CONVEX CHILDREN: THE QUEER CHILD AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGHTWOOD AND THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to challenge the current relationship between traditional psychoanalysis and queer theory by using the novels *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* to demonstrate the ways in which notions of sexual development that underpin psychoanalysis tend to be normative. Also, these novels expose discrepancies in “straight” narratives of development and self-formation by troubling fixed notions of identity. The characters of these two texts are queer children or child-like queer people who are at odds with the ways in which they have been categorized by the world around them.

In order to explore the development of the queer children in these novels, I argue in Chapter One for a queered vision of Lacan’s mirror stage that does not see these children as flat, but convex. The convex mirror stage allows for precarious sexual development that does not adhere to normative notions of linearity and progression. This convex mirror stage also deconstructs the relationship between mind, body, and culture by using Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the fold. The marriage of the fold and the mirror stage in the convex mirror allows for psychoanalysis to interrogate queerness beyond subjectivity and fixed identity.

The second chapter of this thesis explores utopian possibilities using Lacan’s *Agency of the Letter*. Because normative structures like psychoanalysis obscure sites for queer utopian possibility, this project also uncovers the ways in which Barnes and McCullers hint at queer utopia despite its seeming impossibility. By working within the worlds that oppress them, the queer children in these novels gesture towards queer utopias.

The final chapter of this project is devoted to exploring the ways in which queer children circumvent the normative structures upheld by psychoanalysis in order to create their own paths towards queerness. Privileging “becoming” rather than “being” this chapter interrogates the relationship between queer child and notions of animalism, wildness, and primitivism. By revaluing wildness and beastliness, *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* reveal how queer children can map their own sexual development despite of psychoanalysis.

As a whole, this project is concerned with development but resists any fixed notions of identity or a narrative of development. Instead, I argue for a precarious relationship between psychoanalysis and the queer child—one in which the child is constantly interrogating our notions of growth, gender, and sexuality.
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INTRODUCTION

“...This otherness, this
‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way.”

-John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror

In Carson McCullers’s 1946 novel, *The Member of the Wedding*, a twelve year old year looks at her “dark ugly mug in the mirror” (40). When she does this, she thinks of her brother’s impending wedding, she thinks of a couple that lived in her house and had sex with the door open, she thinks of Freaks at the Fairgrounds that probably don’t have weddings, and she thinks of ghosts. In Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), a woman who is “meet of child and desperado” touches things in the dark, she wanders drunk around Parisian cafes, she gives her female lover a doll, and she wonders if she is still growing (38). These characters are dark and dangerous. They are dark because they are relegated to the shadows of society, and dangerous as they threaten normative ideology. McCullers’s Frankie Adams wants to grow up to be a soldier and go to war and Barnes’s Robin Vote is described as a beast turned human. These characters are messy, emotional, childish, and strange. They are children but exceed common understanding of what a child is. They are female but either cannot or will not act like women are expected to act. Frankie and Robin are full of desire but these desires are hard to grasp. They challenge traditional understandings of what desire should be and how it is formed. Frankie is in love with her brother and his finance. Robin has a child and then falls in love with another woman. These aren’t traditional love stories, but they are love stories nonetheless.
What is a common love story? A boy grows up and falls in love with a girl. A girl grows up and marries a boy. It is a straight story. It is linear. It follows a pattern. It is a story that people are comfortable with. In “Somatic Syntax,” Nicole Seymour argues that people in the twentieth century have assumed that traditional ideas about human development are “natural facts.” These hegemonic narratives have been taken up as absolute truth because they are “articulated through basic understandings of narrative dynamics, dynamics that are central to how we apprehend our world and impart information and which, because of their efficiency in achieving these tasks, go uninterrogated” (296). Central to this narrative of human development is sexuality. *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* complicate these hegemonic narratives by employing nontraditional ways in which to tell the story of sexual development. Both novels have nonlinear structures and resist portraying characters who “grow up” by moving easily through predetermined stages (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age).

Psychoanalysis in the 1800s changed the discourse surrounding children’s sexuality. Narratives of normal and abnormal childhood development came to be and these helped to diagnose adult patients or to help parents help their children. During World War I, psychoanalytic narratives of sexual development were both solidified with the rise of Freud and were being challenged by the chaos of war that allowed or even forced once rigid mores involving gender, sexuality, and childhood to be bent. During the interim when Djuna Barnes was writing, norms concerning gender were a bit more lax than they had been during the war. Although gender nonconformity was becoming more popular and peripheral sexualities were starting to be publicly recognized, these aberrations were subsumed back into the larger narratives of sexual development and controlled by categorization. One such category was that of the invert which is a term used most often to describe a woman who desires another woman and,
therefore, must have a man’s soul trapped in a woman’s body. The value of the category of the invert is under constant interrogation throughout Barnes’s work. In fact, as a frequent member of Natalie Clifford Barney’s saloon, Barnes was at the forefront of developing a lesbian subculture in the West, a subculture that worked to trouble such simplistic understandings of female desire (Benstock, 249). Barnes’s most famous novel, *Nightwood*, explores the ways in which people negotiate sexual identity after WWI. The characters of the novel are all connected by one woman, Robin Vote, who marries a man, Felix, and then has a long-term affair with a woman named Nora Flood. While they are living together in Paris, Robin gets involved with another woman and eventually leaves Nora. Most of the book consists of Nora discussing her tumultuous relationship with Robin with their mutual friend, Dr. Matthew O’Connor. Robin, Felix, Nora, and Dr. O’Connor all try to negotiate their desires with the normative structures of the world around them.

A decade after Barnes’s novel and at the brink of WWII, economic troubles along with political rhetoric served as a backlash to the relative flexibility of the interim. This trend, often referred to as “the cult of manliness,” worked to reify traditional gender roles and, because at this time gender and sexuality were seen to be intrinsically linked, sexual development. These rigid notions of manliness and womanliness influenced the work of Carson McCullers. Throughout her life, McCullers felt isolated from other people because of her inability to conform to these rigid gender norms. She dressed androgynously and, although married to a man, had several female lovers. The constant negotiations she had to make in order to live within a world that rejected her identity lead her to develop characters who felt the same isolation in the face of nonconformity. *The Member of the Wedding*, for example, follows the story of Frankie Adams, a twelve year old girl who feels separated from the world around her and wishes to become a
“member” of her brother’s marriage to his finance. During the “green and crazy summer” of the novel, Frankie is unable to conform to gender norms and constantly struggling to figure out who she is and where she belongs (3). Frankie’s housekeeper, Berenice, also feels isolated from (white) dominant society as an African American woman. John Henry, Frankie’s younger cousin, also deals with the pain of being “caught” within a life where categorical distinctions between people inspire alienation and desperation.

Although many queer authors like Barnes and McCullers worked hard to articulate the pain of queerness, certain queer theorists want to keep the dead buried, to forget that painful past. In “Past Burning” Christopher Castiglia identifies an important problem in contemporary queer theory: that the queer subject has been ripped from history and made to demonstrate a psychic universalism, a universalism characterized by negative emotions. In other words, Castiglia fears that queer people from history have been made into examples of a single queer psyche. This single psyche would elide the nuances between different queer psyches. This movement from epistemology to ontology—knowing into being—makes queer people into examples of a psychic lack instead of victims of the loss of the freedom to choose their own desires. This movement signals the point of contestation many queer theorists have with the use of psychoanalysis. The Oedipal framework of Freudian psychoanalysis has produced a fraught relationship between queer theory and traditional psychoanalysis as it privileges heteronormativity and reproduction. This focus on reproduction and the future has the tendency to recreate the circumstances that cause queer subjects pain instead of helping these subjects articulate their pain. In *Nightwood*, Robin gives her lover, Nora, a doll and this doll is an “effigy” and a “shroud.” It symbolizes “the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (152). This is because the importance placed on reproduction symbolically aligns the queer
person with death and nothingness. This nihilistic view of same-sex desire has prevented
psychoanalysis from seeing queerness as capable and deserving of a future.

