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Illuminating the Dark Carnival in American Fantasy

by

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Committee Approval

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Dedication

For my mom, who said I could do anything.

And for my husband, Andrew, who went along with my crazy scheme, and who still keeps all the plates spinning. I love you.

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Illuminating the Dark Carnival in American Fantasy

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2020)

Over the last century, popular US culture has produced multiple variations on a story about a mysterious traveling carnival that arrives in a small, rural town and disrupts normal ways of living. A lack of clear scholarship on the concept, combined with its frequent recurrence, presents a deficit in understanding “the Dark Carnival” as a discrete, recognizable literary concept. This dissertation strives to fill that lacuna by describing the Dark Carnival as a category of American fantasy stories that offer cohesive narrative explanations in times of social upheaval. Identified by a specific ambience, or narrative affect, of wonder and dread, Dark Carnival stories employ a *portmotif* (i.e., *portmanteau* + *motif*) to transport composite carnivalesque structures and content (e.g. settings, characters, objects, and themes) across genres and modes that work to invert and pervert social norms. This storytelling tradition incorporates and reframes the Midwestern pastoral mythology to thwart happy endings as a social critique; protagonists struggle with invasive magical forces in texts that resist, revise, or reinforce dominant discourses and interrogate concepts such as “home,” “family,” and “Americanness.” I employ George Lakoff’s cognitive-based categories in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987) to evaluate Dark Carnival stories based on their similarity to central prototype texts, or best examples (e.g. Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes* [1962]). As a radial structure, the prototype is positioned at the category’s center and surrounded by linked extensions, or deviations, chaining out from the central case. In this study, Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977), represents a metaphoric extension of the Dark Carnival prototype, and Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (1999) exemplifies a metonymic

extension, but all remain linked to Bradbury's prototype by Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblances." This analysis offers a non-hierarchical framework for understanding textual variations and adaptations in contemporary popular cultural, and how they relate or react to inverted social energies.

Keywords: cognitive categories, American fantasy, dark carnival, Bradbury, Bakhtin, portmotif, Lakoff

Chapter One: Introduction

One of the ways humankind understands and explains the world around us is through story. As experimental psychologist Roger C. Schank points out, “story creation is a memory process. As we tell a story, we are formulating the gist of the experience, which we can recall whenever we create a story describing that experience” (100). Whether spoken or written, the function of the stories we tell is inextricably bound up with structures of memory. In *The Narrative Construction of Reality*, Jerome Bruner suggests that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (4). If humans make sense of the world through the stories we tell, there must be a reason we keep telling specific stories. This dissertation examines multiple variations of a story about a mysterious traveling carnival that arrives in a rural U.S. town and disrupts normal ways of living. The frequency of its recurrence in popular cultural texts suggests a need to define “the Dark Carnival” as a discrete literary concept, recognizable by a number of related narrative characteristics in both form and content.

With few scholarly references beyond a fictional title, my search for a clear definition indicates that none yet exists; thus I offer my own theorization to fill the lacuna. The Dark Carnival is a category of American fantasy stories that offers a cohesive narrative during times of social upheaval. Authors invert and pervert social norms through various narrative configurations (e.g. settings, characters, objects, and themes) to evoke a specific ambience of wonder and dread that transcends genre. As Schank points out, “at the root of our ability to operate in the world is our ability to explain the behavior

of others by examining their beliefs” (64). This logical trajectory suggests Dark Carnival stories function as cultural attempts to explain a pervasive sense of confusion during such upheaval, portrayed either as a revolution or some other significant societal change. The act of storytelling itself indicates some kind of social anomaly, as Schank notes, “we don’t tell a story unless it deviates from the norm in some interesting way. Stories embody our attempts to cope with complexity, whereas scripts obviate the need to think” (89). The Dark Carnival story tradition incorporates and reframes the Midwestern pastoral mythology’s affective portrayal of “place” to thwart happy endings as a critique of untenable social expectations; protagonists struggle with invasive magical forces in texts that resist, revise, or reinforce dominant discourses and interrogate concepts such as “home,” “family,” and “Americanness.”

Though authors often use elements of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to signal such significant changes, many such signals have also been distorted to some degree, marking their resemblance to other members of the Dark Carnival story category. This project endeavors to clarify ambiguous meanings by synthesizing research insights with literary analysis and interpretation in an embodied cognitive approach to categorization as a framework for studying cultural expressions of the Dark Carnival.

Literature Review

Within the context of American fantasy texts from the twentieth century to present, the term *fantasy* designates texts that include an unexplainable element usually portrayed as a magical or supernatural force. Thus broadly defined, fantasy includes texts from weird fiction, magic realism, horror, and fabulist tales, among others, and allows the unexplained elements of the Dark Carnival to remain ambiguous. The phrase *Dark*

Carnival famously serves as the title of Ray Bradbury's debut publication of twenty-seven collected stories in 1947, but more recent authors have employed the same phrase in titles of popular works, as Joanna Parypinski does in her 2019 horror novel, as well as popular musical artists like Insane Clown Posse. The phrase also appears in the title of two related historical accounts: in his history of cinematic monsters, David J. Skal describes a central idea in Ray Bradbury's fiction as "the dark carnival," but offers no further clarification. Two years later, a biography Skal published with Elias Savada, *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre* (1995), suggests in both title and content that the idea of the Dark Carnival in Bradbury's fiction had already been indexed by—and circulating in—popular cinema since at least 1919. The first promising lead on the larger concept appears in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), in which Peter Stallybrass and Allon White reference a "carnival of the night" as they elaborate on increasingly negative public responses to carnival festivities and imagery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A search for recent literary criticism on the concept of the Dark Carnival produced a total of four articles. Of those, two authors apply a slightly altered, "darker" version of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's carnival: a 2013 summary brief for the *Society for Marketing Advances Proceedings* uses the same phrase to describe transgressive music by death metal band, Cannibal Corpse. Though the analysis successfully identifies elements of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the article ascribes a nihilistic tone to dominant themes of death metal aesthetics (Fowler, Lanier, and Rader 24). For the purposes of my study, a fruitful analysis would combine the musical expression of such nihilistic themes along with texts that emphasize cosmic horror in more graphic depictions of body horror;

however, due to reasonable time restrictions, I have limited this project's parameters to exploring American fantasy texts written from the twentieth century to present. Though I acknowledge a large body of musical texts expressing Dark Carnival elements certainly exists, this exploration remains beyond my current scope of study.

Linda Holland-Toll uses the phrase "dark carnival" in a 1999 article for the *Journal of Popular Culture* to describe Stephen King's novel, *The Shining* (1977), as another "darker" version of Bakhtin's carnival. The article's application of carnivalesque functions provides an entry point for my larger discussion of metaphoric extensions of the Dark Carnival prototype in Chapter Four. In Andrew Stott's 2012 article for the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, he describes the Dark Carnival as a "subgenre," but leaves the larger parent category unspecified before making a tenuous connection between the Joker in *Batman* and clowns in Charles Dickens' works. I address the article's mishandling of "Dark Carnival" in greater detail in Chapter Five's discussion of metonymic extensions.

Finally, in a 2016 article for *CLUES: A Journal of Detection*, Craig A. Warren also attempts to establish a subgenre of suspense and horror fiction he describes as "dark carnival," positioning mystery writer Patricia Highsmith as its founding member. In contradistinction with such scholarship, I suggest the concept of the Dark Carnival covers a much broader scope of American cultural texts. The breadth of this scope offers evidence for my opposition to describing Dark Carnival stories as a "subgenre." I share the same objections Stefan Ekman offers in response to describing urban fantasy as a "subgenre," as he explains how urban fantasy's rhizomatic propagation from multiple genres easily exceeds subgenre limitations (452). In similar fashion, the Dark Carnival

also draws upon multiple origin texts from a wide variety of genres and historical timeframes. More importantly, as Ekman notes, such rhizomatic origins “raise the issue of to what the form would be subordinated: would it be to fantasy, to horror, to romance, to crime fiction, or to any other possible genre?” (453). This exploration of urban fantasy offers fruitful insights for thinking about literary genres in terms of human genealogy and propagation; the shared resemblances between literary and human histories emphasizes how lived human experience produces literature, as well as how texts seem to have lives of their own. Within a larger academic discourse, Ekman strengthens his case for urban fantasy as a separate genre, but I make no such claims. The Dark Carnival has already transcended genres, and the nature of its content defies the limitations imposed by such conventions. This study focuses on various storytelling modes to highlight the popularity and longevity of Dark Carnival stories and explore how their narrative patterns reflect social changes.

Moving Forward

Due to obvious connections with the subject matter, a discussion of Bakhtin’s concept of *the carnivalesque* foregrounds this study; however, the theoretical impact of the Dark Carnival as I perceive it goes beyond a simple variation on Bakhtin’s ideas. Attempts to assign meaning based on a simple division between the Dark Carnival and Bakhtinian carnival would merely highlight the negative space of differences between the two ideas and mistakenly imply the Dark Carnival functions as carnival’s binary opposition. Beyond a simple definition of terms, this project endeavors to present a fully developed sense of meaning to establish the Dark Carnival as a separate *category* of stories within a larger system of twentieth-century American cultural texts.

Beyond this initial clarification to disregard a text's Bakhtinian carnival associations as a litmus test for discerning expressions of the Dark Carnival, a small but vital semantic detail emerges to further elucidate my attempts to define this concept more clearly. While the initial task of defining the Dark Carnival seems straightforward, it extends beyond an *atomistic* sense of meaning, which would simply combine the individual definitions of each word. Readers familiar with the individual words "dark" and "carnival" might immediately reference the multiple meanings each term conveys, even without consulting the Oxford English Dictionary; *dark* describes a literal setting with poor lighting, but could also metaphorically suggest hidden knowledge, or malice. Similarly, the term *carnival* describes an outdoor festival, but the same word can also metaphorically express an atmosphere of social disorder. After explaining its religious origins, the entry for "carnival" in John Clute's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* acknowledges both *carnival* and the *carnivalesque* have become "technical terms sometimes applied to non-naturalistic fictions in order to characterize their various rhetorical perversities; they are especially pertinent to those involving dramatic transformations of the social order" (167).

Many academic readers could therefore understand this phrase as a signal of a change in the rules governing carnival, but the conjoined phrase significantly increases possible interpretations without increasing clarity. This inadequacy reflects how atomistic constructions, common in an objectivist approach, fail to produce appropriately broad senses of meaning. To correct such deficiencies requires understanding the phrase as a whole, as George Lakoff explains, "It is often the case that the meanings of compounds are not compositional; that is, the meaning of the whole cannot be predicted from the

meanings of the parts and the way they are put together” (Lakoff 147). In other words, compound phrases like “Dark Carnival” confer a complexity of meaning; upon recognizing the semantic link between individual terms, the task of assigning meaning shifts to include darkness as an inherent, experiential quality of the carnivals under examination in the selected texts. In this case, the modifier in the compound phrase “Dark Carnival” signals the noun’s special status, similar to phrases like white lie, tall tale, or birth mother. As Lakoff notes, “In conflicts between modifiers and heads, the modifiers win out. This would follow from the general cognitive principle that special cases take precedence over general cases” (74).

Informed by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophical concepts of “family resemblances” and extendable boundaries, Lakoff’s detailed study, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (1987), highlights the interdisciplinary trend turning toward cognitive approaches to human reason and away from classical objectivist categories. He takes the provocative title from a chapter detailing the development of categories in certain non-Western languages, demonstrating how “people around the world categorize things in ways that both boggle the Western mind and stump Western linguists and anthropologists” (92). For example, in the Australian aboriginal language Dyirbal, Lakoff cites R.M.W. Dixon’s 1982 study that lists women, fire, and dangerous things as members of a specific group of objects, or *Balan*, among the “categories of the human mind. . . that made sense to Dyirbal speakers” (93). Such groups illustrate how linguistic classifications serve as *natural* human categories; the idiosyncratic grouping of women, fire, and dangerous things makes up one of four main categories for nouns in Dyirbal. These categories, Lakoff notes, are “built

into the language, as is common in the world's languages. Whenever a Dyirbal speaker uses a noun in a sentence, the noun must be preceded by a variant of one of four words. . . [that] classify all objects in the Dyirbal universe" (92). This anthropological insight emphasizes how linguistic categories derive from human interactions with different objects in the world and describe natural categories by way of a distinctly human sense of embodiment.

This experiential approach challenges the classical objectivist paradigm, in which "Meaning is then based on truth. The meaning of a sentence is taken to be its truth-conditions," determined by entailments and sameness-of-meaning (Lakoff 168). Understanding objectivism as the default setting for Western culture and philosophical thought imparts Lakoff's study with a sense of exigency, as some cognitive models of categorization prioritize subjective factors over objective. Lakoff describes the objectivist paradigm as an idealization: "It is our objectivist legacy that we view rationality as being purely mental, unemotional, detached—independent of our imagination, of social functioning, and of the limitations of our bodies and our memories" (183). A heightened academic focus on conceptual categories in the cognitive sciences has produced results with surprising inconsistencies, as Lakoff notes: "Conceptual categories are, on the whole, very different from what the objectivist view requires of them. That evidence suggests a very different view, not only of categories, but of human reason" (xiv).

Instead of perceiving human reason as a transcendental mode of symbol manipulation, Lakoff suggests that it "grows out of the nature of the organism and all that contributes to its individual and collective experience: its genetic inheritance, the nature of the environment it lives in, the way it functions in that environment, the nature of its

social functioning, and the like” (xv). The phrase “experiential realism,” or “experientialism,” describes the opposing cognitive approach Lakoff favors over objectivism. He further clarifies the difference between classical objectivist categories and cognitive-based classification when he points out that “human categorization is essentially a matter of both human experience and imagination” (8). Rather than apply idealized objectivist conditions of “necessary and sufficient” to ideas born of folk tales and mythology like the Dark Carnival, this study employs natural categories informed by human interaction with the surrounding environment.

Definition: Ambience

Deeply rooted in the American amusement industry, the Dark Carnival describes a narrative tradition that incorporates and reframes the idealizations of a Midwestern pastoral mythology. As William Barillas notes in *The Midwestern Pastoral*, “The Midwest, according to pastoral myth, is what America thinks itself to be” (4). The stories compound recognizable elements of the declining carnival—tarnished spangles and rickety carousels—with rural, small-town settings to expose the Midwestern pastoral’s illusory promises of self-made prosperity and homogeneous identity in a mythical heartland. A strong sense of nostalgia perpetuates an idealized Midwest located somewhere between the uncivilized wilderness and overcivilized, industrial urban landscapes. As I discuss in Chapter Two, Bradbury offers a quintessential example of the connection between carnivals and the American Midwest.

Authors often portray this mythical landscape as vast open spaces of rolling farmland punctuated by woods and small towns and populated by plain-speaking, generous, upright (white, Protestant) citizens. In opposition to a densely populated

metropolitan background, an idealized version of the rural Midwest assumes a default setting as the *everywhere* and *everyman* of American storytelling. While some stories in this study have coastal settings, recognized as the nation's geographic extremities, most story events take place in mythical Midwestern locales that include, but are not limited to, Kansas, Nebraska, and Illinois. Although each of these states varies widely from the others in appearance and ecological systems, narratives set in any place between the Eastern seaboard and the Pacific Coast have a homogenizing effect on the immense acreage that composes the Midwest; this homogenization extends to narratives set in locations like Arizona and Idaho, though many inhabitants of these states typically associate them with the West. A narrative projection of presumed blankness allows the Midwest to function as an empty canvas so readers can easily project their own images of character and setting, while more extreme or distinctive locations add regional inflections to the narrative.

In response to a banal utopia of temperance, the Dark Carnival's impresarios and performing troupes replace pastoral archetypes and disrupt their flat, provincial Midwestern landscapes with riots of color and magical spectacles. Whirling midway rides transport visitors via lighthearted amusement in stories that affirm life is just a game, except the game in question is a confidence game rigged to claim the ultimate stakes. A perverse form of textual play, the Dark Carnival thwarts anticipated happy endings as a critique of unrealistic or untenable social norms. Rather than blame God for hardship—as in times of war, civil unrest, or economic upheaval, when evidence of the divine is scarce—the Dark Carnival provides readers a cast of outsiders with their mysterious rituals to offer up as potential scapegoats for social upheaval. Such stories offer an

acceptable space for non-religious iterations of the supernatural; in most, the element of wonder replaces the act of worship. In addition, heroes rely on old-fashioned values of self-reliance and exceptionalism to explain away ghosts and monsters with varying degrees of success. The structure sometimes mimics the picaresque format, but replaces the roguish “picaro” with an everyman whose superlative levels of self-reliance and exceptionalism define him as distinctly American.

With this context as reference, the phrase “Dark Carnival” indicates more than just a particular type of carnival, but refers instead to a larger sense of surrounding ambience. In her exploration of ambiguity in fantasy, Alexandra Berlina clarifies the meaning of the Latin prefix when she notes, “amb(i) can mean *both*, as in ‘ambidextrous,’ and *around*, as in ‘ambience’” (236). This implies that ambience functions as an immersive sensation that surrounds the senses. As M.H. Abrams explains, terms such as *mood* or *atmosphere* may be used interchangeably with ambience to describe “the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events” (14). In other words, the feelings these texts perpetuate—wonder mixed with dread—help readers identify them as members of the Dark Carnival category due to a *specific* literary tone, as indicated by regular use of the definite article “the.”

The semantic link within the phrase “Dark Carnival” makes the task of assigning meanings exponentially more challenging, as those meanings apply to a holistic concept and figure carnival as a gestalt of various properties. In his foundational text with Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff explains that we understand sporting events and other activities, like carnivals, as “a holistic structure—a gestalt—[that] govern[s] our

understanding of activities . . . Such activities are structured by a cognitive model, an overall structure which is more than merely a composite of its parts” (21). Rather than attempting to describe the carnival in vague terms, perceiving it as something greater than the sum of its component parts helps clarify its holistic structure. Beyond a collection of mechanical midway rides and rigged games, carnivals comprise a variety of activities designed to elicit specific emotions, often as visceral thrills from high-velocity rides; the relieved laughter that immediately follows a scream from a jump-scare; or the unbridled sensation of joy at escaping the trappings of everyday life.

Within the growing field of Place Studies, Nancy Lincoln Easterlin explains how cognitive studies perceives the idea of “place” as more than a specific physical location, but results instead when “space” is given meaning through personal, group, and cultural processes. Human attachments or dislike for different environments create an affective-conceptual construction of *place*, which she terms “place-in-process” (835). The affective component of a place thus becomes equally as important as the physical settings and structures common to carnivals. Authors employ rich sensory descriptions via multiple channels of sensory input that combine cotton candy and popcorn scents, the noise of laughter, midway rides, and loud music, and the artificial illumination of brightly colored lights all reinforce the carnival signal. These examples highlight the strong cognitive links between vivid imagery, scents (olfactory signals), music (auditory signals) and human memory. Without humans to attach sensory and emotional reactions to a place or event, a carnival amounts to nothing more than an eclectic collection of objects curated to fit a very specific aesthetic. Identifying the sensory components of this gestalt perception helps reinforce carnival as an inherently embodied activity.

Portmotif: Affective Patterns

In his explication of affect studies in literature, Patrick Colm Hogan highlights the importance of the reader's emotional response, but explains how authors present emotional simulations as genre patterns in different types of stories, which "may be explained by reference to ordinary features of emotion systems" (21). While simulated emotions may be easy to identify in stories Hogan broadly defines as those of *romantic* or *heroic* genres, the texts under examination resist such clearly defined boundaries. Though still deliberately mysterious, a recognizable Dark Carnival atmosphere begins to coalesce with early twentieth-century silent films and appears with increasing frequency through the present day.

This broad selection of texts conjures a specific ambience: a nostalgic tone combines anticipation with wonder—bordering on disbelief—at glimpses of the numinous; the compounded notes of childlike emotion are then shrouded in a mist of unspoken, pervasive dread at the discovery of the central conflict. As Hogan suggests, "stories involve the usual appeal of simulation, combined with the usual folk psychology of characters following goals. (Folk psychology is the set of psychological principles that we rely on tacitly in understanding people's minds)" (21, parentheses in original). However, as some Dark Carnival story elements, including characters, remain deliberately ambiguous, I suggest that the carnival setting, characters, and certain conventional images and motifs all contribute to produce a distinct cumulative affect of wonder and dread.

The combined weight of textual elements such as settings, characters, themes, and objects, exceeds the capacity of meaning for a term like *motif*. As Abrams describes it, a

motif is “a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature” (169). While he acknowledges *motif* is frequently used interchangeably with *theme*, Abrams specifies that the latter “is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader” (170). These descriptions imply a higher degree of specificity for literary motifs, such as the recurring imagery of Desdemona’s white handkerchief in *Othello*, while themes refer to broader, more complex ideas, such as *Paradise Lost*’s theme of overreach.

Too specific to be labeled a theme, yet too complex to function as a singular motif, I propose a term that encompasses both theme and motif to offer a more nuanced description of the Dark Carnival’s narrative structure: a *portmotif* is a portmanteau that blends “portmanteau” and “motif.” Just like the luggage that provides a foundational image for the metaphoric construct, the term combines and transports groups of motifs in order to express both symbolic imagery and recurring themes more efficiently. Instead of carving out a new genre category, a portmotif contributes to the Dark Carnival’s overall gestalt perception and allows storytellers to preload meaning in single images, packing them with multiple motifs and themes. Like a folding valise, the portmotif expands to allow for additional meanings but condenses into one container for easy transport. This particular assemblage of residual carnival imagery and signal terms forms an affective gestalt that indexes the Dark Carnival as a broader concept.

Although specifics of a given portmotif depend upon individual discourses, as each telling varies from another, readers may anticipate the Dark Carnival’s particular affective mixture of wonder and dread signaled by recurring story elements. In addition

to physical carnival, circus, or amusement park settings, these elements include characters like magicians, acrobats, and fortune-tellers; objects like masks, tarot cards, carousels, and Ferris wheels; and themes such as the loss of innocence, the wisdom of children, and forbidden knowledge, to name just a few. The frequent recurrence of these elements in popular culture offers textual evidence of common Dark Carnival patterns; however, because the montage of elements exceeds current narratological categories, I suggest the portmotif—as an interim category between motif and theme—functions as a repository for the amalgamation of ingredients that results in the Dark Carnival’s specific affect.

Texts often portray a physical carnival setting to establish a nostalgic tone, but authors may also place grotesque imagery and inside-out logic in contemporary American contexts to generate a nervous Dark Carnival laughter that borders on screaming. The relationship between nonverbal utterances such as laughter and screaming can be traced through Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances, in which “we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (PI 66). The same kind of network describes how a group of motifs, characters, and symbols form a portmotif. These affective literary networks reappear in US cultural texts and materialize in various combinations throughout twentieth-century American fantasy to signal the Dark Carnival’s overall gestalt perception. Rather than apply rigid objectivist categories to an idea born of folk tales and mythology, I refer to Lakoff’s explication of prototype theory and radial structures to conceptualize the Dark Carnival as a story category.

Prototype-Based Categories

Research into establishing definitions leads to an exploration of how humans assign meaning, and ultimately addresses issues fundamental to Western thought, including discourses on the philosophy of language, human reason, and the nature of meaning itself. It is within this context that Lakoff's study emphasizes the vital role categories play in knowledge formation: "They were assumed to be abstract containers, with things either inside or outside the category. Things were assumed to be in the same category if and only if they had certain properties in common. And [those] properties . . . defin[ed] the category" (6). Attempts to categorize the Dark Carnival using this classical rubric of shared properties produced more confusion than clarification. Though far from comprehensive, the selection of Dark Carnival texts spans a century of genres, modes, and media, yet they still share certain resemblances. This suggests the fundamental nature of categorization as a component of human reason, as Lakoff explains, "Most categorization is automatic and unconscious, and if we become aware of it at all, it is only in problematic cases" (6). This shift moves away from objectivism and recognizes categorization as a basic cognitive function, inherently human and embodied.

The classical objectivist view presents reason as a function of "disembodied symbol-manipulation" in which categories "are represented by sets, which are in turn defined by the properties shared by their members" (Lakoff 8). For thousands of years, such ideas have been taken for granted in Western thought "as part of what *defines* science" (Lakoff 10, emphasis in original). However, employing classical categories that seek to eliminate human elements of bias for a doctoral dissertation on *literature* seems not only inadequate, but also unwise. Studies on qualitative subjects like narrative rarely

produce objective scientific results, as Bruner notes, “Unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, narrative constructions can only achieve ‘verisimilitude’” (4). An examination of selected stories—as representations and products of human culture—requires a cognitive model for adequate categorization. A prototype-based method of categorization groups Dark Carnival stories by family resemblances, in which members share a wide variety of similar features instead of a required set of shared traits. “Wittgenstein pointed out that a category like *game* does not fit the classical mold, since there are no common properties shared by all games,” instead, different games may resemble one another, and the category can also “be extended and new kinds of games introduced, provided that they resembled previous games in appropriate ways” (Lakoff 16). Using this line of reasoning, categories (like *games* or *numbers*) may be limited or extended to fit the user’s goals.

Lakoff describes how cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch’s pioneering work challenged the standard model of formal deductive logic by proposing “that categories, in general, have best examples (called ‘prototypes’) and that . . . specifically human capacities” play a role in the task of categorization (7). The cognitive approach embraces embodiment to prioritize what humans call prototypes or “best examples” as the basis for natural categorization, instead of relying on predictive hierarchical taxonomies of objectivist logic. Lakoff emphasizes prototype theory as “a matter of both human experience and imagination—of perception, motor activity, and culture on the one hand, and of metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery on the other” (8). Though he differentiates between objectivism and cognitive models, Lakoff never claims one system as “better” than another, but suggests specific contexts as appropriate to each. For this

project, I cite Bradbury's 1962 novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, as the Dark Carnival prototype. Though not the first, this text offers the best example of the Dark Carnival as a literary concept; examining the extensions of texts from this central model will clarify the meanings associated with the category of Dark Carnival stories.

Radial Structures

Prototype-based categories with radial structures comprise the conceptual scaffolding that undergirds this study in both theory and application. Not unlike a carnival midway, with a central thoroughfare that links fairgoers to a variety of attractions, games, and amusements, radial structures link to extended versions from a central prototype model. Though Lakoff describes a variety of structures, including gradients, schemas, and cluster models, his explanation of radial categories offers an appropriately embodied cognitive model for categorizing Dark Carnival stories, as it mirrors the way humans interact physically with carnivals in the material world.

Lakoff points out two fundamental insights from Rosch's research, that "categories occur in systems, and such systems include contrasting categories" (52). Based on this model, the category of Dark Carnival stories occurs in the larger system of US cultural texts, which encompasses a wide variety of storytelling modes and productions. The prototype-based category "is structured radially with respect to a number of its subcategories: there is a *central* subcategory, defined by a cluster of converging cognitive models . . . The central model determines the possibilities for extensions, together with the possible relations between the central model and the extension models" (Lakoff 91). This structure centers a text as the Dark Carnival's best example, and texts deviating from this prototype extend from the central category, related

by contrast as well as metaphoric and metonymic extensions. Just as the category of *games* extended to accommodate the introduction of video games in the 1970s (Lakoff 16), the Dark Carnival category may also be extended to include new stories as they continue to emerge.

At the basic level, the way a carnival functions in each text signals its membership in either a prototype or a contrasting category. The prototypical Dark Carnival features a performing troupe in a physical carnival setting as an invasive Other; however, in contrasting examples the carnival may serve as Home, or another kind of sanctuary. When authors portray a character's "place-attachment," or fondness for a particular place, as Lisa Butler-Harrington suggests, "attachment is grounded in nostalgia, or a fondness for remembered or supposed ideal (positive) aspects of the past" (251). In Dark Carnival prototypes, the carnival functions as an antagonist that invades the place focal characters associate with "home." In contrasting cases, texts depict carnivals as home, or otherwise aligned with protagonists. From this basic division, texts that further deviate from the prototype often portray carnival in varying degrees of physical representation; examining how individual texts relate to the central category helps clarify what motivates these extensions.

The concept of the portmoteif aligns with what Lakoff describes as cue validity, or "the conditional probability that an object is in a particular category given its possession of some feature (or 'cue'). . . . For example, if you see a living thing with gills, you can be certain it is a fish" (52-53). The higher the number of Dark Carnival elements evident in a given story, the higher the cue validity; in narratological terms, stories with greater cue validity also have a greater sense of indexicality. The folding compartments of the

portmotif transport settings, characters, images, and motifs across genres to generate a narrative affect that combines wonder with dread. In addition to indexing the Dark Carnival's distinct affective vintage, the portmotif functions as the source of metaphoric and metonymic extensions from the central prototype. For example, while Stephen King includes no carnival settings nor any characters described explicitly as magicians in *Doctor Sleep* (2013), Rose the Hat's magical top hat represents a metonymic extension of the prototypical Dark Carnival story, which portrays Mr. Dark (in his top hat) as an invasive magical force. Like a bag of tricks, the portmotif stores the items (cues) that indicate a Dark Carnival text that deviates from the central prototype.

The radial structure of this prototype conveys relational senses of meaning, as Lakoff notes, "while the noncentral members are not predictable from the central member, they are 'motivated' by it, in the sense that they bear family resemblances to it" (65). The structure of this concept echoes many common features of Dark Carnival stories, including the midway as a carnival's physical nucleus. Mark Storey explores how Gilded Age circuses challenged literature's place as high culture with multi-sensory stimulation from "sites that open out to multiple zones of experience" (59). Motivated by the success of previous circuses, the later traveling carnivals maintained the same physical layout with a midway that provided access to different games and other "zones of experience." The same radial structure also emphasizes both natural and mechanical representations of mobility or transience via whirling or spinning rides, mechanical gears, and railroad cars. Indicative of cycles in general, elliptical shapes and circular motion could also signal a clock face, the shape of a striped performance tent, or the endless march of time

expressed as cultural anxieties about mortality. This cognitive-based category configures differently related texts as a cloud of varied meanings orbiting a central prototype.

I have endeavored to plot a deliberately incremental approach to explicating my theory of the Dark Carnival, building from simple ideas and leading, logically and chronologically, to more complex concepts. In the pursuit of clarity, this brief overview reinforces key concepts before presenting a textual example of the Dark Carnival prototype as a radial structure:

1. Bakhtinian carnivalesque elements, while related, do not determine selected texts as members of the Dark Carnival.
2. Because it transcends genre, conventions of neither genre nor subgenre, respectively, apply to the Dark Carnival category of stories.
3. The *semantic link* between noun and modifier in the linguistic compound “Dark Carnival” implies a complexity of meaning.
4. Carnival must be understood as more than a simple sum of its parts (*gestalt*).
5. The specific *affect* of wonder + dread, generated by a *portmotif* of recurring story elements, helps create the gestalt perception of the Dark Carnival.
6. Texts illustrating the best examples serve as *prototypes* of the Dark Carnival; stories that share some family resemblances with prototypical members make up the larger *category* of Dark Carnival stories within the system of US culture.

7. Radial structure = a category with central prototypes and lines diverging from the center outward to *extensions* (stories with shared family resemblances).

Bradbury as Dark Carnival Prototype

The radial prototype structure mimics the atmospheric sense of meaning evoked in Ray Bradbury's first published collection of short stories, *Dark Carnival* (1947), although his later novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* serves as the Dark Carnival prototype for this study. Despite matching my search terms exactly, his debut publication conjures a specific atmosphere or mood without once explicating the title's eponym in the collected stories. This diminished sense of indexicality, in which meaning is constructed in an ongoing process of exchange, creates the kind of ambiguity that relies on implied understanding without making direct connections. In his nonfiction work on the horror genre, Stephen King describes Bradbury's debut collection as "the *Dubliners* of American fantasy fiction," perhaps due in part to the Joycean lack of thematic cohesion (*Danse Macabre* 346). Rather than offer detailed explications of his title, Bradbury generates a specific affect by weaving a string of images through his tales, not wholly unlike T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative." Though certainly related to his debut collection, *Something Wicked* offers a more explicit portrayal of the Dark Carnival; the former creates mystery through implied understanding while the latter spells everything out for the reader. This project endeavors to illuminate the Dark Carnival while still preserving some mysterious attraction.

To contextualize the gestalt of the Dark Carnival as a distinctly American product of the twentieth-century, one must also acknowledge cultural debts to silent films,

Hollywood's Golden Age of monster movies, and Bradbury's pulp fictional genius.

Along with carnivals, the US amusement industry of Bradbury's childhood also included vaudeville, circuses, museums, sideshows, and state fairs and exhibitions. As these forms gradually gave way to the cinema's growing popularity, Hollywood writers and directors folded carnivals and circuses into films as highly marketable subject matter. The 1921 New York release of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a German expressionist silent film, marked the first appearance of carnivals in horror cinema. Tod Browning and other Hollywood directors like him followed this pattern and kept the carousel of Dark Carnival motifs spinning in the public's imagination.

While this cinematic trend peaked in the 1930s with the release of Browning's *Freaks*, now considered a cult classic, literature continued to explore the same ideas and images. Bradbury, in particular, seems to have been directly influenced by Browning's work. In his 1993 book, *The Monster Show*, Skal notes:

Ray Bradbury, who grew up enamored of the films created by Tod Browning and Lon Chaney in the 1920s, would later make images of "the dark carnival" central to his work: black Ferris wheels, starkly silhouetted against lowering skies; nameless, shapeless things displayed in jars of formaldehyde; and the intuition of young boys that the glittering amusements of childhood somehow arrive in the dead of night in crepe-bedraped funeral trains (29).

Bradbury sustains the sense of magic and wonder he experienced when he attended the circus during his own Midwestern childhood. All of these texts converge with Bradbury's novel to form the prototype at the center of the Dark Carnival category. These texts

diverge from mimetic literary predecessors such as Twain and “circus boy” stories that depict a sense of childlike wonder, to extend a surreal ambience until it entwines wonder with dread, much like the fantasy worlds of early horror films.

Instead of forcing qualitative literary descriptions into a rigid taxonomy to determine boundaries of meaning, the analysis in the following chapter presents a central text as Dark Carnival prototype. Textual variations remain linked as related extensions, motivated by their individual relations to the central text through contrast, metaphor, and metonymy.

Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque

Approaching the Dark Carnival as a literary concept requires a familiarity with cultural texts about carnivals as well as the material history of the carnival tradition those texts represent; however, two different perspectives lend two different—though related—meanings to the idea of *carnival*. First, Bakhtin’s study of the medieval European tradition, *Rabelais and His World*, describes carnival as a folk festival that temporarily inverted social norms as people celebrated “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). Carnival offered a way to balance rigid medieval asceticism with temporary escape from strict social, political, and religious conventions, using “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’” (11).

Rituals focused on the equalizing effects of embarrassing, base, bodily humor that emphasized the “grotesque” (affectionately known to modern-day parents and teachers as “toilet humor”). While not all attendees could claim royal bloodlines, the grotesque realism and vivid imagery in carnival spectacles reinforced a sense of shared humanity: even the Pope must eat and defecate. Though the meaning has evolved considerably,

grotesque medieval carnival images feature an extremely exaggerated human body to express what Bakhtin describes as “positive hyperbolism,” and subvert accepted social orders (18). Hyperbolic figures recreated spectacles depicting “the victory of laughter over fear . . . not only a victory over mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden” (90).

