trying to come to terms with his sexuality, fixates on Sherman as the object of his desire. Jester's grandfather, the racist Judge who hires Sherman as his secretary and harbors the "queer" fantasy of reinstating segregation (*CWH*, 155), sees the black boy as a "veritable jewel" (*CWH*, 113) and uses their relationship as the reassuring evidence of his own benevolent paternalism. Malone, who has just discovered that he is dying of leukemia, encounters Sherman as he cuts through an alley and notices the boy's "unnatural appearance": "Once those eyes were seen, the rest of the body seemed also unusual and out of proportion. The arms were too long, the chest too broad—and the expression alternated from emotional sensitivity to deliberate sullenness" (*CWH*, 15). The blue eyes, which appear "unnatural" juxtaposed with dark skin, cause Malone to perceive Sherman as a freak whose entire body is grotesquely disproportionate. Although the boy does nothing more than look at Malone, the pharmacist "automatically" uses Sherman's unusual appearance to classify him as a delinquent. As in his encounter with Jester, whom he classifies as "dangerous" and "strange," Malone, in his treatment of Sherman, arrogantly assumes the power to make moral determinations based on an initial visual perception. As they stare at one another, "it seemed to Malone that the blaze [in Sherman's eyes] flickered and steadied to a look of eerie understanding. He felt that those strange eyes knew that he was soon to die" (*CWH*, 16). While Sherman couldn't possibly know of Malone's diagnosis, the pharmacist reads his own fears about death into the exchange, imbuing Sherman's alien gaze with an "eerie understanding."

Malone's reaction to Sherman's gaze parallels Frankie's experience in the Freak Pavilion, where the exhibits frighten her because they look back at her "as though to say: we know you" (*MW*, 18). Both Frankie and Malone, accustomed to experiencing the Other as a distant spectacle, are disturbed by having their stare returned. They

respond by imparting a mysterious and improbable knowledge to the freaks' impassive look. The momentary discomfort occasioned by the realization that the freakish Other is able to look back has the potential to productively destabilize the familiar hierarchies through which these characters navigate the world. Frankie will eventually embrace this instability, while Malone will die having learned nothing and asserting that "nothing mattered to him" (*CWH*, 207). The near-collision of Malone and Sherman, in which Sherman's mere presence fills Malone with dread of "something momentous and terrible," serves as a paradigm for race relations throughout *Clock without Hands*, in which white men's fears and desires come to pose as attributes of Sherman's person, regardless of his actions.

While Sherman, like Jester, longs for normality, the crucial difference between them is that Jester can conceal his queer tendencies while Sherman's body makes him a target of discrimination and abuse. Unlike Berenice, Sherman's hostility bars him from satisfying personal relationships in the black community, and he feels each act of violence against people of color in his own body, the visible marker of difference that turns him into a freak who is neither black nor white. Sherman's somatic response to news of racial violence is coupled with his desire for a normative respectability that would insulate him from personally experiencing such violence. Respectability, for Sherman, is signified by a large vocabulary, which he consistently misuses in attempts to impress Jester, and the acquisition of luxury items such as expensive whiskey, caviar, and silk bedspreads. If Jester is attracted to other men, Sherman bears a similar erotic relation to material things: as Sherman strokes his bedspread admiringly, Jester feels "an inexplicable creepy thrill" (*CWH*, 67) from observing Sherman's pleasure. Despite boasting of affairs with women, both black and white, Sherman's true passion is for his possessions, which promise the security and fulfillment he is unable to attain through intimacy with others. Sherman is an obedient subject of the Cold War era, when the ownership of things was a form of patriotism that distinguished U.S. citizens from Communist sympathizers. However, his desires also threaten more traditional social divisions in which access to education and material possessions is racially determined.