This insistence on reproduction and futurity is the subject of Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. The
question of who and what is queer has been thought alongside the question of who and what is a
child in various discourses including homophobic rhetoric that seeks to protect the child from
queerness. According to Edelman, such rhetoric suggests that within the Symbolic, the child and
the queer are enemies. He believes that it is only through a rejection of the “cult of the child,” an
anti-sociality, that a useful queer politics can emerge. However, several of his protégés including
Judith Halberstam, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Kathryn Bond Stockton point out a critical
contention within Edelman’s anti-social thesis. That point of contention is the queer child. For
theorists like Halberstam, Muñoz, and Stockton, the queer child is a critical breakdown of the
binary Edelman sees between queerness and children. These theorists have helped shape my
thinking and it is my wish to engage with their work in order to re-imagine traditional psycho-
sexual development with the queer child in mind.

In order to map the development of the queer child, we must deal with a larger problem in
queer theory. This issue is the gap between ontology and epistemology that creates pathologies
of queerness or renders queerness invisible. An ontological approach often makes one queer
psyche stand for many different queer psyches whereas the epistemological approach does not
recognize a queer psyche at all. In “Enfolding Feminism,” Mieke Bal highlights the impasse
between ontology and epistemology that has taken place in feminist discourse. She looks to the
Deluezian fold as a way to repair the rift between ontology and epistemology that has caused
both relativist subjectivity and an objectivism that ignores locality. For Bal, the fold transforms
objects into “events rather than things” so that the subject entangled with those objects is
perpetually in a state of becoming (337). A similar problem has developed in queer theory, especially when it comes to children’s sexuality. To speak of queerness in children has been a tricky project. To speak of queerness is to speak of a queerness that is already or has already been, but to speak of children is always to speak of becoming. Not only because we see the child as a growing thing, but also because that which shapes the child is also changing. In order to tangle with these issues, I offer up the convex mirror.

The convex mirror is a deconstructive tool that builds off of Kathryn Bond Stockton’s idea of “sideways growth” and marries it with a queer vision of sexual development. Stockton claims that not all children “grow up;” rather, queer children undergo a delay that causes them to “grow sideways.” This sideways growth has the potential to make us rethink the linearity and assumed progression of human development. In this project I will be circling around the question of how psychoanalysis can account for sideways growth. Also, unlike traditional psychoanalysis that often risks being deployed in a vacuum, the convex mirror deconstructs the binary between the mind, body, and culture in order to explore how culture becomes a part of sexual development and vice versa. Therefore, the convex mirror is a tool of enfolding that also focuses on the child’s development of self. It combines both the Deleuzian fold and Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Highlighting the becoming of the queer child, the convex mirror locates the child at a specific moment of queer growth without fixing the child to that place. Unlike much of the work that has been done concerning children’s sexuality which focuses on a future anterior, the convex mirror is concerned with a particularly queer embodiment that resists any fixed notions of queerness. This is essential when considering the queer child whose present and future cannot be assumed based on current ideas of queerness. The queer child is becoming queer and the kind of queer she becomes is yet to be known.
Nightwood and Member of the Wedding are two seminal texts that deal with peripheral sexuality and the development of identity. I have chosen these texts because the queer children created within their pages already resist fixed notions of childhood and queer identity in a variety of ways. Because of the specific locality and historical contexts, each novel portrays unique tactics the queer child uses to negotiate her queerness with normalizing structures. The characters that Barnes and McCullers create are convex in that they are not flat, they bulge, they take up more space than they should. These characters are excessive and always shifting. They have the potential to make us uncomfortable because they can’t be pinned down.

In my first chapter, “Through the Convex Mirror: Spectacle and Queer Kids,” I claim that, although Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis offers useful ways in which to articulate the formation of identity, Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding reveal how these theories do not completely account for all sexual development. In order to revise traditional psychoanalysis—specifically Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage—to account for queerness, the convex mirror highlights how the queer child is not formed within a vacuum. Rather, the convex mirror reveals how the unconscious and culture influence each other. It is out of the relationship between the unconscious and culture that queer development happens. Using Deleuze’s concept of the fold to dissolve boundaries between the self and the other, the convex mirror revealed in these works revises Lacan’s mirror stage to account for queerness. Because Lacan’s theories of development are deployed without attention to the ever-changing cultural forces that affect the child, Deleuze’s fold is a useful tool for considering those forces without completely divorcing the mirror stage from Lacan’s original theorization.

Looking specifically at spectacles like circuses and freak shows, I take up Lacan’s notion that the child enters the mirror stage by seeing herself reflected in something. Lacan suggests that
this can be a mirror, a mother’s face, or anything else that allows the child to imagine herself as whole, but that image of wholeness is a misrecognition. In *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding*, however, convex children do not see themselves as whole. Instead, the characters of *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* see themselves as fragmented and continually strive to make themselves whole in various ways. Although their respective struggles for wholeness never resolve, these struggles show how Lacan’s mirror stage does not account for the queer child.

In my second chapter, I will investigate how the convex child re-imagines her world in order to make room for her queerness. This chapter, “The Letter is Q: The Function of Language in the Making of Queer Utopian Memory,” I use Lacan’s “Agency of the Letter” in order to map the various utopias that the convex children of *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* imagine. These utopias are characterized by the spectacles that have shaped their identities while expanding the possibilities of the real world through criticizing hegemony and drawing attention to the ghosts of queer utopias that continue to haunt us. These gestures towards what Muñoz calls queer utopia, I argue are also gestures towards Lacan’s real. Although the real can be frightening, threatening, it can also be utopia to a figure like the queer child that already threatens the Symbolic order. The convex children of *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* reveal queer utopias by momentarily revealing the ghosts of impossible desire and by misrecognizing the world around them in order to imagine ways in which that world could be made to accommodate these characters’ desires and bodies. The ghosting and idealizing that take place in these novels reveal utopia by carving out possibilities for queerness within a heteronormative world that makes such queerness seem impossible.
Finally, in “So Queer Becoming-Animal: How the Queer Child is Rhizomatic,” I argue that the convex children of *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding* reveal how normative narratives of sexual development and identity formation upheld by traditional psychoanalysis forces some queer children experience a becoming-animal in order to maintain and explore their queer desires and embodiments. Again, I use Deleuze to critique traditional psychoanalysis. In this chapter, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari’s “Becoming Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming Imperceptible,” in which they destabilize the binary between human and animal and espouse a theory of “becoming” rather than being (238). Using the rhizome in order to critique the “tracings” of traditional psychoanalysis, I aim to show the ways in which the becomings in these novels defy traditional models of development and act as an avenue to queerness. Thus the development of the characters in these novels show how queerness can come into being despite a host of obstacles and that its development is unpredictable. It is the unpredictability of queerness that makes it both challenging and rewarding within an exploration of sexual development and the unconscious.