Instead of simply inverting categorical oppositions, however, carnival embraced concurrent cycles of life, death, and renewal with ambivalent laughter. The key term is “ambivalent,” as this specific kind of laughter gives valence, or power, to both the object of humor as well as the audience, because both are “in” on the joke. This equalized distribution sets restorative carnivalesque laughter apart from the derisive laughter of modern satire and parodies. Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of restorative laughter, a grotesque aesthetic, and the use of demotic language in parodies and public spectacle to connect these carnivalesque elements to universal freedom and truth. In the foreword to *Rabelais and His World*, Michael Holquist writes,

Bakhtin’s carnival . . . is not only *not* an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists kings and priests and to whose superior power they are actually *deferring* when they appear to be licensing carnival [emphasis mine] (xviii).

The medieval carnival festival temporarily inverted traditional power structures, but the inversion merely switched the players' positions: dominant powers remained in place, reverting to socially accepted roles once festivities ended. Holquist emphasizes that even though social norms were eventually restored, participating authority figures acted out of a tacit understanding of the power behind such folk traditions. Bakhtin's study proposes the novels of François Rabelais best depict this idea of carnival as a holistic cycle of freedom and renewal.

Instead of an immersive communal tradition of festival rituals, audiences in the United States experienced carnivals as part of a booming new *amusement industry* at the turn of the century: after the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, independent showmen terminated long-term collaborations with larger circuses and took their midway shows on the road as traveling carnivals. As historian Robert Bogdan notes, "The carnival provided for small-town America what the large amusement parks provided for the urban masses" (58). Skal describes this era of American history—the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth—as a "world of carnival scams and traveling charlatans" (*Dark Carnival* 105). The carnival's main attraction, the freak show, evolved from the former circus sideshow attraction. Rachel Adams explains the mass appeal of the midway spectacle, noting that "freak shows provoked an interesting exchange between the lowest registers of popular culture and more socially legitimate arts. In addition to the working-class audiences that formed their primary constituency, they were attended by authors, artists, politicians, scientists, and philosophers" (4). In the true spirit of Modernism, "high art" and "lowbrow art" inform

and interrogate one another, as carnivals reached rural audiences who could not afford the price of admission to bigger, more popular circus productions.

Popular at state fairs and exhibitions, the Ferris Wheel – another legacy of the Chicago World’s Fair – became a staple at American carnivals, along with other rides like the carousels featured in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *American Gods* (Neil Gaiman, 1999). While the circular motion of these mechanical amusements creates the illusion of mobility for riders, they also mimic the circulation of traveling shows in the American Midwest. The magical properties of Bradbury’s and Gaiman’s carousels, however, *perverts* their movement as well as their narrative function; instead of mass-produced carnival rides designed simply to thrill rural audiences, these devices travel time and other dimensions, fundamentally changing each story’s characters and plot. Carousels and Ferris wheels may also extend the Dark Carnival prototype through metonymy: the object appears as a symbol that takes the place of an entire carnival.

The Bakhtinian and the American iterations of carnivals each encompass a material history reflected in separate literary traditions that illustrate their different values. The American tradition of writing about circuses and carnivals begins in the mid-nineteenth century with “circus-boy fiction”; authors include Horatio Alger, James Otis, and P.T. Barnum himself. Mark Twain offers another notable literary example with Huck Finn’s reaction to the circus, in addition to the short story, “Those Extraordinary Twins” (1892). Many of these stories establish simple tropes (tents, railroads, elephants) that evolved into more complex themes of innocence, loss, and self-reliance. Tracing the history of American circuses and carnivals reveals how each cultural production informs the other and how authors use them to promote or resist different cultural narratives.

Though related to Bakhtin's ideas on the carnivalesque, the principles behind the American carnival's highly commodified ballyhoo and sideshow spectacles differ significantly from their medieval ancestors. Using these medieval carnival principles to trace the Dark Carnival's origins in fantasy literature presumes the existence of a linear genealogy where none exists; the two concepts retain some family resemblances, but time and multiple translations have weakened their connections.

Games

Because carnival is, essentially, a game that changes the fundamental rules of life, as Bakhtin notes, "the boundaries between the play and life are intentionally erased. Life itself is on stage" (258). In the course of developing my own definitions, Wittgenstein's concept of "language-games" (PI §7) resonates when considering the elasticity of certain meanings, in that language follows a set of "rules" one may bend or break easily to allow for flexibility in interpretation. Bakhtin describes how carnival's ancient comic rituals included parodies and plays written in both Latin and vernacular speech full of "abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties [as] the unofficial elements of speech" precisely because they violated norms of official speech (187). Medieval parodies, carnival dramas, and debates reflect the marketplace admixture of official and unofficial dialects, and extend a parodic principle to the level of grammar. In keeping with this logic, the Dark Carnival functions as a language-game writ large: it encourages stories that elaborate on the details and implications of bending the rules for games, for life and death, and even hints at the hereafter.

Under his concept of language-games, Wittgenstein adds the notion of "family resemblances" to avoid essential meanings. As Jerry Gill notes, Wittgenstein "suggests

the referents of the term *game* are related to a series of overlapping characteristics in the same way that members of a family can be said to resemble one another even though they do not all share one particular feature” (71). In similar fashion, the midway includes a variety of games and amusements that overlap on the midway. As Bogdan specifies, “a carnival consist[ed] of a traveling group of sideshows, games of chance, shooting galleries, and mechanical rides . . . it was [this] organized amusement-company version that went on to be such a remarkably successful twentieth-century industry” (58). Instead of proposing a rigid definition of the Dark Carnival as a literary concept, my research reveals similar meanings—as family resemblances—in traits across multiple genres. Rather than seek exactitude of meaning, I use Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances,” reflected in prototype-based categories and in the term *portmotif*, to suggest networks of related meanings supported by context.

Cultural Work

The same carnivalesque inversion of official roles also plays a central function in texts I describe as members of the Dark Carnival category of stories in American fantasy literature, but unlike carnival, the inversion may not simply revert back to “normal.” Although by no means intended as a comprehensive account, this study includes texts from over a century of US culture with titles that include “carnival” or “circus,” or with prominent residual carnival images and characters. Sifting through layers of imbricated metaphors reveals how the meaning of carnival extends beyond a single event to invoke a broader sense of “spirit,” or atmosphere. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin describes the medieval European folk tradition of carnival as a “spirit” or “idea” composed of several key ideas: universal, redemptive laughter; public spectacle; and the everyday language of the

marketplace. This carnival spirit embraces both dark and light in a continuous cycle of life, birth, death, and renewal. Therefore, if the concept of “carnival” already includes the “dark,” an increased emphasis on the dark might signal some stories lack “lighter” elements of renewal or rebirth in truncated versions of Bakhtin’s holistic cycle. Texts that emulate this model of carnival would perform the kind of cultural work that celebrates interrelated human, natural, and divine elements and reinforces this cycle with ambivalent, restorative laughter. As an industrial work culture gradually replaced the fading feudal system, Bakhtin describes how generations following the Renaissance grew increasingly distanced from the laughter of carnival and its true meaning.

Instead of employing a universal form of laughter to achieve freedom, Dark Carnival texts work to resist and revise dominant social discourses by destabilizing the narrative. In such stories, laughter offers no restoration and often precedes or pairs with a bloodcurdling scream, as laughter and screaming both represent ambiguous, nonverbal expressions. The Dark Carnival shares the same carnivalesque tools for shaping language and imagining bodies, but produces different narrative affects. The grotesque realism that fashions comic monsters in carnivalesque texts becomes a source of horror and derisive laughter in the Dark Carnival. Novels employ a narrative technique Bakhtin describes as *polyphony* (many voices), in which an author “represents every thought as the position of a personality,” focalizing story events through various characters as the “interaction of fully valid consciousnesses” (*Problems* 9). The same technique in Dark Carnival texts often creates doubts about a narrator’s reliability. Underwriting the possibility to employ narrative techniques like the polyphonic novel and carnivalesque inversions is Bakhtin’s foundational concept of *heteroglossia*, which acknowledges the “stratification and

diversity of speech,” and because “language is alive and still in the process of becoming,” implies a continual negotiation of meaning between various dialects (*Dialogic* xix). This multiplicity of meaning inherent in language opens up possibilities for laughter and parody in carnivalesque literature, and destabilizes the narrative through madness and existential dread to generate affect specific to the Dark Carnival tradition

Most carnivalesque tools highlight the possibilities inherent in multiplicity, liminality, and ambiguity; such values enhance carnival’s holistic status as an ever-changing cycle, and enable its transgression of traditional boundaries. If the function of carnival is to *invert* social norms, then the Dark Carnival *perverts* those norms, not simply by changing them back, but shifting everything fifteen degrees off center, distorted like the images in funhouse mirrors. Returning inverted story elements back to right-side-up presents an easy path to resolution, whereas distorted elements defy simple solutions if they may never regain their “normal” positions. A comedic focus on the lower bodily stratum, common in the carnivalesque, shifts what was once merely scatological or bawdy humor into terrifying depictions of pornographic, incestuous, or abusive situations in Dark Carnival stories. Such transgressive events destabilize the narrative and provide a kind of camouflage for resistant or revolutionary discourses in opposition to dominant social norms.

The concept of the Dark Carnival expressed in twentieth century American fantasy literature has stronger ties to modern-day horror than its originary medieval ancestors. While Bakhtin acknowledges the importance of cosmic terror in the medieval worldview, he emphasizes carnival’s essential goal as freedom from fear through human expressions of unity, hope, and laughter. He likens religious social controls to carefully

deployed forms of cosmic terror when he notes “it is the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force. It is used by all religious systems to oppress man and his consciousness” (*Rabelais* 335).

Many Dark Carnival texts subvert traditional forms of religious worship by replacing them with eldritch or occult rituals, magical elements of wonder, or secular forms of adoration, like a standing ovation or getting enough “likes” on social media. As Storey suggests, many Gilded Age authors portrayed male acrobats as catalysts for girls’ sexual awakening when the “idealized male body appears in the romanticized space of the circus,” making it a safely theatricalized spectacle (72). Within this context, the carnival also functions as a transformative event that connects specular rituals to sexual awakenings instead of spiritual ones. The interpretation of such events varies according to each individual text, as the transformation in question may also suggest an intellectual awakening.

In an extension of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque concepts, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explicate the socio-historical contexts surrounding carnival’s decline in *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression*. The authors highlight the festival’s dual nature in European culture, as “a specific calendrical ritual . . . ineluctably followed by Lenten fasting and abstinence . . . [but] carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images, and discourses which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century” (15). While they acknowledge carnival festivities had been commingled with English politics until the eighteenth century (14), they also point out how efforts of suppression further politicized carnivals. As they note, “The dialectic of antagonism frequently *turned* rituals into resistance at the moment of intervention” (16,

emphasis in original). This socio-historical background provides a logical foundation for refuting critical claims that essentialize carnival as revolutionary.

Stallybrass and White propose instead to “consider carnival as one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure” (19). Thinking of carnival as simply breaking the rules (transgression), allows Stallybrass and White to extend the carnivalesque beyond critical limitations such as Bakhtin’s idealization of “the folk”; the paralysis of nostalgia; a failure to overturn dominant culture (as licensed release); and a process Stallybrass and White describe as “displaced abjection”: the sustained violent abuse and demonization of weaker social groups, often masked or overlooked as licensed complicity (19). In order to move past political problems of historically situated carnivals, the grotesque body and the “low-Other” serve as symbolic categories that map individual identification processes onto the abstract body politic, as Stallybrass and White note, “the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its negation” (20). Comparing somatic and topographic qualities reveals a correspondence between how different kinds of human bodies are privileged or restricted within a society, as similar terms and concepts describe mapping boundaries in psychological, political, and geographic terms.

Echoing Lakoff’s description of radial structures, Stallybrass and White note how “the higher discourses are normally associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power” (4). In other words, the central members of society correspond to Lakoff’s description of radial structures with central, or “best examples” for different categories. In each system, the center determines which members make up the extended, peripheral, or boundary cases; however, unlike a category of

related stories, human societies *require* peripheral members in order to define their central socio-economic members. In support of an emergent bourgeois class, Stallybrass and White emphasize how the “bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as ‘low’—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust” (191).

By centering the human body, both symbolically and as an integral participant in carnival rituals, Stallybrass and White note how differences between “grotesque” and “classical” representations parallel critical discourses that negotiate “high” and “low” aesthetic forms, geographic spheres, and class struggles. The medieval context for the term *grotesque* functioned as a comic mode integral to celebrations of life’s fullness, signaled by hyperbole, rather than the overwhelmingly negative connotation of its contemporary meaning. Some hyperbolic bodies signified local legends, most often connecting giants to land formations.

Used as a synonym for “disgusting,” or “shocking,” grotesque elements once celebrated for an aesthetic of abundance gradually took on a narrower, abstract meaning that now communicates feelings of disgust and fear. James Goodwin calls “the grotesque” a sense that “refers to an event or appearance noteworthy only for its bizarre or perverse qualities and only for its effects of shock or scandal” (1). Goodwin endeavors to reconcile this concept of the grotesque with modern American examples, noting that “the grotesque figure and its meanings are designed to be detected and understood in terms of pronounced, and often absolute, contrasts” (2). Instead of a comedic bodily exaggeration,

modern instances of “the grotesque” signal some kind of drastic deviation from social norms, if not outright rejection.

The rise of Victorian social mores increased the threshold of shame surrounding the body, and cast excess as the sin of gluttony. As White points out, “with romanticism the carnivalesque was both driven underground (quite literally in the Gothic) and transformed from a public carnival of the day into a ‘carnival of the night’” (*Pigs* 54). Significant, slow-moving social shifts also contributed to a collective sense of moral revulsion to carnival, such as the Reformation’s division of European culture along Protestant and Catholic lines. White emphasizes this division as a “dramatic restructuring of social time [that] went on across Europe . . . and although carnival did not completely disappear it lost most of its public force and its structured domination within the calendar cycle” (55). Similar to the multiple accounts of “the vanishing Indian” fabricated to support Manifest Destiny’s dominant colonial ideology, the carnival never vanished to support repressed Victorian morals or Ideal Womanhood, either.

Throughout their study, Stallybrass and White summarize their unifying psychological thread in a key phrase: that “what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central” (5, emphasis in original). Using the example of long hair in the 1960s as a central symbol of hippies on the social periphery, one might extend this logic to infer that carnival performers—but particularly “freaks,” with all the freighted transgressive connotations of physical disability and sexual deviance—present readers with a salient symbol of the social periphery in stories of the Dark Carnival. I address freak performers within the context of disability studies later in this section, and offer more detailed critical readings in following chapters. From a cognitive organizational

perspective, the texts that extend outward from the prototype may produce more fruitful critical insights for this study than the central texts, as Stallybrass and White suggest locating the “most powerful symbolic repertoires at borders, margins and edges, rather than at accepted centres, of the social body” (20).

The American carnival tradition echoes Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque, but only approximately. Disconnected from the religious underpinnings of its medieval predecessor, the commercialized American carnival, as Rachel Adams notes, was born of “a conjunction between scientific investigation and mass entertainment” (27). Ensnared within a cultural system founded in part by Calvinism’s religious precedents—vastly different from centuries of compulsive Catholicism of its European ancestors—the US carnival preserves unexplained elements that produce stories of nostalgic wonder tales just as often as they produce horror stories. Just as “carnival” communicates a larger concept embedded in the figurative language of literature, as situated cultural expressions, Dark Carnival stories make manifest a wide range of ideas about “American” identity. Many of these texts reinforce colonial and imperialist narratives through pastoral ideals of self-reliant exceptionalism as well as portraying exploitative carnival practices that position women, disabled, and non-white people as exotified Others.

Several works under examination depict figures described as “disabled,” “freaks,” “grotesque,” and “monstrous”; a clarification of terms foregrounds their exploration in later chapters. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes the social construction of disability as “the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of *bodies* as a product of cultural rules about what bodies *should be or do*” (6, emphasis mine). For example, if a girl without legs is born to a family who shares her

features, and they live in a community of other legless people, that girl is unlikely to self-identify as “disabled” because her culture’s accepted “norm” for embodiment does not include legs. Thomson describes this concept as “our accepted hierarchies of embodiment” (7). Within that hypothetical culture, all people born without legs would be described as “normates,” and those with legs would have “deviant” bodies. Adams points out the mutable, relative nature of freakishness, as “the spectacle of the extraordinary body swathed in theatrical props, promoted by advertising and performative fanfare . . . they required narratives about exotic places, miraculous events, or horrifying accidents that might give coherence to bodies that otherwise suggested an intolerable fragmentation and dissolution of meaning” (5). Understanding socio-historical contexts for terms such as “freaks” and “disabled” opens up possibilities for interpreting social commentaries in works by Tom Reamy, Katherine Dunn, Genevieve Valentine, and Joe Hill, among others.

Beyond physical difference, the word “freak” has been freighted with gender nonconformity and sexual deviance since at least the 1920s. As Adams notes, “freak” implies a “specific context in which the boundaries of racial and sexual normalcy were policed with particular rigidity. The tensions between the deviant body and the imperative conformity of the dominant culture are granted visibility at the freak show” (90). The element of spectacle is particularly significant, because it links the disabled, inferior “other” to the carnivalesque milieu of the freak show, a familiar feature in many selected texts. As Guy Debord formulates it, “the spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than ‘that which appears is good, that which is good appears.’ The attitude which it demands in principle

is passive acceptance” (12). A variation of the freak show spectacle appears in some texts as a menagerie of fantastic beings.

Adams specifies the differences between disabled figures and “freaks,” emphasizing how a specific combination of stylized performance, staging, and costume constructs the freak. She suggests that “to characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow, who participate, albeit not always voluntarily, in a dramatic fantasy that the division between freak and normal is obvious, visible, and quantifiable” (6). This highlights the performance of a stylized identity as “freak,” instead of hiding a visible deviation from the “norm.” Adams qualifies the emphasis on performance, noting “some bodies are so visibly different from the norm that their deviance cannot be concealed or ignored. Freaks are creatures that lurk in the unsteady seams where corporeal matter meets with fantasy, drama, and promotional hype” (6). Such “unsteady seams” in Dark Carnival stories serve to destabilize the narrative and open up sites for the reader to encounter impossible creatures, eldritch forces, and magic users instead of dominant religious discourses.

The practice of commodifying radically “Other” bodies has a lengthy history, even appearing in Shakespeare’s final play, *The Tempest*, when Trinculo plots to kidnap Caliban, and make money by exhibiting him as a freakish “painted fish” (Act II, Sc. 2). A popular European trend, the *Wunderkammer*, or “Wonder Cabinet,” acted as a precursor to the museum exhibits of later years. Caroline Bynum explains the implications of this specific artifact:

the early modern European impulse to collect and explore—displayed in such phenomena as the origins of the museum in the *Wunderkammer* . . .

has stressed the enthusiasm for wonders as expropriate and appropriative. The collections of narwhal horns and jewels, deformed fetuses and human captives, made by rulers, missionaries and naturalists have been understood as an early modern Orientalism—a projection of self or construction of “other” as self. (40)

Adams explains how “freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme forms of Otherness they could imagine” (2). In texts that depict such performances, like *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, sometimes the cultural work offers readers a way to recognize their own reflections rather than mastering another’s.

Insight into the cultural work performed by these selected texts depends on the narrative tools available in each portmotif; therefore this study must take individual works into account, but also seeks larger patterns among Dark Carnival stories with shared family resemblances. This accounts for a variety of story interpretations within the same radial structure of the Dark Carnival category. Some prototypical texts, like *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, portray a carnival setting as a transgressive site that functions as a pressure valve, thereby reinforcing social norms that are first disrupted, then restored at the tale’s conclusion.

In texts like Bradbury’s, portrayals of physical carnival settings serve as combined expressions of time and space, or *chronotopes*. Another Bakhtinian concept, he defines this linguistic structure in *The Dialogic Imagination* as follows: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically

visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history ” (84). In prototypical Dark Carnival texts, authors portray the same unity of time and place, often leveraging a nostalgic tone that hearkens back to days when traveling carnivals enjoyed the height of popularity, roughly between 1920 and 1950, often sustaining a sense of time out of place.

Central texts follow Bradbury’s prototypical trajectory: a physical carnival appears as an invasive supernatural force, but young/adolescent characters defeat the predatory carnival, defy Faustian temptation, and restore normalcy to rural, small-town USA. In addition to Bradbury, examples of this Dark Carnival chronotope include Charles G. Finney’s *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (1935), Peter S. Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn* (1962), Tom Reamy’s *Blind Voices* (1978), and Joanna Parypinski’s *Dark Carnival* (2019). In some cases, the Dark Carnival appears when people forget to balance the hyper-productivity of a Puritan work ethic with the joy of simple freedoms. However, as Allan Lloyd-Smith notes, even though the Puritan consciousness itself had waned by the seventeenth century, it “established a profoundly Gothic imagination of good and evil” that still resonates in contemporary stories of the Dark Carnival (110). Instead of seeking reassurance in such emphatic religious terms, some modern-day viewers look for more moderate levels of validation by contrasting their own life choices against reality shows like *Botched*, or *Hoarders*, as examples of modern-day “freak shows.” In similar fashion, central Dark Carnival texts focus on stylized performances and artificially illuminated carnival acts to delineate the boundaries of “normal” for readers.

Some selected texts recount oppressive historical practices common in the US amusement industry; such regular exhibits featured the surveillance and exploitation of

women, disabled, and non-white characters as Others. Disability studies and cultural critics often view American carnivals as degrading performances that trade on a voyeuristic economy of pity; however, some fantasy authors depict narratives told from the performers' perspectives as a way to reclaim power. Thomson underlines American culture's moral imperative of work, and points out how "American individualism is most clearly manifest in the conviction that economic autonomy results from hard work and virtue, while poverty stems from indolence and moral inferiority" (47). This Puritan work ethic, which still survives today, ignores the implications for bodies that are not suited to the same kinds of work environments that affect social class or status.

Fantasy literature's inherent impossibility allows authors to create sites of resistance and revolution in Dark Carnival stories, particularly in narratives contrast the central prototype. In these contrasting cases, the carnival serves as a site of sanctuary, or home (place-attachment), instead of the prototypical carnival as Invasive Other. Contrasting examples include Dunn's *Geek Love* (1983), Genevieve Valentine's *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* (2011), and Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* (2012). Telling stories that contrast the Dark Carnival prototype flips the script, opening up opportunities for interpretation beyond a Faustian plot thwarted by restoring social norms. While such broad implications may be useful for the broadest categories of prototype and contrast, additional extensions from the prototype cannot be predicted. In keeping with Lakoff's principles of natural categories structured like languages, each case must be evaluated individually to determine how an extensions of the prototype is motivated, as well as to interpret a text's cultural work.

Locating the Dark Carnival's specific affect of wonder and fear leads to a text's portmoteif of recurring narrative elements, but cultural work must be evaluated on an individual basis. A broad overview of selected texts helps identify connections between Dark Carnival stories and social upheaval, likely revealing larger cultural patterns across genres and modes. While central Dark Carnival stories resist traditional symbols of technology in favor of supernatural magic, some contrasting cases, like *Mechanique*, embrace technology and frame its skillful use as a form of art. In other examples, horror stories like *Dark Carnival* feature elements of body horror as a central affective device; such narratives often resist epistemologies that abstract the human body, but lean into psychological elements to amplify the affect of horror.

Contemporary Dark Carnival Regenerations

More current texts may feature increasingly hybridized or multi-modal works in new carnival configurations. Contemporary Dark Carnival stories may narrate the modern media circus's latest train wreck, recount the antics of a King Clown, or cast Insane Clown Posse's Faygo-fueled fandom in whiteface as unlikely revolutionaries against fascism. Though not identical to Bakhtin's carnival, as it works to distort more than invert, the Dark Carnival does bear some resemblances to its medieval ancestors. Carnival rituals preserve a spirit of resistance and revolution in the face of oppressive autocratic hierarchy to this day: most importantly, they preserve some forms of laughter, even if only briefly.

In most cases, elaborate, unfulfilled promises drive the category of Dark Carnival stories; texts often depict a world turned upside-down that may never regain its former equilibrium. In addition, the work of interpreting the narrative signals for "normal" may

prove an increasingly difficult task during our current era, as news outlets and social media spew forth information like a fire hydrant and update the “new normal” with alarming frequency. The time of this writing coincides with my state-mandated isolation on the edge of quarantine for a global pandemic, compounded by heretofore-unprecedented economic and environmental upheavals. “With more cases than any other American conurbation, this city [New York] is once again Ground Zero, a term no New Yorker ever wanted applied here again. With manic suddenness, our world has been turned upside down, just as it was on September 11th” (Bryant, BBC). The current Keystone Kops of Officialdom foster no confidence for me in national leadership, nor any reassurance of survival; wealthy politicians in gilded facilities maintain disdain for the unwashed by hiding in their rococo halls and stuffing their ears with pork and gold to mute the cries of the poor and dying. The world is truly upside-down. Thankfully, the ancient carnival laughter still rings through streaming services to distract quarantined mass audiences from impending doom and convey the Dark Carnival’s poisoned promises—unless the laughter prompts a coughing fit, which then offers camouflage for the inevitable screaming.

Various pop cultural media and modes continue to propagate the Dark Carnival in images and affects, evidenced by a steady production of recent texts. Leaving aside an entire film genre of clown horror, such Dark Carnival reimaginings include movies like *Birds of Prey (And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020), *Spiderman: Far From Home* (2019), *Shazam!* (2019), *The Purge* films (2013, 2014, 2016, 2018), *The Greatest Showman* (2017), *Suicide Squad* (2016), Stephen King’s *It* (2017 and 2019), *Doctor Sleep* (2019), *Us* (2019), *Dumbo* (2019), and the Oscar-winning *Joker*

(October 2019). Televised and streaming series include *Carnivàle* (HBO 2003-2005), *American Horror Story* (2012-2017), *Stranger Things* (Netflix 2013-2019), *Z-Nation* (2014-2018), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix 2018-2020) and *Carnival Row* (Amazon 2019). Variations abound in graphic novels like Batman's *White Knight* series (2017), collections centering the Joker or Harley Quinn, and Bradbury adaptations by Zenescope and Neil Gaiman. Even Marvel comics pays homage to Dr. Lao in *Shang-Chi: Master of Kung Fu*. Insane Clown Posse offers the most popular (though not the only) musical example as their body of work features an extended Dark Carnival mythology from which they have consistently drawn since 1987.

While not all exhibit the same prototypical elements as Bradbury's central text, many of these stories exhibit family resemblances through extensions related by contrast, metaphor, and metonymy. The tradition of Dark Carnival stories also portrays a spectrum of liminality in character types, physical spaces, stages of adolescence, and dimensions between worlds. As a category, central texts represent carnival as a physical analog, while extended versions employ carnival in decreasing degrees of physicality, including its use as a metaphor for social upheaval. As stories become increasingly individualized, a simple dichotomy between mimesis and metaphor offers an inadequate categorization for newer, more complex combinations of the affective indices of the Dark Carnival.

Using the same radial structure that centralizes *Something Wicked* as a prototype to map related ideas in critical theory would position Bakhtin as the central text, surrounded by related extensions of Peter Stallybrass, Allon White, Rachel Adams, and Rosemarie Thomson. Their work on transgressive texts extends to critics of Gothic and horror literature, bell hooks' pedagogical theory, and Jodie Nicotra's concept of

“folksonomy” in writing classrooms. The following chapters explore Dark Carnival stories grouped by extension from the central prototype. Chapter Two examines central texts with physical carnival settings (chronotopes). Within the prototype, depictions of carnival serve as a basic-level distinction: those featuring carnival as invading Other align with the central prototype. Texts that portray carnival as Home make up a contrasting category, as explored in Chapter Three. Chapter Four examines metaphoric extensions of the prototype, and Chapter Five explores metonymic extensions, as well as combinations of physical and metaphorical carnivals in new iterations. Chapter Six addresses the idea of reframing how instructors define “writing” in the college classroom to expand the category beyond narratively defined genres in favor of the nonlinear ways our students and we write on a daily basis.

Chapter Two: Chronotopes

Chronotopes as Prototype Patterns

In texts that depict physical carnivals, the setting often plays an integral part in the overall plot. Such textual integrations of time and place reflect Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, as in the prototypical Dark Carnival of Ray Bradbury's 1962 novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. As Bradbury's personal correspondence with Stephen King describes, the Dark Carnival prototype "began as a short story in *Weird Tales* called "Black Ferris" in May, 1948, and just *grew*, like Topsy" (qtd. in King 347, emphasis in original). Perhaps Bradbury's clearest example of the carnival chronotope, the novel focuses on the ensuing conflict after a secretive carnival troupe invades an idyllic Midwestern town. The focal characters' strong emotional attachments to "home" highlight the invasive carnival's Otherness; later texts adopt a similar pattern of outside infectious agents during a nostalgic timeframe, reinforcing the chronotope's intertwined temporal and spatial elements.

Nancy Easterlin describes the importance of "home," as a concept, as it is "associated with identity, order, rootedness, attachment, privacy, and security: home is both an anchor and an evolving site in the process of self-definition" (832). Similar to representations of the carnival, textual portrayals of home communicate a specific set of values through metonymy. This practice reflects a common function of the English language, as Lakoff notes, "English has a general principle by which a place may stand for an institution located at that place" (77). While "home" and "carnival" may not necessarily represent formal institutions, they do signal different sets of values or

ideologies as portrayed in selected works. Barillas notes the values associated with small Midwestern towns that serve as “home” in prototypical texts when he describes the region’s defining ideology as “the pastoral vision of a peaceful agrarian kingdom between (and away from) the extremes of urban sophistication and the moral license of unsettled western frontiers” (24, parentheses in original). Within the central texts, the concept of home provides a basis-level distinction between prototypical Dark Carnival stories and contrasting examples; the prototype depicts the carnival as an invasive Other, while the contrast portrays the carnival as a “home” or some kind of sanctuary.

Critical Conversations

In a 2001 collection of critical essays on Bradbury, editor Harold Bloom notes as he “tries to evaluate [his] literary achievement,” that “Bradbury himself sees science fiction as imagination returning to literature, a contention persuasive to those already persuaded” (vii). Bloom’s editorial notes and his introduction sustain a tone of open disdain for both Bradbury and genre fiction, asserting that “Science fiction, despite its vast, worldwide audience still exists on the borderlands of imaginative literature. I am being sadly accurate, and hardly haughty” (1). Such comments situate Bloom as stuck in what David Seed describes as “the genre ghetto of the 1940s” (2). While genre scholars would argue that Bradbury writes fantasy, not science fiction, the battle over genre boundaries represents the literary hill upon which Bloom makes his stand. He couches his defensive rhetoric within “a time when all literary and aesthetic standards are collapsing,” and blames uneducated readers for Bradbury’s popularity before conceding “eminent critic Geoffrey H. Hartman [shares] in the French appreciation for Bradbury’s achievement,” although he credits the French language for Hartman’s endorsement,

“since Bradbury, like Poe, improves in translation” (1). Despite an underwhelming introduction, most of the contributing authors offer more critical enthusiasm for the author and his cultural influence.

Among them, fellow author, Damon Knight explains how “Bradbury began writing professionally at the floodtide of the cerebral story in science fiction—in 1940, when John Campbell was revolutionizing the field with a new respect for facts, and a wholly justified contempt for the overblown emotional values of the thirties,” yet Bradbury “had nothing but emotion to offer” (3). He continued in his own style, submitting a story per week to publications like *Weird Tales* and *Planet Stories* until his persistence paid off. As Knight recalls, “One day we awoke to discover that he had leapfrogged over John Campbell’s head . . . his work was beginning to appear in *Harper’s*; in *Mademoiselle*; in the *O. Henry Prize Stories*; on the radio; in *Esquire*, *Collier’s*, *The Saturday Evening Post*” (3-4). Though Knight praises Bradbury’s craftsmanship and describes his lavish trademark imagery as “luminous and penetrating, continually lighting up familiar corners with unexpected words” (6), he offers ample criticism for the author’s later decline into “syrupy” sentimentalism (8).

Knight’s embrace of genre fiction creates more credibility around SF after Bloom’s dismissal of the literary borderlands. Essays by Wayne L. Johnson and William F. Touponce recuperate Bloom’s sneers with thoughtful—often poetic—insight into Bradbury’s work. Johnson suggests that “*Something Wicked This Way Comes* is in many ways a novel about invasion . . . not about an attack by extraterrestrial aliens, but about the invasion of a small American town by the forces of darkness” (14). He highlights the importance of children to invasion tales, as they occupy the same space as adults, yet

“their perception of it is, in many ways, radically different” (15). Additional themes include metamorphosis, as well as the “ambiguity of the relationship between the invader and the invaded” (15), the mode of travel, and the process of assimilation after the invasion. As Johnson notes, “Invasion is not merely an intrusion, unless primarily a military operation. When one culture moves in on another, some sort of mixture will probably occur” (21).

Touponce follows Johnson’s analysis with two essays rebutting Bloom’s objections to Bradbury and science fiction in conscientious arguments that echo carnivalesque values. In “Dusk in the Robot Museums: The Rebirth of Imagination,” Touponce makes a creative refutation of all hidebound academic practices of policing the Ivory Tower and its canon. Ensnared within a hypothetical narrative poem, he envisions an interactive museum with animatronic historical figures to answer children’s questions; in his scenario, a young visitor asks “How come the United States, the country of Ideas on the March, for so long neglected fantasy and science fiction?” (23). Touponce extemporizes a reply as an argument for genre fiction as a reimagining of the History of Ideas (25). “The children guessed, if they did not whisper it, that all science fiction is an attempt to solve problems by pretending to look the other way . . . Indirection is everything. Metaphor is the medicine” (26). He concludes with echoes of Bakhtinian warnings against serious-minded “agelasts,” noting, “seriousness is the Red Death if we let it move too freely amongst us. Its freedom is our prison and our defeat and death. A good idea should worry us like a dog. We should not . . . smother it with intellect, pontificate it into snoozing, kill it with the death of a thousand analytical slices” (28). His analysis of “The Golden Apples of the Sun” demonstrates this kind of surgical precision,

pairing critical theory with speculative literature to generate interpretive possibilities. In impenetrable academic prose that borders on parody, Touponce argues Bradbury's strategy is to "transform then-popular notions of existentialism and Freudian psychology by having the reader explore a certain phenomenological structure of imaginative consciousness" (41).

The collection also includes essays analyzing Bradbury's perspective on invention and borrowing, as Hazel Pierce writes, "For him, the author's purpose is to find fresh ways of presenting basic truths" (56). Additional contributions include Gary K. Wolfe's exploration of the romantic wilderness as recurring imagery of the frontier myth, as well as an exposition on Bradbury's portrayal of children, and an analysis of *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451* as products of the Cold War. Though printed in 2001, Bloom's collection gathers criticism reprinted from publications as early as 1956. As a literary critic, Bloom looms large, and reappears in critical conversations about primary authors in later chapters.