Like Frankie and her ill-fitting dress, Sherman's inability to use material things successfully to conceal his difference highlights the undeniable visibility of his black body and the commodity's untenable

guarantee of privilege and inclusion. As in *Member of the Wedding*, frivolous clothing is an important signifier of Sherman's distance from his inappropriate social aspirations: "He had two Hathaway shirts and wore a black patch on his eye, but it only made him look pathetic instead of distinguished and he bumped into things" (*CWH*, 63). The Hathaway shirts advertisement that attracts Sherman's attention features a series of successful white men wearing eye patches. A blank silhouette in the final slot accompanied by the slogan, "to be announced soon," suggests that the man to flesh out the space might be the consumer himself, transformed by purchasing a Hathaway shirt. In his acquisition of shirt and eye patch, what Sherman fails to notice is that the silhouette is white, that instead of indicating unlimited possibilities the space is reserved for someone already marked for wealth and social privilege. Unable to secure social legitimacy through the ownership of such status symbols yet disdainful of the community inhabited by other black characters in the novel, Sherman is a freak who occupies a dangerous liminal space between black and white.

Finally, Sherman's fetishization of material things as compensation for racial inequality, the death of his parents, his lack of education, and the absence of erotically satisfying relationships bring about his violent death. Having secretly fantasized that the blue-eyed Judge who patronizingly calls him "son" is his father, Sherman is enraged to discover that the Judge was involved in the death of his parents, whose racial identities do not conform to his fantasies about them. Instead of the stereotypical scenario of a black woman brutally raped by a white man, Sherman unveils a queer reversal in which his white mother engaged in consensual sex with a black man, "like Othello, that cuckoo Moor!" (*CWH*, 184). He responds to this unsettling knowledge by seeking out a dangerous and excessive visibility, using white water fountains, bathrooms, churches, and restaurant counters, where he becomes frustrated when his transgressions fail to attract attention. Ultimately Sherman's shattered fantasy of political enfranchisement gives way to demands for another kind of equality—the right to be a consumer. In contrast to his earlier desire for luxury items, Sherman at the end of the novel attempts to become a properly domesticated consumer by renting a house in a white neighborhood and going on a deadly shopping spree to furnish it.³⁷ If he can vote only in fantasy, his actions insist that the right to purchase on credit is truly color-blind. In the 1950s advertisements and television shows equated

the possession of commodities with being a normal American; thus, purchasing things becomes a way for Sherman to proclaim his citizenship. A black man who has always felt violence to his race in his own body, who has lived in constant awareness that black was once the possession of white, Sherman is literally consumed by an “ecstasy of ownership” (CWH, 196), by the possibility of owning himself and his possessions.

However, in McCullers’s fiction freaks cannot easily reconcile their inappropriate bodies with the orderly world of Cold War consumer culture. When Jester rushes to warn Sherman that an angry mob is gathering, Sherman responds by showing off his new purchases, refusing to leave the things that will ensure his death at the hands of resentful white citizens. The house that becomes “all of Sherman’s world” (CWH, 197), a space where he can briefly enjoy the pleasures of ownership, distracts him from the dangers of his black body. Nonetheless, a black man who can own rather than be property poses a threat to the white citizens who bomb Sherman’s house as a means of violently reasserting his difference from them, for their normality can only be secured by transforming him into a dangerous freak. As Robyn Wiegman has argued, in a lynching “differences among men are so violently foregrounded that one can no longer cling to the rhetorical homogeneity attached to the masculine.”³⁸ Sherman’s death makes all too clear the profound gulf that separates him not only from Jester but also from the resentful working-class men who see their whiteness as their only claim to superiority. Dramatically demonstrating divisions among men, lynching thus gives the lie to the false leveling of differences promised by the consumption of commodities. While *Clock without Hands* challenges the existence of normative masculinity by suggesting that all of its male characters—Malone, dying of leukemia; Judge Clane, disabled by obesity and a stroke; Jester, a closeted queer; Sherman, a mulatto—are freaks, it nonetheless asserts that some forms of freakishness are more dangerous than others, and racial difference remains the most damaging and divisive of all social categories. The most important scenarios in McCullers’s fiction are thus those in which characters of various races imagine a world that does not rely on hierarchical distinctions among persons for its social organization.