Therefore, I propose that only way in which psychoanalysis can be useful for discussing queerness is if it resists prescription. Denying the ontological certitude of queerness, Muñoz claims, “if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only on the horizon.” My goal is to trouble both queer ontology and epistemology in order to upturn the heteronormative structures of psychoanalysis that block the roads for queer children like Robin and Frankie to form a queer unconscious. I seek to avoid constructing a queer pathology (which ontological approach often does) or ignoring the fact that queer development is distinct from normative development (as an epistemological approach can). By seeing queer development at the crux of ontology and epistemology, I hope to let the queer children of *Nightwood* and *The
Member of the Wedding form their own queer psyches. Although what queerness becomes may yield new and unforeseen problems for theory, I believe we must let this queerness happen instead of determining what it will be ahead of time. It is preemptive strikes against possible kinds of queer that allow for ontological certitude to continue. This certitude is then foisted onto the child. This includes notions such as “these are your real desires,” “this will be who you are when you are an adult,” “this is a phase,” “this is not actually desire at all,” and so on. Although psychoanalysis has played a large role in perpetuating these myths of certitude, it is my hope to find ways in which psychoanalysis can be used to articulate the development of queer identity without falling into heteronormative traps like ontological certitude.

Any understanding of queerness must be precarious in order for new avenues to queerness to emerge. Any fixed notion of queerness reifies the structures that cause queer pain. A precarious understating of queerness means challenging hegemonic discourses like psychoanalysis, while not necessarily doing away with such discourses altogether. Although psychoanalysis has had seriously dire affects on the development of queerness and on the lives of queer subjects, it has also allowed for a demystification of queerness that has been useful for bringing queers out from the shadows.

Queer children like the ones that make up the pages of Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding can help us to examine what is and is not useful in psychoanalysis by highlighting the places in which psychoanalytic narratives of sexual development fall short. Also, these queer children might help us to reach the limits of ontology and epistemology in order to see a queerness that has become and burgeoning kinds of queerness that we might anticipate. By moving beyond subjectivity while still paying attention to the particular position of the subject, this project seeks to make visible the “me” and “not me” that make up queer identity. This
project is also concerned with notions of self-formation that precarious. In order to better understand how the queer children of these novels see themselves, this project seeks to trouble identity and privileges visions of queer selfhood that are never allowed to be stable. Not only might this help readers get a better sense of “how it came to be this way” in *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding*, but also how queerness might come to be in the future.
CHAPTER ONE

Through the Convex Mirror: Spectacle and the Queer Mirror Stage

“She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes. And all the years she had remembered them, until this day.”

-The Member of the Wedding

What could be queerer than the circus, than a Freak show? For the child, spectacle is a queer mirror held up to her face. It tells her, this is you and not you. A little girl looks in a mirror and sees a Freak, anticipates her adulthood as a woman in an unwomanly body. She looks in the mirror and desires her brother and his finance. As she stares, some of her features are intensified, her adolescent skin swelling, rounded and tumescent—she sees herself reflected and refracted. Frankie Adams sits in the kitchen after meeting her brother’s finance and forgets the “long Freak eyes” that had haunted her (20). These eyes seemed to tell her something about herself she didn’t dare realize. We don’t always realize what we see when we look in the mirror. For the queer children of Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding, spectacles like circuses and Freak shows both reflect and distort the ways in which these characters see themselves. These characters encounter and respond to spectacle in a variety of ways, but for all of them, spectacle helps to inform their queer self-formation.

These novels are engaging with Lacan’s mirror stage long before Lacan had developed it. When it was first introduced, Lacan’s mirror stage was revolutionary. It changed the face of psychoanalysis and eventually caused a schism between traditional Freudian psychoanalysts and the followers of Lacan. Decades after Freud theorized the self (id, ego, and superego), Lacan developed the process in which the self is produced. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is the
moment when the “I” comes into self awareness. When a child sees herself in the mirror for the first time, she sees herself as separate from the things that surround her. This realization that the self is separate from the other is what Lacan refers to as entering the Imaginary. The Imaginary is the world of images that is separate from the original state of being called the Real. So once the child sees herself in the mirror, she separates herself from the Real and enters into a world where images are registered, where consciousness takes shape, and where the body seems whole. It signals the beginning of the child’s relationship to her body and the child assumes that this relationship is perfect, that she is a whole being. However, according to Lacan, the assumption that the child is whole is a myth. Although the child thinks she is whole, she is actually fragmented. The mirror stage is also the beginning of narcissism as the child is in love with her seemingly perfect image. Although the mirror stage is often explained in terms of the child literally looking at herself in a mirror, Lacan notes that other things may act as the mirror in this equation. Anything that the child perceives as reflecting her image can stand in as a mirror in this theory (Lacan, 1-7).

In *Nightwood*, the circus acts as a mirror for many of the characters. Their first encounters with the circus signals the beginning of queer self-formation of Felix and Robin. However, unlike Lacan’s mirror, the circus distorts these characters’ image of themselves. Encountering the circus and seeing their respective images reflected in its spectacle is not the comfortable and self-absorbed event that Lacan describes. Because the formation of the self does not operate in the vacuum psychoanalysis often suggests it does, the mirror stage can be a painful and even loathsome event for queer children. Forming a queer self often means alienation from dominant society and a relationship with the self that can be more problematic than Lacan’s mirror stage initially proposes. For Frankie and John Henry of *The Member of the Wedding*,
seeing their images reflected in the Freak show highlights their feelings of being “caught” in a society that does not approve of those images. Also, the characters that Barnes and McCullers create do not misrecognize their images in the same way in which Lacan’s child mistakenly sees herself as perfectly whole. Rather, these characters understand that they are fragmented because the heteronormative cultures they live in do not support the illusion of wholeness for queer subjects the same way in which it supports this illusion for normative subjects.

The mirror stage offers a useful way to think about the production of the self; but it assumes that there is a clear distinction between the self and culture. Also, Lacan claims that the subject is not a unified whole even if she assumes that she is. The image of her body and her mind are completely distinct for Lacan. However, according to Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the fold the mind, the body, and culture are all intrinsically connected or “enfolded”. In his investigation of Leibniz, Deleuze started to develop his concept of the fold. He believed, like Leibniz, that everything is contained within each being. Humans, then, are completely entrenched in the world around them as is that world entrenched or enfolded into them. In her essay “Enfolding Feminism” Mieke Bal argues, “…the ‘fold’ catches the nature of relationship beyond the rift between ontology and epistemology, and, politically speaking, beyond identity, essentialist stability, but also beyond the individualist pluralization that killed identity politics.”

Just as this concept has potential to mend rifts in feminism, it also has the potential to get us beyond assertions about where queerness originates (the unconscious, culture, genetics, and so forth) and help us to focus on queer subjectivity with its endless array of facets. Bal explains, “The fold’s potential to overcome individualism derives from the way, as a figure, it helps us think, not the position of the subject caught in the abyss between victimhood and pleasure, or that of the object… but the relationship between the two. This relationship is mutually
transformative; it is neither static nor slippery but durative in a dynamic way” (325). If we can see queer subjectivity beyond the subject, as the subject and object constantly transforming each other, we might have a fuller understanding of the development of the queer child.

In *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding*, spectacle is a convex mirror that highlights and distorts. It is, in Lacanian terms, a “decisive turning-point” in the development of the child and begins the child’s relationship to her body. This is a turning-point of what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls “sideways growth.” However, the convex mirror isn’t just a prop, it isn’t just a gateway into the Imaginary—it transports the child beyond subjectivity. The convex mirror, then, is both Lacan’s mirror and Gilles Deleuze’s fold. The convex mirror is seductive, “catching,” and yet it cannot imprison the child. Mieke Bal explains: “Attracted to its inner secrets, we want to know (epistemically driven) what is in it. But there is nothing, so there is no ontological trap that can captivate us” (325). Therefore, the queer child moves beyond subjectivity, beyond narcissism while still staring at the mirror because she is able to recognize what is other when she discovers her own image.