In addition to serving as Director for the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies at Indiana University, Jonathan Eller remains the authoritative source on all things Bradbury, as author of two biographical texts and co-author (with Touponce) of a third. In *Becoming Ray Bradbury* (2011), Eller recounts Bradbury's early personal history, intertwined with a painstakingly detailed bibliography through 1950; Eller intersperses nuggets of critical insight and historical influence among the details. In *Bradbury Unbound* (2014), Eller continues to trace Bradbury's cultural influence after the success of *Fahrenheit 451*, adding a wide range of activities, including film production, screen adaptations, public advocacy for NASA's space program, and consulting for Disney's

centerpiece at Epcot. Eller describes Bradbury's editorial role in producing *The Circus of Dr. Lao and Other Improbable Stories* for Bantam in 1956 as his "final significant work as an anthologist of fantasy" (74). Persuaded to read Finney's text by his friend Robert Bloch, Bradbury found it "'spare, only fitfully imaginative, somewhat vulgar, and not at all the set of fireworks my friends had led me to expect'" (Eller 74). His unease with Dr. Lao contributed to multiple "private tensions behind the making of this anthology" (79).

Bradbury's production of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* as a novel and a screenplay also intersects with the film adaptation of *The Circus Dr. Lao*, for which his friend Charles Beaumont wrote the screenplay. Beaumont expressed concerns about two scripts about a carnival circulating simultaneously in Hollywood circles, but his fears proved unnecessary. As Eller describes, "*The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao* premiered in 1964; over time, however, Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* would have far greater long-term prominence as a novel" (165). *The New York Herald Tribune* carried Anthony Boucher's review of *Something Wicked* in 1962. In it he balances, as Eller notes,

praise for the power of the narrative fantasy with a concise statement of its limitations as allegory: 'Bradbury's good and evil are simply and unsubtly conceived, as is the final defeat of Darkness by Love and Laughter. The novel lacks distinction as an allegory; and its beings both human and supernatural, lack the complexity that could bring them fully alive.' But the true triumph of this novel from an established storyteller was the sustained combination of suspense, invention, and what Boucher called

‘the small horrors of magic’ that Bradbury was finally able to extend into long fiction (193).

Though *Something Wicked* cost Bradbury some support from the SF community, Eller points out how the novel exhibited his “mastery of a most chilling form of terror” (193).

David Seed’s *Ray Bradbury* (2015) references Eller’s co-authored text with Touponce, *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction* (2004), to condense personal details and produce a thematically organized critical text. All critics recognize film as an important influence on Bradbury’s writing, and see its inevitable pull in collaborations with figures such as Arthur C. Clarke, Alfred Hitchcock, and Rod Serling. Adding to Knight’s criticism (in Bloom), fellow author Isaac Asimov bristled at Bradbury’s scientific inconsistencies but acknowledged that “‘among the general population, he is by far the most popular Science Fiction writer’” (Seed 39). As a counterpoint to this criticism, Seed points out that “political theorist Russell Kirk saw Bradbury as a creator of moral fables, constantly questioning materialism and technology. In that sense he shouldn’t be thought of as a futurist so much as a critic of contemporary society” (39). Despite Bradbury’s own nonconformist spirit, even to scientific laws invoked by science fiction, Seed emphasizes his “formative influence on a generation of SF writers, who continue to produce volumes of tribute stories, and his works are at last gaining recognition for their narration of speculative themes through sophisticated scenic methods” (157). Overall, Bradbury’s work may be considered more fantasy than SF, as he focuses on human reactions and emotions, regardless of where plot devices originate: Earth, Mars, or another unspoken realm.

Dark Carnival as Fantasy

Bradbury's folkloric approach to characters and ritual events in *Something Wicked* aligns a Midwestern mythology with the folk rituals of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. As Bakhtin specifies, "Literature that was influenced . . . by one or another variant of carnivalistic folklore (ancient or medieval) we shall call *carnivalized literature*" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 107, emphasis in original). Principals of Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show recall ancient carnival archetypes, but the American adaptation of medieval rituals distorts archaic characters to fit a contemporary capitalist setting. Mr. Dark represents the Judeo-Christian devil, but his act as The Illustrated Man situates him as a more contemporary character. As Lloyd-Smith notes, the Puritan mindset had a "tendency to think of sin and virtue in terms of black and white, or the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness" (110). While King acknowledges the novel has no claim as Bradbury's best-known or most successful book, he argues it represents the author's best work, "a darkly poetic tall tale . . . a shadowy descendant from that tradition that has brought us stories about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett" (344). Technological and commercial marvels—now the domain of corporations—have usurped ancient values once defined by the hero's feats of strength.

Mirroring the instability of meaning in a term such as "hero," the definition of "culture" in the U.S. also defies singular description. While higher education valued a canon of classical Greek and Roman mythology, fields like folklore and ethnography lacked credibility until the turn of the (nineteenth) century when institutions increased professionalization for social sciences like sociology and anthropology. Social scientists

mined individual and family histories to fabricate a national “American” identity built on the borrowed bones of forgotten mythologies.

By the time Bradbury started publishing short stories (1940s), the US had worked for over a century to engineer a national identity through invented, stolen, or repurposed folk heroes hired for roles supporting American exceptionalism in pursuit of Manifest Destiny. Traveling carnivals, in comparison, had changed little, and reached peak popularity by the 1940s. With few exceptions, most carnival figures appear in costumes or masks that help define their roles, indicating the importance of the role itself more so than any individual performer. In addition to animal menageries and aerial performers, sideshows and freak shows carried on the practice of narrativizing and displaying Other cultures, rearranging acts as high, low, exotic, or primitive in comparison to dominant (Anglo) culture, while ignoring most existent Native traditions. As Bogdan notes, “in the exotic mode, showmen presented the exhibit so as to appeal to people’s interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic” (105). These familiar figures often take the place of legends for many authors.

Narratives with a physical carnival analog tell of a particular traveling show, either as an insider (performer) or an outsider (audience) set in a rural town somewhere in the idealized Midwest. Many of these works express nostalgia for “the good old days” in detailed descriptions of historical, physical settings and archaic or antique objects closely related to traveling carnivals. In many, the carnival arrives under cover of night to entertain crowds with unexplained feats of wonder; in others, the traveling show camouflages a sinister plan to harvest souls or recruit new members to join the carnival. All of them portray a show that promises wonder but delivers deceit in varying degrees of

carnage and personal cost. Texts following this pattern include Charles G. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (1935), Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1962), Tom Reamy's *Blind Voices* (1978), and Joanna Parypinski's *Dark Carnival* (2019). Parypinski follows the prototypical narrative pattern that portrays the carnival as invading force or contaminating Other, but amplifies the affect of horror.

Prototype: *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

Filled with contrasting imagery of dark and light, young and old, summer and autumn, Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) offers the prototype of a literary concept this dissertation project theorizes as the "Dark Carnival." Bradbury focalizes his story via two thirteen-year-old boys in Green Town, a fictional version of his hometown of Waukegan, Illinois, that recurs throughout his work. Born one minute before and after Halloween, best friends and next-door neighbors Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade (respectively) complement each other's opposing traits. Blond Will is a "summer peach," innocent and easily bruised, while dark-haired Jim is "marbled with dark" (39), suggesting a vulnerability to temptation. Amid the winds of an October storm, itinerant lightning-rod salesman Tom Fury prophesies that lightning will surely strike Jim's home that night. Lacking any adult customers, Fury gifts young Jim an exotic-looking device, exhorting, "Climb that roof, nail this rod high, ground it in the good earth before nightfall!" (9). The ominous weather foreshadows events to come and the predicted lightning signals the target and scale of the novel's central conflict. The storm symbolism appears in almost every text under examination in this study.

The boys select books for the weekend at the town library, where Will's father works as a janitor. While fathers in their fifties are not uncommon in contemporary

western society, Bradbury emphasizes Charles Halloway as older than most fathers at that time (between 1920 and 1940). The boys' youthful enthusiasm highlights Charles's despair at the dramatic age difference; Bradbury's descriptions impart a gothic sense of longing for a youth squandered by hesitation. To Will and Jim's chiaroscuro, Will and his father add a temporal dimension of contrast: "a boy with corn-colored hair and a man with moon-white hair, a boy with a summer-apple, a man with a winter-apple face" (15). The boys' thirst for wonder and adventure contrasts Charles's regrets in sharp relief and positions him as the story's unlikely hero. Though not a literal arsenal, the library serves as a nexus of vital historical, social, and mythological information, as well as a site for key confrontations.

Jim's physical description emphasizes how darkness has touched his life. In contrast to Will's light features, Jim has "eyes as dark as twilight, with shadows under the eyes from the time, his mother said, he had almost died when he was three" (39). As his single mother's only surviving child, Jim understands the flexibility in values like "right" and "wrong." He and his mother bear signs of hardship inscribed on their bodies and in their worldviews; this sense of perspective makes Jim more comfortable than Will with moral shades of gray.

Will's innocence balances what his father perceives as Jim's aptitude for mischief, evident in his casual internal observation, "They eat the dark, who only stand and breathe. That's Jim, all bramblehair and itchweed" (17). While the latter phrase positions Jim for alignment with the carnival, in the former, Bradbury re-works a final line from Milton's Sonnet 19: "They also serve who only stand and wait," ("When I consider how my light is spent"). Though critics debate whether the "light" in question refers to Milton's

eyesight, his creativity, or his life, the allusion here seems to gesture at Charles's increased focus on his own mortality while also commenting on the inherent dangers of apathy. More specifically, he wonders how idle people (Jim) may become increasingly susceptible to evil while waiting for something to happen. This internal monologue foreshadows his own role in the coming conflict as well as Jim's: though comfortable in the library's solitude, Charles must choose action over knowledge in response to supernatural threats. In keeping with the Miltonic allusion, applying Edenic apple imagery to Will and Charles (15) suggests all three characters will face some form of temptation.

Most small towns typically hold carnivals in summer, not the end of October. A conspicuous absence of pageantry only compounds the calendric irregularity. More than pageantry, this carnival lacks an advance man, or indeed, any human figures. A low-key whirlwind functions as unlikely automation for distributing carnival handbills; further advance notifications draw characters to Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show like a siren song played in multi-sensory translation. Alternate communication channels deliver invitations to the carnival through the scent of cotton candy or a half-heard calliope melody (22). Bradbury employs a variety of identifiable sensory descriptions, but also joins them in synesthetic hybrids that create unique combinations—or confusions—of sensory input, such as his description of the carousel animals, “asking mercy with their fright-colored eyes, seeking revenge with their panic-colored teeth” (72). Beyond hyperbolic or superlative descriptions, such unlikely word pairs help paint a picture of the unexplainable elements in fantasy narratives.

Jim and Will sneak out after hearing “the slow-following dragon-glide of a train. . .[and] a calliope . . . grieving to itself, a million miles away” (45). Together with an “undersea funeral bell” (49) and a shrieking whistle like “a billion people dead or dying,” the calliope crescendos in a sinister fanfare at the train’s midnight arrival (50). The cacophony ceases suddenly when the ringmaster emerges to assemble the carnival’s scaffolding in magical silence. The Dust Witch assists him from a hot-air balloon hovering over the meadow, “like a great fat spider, fiddling with the lines and poles, rearing a tapestry in the sky” (52). Bradbury’s account figures the carnival as a living entity, “waiting for its canvas skin” (52), and breathing, “The great tents filled like bellows. They softly issued forth exhalations of air that smelled like ancient yellow beasts” (54). It echoes the traits of nocturnal predators, crouching in silent anticipation like felines, birds, and spiders. Jim and Will witness the bizarre ritual in fascinated, mute horror until panic chases them home at three in the morning.

By daylight, the spectacle fades to mundane disappointment: “close-up, the carnival was mildewed rope, moth-eaten canvas, rain-worn, sun-bleached tinsel” (61). Other attendees like Miss Foley, however, welcome the diversion, as she searches for her nephew Robert. This encounter allows Jim and Will to rescue their teacher from the Mirror Maze, which Will immediately recognizes as dangerous: “He stared at fathoms of reflections. You could never strike bottom there. It was like winter standing tall, waiting to kill you with a glance” (62). Unbeknownst to Will, Jim yearns to be older after glimpsing his own reflection. Here, Bradbury amplifies the mirror’s reflective ability into a device capable of capturing moments of time, imagined or real. These suspended moments of possibility—projected in the carnival maze’s infinite angles—lure customers

inside to trap them with paralyzing fear. Rational daylight experience camouflages the uncanny events people often explain away, pleading confusion. Rather than attempt to explain how an infernal carnival plots to devour souls, simple self-doubt offers a more relatable excuse for eerie experiences.

While the Mirror Maze distorts and multiplies reflections of the physical appearance, the carousel transforms the body itself. Jim and Will sneak inside the shuttered ride, ostensibly closed for repair, but carnival owners Mr. Cooger and Mr. Dark apprehend and eject them. In this scene, physical descriptions signify Dark, The Illustrated Man, as the main antagonist; echoing Jim's earlier description, Dark's "itchweed suit" (73) complements the animal qualities of his serpentine tattoos and unnatural yellow eyes. Recognizing his quarry, he offers Jim a free ticket to return to the ride once repaired. The boys give false names but instead of heading home they hide in the trees outside the carnival. Overpowered by adolescent curiosity, they witness the carousel's occult power as Cooger grows younger by riding in reverse (79).

The boys follow the freshly adolescent boy to Miss Foley's house, where he masquerades as her nephew. Running away once more, "the nephew" tosses her jewelry at Jim and Will to implicate them as thieves. Though they give chase, Bradbury distinguishes between their motivations: while Will wants to stop the nephew, "there'd be no help from Jim. Jim wasn't running after nephews. He was running toward free rides" (100).

The pursuit leads back to the carnival, where Cooger leaps onto the forward-moving carousel. The boys wrestle over the control box: Will tries to keep Cooger from aging, so they can clear their names, but Jim wants his free ride. Blows from the fight

combine with lightning to overload the panel, spinning the ride out of control: “The carousel, like the earth spinning, whipped away air, sunlight, sense and sensibility, leaving only dark, cold, and age” (103). The boys summon help for the mummified body, and Jim’s panicked apologies figure the carnival itself as a collective living entity whose wrath he fears. Will’s thoughts, as free indirect discourse, echo his sentiments: “we thought it would all be simple. The old man, Mr. Cooger, dying, so we bring doctors to save him, so he forgives us, maybe, maybe the carnival doesn’t hurt us, lets us go” (111). Instead of a mummy on the merry-go-round, the police find the desiccated Mr. Electrico (formerly Cooger) in the Freak Tent, propped in the electric chair to rehearse the carnival’s newest act.

Just as Cooger frames the boys to discredit them as thieves, Dark frames Cooger’s carousel mishap as an elaborate sideshow performance to cast doubt on the police report. Dark deflects attention by interrupting police questions with his own: “Said? But what did he *see*? Boys always scare themselves at sideshows, eh? Run like rabbits when the freaks pop out” (110). Jim and Will find themselves the butt of a practical joke when the electric chair jolts enough life into Cooger for him to laugh at them. Instead of viewing the carnival folk as a serious threat, the police laugh at the boys along with them and chalk the night up to a false alarm. After collecting the boys at the station, Will’s father agrees to trust Will until the morning when he can tell him everything, but the carnival extends their separation.

By refusing to give their real names a second time, Jim and Will ensure Dark remains focused on them. Guarding their true names indicates their awareness of the power of names and naming in various historical, cultural, and mythological traditions.

The power to name implies the power to know a thing, according to garden mythology of Abrahamic religions. Without their true names, Dark lacks the power to know them or the ability to find them; thus, the elaborate parade that usually announces a carnival's arrival camouflages a search party. Here, Bradbury reinforces Dark's unholy motives, describing "the thumping pagan heart of the carnival band" that lures people directly out of Sunday morning services so that "pew-stiffened crowds became relaxed parade crowds" (165). Not recognizable as simply "good" or "bad," descriptions of the carnival's Lovecraftian qualities reinforce its unnatural, collective nature: "A multitude of hot and incredibly bright fierce eyes, the parade moved, desiring, but not quenching its desire" (166). Though many participants make up the parade, the singular possessive pronoun marks it as a single entity.

Surprised to spy Jim and Will hiding below the sidewalk grille, Will's father keeps their location secret; Dark questions him directly, flashing the boys' images inked on his palms, but Charles replies with false names. The boys wince in pain as Dark clenches his fists in frustration, implying he wields physical power over his Illustrations (175). Just as the Mirror Maze and the carousel trap and transform people, Dark's Illustrations also imprison them, body and soul. The images squirm with anticipation and spring to life from his skin: the contracts of souls bound to him—and to the carnival are inscribed on his skin. The Illustrated Man *is* the carnival, and wears its roster as an outward sign of their collective identity.

His disturbing trait of multiplicity recalls New Testament accounts of a man possessed by demons, who, when asked his name replies, "Legion, for we are many" (Mark 5:9). Despite these infernal implications, Dark laughs at the Bible Charles holds in

the library, and blows smoke across its pages before dumping it in a trash bin: “Do you expect me to fall away into so many Dead Sea Scrolls of flesh before you? Myths, unfortunately, are just that. Life, and by life I could mean so many fascinating things, goes on, makes shift for itself, survives wildly, and I not the least wild among many” (212). The confrontation resists Judeo-Christian narratives of good vs. evil, but confirms what biographer Jonathan Eller describes as the author’s “falling away from the Baptist heritage of the Bradbury family” (24). Dark’s “wild survival” implies vast worlds of creatures unknown and untouched by Midwestern Manichean notions of morality.

Though Jim and Will focalize much of the story’s action, Will’s father conquers his fear of failure and emerges as the hero by taking decisive action. After he unearths evidence the carnival has preyed on Green Town over an unnaturally long history, Charles deduces Dark’s plot to gorge on the town’s deepest fears. He remarks on their predatory practices,

the carnival wisely knows we’re more afraid of Nothing than we are of
Something... That flourish of mirrors out there in the meadow, that’s a raw
Something, for sure. Enough to knock your soul sideways in the saddle.
It’s a hit below the belt to see yourself ninety years gone... Lord, I do
admire their direct approach. Hit an old man with mirrors, watch his
pieces fall in jigsaws of ice only the carnival can put together again (205).

While the boys hide in the library, he explains his theory: as people grow into responsible adults, they become preoccupied with achieving success. Society advises us to take actions that ensure the physical and financial safety of ourselves and our families, usually by working hard, saving money, spending wisely—all measures of delayed gratification.

While such planning is certainly not “bad” in and of itself, privileging safety to the exclusion of joy (“mindfulness”) can impoverish our life experiences when overthinking eclipses action. If simple planning grows into distorted forms of paranoia or isolation, we deprive ourselves of social and communal benefits because “fun” becomes a luxury subordinated to what is deemed necessary. Such self-deprivations act like grains of sand that irritate the clam’s lining; the moments of yearning for lost time build up like nacreous layers in a pearl. And Dark’s carnival collects pearls.

Jim and Will’s abduction truncates their plan, but Charles drives off the Dust Witch with uncontrolled giggling and arrives at the carnival to rescue them after recognizing his epiphany: fear gives away our power, but laughter reclaims our power by questioning and ridiculing it. Charles trusts his gut, endorsing the importance of embodied knowledge. Despite an injury, he volunteers for Dark’s Magic Bullet Act, and the smile he carves into the wax bullet—symbolic of his laughter—kills the witch. Redemptive laughter saves them all, including the freaks imprisoned in Dark’s skin, and the crowd flees. When a small boy asks his help in the confusion, Charles recognizes Dark’s disguise and embraces him despite his violent protests. In this scene, Bradbury literalizes the metaphor: Charles kills Mr. Dark with kindness, proclaiming, “Evil has only the power that we give it. I give you nothing. I take back. Starve. Starve. Starve” (275). His inverted sermon drives out shadows of subcutaneous inmates that slink away in ripples from the nine-year-old body of the former Mr. Dark.

As an inversion of the carnival’s arrival scene, Bradbury figures the implosion of tents and makeshift structures as serpents in retreat, “With hiss of viper, swirl of cobra, the ropes insanely raveled, slithered, snapped, cut grass with frictioned whips” (278).

This transfiguration compares the carnival to poisonous snakes, further aligning its features and characters with Edenic garden imagery of the Fall and with the tools of Christ's whipping before his crucifixion. The scene also signals the human trio's triumph over evil, driving it from their home.

Bradbury emphasizes the calliope's unearthly sounds, and compares them to a woman singing; these descriptions highlight the connection between music and magic, paralleling the strong theme of temptation in antecedents like Homer's *Odyssey*, or *the Pied Piper of Hamelin*. Children focalize story events because they are most likely to believe in unexplained events or characters otherwise described as magic or supernatural. In addition, their inexperience with worldly events and situations facilitates exposition for the reader by posing questions rooted in genuine curiosity. Mothers appear in the novel, but function more as set pieces than as fully developed characters. Boys invoke their names when sealing a promise, giving mother figures an air of the sacred in keeping with the "the angel in the house" trope, from the cult of True Womanhood. Distant and sacred, their passive, invisible feminine presence reinforces the signs of traditional (hetero) masculinity when male characters take decisive action in the public sphere to protect their homes from exotic, invasive magic.

Though Bradbury leverages wordplay with a carnival owned by a proprietor named Dark, Charles's research leads him to more abstract insight. When Jim and Will ask if the carnival is death, he replies

No. But I think it uses Death as a threat. Death doesn't exist. It never did, it never will. But we've drawn so many pictures of it, so many years, trying to pin it down, comprehend it, we've got to thinking of it as an

entity, strangely alive and greedy. All it is, however, is a stopped watch, an end, a darkness (205).

The prototypical Dark Carnival of Bradbury's novel appears to be made up of humans, but that appearance disguises a supernatural evil that lures people with promises of fun and wonder that turn out to be death and isolation. The carnival represents the Other as exotic, disabled, non-white, or otherwise; their invasive magic threatens the small-town setting of "home" with a battle royale between Good and Evil. In this text, the setting and timeframe seem fused together; time in the novel exists in the same timeless category as "once upon a time."

The Dark Carnival contains elements of the unknown, often as forbidden or esoteric knowledge (magic), but they do not define it. Unlike European carnival festivals that echoed ancestral medieval traditions of inversion, the Dark Carnival in American narrative uses the power of story to *pervert* social norms. An inverted object is turned upside-down or moved into an opposing position, like the carousel in *Something Wicked*: it moves forward in the daytime, yet backwards at night, providing what Eller describes as "the central metaphor for the dark powers of evil" (193). The axis remains in place but the movement is reversed. Different authors alter the rules for their own Dark Carnival stories, and this study describes such patterns of change.

Not merely turned backwards, a perverted object is turned away, diverted from its "true" path. A person or object thwarted by perversion may be incapable of simply reversing direction to continue their original path. If inversion is comparable to shifting a car into reverse, perversion is more like a broken axle; shifting gears will not correct the axle, and may cause further damage. Though the carousel here undergoes miraculous

repairs, it still derails the lives of several townsfolk by perverting the laws of time. Charles defeats Mr. Dark and drives the carnival away from Green Town, so one might read this as a return to the social norms that the carnival's arrival inverted. He also interrupts its cyclical return, however, so by destroying Dark he also eliminates the possibility that those lost to the carnival might still be recovered. Newly aware that survivors even "wilder" than Dark may still exist, Charles warns Jim and Will that they must always alert to the presence of others like the people from the carnival. While not a direct reversion of norms, Bradbury's ideas expand the reader's ideas of good and evil beyond the simple divisions of binary dualism.

Bradbury's Background: Browning's Films

Though often recognized as a science fiction writer, many of Bradbury's works can be categorized as horror, evidenced by his role in crystallizing and circulating the Dark Carnival mythology in the American imagination. First printed in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, his early work bears a stronger resemblance to horror fiction than the fanciful speculation of later works like *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) or *Dandelion Wine* (1950). As Darrell Schweitzer notes, the pulps offer "a direct line of development from early Bradbury stories to Stephen King, Peter Straub, and the rest of the contemporary horror pantheon" (18). The tendency of horror narrative to express cultural anxieties makes it well suited to convey tales of social upheaval.

After a young Bradbury moved to Los Angeles from Waukegan, Illinois, movies and monsters became a key ingredient in the cultural energies that circulated during his developmental years. His correspondence describes to King how classic Hollywood monster movies of the twenties and thirties influenced his childhood imagination, as an

“entire life of loving Lon Chaney and the magicians and grotesques he played ... Chaney took over my life. I was a raving film maniac long before I hit my eighth year” (*Danse* 347). A childhood obsession with cinematic monsters predisposes his tendency to write about spectacular events and characters—or, more specifically, about the specularity of characters who look different—but his tales also align differences with an acute sense of childhood alienation that often carries over into adulthood. Many of Bradbury’s tales also depict how collaboration—as exemplified by “the Losers” in King’s *It* (1986)—can transform feelings of weakness into a source of strength.

The cinema absorbed ambient images of the Dark Carnival’s mythology, crystallized the concepts, and redistributed them in films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1921), *The Unholy Three* (1925), and *The Unknown* (1927). Many works directed by Tod Browning reflect a larger cultural shift in popular entertainment, from large-scale circuses to smaller carnivals, and finally to cinema. As film historian David Skal notes, the somnambulism popular in thirties horror films, “once a German metaphor for involuntary military conscription in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* now reflected a more diffuse anxiety in America,” (168). Some scholars hail *Caligari* as initiating the cinematic horror genre; released after WWI, it reflects the madness of a society conditioned not to rebel against a deranged tyrannical authority. Therefore, despite performing at a carnival, where the social norms are inverted, an insane hypnotist who acknowledges no other authority controls the sleepwalker. The film questions the boundaries of madness and sanity, as well as the separation of carnival space from “normal” society. A twist ending implies the difference is only a matter of perspective,

but this carnival provides camouflage for insane hypnotists and sleepwalking murderers, thereby aligning darkness with evil.

Though *Caligari* uses a carnival setting, it is tangential to the central murder mystery; this positioning illustrates Stallybrass and White's finding, that the *socially peripheral* is *symbolically central* (20). While zombies embodied a nightmare vision of Depression-era breadlines, many performers in Tod Browning's *Freaks* confronted post-war audiences with less subtle displays of cultural anxiety. Browning hired real humans grappling with physical disabilities to enact spectacles of hardship, instead of just performers made up to appear disabled. Skal points out how "Millions already knew that they were no longer in control of their lives; the economic strings were being pulled by faceless, frightening forces" (*Monster* 169). The films portray carnivals as ethically questionable, yet audiences grew to expect flexible morality as part of a carnival's entertainment value; half the fun was in pointing out the papier-mâché "gaffs" designed to fool audiences, who placed greater value on showmanship than on the authenticity of freak show performers. "The American nightmare, as refracted in film and fiction, is about disenfranchisement, exclusion, downward mobility, a struggle-to-the-death world of winners and losers. Familiar, civic-minded signposts are all reversed: the family is a sick joke, its house more likely to offer siege instead of shelter" (*Monster* 354). Skal underscores the carnivalesque atmosphere prevalent among US audiences during aftershocks of cultural upheavals such as the stock market crash and World War I. In similar fashion, authors draw from their own lived experiences, or "social energies," to construct the fictional worlds of literary and pop cultural texts; given the cultural milieu,

there's little wonder the Dark Carnival emerged from a collective imagination attempting to rationalize the impossible as absurd.

All texts under examination contain elements of the fantastic, as magical or supernatural. Part of a text's verisimilitude, even in fantasy literature, may be attributed to the background an author creates as a story's setting. While easily ignored, physical surroundings often help establish an underlying emotional tone that anticipates or amplifies plot events and recurring themes. Easterlin describes "environment" as anything outside the human organism, and "place" as a non-geographic designation. Instead, space is given meaning [as place] through personal, group, and cultural processes in an ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing a place via subjective descriptions of human attachment and affect. In other words, rather than being circumscribed to a physical geographic location, a "place" can be symbolic, imaginative, or whatever emotions (affects) or memories we associate with it (834). In this way, physical carnival settings offer subtle cues to audiences about story events.

Bakhtin asserts carnival as an example of the chronotope, a narrative combination of time and space he describes as an "organizing structure for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (*Dialogic* 250). Chronotopes like "The Road," establish the setting as an idea pre-loaded with complexity and dimension. In prototypical Dark Carnival texts, readers expect nostalgic physical carnival settings with menageries, carousels, and maybe a magician or a trapeze artist; however, the Dark Carnival thwarts expectations for typical carnival characters and set-pieces. Whether this reversal results in humor or horror relies on context.

Central Prototype Examples

Finney's fictional performance troupe in *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (1935) subverts reader expectations with both form and content throughout the novel. In his introduction to the edited collection, *The Circus of Dr. Lao and Other Improbable Stories* (1956), Bradbury writes, "Certainly Mr. Finney has given us a long stare at Reality, and done so by dressing it up in fantastic guises. He catches us off guard by pretending to show us something not real, which, at a crucial moment, unshells itself to reveal the raw center of existence" (ix). Instead of using inversion, Finney reflects a distorted reality, as his characters re-create a funhouse mirror's perverted forms. Finney's "trick" is that there is no trick; his observational account critiques privileged forms of canonical knowledge by highlighting the importance of experience. As Janet Whyde suggests, Finney's novel "not only anticipates 'some of the metafiction experiments of the 1960's,' [sic] but it also represents a postmodern revolt against the modernist aesthetic before the emergence of the 'postindustrial' society" (230).

"The novel introduces the circus without naming it, but Finney lists the specifics of the advertisement itself, as Whyde points out, "in ridiculously minute detail . . . In addition to the precise data (minus the year) and placement, Finney provides the precise measurements of the advertisement . . . [and] creates expectations for textual realism that Finney only slowly, and ambiguously, reveals as unfounded" (231). The internal dialogue of the newspaper's proofreader, Mr. Etaoin, articulates questions about the show's proprietor, as Lao's advertisement ignores the "rules" of advertising: most copywriting courses emphasize repeating a client's name a minimum of seven times to ensure audience retention. As Storey notes, "Advertisements, the material debris of a

rationalized commercial enterprise, present an image of the circus that obscures its real nature (a money-making exercise) and so cultivates a persistence of what Max Weber would have called ‘magical thinking’” (69). For most circuses, the advertising posters participate in the spectacle, but Lao’s ad ignores amusement-industry norms. A full-page ad offers florid descriptions composed as negative hyperbole—daring readers to believe—and omits his name entirely. Unsettled by the nameless ad, Etaoin remarks how “Generally these circus impresarios are hell on having their names smeared all over the place” (13). Not only does Lao omit his own “brand,” but his text-heavy ad also assumes his potential audience members can read. If, as Storey suggests, “Circus posters . . . present an image of an event that for all its glitzy persuasiveness cannot be reliably trusted” (55), readers might question if the inverse holds true and makes Lao’s understatement a hallmark of his believability. Readers and characters alike finally learn the name behind the circus is Dr. Lao on page 39, when his name appears in bold type. This resistance to naming and taxonomy continues throughout the novel, challenging epistemological forms including science, folklore, religion and gossip.

The people of Abalone, Arizona may see different versions of fantastical creatures, but all communicate the same sense of underwhelm at the paltry opening parade. If circuses, as Storey proposes, were supposed to present symbols of “modern efficiency [that] invite comparisons to the factory and the city,” by bringing modern experiences to rural spaces (57), then Dr. Lao’s circus, populated by figures of myth and legend, subverts those industrial symbols of modernity. Magic seems visible only by those characters with enough imagination and desire to believe it possible, as reflected in the discrepancies between reported spectator accounts. Each character sketch, Whyde notes,

“represents an act of textual interpretation, replicating, in effect, the reader’s own experience. Interpretation within the novel is shown to be both boundless and bounded by the limitations of the individual characters” (232).

Finney continually foils the hyperbole expected of fantasy by adopting a newspaperman’s rhetorical approach. Using characters’ reported speech and internal dialogues further distorts his reporting style by adding individual biases to accounts of characters who can neither understand nor identify what they witness. As Whyde notes, “the work both asserts and denies hermeneutical possibility by consciously blurring, and implicitly questioning, the boundary between fantasy and reality, by subverting realistic narrative techniques and readers’ expectations, and by exposing the artifice of fiction” (230). Filtering Dr. Lao’s fantastic attractions through the polyphonic narratives of the townspeople reveals a broad spectrum of narrowly defined worldviews; the constraints each places on their epistemological system only allow for limited perception, as if reading through highly specialized prescription lenses. Though they have seen the performers firsthand, they still doubt what they see is real. The variations in these accounts interrogate the reliability of the narrators, but Lao’s magical menagerie is presented in a straightforward, mimetic manner. This technique, Whyde notes, places readers in an uncomfortable position, forced to “either accept the authority of the third-person narrator who is telling them to accept the presence of mythological figures in . . . a realistic novel, or accept the skeptical and oftentimes contradictory readings of the figures as fakes or figments of the characters’ imaginations” (233). Rather than a true inversion of the Associated Press (AP) style, the shift functions as a perversion of

expectations for fantasy writing, just as Lao's traveling circus thwarts expectations of characters and readers alike.

Finney depicts Miss Agnes Birdsong's encounter with the satyr as an intimate nonverbal experience. The first of three "primary sexual narratives," as Whyde describes, that highlight sexuality as a "leitmotiv that binds the isolated experiences of characters. In this way, sexuality functions both as symbol of violation and transcendence" (234). Instead of catalyzing a sexual awakening through the spectacle of idealized male bodies, the goat-like satyr ensorcells Agnes with syrinx music, dancing, and musk (45). The satyr replaces the fetishizing gaze with olfactory, auditory, and tactile signals to induce a sexualized trance, which Lao interrupts for a lengthy exposition; his description of the satyr's hybrid features as symbolic of lust "has the effect of inserting ambiguity into the seduction" (Whyde 235). It also prefaces a more detailed account of its cultural history and religious transformations after "encroachment of the hostile Christian deity drove him and his kind out of Hellenistic hills to seek refuge in unamiable lands" (46). For each attraction, Lao narrates a similar diaspora that mirrors his own alienation. In Chinese folklore, "Lao" is known as a great magician – and author of the *Tao Te Ching* (Laozi). The abrupt ending of Finney's novel aligns with the mythical figure's disappearance from China for the West, never seen or heard from again. Many scenes throughout the novel break without resolution, continuing a theme of ambiguity Whyde points out, "as in the sexual narratives, the larger narrative line of the novel also ends prematurely—that is, without resolution or explanation" (237).

Lao's character presents himself in various registers, speaking in pidgin English as a caricature of Orientalism to appeal to Anglo audience expectations, then switching to

a higher rhetorical mode for his historical expositions. This kind of stylized linguistic hybrid parodies each amplified mode, creating what Bakhtin describes as “an argument between languages,” in that it creates “a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other” (*Dialogic* 76). John Marco refers to this unresolved linguistic conflict in his introduction to the critical edition, as he writes, “Dr. Lao shifts, chameleon-like, from being a horrible stereotype to being an eloquent orator and back again, leaving us to puzzle over his true nature—just one more of the book’s mysteries” (xiv).

After introducing Frank Tull to the chimera, Tull questions Dr. Lao’s claim that Gila monsters lack elimination systems: “Well, that’s what everybody around here claims,” said the doctor. “A hell of a lot of people have told me that. Seems that’s how the Gila monsters get their poison... Quite an interesting theory, I think. I much prefer its piquancy to a more rational explanation of *Heloderma*’s venomous attributes” (77-78). Lao’s explanation begins with coarse colloquialisms and gradually inverts in rhetorical style; casual terms decrease, replaced by increasingly academic language, so that none of the locals seem to know or care that his conclusion declares his strong preference for colorful fiction to dry scientific explanations. Whyde compares the eponymous figure to the work itself when she writes, “Like the novel as a whole, which resists monolithic interpretations, Dr. Lao argues for radical relativity. Interpretation, like fantasy, springs from the individual’s ‘own table for computing values’” (238). As an example of meta-fantasy, the tale turns on itself to explore how fantasies begin by inviting audiences in to inspect mythological figures up close. By inspecting these “fundamental illusions upon

which understanding of our culture rests,” as Whyde suggests, *The Circus of Dr. Lao* “exposes cultural origins or myths to deny their meaningfulness” (231).