“A mixture of delicious and freak”

Fantasies in McCullers’s fiction are the most significant way of envisioning alternatives to corporeal inequalities that create an atmosphere of alienation and claustrophobia. In this respect, the scene in *Member of the Wedding* discussed earlier, in which Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry “judge the work of God, and mention the ways how they would improve the world” (*MW*, 91), is crucial.³⁹ If the world around them is torn by conflicts audible in the persistent buzz of wartime news on the radio, these three characters compensate for inadequacies in their own lives by generating utopian fantasies of remaking the world. Each occupant of the kitchen takes a turn weaving a fantasy that reflects individual longings while, at times, interweaving with the fantasies of the other two, so that “their voices crossed and the three worlds twisted” (*MW*, 92). This model of collective imagining that can momentarily bridge differences in age, race, and gender among its collaborators is especially important in the work of remaking.

Frankie’s fantasy, in which persons would be able to change from one sex to another at will, responds to anxieties about her developing sexual identity. Louise Westling has argued that these progressive fantasies are undone by the novel’s movement towards “Frankie’s ultimate submission to the inexorable demand that she accept her sex as female.”⁴⁰ This reading places an undue emphasis on the novel’s ending and forecloses the possibilities of its more radically affirmative moments.⁴¹ Moreover, a negative understanding of Frankie’s acceptance of female sexuality ignores the lesbian implications of “the wonder of her love” (*MW*, 151) for her new friend Mary Littlejohn at the close of the narrative. Frankie’s obsession with becoming “a member of the wedding”—the narrative’s eponymous organizing concept—might be interpreted as evidence of a conservative socialization process that conditions young girls to desire a conventional femininity that culminates in marriage and motherhood. But instead of longing to replace the bride, Frankie’s ultimate fantasy is to become a part of the community formed by Janice and Jarvis. The queer desire to be not a “bride” but a “member” challenges the normative heterosexuality of the marriage couple by imagining a social organization based on triadic relations, much like those the author sought in her own life. In both novels, alienated characters long for membership, a mode of identity that is relational, inclusive, and nonhierarchical.

The models of sexuality and race generated by the three inhabitants of the kitchen are fluid and open to many different permutations. In Berenice's imagination, "there would be no separate colored people in the world, but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair. There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives" (*MW*, 91). In this new world free of racial bigotry, both Berenice, with her blue glass eye, and Sherman Pew, born with dark skin and blue eyes, are model citizens: freakish mixtures of black and white, nature and artifice, that defy normative hierarchies of difference. Berenice's proposal entails a radical reconfiguration of race that would not simply reverse white domination of black but obliterate the entire system of differentiation based on bodily appearance by making each person a racial hybrid. The hybridity that causes Berenice and Sherman to be figures of ridicule—and in Sherman's case, violence—would instead become the norm.

But six-year-old John Henry's fantasy is the queerest of all. In contrast with Frankie's fearful experience of the Freak Pavilion, John Henry is enamored of the Pin Head, who "skipped and giggled and sassed around, with a shrunken head no larger than an orange, which was shaved except for one lock tied with a pink bow at the top" (*MW*, 18). Unafraid of the freaks, John Henry declares, "[S]he was the cutest little girl I ever saw," indicating an acceptance of the Pin Head as a part of his world, and even raising the possibility of a growing erotic attraction. In fact, John Henry's delight at dressing in women's clothing brings out his own freakishness by making him look "like a little old woman dwarf, wearing the pink hat with the plume, and the high-heel shoes" (*MW*, 117). A character whose ill-suited clothes make him appear both young and old, male and female, John Henry most completely embodies the potential of the freak to provide alternatives to the exclusionary norms that structure his culture. Instead of a shameful inability to fit a proscribed role, wearing someone else's clothing generates the potential of new and varied possibilities. John Henry's model of remaking the world is one that, in its disorder and particularity, can incorporate "a mixture of delicious and freak":