The convex mirror stage, as a queer vision of Lacan’s mirror stage, is a kind of delay in that it keeps the subject in a state of childishness; but it is also allows for change. Therefore, the self the queer child develops is not a stable self, but one that is constantly changing as the mind, body, and culture continue to influence one another. Stockton notes that one of the issues the queer child highlights is that of children’s delay. Children’s growth, she claims, has been “unhelpfully” and “relentlessly figured as a vertical movement upward (hence ‘growing up’) toward future stature marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (4). However, the queer child’s growth suggests a horizontal movement. With this configuration of a queer mirror-stage, the convex mirror allows for a delay that is still predicated on movement. It enfolds
without imprisoning; it delays without ceasing movement. Spectacle, a public performance made to appeal to the senses, is held up to the queer child as a convex mirror and becomes the queer child’s making, her delay, that which tips her on her side. In Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case,” it is the theatre that makes Paul believe he is special. He sees himself in the lovely leading men and also desires them. It is the theatre that motivates his sideways growth. As Stockton points out in *The Queer Child*, queer kids like Lolita are fascinated by advertisements, and others, like the boys from *Hoop Dreams*, are drawn to the spectacle of professional basketball. These spectacles keep these queer children in a state of childishness, but they also motivate the child to develop, often resulting in an even queerer self. Each of these are spectacles that shine back at the child in their own queer light and motivate their sideways growth.

**The Whirl of the Circus in Nightwood**

In *Nightwood*, it is “[t]he emotional spiral of the circus, taking its flight from the immense disqualification of the public, rebounding from its illimitable hope” which acts as a queer mirror for the characters. The circus is the turning-point for Felix, Robin, and Nora who all take a sideways turn after their respective visits. The circus is figured as a queer place in the novel by Frau Mann, who as her hermaphroditic name suggests, is positioned somewhere between gender binaries. When Felix meets Frau Mann, he is drawn to her but still feels distance: “Frau Mann, then in Berlin, explained that this person had been ‘somewhat mixed up with her in the past.’ It was with the utmost difficulty that [Felix] could imagine her ‘mixed up’ with anyone, her coquetries were muscular and localized. Her trade—the trapeze—seemed to have perversed her” (15). Here Felix locates the circus as the site of her queerness, a queerness that not only speaks to the gender trouble of her embodiment, but also to her sexuality. However,
Frau Mann’s queerness is not simply inversion (although Barnes is definitely playing with that category here and throughout the novel) but is so incomprehensible that it is beyond the current categories of sex and sexuality. Frau Mann is excessively sexual, masculine, and feminine and yet she is “as unsexed as a doll” (16).

For Felix, the circus is “a loved thing that he could never touch, therefore never know.” Felix, the fake baron, the keeper of a false history, seeks out the circus because, “people of the theatre and the ring were for him as dramatic and as monstrous as a consignment on which he could never bid” (15). Felix looks at the circus and longs to be one of the performers. However, his identification with them is also frightening to him. He sees them as monsters and is thus forced to look at the “monstrosity” inside himself. Felix has a hard time dealing with his queer desires as he has internalized heteronormative notions of sex and gender. Through the circus performers he meets Dr. Matthew O’Connor who he finds “volatile,” but by whom he is charmed through “valuable lies.” Felix’s interest in Dr. O’Connor is described using the language of the circus. Felix watches Dr. O’Connor carefully: “With tension in his stomach, such as one suffers when watching an acrobat leaving the virtuosity of his safety in a mad unraveling whirl into probable death, Felix watched the hand descend, take up the note, and disappear into the doctor’s pocket” (40). The movement of Dr. O’Connor’s body is conflated with the circus performers who Felix both loves and yet feels he can never touch. Because Felix’s interaction with Frau Mann has positioned the circus and, more specifically, the trapeze as the site of “sideways growth,” this acrobatic metaphor carries with it notions of gender ambiguity and peripheral sexuality. Unsurprisingly, we later find Dr. O’Connor in bed in a woman’s nightgown. Like Frau Mann, Dr. O’Connor is amorphously gendered. He has both masculine and feminine traits
smashed into one body like a collision above the ring. Felix’s desire for such a body is for him both titillating and painful.

Although he experiences non-normative desire, Felix fights his sideways growth and wishes to “grow up” and have a heteronormative family. He is motivated by his marginalization from white European nobility that he wishes so badly to be a part of. After his parents’ death, he chooses to live in the lie of European nobility his father had started for him. He keeps dear the portraits of his “noble ancestors” and holds on to the yellow handkerchief that unlocks the secret to his racial pain. Because of this, when he meets Robin, he looks upon her like she was “a figurehead in a museum” (41). She is like a blank slate on which he can write the history of his fake noble lineage and thus legitimate his father Guido’s lie.

Robin, who is “meet of child and desperado,” leaves Guido after giving birth to his child (38). She rejects Felix’s vision of her as Baroness and mother. Instead, she too goes to the circus. It is at the Denckman circus where she meets Nora. Here Robin undergoes delay, an “elaborate waiting game” that is a “major source of painful pleasure” (Stockton, 74). At the circus, Robin seems to be like one of the animals, they are drawn to her and they reflect her strangeness. Sitting in the stands, Nora “looked at [Robin] suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point. They did not seem to see the girl [Robin], but as their dusty eyes moved past, the orbit of their light seemed to turn on her. At that moment Nora turned” (59). The spectacle of the circus not only highlights Robin’s queer self-formation, but is also the reason Nora is drawn to Robin, signaling her own decisive turn.

Although T.S. Eliot warns in the introduction to the novel, not to “regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks,” Barnes figures her queer characters as freakish to highlight the pain of exceeding normative categories (xxii). Nora scolds Dr. O’Connor, “You
argue about sorrow and confusion too easily.” She is suspicious of the certainty he has in his
philosophic rants. But he tips his hand, reveals his role as bullshitter saying, “Nora my child,
confusions and defeated anxieties—there you have us one and all” (25). Dr. O’Connor is also
lost, but he knows there is a pain inside them all, making them a little queer.

**The Member of the Freak Show**

Like Frau Mann, Frankie’s androgyny also makes itself known through names. She is
Frankie, the tomboy, and she turns herself into F. Jasmine in a failed attempt to fit in with the
older girls in her town. The novel begins with Frankie being in-between. She is in-between
childhood and adulthood, male and female, girl and Freak. It begins in the “green and crazy
summer when Frankie was twelve years old” which means Frankie should be, according to
dominant narratives of maturation, becoming a young lady. However, her experience with
adolescence is “crazy” and, unlike the other local girls, “Frankie had become an unjoined
person” (3). This theme of membership characterizes the self-formation of the characters.
Frankie is not a member of the girls club, Berenice is not a member of white society, John Henry
wonders about being part of the Freak Pavilion. The characters’ pre-occupation with membership
also underscores the notion of being “caught” that comes up often throughout the novel. For
McCullers’s characters, membership is desirable in so far as it is necessary and inevitable.
Because they feel they can’t escape being members of a category, the characters feel “caught”
within an identity they have no control over. We often catch children in categories of sexuality
because discourses of sexuality see childhood as a cause for the adult sexuality that will be. As
Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley note in the introduction to *Curiouser*, children’s sexuality is
“caught between the future and the future anterior” (xviii).
For Frankie, this fear of being caught is amplified by her convex mirror: the freak show. Frankie is preoccupied with her own freakishness “which is depicted most often as a lack of commonality with other girls and sometimes as a form of female masculinity” (Halberstam, 194). Frankie’s body has gotten lanky and boyish and not being like other girls, being a freak frightens her. Frankie thought that unless she stopped growing “she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak” (19). In “Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy” Judith Halberstam writes, “As she dawdles in the last light of childhood, Frankie has become a tomboy who ‘hung around in doorways and… was afraid’” (195). Frankie sees this same fear in John Henry when she says “He looked scared… Maybe I mean lonesome” (9). Abnormal embodiment to Frankie means not being a member, and her greatest fear is being alone.