A far cry from the diabolical Mr. Dark, Dr. Lao’s impresario character deviates from the prototype, but the rest of the narrative aligns well with Bradbury’s central text: a physical carnival of Others arrives in a small town, and its exhibitions seduce the town’s inhabitants. Instead of an invitation to join infernal forces, Lao’s newspaper ad invites readers and characters alike to open themselves to the possibility inherent in wonder. In the introduction to the Bantam anthologized version of Finney’s novella in 1956, Eller describes that “Bradbury noted how Finney seemed to have reversed the old saying that ‘the first to catch the circus in a lie is a boy’ by having Dr. Lao catch life in may of *its* lies.’ But the overall tone of Bradbury’s discussion is ambiguous, suggesting that the boy—perhaps now a writer of introductions, but still a boy at heart—may yet have his eye on the circus” (77). Bradbury’s obvious unease with Finney’s novel illustrates to some degree why it often gets classified as Weird Fiction, a genre between horror, mystery, and surrealism. As editors Ann and Jeff VanderMeer note, “The Weird acknowledges that our search for understanding about worlds beyond our own cannot always be found in science or religion and thus becomes an alternative path for exploration of the numinous” (xvii).

Like Finney, Peter S. Beagle portrays a carnivalesque event with the transformative power of wonder. Though Beagle depicts a fully developed secondary fantasy world in *The Last Unicorn* (1968), the mythical menagerie of Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival echoes mythic themes similar to Finney’s work. Limited to the novel’s first three chapters, Beagle’s carnival conforms to the prototypical pattern of physical

analog, but where Lao under-plays the wonder, Mommy Fortuna augments her [mostly] mundane captives with thin glamours to make them appear more obviously mythical to the rubes, creating “stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth” (Beagle 21). As Schmendrick explains, “Belief makes all the difference to magic like Mommy Fortuna’s. Why, if that troop of witlings withdrew their wonder, there’d be nothing left of all her witchery but the sound of a spider weeping” (Beagle 25).

The menagerie’s magically enhanced features have a transformative effect on an audience who has forgotten how to see real magic. Only the wizard and Mommy Fortuna recognize the inherent magic of the unicorn, and of the harpy in the neighboring cage, for whom she must use magic to imprison. Schmendrick confides to the unicorn, “[her] craft is just sure enough to hold the monster, but its mere presence is wearing all her spells so thin that in a little time she won’t have power enough left to fry an egg. She never should have . . . meddled with a real harpy, a real unicorn. The truth melts her magic” (Beagle 26). He agrees to help the unicorn escape, and ultimately joins her search for the Red Bull in his own quest for real magic; freeing her also releases the fearsome harpy, who exacts a gruesome revenge on Mommy Fortuna.

Beagle also relates to Finney’s novel through a shared sense of metafiction, presenting mythical and legendary characters that express literary self-awareness. Although Beagle employs conventions of traditional fantasy literature—with a wizard, a wicked king, and an epic quest to save the unicorns—none of these elements adheres to reader expectations. Instead of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, Beagle presents the timeworn figures of Captain Cully and Molly Grue, who Jean Tobin writes, as “traditional characters already strayed far from type, are also allowed to express

delightfully hackneyed modern feelings about their nonmarriage” (21). When the wizard and his “white mare” arrive unannounced in Cully’s camp, Molly objects loudly to uninvited guests, not unlike a scripted sit-com: “I’ll not have it, Cully, the soup’s no thicker than sweat as it is!” (66). Cully frames her fury as overprotection, explaining it as “only natural that Molly should become suspicious, pinched, dour, prematurely old, even a touch tyrannical” (67). Though he never utters the phrase “ball-and-chain,” the connotation is clear in the exchange.

Though the novel lacks a carousel to symbolize the cycle of life and death and recurring social crisis, Beagle’s characters sustain a sense of tension between immortality and mortality. A spell prevents the magician Schmendrick (“fool” in Yiddish) from aging until he can access his magic, and until he changes her into a human, the unicorn is immortal, both representing endlessly repeating cycles. The immortal unicorn chafes at her mortal disguise, disgusted by its active decay. Haggard and Mommy Fortuna seek immortality through proximity to captive magic after gaining a temporary measure of control over magical creatures. Except for Schmendrick, each character mistakenly assumes immortality can be possessed or caged, despite observing the lives of mortals and immortals as fluid and ever-changing. As Geoffrey Reiter notes, “Schmendrick, for all his awkwardness, recognizes what so many characters . . . cannot—that life is made of little, transient moments that must end, but that ought to be enjoyed with an immediacy that only mortality can provide” (110).

Reiter makes a fine distinction between characters who grasp after immortality, and those who are inspired and then reach for it; while “grasp” implies a closed grip, “reach” could imply a stretch, in body, consciousness, spirit, but always an open hand.

Both King Haggard and Mommy Fortuna seek immortality by “collecting” and confining magical creatures; though this does not transfer any power, they crave the proximity of their fetishized symbols. Rather than polar opposites, mortality and immortality in Beagle’s novel complement each other; positive mortal characters realize they lead richer, fuller lives by striving toward an ideal (immortal) value. Instead of remaining aloof, the immortal unicorn gains empathy by experiencing mortality, and becomes more relatable. While her transformation is obviously corporeal, the unicorn also awakens to the possibility of love as a worthwhile emotional investment.

Echoing themes of transformation and characters who grasp for immortality, Tom Reamy’s posthumously printed novel, *Blind Voices* (1977), responds to images and themes prevalent in both Bradbury’s and Finney’s works, and portrays a physical carnival as invading Other through a glaze of nostalgia, though no scholarship on his work exists. Similar to Bradbury, Finney, and Beagle, Reamy’s physical carnival also features a menagerie in Haverstock’s Traveling Curiosus and Wonder Show, focalized through three teenage girls, Evelyn (Evie), Francine, and Rose, all eighteen, and two boys, Phineas (“Finney”) and Jack, twelve. The character’s nickname, Finney, recalls *The Circus of Dr. Lao*’s author, and his full name echoes that of P.T. Barnum. Predisposed to believe the carnival’s magic, the boys provide an outlet for exposition and a counterpoint of enthusiasm for wonder against older, more cynical perspectives in the small town of Hawley, Kansas.

Framed by scenes depicting the carnival’s primary vehicles, the novel opens with detailed descriptions of horse-drawn wagons, emblazoned with bright promises of hidden wonders, as they plod towards a black Model-T coming from the opposite direction.

Readers see the same ruined conveyances at the novel's conclusion, unlike the rest of the town, that "scarcely noticed the wagon and the car anymore [sic]. They had become a part of the landscape, curiosities grown common" (181). Anne Dwyer examines how forms of movement and nomadism became a metaphor for artistic creation to Viktor Shklovsky, who locates artistic potential in the marginal and unfamiliar (270).

Continuing along this line of logic figures Reamy's small Kansas town as the kind of place such artistic potential goes to die, despite—or perhaps because of—the author's heavy nostalgic tones. Reamy describes Hawley on a bright summer day, populated by old men "telling half-remembered or half-invented stories of better times . . . pontificating on the government, President Hoover, the Communists, the Anarchists, the Catholics, the Jews, the stock market, and other topics about which they knew little or nothing" (4). As symbols and sources of physical and social mobility, the vehicles' fiery destruction might also signal the town's stagnancy, especially during Hoover's administration, which coincided with the stock market crash and early years of the Great Depression, from 1929-1933.

Amidst this bucolic torpor, the magician Haverstock presents fantastic creatures in a showcase of wonder, including "Electro, the Lightning Man" (9), reminiscent of Bradbury's Mr. Electrico. The Snake Goddess, Medusa, mermaid, and Minotaur all recall Dr. Lao's mythological menagerie, with an albino Magic Boy named Angel to foreshadow the battle between good and evil. His mimetic presentation also recalls Dr. Lao's approach initially, but his psychic training session with Angel—to hone the mute boy's "gift"—reveals a nefarious nature: the "magical" creatures are his successful genetic experiments, and the boy is his prisoner. Instead of echoing Dr. Lao's

mythologies, these creations anticipate the forced engineering of *Geek Love*, and Haverstock's actions recall Caligari, as he keeps Angel under hypnotic control to access the boy's telekinetic powers. It also boosts his own limited abilities, which he passes off as magic during the main show; Haverstock calls this power the "gift," an underdeveloped telekinetic power that everyone possesses, though not everyone can control.

Evie's chance daytime encounter with Angel leads to his eventual escape from the carnival, and their growing romance matches his rate of growing autonomy once freed from the magician's control. Haverstock, growing more frantic after learning the Minotaur has raped and killed another local girl, sets the rest of his wayward menagerie ablaze. After recapturing Angel, Haverstock holds Evie captive, and she goads him into spelling out his evil plan. In addition to grasping after immortality, he believes the gift will make him invincible, as he gloats, "Perhaps I shall rule the world—if I should wake up one morning and *feel* like ruling the world" (171). Reamy reverses some of Bradbury's tropes as Angel challenges Haverstock in magical combat; a mirror maze serves as a protective shield for Evie and himself, and instead of using lightning to spark life, as in the mummified Mr. Cooger, Angel rains down enough destructive lightning to inspire a Norse god to jealousy in his final scene with Haverstock. Though Angel and Evie survive the battle, their future remains ambiguous. The novel's closing scenes indicate that the small town reverts back to its pre-carnival norms once Haverstock is defeated, though readers know the historic upheaval of the Great Depression still looms for characters in this timeframe.

Reamy follows the structure of Bradbury's central prototype closely, though *Blind Voices* is less freighted with biblical overtones as social corrective, and depicts more sexually explicit themes. The text perverts cycles of adolescent yearning and awakening in scenes that hint of Haverstock molesting Angel (3)—as his hypnotic control also eliminates Angel's ability to consent—and repeats this perversion with Louis and Harold. (To clarify, Haverstock's hypnotic override of consent illustrates perversion, not his choice of sexual partner.) Louis describes in flashback some less-than-binary youthful moments that also break incest and miscegenation taboos, two common social indices of perversion in literature. When Haverstock endorses Louis with a libidinous racial stereotype, the context also suggests he regularly uses hypnosis to take advantage: "Such a handsome young man, and so randy. It's true what they say about hot-blooded Latins" (166). While confessing to his demise, Haverstock makes similar implications to Evie in comments about her brother Harold: "'Don't think harshly of your brother. He resisted for quite a long time. But, in the end, of course . . . Such a shame, too. He was such a good-looking boy'" (168). Though his character does not survive the conclusion, Henry (Henry-Etta) resists the stereotypical role of predatory homosexual; instead Reamy presents Henry as a sympathetic character whose intersex status provides him a platform for survivance, performing as daily resistance to dominant heteronormative social conventions.

Although socially conscious Rose plans to marry Harold, she blames his "gentlemanly" manners for forcing her into a tryst with roustabout Kelsey Armstrong (71). This inverts dominant discourses about sexuality and gendered notions of libido that simultaneously diminish and fetishize women's sexuality; in seeking physical

gratification, Rose claims agency for her body and her needs, although her family clings to traditional gender roles. When Kelsey professes love and asks her to elope, Rose refuses, stating “there’s too many poor people around here, and I won’t be one of them, not for you, not for anybody” (136). Kelsey fears Haverstock will kill him if he finds him; by revealing his location, Rose not only perverts their relationship, but also becomes complicit in Kelsey’s murder (138).

Reamy’s graphic descriptions of Francine’s fatal Minotaur assault tie the cycle of sexual awakening to pagan religious ritual, contrasting between gentleness and unspeakable pain to amplify the perversion: “Francine stood looking up at the Minotaur, like a worshiper before the bronze idol of an animal god” (88). The narrative further subverts traditional religious norms with the show’s professed carnival ethos; as Henry explains to Evie, Haverstock includes blatantly rigged acts in order to camouflage the real magic: “it convinces them everything is a fake and not the work of the Devil” (107). Reamy solidifies subversive connections in the preacher’s sermon: “he made great use of circumlocution, allegory, and parable, with especially heavy emphasis in fallen angels and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, no one. . . had any doubt he was talking about the tent show” (133). If Angel is the “fallen angel,” then Evie makes an obvious “Eve,” but in resistance to dominant Christian norms, the protagonists save the world from Haverstock’s psychic tyranny instead of taking the blame for original sin.

Evie and Angel’s later consensual union recuperates the cycle of adolescent yearning and fulfillment, which begins anew—symbolically—as Finney dreams of purchasing Haverstock’s burnt-out circus wagon. Jack questions his friend’s decision with Bradburian logic: “What do you want it for? School starts next week and the

summer's over. Circus wagons are part of the summer. They're no good after school starts" (181). The narrative acknowledges the timelessness of curiosity and commonality, discovery and knowledge, but implies that circuses lack the same power during the regular school schedule. While the boys' perspective communicates an inexhaustible adolescent joy of summer before school starts, it also signals a shift from wonder back to dominant epistemological models of public education.

Reamy died at the tragically young age of 42, and aside from an analysis of one short story ["Under the Hollywood Sign" (1975), also in *Science Fiction Studies*], scholarship on the author remains limited to nostalgic reminiscences of his lost potential, like Michael Hemmingson's contribution to the "Notes and Correspondence" of *Science Fiction Studies* (2007). Prompted by a rediscovery of stored books, Hemmingson draws attention to Reamy's unrecognized contributions, and mentions another posthumous publication of collected short stories, *San Diego Lightfoot Sue and Other Stories*, with an introduction by Harlan Ellison. Ellison describes Reamy's demise as a "writer's death," and explains that he "had a heart attack while sitting at his typewriter," trying to finish a story for a deadline (xix). As Hemmingson notes, "Ace published his first and only novel, *Blind Voices*, posthumously in 1978, and the collection of stories a year later" (529). The year before his death, Reamy won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and contributed stories to several anthologies. "Ellison, like many in the field, wondered what kind of work Reamy would have produced had he lived" (Hemmingson 530).

Though no scholarship yet exists for Joanna Parypinski's 2019 novel, this is likely due to having such a recent debut publication rather than having been overlooked among stored boxes of books. Parypinski's novel, *Dark Carnival*, shares a title with Bradbury's

debut publication, but unlike the original collection's indirect atmospheric evocations, Parypinski offers a more direct horror story. The tale opens as her protagonist is leaving school, but he shares none of the unbridled glee Jack and Finney exude in Reamy's novel; instead, Dax Howard leaves school as a college senior to bury his father in his small hometown of Conjunction, Nebraska. The novel opens as Dax pulls over to change a blown tire after hitting a coyote. The eidetic details describing the incident testify to the animal's existence, but when Dax looks back the coyote has vanished, except for a bloody streak on the highway.

Polyphonic narrative strains make Dax question his own perception of reality when he hears his estranged mother, missing for fourteen years, whisper, "That coyote was dead, kiddo. Killed by its own carelessness . . . Or maybe . . . maybe it was a trickster" (9). Parypinski oscillates between the novel's resistant indigenous narrative and dominant religious discourses evident in her description of the small town's billboard, immediately following the trickster sighting: "there was the familiar black billboard that declared in tall white letters, HELL IS REAL" (9). Dax reasons to himself that the animal limped off the road to die in the bushes, but the phantom trickster roadkill foreshadows complications of cosmic proportions in an immediate instance of narrative instability, further complicated by ghostly whispers and a pair of "sickly yellow eyes" watching from the bushes (11). The inhuman yellow gaze appears to different characters as a supernatural motif, but the novel remains unclear about their status as "real."

Though absent most of his life, his mother's voice lends a strong note of nostalgia, as it represents the piece of her Dax holds closest: "Of all the fading, piecemeal memories he still had of his mother, he remembered her voice most of all. He was haunted by it"

(14). Her present absence imparts a tone of uncertain anticipation. When Dax left for college to study astrophysics, he and his father, Roy, parted on bad terms; even though they shared the same longing for closure about his mother, Renée, they lacked the ability to communicate. Dax escaped to study the stars, and Roy drank himself to death while he searched for evidence about the carnival that disappeared with his wife. His collection of newspaper clippings contributes an objective voice to the polyphonic narrative, to counter the tide of rumors and myth around Renée's disappearance. Discovering this evidence only adds to Dax's confusion.

Dax shows little place-attachment to the town of Conjunction, and describes it in terms of decay and liminality as "the kind of place you glanced at from the corner of your eye and promptly forgot, like a shape at the edge of your vision that turned out to be nothing at all. It was a forgettable and forgotten place, full of people wanting only to forget" (11). Though overwhelmingly negative, his description emphasizes the town as a liminal place, echoed in the town's name for a linguistically liminal function: neither fully one place nor another, Conjunction only serves to connect departures and destinations. Even his childhood home stirs no fondness, as he notes on entering, "there, distinctly, was the smell of home, and he felt, immediately, and joylessly, as if he had never left" (15).

The only bright spot is the vague memory of his mother prompted by the sight of her belongings in his dad's empty house. He recalls the stories she used to tell him, "of her Lakota grandfather and the myths of his people" (21), and opens her armoire to find one of the sketches she used to illustrate her stories. Here, Parypinksi contributes the voice of Lakota mythology to the novel's growing polyphony, aided by the visual

rhetoric of his mother's sketch, and adds a moment of symbolic counterpoint when Dax mistakes his reflection for his father in the armoire's mirror. Though not identical to Bradbury's carceral Mirror Maze, it bears some family resemblance in its distorted reflection, as Dax has no desire to follow his father's path, nor to remain in Conjunction.

Together with high school buddy Wyatt, and Wyatt's sister Sarah, the trio attend a house party at an abandoned house rumored to be haunted, and come in contact with a range of unsettling events that include the same inhuman yellow eyes Dax saw on the highway. Wyatt recounts seeing something similar at the lake; though his story is purportedly about fishing, he confesses, "I mean no, I wasn't there to fish, not really, I was just there to light up," but then he notices something at the water's edge, a "thing *pretending* to be the coyote" staring at him with yellow eyes (41). When it leaves, he sees a girl floating face down in the water, but before he can reach her, she grabs his arm with enough force to break it before levitating out of the water to hover above it. Wyatt claims he fled without any backward glances, but his drug use makes Dax doubt his story, despite the cast on his arm. They retreat to Dax's house where Roy's collection of articles pulls them all into the mystery of Renée's disappearance.

Dax and his friends follow increasingly grisly and drug-fueled leads until he finds his mom, covered in tattoos of Lakota myths and working for the carnival as a storyteller (196). Renée explains how the carnival camouflages a cult whose members follow the Prophet, Iktomi in a search for Baykok, Father Death—symbolized by the shape of a human eye—to release him from his long incarceration in the earth. They also use the carnival, Renée explains, "as a way to gather what they needed as offerings to their god. Our lives are told through stories, and Father Death consumes life" (198). As with many

Trickster tales, however, this one takes unexpected turns; in a key scene of spiritual transformation, Renée denounces the cult and confesses, “the stories of our people—were never about death. They were about life. And now every story has been taken over and perverted by the pale monster, been made about death. All animals, all plants, all living creatures—we’re connected. . . But not these beings” (198).

Instead of a straightforward awakening, Renée shrugs off the carnival’s hypnotic hold and recognizes deeper truths in indigenous myths the Prophet’s nihilistic vision has perverted. She believes the Prophet murdered Roy as retribution for her betrayal, and will target Dax next; the revelation prompts an alliance with his mom to defeat the cosmic horror, but the battle is not without casualties. Though her tattooed appearance and cult membership aligns her with Bradbury’s villain Mr. Dark, Renée’s transformation in renouncing the cult aligns her more closely with Charles Halloway: her encyclopedic knowledge of stories is instrumental in defeating Baykok, and her primary goal is to save her son.

In his study, *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll suggests that “novels are denominated horrific in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain *affect* . . . it must be underlined that not all genres are identified in this way” (14). He describes that both physical and cognitive functions produce the reader’s emotional state of “art-horror” (15), triggered by encountering a particularly threatening and impure object, usually embodied as some kind of monster. The monster in Parypinksi’s novel remains unseen for the majority of the text, but readers first recognize the threat implied by crime scene descriptions.

Though they fail to reconcile, Dax honors his mother's indigenous ways when he expresses the need to tell his story to another friend of indigenous descent: "He wanted to tell her this story—had to tell it as a way to keep living. *There is a kind of death in silence*" (234 emphasis in original). In seeking an audience to share his story, Dax echoes Bruner's ideas about how narrative "operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (6). Rather than tell the story as it was handed down, however, Dax adds his own voice to the polyphonic telling and closes one narrative loop to open up possibilities for another telling. Instead of spinning in place, the story can progress beyond its last stopping-point.

Though this Dark Carnival tale prompts more shrieks of fear than bursts of laughter, the ambivalent Trickster elements align Parypinski's novel with Bakhtinian laughter and story as survivance. Coyote begins the novel with a disappearance, and other Native figures like Iktomi suffuse the novel with a heteroglossic trickster presence throughout the novel; though Parypinski presents more than one trickster figure, their collective presence negotiates a broader meaning as part of the novel's discourse. As William Doty explains, the Greek figure of Hermes fulfills the role of Western Trickster as the "god of language and speech, who nonetheless makes his appearances veiled in silence" (49). The novel leans heavily on the play between speech and silence by emphasizing Renée's role, despite her absence. Dax's childhood memories center on her storytelling, even though her absence silences her for the duration; while she plays an official role as Storyteller for the cult, when Dax first sees her, she illustrates the spoken stories in silence. She then renounces her role and the cult, which effectively silences the cult while allowing her to speak freely.

The physical carnival and rural Midwestern setting follow Bradbury's prototype, but divert from Judeo-Christian overtones to recall indigenous storytelling traditions that borrow from H.P. Lovecraft's mode of cosmic horror and existential dread. Dax's childhood nostalgia functions as a prosthetic that projects his child-like perception, rather than using children as focal characters. In a childhood flashback, Parypinski's description estranges a traditional church setting when his aunt Helen arranges a candlelight vigil for Renée. As Dax recalls, "a wooden crucifix had hung before him, robed in shadow against the candles' bewitching light. Jesus, in his crown of thorns, had appeared to scream in silent horror—reluctant sacrifice of some black mass" (143). This description situates the narrative outside Catholic traditions, though many other story events reinforce the power of ritual practices, particularly inside a designated carnival space.

In addition to Dax's nostalgic filter, polyphonic narrative strains contribute to a sustained sense of ambiguity; multiple voices, including newspaper clippings, half-remembered Lakota myths, astronomy textbooks, and town rumors all offer nuances of meaning that multiply possible interpretations. Though the carnival and the prophet figure of Savannah/Iktomi extend temptations to different characters, Parypinski's text does not revert back to previous norms; instead of carnivalesque inversion, she uses trickster figures to facilitate narrative misdirection and change the story during moments of instability marked by polyphony and ambiguity. Overall, this text places more emphasis on themes of isolation and belonging, similar to texts by the authors who make up the following category contrasting the prototype at the basis level.

Though Stephen King's novel *Joyland* (2013), might also fall within this prototype category, a full discussion lies beyond the scope of this study. While an

unexplained supernatural element may very well be evident, as a “hard crime” novel, King seems to rely less on the fantastic in this story than in his other works under examination here. A comprehensive analysis for future exploration would also include a longer discussion on various genres and the ways in which those conventions overlap. I merely mention the text here to acknowledge its possible membership in the prototype category, but to avoid treading too far down that path without the full discussion it deserves.

Chapter Three: Contrasts

Central Contrasts: Morgenstern, Dunn, Valentine

Contrasts of the central prototype portray the carnival as a sanctuary or “Home” instead of invading Other, and include texts such as Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1983), Genevieve Valentine’s *Mechanique* (2011), and Erin Morgenstern’s *The Night Circus* (2012). While these examples also portray physical carnival settings, their fragmented timelines destroy the narrative unity represented by chronotopes. Morgenstern, Dunn, and Valentine represent contrasts to Bradbury’s prototype as basic-level distinctions, which as Lakoff notes, are some of the most useful distinctions to make “since they are characterized by overall shape and motor interaction and are at the most general level at which one can form a mental image” (49). Lakoff lists examples, noting that a two-year-old’s category—in which lions, tigers, and house cats are all called “kitty”—may be different than an adult’s, but “those categories are determined by the same principles that determine adult basic-level categories” (49). Like the prototype texts, these works all portray a physical carnival setting, but the characterization of these carnivals represents a salient attribute that signals a difference at the basic level. Each of these authors prolongs the carnival’s ambiguous status until protagonists fully embrace their various carnival communities as Home. A full discussion of intersecting critical perspectives follows the interpretations.

Erin Morgenstern relates a tale of toxic father figures in *The Night Circus*, engaging directly with the fantastic and focalizing it through magic-wielding protagonists set in the nineteenth century. Games and their perversions structure the novel and control

the actions of the protagonists, as Prospero the Enchanter (stage name for Hector Bowen) discovers the five-year-old with a note pinned to her coat is not only his daughter, but also has a natural affinity for magic. Though emotionally unavailable as a father, he begins Celia's instruction in earnest to shape her for competition in a magical duel. Fellow magician, Mr. Alexander H— ("the man in grey"), proposes to train his own protégé, selected from an orphanage, to settle their disagreement about whether natural talent or proper training produces more powerful magic.

The master magicians also disagree on the power of names; Hector grumbles that Celia's mother did not name her Miranda, to complement his bardic stage name, whereas Alexander never names his pupil, nor does he ask the boy's given name. In a negation of Bradbury's philosophy, he asserts "Names are not of nearly as much import as people like to suppose . . . If you find you are in need of a name at any point, you may choose one for yourself" (27). The boy calls himself Marco Alisdair, but the novel usually only refers to his mentor as "the man in grey." Though neither instructor provides much nurturing for his respective apprentice, each instills a sense of gravity in the arcane skills they will deploy against their unnamed opponent. Hector immerses Celia in theater life as a traveling magician while Marco receives a methodical, almost clinical training. Readers follow their simultaneous accounts in a non-linear narrative, dated in an epistolary style, but narrated in third person.

After years of rigorous, painful training, the apprentices remain unaware of the rules, and the ultimate objective of the game itself until near the novel's conclusion, though both Marco and Celia learn that *Le Cirque des Rêves* (the Circus of Dreams) serves as their playing field. In addition to being restricted to a specific "sacred circle,"

Johann Huizinga defines the concept of “genuine play” as possessing “formal characteristics [rules] and its joyful mood, at least one further very essential feature, namely, the consciousness, however latent, of ‘only pretending’” (22). Given these qualities constitutive of “play,” it seems evident that Celia and Marco serve as mere gamepieces, holding space on the board for their patrons, who are the *real* “players.”

His position as secretary for the show’s producer, Mr. Chandresh, gives Marco the advantage of recognizing Celia as his opponent at her audition long before she knows of him. Chandresh describes the endeavor to his collaborators, as “More than a carnival . . . More than a circus, really . . . Not a single large tent but a multitude of tents, each with a particular exhibition. No elephants or clowns. No, something more refined than that” (76). This description aligns Morgenstern’s traveling show more closely with Gilded Age circus companies than with carnivals, in either the Bakhtinian sense of medieval festivals or as part of the US amusement industry. Such a three-ring railroad show, Janet Davis notes, “was too big to see at once . . . a distinctly American cultural form whose scripted chaos and singular indigestibility departed sharply from its intimate one-ring European antecedents” (24).

While Celia travels with the circus as its main illusionist, Marco remains in London, but convinces Chandresh to hire Isobel (his lover) as the circus fortune-teller; her letters keep him connected to the circus and informed of events from inside. Isobel constructs a simple charm using the Angel of Temperance. Known in the tarot as “the Alchemist,” it signals balance, diplomacy, and the ability to find mutually beneficial solutions: an impossible ending for a game that only ends with one player’s death. Morgenstern adds layers of nuance through subtle symbolism and messages in playing

cards and tarot deck spreads; the cards often emphasize the overt narrative theme, however, they can also provide supplemental details. For example, prior to opening night, Marco shares his concerns with Isobel about facing Celia remotely; consulting her tarot deck, Isobel first draws The Lovers, signaling romance, partnerships, and choices, and then draws The Tower, a sign of disruption, chaos, or difficult change (104). From Isobel's perspective, the cards imply she needs to take preventative steps to keep her relationship with Marco intact, however, later chapters reveal the same cards could also apply to Marco and Celia. The intermittent tarot references lend a cryptic strand of polyphony to the narrative, complicated by additional voices from Arthurian legend, *The Tempest* echoes in Hector's stage name, Celia's correspondence with Herr Thiessen, and Tsukiko's polyvalent hieroglyphic tattoo. While an initial read may tempt readers to dismiss the novel as mere romance, a closer examination reveals more complex meanings with considerable opportunities for interpretation.

Even though Isobel's charm keeps the circus balanced, the opponents fall in love. Their duel evolves into romantic exchanges of elaborate magical showmanship, expressed as new circus attractions. When Marco finally reveals his feelings about Celia (386), Isobel deactivates her tempering charm and throws things off balance. While Morgenstern does depict Celia and Marco's physical consummation, the text does not contain overtly graphic sexual awakenings similar to those in other texts (Finney, Reamy, Dunn). Hector, however, views their magical circus collaborations as deviant: he describes their joint efforts in constructing the Labyrinth "debauched juxtaposition" (288). One might read his reaction as peculiarly perverse, as he seems to value the game over human connections, including that of his own daughter. Morgenstern's descriptions of

Hector and Alexander and the different iterations of their “game,” and its extended playing time, leads readers to suspect that the older magicians are either unnaturally long-lived, or that they no longer occupy the same plane of existence as the novel’s other characters. If they are no longer physically human, their transcendent state would explain Hector’s overreaction to Celia’s artistic collaborations.

Following an unexpected casualty, Alexander confronts Hector to protest their game’s increasing perversion. In an uncharacteristically direct moment, Alexander demands, “how many of your own students have chosen to end the game themselves . . . Seven? Will your daughter be the eighth?” (382). Instead of testing the players’ magical abilities, the game tests the limits of their physical and mental survival skills. Even circus outsiders notice the imbalance when fans following the circus, called *rêveurs*, note that since the death of Herr Thiessen, “the circus itself seems a bit different . . . Something off-kilter. . . like a clock that is not oscillating properly” (416). The Dark Carnival’s powers of perversion extend beyond the immediate members of the circus to the lives of countless fans.

Early on, young Bailey Clarke sneaks into the circus in Boston and meets Murray twins, Poppet and Widget, and over the years they become friends. Because Poppet’s precognition reveals Bailey as the circus’s future caretaker, she later asks him to leave home and join them at the circus. She remarks that the circus has started to “feel unfamiliar,” and applies the same logic of attunement to make her appeal: ““Have you ever wished for someone to come and take you away?”” (358). Their exchange implies both characters ascribe feelings of place-attachment, or “home,” to other characters instead of a particular location. In this way, the novel resists dominant discourses about

the ideal nuclear family and extends the configuration of “home” beyond a static geographic location or structure. Poppet also steps outside Victorian gender norms, which encouraged passivity in young women. In similar fashion, even though Hector offers Celia little emotional support, his role as a single father also resists cultural norms about separate gendered spheres of public and domestic spaces. The circus further problematizes the combination of these separate spheres, as the respective social conventions are always already carnivalized.

Bailey’s grandmother urges him to follow his dreams, thereby settling the argument over his future. Since age ten, he has only dreamt about the circus, so following his dreams ultimately allows the circus to keep spinning. As Storey notes, in Gilded Age fiction, trains represent the “herald of modernity that carry at least the potential for social progress and mobility” (27). Since Celia’s magic powers the train that transports the circus rather than industrial technology, one might read it as a symbol of the potential to embrace magic as a means of progressing in life. This also resists social discourses about the definition of “success” in a US capitalist society, though it reinforces notions of American exceptionalism; rather than abide by his father’s wishes to take over the family farm, Bailey finds success by following his own dreams.

A looping progression recurs in the movement of crowds through the circus, in the *Wunschtraum* clock (German for *dream*, *hope*, or *ambition*), and in rides like the carousel that mimic mobility, but never progress. As the clockmaker describes it, “The whole of Le Cirque des Rêves is formed by series of circles . . . Rather than a single tent with rings enclosed within, this circus contains clusters of tents like pyramids . . . They are set within circular paths, contained within a circular fence. Looping and continuous”

(7). The construction mimics the interconnected members of an ecosystem, always in flux, in a continuous cycle; the circus mimics life itself. As Zara Wilkinson notes, “the circus itself, despite carefully establishing and maintaining the illusion of disorder, is a highly ordered, carefully managed event” (151).

Unable to forfeit or simply reverse directions, the players must break the game—but save the circus—in order to outsmart the rules. Bound by contracts sealed in their youth and seared into their skin with an exchange of rings, Celia and Marco throw the game into “an unforeseen loophole,” as Alexander describes it (505). More than a simple contest, the “game” has evolved to include a vast web of interconnected people and places, all bound by the love they share for the circus. Stephanie Weber describes Morgenstern’s circus as “‘wonder and comfort and mystery all together’, something the people that seek the circus—a cult following referring to themselves as ‘rêveurs’—have nowhere else” (355). In this case, the circus employs art—expressed via magic—to create a transformative experience for attendees.

Celia and Marco, however, undergo a different transformation when they discover how to transfer responsibilities they can no longer carry. The scenes leading up to this resolution align *Le Cirque des Rêves* with a form of religious ritual, as Huizinga notes, “a certain element of ‘make believe’ is present in all primitive religions. Whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once” (23). As each sorcerer attempts to prevent the other’s sacrifice, they both throw themselves into the unnatural bonfire powering the circus, thus their union becomes part of the circus. As Wilkinson notes, “by removing herself from the wager, [Celia] too is attempting to control her own

destiny. For her, to do so is to attempt self-actualization, to become a part of the game rather than a pawn on the board” (164).

Though their individual actions remain unclear, their effects are final: “To the outside world, Marco and Celia are dead, and for Hector and Alexander, the terms of the challenge have been fulfilled” (Wilkinson 163). Their actions demonstrate the permeable boundaries between sacred rituals and play, and illustrate how play can, in effect, *create* a culture. As Huizinga notes, the link between “the unity and indivisibility of belief and unbelief, the indissoluble connection between sacred earnest and ‘make-believe’ or ‘fun’ are best understood in the concept of play” (24). By recruiting Poppet, Widget, and Bailey as new hierophants, as it were, Celia and Marco transform the “game” into a sacred ritual, emphasizing how “the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness” (Huizinga 25). Instead of worship services, the circus rituals sustain the community of interconnected human lives that have grown out of the circus.

Rather than closing the narrative loop, this shift in perception constructs a logical bridge that allows Widget to tell the story again, in second person—just as he relates it to Alexander—interspersed throughout the novel as section headers. At the novel’s end, readers recognize the opening sentence as a coda that begins Widget’s story from the first page to tell the story from a new perspective: “The circus arrives without warning” (508). While their unannounced itinerary echoes that of Cooger and Dark’s Pandemonium Show in Bradbury’s text, Morgenstern’s carnival exhibits fewer predatory behaviors, although one might certainly read it as consuming the protagonists. The ambiguous description of their liminal existence leaves readers uncertain about the ending; all we know is that

Celia and Marco's love seems to have transcended the game. And then the story begins anew.

While Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* can claim status as a National Book Award finalist as a measure of critical success, readers who follow *The Night Circus* with Dunn's novel may benefit from a warning that the two works dispense ambience from opposite ends of the flavor spectrum. After ingesting Morgenstern's rich olfactory descriptions of toffee, spiced ciders, and exorbitant Midnight Dinners, Dunn washes the lush fantasy down with a gas-station trail-mix of stale popcorn, frozen dinners, and chlorine gas. The 1983 novel portrays female characters that resist claims of patriarchal authority as an excuse to control women's bodies. Anna Mae Duane points out that the novel "was published at a moment when free market and family values were touted as if they were mutually constitutive...insisting on a world where the market should be brutally competitive but the home unconditionally accepting" (106). Dunn sets the primary actions within a traveling carnival so that the norms are immediately carnivalized; she uses the moving backdrop of the carnival world to show how frequently the allegedly separate spheres of market and home always already interconnect and influence each other.

Superimposed upon this scenery, Dunn's carnivalesque inversions know no bounds in terms of both sheer volume and shock value. The fictional family of Binewski Fabulons emphasizes an aesthetic of grotesque realism in the characters' extraordinary bodies. Carnival patriarch Aloysius Binewski takes a home brewer's approach to genetic manipulation, thereby challenging medical epistemologies. This characteristic acknowledges an ancient carnivalesque connection between medicine and folk art, as

Bakhtin describes, “which explains the combination in one person of actor and druggist” (159). As Dunn writes, “Al was a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence...He decided to breed his own freak show” (7). Al’s folk fertility concoctions set a cycle of perversions in motion by triggering genetic mutations in his pregnant wife. The surviving Binewski siblings remain with the family because they exhibit a sufficiently valuable combination of anomalies: the “normal” children are abandoned at grocery stores along the road.

Al and his wife Lillian (“Crystal Lil”) produce Arturo, the Aqua Boy; conjoined twins Iphigenia and Electra; Olympia, an albino hunchbacked dwarf; and Fortunato, nicknamed “Chick,” who appears painfully normal by comparison, but develops extremely useful telekinetic powers. As Duane notes, “The shocking premise in *Geek Love* that parents would create children as explicit commodities starkly dramatizes what, for many theorists, is nothing less than the dominant economic model of the late twentieth century” (111). Their wondrous freak physiques foreclose the possibility of bodily agency or autonomy (especially as children); however, the same extraordinary features also ensure their survival as *contributing* members of the family. Weber suggests that the Binewski family “highlights how the sociocultural conceptions of bodies may differ from interpersonal or familial fantasies of the idealized body” (350).

The story relates Olympia’s childhood memories in flashback while present-day Oly (a.k.a. Hoppy McGurk) hovers protectively near her own adult daughter, Miranda. Though born with a short tail, Arty declares her too “normal” to stay with the carnival and forces Oly to give Miranda up for adoption. The phrase “geek love” first appears as the title of one of Miranda’s drawings, and pairs feelings of revulsion and fascination at

such a sight. It also foretells a more detailed account of Al and Lil's romance, which sparks when Lil understudies for a geek. Not seduced by traditional Western standards of feminine beauty, Al falls for the blonde who can bite off a bird's head without blanching. Though a Freudian analysis seems almost too easy, the carnivalesque imagery of inversion is not far off the same mark. Bakhtin highlights the "positive hyperbolism" of carnival banquets that were often paired with scenes of dismemberment as a celebration of life and fertility (279). While she mimes appetite, however, Lil's geek act offers no nutrition, only destruction. Her performance highlights the contrast between high and low, a "Cleopatra" performing the lowest, bloodiest act in a "geek pit" (Dunn 6). Though the reference might be a nod to the historical Queen of the Nile, "Cleopatra" also invokes the name of the infamous evil aerialist in Tod Browning's 1932 cult film, *Freaks*. Here, Dunn leverages heteroglossia and its continual negotiation of both "Cleopatra" and "freaks" in various contexts. The film ends with a crowd of rubes gawking at Cleopatra, exhibited in her human-bird hybrid form as "the biggest freak of them all," and her transformation is evidence of the carnival justice that bears some similarity to frontier justice, in that people get what they deserve.

As Al's wife, Lil is the undisputed matriarch, and historically, some female circus performers could earn as much as some male performers; however, Lil's complicity in Al's perverted family planning reinforces circus-generated narratives like those in "publicity pieces [that] mentioned the husbands of female stars to prove that the women's primary loyalties lay with their husbands" (Davis 99). In similar fashion, Lil demonstrates her loyalties begin and end with Al, even exceeding her children.

The text goes beyond mere carnivalesque inversion in portraying insular social “norms.” While male characters wield the most authority, their transient carnival lifestyle permits transgression of common social taboos like incest without official repercussions. Rachel Adams highlights this gender imbalance when she notes “The freak show’s traditional preoccupation with genealogy is introduced into a contemporary context where reproductive technologies have altered the relationship between sex and procreation, the fetus and the maternal body. But...women continue to bear exclusive responsibility for creating freaks” (187). In describing her grotesque physical attributes, Olympia also establishes bounds of normalcy for her world: “It was a disappointment when I emerged with such commonplace deformities. My albinism is the regular pink-eyed variety and my hump, though pronounced, is not remarkable in size or shape” (8). The Binewski siblings seem unnaturally close: while her conjoined twin sisters do not share the same feelings for Arty, Oly openly admits her devotion (78). Ticket sales complicate family affections, however, and jealousy over the infant Chick’s power drives Arty to attempt murder (81). Duane highlights the novel’s economic influence, noting, “the Binewskis reflect in their particular funhouse mirror how extensively the logic of the marketplace permeates the allegedly sacred realm of home and family” (107). Carnival logic further separates “home” and “family,” as Arty’s tank becomes the “sacred space” at the Binewski Fabulon, but not for the family.

The eldest and most ambitious sibling, Arty’s act evolves from an oracular tadpole to a monomaniacal cult leader. A grotesque parody of the carnivalesque mermaid figure, his siren song lures new members to the Arturan religion, dubbed “the Admitted.” Dunn literalizes the metaphor in describing the price of finding peace by joining his cult

of personality: it costs an actual arm and leg. His followers ritually amputate body parts in symbolic sacrifice to become more like him: “His hands and feet were in the form of flippers that sprouted directly from his torso without intervening arms or legs” (Dunn 7-8). After toes and fingers, Arturan acolytes shed larger limbs as they progress. In this perverse expression of identity, Arty’s followers claim they want to be like *him*, rather than recognize their own identities. Chick’s powers provide a form of psychic anesthesia for surgical procedures, so his character embodies the Arturan version of the “opium for the masses.” While this parodic depiction of religion seems absurd at first, the novel follows through on the premise until Arty’s cult leaves limbless followers scattered across the country in nursing homes. The more pieces of themselves they cut away, the closer they are to the “sacred,” despite Arty’s own skeptical views.

In a Russian nesting-doll schema of parody within parody, Oly devises a plan to protect Miranda from frozen-food heiress Mary Lick, whose mission it is to “help” young women escape their own inevitable exploitation: “Miss Lick’s purpose is to liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers....If all these pretty women could shed the traits that made men want them (their prettiness) then they would...use their talents and intelligence to become powerful” (162). With a religious zeal that parallels Arty’s followers, Miss Lick offers to strip women’s physical beauty as if clearing a path to their success—in exchange for unlimited financial assistance and education. Though her family built its fortune on frozen food, her mission endeavors to metaphorically starve “male hungers.” She also videotapes the surgeries so she can gawk in morbid fascination, like a one-woman freak show audience. These procedures mirror Arty’s devoted amputees, but instead of self-abnegation, Miss Lick pitches them as acts of

embracing the “true self.” Miss Lick’s awkward height inverts Arty’s stunted physique, and her self-proclaimed asexuality foils Aqua Boy’s legendary promiscuity.

Miss Lick offers to remove Miranda’s tail after spotting her at a burlesque show, and when Oly learns of her daughter’s dilemma, she knows she must kill Miss Lick. (She is always “Miss Lick,” never “Mary.”) Like many women complicit in systematic oppression, Miss Lick ignores the imbalance of power at the root of the problem to focus on the victims. She assumes Western standards of ableism and heteronormative beauty, and those who meet such standards will not only recognize their own genetic windfall, but will view their physical traits as the primary tools for success. Miss Lick’s opinion is rooted in her experience of growing up “homely,” despite her wealth, among glittering debutantes. She and Arty assume parallel roles as the impresario who tempts unsuspecting marks to part with their treasures . . . and toes. Minus the tragic ending, the novel’s commitment to parody might have kept the story within the Bakhtinian carnival.

The last fifty pages finally reveal Arty as Miranda’s father, though Chick’s surgically precise telekinesis allows Oly to keep her immaculate conception (via psychic fertility treatments) a secret until she shows a bump. Even while pregnant, she easily disarms Arty’s physical attack, but sickens at recognizing she is programmed to perceive violence as an act of love: “He must love me, I thought, amazed. A faint whiff of nausea hit me at seeing pain as proof of love. But it seemed true. Unavoidable” (304). Her character’s confessional self-awareness might be described as metanarrative, in function, if not true to form.

Thematically, the moment serves as Oly’s awakening, as it transforms her outlook on what it means to love, and be loved. She writes: “Understand, daughter, that the only

reason for your existing was as a tribute to your uncle-father. You were meant to love him. I planned to teach you how to serve him and adore him...Forgive me. As soon as you arrived I realized you were worth much more than that" (309). Prior to this, Oly's accounts sound apologetic, or at least ambivalent, about Arty. Here, she recognizes his monstrous behavior as a threat to her daughter's life, as well as her own role in enabling his megalomania. Olympia Binewski caricatures the martyrdom of motherhood; she may not claim feminist subjectivity for herself, but she ensures Miranda's agency remains intact. That marks the hill upon which she is willing die, along with anyone else who threatens her child. As Duane suggests, "*Geek Love* chronicles a new domestic space reflecting an affective economy that undoes the division between home and work, and between love and money. In the process, the novel chronicles the destruction of the individual subject created by the supposed tension between the home and the market" (106). Dunn illustrates Oly's limited choices through parody, hyperbole, and absurdity to create a world that interrogates the boundaries of normalcy.

The novel serves as Olympia's love-letter to Miranda, who remains unaware of her origins. Along with her letters, Oly fills a trunk with news articles, memorabilia, and carnival ephemera as documentation of her family. These additional voices contribute polyphonic qualities, as do references to Browning's *Freaks*, and Norval Sanderson's news-feature articles. Physically fragmenting people in the name of becoming "whole"—either as part of Arty's cult or as Lick's pet projects—can certainly be read as an inversion, but the logic behind such thinking must also be considered perverse. While Oly's historical accounts are firmly situated within the family carnival business, the carnivalesque is often overshadowed by perverse and grotesque absurdities. Thus the

questionable nature of the Binewski family business interrogates dominant discourses about both “family” and “business.”

By highlighting acts of self-sacrifice in pursuit of peace, by Oly, the Arturans, and Miss Lick, Dunn critiques such actions described as part of worship. As Weber notes, “the consent to give up and eradicate the Self when faced with internal trouble and the promise of salvation as it is depicted in *Geek Love* rewrites Freudian and Jungian notions of group psychology, theology, and cult experiences and explains how the freak turns from being wholly grotesque into being regarded as quite literally the holy grotesque” (360). Weber establishes a reasonable rhetorical link between Arty’s Arturans and Morgenstern’s rêveurs as comparable literary examples of cults, noting “Those who follow the travelling shows identify with one another, highlighted by the use of a collective name for members of the group . . . [and] the attempt to physically set themselves apart from other visitors” (361). The similarities end with collective names and separate physical spaces, however, as only Arty exemplifies the role of self-proclaimed prophet.

Though Dunn and Morgenstern both portray poor parenting practices, they reinforce how the affective nature of family outweighs taxonomic designations of genealogy. More of a feeling than a family tree, both authors convey family as a sense of trusted community. Dunn’s novel recounts Olympia’s letters to her daughter, and Morgenstern’s tale collects Widget’s retelling of how Le Cirque des Rêves began to M. Alexander H— in exchange for a “used playing field.” The individualized accounts impart to readers details that mark characters as insiders or outsiders, and illustrate vast differences in the social norms that govern these worlds.

In another portrayal of the circus as outside “normal” social conventions, Genevieve Valentine depicts an immersive secondary world with a post-apocalyptic steampunk aesthetic in her 2011 novel, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*. While recounting the events of a mechanical carnival of cyborgs and ex-soldiers in crumbling urban settings, Valentine employs a second-person narrator to create a greater sense of intimacy for readers of her future dystopia. Though this novel echoes themes of body horror similar to those in Dunn’s text, Valentine adds steampunk and cyborg tropes, as well as magical modifications performed by ringmaster, Boss.

The nonlinear narrative doles out fragments of information that position the circus as a figure of legend, pursued by authorities for illegal, potentially destructive acts of creativity: “Boss knows that great events have a spirit of their own . . . the reason some cities fall after the Circus Tresaulti has passed through is because the life of a city flickers and trembles when they are near. Then Tresaulti departs, and the life of the city tries to follow and cannot” (112). This passage echoes Bakhtin’s concept of the medieval carnival as an atmosphere or spirit of freedom, the recognition of this freedom, as the “life of the city,” stands out in dramatic comparison to the desolate post-war setting Valentine portrays. The second-person narrative voice reinforces the reader’s sense of fragmentation, as Valentine’s chapters rotate the narrator’s identity among her characters but delay revealing which character is narrating.

When Boss fixes someone, either to enhance circus performance or to save them from injury, it means they will die, but only temporarily: “After the worst of their terror is over, Boss says, ‘You can never leave the circus. It will keep you alive after I finish fixing you’ (79). She performs a variety of cyborg modifications, but the novel implies

her griffin tattoo signifies her ambiguous magical powers, which allow her to re-animate her subjects without relying on technology; such powers of parthenogenesis also figure her as a mother to the circus. As Wilkerson describes, “Boss’s power, although here magical and unexplained, is at its core a woman’s power: she can give life, and unlike matters of ‘normal’ reproduction, she needs no male involvement” (156). Her assistant, George, attests to her skill, “Boss makes freaks, but she knows what she’s doing” (23). She replaces performers’ regular bones with copper to make them lighter, gives roustabouts mechanical strength, and restores a musician as a human-calliope hybrid, made to look like a resurrected junk-man. Weber compares her practice to religious ritual when she notes the comparison between “salvage, salvation, and the grotesque body as ‘joyous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth’” (353).

The leftover raw materials help Boss construct a pair of wings for her lover, Alec, who performed as the Winged Man and also became an iconic image on circus posters. “Of all the mechanical pieces in the Circus Tresaulti, Boss has taken these into her heart . . . everyone sees the wings are not really a machine. They are art; they are skill; they are proof the world has not abandoned beauty” (Valentine 33). Now they hang in Boss’s workshop since Alec’s death; the echoes of people whose bones made his wings drove Alec to take his own life. As Weber notes, “Even though [Alec] appears complete and moves the audience to tears, behind the scenes the control he has over himself begins to slip away” (354). Following this train of logic, one might read his death as a way he thought he could regain a measure of control. Wilkinson describes Boss as “the necromancer-magician who keeps the circus people in their state of not-quite-alive” (155), adding an occult angle to Boss’s projected religious qualities. Voices of the dead lend a

cacophonous narrative strand, but Valentine balances that with a G major seventh musical chord, as well as the collection of circus posters and tales of performers' past lives to add a multiplicity of meaning.

Both Bird and her partner Stenos covet the wings, but Boss hesitates to repeat the mistake. Weber describes the difference between Alec and Bird when she notes, "Alec becomes estranged from his own body . . . causing disturbances on all levels of his subjectivity. Bird on the other hand, who was never at peace with herself, felt the lack of the wings enlarged in in the perception of herself" (354). Because Alec was whole when Boss gave him the wings—she did not use them to repair an injury—he expended considerable energy attempting to integrate the wings into his self-perception, but failed. According to George, the wings pose no additional threat to Bird, as the rest of the circus already thinks her mad. This includes Bird, who confirms, "I don't think I can get any madder" (227). Madness acts as another site of narrative instability here, leaving readers uncertain of Bird's true intentions.

Though she refuses George the bones, Boss inscribes a griffin tattoo on his skin to match hers, and endows him with magic of his own. Here, Valentine literalizes the metaphor, for George's matching tattoo makes him Boss's right hand man, authorized to make decisions in her absence. When he acts on his decision to give Bird the wings, she nearly drags him into death with her, but they resist together so that both emerge, transformed by resurrection. By choosing to use his gift, Little George, "who relayed choices other people made" (228), becomes the decisive George who acts as Boss's partner.

Ultimately, giving Bird the wings not only transforms George, it also makes her feel complete and empowers her to save Boss from the government men, who want to weaponize her creative powers to make soldiers instead of performers. Although former female soldiers make up a large portion of the circus acts, the government representatives are portrayed as exclusively anonymous males, highlighting Boss's individual character, as well as her specifically female magical qualities. Wilkinson comments on this discrepancy in the government man's actions when she notes, "Evoking the role of women in the very male need to beget male offspring, he needs a wife-figure who can birth the soldiers he will use to restore the society that once was" (156). No matter how far back that society "once" was, the circus predates it, as Little George learns early on, "We're the circus that survives" (16).

Though not related by blood, the troupe still consider themselves a family, bound by their individual and collective wartime trauma and relative notions of home: "for a moment Boss feels that the circus is a true home. Sometimes, by accident, they become a family" (155). Boss's words reflect this notion when she tells her remaining troupe to flee upon her capture: "You hope all of them are miles away . . . there are other, safer places. A circus always finds a home; everybody wants a show" (152). For Boss and her circus, "safe" refers to the mobility in their roles related to work, performing, and belonging; the safety of proverbial houses would pose a greater threat, for people would know where to find the beautiful and terrible Circus Tresaulti. Panadrome, the human-calliope, expresses the troupe's reverential attitude toward Boss after she's arrested: "She deserves our fight. Without her, who of us would still be living?" (256).

Wilkinson notes, “In *Mechanique*, circus women are afforded opportunity and power outside the dominant society, while in *The Night Circus* they are contained and imprisoned” (148). Although she does account for the situated socio-historical perspective of nineteenth century Victorian gender norms, Wilkerson offers few possible readings of resistance in *The Night Circus*, particularly in comparison to *Mechanique*. Though Morgenstern’s circus inspires a kind of consuming, creative love expressed by Celia and Marco, it also inspires the change and survival represented by Bailey and the Murray twins, as well as resistance to heteronormative values in Tsukiko’s story line. Although in a Victorian system of social mores Tsukiko’s character would be considered an Exotic Other, she remains the winner of the previous wizard’s duel and maintains her queer female identity. Chandresh represents the queer exotic male end of the representation spectrum, though his Indian identity would also count him as an Exotic Other.

Wilkinson offers a comparison between Morgenstern and Valentine’s texts: “*The Night Circus* is a nostalgic glance backwards at a circus that presents only the illusion of disorder and transgression while upholding social hierarchies. *Mechanique*, on the other hand, allows its readers a guarded look forward, a view of a world—and a circus—so drastically different that it can only be born after a complete collapse of what came before” (169). Despite an oversimplification of terms that collapses “the circus” into the same category of meaning as the carnival, Wilkinson’s acknowledgement of inflections from genres and historical contexts recuperates some insights from her analysis. While both Valentine and Morgenstern employ the same word, “circus,” to describe the traveling shows depicted in their respective novels, the Circus Tresaulti of *Mechanique*

offers a closer representation of the Dark Carnival as a literary concept as I perceive it than does Morgenstern's parallel nomenclature in *The Night Circus*. The circus world of Marco and Celia follows the pattern of Gilded Age circuses that established such shows as heavily produced and polished productions that presented the illusion of resistance. However, much like women in corsets during the same timeframe, the visual production was the result of strict controls and oversight. Because both works evoke an affect of wonder and dread, and portray protagonists tempted—or forced—to join a game or contest that also threatens to consume them, these novels show some resemblances to prototypical Dark Carnival texts. However, because Valentine and Morgenstern portray their respective carnivals as “home” rather than invasive outside forces, they represent contrasting examples of the prototype. During extended periods of wartime, Valentine's circus mimics the freedom its audience craves, but understands as impossible, whereas Morgenstern offers a circus as a kind of magical “folly,” in the Victorian tradition. Valentine's speculative world offers more freedom to create opportunities for resistance, since readers cannot know the social norms, whereas most readers have some understanding of restrictive Victorian ideals.

By normalizing procedures that make bodies extraordinary, however, the “human” performers in the Circus Tresaulti become the marginalized “freaks,” and the brass-plated, copper-infused performers become subjects to envy and fear during the apocalypse. Wilkinson highlights these reversals when she notes, “as previously able-bodied people, the aerialists' choice to become ‘freaks’ does represent, on some level, a willingness to reject social norms about what bodies should and shouldn't be” (154). George's augmented visual acuity increases his awareness of the circus and its members, but the

characters react as if his tattoo corrects some kind of physical deficiency or disability, as he notes, “the tattoo was like putting a pair of spectacles on a child with poor vision” (131). Unlike the other performers Boss resurrects, George requires no physical repairs, but he and the rest of the cyborg circus company enact a wartime version of “survivance,” surviving through their ability to perform (and seem) fully human. Depicted as *more than* human, Boss and George form a partnership of ringmasters.

Their leadership in a post-apocalyptic setting implies some level of divinity (or magic use) often used to subvert traditional religious discourses. Though not as blatant as Dunn’s text, Boss and George grow into savior figures, though the “salvation” they offer is more like industrial upcycling within a future version of the US healthcare system. As Weber notes:

The examples of *Geek Love*, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* . . . and *Nights at the Circus* show how salvage and salvation are negotiated through representations of deviant bodies. While it is possible to subvert the monstrous into the Secret Self and undergo transformations that lead to a stability of the embodied self—as happens for Bird—the offering of ‘earthly sanctuary’ of the Admitted undermines any kind of individual development. The only thing the promise of salvation leads to is extinction (364).

While Weber interprets the allure of grotesque bodies as “holy,” I suggest that in *Mechanique*, that allure is more “shiny,” at least for the government men who seek to appropriate Boss’s powers and her creations as “resources.” Valentine depicts audiences reacting with awe and appreciation, but not out of inspiration to become circus disciples,

as with Arty's audiences in *Geek Love*. Those who do seek to join the circus seem to have no other viable options, often in a literal sense when they come to Boss with mortal injuries. The characters most convinced of Boss's divinity are her circus "children," but they follow her instructions without proselytizing, as their primary interest is survival.

Supernatural elements of the Dark Carnival metaphor open up fictional or mythological events to application as social critique. Though some prototypical texts fictionalize ancient tropes that encompass the tension between warring values, like making a deal with the devil, others deconstruct the individual elements and introduce the "devil" as a friend and ally. Most Dark Carnival texts, however, depict a carnival as an alluring departure from reality that promises fun, or some other form of escape, but later reveals the admission as a price too dear to pay; those who cannot pay must remain as new members of the carnival.

Masked by bright lights and calliope music, the central message might also be one of survival (survivance) amidst dominant social narratives that impose Judeo-Christian (Protestant) values to declare a person's trajectory toward heaven or hell as a foregone conclusion. Parypinski's novel deploys this message, rooted in indigenous trickster mythology and cosmic horror, as does Finney, replacing Protestant shame-casting with predatory telekinesis. The contrasting category, including texts by Dunn, Morgenstern, and Valentine, offer messages of resistance to social norms informed by religious views of morality best expressed in Bradbury's prototype that warns readers, "beware of the carnival, lest it drag you to hell." Dunn's protagonist in *Geek Love* would keep the warning, but replace the conditional phrase with, "or I'll take everyone with me." Morgenstern's novel substitutes transcendent magic for religious realms, and Valentine's

text implies that hell is already here. While these contrasts offer overt portrayals of carnival wonders replacing traditional worship thus far, Neil Gaiman's 1999 novel, *American Gods*, amplifies this theme to maximum volume in Chapter Five.

Seanán McGuire has also produced several examples of contrasting Dark Carnival prototypes, but a full examination lies beyond the scope of this study. Her female protagonist in *Deadlands: Boneyard* (2017), Annie Pearl (Grace Murphy), absconds with her infant daughter in the dead of night to escape the murderous “help” of the mad-scientist Mormon husband she left in Deseret to disappear as a traveling carnival's Mistress of Monsters. McGuire leans more heavily on the human/monster transgressions in her series of InCryptid novels, currently on book nine. The novels situate a family of cryptozoologists as champions and conservationists for a wide variety of as-yet-undiscovered non-human species, or what most humans would call “monsters.” Throughout the books, McGuire constructs a world that relies on the inside-out logic of carnival, and entwines the Price family tree with a century of mythology from the Campbell Family Carnival. Both human and non-human characters constantly negotiate the boundary area between human and “monster”; tasked with this precise evaluation, her (mostly) human protagonists work to protect unrecognized biological species, known as “cryptids,” as well as magic users, revenants, ghosts, and anyone protecting them from religious zealots. A more robust critical analysis for future studies would also examine the frequency with which women writers portray the carnival as “home” to determine whether causation pairs well with the correlation.

Chapter Four: Metaphoric Extensions

Metaphors: King and Hill

This chapter examines texts that extend the Dark Carnival prototype through metaphoric mappings that fundamentally invert a story world's social norms though it lacks a physical carnival setting. Following an introductory atmosphere of wonder and dread, the carnival spirit as a "world turned upside-down" often produces an affect of horror, which is more central to these stories than the physical setting of the prototype. Each of these texts combines overlapping carnivalesque elements to evoke a carnival atmosphere as a metaphor for social upheaval. Strong examples of texts as metaphoric extensions include Stephen King's novel *The Shining* (1977), its sequel *Doctor Sleep* (2013), and Joe Hill's *NOS4A2* (2013). Even when the Dark Carnival is metaphorical in relation to the prototype, the metaphor still emphasizes place, as in *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*, and actually conjures it, as in *NOS4A2*. These particular texts also demonstrate *actual* family resemblances between authors related as father and son, and in addition, all have been adapted for visual media. Although I make brief mention of the visual texts, this chapter focuses on the written works.

Critical Conversations

Just as Harold Bloom headlines my critical discussion in Chapter Two, the disdain he feels for Bradbury gets amplified exponentially by Stephen King's audacious success as a writer. As Bloom explains in *The Anatomy of Influence*, "one writes for oneself and for strangers, which I translate as both speaking to myself . . . and to those dissident readers around the world who in solitude instinctually reach out for quality in

literature, disdaining the lemmings who devour J.K. Rowling and Stephen King as they race down the cliffs to intellectual suicide in the gray ocean of the internet” (Bloom 10). First of all, I take issue with such an egregiously mixed metaphor: why is the internet at the bottom of a cliff if the prevailing ethereal metaphor of “cyberspace” lacks gravity? Secondly, I identify as one of those “lemmings,” but offer my begrudging (posthumous) thanks for so colorfully illustrating the constant negotiation between “high” and “low” art forms, including literature.

Bloom grants Bradbury sparse literary credit, despite winning an O. Henry Award for “Homecoming” in 1948; in similar fashion, the critic has no affection for King, who also won an O. Henry Award. As Philip Simpson notes, King’s writing “appeared regularly in *The New Yorker*, and his story “The Man in the Black Suit” had won the coveted O. Henry Award in 1996, a notable landmark in King’s journey to legitimacy because this fantasy story beat out other eligible stories by ‘literary’ writers” (38-39). Bloom’s exaggerated negative reactions establish a sense of academic canonicity against which writers of genre fiction still rail.

As Tony Magistrale notes, three of the Yale professor’s publications “acknowledge King’s narrative skills appeal to an unsophisticated mass audience . . . and declares King will be remembered as a ‘sociological phenomenon,’ an image of the Death of the Literate Reader (“Why” 353). When the National Book Foundation honored King for his “distinguished contribution” in 2003, Bloom “unloosed a memorable blast in the *Los Angeles Times*,” expressing his outrage at bestowing an award “that had previously been given to masters of the literary craft such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Arthur Miller, whereas Stephen King’s thrillers ‘sell in the millions but do little more

for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat” (Murphy 135). Cullen Murphy, managing editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, ran a two-page essay, “Setting the Bar: When our standards don’t live up to our standards,” in reaction to Bloom’s public outrage at King’s award as “one more episode in ‘the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life’” (135). For perspective, Murphy cites more examples of “sliding norms,” first noting that the US military no longer shoots deserters, as was the norm after World War I. In fact, Murphy notes, today’s US Army “almost never prosecutes deserters. . . . No American has been shot for desertion since 1945” (135).

While deviating from literary standards bears little resemblance to military desertion, Murphy’s hyperbolic example offers some perspective. His examination of declining standards in general includes Bill Clinton’s “inappropriate behavior,” his own father’s notion of brown shoes as “inappropriate,” and Harvard’s “softened” admission standards in 1892, which “seem almost laughably stringent” (135). Murphy also cites Senator Patrick Moynihan’s article in *The American Scholar* that “described how society’s increasingly relaxed standards were allowing more and more marginal behavior to gain gradual acceptance. He called the process ‘defining deviancy down’” (135). Though written in the 1990s, Moynihan’s article seems prescient in today’s political climate, yet still makes Bloom’s diatribe look ridiculous, particularly when grouped with increasingly disparate examples like Barbie’s personal measurements and crayon hues named for human complexions. Murphy emphasizes his point at the end of each page, first by emphasizing “the situation with respect to standards is not straightforward because for every example of declining norms in one area of life there is an example of rising norms somewhere else” (135). Acknowledging some “standards will always be in

flux,” he proposes a list of ten timeless rules, starting with “wash your hands,” and concluding with “Anything that does ‘little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat’ deserves an award” (136).

Magistrale points out that King violates the New Critics’ preference for literature that privileges tradition over events that define the historical present, by incorporating issues like race, politics, or other social commentary (356). In terms of criticism, Bloom’s negative reactions may have been more of a boon for King than some straightforward analyses. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller’s edited collection, *Fear Itself*, includes critical essays that position King as a regionalist, writing in the tradition of American naturalism (52); as a modern adaptor of fairy tales (67); and as an author writing *within* the tradition of the horror genre and *to* an audience he recognizes as horror fans via in-genre allusions to Poe and Jackson (83). It also recognizes King’s short stories “owing something to Ray Bradbury . . . real people, believable action, a perfectly developed setting, and a freightload of horror” (88). As Don Herron writes, “Too many critics have torn apart his work, *dismissing it simply because of its fantastic trappings* . . . Many critics seem to miss the point that King’s work is top-notch *noir*” in addressing serious social problems and everyday elements of horror (96, italics in original).

Though not as problematic as it once was, writers and scholars of genre fiction frequently contend with dismissals of fantastic elements as “juvenile,” or unbelievable; scholarship defending fantasy literature dates back to at least the Victorian era (with George MacDonald), so the argument is not new. Herron groups *The Shining* with King’s other supernatural works in suggesting “King’s major problem as a supernaturalist and simply as a writer has been the balancing of the real and unreal elements . . . In many

cases, *the failures of the supernatural are obvious concessions by the author to prolong the action* . . . King sacrifices *overall* believability in plot in favor of *believability for the moment*. He sacrifices *rationality* for intensity” (97, italics in original). While the criticism may have merit, some actions can only be described in “irrational” terms. Like Herron and Ben Indick, Heidi Strengell also points to Poe and H.P. Lovecraft as influences on King’s supernatural fiction, emphasizing how “psychological honesty marks the writing of both Poe and King” (104). Indick emphasizes Jack Torrance’s feverish experiences at the Overlook as “the final horror, which is death or capitulation, *the surrender of one’s humanity* (176, italics in original). Jack’s alcoholism aligns him with Poe, as “addiction pushes Torrance, as it did Poe . . . further from reality, into his own imaginary version of reality” (Magistrale 356). Magistrale belongs to a growing number of scholars who situate King’s writing as part of a distinctly American tradition emblematic of a uniquely Gothic vein. This distinctive style connects King to a Gothic lineage beginning with the New England Puritans, with their emphasis on innate depravity and particular distrust of natural wilderness (“Why” 356).

Philip Simpson notes how “King’s cultural influence is apparent in the number of allusions to him and his work in film, television, music, and novels” (57). More than just an author New Critics love to hate, King has become something of a cultural force, similar in many ways to Bradbury’s cultural impact. As Magistrale notes, “Although he has emerged as a product of the fertile American Gothic imagination, King has ultimately transcended genre and become a spokesman for his times” (363). The author maintains an active social media presence, famously sparring in (formerly) 140-character bursts with Donald Trump on Twitter long before the 2016 election. The inaugural issue of the

Journal for Stephen King Studies, *Pennywise Dreadful*, launched in fall of 2017; this offers evidence that scholarship on King's work has evolved into an acceptable specialization within larger academic fields such as American literature, horror fiction, and Gothic studies.

Metaphors

The central Dark Carnival prototype and its closest examples follow a chronotopic structure that combines narrative elements of time and space; thematically, they also portray some central temptation to join or perform an activity that will also consume them, but protagonists restore social norms in the conclusion. Metaphoric extensions, like King's *The Shining*, maintain the theme of temptation, but the Torrance family shifts from their home in Connecticut to care for The Overlook Hotel in Sidewinder, Colorado. In addition to breaking the chronotope's unity of time and place, the novel includes a metaphoric version of carnival as a world-upside-down rather than a physical carnival setting or performers. Jack Torrance battles phantom carnivalesque temptations to "unmask, unmask, unmask" (362), though the novel depicts no physical masquerade. After Jack's death, his son continues the story in the sequel, *Doctor Sleep*, except Dan manages to reverse almost all of the roles his father modeled. As a recovering alcoholic, however, he faces temptation on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis; while battling his own metaphorical demons Dan still faces the hotel ghosts that continue haunting him as an adult. His experiences prepare him to pass on his supernatural expertise and sustain some of his family's more positive traditions. In this way, Dan's story in *Doctor Sleep* works as an inversion of *The Shining*, rather than the world at large. In another metaphoric extension, Joe Hill portrays Christmasland as an infernal

amusement park in *NOS4A2*, accessible only in another dimension by people known as “strong creatives” who possess the means (vehicles) and the knowledge to travel such roads. Neither King nor Hill depicts a protagonist who restores social norms; instead, they leave readers to construct a “new normal” in their imaginations.

Without the ominous arrival of a predatory carnival troupe or a physical carnival setting, different elements in both form and content serve to index the metaphorical Dark Carnival at work in these stories. Selected texts portray recognizable (mimetic) worlds with focal characters that experience a fundamental inversion of social norms. Those focalizing characters tend to be children (or child-like characters) who also narrate the upheaval, and must negotiate a pivotal temptation scene as part of a game or contest. The peculiar combination of these themes, when combined with recognizable carnival imagery, acts to destabilize reader expectations and pervert the already inverted social norms; this produces a sense that things are more than just topsy-turvy, but also about fifteen degrees off center.