[H]e did not think in global terms: the sudden long arm that could stretch from here to California, chocolate dirt and rains of lemonade, the extra eye seeing a thousand miles, a hinged tail that could

be let down as a kind of prop to sit on when you wished to rest, the candy flowers. (*MW*, 91)

Unable to “think in global terms,” John Henry imagines a world that values specificity over totalizing models of identity. Like recent articulations of the queer, John Henry’s proposed heterotopia is not organized around a consistent, determining logic of identification, but, rather, it revels in quirky opposition to all that is normal. The long arm and extra eye that allow for a more expansive community outside the South’s stifling regionalism, the excremental appreciation of “chocolate dirt and rains of lemonade,” the hinged tail that recalls our inextricable connection with the animal world, all suggest a sympathetic appreciation of the body and its many variations. The best that a freak can be, John Henry contracts meningitis and suffers a gruesome death, “screaming for three days [with] his eyeballs walled up in a corner stuck and blind” (*MW*, 152), for in McCullers’s fiction, bodily difference often must be hidden, normalized, or punished, leaving hope for change in the utopian imaginings of a better world. However, as the more mature Frances embarks on an exciting new relationship with Mary, she holds onto the queer possibilities suggested by John Henry, whom she remembers “at twilight time or when the special hush would come into the room” (*MW*, 153).

At the end of *Member of the Wedding*, Frances and Mary return to the fair but not to the Freak Pavilion, “as Mrs. Littlejohn said it was morbid to gaze at freaks” (*MW*, 152). This explanation for their avoidance might indicate Frankie’s submission to the older woman’s authority, thus serving as evidence of her ultimate normalization. But such a reading remains unconvincing in a narrative so saturated with references to the queer. Rather than a sign of their obedience to Mrs. Littlejohn’s prohibition, the young women’s abstinence more plausibly indicates their recognition that the world is composed of freaks, that they no longer need to secure their own normality by exploiting a less fortunate Other. The logic of the freak show, which insists on cordoning off the differences of some to proclaim the sameness of everyone else, is precisely the logic that led to Sherman’s death and to Honey and Berenice’s feeling that “we all caught” (*MW*, 114).

A queer reading can move beyond this conclusion because it draws attention to forms of membership that are not based on being caught

within the confines of identity-based categories. This is not a move that McCullers's characters are often able to make, but it is something that they consistently imagine and towards which they struggle. The queer and the freak are terms that counter the binary logic of sexual and racial division and, by seeing themselves in this way, her characters are both able to identify the "caughtness" that they feel and the possibility of imagining it otherwise. This is the corrective lesson that queer theory brings to the identity politics that caused disillusionment in the wake of the women's, civil rights, and gay rights movements. Rereading McCullers's work from this perspective does not provide a coherent plan of action but rather a place to begin thinking about what it would be like to inhabit a community rooted in heterogeneity rather than sameness, desire rather than prescription, where each member can find in herself "a mixture of delicious and freak."

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Notes

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- 1 Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 519.
- 2 For a more complete account of Hall's life in Charleston, see James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948–1968* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), chap. 5.
- 3 Carr, *Lonely Hunter*, 519.
- 4 Eve Sedgwick has discussed the eroticism of triangulated relationships in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), where she argues that the heroine in the Western literary tradition often functions as the conduit for an intimate erotically charged struggle between two male competitors. McCullers's own complex erotic life more than once placed her at the apex of such a triangulated affair, and in what follows I will propose that there may be pleasure not only in the homosocial bond between men, but in the woman's position as intermediary.