Frankie is queer in various ways: she is in love with her brother and his fiancé, she feels “queer” about intimacy with boys, and she obsesses about being a member of the club that the feminine little girls in her town have created. However, the queerest thing about her (or at least that which is focused on the most throughout the novel) is her masculinity. Not only her tomboyish body, but also her inability to desire the things girls traditionally desire. She dreams not of growing up and getting married, but of going off to war. These desires are reflected back and amplified in the drawings on the kitchen wall. Spectacle and excess mirror her queerness back at her, “The walls of the kitchen bothered Frankie—the queer drawings of Christmas trees, airplanes, freak soldiers, flowers. John Henry had started the first pictures one long afternoon in June, and having already ruined the wall, he went on and drew whenever he wished. Sometimes Frankie had drawn also.” This childish collaboration between Frankie and John Henry shows how Frankie and her world are folded into one another. Freakishness in the novel (the Freaks in
the Pavilion and the “freak soldiers on the wall) mirror back Frankie’s bodily excess. Her arms and legs are too lanky; she thinks she will grow too tall. The kitchen, oddly enough, is most often situated as a place of freakishness throughout the novel. McCullers brings strangeness and excess to the heart of heteronormativity. It is in the kitchen where Frankie stares into the mirror and is frightened by what she sees: “the kitchen looked strange to her, and she was afraid” (9).

Whereas Frankie is afraid of seeing herself reflected in the Freaks, John Henry is intrigued. John Henry’s identification with the Freaks allows him to develop a self that he sees as desirable despite the fact that it is characterized by “freakishness” and thus rejected by dominant society. When Berenice argued that the “law of human sex was exactly right just as it was,” John Henry would argue that “people ought to be half boy and half girl, and when the old Frankie threatened to take him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion, he would only close his eyes and smile” (98). Similar to Felix and Frau Mann in *Nightwood*, John Henry identifies with the Half-Man Half-Woman freak they saw at the carnival. However, unlike Felix, John Henry seems to relish this identification. Rachel Adams claims that freakishness in McCullers work draws attention to queer desires that, like the body of the freak, cannot be domesticated (553). The freak John Henry identifies with is exceptional because of aberrant sex characteristics. Thus John Henry’s desire to live outside normalizing notions of gender, to grow sideways is reflected in his desire to live with freaks. Moreover, his acceptance of “freakishness” shows how he is less influenced by normative structures than Frankie.

John Henry rejects dominant narratives of growth (adulthood, domestication, and conformity) in favor of visions of a childish utopia. When Frankie and John Henry would sit at the dinner table critiquing “the work of God,” imagining ways to improve the world, John Henry, with a voice “happy and high and strange” would sing about the world he imagined. The future
John Henry wishes for himself and others is specifically freakish, but not in a frightening way at all. His world is “a mixture of the delicious and the freak” (96). It is also scatological in a childish way—chocolate dirt, lemonade, a hinged tail—that enfolds subject and object. This world is, as Mieke Bal would say, “ontologically corporeal… bodies of thought” and involving “an epistemology of what that could mean—the presence of the human body” (333). The ways in which John Henry imagines the world reveals a rejection of the classic body and a privileging of messiness and chaos. Unlike “the work of God” that operates at the advantage of normative subjects, John Henry’s world is egalitarian and accommodates a range of bodies and desires. It is a body of thought as it thinks through the presence of the freakish body and thinks about the utopian ramifications of a symbiotic relationship between the world and the body.

The Fragmented Body

As Lacan tells us in *Ecrits*, the body the child sees in the mirror seems whole but is actually a fragmented body. In *Nightwood* and *The Member of the Wedding*, queer children realize that their bodies are not whole. Although the mind, body, and culture are all enfolded, these children experience fragmentation because heteronormative structures have foisted a narrative of maturation upon the child that she cannot live up to. In other words, because wholeness is defined by heteronormativity, the queer child is always already fragmented. This fragmentation causes Frankie to try to make herself whole through a union with her brother and his bride. Likewise, Barnes writes childish queers, Nora and Dr. O’Connor, who play dolls and dress up, but underneath their playfulness is a burning pain, a pain born from looking into a convex mirror and feeling shattered. The struggle to make one’s body whole is painful for the
queer child as the objects and people they choose to fulfill this desire is considered a “bad” object choice by dominant society.

Frankie sees the wedding as an opportunity to do away with her alienation, with her bodily aberrations, and become a part of a marriage. Although Frankie longings are placed at the altar of heteronormativity, it is her relationship to it that queers this coupling. By desiring both her brother and a woman to be in a polygamous union with her, Frankie queers the wedding. She says, “When they walked in the house today it was so queer” (4). Her heternormative expectations do not live up to the queerness brought about by her own desire. If, as Lacan says, the mirror is “the threshold of the visible world” and establishes “a relation between the organism and its reality” than the convex mirror reflects back not only a convex child, but a convex world surrounding her. Her very presence queers her reality, queerness touching everything she touches. Gay rights activists often purport that being gay is not contagious. Maybe so. But being queer is contagious, is catching within the realm of the Imaginary and Symbolic. Therefore even though Frankie desires the heterosexual couple, her very desire queers their heterosexuality.

Berenice claims Frankie is jealous of the wedding, pointing to Frankie’s longing to be normative. In turn, Frankie locates her violent feelings towards her own inability to be a part of the wedding, to be feminine and heterosexual, at the Freak show. The mirror and Frankie’s fear of the Freak show are closely tied. She stares into the kitchen mirror and thinks of the Freak show. She “stood before the mirror and she was afraid.” Staring, she thinks about the House of the Freaks, next to the Palace of Mirrors at the local fairgrounds. Frankie contrasts freakishness and heteronormativity when she says “I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding… Those Freaks” (20). Being a Freak and being heteronormative are mutually exclusive to Frankie
and thus she directs all her queer rage through acts of Freakishness, most notably her knife-throwing. In this scene we can see that she is expressing the queer feelings she has towards the wedding through her knife-throwing:

She stood very still, looking around the queerly pictured wall, and then she closed her eyes. ‘I’m going to Winter Hill. I’m going to the wedding. And I swear to Jesus by my own two eyes I’m never coming back here any more’… She had not been sure that she would throw the knife until it struck and shivered in the stairway door. (36-37)

After throwing the knife she decides, “After the wedding I’m not coming back” and starts developing her own queer fantasies for the future (37).

While enacting her fantasy, she strives to dress like other young girls, like a lady. She purchases a pink organdie dress to wear to the wedding, goes on a date with a soldier, and changes her name to the more feminine “F. Jasmine.” She tries to create a whole body by making herself more feminine and for a while she “felt connected with all she saw” (49). However, when she goes to the local tavern to have a drink with a soldier, she suddenly starts to feel “queer” again. Her attempt to achieve heteronormativity and, by her own logic, achieve wholeness, fails when she goes out with the soldier. As she walks home, she thinks she sees something “sideways” out of the corner of her eye. This enigma, this “accident” shocks her. She realizes that she feels her brother and his finance, Jarvis and Janice, walking behind her in an alley, “although she knew, and well enough, that they were in Winter Hill, almost a hundred miles away” (75). Her desire for Jarvis and Janice reasserts itself, almost violently, and certainly in way Frankie finds frightening just as her attempt at heterosexual coupling starts to crumble.