A gradual recognition of the Dark Carnival emerges as a collaborative effort between authors and readers in an ongoing process of meaning creation centered on the idea of indexicality, which narratology scholars describe as “the process through which linguistic elements are connected to social meanings in ongoing processes of meaning creation” (DeFina and Georgakopoulou 117). Instead of conversational components, however, replacing “linguistic” with “literary” indicates how readers arrive at an understanding of the Dark Carnival through an accumulated comprehension of different narrative elements (indices). This gradual sense of recognition helps illustrate why the narrative affect plays an important role in identifying Dark Carnival stories; readers can

identify Dark Carnival stories more easily by amassing enough narrative cues that all index the same emotional tone, particularly when a story lacks the prototypical carnival setting.

Describing these works as merely carnivalesque would imply a temporary inversion of norms that are restored by the story's end. While this reversal accounts for some events, the Dark Carnival also works to skew the axis of inverted norms; instead of a temporary site of *inversion*, the Dark Carnival produces a *perversion* of norms that might never regain their original positions. In texts with physical carnival settings as designated performance sites, readers understand the show must end; however, authors might employ a metaphorical carnival for stories that extend beyond the performance space. Many horror stories deliberately avoid narrative closure to contribute to an overall sense of cosmic dread, in which case the "show" never really ends. Kubrick's film offers a borderline case: when Jack Torrance freezes to death outside the Overlook, part of him lives on in the heart of the evil that thrives there, as reflected by his central position in the New Year's photo outside the ballroom. King recovers Jack's transcendent spark of consciousness in *Doctor Sleep* for a sense of long-awaited narrative coherence.

King and Hill portray diegetic worlds in flux through a fundamental inversion of norms: in *The Shining*, Jack Torrance uproots his family's New England home to make a new start in a haunted hotel in the isolated Rockies. Despite surviving Jack's fatal confrontation with the supernatural, *Doctor Sleep*'s adult Dan Torrance inherits his father's alcoholism and hits bottom before seeking professional help to battle his own demons. Born with an unusual gift for locating lost items, Vic McQueen must rescue her own son from the same predator who kidnapped her as a child in *NOS4A2*. Each story

builds upon an underlying foundation of reversal; having established a foothold of carnivalesque inversion, the Dark Carnival further skews the imbalance to the point of perversion. As Linda Holland-Toll suggests, “An apt metaphor for horror fiction is that of the warped but true carnival mirror, the mirror that sees the soul and reveals all the dis/eases, simultaneously forcing us to recognize all the hidden monster-seeds within ourselves and within our society” (132).

In addition to a primary social inversion, children serve as focalized characters and narrators, perhaps because without decades of social conditioning to reproduce enlightenment values, children more readily accept fantastic events as reality. Lacking a physical carnival, a child’s guileless perspective allows adult readers an easy transition to the suspense of disbelief required of fantasy; like a narrative prosthetic, children provide access to an added dimension of possibility that reveals additional carnivalesque potential. Whether or not these characters perceive fantastic events as reality, however, the authors emphasize their concern about convincing the adult characters to believe them; belief functions like the fuel that powers the vehicle of story: nothing gets far without it. This illustrates how plot functions of discovery and confirmation work together, in what Carroll describes as “the complex discovery plot, the discovery that a monster is at the root of recent evil is resisted, often by the powers that be . . . [and] necessitates a further confirmation to the satisfaction of third parties of the monster’s existence” (101). Each text also presents its focal characters with temptation in some form of play or game; however, joining the game in question also threatens to consume them. Just as writers employ carnival metaphorically, the “game” in each text may refer a character’s given path, or the game of life. Instead of striving to create or identify some kind of absolute

meaning or literary formula for Dark Carnival stories, these patterns become evident in the family resemblances they bear to similar texts.

Holland-Toll declares King's novel an example of the Dark Carnival, which she describes briefly as "carnival reversed." Her description minimizes the complexity of Bakhtin's concepts, and confines carnivalesque inversion to simple categorical opposition. Bakhtin describes a more holistic, dynamic force that casts such reversals as "demand[ing] ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal" (*Rabelais* 11). If this view embraces both "upright" and "inverted" carnival positions as parts of the same universal transformative process, then carnival always already includes "reversed," "upright," and every point in between. Although Holland-Toll asserts that King's "sense of carnivalization is substantially darker than Bakhtin's original definition of the term" (133), any further clarification remains scattered throughout the article in phrases like "Dionysian revelry," and ominous statements that "this carnival alienates and kills" (136).

Despite the imprecise nomenclature, Holland-Toll also describes polyphony and heteroglossia as carnivalesque practices King employs to undermine authoritative discourses (133). Although not entirely incorrect, I must point out how Holland-Toll's use of these terms as interchangeable obscures her article's larger argument. As the editor and translator of several of Bakhtin's major works, Michael Holquist explains, Bakhtin uses *heteroglossia*, or the stratification of language, as a "master trope at the heart of all his other projects"; because it describes the interanimation of diverse kinds of speech as part of a living language, it would be more accurate to explain polyphony and carnivalization as expressions of "the primary condition of heteroglossia" (*Dialogic* xix).

The concept of heteroglossia describes diversity at the level of language, as Bakhtin describes, “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot . . . it represents the socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past . . . between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth” (*Dialogic* 291). Thus polyphony echoes the multiplicity of language as a narrative style pioneered in the novel (specifically in works by Dostoevsky), and the process of carnivalization embraces and inverts larger themes and norms in the novel.

King’s descriptions of a ghostly masquerade ball (350) offer the most obvious carnivalesque connection in *The Shining*, though he also employs grotesque realism, derisive laughter, and depictions of “madness” to destabilize the narrative. Holland-Toll notes that “King uses the isolation of the Overlook Hotel, a famous hotel with an infamous history, to discuss how the heteroglossic societal forces which humans have shaped and live with can create monsters out of perfectly nice guys” (137). In addition to the cultural capital inherent in mob-related scandals and later connotations of the term “GoodFellas,” the present absence of missing indigenous cultures underwrites the ugly side of American exceptionalism the Overlook represents. Valdine Clemons writes about the faulty premises upon which American identity has been founded, and specifically in Colorado, “In the case of the Arapaho, their annihilation was undertaken ‘with full knowledge and consent’ of Governor John Evans and his superior officers, to whom the Cheyenne and Arapaho had already given most of their guns” (191).

The novel physically relocates Jack, Wendy, and Danny Torrance from New England to the remote Colorado setting of the Overlook Hotel. A recently unemployed teacher and struggling writer, Jack views the opportunity to become the hotel’s caretaker

as a fresh start for his whole family. While touring the hotel's well-stocked pantries, Wendy recalls the ill-fated Donner Party, "not with thoughts of cannibalism...but with the reinforced idea that... when snow fell, getting out of here would not be a matter of an hour's drive to Sidewinder but a major operation" (104). Like the pioneers who foolishly attempted a mountain pass with no consideration for the coming winter, Wendy questions whether her family is truly prepared for the winter ahead, offering a polyphonic strain of doubt to temper Jack's hubristic self-confidence.

Five-year-old Danny regularly experiences precognitive episodes and nightmares, or what hotel chef Dick Halloran calls the "shine" (113). His ability presents as an epileptic seizure, but a doctor's visit dismisses Wendy's concerns about her son's health (211). Holland-Toll points out Wendy's rejection of the doctor's "comforting and authoritative medical discourse leav[ing] her prey to the forces of unreality. . . she hesitantly offers . . . the speech of wise women, when she says Danny was born with a caul, a reference to the old wives' tale, yet another example of heteroglossia" (139). Since Wendy's comment represents a level of diegetic discourse that assumes an already-negotiated status of meaning, I submit that her voice here represents another strain of polyphony, and not heteroglossia. Later in the novel, Jack's repeated threats to administer "medicine" with a roque mallet offer a clearer example of heteroglossia, as he destabilizes the allopathic meaning of "medicine" by applying a more psychopathic use.

Added to Wendy's voice are Danny's and Tony's, as conscious and unconscious representations of the same character. Polyphonic narrative strains introduce questions about the reliability of certain narrators. Examples of these additional voices include Danny's conversations with Tony and his warnings of "redrum" (46); the boiler's

“mechanical roaring” (208); newspaper articles in the hotel scrapbook (227); and Jack’s somniloquent repetitions of “unmask, unmask,” a recurring reference to Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death” (362). Each voice contributes a different discourse as carriers of collective meaning, but rather than fostering carnivalesque ambivalence the voices create confusion and panic, heightening a sense of horror.

Similar to carnival’s permeable boundaries between work and play, living in a hotel during the off-season blurs the margins between “vacation” and “home.” While the location seems particularly inviting for ski trips, King describes summer as the hotel’s busiest season, further inverting “on” and “off” seasons for vacation. Though Jack’s intentions to maintain the hotel and to finish writing his play both seem genuine, the family’s luxurious alpine surroundings gradually shift from exceptional to mundane, and grow increasingly menacing as history reveals a malevolent power festering behind the resort’s surface. As Brandon Benevento writes, “King puts maintenance and management into opposition, using the former to show the latter as both evil and inept” (723). As Jack’s management role increases, his capacity for caretaking decreases, both in terms of basic physical and emotional care for his family as well as maintaining the hotel’s physical structure.

The site’s malevolent energy echoes animistic beliefs of some cultures that make strong associations with place and spirit. King’s choice in naming the fictional town of Sidewinder evokes the ancient Roman *genius loci*, protective spirits of place, often depicted symbolically as snakes. In *Landscapes of Fear*, Tony Magistrale writes that “the Overlook Hotel seems to have had an evil attraction from its onset, as though a malevolent *genius loci* [sic] were present. From its iniquitous origins, the hotel has

apparently been accumulating and concentrating instances of human evil” (65). The town’s name recalls a snake’s peculiar undulating locomotion, mimicked in the zigzag design of mountainous roadways that employ a series of switchbacks; however, because the snakelike road will be closed, it seems to be guarding against the family’s departure rather than aiding their arrival. As Carl Abbott mentions, “Colorado was very much isolated from the more powerful flows of east-west commerce until 1979, when the Interstate Highway builders shoved I-70 through the Eisenhower Tunnel. It was easy to get *to*, not so easy to get *through*” (Abbott 223, italics in original). Given the original publication of *The Shining* in 1977, this sense of isolation was likely still circulating in the public imagination.

The exclusive resort has sheltered infamous figures and hosted their violent acts for over a century; Jack’s plans to reboot his writing career fail spectacularly as the hotel Management lures him to madness with illusions of power. As Benevento points out, Jack “becomes obsessed with writing a great book, sourced from records found in the basement—a type of insider access provided by the hotel. And, as the hotel lures him with such greatness, entitlement and authority, he forgets to check the boiler” (726.) This Faustian thread of temptation common to Dark Carnival texts (155, 158, 566) marks another inverted expectation when Jack looks forward to the job as caretaker because it will give him more time to write. As Benevento points out, “Jack is working in order to work” (734), and ends up prioritizing the corporation’s needs above his own self-determined creative output.

This conflict between responsibilities compounds Jack’s unresolved psychological issues, some of which remain from his own childhood. As Mathias Clasen

notes, Jack's character signals cultural anxieties of "masculinity and what it meant to be a man—[he] represents a transitional form of masculinity,' . . . between . . . his own abusive, patriarchal dad and . . . the father as a loving co-parent" (78). Instead of reviving his writing career and reinvesting himself as a husband and father, Jack succumbs to the Hotel's sinister calling when he agrees to exchange Wendy and Danny to attend the masquerade ball and finally "unmask" his true self. Rather than writing his own script, he lapses into reprising the same abusive role his own father handed down. As Clemens notes, "Wendy and Danny discover that the man who has taken them to an apparently peaceful mountain retreat, where they hope to find refuge from the family's financial troubles, becomes a drunken, violent, murderous maniac" (191). The idea of unmasking relates to Jack's failed attempts to revise his life; if a haunted house represents the protagonist's psyche, one might read the hotel, as a (perverted) simulation of "home," unmasked as a simulated life he will never live.

Fittingly, the hotel's critical malfunction – the boiler – resides in its foundations. Though the staff warns Jack repeatedly to monitor it carefully, the fixture eventually overheats; in similar fashion, and despite his own constant reminders, Jack's temper boils over spectacularly. Instead of preserving his nuclear family, Jack's explosive demise brings in an element of heteroglossia, oscillating between competing meanings of the word "nuclear." Although Jack's tenure as caretaker ends in violent catastrophe, Danny's "shine" ensures his survival.

Within the content of the novel, Jack fails to change his own story cycle, but Danny and Wendy survive his brutal attacks. If Jack is the "monster" in the story, then defeating him should restore the status quo—except the family has been permanently

fractured. While Carroll's philosophy of horror predicates the horror genre on the presence of at least one monster, as a "being whose existence science denies," he also extends his earlier work to include "some psycho-killers as monsters of supernatural provenance" (Humor 148). Following this line of thinking also supports considering King's narrative environments in *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep* as monstrous in their own right. As Easterlin proposes through her work in place studies, rather than being circumscribed to a rigid physical location, a "place" can be symbolic, imaginative, or reflective of whatever affects or memories humans attach to it.

The language of place studies offers academic terminology to convey a concept King spends over a hundred pages describing as "The Bad Place" (*Danse Macabre* 264-375). Although a story's background is often easily ignored, its narrative construction helps establish an underlying emotional tone to anticipate or amplify plot events and recurring themes. Kevin Corstorphine notes how "the power of space and territory can be felt strongly in horror fiction, particularly in the work of Stephen King, and amidst the corruption and violence that pervades his 'bad places' can be detected a strong sense of the power of place" (84). The "bad place" King constructs in *The Shining* serves as the atmospheric foundation for *Doctor Sleep*.

In this case, the term "environment" refers not only to the general conditions in which a person, plant, or animal exists—like a home, outdoor, or working environment—but it also highlights natural features specific to a geographic area, like a high desert climate. While the natural features of the given world differ in obvious ways from the human engineering in architecture or landscaping of the built environment, King often conflates them deliberately in these texts, and in so doing, creates settings conducive to

cultivating evil. Although *Doctor Sleep* was published thirty-six years after *The Shining*, I consider both texts as a single story (Danny's) initiated by supernatural events at the Overlook Hotel and related by family resemblances. While King relies heavily on personification in *The Shining* to imbue the hotel with predatory characteristics, his descriptions in *Doctor Sleep* rely on a more sophisticated form of conceptual metaphor to unite the two texts as one story under a broader concept of evil. The settings of these novels serve as sinister psychic substrate: they nourish King's fiction with Gothic elements built into the narrative foundations to generate the atmosphere of creeping dread readers expect.

Danny Torrance and the town of Sidewinder serve as points of contact to continue the larger story of good versus evil; however, the story's central conflict and its background elements reflect an evolution that mirrors changing sources of anxiety in contemporary society. The sequel locates the source of evil in the same remote site and uses the environment to sustain the affect of horror. Rather than focus on its specifically western location, I suggest the sense of remoteness, coupled with a sublime sense of terror inherent in mountainous terrains, works to increase tension and build an atmosphere of horror. The separation from society destroys Jack Torrance, his family, and ultimately, the Overlook itself in *The Shining*, but the isolated location ensures the new villains of safety and anonymity in *Doctor Sleep*.

Danny continues the story his father began when the hotel's undead guests find him three years later in Florida as he and Wendy try to start over in a friendlier setting. In this instance, the "carnival" invades Danny's psyche, instead of his physical home. Fellow Overlook survivor Dick Hallorann teaches Danny some psychic protection

techniques to avoid “feeding angry spirits,” different and more corporeal than the “regular” phantoms he faced in the old hotel. Hallorann also mentions the name “Charlie Manx” as a bogeyman figure his Black Grampa used to scare him into submission (13); his description brings in an outside narrative voice in an intertextual reference to Hill’s antagonist in *NOS4A2*, published the same year as *Doctor Sleep*. At the same time, Hallorann’s instructions help Danny shut down other threads of narrative polyphony, as he traps the undead Overlookers inside mental lock-boxes.

Though he successfully employs these psychic self-defense tactics, as he matures, Danny also learns from his inevitable genetics that alcohol muffles the shining’s disquieting effects. Because the “bad places” live on in characters’ memories, Dan has good reason to adapt his behavior to contend with his environment, despite the detrimental side effects. James Egan describes how King treats “the Dark Fantastic as an environment where the primitive, superstitious, and rudimentary incarnations of good and evil hold sway. In such an environment, those who refuse to take the fantastic seriously or who continue to explain it in terms of the realistic are usually its victims” (64). Readers empathize with Dan’s struggle, because his story represents an extension of the supernatural struggles from his past; this inverts the reader’s identification in comparison to *The Shining*, as most readers read Jack as the “monster.”

Alcohol allows Dan to acknowledge the reality of supernatural forces, but it also relieves him from the responsibility of making conscious decisions about them. “One drink would send him back to sleep. Three would guarantee not just sleep but dreamless sleep. Sleep was nature’s doctor, and right now Dan Torrance felt sick and in need of strong medicine” (*DS* 74). His alcoholism partially dampens the narrative’s polyphonic

atmosphere, but strains of memory remain, as does Hallorann's voice, as an avatar of Dan's conscience. The only psychic feature alcohol seems unable to erase is the "deathflies" (40) Dan sees on the faces of those about to die.

Dan struggles with addiction, until a particularly desperate moment prompts him to move on, thinking, "If he got to some other place, some *good place*, he might be able to quit the drinking and start over" (38). Dan drifts up the eastern US coast, working as a hospital orderly at various stops, until drinking gets him fired and he keeps moving until he reaches Frazier, New Hampshire, where Alcoholics Anonymous finally helps him confront the addictions bequeathed by his father. The AA textbooks and meeting rituals serve as a secular form of worship; they help him stave off memories of the Overlook that emerge as REDRUM painted in his mirror, and they help heal his mind and strengthen his resolve, so he is able to keep the old ghosts away. As Hallorann warns him, his lock boxes work on ghosts, but not on memories.

Dan finds fulfilling work as a hospice orderly at the Helen Rivington House, where his duties earn him the nickname "Doctor Sleep." The hospice cat, Azreel, curls up on a resident's bed to signal when they near death, and Dan helps them cross over in their final moments. Upon waking to find Azreel, a resident confesses his fear of dying and Dan reassures the man, "I can help . . . It's just going to sleep. And when you wake up—you *will* wake up—everything is going to be better" (139). Dan's abilities confer the "terrible privilege" of comforting dying residents in their final moments; this lends new strains of polyphony to the narrative that help counterbalance the horrors of his past with positive experiences. Once more, King inverts the dynamics from the previous story, allowing Dan's psychic abilities to help others instead of operating as the source of his

fear. Named for the Angel of Death, Azreel's feline features perform a similar inversion when they soften death's arrival for hospice residents.

The dignified hospice Dan affectionately calls "The Riv," serves as a positive inversion of the Overlook Hotel. Readers see the structure as "a rambling Victorian home flanked on both sides by newer brick buildings... There was a turret at the top of the mansion on the left side, but none on the right, giving the place a queerly unbalanced look that Dan sort of liked. It was as if the big old girl were saying *Yeah, part of me fell off. What the fuck. Some day it'll happen to you*" (DS 57). This sense of individual identity stands the hospice in stark opposition to the hotel's malign, otherworldly force (*Shining* 82), masquerading as an uncanny replication of home. As a hospice, The Riv functions as a destination that offers its residents rest. Bequeathed by a romance novelist, it has always been a home; the structure itself originates from loving energies, and it allows Dan to use his shine to help people move on peacefully.

Young Abra Stone, whose psychic powers surpass his own, presents a surprising link to Dan's past but attracts the predations of the "True Knot," a nonhuman nomadic tribe that makes its headquarters at the strategically located Bluebell Campground, the same place as the Overlook's fiery end. A historically "bad place," the setting provides readers with a foothold for narrative coherence. The hotel boiler's explosion dissipates some of the sedimented sins, but also condenses and heats the hotel's remains, distilling the negative energies accumulated over hundreds of years. Fed by the psychic residue from the hotel's heritage of violent greed, the campground serves as a perversely fertile host for a different kind of haunting by members of the True, like toxic mutations of "regular" ghosts. If ghosts are viruses that infect people with fear that consumes them

from the inside out, then the True Knot is a muscular strain of virus that attacks from the outside, like a swarm of mosquitoes. Fully corporeal, and endowed with exceptionally long lives, they bear little resemblance to the Overlook ghosts. These “monsters” invert the original Overlook ghosts in both form and function.

Instead of trapped phantoms haunting static environments, the True have evolved as a highly mobile form of aggressive supernatural parasite that lives off “steam,” an essence of the shining expressed as fear. Rube disasters like the 9/11 attacks, called a “seventh wave,” qualify as tragedies big enough to produce “agony and violent death [as] an enriching quality. Which was why the True was drawn to such sites, like insects to a bright light” (155). Like all natural resources, seventh waves and steam itself have become scarce, so they disguise themselves as innocuous RV People and haunt the interstates, hunting for children with the shine. As King writes, “America is a living body, the highways are its arteries, and the True Knot slips along them like a silent virus” (151). Led by “Rose the Hat,” formerly Rose O’Hara, the members of the True inject unexpected strains of polyphony with a wide range of socio-historical contexts in the backstories of characters like Crow Daddy, Grampa Flick, and Snakebite Andi. Most adopt the showman’s slang common in circuses and carnivals, where “rubes” are outsiders without any psychic powers that shine, and “steamheads” are food. During Andi’s initiation, or Turning, the tribe invokes polyphonic strains of Browning’s “Freaks,” as they invite her to become “one of us” (29), before chanting in an obscure ritualistic language. Colorful carnival stage names imply the True operates like a traveling show: they set up camp and pretend to be mundane retirees during their hunt, but pull up stakes

and move on before the rubes catch on. Furthermore, as the “ringleader, Rose wears a black silk top hat imbued with unusual properties as another metonymic carnival symbol.

Untethered from architectural structures, the True Knot remains in constant motion to avoid attention. Their transience emphasizes the permeable boundaries between “home” and “vacation,” though the vehicles offer more familiarity than a generic hotel room. They own several “bespoke” towns, including Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine, as well as Sidewinder, Colorado, acknowledging the interconnected geography in the universe constructed by King’s novels. In the plan to protect Abra, whose prodigious psychic abilities make her a target of the True, Dan’s ally John Dalton remarks on their connection to the Overlook, “It makes sense, I suppose...once you accept the idea there could be supernatural beings among us and feeding on us. An evil place would call evil creatures” (429). Whereas the Overlook hotel’s malevolent force directs Jack to kill his family and join “management,” members of the True Knot hunt children with psychic abilities, then abduct and torture their prey to “take their steam,” or inhale their essence. Instead of counting on Jack’s inherent qualities of self-reliance and American exceptionalism to rescue their isolated family, Dan has an extensive support network—including some adults who shine—to battle the psychic vampires hunting his niece. While the film omits this narrative detail, the book reveals Abra is the product of an extra-marital affair Jack had with a graduate student. Though the woman (Alessandra) died in a car accident, her daughter, Lucy, is Dan’s half-sister and Abra’s mother (432).

Clemens adds a historical note to the polyphony when she points to the cold war anxiety that positions *The Shining* as a critique of American politics, as it “first appeared in 1977, in the aftermath of two major political crises [Watergate and the Vietnam War]”

(185). The hotel itself, Clemens notes, “not only represents the failure of the American Dream since World War II, but it also represents the failure of the original City on the Hill, the dream of America’s Puritan forefathers” (190). Benevento extends this critique of the Overlook’s hotel Management to “the erosion of both self-determination and collective responsibility in the face of neoliberalism,” and points to Wendy Brown’s text, *Undoing the Demos*, as his source of political insight (730). He highlights Brown’s focus on the Foucauldian term “governance,” and how it parallels the Panopticon’s unequal distribution of power, when “governing without government” as a “plank of neoliberal rationality . . . suggests that individual responsibility—in the context of hierarchical organization—involves slight [sic] of hand. As a method of governance, responsibility does not come with the agency and autonomy that the word suggests” (730). This system installs a bloated sense of responsibility for corporate success in the laps of individual employees; by this logic, the company takes credit for individual successes, but also makes individual employees responsible for corporate mishaps. In keeping with similar themes from popular texts in the 1980s Benevento notes how “responsibility for the family brings Jack to seek work at the Overlook, while responsibility to the Overlook entails destruction of the family” (731). Popular texts from the same era, like *Mr. Mom* (1983), *Working Girl* (1988), and *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* (1989), reveal the lie at the heart of the promise: you *can* have it all, but only if you are a.) male, or b.) you are willing to postpone, if not sacrifice, either your career or your family in favor of the unchosen option.

In *Doctor Sleep*, King continues the carnivalization, largely through its extension as a sequel. The novel demonstrates literalized family resemblances, as Dan and Abra

both display Jack Torrance's characteristic anger. Dan's childhood memories add a nostalgic framework, and create moments of narrative instability in moments of alcoholic uncertainty as well as in purely psychic inventions. The sober son trying to rebuild his life by helping people overcome their fear of death inverts the original story, where his father tries to rebuild his career by destroying his family and instilling fear. Just as Hallorann appeared as a mentor to help Danny, Dan encounters his niece Abra and helps mentor her to continue the cycle and move the story forward, echoed by the wheel that turns the world King uses as a story device to conceptualize how characters invade another's consciousness (283). King repurposes the steam from the boiler as the psychic essence the True feeds upon; in both stories, the power of steam—in both literal and metaphoric forms—ends up destroying the respective monster. Although by the end of *The Shining* Jack does become monstrous, as Holland-Toll notes, he “retains a vestige of human feeling, at least enough for his widow and orphan to remember and mourn” (144). Dan and his raiding party arrive for the battle royale with Rose, and King recuperates this surviving shred of humanity when Jack helps his granddaughter destroy Rose, and blows Dan a kiss goodbye, “*Bedtime, doc. Sleep tight. Dream up a dragon and tell me all about it in the morning*” (508, italics in original).

Situated within a post-9/11 American context, monstrous figures like the True Knot that rely on freedom of movement and freedom *from* recognition suggest social anxieties about spontaneous acts of senseless violence (school shootings), anonymous disasters (identity theft), or disastrous viral pandemics < gestures apocalyptically >. They might also reasonably symbolize a larger, older abstraction, like the crumbling ideals of American democracy perverted by rapacious appropriation and insulated by old-money

oligarchs in positions of power. As Lloyd-Smith writes of Gothic sensationalism, “there is a dark impulse beyond understanding which wreaks havoc, operating in complete contradiction to the normative assumption of the early United States polity, that individuals will always seek to act in their own best interests (and therefore can be trusted with democratic self-government and capitalist enterprise)” (114-115, parentheses in original). Though his comments are directed at writers like Edgar Allan Poe in the context of nineteenth-century, the core sentiment still resonates in a contemporary context. Instead of haunting as a reckoning come due, or a haunted house as a troubled psyche, as corporeal beings the True remain physically ambiguous. Readers understand the metaphor of unseen forces that upend social, economic, and acceptable moral values; like the unseen forces of the True Knot, readers can only ascertain that the threat is not human, and it comes from a place that embraces chaos.

In Joe Hill’s *NOS4A2*, the deceptively named Christmasland serves as a sinister repository for abducted children “saved” by the same Charlie Manx that used to scare Dick Hallorann in his childhood. While it serves as an obvious iteration of the Dark Carnival, Christmasland has no physical analog in the real world. In addition, it may only be accessed intentionally by very few, although the True may have visited, if the bumper sticker is valid: “They put the same decals on their Bounders and ‘Bagos, touting all the peculiar places they’ve visited (I HELPED TRIM THE WORLD’S BIGGEST TREE IN CHRISTMASLAND!)” (*DS* 150). Hill’s novel is not only in direct conversation with King’s novels through intertextual reference, but it also works to recuperate many of the problematic horror tropes his father invented.

Before the story proper begins, ambivalent paratextual images introduce readers to the deceptively named village of undead children with illustrations by Gabriel Rodríguez, Hill's longtime collaborator on graphic novels. The images evoke Christmasland's atmosphere of metaphysical creepiness well before Hill's novel begins textual inversions. Two vertical stylized lists split the left-hand page opposite the title page, where an ersatz Santa figure borders the left margin of the top list for "nice" children, and directly below a bone mallet dripping with blood flanks the lower list labeled "naughty." The bone mallet sends a clear, threatening message, but without background on Charles Talent Manx III, the clean-shaven Santa stand-in with the toothy grin appears gaunt but happy, like a Tim Burton adaptation of an Edward Gorey character. Just as *Geek Love* channels polyphonic voices of *Freaks*, so *NOS4A2* invokes elements of the 1922 silent film, *Nosferatu*, another example of German Expressionism. With these expectations in mind, the prologue offers a preview of present-day Manx, bedridden for a decade in a Colorado federal prison. The ancient prisoner wakes long enough to threaten his nurse's son, and readers know "the game is afoot" when the young doctor calls Manx "the old vampire" (Hill 8).

The familiar flashback device transports readers back over two decades to introduce "The Brat." While not quite an inversion, the fragmented timeline further disrupts the narrative. Eight-year-old Victoria McQueen (Vic) focalizes the novel and mediates her parents' failing marriage with her gift for finding things. Whether the power is innate or Vic unlocks it with her bike, she travels through a roar of white noise on the Shorter Way covered bridge—"Shortaway" in Massachusetts—an interdimensional shortcut to lost objects, like her mom's bracelet, or her dad's wallet (13). As in most Dark

Carnival stories, magic comes with a steep price and children often end up paying their parents' debts; Vic's unique pathway takes its payment in the form of migraines and later mental health complications.

Vic idolizes her dad Chris, a motorcycle-riding badass who works for transportation doing demolition. When her parent's fight gets heated, however, she cries for her mom Linda's sake as Chris snaps, "Jesus. What an ugly fuckin' person you are inside. And I had a kid with you" (13). Here, Hill's emphasis on the past tense makes the symbolism obvious: Chris gets paid to blow things up and walk away. Conflicts between Vic and her mom multiply after he leaves them for a new wife, and predictable teenage rebellion fuels her pedal-powered flight from home, seeking answers about her bridge.

The Shorter Way deposits a thirteen-year-old Vic in Iowa, and librarian Maggie Leigh appears as a source of exposition, echoing characters like Bradbury's Charles Hallows, or King's Dick Hallorann. Expecting Vic's arrival, Maggie and her Scrabble tiles provide insight into their abilities as strong creatives. She explains, "Your bridge is a short circuit in reality. Just like my tiles. You *find* things and my tiles *spell* me things" (99, emphasis in original). Rather than "magic," Maggie calls her Scrabble tiles the "knife" she uses "to poke a hole in reality" (99). She explains the difference between the *real* world of objective facts, and "the world inside [everyone's] own head. An *inscape*, a world of thought . . . [where] every idea is a fact. Emotions are as real as gravity . . . strong creatives, though, can use a knife to cut the stitches between the two worlds, can bring them together" (100). Vic's bike acts like Maggie's tiles, giving her a tool to make shortcuts in the fabric of reality.

Though rooted in the philosophical poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins, inscapes also echo the concept of “place” as a space that has been given meaning through its association with human emotions (Easterlin 832). As Easterlin explains, cognitive literary studies enhances the conscious understanding of place-in-process as “the affective-conceptual construction of physical locations that changes in light of events, experiences, and relationships” (831). In this context, whenever humans attach emotions, memory, or imagined qualities to a place, they create an inscape. Only strong creatives, however, can pull these idealized or imagined worlds into the “real world.” Hill provides a map of interconnected inscapes that trace a road from Christmasland, in Colorado, to eastern locations like The House of Sleep, Lovecraft Keyhole (from *Locke and Key*), and Pennywise Circus (from King’s *IT*). In this way, Hill’s paratextual illustration pulls other imagined worlds he and his father have constructed into the reality of this novel, like a multi-level allusion without words.

When her tiles suggest Vic could find “the Wraith,” Maggie immediately sweeps them out of sight to avoid the topic, but she buckles under Vic’s persistent curiosity. Though short on details, she confirms the Wraith is an old man who kidnaps children in his car, drains them, and leaves them in his own inscape. She also suggests he works with an accomplice, like Renfield, who takes the fall for his crimes. Maggie’s references to vampires and Renfield invoke Bram Stoker’s voice to create a polyphonic atmosphere, deepened by later allusions to “the bloofer lady” (219). Although Vic departs after promising Maggie *not* to go looking for him under any circumstances, years later her frustration makes her forget her promise and she lands on the doorstep of his “Sleigh House,” in Gunbarrel, Colorado. A homophone of “slay,” the word lends an element of

heteroglossia as readers negotiate both meanings for the same sounds, since both are already in play. Her traumatic but brief captivity ends in Manx's arrest after a harrowing escape and a heroic motorcycle rescue by the novel's real hero, Lou Carmody.

Lou's last name echoes a character from one of the short stories in Bradbury's debut collection, "The Jar," lending an additional strain of polyphony to the narrative atmosphere. In addition to this Bradburian resonance, Lou brings in a full orchestra of polyphonic narrative strains: he speaks several dialects of pop-culture, including Marvel, DC, and Dr. Who, as well as iPhone txt language. Whole solar systems of ancillary knowledge orbit Hill's novel to create a galaxy of expression. In addition, Hill makes repeated references to Lou's weight: the hero is a nice guy who happens to be overweight, and he also gets the girl—but he frequently calls her "Dude." His character recuperates Ben Hanscom's path (from *IT*) and resists dominant discourses about muscle-bound masculine heroes. His romantic relationship with Vic resists dominant heteronormative discourses, as well as societal preferences for monogamy. When Vic struggles with substance abuse, Lou focuses on raising their son while Vic dates or hooks up with random men and women. The man may drive a (stereotypically masculine) tow truck, but he can also change a diaper and show genuine emotion better than James Bond ever could.

Hill's focus on various modes of travel, symbolic of mobilization, parallels the carnivalesque celebration of life as a cycle, or continuing process, but also highlights how relying on unauthorized (unofficial) paths, like the Shorter Way, often have dire consequences. Manx's power to travel parallels Vic's power to find, though he prefers The Wraith—a 1938 Rolls Royce that functions as his psychic extension—while Vic

rides her bike. As he drives, the car siphons negative emotions from the young passengers (victims) he claims to be “saving” from their parents’ terrible child-rearing skills. When they reach their destination, the children have forgotten everything human: devoid of empathy, they are ready for Christmasland. The fictional winter carnival only exists in Manx’s imagination, but during Vic’s visit to Iowa Maggie explains how these psychic highways, or “inscapes,” connect behind the visible world, like strings of Christmas lights with camouflaged connections. As Bakhtin describes, “This bodily participation in the potentiality of another world, the bodily awareness of another world has an immense importance for the grotesque” (48). This secondary world provides escape and renewal, but not everyone can embrace such an unstable site of possibility. Manx’s personal inscape provides *him* with renewal, but the children he “saves” fare poorly.

In this regard, Hill’s portrayal of Christmasland acts as a heterotopia. As Fred Botting explains, “for Foucault, a heterotopia, in contrast to a utopia, is a ‘counter-site,’ an ‘effectively enacted utopia’ in which the real sites of culture are ‘represented, contested, inverted’ . . . Not only does it transport readers into remote and unreal places, but it is read in a specific place in the present, thereby disturbing a sense of reality along with the aesthetic values supposed to sustain it” (9). Christmasland’s aesthetic reflects a juvenile sense of hyperbole, but since its inhabitants lack empathy, the normative rules, of not just society, but *humanity*, no longer apply. Though the exterior is swathed in candy cane stripes and dusted with sugar-snow, the children do not smile so much as bare their unnaturally sharp teeth; the only real substance in Christmasland is death. In a direct reference to *Doctor Sleep*, Manx mentions the True Knot by name, as others who “live on the road, and are in much the same line of work as myself. I leave them be and they are

glad to return the favor” (Hill 511). While the True Knot buries the victims whose steam they consume, Manx collects their empty, animated husks and “gives” them Christmasland.