- 5 Pamela Bigelow, "Carson McCullers," in *Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. Sharon Malinowski (Detroit, Mich.: St. James Press, 1994), 257. Critics who have argued that McCullers's characters symbolize universal human alienation include Virginia Spencer Carr, *Understanding Carson McCullers* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1990); Ihab Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature, 1945–1972* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973); Klaus Lubbers, "The Necessary Order," in *Carson McCullers*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 33–52; Frances Freeman Paden, "Autistic Gestures in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 28 (autumn 1982): 453–63; Louis D. Rubin, "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain," in *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, ed. Beverly Lyon Clark and Melvin J. Friedman (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 111–23; and Lynn Veach Sadler, "'Fixed in an Inlay of Mystery': Language and Reconciliation in Carson McCullers's *Clock without Hands*," *Pembroke Magazine* 20 (1988): 49–53. Among those who acknowledge the depiction of homosexuality in McCullers's work but make similar claims for universality are Stephen D. Adams, *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980); Pamela Bigelow and Clare Whatling, "Carson McCullers," in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 470–71. For a useful overview of McCullers criticism, see Lisa Logan, introduction to *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, ed. Clark and Friedman, 1–16.
- 6 For discussion of McCullers's postwar drama as social criticism, see Lisa Logan and Brook Horvath, "Nobody Knows Best: Carson McCullers's Plays as Social Criticism," *Southern Quarterly* 33 (winter–spring 1995): 23–33.
- 7 On the relationship between consumption, domesticity, and the postwar economy, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Larry May (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 38–60; and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1998). This perceived homogeneity is, of course, countered by the particularity of many Americans' lives. Recent analyses of urban life, youth culture, and sexual and racial minorities indicate a previously unrecognized complexity and conflict during the postwar years. See, for example, the essays in *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury Icons*, ed. Joel Foreman (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997) and in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1994).
- 8 For an analysis of how the desire for luxury items poses a queer resis-

- tance to the socially sanctioned consumerism of the Cold War economy, see Robert Corber, "Resisting the Lure of the Commodity: *Laura* and the Spectacle of the Gay Male Body," in Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 55–78.
- 9 On homosexuality during the postwar period, see Robert Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), and *Homosexuality in Cold War America*; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983); John D'Emilio and Estelle Freeman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); and Colin Spencer, *Homosexuality: A History* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).
 - 10 As Judith Butler describes the earlier significance of the term, "'queer' has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpolation" (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* [New York: Routledge, 1993], 226).
 - 11 According to D'Emilio and Freeman, the social circumstances of World War II contributed to the development of homosexual subcultures in major cities such as New York and San Francisco. Despite the repressive atmosphere of the Cold War, these subcultures continued to expand, flourishing in the 1960s (*Intimate Matters*, part 4). See also Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*; and D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, part 1. On the rise of queer urban spaces in the modernist period, see Joseph Boone, "Queer Sites in Modernism: Harlem/The Left Bank/Greenwich Village," in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), 242–72.
 - 12 So named by poet Louis Untermeyer, who recalled attending "a gay (in both senses of the word) occasion at which Auden and Gypsy Rose Lee were present" at the home McCullers shared with Auden and George Davis (quoted in Carr, *Lonely Hunter*, 199).
 - 13 Indeed this violence has been so pervasive that "queer bashing" is one of the compound words listed under "queer" in the *OED*. While it is difficult to trace a precise genealogy of the term, it is clear that *queer* was used almost entirely as a negative label during McCullers's lifetime. For brief reference to previous pejorative uses of the term, see Lauren Berlant (with Elizabeth Freeman), "Queer Nationality," *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 145–74; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Rout-

lege, 1995), 155–72; Spencer, *Homosexuality*; and Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994). George Chauncey details the significance of *queer* between 1890 and 1940, when it was used by male homosexuals to differentiate themselves from the more effeminate *fairies*. According to Chauncey, *queer* did not become a derogatory term until the mid-twentieth century. See Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Lori Kenschaft argues that “[i]n 1946, when *Wedding* was published, ‘queer’ (like ‘gay’) was a code word known to many ‘in the life’ but few outside; it was frequently used to identify oneself to another discretely, under the public eye but without public knowledge” (“Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers ‘As a Lesbian,’” in *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, ed. Clark and Friedman, 221). Despite Kenschaft’s assertion that *queer* functions as a code among insiders, historical evidence indicates that it was also widely used during this period to condemn the innate abnormality of the homosexual. Just three years later, an article on homosexuality as deviant perversity entitled “Queer People” would appear in the mainstream magazine *Newsweek* (10 October 1949, 52+).