Frankie’s fragmented body is reflected in the freaks at the fairground, in non-normative embodiment so she strives towards normalcy. Such a struggle, Lacan suggests, is an impossible
one as we are forever separated from the Real and thus from wholeness. Frankie continues to be “caught” by her queer subjectivity as any way out of it leads her right back in. She places the hope for wholeness and normativity in Jarvis and Janice but her desire for them queers that relationship. She tries at a heterosexual relationship with a soldier and ends up feeling queer and feeling Janice and Jarvis walking ever behind her like ghosts reminding her of her missing pieces.

_Nightwood_ not only describes fragmented bodies, it is a fragmented body of work. In _A Thousand Plateaus_, Deleuze and Guattari claim that the world “has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world.” Therefore, a fragmented book like _Nightwood_ is a “strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented” (6). _Nightwood_ not only communicates the fragmentation of living, but makes us feel it. In “Thinking Affect” Armstrong claims a text cannot reproduce affect through “the inhibition of symbol nor through the new representation spurred into being by the punctuation of the signifier achieved by the Id and its unnameable energies”(111). Armstrong claims that it is only through tension, through struggle, through anxiety can affect be reproduced in art. It is “a struggle between the inhibition of the symbol and the realized signification” that affect can live in a text. This “struggle for form” can be found in Djuna Barnes’ _Nightwood_, particularly in Nora’s dream and the monologues of Dr. O’Connor (125).

Dr. O’Connor articulates the frustration of his embodiment through imagery of war and words. For O’Connor, words are weapons. They not only allow him power over the other characters in the novel, but they also inflict pain upon him. Barnes writes the O’Connor says “with violence”: “lie weeping with a sword in your hand! Haven’t I eaten a book too? Like the angels and the prophets? And wasn’t it a bitter book to eat?... Didn’t I eat a page and tear a page
up and stamp on others and flay some and toss some in the toilet for relief’s sake…” (135). Here, O’Connor is fractured, torn between the angels and the toilet, between transcendence and immanence and his embodiment is symbolized by the pain, the “bitterness” that words have inflicted upon him and his need to tear out the pages of a book.

The energy of O’Connor’s affect meets directly with the “punctuation of the signifier.” These two tussle, struggle, and in the end the doctor warns against naming and says that “time and the birds” have removed the body. Both words and feelings fall short for him here and it is in his recognition of that failure that Barnes is able to reproduce affect. Not only is it in the tension between words and bodies expressed by Dr. O’Connor, but also in the tension the reader is made to feel through her style. Use of images of the body, of excrement, of the toilet are consistently used; however, her poetic style makes understanding embodiment a struggle so the reader might feel if only for a moment the pain of living fragmented. In Dr. O’Connor’s monologues he is continually offering up metaphors and then change their meaning. Just as he struggles with the pages of a book, we too struggle with Barnes’ prose. It takes us to the heavens and to the toilet, leaving us lost in that space between where we might feel embodiment reproduced.

Nora discovers feelings of fragmentation within a dream where her desires are chaotic and ungoverned by the structures that would normally prevent her from feeling queer. “This fragmented body” Lacan explains, “… usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual” (4). She had this dream many times before but, “[w]here the dream had been incalculable, it was now completed with the entry of Robin,” and thus with its completion the dream ceased to occur. In the dream, Nora is in her grandmother’s room, a “taboo” place in the house, and her grandmother is dressed as a man and transforms into Robin. In the room there were symbols of decay and
abandonment including pictures of a great-uncle who had died in the Civil War. Upon seeing Robin in the dream, “Nora said to herself, ‘The dream will not be dreamed again.’”

In the dream, Robin is “disfigured and eternalized by the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain.” This recurring dream was frightening to Nora because Robin was smiling “the smile of an ‘only survivor.’ A smile which fear had married to the bone” (68). Also, Nora is frightened because her grandmother calls her into her room, which transgresses a taboo set up in the Oedipal kinship structures Freud has explained or created. This dream brings repressed desire to the surface and, in conflating Robin with Nora’s grandmother, reveals similarities between Nora’s family during her childhood and the family she has built with Robin. There is a line she cannot cross—the threshold of a room, the place between normativity and her own desire—and her “infantile wish” to do so is revealed in this dream.

**Enfolding Queerness**

The answer to the question “What came first, culture or nature or the queer?” is the fold. We unravel the answer not like an onion or a matryoshka doll, but like a cloth, a crumpled piece of paper: with every fold we lift, a new one is formed. Culture and queerness are folded into each other. A fold within a fold. If “A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern” then the object and subject are folded into each other, revealing a self that is the self plus. For Frankie it is herself plus the Freaks, Janice and Jarvis, soldiers, a kitchen, and much more that forms her subjectivity, that subjects her to her state of (un/)consciousness. As we pull these fold apart, we do not undo them. The folds do not fall apart. “Unfolding,” Deleuze clarifies, “is thus not the contrary to folding, but follows the fold up to the following fold” (6). Unfolding maps the folds, creates new folds for us to discover. Beneath the world of weddings and Freaks there are
far more folds to discover, histories to be told, connections to be made. According to Deleuze, “…when an organism is called to unfold its own parts, its animal or sensitive soul is opened onto an entire theater in which it perceives or feels according to its unity, independently of its organism, yet inseparable from it” (11). Unfolding, then, can be frightening as Frankie discovers because it may reveal in its theater, things enfolded that we may not like. For a queer child like Frankie this means unfolding desires that contradict the folds of society’s norm.

_Nightwood_, with its fragmented style and endless allusions is more open about its folding and unfolding. In her essay, “Laughing at Leviticus,” Jane Marcus explains how culture and the queer body are enfolded in _Nightwood_. She claims that Nora’s struggle is due to her perception that the mind and body are split (235). She does not realize that the mind and body are enfolded too. The consummate Cartesian, Nora justifies her queer desire as a spiritual urge to save Robin instead of a physical desire. Dr. O’Connor explains for Nora how the mind, body, and spirit are enfolded, forces her to “deal with the animal in herself” as Marcus maintains, in order for her to understand her love for Robin. He says:

> That priceless galaxy of misinformation called the mind, harnessed to that stupendous and threadbare glomerate compulsion called the soul, ambling down the almost obliterated bridle path of Well and Ill, fortuitously planned—is the holy Habeas Corpus, the manner in which the body is brought before the judge—still—in the end Robin will wish you in a nunnery where what she loved is, by surroundings, made safe because as you are you keep ‘bringing her up,’ as cannons up the dead from deep water. (159-160)

Nora must recognize the interconnectedness of the mind and body, their lockstep, their Habeas Corpus, in order to comprehend her love for Robin. It is not a love of minds or a love of bodies, but the two folded. Nora’s mistaken understanding of their love of the minds causes them only
trouble as Nora continues to try to control Robin with her mind, “bringing her up” and driving her to the arms of other women. *Nightwood* performs the task of blurring the lines between “contours,” between folds by “writing on the body, or rewriting the body” (Marcus, 237). With the book as the body written, we find the mind and body “harnessed” together in order to grasp what it is to be a queer subject and to love.