Vic embodies a heroine focused on action. Her attempts to reconcile the obvious unreality of the Shorter Way with her own internal perception of the world reflect carnivalesque themes of madness as moments of narrative instability. Bakhtin suggests that “the theme of madness is used in the grotesque...to escape the false ‘truth of this world’ in order to look at the world with eyes free from this ‘truth’” (49). After her rescue, seventeen-year-old Vic spends time and money on therapists who try to help her heal from the traumatic experience with Manx. Most of this help includes rationalizing her experience with psychobabble and medicating her for schizophrenia. She attends art school briefly, and has a son with Lou, named Bruce Wayne Carmody (“The Bat”). They never marry, but Vic helps tinker in his garage and saves his start-up detailing business from ruin with her formidable artistic skills (198). Her art truly saves her when the phantoms of Christmasland start calling, and her mental health deteriorates despite her success as an author/illustrator of children’s books. Naming her son after a famous comic-book character introduces another strand of polyphony to the narrative mixture, not just by validating comic-books as legitimate cultural texts, but by believing in those values strongly enough to embody them in her son. His family nickname, “The Bat,” echoes her own moniker, “The Brat,” foreshadowing the similarity of their experiences. Vic and Lou resist dominant narratives of nuclear families, and their dedication to their son ignores centuries of disapproving social discourses on the “legitimacy” of children born out of wedlock and defined as “bastards.”

Hill's novel responds to dated tropes common to the horror genre, many of which were popularized by his own father, Stephen King. The first run of *NOS4A2* happened the same year as *The Shining*'s re-printing (2013), thirty-six years after it debuted. Hill's portrayal of a strong, nonbinary, tattooed female hero comments on the perceived helplessness of female victims. Vic McQueen's strength recuperates the flappy-handed helplessness of some flat "mother" characters in works like King's *Cujo* and *The Shining*. He also recuperates *Cujo* with Wayne's dog, Hooper (named for the character in *Jaws*), a Saint Bernard who gives his life to protect Wayne. Many female characters in horror narratives behave in ways once labeled "hysterical," but Vic's ability to provide Lou with physical proof of her "magic bridge" challenges her stereotyped predecessors as well as the epistemology behind her diagnosis of schizophrenia. While Wendy Torrance whimpers and screams helplessly, Vic McQueen gets on a bike she built herself and fixes the problem, whether it's a missing bracelet, her remaining sanity—preserved in the amber of her own creative efforts—or her missing child, held hostage by an inter-dimensional emotional vampire with a malicious antique version of K.I.T.T.

Her proficiency in using the bridge also reinforces the importance of liminal characters, often portrayed as insane, marginalized, or existing in some other in-between state. In all three texts, the concept of telepathy is linked to the concept of haunting. Mark Fisher suggests that when the Overlook's malevolent energies seek out Jack and Danny Torrance's telepathic abilities, the idea "reflects anxieties about the 'action at a distance' which is the form contemporary power increasingly assumes" (20). The same principle applies to Vic's power to transverse distances using her metaphysical bridge. By expanding the concept of "movement" beyond physical motion or highway driving, King

and Hill give their characters a greater range of expression, as Vic McQueen's drawing keeps her mind in constant motion to guard against haunting. It also serves as a reminder that people, like these fictional characters, are always in a state of becoming.

With *NOS4A2* Hill successfully revises some of the horror tropes that King helped create. Like King, Hill employs allusion and intertextuality to create ambivalence and make space for wider interpretation. All three novels feature focal characters—Jack, Dan, and Vic—that seek to end their own cycles of abuse, as well as with their own children (or half-sister). By making Jack into *The Shining*'s “monster,” King's *Dark Carnival* fails its attempts at revolution, as Jack yields to the hotel's temptation, foreclosing on his fresh start before it can really begin. Hill's hero also sacrifices herself, but in so doing, she recuperates over three decades' worth of weak women in horror *and* saves her son. This kind of multi-tasking signals a change in dominant discourse. Furthermore, Hill not only dedicates his novel to his own mother, Tabitha King, he puts her in the book, too, as FBI agent Tabitha Hutter. Her budding romance with Lou nudges the text closer to representing a successful revolution.

Within the texts under examination, a scene of reversal or redemption signals the *Dark Carnival*'s efficacy in subverting dominant discourses. In contrast, texts that end in tragedy, without elements of reversal or redemption (usually in cosmic horror, or existential dread) present the greatest difficulty for *Dark Carnival* texts to articulate alternative discourses. The texts under analysis in this chapter highlight the protagonists' attempts to escape from supernatural threats. True success, however, is not measured by a character's ability to evade capture, but by their ability to break the overall cycle of temptation and pursuit. The authors do not extend this success to speculate on alternative

futures, however; perhaps the work of disruption is enough, if the disruption is big enough to destabilize deeply entrenched narratives and imagine a new kind of heroine. She's probably strong enough to figure it out herself.

Additional examples of metaphoric extensions of the Dark Carnival prototype might also include King's novel *Needful Things* (1992), which portrays the small-town implications of literalized Faustian bargains, but with fewer carnivalesque elements. New interpretations of the Dark Carnival emerge in cultural texts that also lie beyond the scope of this study, but may prove to be a fruitful line of future textual analysis. The metaphoric extension is easily identifiable in the recently recognized "Zom-com" genre: these films and streaming series feature zombie protagonists in romantic comedies. The living/dead binary gets fundamentally inverted by aligning viewers with an undead protagonist, and roots the story line firmly in the realm of fantasy/horror. Examples include films like *Warm Bodies* (2013), and series such as *iZombie* (2015-2019), and *Z-Nation* (2014-2018). On top of employing fundamentally inverted social norms via the Zombie Apocalypse, *Z-Nation* also features an episode populated with undead Insane Clown Posse fans: Zombie Juggalos, or (you guessed it) Zuggalos.

Chapter Five: Metonymic Extensions

Carousels & Clowns in Gaiman & King

This chapter examines metonymic extensions of the Dark Carnival prototype such as Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (1999) and Stephen King's *IT* (1986). Neither text depicts a physical carnival with which to impel story events, but each demonstrates family resemblances to the prototypical gestalt perception in employing physical fragments and archetypal characters as metonymic carnival images that index the larger concept. As Lakoff and Johnson note, "metonymy serves some of the same purposes that metaphor does, and in somewhat the same way, but it allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to" (37). In this case, singular images and characters function as metonymic extensions of central Dark Carnival texts; in *American Gods* and *IT*, the partial images of a carousel and a clown, respectively, link these texts to the holistic concept of carnival without restricting the story to a specific setting. As a systematic means of reference, metonymy "allow[s] us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else" (Lakoff and Johnson 39).

Critical Conversations

In 2013, Neil Gaiman wrote the introduction to the sixtieth-anniversary edition of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, which he reprints in his collection of essays, *The View From the Cheap Seats* (2016). In it, Gaiman takes pains to point out that:

the heart of the book remains untouched, and the questions Bradbury raises remain as valid and important. Why do we need the things in books? The poems, the essays, the stories? . . . Why should we care? . . . Ideas,

written ideas, are special. They are the way we transmit our stories and our ideas from one generation to the next. If we lose them, we lose our shared history. We lose much of what makes us human. And fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over. I knew Ray Bradbury for the last thirty years of his life, and I was so lucky. He was funny and gentle and always . . . enthusiastic. He cared, completely and utterly, about things. He cared about toys and childhood and films. He cared about books. He cared about stories (181-182).

As critical conversations go, this is one of my favorites. Bonus points for connecting Neil Gaiman directly to Ray Bradbury.

In the introduction to *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, Hank Wagner, Christopher Golden, and Stephen Bissette use a Stephen King quote to introduce Neil Gaiman as ““A treasure house of story . . . we are lucky to have him in any medium””(1). Although he may be best known for his work on *The Sandman* comics (1988-2003), “Gaiman has been known to describe *American Gods* as his first novel,” because *Good Omens* was a collaboration with Terry Pratchett, *Stardust* was first serialized, and *Neverwhere* is an adaptation of television scripts (*Prince* 330). Featured prominently in the novel is “the uniquely American phenomenon of the roadside attraction . . . to give you the illusion that you’ve seen something out of the ordinary while making you part with your hard-earned money” (331).

As Wagner, Golden, and Bissette explain:

American Gods is also a novel that only Gaiman could have written: Given his ‘outsider’ status (having settled in the United States after spending his formative years in England), and his refined powers of observation, he could be part of America but remain removed, ‘in it, but not of it.’ The novel reflects his deep fascination with and love for his adopted country, but also reflects its harshness, and strangeness, and flaws (331).

The novel portrays Mr. Wednesday as “the contemporary North-American incarnation of Odin,” who, as Elizabeth Swanstrom notes, plans to rectify his dwindling faith-based organization “by teaming up with his son Loki, and by misleading the other gods into thinking they are enemies, he plans to stir them up to . . . fight each other to the death on a battlefield of his choosing” (3). The “mark” in this confidence game is Shadow, Wednesday’s son. As Swanstrom notes, “Shadow is a muscle-bound convict who likes to do coin tricks. Strong, sweetly naïve, and eager to please, he’s exactly what you might think a modern-day Balder should be,” except for one detail: he has no awareness of his father’s identity, nor his own divine status (4). Shadow finally recognizes he’s been Wednesday’s pawn in an elaborate two-man con at the conclusion, which as Swanstrom points out, also foregrounds for readers “how *American Gods* manages to foil any commonsense understanding of causality” (7). In addition to Swanstrom’s application of derivative causality to explicate how Wednesday creates doubt, Ray Bossert suggests reading the novel as “an allegory for the state of American Philosophy,” due to “uncanny parallels between the way Gaiman depicts the gods and the way philosophy functions in American life. The American gods are like American

philosophers in that both groups operate in the background of society and behind the scenes” (39). As Baker explains, “Every god encountered within *American Gods* is the manifestation of a different tribe’s ritualized system of relating to the world. Each is and has its own story, its own viewpoint, and its own people” (485). With the many different voices contribute their stories, they become easily entangled with the primary narrative thread.

Gaiman famously narrativizes allegorical characters in *The Sandman* comics, including Morpheus (Lord of Dream), and his siblings, Death, Desire, and the other members of the Endless. *American Gods* does the same thing, but without the benefit of illustrations, which leaves many fantasy scholars to question, “what *IS* this?” As readers and fans of fantasy literature, we are comfortable with unexplained elements that represent magic or the supernatural. As scholars, however, the impulse to categorize literature becomes an intellectual undertow. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn groups fantasy texts according to how magic enters the story; most readers are familiar with quest plots: save the prince, steal the jewel, take the One Ring to the mountain (the Hero does the Thing). As Mendlesohn states, “Although portal fantasies do not *have* to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are” (1). In these stories, like Baum’s *Oz* tales, “the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not leak” (Mendlesohn 1, italics in original). Since Gaiman’s novel “leaks,” and because identifying exactly how and where “magic” enters, Sandor Klapcsik’s comment seems especially relevant when he notices in another Gaiman tale, how “The pretense of the narrator that nothing unique is happening doubles the narrative perspective, as the restrained voice of narration becomes echoed by the reader’s growing wonder and estrangement. It seems as if the protagonist, the main

focalizer, was blind to the fantastic, or at least, to the astonishing nature of the fantastic” (199). This approach situates Gaiman’s novel as an example of Mendlesohn’s “liminal fantasy, in which the lack of surprise is accompanied by another lack: the lack of our understanding the reserved narration of the fantastic events” (Klapisik 199).

Though the critical conversation on Stephen King in Chapter Four certainly applies here, it’s worth noting a recent article by Regina Hansen that examines the novel *It* as “(white male) nostalgia for the redeemed loser narrative, exposing the trope of the white underdog hero, [which] often [leads] to problematic representations of women, people of colour, queer people, working-class people and those with disabilities” (162). While Hansen’s reading brings up relevant avenues for further exploration, this chapter focuses more on the clown figure as a metonymic extension of carnival. The revelation of the monster as female, as Hansen points out, “also reiterate[es] the dominance of the male over the female, in this case ‘a disturbingly obvious image of feminine monstrosity’ in the form of a narratively disappointing giant egg-laying spider” (Sears 184, qtd. in 168). Though I do not address issues of gender in the following analysis, it could produce fruitful explorations in future research.

Carnival Parts

Examining the specific relations between these parts and wholes reveals how the carousel in *American Gods* appears as a machine designed for human amusement as well as a symbol of repetitive or cyclical motion, but functions in the novel as a gateway to divine realms. Michael Valenti notes the origins of the popular ride “date back to the Crusades, when European knights encountered ring spearing, a popular sport and training exercise” (N.P.). Valenti cites Charles J. Jacques, an amusement-park historian, who

notes that in Europe, “the sport became known as “carrousel,’ French for ‘little war’” (N.P.). This bellicose genealogy connects the carousel as a device for play and preparatory wartime rituals that disguised genocide as “salvation”; the peculiar movements of Gaiman’s carousel indicate some perversion of movement that allows the device to deposit riders at the meeting of a war council.

The iconic clown figure from *IT* serves a similar metonymic function as a symbol of childhood innocence; instead of following the circus clown’s script that would fashion him into a country bumpkin or a foolish distraction, Pennywise uses his appearance to lure children within gobbling proximity. Though clowns typically work as circus performers, they have a historic connection to the carnival, as Bakhtin notes, “clowns and fools . . . are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life” (8). The clown’s ancestry figures Pennywise as a relation of Bradbury’s prototypical Dark Carnival, extending the central category through the character’s family resemblance. While the characteristic Bakhtinian clown embodied the carnival spirit, understood here as redemptive laughter, the figure of Pennywise leverages this association with laughter so that his predatory actions create a shocking reversal of expectations and produce a narrative affect of horror instead.

In addition to depicting metonymic extensions of the prototype, these texts also bear strong thematic resemblances to the metaphoric carnivals in the previous chapter. Both authors portray recognizable (mimetic) worlds with focal characters that experience a fundamental inversion of social norms. Those focalizers tend to be children, child-like, or naïve outsider figures who are tempted to join or believe something that threatens to

consume them, often as part of a game or contest; they also question dominant discourses of family, home, belief, and the power of place. These themes, combined with metonymic carnival imagery, destabilize narrative expectations and produce an affective combination of wonder and dread at the prospect of resolving elements distorted beyond simple inversion.

Daniel Baker describes Gaiman's novel as a "potent example of a subversive . . . model for fantasy. . . [because it] eschews its conventional tendency for conservatively monophonic, closed narrative loops" (471). The text employs polyphonic narrative strains to destabilize specific story elements, and to further enrich a multifaceted exploration of the origins and exponents of foundational American mythologies. This process of narrative excavation highlights the complicated fiction of American "identity" by producing a "counternarrative to the traditional portal-quest structures" (Baker 471). Compared to the rich mythologies and folklore traditions of Greek, Norse, English, and other cultures, few legends recount the heroic deeds of truly "American" (i.e., white, male, Anglo) figures. This dearth of demigods can be attributed in part to cultural definitions of terms like "heroic" and "legend." Though ancient Romans praised Hercules' twelve labors as heroic, captains of industry in the western world might assign different values to tasks easily described as poaching, murder, or theft. Though largely ignored by official culture, some legends and heroes of Native American cultures that survived encounters with white settlers still live on. In addition, the US, bolstered by increased immigration, saw new heroes from hundreds of different cultures: stories carried them from the Old World to filter into their children's imaginations in a New World.

Among the family resemblances *American Gods* shares with prototypical Dark Carnival texts is a protracted discussion of an impending storm. Focal character Shadow Moon senses trouble before leaving prison, but chalks it up to weather: “It felt as if a storm was on the way, but the storm never came” (8). He mentions it to his wife, Laura, but they both dismiss his unease in anticipation of their reunion. Two paragraphs later a fellow inmate warns Shadow of a storm so disastrous he describes it as “tectonic.” Like Bradbury, Gaiman’s storm manifests in both literal and figurative terms: Shadow leaves prison two days early for bereavement when Laura dies in a car accident. While his personal loss can certainly be described as “tectonic,” it foreshadows unseen losses beyond the human scale. Her death fragments Shadow’s emotions and upends the touchstones of his former life, like the inside-out logic of carnival. In spatial terms, readers first see Shadow inside the prison, but he quickly shifts to outside the prison, and then beyond the outlines of what he thinks his life should be.

Though portrayed as an adult, Shadow’s character resembles a neophyte: after three years in prison, he does not *resume* his life so much as he follows someone traveling in a different direction and everything is new to him. Reborn to the outside world, he sustains a sense of wonder, as Mr. Wednesday (Odin) hires him as an “associate,” and their ensuing adventures test the limits of belief. Both Shadow and Wednesday share an affection for sleight-of-hand, but each character uses it to underline a deliberate sense of ambiguity, as opposed to the magicians and impresarios in several Dark Carnival stories who lean into the role of antagonist. Baker points out how Wednesday’s character rewrites fantasy tropes, noting “where the reader of fantasy is

familiar with a particular meaning for a particular hieroglyph, *American Gods* . . . may offer different translations” (481).

The carousels in both *Something Wicked* and *American Gods* repeat the same horizontal movement of linear time, but the latter allows characters to bend the rules somewhat. Though the real-world analog of The World’s Largest Carousel exists in Spring Green, Wisconsin at the House on the Rock, in Gaiman’s novel, it serves as a magical revolving door to a different dimension. As the author describes:

Real creatures, imaginary creatures, and transformations of the two: each creature was different—he saw mermaid and merman, centaur and unicorn, elephants (one huge and one tiny), bulldog, frog and phoenix, zebra, tiger, manticore and basilisk, swans pulling a carriage, a white ox, a fox, twin walruses, even a sea serpent, all of them brightly colored and more than real . . . “What’s it for?” asked Shadow.

“It’s not there to be ridden, not by people,” said Wednesday. “It’s there to be admired. It’s there to *be*.”

“Like a prayer wheel goin’ round and round,” said Mr. Nancy.

“Accumulating power” (114).

In Bradbury’s novel, the carousel’s movement propels characters forward or backwards in time, and the characters’ bodies bear the effects. In this selection, the ride’s movement animates the carousel’s individual animals, so the mounts can carry their riders sideways through dimensions or perceptions of time. Nancy’s comment makes a clearer connection to the power of belief as a fitting introduction to the pantheistic meeting about Wednesday’s “Infinity War” plans.

As Baker notes, “Wednesday divides the narrative with an ethical binary: the old gods are good, the new gods evil. He narrates his reality in the form of epic conflict, seamlessly taking the lead, expecting others to follow” (482). Though the supernatural conclave beyond the carousel behaves like a board meeting, Shadow remains unconvinced about supernatural events. Readers first recognize the supernatural in Shadow’s bizarre dream of a buffalo-headed man: “Believe,” said the rumbling voice. “If you are to survive, you must believe” (17). The power of belief represents a more potent form of cultural capital than economic or monetary value, as both sides prepare to battle for control. The buffalo-headed figure represents the spirit of the American land, which Wednesday describes as bad for gods, like a poorly planned theological garden. If the Old Country was a naturally hospitable environment where certain gods and practices thrived, transplanting them to America would be like trying to grow mangoes in Idaho: while not impossible, the unnatural process would require significant engineering. As Baker points out, however, “Wednesday is repeatedly said to be unworthy of trust, someone who should be questioned. That he is not, that he is able to manipulate other characters, attests to both the seductive pull of single narratives and their inherent danger” (483).

The text’s focus on games and play becomes more pronounced, as when Wednesday describes his favorite grifts, the Fiddle Game and the Bishop Game. Though they occur in two different historical period and places, he also brags about repeating the same con game, foreshadowing his role in the coming war. As Shadow accompanies Wednesday to meet Mr. World, temptation emerges as a pervasive theme in Las Vegas. While not depicted on the same grand scale of Temptation as in other works, this highlights its mundane accumulation instead. Gaiman describes the Counting Room as

the “Holy of Holies” (250), connecting religion directly to the concept of luck, or a variation on belief. Games of luck, chance, or skill feature prominently in carnivals, and Las Vegas functions as a municipal shrine to the god of luck.

Further references to a variety of games highlight their thematic importance. While Shadow hides in Lakeside, Wisconsin, Wednesday says he is “off the board,” figuring him as a metaphoric chess-piece. As Shadow drives, Wednesday maneuvers their vehicle “behind the scenes” (300, 306), in a metaphor that figures human perceptions of the world as a stage play, with deities feeding them lines from a script, which is precisely what Wednesday does with Shadow until he finally volunteers to hold a suicidal vigil for his father. He explains to Shadow, “You did everything you were meant to, and more. You took everybody’s attention, so they never looked at the hand with the coin in it. It’s called misdirection. And there’s power in the sacrifice of a son” (Gaiman 472). In Wednesday, Gaiman creates, as Baker describes him, a combination of “the wise guide of fiction with the historical reality of a xenophobic demagogue. The righteous prompt toward glorious sacrifice is unmasked as the cold logic of manipulation. Wednesday’s ‘con’—the fabrication of the central conflict to farm the power of prayer—clarifies the destructive potential of unblinking adherence to a single, limiting ideology” (483).

Gaiman emphasizes the importance of writing through individual accounts of supernatural belief, interspersing metanarrative fragments as episodic breaks between sections of the larger narrative. These interludes offer overt instances of polyphony for a narrative of orchestral proportions. Added to these specific voices are an encyclopedic collection of divine figures from different pantheons, mythical characters of various

origins, legends, culture heroes, folk tales, and even “fake-lore.” Shadow’s cover identity, “Mike Ainsel,” also suggests a form of heteroglossic haggling that borders on formalized riddling. His name recalls a British tale of a child and a fairy playing together. The fairy tells him her name is Ainsel, and the boy replies his name is “My Ainsel,” which means “my own self” in a Scottish/Northumbrian dialect. In this case, whenever someone asks Shadow his name, his response of “My Ainsel” is still truthful, for he will always be his own self. As Baker notes, “Words like reality, impossibility, god, good, evil, and death are both battlegrounds and their prizes. Gaiman uses traditional fantasy conventions as the provocation for an answering alternative. Thus, there is a real, more critical dialogue taking place between the possible and the impossible, within the text, and between author and reader” (485).

Gaiman’s text bears the closest resemblance to Morgenstern’s in its introduction of the fantastic alongside the more mundane or mimetic story elements. In this normalization of magic, both *The Night Circus* and *American Gods* can be called liminal fantasies, rather than the intrusive fantasies of Bradbury and Finney. Though Farah Mendelsohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* has served as a respected taxonomic resource for genre studies since its publication in 2008, taxonomies make ill-fitting claims for studies of prototype categories based on cognitive models. While Baker describes *American Gods* as a “portal-quest,” I disagree with the designation because the story lacks a portal device similar to the one that transported the Pevensie children to Narnia. However, since this chapter focuses more intently on the novel’s depiction of a carousel as a metonymic extension of prototypical Dark Carnival texts, the specification of genre boundaries or lack thereof lies beyond my current scope. The description of “liminal

fantasy” seems more appropriate, as the novel abounds with liminal imagery, spaces, and characters, and the movement on the World’s Largest Carousel might also be described in liminal terms.

The figure of the clown offers a different representation of liminality in some Dark Carnival texts, though King’s novel *IT* offers one the most recognizable clown characters in popular fiction. In general, the clown’s uncanny appearance reflects a historically ambiguous role. As Charles Bucknell notes, characters like the devil and the allegorical figure of Vice—a clown who embodied the Seven Deadly Sins—provided comic relief in medieval morality plays (156). Despite this association, as allegorical figures, both the medieval clown and the devil were conduits for laughter rather than terror, emphasizing a carnivalesque sense of ambivalence.

The clown’s liminal status parallels that of the Losers, who cling to the last stages of childhood as they prepare to become young adults. Like his pre-teen prey, clowns are also liminal figures: they (often) resemble adults in size, but their actions communicate a childlike perception of the world. Such incongruous behavior has long been established as an expectation for clowns, as John H. Towsen notes “Many of the most enduring clowns . . . were fascinating contradictions, combining naïveté and ingenuity” (67).

Pennywise exhibits the same qualities, but instead of a charming incongruity, the shape-shifting monster projects certain qualities to deceive intended victims. Erin Mercer highlights this liminality as a defining characteristic, as *It* takes the shape of a victim’s greatest fear: “The monster referred to as ‘It’ primarily preys on children, (hence its favored manifestation as Pennywise the Dancing Clown)” (315). As Magistrale notes, “Pennywise’s jocular persona first lures the unsuspecting child with the promise of

pleasure and fun, and then turns on her” (*Hollywood* 186). While traditionally associated with laughter, this clown prefers screams.

While the killer clown has become an increasingly common horror trope, the figure goes against hundreds of years of historical precedence associating clowns with circus troupes, billed as family-friendly “Sunday-school shows.” The broad appeal of the clown’s physical comedy proved less popular among adult carnival audiences, but that does not exclude clowns from all carnivals. Once more, Wittgenstein’s approach to making meaning relies on descriptive more than prescriptive formulations; as Bright emphasizes, “if we *look*, instead of trying to speculate in advance, we shall not see a feature that is common to *all* games,” nor to all carnivals (93). In other words, just because a Dark Carnival text like King’s *It* features a murderous clown, that does not implicate every text with a similar antagonist as a member of the same category: a killer clown does not a Dark Carnival make, but he certainly shares some family resemblances.

The clown figure in *It* presents a metonymic extension that resembles Dark Carnival prototypes, similar to Gaiman’s metonymic extension of the carousel. The clown’s job included advance man, luring business to the fairground, distracting audiences with physical humor or interrupting the ringmaster while stagehands set up in the background, or to give performers a rest. Towsen draws attention to the performer’s salient visual presentation, noting “Their very appearance makes it clear that clowns are separate creatures altogether, that they never really can belong . . . [they are] always intruders, and almost always impostors” (246-247). The white greasepaint, or “clown white,” highlights a performer’s features on stage; however, the visual elements can also be read as a death’s head, with over-emphasized eyes and mouth to match exaggerated

faculties of visual and oral consumption. Donald McManus confirms these themes in citing director Dario Fo as a critic who associates the clown with class struggle: “‘Clowns, like minstrels and ‘comics,’ always deal with the same problem—hunger, be it hunger for food, for sex, or even for dignity, for identity, for power’” (16).

Because most contemporary audiences recognize clowns as symbolic figures of comedy, the novel uses this association to camouflage his function as the primary agent of destruction; Pennywise is the reason childhood is not just lost—as if passively misplaced—for the shape-shifter emerges hungry after twenty-seven years of hibernation, and devours children violently. Recognizing that horror stories often index specific cultural anxieties positions the figure of Pennywise as an apt symbol of childhood anxieties. King’s novel also explores issues of identity, but focuses on how the interconnection of childhood experiences and feelings of place-alienation can shape individual identity, particularly for characters growing up in Derry, Maine.

Magistrale describes the significant imagery of the monster, “King’s choice of a clown as a unifying symbol for the various creatures representing It is masterful: what better lure for a child than the carnival clown—an adult in elaborate make-up—who is capable of disguising monstrous intentions” (*Landscape* 113). Tim Curry’s performance in the 1990 miniseries recalls classic comic gags of performers like Jimmy Durante; dry one-liners evoke a sense of nostalgic whimsy just before a shocking reversal. As Magistrale observes, “Pennywise’s dark sense of humor, always bordering on the obscene (it is impossible to separate this character’s grotesque humor from his terror), is lost on the children he seduces” (186). Although the historically positive association of clowns and children has not been entirely erased, pop culture texts reinforce the

perversion of circus clowns into “killer” clowns, particularly in the context of horror narratives. Benjamin Radford points out with some irony that “A key reason that evil clown Pennywise is so widely known is that *It* was seen in nearly 18 million households, including by children and teenagers. If *It* had been a PG- or R- rated theatrical release, its audience would have been cut by two-thirds” (67).

Even without becoming a popular horror trope, the figure of Pennywise would present a terrifying reversal that relies on the same comic principle of incongruity to leverage audience expectations and generate the opposite emotional affect. In his article, “Horror and Humor,” Noël Carroll describes the similarity of these functions when he notes, “the basis of comic amusement is *incongruity*—the bringing together of disparate or contrasting ideas or concepts. Comic teams, for example, are often composed of a tall, thin character and a short, fat one” (153). The same mismatched elements that make audiences laugh are also the transgressive properties inherent in Hollywood monsters. Carroll explains that while monsters represent an immediate physical threat to protagonists, “we [the audience . . .] are disgusted by the monster. We find it loathsome and impure” (150). In this context, the notion of impurity goes beyond a werewolf with muddy paws. The dirt itself adds another layer of impurity, but more importantly Carroll points out, “Things that are interstitial—that cross the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture’s conceptual scheme—are primary candidates for impurity” (152).

The clown’s subterranean habitat reinforces his impurity, and the extensive sewer system below Derry present another interstitial location, half-submerged, below the street, but not the simple “ground” of underground. David Punter highlights how King’s portrayal of Derry reflects larger concerns about American identity, that a “fear of

remaining at surface level means never being able to own or dig down into the land,” and missing out on the mythological riches hidden below (17). Punter credits King with chronicling “deeper issues about ‘this land,’” (18) and draws attention downward as young Ben Hanscom hears a distracting humming sound from below when he pauses mid-flight through the Barrens from Henry Bowers and his gang:

He took a breath, got a whiff of a smell that was both dank and shitty, and drew back with a wince. It was a sewer, that was all. Or maybe a combined sewer and drainage-tunnel—there were plenty of those in flood-conscious Derry. No big deal. But it had given him a funny sort of chill. Part of it was seeing the handiwork of man in all this overgrown jumble of wilderness, but he supposed part of it was the shape of the thing itself—that concrete cylinder jutting out of the ground. Ben had read H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* the year before . . . This cylinder with its vented iron cap reminded him of the wells which lead down into the country of the slumped and horrible Morlocks (207).

The Derry standpipe leads down to the “unimaginable and the imaginary, into the realm of the past, made up of residues which lie behind and beneath the present town” (Punter 19). Ben imagines the Morlocks living inside the Derry sewer, but the real threat is *unimaginable*. King’s fear of what lies below the surface, Punter notes, poses a “larger question about whether American land is as uninscribed as it appears” (19). What King complicates with the clown’s habitat is that the invasive alien presence predates Anglo-European colonizers.

As Mercer points out, “The cyclical return . . . is connected with recurring personal and communal horrors of history” (318). This suggests an unacknowledged cache of atrocities by the town and its citizens remain forgotten, and therefore buried. Such a conflation of place and past sins echoes King’s influence by New England Gothic predecessors like Nathaniel Hawthorne. Lloyd-Smith’s description of “The House of the Seven Gables, itself erected on a shameful rotting corpse, is thus a version of the haunted Gothic castle” parallels King’s descriptions of Derry’s urban planning coupled with institutional amnesia (116). The festering waterlogged habitat reflects Pennywise’s nature, which Magistrale describes as “the collective representation of the town’s adult crimes and darkest impulses. The sewer system of any city contains the wastes of its populace; Derry’s accumulative moral wastes coalesce into Pennywise” (110).

Beyond drawing mere parallels, Carroll defines the clown figure as a full-fledged monster: “It is a fantastic being, one possessed of an alternate biology . . . that can withstand blows to the head by hammers and bricks that would be deadly for any mere human, and the clown can sustain falls that would result in serious injury for the rest of us” (155). In addition to the exaggerated size and categorical transgression of clowns and monsters, the nonverbal sound of laughter clowns elicit from an audience parallels the nonverbal sound of screaming that monsters generally elicit. Ultimately, context determines whether such interstitial figures deserve screams or belly laughs. As an interstitial being, not only does Pennywise survive improbable injury, but he also inflicts unspeakable injury, as George Denbrough first discovers: “‘Everything down here floats,’ that chuckling, rotten voice whispered, and suddenly there was a ripping noise and a flaring sheet of agony, and George Denbrough knew no more . . . Blood flowed into the

stormdrain from the tattered hole where the left arm had been. A knob of bone, horribly bright, peeked through the torn cloth” (15). Although one neighbor seems to notice something’s amiss, most of the adults in Derry actively ignore the recurring crimes, but their silence is deafening.

The novel presents a full spectrum of polyphonic narrative voices, some heavy with unspoken parental outrage, and others that extend beyond the core group of protagonists. King also embeds voices of popular cultural narratives, such as in Richie Tozier’s encounter with It as the Werewolf. Sections of Mike Hanlon’s ethnographic accounts of Derry’s oldest citizens are interspersed throughout the novel, many of which corroborate the deeply entrenched sense of racism in the town’s history; together with self-aware references to Bill Denbrough’s latest successful novel, they lend a metanarrative voice to the growing chorus and further emphasize the importance of writing, as a craft, as a thought process, and as a way of remembering the past. Mike’s research also offers an example in response to Mercer’s suggestion that, because Pennywise primarily targets children, this “has encouraged critics to explore the novel primarily in terms of its focus on the imaginative belief that makes children vulnerable to, and powerful against, monsters . . . but . . . often overlooks the importance of adulthood” (315). Mike’s research proves to be the key to defeating the monster, and reveals Derry’s dual nature: “one version of the town relies on omission and forgetting and another darker version that relies on uncovering buried history” (Mercer 317). As Harvey Greenberg points out, “Delving in the library by the Losers’ quondam historian reveals that Derry’s *heimlich* reality is, and has always comprised a scrim over Pennywise’s *unheimlich* inferno since the town was founded” (28F). The structural similarity of the

central conflict to the *Three Billy Goats' Gruff* contributes a faint fairy-tale note to the swelling polyphony.

Despite the various social inequities that made a group of individual outsiders into the Losers' Club as kids, they all return as successful adults to the same "Bad Place" they called home as children. Their temporary amnesia about childhood in Derry suggests what Easterlin would describe as "place-alienation," since each of the Losers attaches negative or ambivalent emotions to memories of Derry. However, Easterlin notes that "feelings for place are modified by contemporary patterns of mobility," but more importantly, "the quality of social connections serves as the central factor in attachment and as sources of sentimental ties" (835). Greenberg corroborates this by pointing out that each of the Losers "typically grow more whole psychologically as [the story] evolves. The group identity forged is stronger than its parts" (28E). In another family resemblance to the larger Dark Carnival category, the strength of the Losers lies in the gestalt perception of their friendship as a whole.

Although the adult protagonists "no longer possess the imaginative beliefs of children . . . they possess adult knowledge associated with memory and history" (Mercer 316). While this suggests imagination and maturity exist as mutually exclusive traits, it stands to reason that some adults might also develop a more robust sense of imagination after exposure to new and varied experiences, or simply prioritize it as a mental practice. As adults however, the Losers also gain the perspective and ability to contextualize that only comes with life experience. Instead of imagination, the protagonists rely on each other for support as they face the monster armed with their own recovered truths. As Mercer writes, "By bringing the buried horrors of the past into the light—either through

remembering trauma, facing psychological realities, or uncovering local history—the adult protagonists are able to exorcize their personal demons and those that haunt their hometown” (326). While this vague generalization avoids an even more abstract discussion of the ritual of Chüd, it also boils down King’s florid descriptions to their rhetorical core. Despite an ambivalent ending that promises another return of the perpetually repressed, the protagonists defeat the monster. As Mercer writes, “In the face of a world characterized by violence, *IT* implores us to examine our own prejudices, as well as the myriad anxieties that permeate culture, in the hopes of eradicating both monsters and monstrous places” (328). Or, in the famous words of Bill Hader as Richie Tozier, “Let’s kill this fucking clown!” (2019).