- 14 Carson McCullers, *Clock without Hands* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1979), 86. Subsequent references, cited parenthetically as *CWH*, will be to the Penguin edition.
- 15 Quoted in Carr, *Lonely Hunter*, 159.
- 16 Carr’s biography chronicles the numerous queer erotic arrangements in which McCullers and her husband engaged throughout their relationship. Unfortunately, Carr’s descriptions are frequently tinged with condescension or homophobia. She offers this summary, for example: “Having sexual problems himself which he could not resolve, Reeves was incapable of coping with his wife’s sexual inclinations or of *helping her to become more heterosexually oriented*. Carson was completely open to her friends about her tremendous enjoyment in being physically close to attractive women. She was as frank and open about this aspect of her nature *as a child would be in choosing which toy he most wanted to play with*” (*Lonely Hunter*, 295, italics mine).
- 17 Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xxvi.
- 18 Freak shows were most popular in the United States between 1840 and 1940, when audiences from all walks of life paid to stare at the spectacle of human bodies on display at low-budget traveling shows, World’s Fairs, and dime museums. The best historical accounts of freak shows are offered by Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988); the contributors to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*,

- ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1996); and Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (Simon and Schuster, 1978; reprint, New York: Anchor Books, 1993). For more theoretical interpretations of the freak, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit," in *Freakery*, ed. Thomson, 55–68; Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997); and Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984). While Grosz and Russo read the freak within the context of feminist theory, Thomson also links freak shows to the history of disability in the United States. On freaks in the context of the dime museum and World's Fairs, see Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997), and Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Excess at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984). For a dazzling reading of the freak show as the "material unconscious" of Stephen Crane's *The Monster*, see Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 199–245.
- 19 Using a somewhat different vocabulary, Rubin wrote of McCullers's fiction, "[I]t isn't that freaks are commentaries or criticisms on normality; they *are* normality" ("Carson McCullers," 118).
- 20 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 229. Likewise, articulating the possibilities of a queer Asian American studies, David Eng remarks that "in its consistent elision of race as a conceptual category for analysis, mainstream gay and lesbian scholarship fails . . . to embrace queerness as a critical methodology for the understanding of sexual identity as it is dynamically formed through racial epistemes" ("Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," *Social Text* 52/53 [fall–winter 1997]: 41–42). On the necessity of a more complex analysis of racial difference within queer theory, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 1–20; Steven Seidman, "Deconstructing Queer Theory or the Under-Theorization of the Social and the Ethical," in *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, ed. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 116–41; and Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*). Rosemary Hennessey has noted the neglect of class-based analysis among queer critics ("Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," in *Social Postmodernism*, ed. Nicholson and Seidman, 142–83).
- 21 This is the standard argument of feminist scholarship on McCullers, which concentrates on her female characters' resistance to feminine be-