Lacan elides the presumptive division between (human) nature and culture by redirecting any quandaries about this to his three divisions: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The “knot” of these three realms shows an interconnectivity that postmodern theorists like Deleuze make between nature and culture. It is interesting, though, that Lacan purports that power over this knot is in love. At the end of his essay, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” he writes, “At this junction of nature and culture, so persistently examined by modern anthropology, psychoanalysis alone recognizes this knot of imaginary servitude that love must always undo again, or sever”(7). If love has the power to “undo” or “sever” the knot connecting Lacan’s realms, what would such severing accomplish? Would the Real bleed into the Symbolic and Imaginary? Would we see the distinction between nature and culture collapse, the two folding into each other? *Nightwood*’s resident philosopher and psychoanalyst, Dr. O’Connor seems to think so. According to him, Nora’s love for Robin has the potential to shake the foundations that separate mind, body, and culture. Dr. O’Connor believes that the pain that often comes with “undoing the knot” makes human life more valuable. People are “only of value when they have laid themselves open to ‘nuisance’—their own and the world’s,” he says (159). Although the divisions between mind, body, and culture help to support an easy narrative of human development, a narrative that most people can’t be bothered to interrogate, realizing the pain of the failure of these divisions can lead to greater fulfillment.
CHAPTER TWO

The Letter is Q: The Function of Language in the Making of Queer Utopian Memory

“To pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future.”

-Dr. Matthew O’Connor of Nightwood

Utopia is by its very definition impossible, it is always imagined. Therefore, for utopia to come into being it is no longer utopia. As Jose Esteban Muñoz claims, queerness as an ideality is always on the horizon. Therefore, for queerness to come into being, it is no longer queer. However, as Dr. O’Connor of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* articulates here, memory dissolves the barrier between past and future. Memory is a utopia-building tool because it critiques the past while looking forward towards the future. Queer utopia may be impossible in the world as we know it, but there are glimpses of this utopia in the gesture of memory.

Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* investigates what he calls queer utopian memory, or “a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present” (37). He clearly outlines what queer utopian memory is, its characteristics and affects; however, how queer utopian memory functions and its limits still need further theorization. I believe psychoanalysis offers a useful methodology to further investigate the particularities of queer memory and its ability to build queer utopias. However, psychoanalysis also offers up a certain set of challenges that often work to undermine the goals of queer theory. Because it is a discourse that works to regulate and categorize sex, sexuality, and desire, psychoanalysis can easily fall into heteronormativity.

In order to uncover the utopian possibilities found within the development of the queer child, I will be using psychoanalysis to critique some of the assertions that psychoanalysis itself has often been used to uphold. The Oedipal framework of Freudian psychoanalysis have produced a
fraught relationship between queer theory and traditional psychoanalysis as it privileges heteronormativity and reproduction. In order to rethink the deployment of psychoanalysis in queer theory, I wish to take a Lacanian approach for the following reasons:

- The diachronic approach Lacan takes to examine language allows us to see the current systems without tracing linguistic origins. A synchronic approach privileges a heteronormative framework and operates within what Muñoz calls “straight time.”

- A Lacanian approach reveals the failures of the Oedipal family even if it is still tied to that framework.

- Lacan’s theorization of desire offers us a more nuanced understanding of how desire is formed and how it operates unlike Freud who continually ties desire to an Oedipal system.

- Lacan is attentive to the linguistic structures of the social that queer theory is trying to criticize, rethink, queer.

In the introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, the editors explain that the work in this anthology relies on a Lacanian vision of language because it “exploits the possibilities of uncolonized, nonnormative desire, the unsettled and unsettling range of erotic possibilities that psychoanalysis has helped to articulate. The letter has an agency in the unconscious… that letter is q” (xxii). The idea of the letter q, or the queer agent seems contradictory as naming produces categories and queerness is all about resisting categories. However, I find it a compelling task to explore the limits of the unconscious and its ability to articulate queer utopian memory within the heteronormative framework of language. To take up the analogy offered by the editors of *Curiouser*, how does the letter q function to articulate memory? What transformation happens between the moment in the past that is articulated and the articulation of memory? How can queer utopias be built within the world of language when
language itself resists queering? What “uncolonized” desires still await us within the gaps between words, the failures of language? In order to grapple with these questions, I will be turning to two post-Freudian novels by queer writers writing about queer feelings. *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes and *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers offer useful examples of how we might see queer utopia in the articulation of memory.

**The Real and Utopia**

Entering the Symbolic, we are split. According to Lacan, the use of language forms the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious. We can, however, read the unconscious as it articulates itself through language, dreams, fantasies, and memory. What Lacan calls “the Real” is the state that our entrance into the Imaginary and then later into the Symbolic (the world of language) forever severs us from. This state is “beyond language” and thus impossible for us to achieve as beings who are “born into language.” Being both beyond symbol and image, it is also impossible for us to even conceptualize the Real. However, what Muñoz calls a glimpse into utopia, might also be a glimpse at the Real. The Real is a state that we always desire to return to. It is a state beyond subjectivity and all that structures social life. Being a state that has desire at its core and the lack of language and image as its only rule, Muñoz’s utopia—without the restrictions of categorization and bodily difference—shares common ground with Lacan’s Real. Also, the impossibility of the Real also lines up with Muñoz’s assertion that utopia is always “on the horizon.”

Unlike the Real that is characterized by its lack of absence, the Imaginary and the Symbolic rely on negativity in order to function. Under the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan developed his theory of the chain of signification. Like Saussure, Lacan believed that the
sign is made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified. These two parts are irrevocably split and can never refer to one another. Instead, Lacan says, the signifier can only refer to another signifier. This chain of signification, he says, is like the “rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings.” Therefore, the chain of signification not only spreads vertically, but also horizontally. Moreover, this chain is always shifting, evolving, and growing.

**Utopia Haunting**

Because we are born into this ever-changing web of signification and the referent is always closed off, separated from the signifier, Lacan says that our desires, too, are impossible. We are forever “stretching” towards a desire we cannot name because it is beyond naming. He says, “It is in a memory… that is found the chain that insists on reproducing itself in the transference, and which is the chain of dead desire” (Lacan, 167). This chain of dead desire reminds us of the hauntology that Muñoz uses to explore utopian possibility in absence and erasure. The chain of dead desire signals both absence and presence as the desire haunts us but is impossible in its haunting.

*Nightwood* uncovers utopian moments not in the successes of queer relationships, but in the mourning for their failure. By making visible a lost queer love that is allowed to be mourned for, Barnes’s text allows the reader to imagine a world where a love like Nora and Robin’s is allowed to live on. The ghost of their love haunts the novel, letting us see something that is dead but still remains. Similarly, Muñoz claims that ghosts represent a “double ontology” and that ghostliness is a useful tool for queer theory as “ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions.” This, he suggests, helps in queer theory’s “attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that ‘carries’ our dead with
us into battled for the present and future” (Muñoz, 46). Lacan adds a useful nuance to this idea as “communal mourning” and “group psychology” suggests one communal desire or loss. However, with its many rings within many necklaces, the chain of dead desire, then, underpins a politics that recognizes that there are, as Foucault claims, “not one but many silences” (27).

Barnes’s novel demonstrates a queer critique of psychoanalysis by suggesting that what is lost because of psychoanalysis is worth saving. For Robin, this is the loss of her freedom due to categorization. This categorization forecloses any possibilities to see Robin on her own terms. In his investigation of queer utopia in the chapter, “The Ghosts of Public Sex,” Muñoz, looks at post-AIDS crisis artist Tony Just’s work. This work, he claims, contains “specters” of pre-AIDS crisis queerness. Because the AIDS crisis foreclosed certain possibilities for fulfilling desire, Just’s work gestures towards a utopia that reopens these possibilities—in this case, the possibility for public sex. The AIDS crisis, though, is just one of many foreclosures that worked to regulate how queer desire is fulfilled. In the case of Nightwood, it is Freudian psychoanalysis that regulated queer desire by tying it to an Oedipal system and, as a result, pathologised nonnormative desire. Freud’s theory of inversion is a particular focus of Nightwood, its characters are both grappling with and trying to live outside of this framework. In Nightwood, the specter that haunts the text is that of the ghost of pre-Freudian queerness.