The longevity of the clown’s mythology seems particularly relevant after two recent film adaptations of the text that launched a million Gen-X nightmares, as *It* (2017), and *It: Ch.2* (2019). Lowell Swortzell, NYU professor of educational theater, places the first recorded clown performance at about 2270 B.C. (8). When one considers an entire subgenre of “clown horror” has developed since the novel’s 1986 debut, it is difficult to imagine another inspirational source of so much blood and that many teeth. It also suggests “the clown’s role as commentator and social critic persists today as a universal element of world theater” (Swortzell 8).

Andrew McConnell Stott positions Canio, the clown from *I Pagliacci*, as the “original” killer clown, when he notes, “At the end of the nineteenth century, a new figure emerged from the ashes of the harlequinade—a clown intent not on laughter, but on awful, bloody revenge” (3). While the popular 1892 opera does depict a murder committed by a man dressed as a clown, his use of the phrase “killer clown” only aligns

in meaning atomistically; in other words, Canio is a killer, and is also dressed like a clown. However, I apply the meaning of “killer clown” as a compound phrase, in which the words are linked semantically. As Lakoff explains, “the meaning of the whole cannot be predicted from the meanings of the parts” (147). Pennywise is a killer clown in the compound sense of the phrase: the figures under examination are not killers who happen to be dressed as clowns; they are clowns who use their uncanny, theatrical appearances *in order* to kill. To apply this compound meaning to *I Pagliacci* risks an anachronistic reading of the operatic text.

Stott also mishandles the phrase “dark carnival”: the same phrase I have endeavored to clarify in the previous hundred pages of my larger study. He suggests that in recent years, clowns in general “have become significantly more sinister, foregoing idealism and pathos in favor of terror and debauchery. This is especially true of clowns found in a subgenre known as ‘dark carnival,’ a mix of circus imagery and horror motifs that depict pleasure pushed past its tipping point to become something much more troubling and perverse” (5). His footnote cites culture critic Mark Dery’s *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium* as his main source for defining the phrase “dark carnival,” but also invokes 1988 horror-comedy film, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, *Insane Clown Posse*, and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s 1988 graphic novel on the origins of Batman’s nemesis, *The Killing Joke*.

In my examination of Dery’s text, however, he credits David J. Skal’s *The Monster Show* for the related theme he has “identified as the ‘dark carnival’ motif, a pathological amusement park whose symbolism overlaps with that of the psycho-clown” (73). Clearly, Stott has not read Skal’s texts, or he would certainly have credited

Bradbury, as Skal does in *The Monster Show* (29). In fairness to Stott, he does not employ the same cognitive classification methodology that identifies a prototype as the best example of either “killer clowns” or the “dark carnival.” It seems instead that he lists what seem to him to stand out as the most salient examples of each, and many of his examples bear some family resemblances to the prototype as I have outlined in previous chapters. Nevertheless, the gaps in his research open up an opportunity for this study to elucidate these overlapping terms and sources that claim familiarity with the Dark Carnival, yet lack clarity of understanding.

King’s novel *It* demonstrates family resemblances to the Dark Carnival prototype through the metonymic extension of Pennywise the Dancing Clown. First broadcast as a made-for-television series in 1990, recent films have updated the nostalgic fan favorite. The character’s shift in appearance reflects his changing tactics: Tim Curry’s original clown, in minimal makeup, wears a colorful costume resembling TV icon Bozo, with a fringe of red hair above an expansive white brow, some blue on his eyelids, and a red rubber nose. In 2017, Bill Skarsgård’s Pennywise wears a Victorian-era ruffled costume in what starts as an almost monochrome white, as if to emphasize his character as the blank screen onto which the Losers project their deepest fears. By the sequel in 2019, the clown’s white costume, like his facepaint, shows more signs of wear and decay. The lace-up tunic and leggings go from dingy gray to torn shreds of indecipherable color. His costume, like his makeup, is punctuated by dashes of red, like drops of blood. Instead of exaggerating the natural curve of his mouth, Skarsgård’s Pennywise extends his grin upward with red lines that blend into his eyes, like a parody of Pierrot, the sad French clown. Instead of a rubber nose, only the end of the actor’s natural nose is painted red. If

Curry's clown relies on "Gotcha!" for scares, Skarsgård creates a more physically disturbing and unsettling character.

The 2017 screenplay further emphasizes the displaced status of the Losers, but updates social norms by 27 years after the 1990 miniseries. By narrative logic, the monster's hibernation cycle would have ended by 2017 and a new hunting cycle begun. The Losers form a separate community of outcasts; they're still located in Derry, but clearly not part of it—and rely on one another to reinforce their choices. Perhaps this reflects a cultural sense of fragmented identity after a polarized 2016 political season. After the presidential election, many people reflected in man-on-the-street interviews that they didn't recognize their own country any more. In similar fashion, the adult Losers must work hard to remember their childhood home of Derry, because they, too, have forgotten the site of so much trauma. As Mercer notes, "Certainly, the novel is concerned with childhood imagination, but it is also concerned with the coming to light of the horrors of history that are both personal and communal; horrors that only adults can begin to understand" (316).

The clown's frequent appearance (and re-appearance) in contemporary texts might be read as a signal of a growing cultural anxiety about the power of unexplained mythology. Though the clown's history extends backwards as far as ancient Egypt, US audiences have a distinctly American perception of clowns, beginning at roughly the same time as the nation itself. The success of Gilded Age circuses grew with the expansion of the railroad, and again with historical figures like P.T. Barnum, John Bailey, and the Ringling Brothers. Americans paint these captains of a burgeoning amusement industry with the same mythological palette used to re-mythologize clowns. While

European audiences can trace the history of some clown figures to medieval mystery plays and Italian comedies, American culture has limited exposure to carnival cultures and practices that were once part of the (Catholic) Church's unofficial culture. Instead, US audiences cite the circus and the (Stephen) King as notable forces in the mythology of clowns. Prior to Barnum, however, American audiences lack a cultural benchmark for this popular figure; we understand the mythology, but the details fade.

Fortunately, as Towson points out, "clowns can and do emerge spontaneously out of their native cultures, in the process reinventing ancient forms of comedy" (64). In other words, *they always come back*, so perhaps we should have expected zombie clowns. When comedic characters cross over into horror, however, it seems to signal a significant cultural change. The characters that caused so much laughter with pies in the face and baseball bewilderment now haunt our nightmares.

Such contradictions might indicate cultural anxiety around entertainment in general, as western society becomes increasingly fixated on "productivity." With technological advancements that erase boundaries between work hours and free time, many professionals remain on duty, accessible by cell phone, e-mail, or any number of social media platforms at all hours. We fear the backlog of e-mails, work, and communication that inevitably accrue when we allow ourselves the luxury of leisure time. We fear falling behind in work, punish ourselves, and police others for not taking things "seriously" enough. Unlike typical clown performances, we work hard to ensure our own successes because failure is rarely funny, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to discern between work and play.

The connection between clowns and childhood seems obvious enough. The clown's traditional performance function—as a visual distraction from background movement (while changing scenes for example)—parallels the social media and “false news” stories that distract people from more important events on the political stage. Clowns only distract audiences from the stagehands as they set up the next spectacle, however; when absurdity and exaggeration become the new “normal,” distinguishing between satire and horror presents audiences with a formidable challenge. In such contexts, clowns might signal anxiety about who's really behind the mask. We might be relieved to discover a “normal” human alter ego under the greasepaint and garish costume; finding out that the real clown costume doesn't come off would be terrifying.

In addition to the clown's powers of obfuscation, the emphasized mouth suggests a physically enforced grin, symbolizing a sense of “toxic positivity” that pervades U.S. productivity culture (Lukin n.p.). Professional settings often force workers to “grin and bear it,” stunting natural emotional responses in order to keep a straight (professional) face until one can reach a private location; alone, we are finally permitted to act like humans who experience real, ugly, human emotions. The same toxic positivity appears in settings wherever we regularly mask negative, excessive, or otherwise unacceptable emotions with performances of expected social roles. The standard greeting, “How are you?” demands a bland, positive reply; people often discourage responses that include personal details. Such scripts serve only as a formality to sustain the simulation of community.

The clown represents a relic of nostalgic places and childhood entertainments that once provided comfort or temporary escape. The relics have slowly decayed and now

enrich the subconscious soil in which our nightmares take root. Once associated with wholesome childhood fun, clowns have turned into terrifying metonymic figures that index the larger concept of the Dark Carnival. Additional texts that might also be categorized as metonymic extensions of prototypical Dark Carnival texts include Andrea Hairston's *Redwood and Wildfire* (2011), which features a time-traveling Conjure woman, and *The Talisman* (1984), King's collaboration with Peter Straub that flips between the world we know and an alternate world known as "the Territories." Though each author employs different metonymic symbols, they all index the larger concept of the Dark Carnival in American fantasy.

Chapter Six: Pedagogical Applications

While my theory of the Dark Carnival as a category of literature might prove too complex for introductory courses on composition and literature, it provides a useful illustration for different approaches to academic research and writing. As college instructors, we endeavor to teach our students new ways to think about their writing, and by extension, their thinking; ultimately, we introduce new ways to perceive the world through metacognition. When such metacognitive practices lead us to change our initial perceptions, we reach for new metaphorical concepts, as Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated, “metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words . . . on the contrary, human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical” (6, italics in original). Thus, when writing practices change in response to changing perceptions of our writing *spaces*, we need a new metaphor to conceptualize this new worldview, particularly as educators deeply invested in the power of words.

In the last month alone, I, along with over a million other US instructors, have witnessed a significant shift, not only in how we think about writing and teaching writing, but also in our physical writing spaces. Since the start of 2020, a global pandemic has forced students and instructors into quarantined isolation to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. This has truncated the semester at Spring Break, forcing us to re-think how to teach courses in completely online settings, and challenging dominant face-to-face pedagogical practices. It also means we are experiencing a new physical reality that blurs the boundaries between locations previously defined as “home,” “classroom,” and “study” spaces. This displacement has been disorienting. As Lakoff and Johnson describe

them, orientational metaphors do not “structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another . . . These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies . . . and that they function as they do in our physical environment” (14). Because we make sense of the world based on our embodied experiences, we must find a new way to describe this (hopefully temporary) disorienting shift in spatial relations, but we must also acknowledge that it has influenced how we, and our students, perceive of writing because of our new spatial relations.

Jodie Nicotra’s research on college composition examines the shift in writing on a much broader conceptual scale; she describes how “attempts to redefine writing have focused on expanding the conceptual framework that currently defines ‘writing’ as the act of producing a discrete textual object” (W261). In this case, “writing” serves as a container metaphor, in that it contains the activities deemed acceptable as “writing” by academic standards. This static, linear perception reflects the need to embrace what Nicotra calls “the dynamic, newly spatialized practices of composition occurring on and via the Web” (W259). This awareness of a shift in orientation reflects the cognitive-based system of categorization I embrace in chapter one as a conceptual framework. Nicotra describes this new way of writing as “folksonomy,” a portmanteau of *folk* and *taxonomy* that refers to “multi-user tagging” and “provides a new technology for organizing material on the Web, one that moves away from traditional hierarchical classification systems” (W260). This kind of classification reflects a more intuitively human way to organize information online; similarly by shifting my concept of the Dark Carnival to a

cognitive-based concept like a prototype—away from traditional taxonomic structures—helped move this study forward to completion.

Cognitive-based categorization can provide an accessible way to shift how we, as instructors, think about writing, because it relates to our embodied perceptions of our surroundings. Similarly, whether we continue along the path of online instruction or return to meeting students face-to-face, future pedagogical practices must consider “a new metaphor for writing that encapsulates how writing emerges spatially from dynamic, collective subjectivities in a network” (Nicotra W259). If the previous metaphor used to conceptualize writing is a “container,” in that writing contains a discrete textual object(s), then writing as “space” presents more opportunities to develop meanings based on how and where we write. Nicotra draws attention to changes in perceiving writing itself as space, and cites Jay David Bolter’s book, *Writing Spaces*, for his definition as “a material and visual field, whose properties are determined by a writing technology and the uses to which that technology is put by a culture of readers and writers” (12, qtd. in W264). As scholars and instructors of literature, we are accustomed to explaining how readers and authors construct texts together in an ongoing process, so thinking of writing space as a similar co-construction represents a minor shift in perception.

Most academic writers are already accustomed to citing sources, so thinking about citations and other practices that highlight the connection of broader or tangential ideas as “tagging” represents more of a shift in perception than a change in practice. As Nicotra points out, “traditional definitions of writing as a discrete textual object produced for a definable audience by a single individual or group of individuals working in concert have become restrictive, to say the least” (W259). Similarly, defining “teaching” as a live

interaction in which one instructor stands in front of a group of live students, all in the same physical classroom, has proven too restrictive a definition at this historical moment. As Nicotra writes, “Our habituated ways of thinking about and teaching writing are analogous to a dress that no longer fits: it chafes and squeezes in the wrong places” (W274).

Instead of seeking a narrower definition (an even smaller dress) of writing as a philosophy or practice, however, I’m reminded once more of Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances to expand the boundaries of what “counts” as writing. Metaphorically, this new “dress” would not only be infused with elasticity, it would also have pockets. In addition to the immediately collaborative example of hypertext common in online content and aggregated news feeds, tags allow writers to participate in a kind of “hive mind” collaboration. Beth Cooper points out how former Google designer Chris Messina brought the practice of “hashtagging” to Twitter in 2007, after looking to Flickr’s use of tagging and social network, Jaiku, for successful practices (Cooper N.P.). This recognizable illustration situates Nicotra’s examples of tagging in more recognizable contexts. The practice has spread from Twitter to make regular appearances on other social media channels such as Instagram and Facebook, among others. The most valuable worker in “today’s economy possesses the ability to ‘become-DJ’—that is, to be able to find and draw from disparate cultural aspects, remix them, and spin them in a different way” (Nicotra W262). This fragmented kind of composition, reminiscent of a bricolage style, also recalls Bakhtinian carnivalesque notions of privileging “unofficial” speech.

If students needed to research photos of events from ISU’s College of Arts and Letters, using hashtags like #shareyourheART to search Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram

yields images and videos of projects by current students and alumni. Likewise, students can also contribute to this conversation and add to a much larger, ongoing collaborative text by tagging posts with the same hashtag, or create an entirely different tag, to initiate a new conversation or text. As Katherine Mieszkowski points out, “It’s kind of like this invisible hand of positive social pressure that results in something that’s much bigger than the person himself could ever hope to achieve” (Steal 3).

To illustrate the benefits of collaborative writing, Erin Morgenstern’s novel, *The Night Circus*, is a Dark Carnival text that depicts the magical possibilities of collaborative creation. Though Celia and Marco are supposed to be competing with each other, they collaborate anonymously to create magical circus attractions. An appropriate assignment might require responses or blog posts contrasting the benefits of collaboration and competition; another could require students to create aggregated reviews of the novel from Amazon and Goodreads, using hashtags to find the required information.

In this case, the finding is equally as important as the writing, and possibly even more so. To create a new mixture of writing, writers/DJs must first locate source material. Nicotra cites labor theorist Robert Reich’s notion “that the most significant economic force in recent years has not been producers . . . but ‘symbolic analysts,’ who as workers ‘are valued for their ability to understand both users and technologies, bringing together multiple, fragmented contexts in an attempt to broker solutions’” (Database 201, qtd. in W262). The rhetorical triangle still exists, but writers must also consider a wider variety of possible audiences, modalities, and media when composing an appropriate rhetorical response. Nicotra suggests that digital writing spaces may simply “amplify what the process of knowledge production has been all along. Though perhaps we tried to

characterize [it] as a linear, controlled, argument-driven process, in actuality it has always been a deeply intuitive, affectively driven process of recombination and reorganization” (W262). In terms that parallel Dark Carnival themes, knowledge production has always been about making new monsters: creating various categorical transgressions and improbably hybrid creatures that spark wonder and sustain curiosity.

This reconceptualization of writing parallels my initial chapters outlining my exploration of prototype theory to understand what the Dark Carnival is and does within the larger system of US cultural texts. Instead of shoehorning a hairsplitting deconstruction of yet another subgenre into the gaps of literature already accepted by the Academy as canonical, I had to step back to get a broader perspective of the larger patterns I was seeing. Instead of forcing my study to conform to a hierarchical taxonomy, I stepped outside the metaphor of hierarchical taxonomy to employ a system of “natural organization,” so named because it follows the same principles of categorization that many human languages develop. Such languages often group categories of words based on experience, physical human interaction, and part-to-whole perceptions.

The concept of folksonomy does the same thing with writing: it applies a bottom-up “folk theory”—also known as accepted knowledge—to the concept of taxonomy. When we reconsider writing from the position of daily use in a fully digital online setting, it becomes evident that our students may not think of “writing” as the same kind of standard, linear, essayistic format we’ve become comfortable teaching. Though Nicotra suggests essayistic literacy “shows no signs of abandoning us anytime soon, linking the acts of . . . rhetorical production in which our students already gleefully participate with what we teach as ‘writing’ in our composition classrooms will infuse a greater sense of

relevance to what we try to do as teachers of writing” (W274). In this sense, folksonomy tracks well with carnivalesque, or unofficial forms of writing. Instead of adhering to traditional, top-down hierarchies, folksonomy encourages a bottom-up approach not unlike hive-mind creations such as wikis, or collaborative Pinterest boards. If a tree best represents traditional taxonomies, Nicotra cites information philosopher David Weinberger, who suggests the new way “rakes leaves together” (Trees 2, qtd. in W269).

The affectively driven practice of folksonomy fits well with the larger concepts of carnival and play, all of which lend themselves readily to a classroom setting. Before outlining play via outward, observable traits, Johann Huizinga describes a distinctly joyful affect as play’s primary quality, noting how an irreducible “fun-element...characterizes the essence of play,” and that this personal aesthetic quality must factor into a “real understanding of the play-concept” (2-3). Similarly, in a *New Philosopher* article, Oliver Burkeman describes “the real promise of play” as more than temporary escape from a task-oriented, or “telic,” lifestyle (22). Instead, Burkeman suggests that play and leisure, as “‘*atelic*’ activities, undertaken for the sake of themselves, for the pleasure experienced in the doing of them,” can infuse quotidian tasks with a sense of fun (22). I suggest a curriculum guided by a philosophy of play will not only make learning fun again, but will also encourage creative thinking, and offer a mode of scholarly inquiry potentially more productive than other, more “serious” methods. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest, “It is indeed one of the most powerful ruses of the dominant to pretend that critique can only exist in the language of reason’, ‘pure knowledge’ and ‘seriousness’” (43).

Among a wide variety of texts that feature carnivalesque elements, the concept of play functions as a common thread of connection. In his seminal work on play studies, Huizinga suggests play actually *becomes* culture, yet considers its “manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction” (4). Assessing the significance of play in human culture as a whole would require an investigation beyond the scope of this project. Because play is central to carnival, however, highlighting some of its core components may also illuminate a path of inquiry into its pedagogical applications. In relation to folksonomy, however, “play” is one of the primary goals of using tags. As Mieszkowski notes, “Tags don’t have to be popular—you could use obscure words to tag all your information and end up with a secret language known only to you. But then your data doesn’t get to play with everyone else’s” (Steal 3, qtd. in W272). Tagging data so it can “play” with other data is the key to emergent, hive mind creations common to folksonomy.

Beyond the essential “fun-element,” most play scholars recognize key features defining play as *exceptional*, *limited*, and *free*. Play’s exceptional status transgresses social norms in that it is separate from “real” or “ordinary” life; limited both temporally and geographically, play time is perceived differently than everyday life, and confined to a separate spatial sphere. As a completely voluntary activity, play is “free”: players elect whether or not to participate, and are subject only to the rules of the playground (Huizinga 7-9). These principles of exceptionalism, limitation, and freedom governing play might also inform a pedagogical philosophy. Burkeman, however, notes game designer Ian Bogost’s objection to the exceptionalism that separates play from “real life.” Instead, Bogost suggests that by treating everyday tasks like the rules of a game, the

whole world can become a playground, adding the playful exhortation: “‘*Anyone* can treat *anything* with the deliberate attention that produces fun’” (Burkeman 22, emphasis in original). Despite Bogost’s formal objection, the two perspectives are not as oppositional as they first seem when the ideas are put into practice. Bogost might make a game out of mowing his lawn, but if the game does not interfere with other “real life” concerns, it may still be considered as separate.

In the *American Journal of Play*, Thomas Henricks also emphasizes play’s atelic nature when he notes, “as work focuses on end products, so play focuses on processes” (240). Extrapolating the central processes from carnival rituals of inversion, make-believe, and transgression offers playful models for teaching critical thinking in composition classes, literature courses, and upper-level classes in literary theory. The central process of carnival inversion becomes a lesson on logic, make-believe presents creative opportunities for speculation on the possible, and transgression can encourage students to seek beyond the confines of their customary boundaries. In this context, I refer to the definition of “transgression” Stallybrass and White share with bell hooks when they describe behavior that contradicts or inverts cultural norms, and not transgression as an extreme violation of aesthetics (Stallybrass and White 18). Thus hooks writes of “teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (12).

Surprisingly, students in introductory or general education courses may resist an instructor’s play-driven pedagogy, even though the college setting seems ideally suited to explore the same principles of exceptionalism, limitation, and freedom that college classrooms reflect. While general education courses are not often free, students must elect

to pursue their own college degrees. In addition, the college classroom – like the playground – is exceptional in that it is set apart from the working world; students can practice skills and concepts without fear of being fired, subject only to classroom rules. Finally, typical college courses are limited to an average time span of sixteen weeks, and prescribed programs of study limit the time required for individual degrees. A growing number of online course offerings transgresses traditional geographic boundaries, and yet many college courses remain confined to university campuses. Lamenting the lack of fun in college classrooms while crafting her own radical teaching philosophy, hooks writes, “Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress” (7). This suggests an opportunity to apply Bogost’s approach to producing fun: by paying deliberate attention to the processes we are trying to teach instead of focusing so heavily on the outcomes.

Having internalized the hierarchical structure prevalent in high school, many first-year college students expect their instructors to hold serious discussions about important topics and thesis-driven academic discourse, or what Paul Heilker describes as “the official feast of writing instruction” that has become “our dogma, whether we mean it to be or not” (78). While this traditional pedagogical approach provides a familiar set of expectations for some students, it may also reinscribe the same systems of power that instructors ask students to interrogate. Although the customary “thesis-and-support writing” remains an important skill for college students to master, Heilker argues that they also need to practice “the opposing and complementary public ritual of the carnival

and thus come to transgress and transcend these forces which would place such hard limits on their senses of who they are, what they can do, and who they might become” (77). The carnival spirit of freedom lives on in fundamental principles of critical thinking when instructors ask students to question (or invert) what they have been conditioned to believe as truth and to evaluate sources for credibility. The same practices also make room for students to think more creatively by going against convention, as Marina Benjamin notes, creativity “cannot be codified, or emulated. The best any pedagogy can do is recognize, then help contrive, the conditions that allow it to flourish, a bit like giving a plant the right combination of light, nutrients, care, and neglect. Yes, neglect: if you fuss too much with the thing, it will most likely die” (82). Although the idea of establishing classroom practices based on principles of the carnivalesque or neglect sounds dubious (especially when “carnival” often denotes “chaos”), the spirit of *play* at the heart of carnival – and its fundamental affect of fun – offers a more productive way of thinking in pedagogical terms.

Implementing Heilker’s suggestions in favor of presenting “unofficial” discourses may include assigning ungraded, exploratory essays as part of the prewriting process. However, the idea also seems to echo Robert Brooke’s pedagogical concept of “underlife,” which “can be understood as the activities (or information games) individuals engage in to show that their identities are different from or more complex than the identities assigned them by organizational roles” (142). Both theories parallel carnivalesque practices of subverting official culture, but in nuanced degrees of difference. I think students enjoy a feeling of triumph if they “pull a fast one,” but I am more interested in classroom practices that allow students to question dominant cultural narratives without

feeling guilt for imagined infractions. This kind of questioning helps foster intellectual curiosity, and encourages an atmosphere that rewards critical thinking.

Once enrolled in college-level courses, students occupy a position indicating some degree of privilege; for many, the very idea of higher education communicates privilege, yet students may struggle with the idea that they, in fact, *are* privileged, simply because they have worked so hard for the opportunity to attend college. Applying a philosophy of play to a classroom that also teaches stories of the Dark Carnival, filled with circus freaks and other social misfits, offers students a way to experience Otherness and exceptionalism in ways they may not otherwise conceive. Myra Mendible cites Robert Stam's description of Bakhtinian carnival as an event in which "all that is marginalized and excluded—the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory—takes over the center in a liberating explosion of otherness" (86, qtd. in Mendible 72). While college English courses establish literary representation as separate from material history, as educators, we also recognize that texts are products of that historical condition. Offering students a canon of carnivalized texts also presents them with complementary questions of historical context, applying Greenblatt's idea of the circulation of social energies that produce such texts.

A course on marginal literature would need to acknowledge an awareness of ever-increasing individuation within society, as well as understanding that these increasingly personal issues are always already political. As Mendible notes, "Clearly, 'difference' and 'marginality' are relative terms, fraught with social and political tensions. As such, their legitimacy as social/spatial metaphors suggests a relationship already established by the dominant speaker" (74). This fluid relationship would allow me to interpret the

definition of “marginal” in a variety of ways, providing multiple course trajectories with a selection of readings. One of the advantages of using fantasy literature is that impossible characters and narratives open up spaces for interpretation, in terms of representation. For example, Stephen Graham Jones writes about a nomadic family of werewolves in his 2016 novel *Mongrels*. While Jones never describes the werewolves explicitly as Native Americans, as an author who claims Native American identity, he presents his fantastic characters as a possible metaphor, available to represent the hybrid existence experienced by many Americans who claim similar identities.

A foundational philosophy of play would endeavor to inject fun into discussions on marginalized populations and literature; while Jones’s characters might seem threatening at first, as werewolves, their fantastic nature forecloses the possibility of any “real” threat, presenting werewolves as marginalized characters in a more playful manner. Teaching Bradbury’s short stories within the context of their marginalized publication in pulp magazines like *Weird Fiction* offers students more advanced lessons about the physical printing process, paratextual elements, intended audience, and the dialogic process editors encouraged with letter columns. The same exchange between editors and readers is also preserved in many comic book series.

Because so many texts cycle through replications in popular culture, and because “there is nothing outside the text,” cultural texts like films, music, YouTube, etc. act as a “gateway” to literature. As Jerome Evans writes, “Popular culture has an important place in the English classroom—as an object worthy of study and as a means for students to access and study literature successfully” (32). The classic Disney cartoon *Dumbo* (1941) could serve as an excellent conversation starter for topics as diverse as critical animal

studies, the economic impact of the railroad system, or the question of faith raised by the baby elephant's "magic feather." It would also anticipate a discussion on the differences between the circus and the carnival, and the narratives each cultural form upholds or resists; this in turn, would provide students a scaffolded entry into more complex discussions about Dark Carnival texts, ideas, and implications.

Including such texts in a course on marginalized opens up opportunities for discussion about high and low culture, and about ideas governing the academic construction of a literary canon. Megan Condis notes how the traditional American literary canon has acted as a gatekeeper of cultural capital, even among the "lower" pop cultural texts, when she writes:

As the famed Canon Wars still taking place in US universities demonstrate, this cultural capital has not been equally or meritocratically distributed along the lines of class, gender, and race. Scholars including Gregory S. Jay, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Lillian S. Robinson argue that by contributing to the maintenance of a literary canon that overwhelmingly represents white male authors and characters to the exclusion of other groups, professors risk giving students the impression that to be counted among the literary elite one must be white and male (7-8).

Instead of instructing students about the "right" texts to read and the "right" way to write about them, a marginal canon focuses on the process of canon-formation. Marginalized texts provide a path that transgresses academic traditions and encourages self-guided exploration of topics to foster a genuine interest in learning. Focusing on the "low"

culture native to the carnivalesque encourages class discussion about the oscillation, inversion, and supervision of cultural capital.

Employing carnival rituals and grotesque imagery in undergraduate classes can present challenges, depending on the selected texts and course activities. When teaching works by Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers in Dr. Amanda Zink's 2016 American Modernisms course, I found Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque and the shifting meaning that applies to "the grotesque" particularly helpful in explicating the authors' divergent approaches to portraying disabled "freak" characters. I presented a brief overview of disability studies as a critical lens to help students better understand representations of disabled characters in texts by O'Connor and McCullers. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder suggest, without this critical perspective, readers risk internalizing such representations as a form of "narrative prosthesis," in which a character's disability serves as a metaphor for an abstract character flaw rather than a complex disability subjectivity rooted in material experiences themselves (13).

Lacking a narrative set in a physical carnival environment, another way to bring elements of play into the classroom setting is to introduce examples of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Jordana Hall proposes the *Harry Potter* series as an excellent introduction to official and unofficial cultures, with witches and wizards living alongside non-magical human "muggles." As Hall notes, "the carnivalesque and grotesque in Harry Potter illustrate an appeal to achieve social transformation through the power of laughter and the reversal of the dominant order of racial and ethnic difference in the wizard world" (71). She describes the series as a "form of interrogative text that challenges official culture through carnival motifs and imagery as consistent with Bakhtin's theories" (72). Students

can find the same kind of interrogation in a darker tone in Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), which also portrays transformation through the power of laughter: where J.K. Rowling's "Riddikulus" spell defeats shape-shifting boggarts with laughter, Bradbury's father figure defeats the sinister Mr. Dark and his infernal carnival with a smile carved in a wax bullet and a warm embrace as an antidote for evil. Bradbury literalizes the metaphor: his hero kills the villain with kindness. Whenever a text portrays laughter as a victorious weapon against the forces of evil, it echoes the ancient, restorative laughter of carnival rituals that renewed medieval communities until the next feast.

Establishing a sense of community in college classrooms can be challenging, especially when classes meet for only fifty minutes at a time. Factoring in social awkwardness and endless combinations of personal challenges does nothing to increase the odds of creating interpersonal bonds. And yet, adopting a pedagogical approach rooted in the concept of play requires an emphasis on the collective nature of what bell hooks refers to as the "learning community" when she notes that "Excitement is generated through collective effort" (8). Most instructors with experience in a decentered composition classroom can attest to the difficult task of wringing meaningful discussion from a silent class. As hooks writes, "There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes...there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics" (8). Heilker suggests writing assignments that do not adhere to a linear, thesis-support structure can help foster more creative contributions and encourage innovative problem-solving skills. He writes, "We need to help students learn to engage

in more than just this official feast, to move beyond the extant discursive, epistemological, and ideological boundaries that proscribe the limits of their imaginations—their thoughts, their actions, and their identities” (81).

One small gesture I employ in my 1101 classroom to foster a sense of collective contribution is passing around a sign-in sheet instead of standing at the front of the class to take roll. This places the responsibility for their attendance on the students themselves. Instead of administering formal grammar quizzes, I also employ “Mad Libs” as a playful classroom practice that students have embraced enthusiastically. I explained to my students that, if they wouldn’t object, I prefer to have fun in class, and thus have abolished most traditional quiz formats. I also developed a game I call “Smokescreen,” based on an assignment I remember from my misspent youth: divided into teams of four or five, each student must translate a clichéd phrase I have written on an index card. Knowing they must avoid such lazy, formulaic writing, each student must come up with three different translations for their given idiom: one translation into polysyllabic academic obfuscation (what I call “five-dollar words”); another translation into slang – they must also identify the subcultural source of their argot; and the final translation is for a typical kindergarten class. Teammates compare the “smokescreens” they have devised, and select one translation from one person’s card to offer up for the other teams to decode. The first person to guess the correct idiom keeps that card (or I write the name of the winning guesser on it), and the team with the most cards at the end of the semester wins. (I have not yet decided on a “grand prize” for the winning team, but with a majority of teenage boys in the class, food is usually a safe bet.) So far, nobody on the scoreboard has broken five points, but students have started to look forward to “quiz day” to see if they

can knock the reigning Queen out of her winning streak. While technically students are competing against each other, the process of playing the game in small groups also provides opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and relationships with one another.

The activity may sound pointless at first; the students are just looking up words, after all. However, this game packs several lessons into each session: it teaches students to identify different audiences, and to modulate their tone and word choices to best communicate with that audience. In addition, it also increases vocabulary and contextual knowledge. Huizinga himself acknowledges linguistic limitations and permutations for the meaning of play over time, but he also asserts that the “play-concept as such is of a higher order than seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness” (45). Once I hear my students smack-talking—in true carnivalesque fashion—about their “Smokescreen” status, I’ll know that the game has reached new levels of seriousness—and I’ll revel in the knowledge that I’ve tricked them all into learning more than they expected.

This kind of playful interaction echoes an ancient disdain for dour academic seriousness. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes that medieval societies often perceived official discourse with guarded reservation, while embracing the comic festivities of carnival as unassailable truth: “At that time [sixteenth century] the people could be approached only if armed with the nonofficial instrument of laughter, for men...were suspicious of seriousness and were accustomed to relate sincere and free truth to laughter” (100). I cite this example not to suggest stand-up comedy as a pedagogical approach, but rather to endorse re-examining the seriousness governing pedagogy and canonical texts for opportunities to expand them with play. Huizinga

describes the two main aspects of play “as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something,” or even both aspects at once, including contests, displays, performance, and make-believe (13, emphasis in original).

Using these playful elements to construct a canon of carnivalesque, or gamified, texts presents students with representations of various games and contests. Central texts might include, but are not limited, to the following: Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; Cordwainer Smith’s “The Game of Rat and Dragon”; Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants*; Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik* and *Time Out of Joint*; Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*; Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*; Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One*; Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*; Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants*; John Scalzi’s *Redshirts*; Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy; and Stephanie Garber’s *Caraval*. To tailor the course for upper-division students, I would emphasize similar texts that fall more clearly under the description of “horror narrative,” including Stephen King’s *The Shining*, Joe Hill’s *NOS4A2*, and perhaps selections from novels in George R.R. Martin’s series, *A Game of Thrones*. Some of these works have the added bonus of employing metanarrative and intertextual allusion as forms of textual play. Most selected texts are easy to locate as used paperbacks, as they are often categorized as “low” culture. Several works have been adapted as cinematic texts, and at least two can also boast of video game versions. These adapted texts offer students additional modes to analyze and provide an introduction to adaptation studies. Assignments in such an amazing class would certainly include essays exploring the choices in adapted texts, as well their connections to the “source material” and other intertextual allusions or references. These varied connections allow students to experience playing with texts for

themselves and encourage them to make their own unique connections; this provides them with the opportunity to make their own unique contributions in the academic game of creating knowledge.

Both concepts of carnival and play emphasize community, movement, and transgression in pursuit of freedom. Huizinga cites play as a useful mnemonic device, which, for many instructors, offers reason enough to employ such practices. My goal for participating in such transgressive teaching practices is to witness my course descriptions incite “enrollment wars”: one day, competing students will sit before their computers (or VR headsets) at the stroke of midnight, fingers poised to key in course identification numbers when the registration floodgates open for the next semester.

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