- haviors and expectations. See, for example, Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976); Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985); and Barbara A. White, "Loss of Self in *The Member of the Wedding*," in *Carson McCullers*, ed. Bloom, 125–42. The limitation of this argument is that by focusing exclusively on female characters it neglects the relations among men and between men and women in McCullers's fiction that put pressure on traditional gender categories in more radical ways.
- 22 This anxiety is shared by Frankie's counterpart Mick Kelly in McCullers's first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1953). Page references are to the Bantam edition. Anticipating Frankie's tortured relationship to the freak show, Mick's friend Harry Minowitz attempts to quiet her doubts about her excessive growth with a less-than-comforting reassurance: "Once I saw a lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall. But you probably won't grow that big" (94).
 - 23 Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1969), 2. Subsequent references, cited parenthetically as *MW*, will be to the 1969 edition.
 - 24 See Carr, *Lonely Hunter*, 169, 171, and 296 for examples of McCullers's theory of bisexuality as it was manifest in her own life.
 - 25 This characteristic of McCullers's fiction prefigures recent theories that posit the transsexual body as a site where rigid distinctions between sexes and genders break down. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Grosz, *Intolerable Ambiguity*; and Sandy Stone, "The *Empire Strikes Back*: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura* 29 (May 1992): 151–78. These critics see the transsexual/transgendered body not as a freakish anomaly but as evidence that the sex-gender system is more open to variation and multiplicity than the polarized categories of male and female allow.
 - 26 See D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988), on the relationship between the "open secret" and the novelistic form. As Kenschaft rightly points out, "a reader who was unfamiliar with gay slang circa 1940 would miss certain implications of McCullers's texts, even though those texts could reasonably be read and interpreted without that knowledge" ("Homoerotics and Human Connections," 222).
 - 27 Kenschaft acknowledges that "few of McCullers's characters are adequately described as homosexual: They are an adolescent girl falling in love with an engaged couple, an Amazonian woman infatuated with a bird-like man, a married man who never consummates the marriage

- but is entranced by his wife's desire for other men" ("Homoerotics and Human Connections," 226–27). As these examples attest, *lesbian* may be too specific a category to describe either the polymorphous desires of McCullers's characters or the unpredictable identifications of her readers.
- 28 In addition to these references to the "queer," see *MW* 2, 4, 22, 23, 27, 34, 85, 94, 116, 141.
 - 29 Kenschaft, "Homoerotics and Human Connections," 228.
 - 30 For oral histories documenting the experiences of gay men in the South during the Cold War/pre-Stonewall era, see Sears, *Lonely Hunters*.
 - 31 Gayatri Spivak, "A Feminist Reading of Carson McCullers's *Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*," in *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, ed. Clark and Friedman, 136.
 - 32 For analyses of the social function and reception of the *Kinsey Report* in postwar America see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; D'Emilio and Freeman, *Intimate Matters*; Lewes, *Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*; and Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1983).
 - 33 Recent studies of homosexuality during the Cold War period demonstrate a conflation of the demonized identities of the homosexual, the Communist, and the alien. See, for example, John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Robert Corber, *In the Name of National Security and Homosexuality in Cold War America*; Lee Edelman, "Tearrooms and Sympathy; or, Epistemology of the Water Closet," *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
 - 34 Thadious M. Davis, "Erasing the 'We of Me' and Rewriting the Racial Script: Carson McCullers's Two *Member(s) of the Wedding*," in *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, ed. Clark and Friedman, 207.
 - 35 On the representation of racial difference in freak shows, see Bogdan, *Freak Show*, and Thomson, *Freakery*.
 - 36 Thadious M. Davis argues that Berenice's differently colored eyes offer "a sense of the unexpected in human nature" ("Erasing the 'We of Me,'" 208); however, the prosthetic eye also calls into question the very notion of "human nature," suggesting a more radical incentive to expand or explode the category.
 - 37 Sherman's failed political protest must be contrasted with that of the Judge's savvy black housekeeper, Verily. Having endured the Judge's racism for years, she eventually demands that he make social security payments. When the Judge refuses, she quits her job to take a more legitimate and better-paying position, demonstrating an agency and political knowledge that Sherman does not possess. Sherman's rejection of his white acquaintances, as well as the black community of which Verily is an

active part, makes him a freak who refuses all social categories. Verily's presence in the narrative indicates McCullers's awareness of important differences within racial communities as well as between them.

- 38 Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), 82.
- 39 For a similarly affirmative reading of community in the cafe scenes in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, see Kenschaft, "Homoerotics and Human Connections," 230–31.
- 40 Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, 127.
- 41 See also Horvath and Logan, who read the stage version of *Member of the Wedding* as a story of Frankie's normalization, which, they argue, is an allegory for the conformity of postwar American culture ("Nobody Knows Best").