Most of Nightwood revolves around the relationship between Robin Vote and Nora Flood. After meeting at the circus, the two have a short but intense romantic relationship that ends with Robin leaving Nora for another woman. The two characters are described as “haunted of each other” and most of the second half of the novel is about Nora trying to make sense of their relationship. In order to try to understand this loss, Nora goes to a mutual friend, Dr. O’Connor, and asks “tell me everything you know about the night” (86). Night in the novel
functions as a space where the characters can explore their desires and are free from the pressures of society. So when Nora wants to know about Robin, she asks about the night because she associates her relationship with Robin with the freedom of nighttime. However, as Dr. O’Connor points out, there is really no freedom for a relationship like the one Nora had with Robin. Dr. O’Connor blames hegemonic discourse for this impossibility:

We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince—and not a man… They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they the living lie of our centuries. (145-146)

Here, Dr. O’Connor explains that the normative narratives of desire, the stories of heteronormative love we are all told as children and have been told for generations, is the “living lie” that makes her love for Robin impossible to recreate. This “miscalculated longing” makes all desire an inevitable failure and makes “what we never had stand waiting” (145).

So where is the utopian possibility of Nightwood? It is in this failure. Muñoz says of Just’s work, “In pan, I see the ghosted materiality of the work as having a primary relation to emotions, queer memories, and structures of feeling that haunt gay men on both sides… (41). In Nightwood, the haunting of “dead desire,” of desire that can never be, highlights the queer pain of living within the Symbolic where queer desire is doubly impossible: impossible because all desire is impossible, and also because the desire that assumes possibility, that of the girl and the prince, disallows all others. By “rendering visible” this pain, Nightwood allows us to imagine a world without it. The queer specter of pre-Freudian queerness, “bring[s] to life a lost
experience.” This experience, Muñoz says, needs to be read in gaps, auras, residues, and negations (42).

“What do they find then,” says Dr. O’Connor speaking of the invert, “that this lover has committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist—and they come down with a dummy in their arms” (100). Because Nora’s love for Robin threatens the social order, it cannot be fully expressed within the chain of signification. What she ends up with, then, is an empty signifier, a dummy, a ghost. It is in this gap between the feelings Nora has for Robin and her ability to express it and thus to live it that we find the lost experience and, using Muñoz’s idea of the double ontology of ghosts, it is also where we can see the possibility of obtaining that experience. Thus Muñoz might help us re-imagine the chain of dead desire as not just a killing off of desire, but also a making a permanent place for the specter of desire. Even if the signifier is empty, a dummy, it is a placeholder for a desire that can be obtained within the Real.

However, the Real, for Lacan, is not altogether positive. He says that the Real is threatening to us because it calls into question the validity of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, it threatens existence as we know it. Nora says, “Love is death, come upon with passion; I know, that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it” (146). Nora loves “as one condemned to it” not only because loving outside of heteronormativity is dangerous for individuals, but also because the very knowledge of desire outside the traditional narrative is frightening. This knowledge, this glimpse into the Real is frightening because it threatens the meaning-making systems that construct our lives, it threatens meaning itself.

However, as Nora says, “Only the impossible lasts forever; with time, it is made accessible.” It is important for Barnes to explore and collapse the meaning-making system of Freudian psychoanalysis in order to render visible queer desires that do not fit exactly into
Freud’s theory. Nora questions the theory of inversion and thus calls into question desire itself. However, she also gestures towards the possibility of desiring outside that framework. “Robin’s love and mine was always impossible,” she says, “and loving each other, we no longer love. Yet we love each other like death” (148). And it is in the death of their love that Muñoz’s ghosting can take place. Therefore, within what seems like another tragic failure of a queer relationship, we can see the possibility of a queer utopia beyond the structures that make Robin and Nora’s love “impossible.”

**Idealizing**

Unlike Freud who sees psychic development as a linear process, Lacan suggests that we encounter these stages constantly throughout our lives; therefore, Lacan’s theory of development operates outside of “straight time” and allows for queer moments as opposed to a queer physic makeup. Also, even though Lacan takes a diachronic approach, he is still concerned with how language functions within particular historical moments. Therefore, a Lacanian approach both allows us to see the particularity of a queer subject within his or her moment in time, but also allows us to see beyond time and to collapse distinctions between past, present, and future which is necessary in order for Muñoz’s queer utopian memory to operate.

Imagining new utopian worlds is important for the characters of Carson McCuller’s 1946 novel, *The Member of the Wedding*. Set in a rural southern town during World War II, the novel is about an adolescent girl, Frankie, who is preparing for her brother’s wedding. She wants to become a part of the marriage between her brother and his fiancé and struggles with her inability to bring this fantasy to life. Most of this novel revolves around Frankie, the housekeeper, Berenice, and Frankie’s cousin, John Henry, sitting in the family’s kitchen discussing how they
see their lives and how they wish their lives could be. Muñoz claims that there are utopian possibilities within the quotidian. In McCuller’s text quotidian pleasures demonstrate Muñoz’s idea that “all memory is political” because they communicate how the characters believe the world should be in contrast to the World War II southern backdrop that silences queerness (35). In *The Member of the Wedding* memories of quotidian pleasures have political potential in that they communicate both in against various chains of signification.

Frankie is obsessed with becoming a member of her brother’s wedding, a part of his relationship with his fiancé, which acts to queer the heteronormative relationship at the center of the text. In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton claims that connection is “a form of intrusion” and “Intrusion, moreover, can force new connections” (184). Frankie’s intrusion on the wedding, then, forces a queer connection upon an otherwise normative relationship. In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCuller’s uses queer signification, intrusive membership, to imagine non-hegemonic possibilities within “straight” relationships. This queer signification, then, allows us to “map” queerness upon connections that would otherwise be resistant to queerness.

Signs are at the forefront of McCuller’s text and naming, especially, brings about queer pain for the characters of the novel. Frankie asks Berenice, the black housekeeper, why people are not allowed to change their names. Berenice answers, “You have a name and one thing after another happens to you, and you behave in various ways and do things, so that soon the names begin to have a meaning. Things have accumulated around the name” (113). This explanation of the power of naming traces the signifying chain of names and reveals that, no matter how much one tries, it is impossible to escape the signification of one’s name. Frankie tries to resist this anyway, renaming herself F. Jasmine in order to cultivate a new identity, new signification.
Naming and the resistance to naming are tied directly to resistance to heteronormativity in the novel. Berenice explains that Lily Mae Jenkins, a local person, was formerly a man but fell in love with another man and “changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (81). Frankie also thinks that she can change her name to F. Jasmine and, as a result, become a member of the wedding. Foucault says that “calling sex by its name” resulted in a foreclosure of sexual possibilities. “As is in order to gain mastery,” we give sex and sexuality names, we “subjugate it at the level of language” (17). Because of what Lacan calls the “closed order” of signs, naming results in a perpetual imprisonment of the signified. The characters of *The Member of the Wedding* recognize this and feel “caught.” Berenice says, “We all of us somehow caught. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and burst free. But no matter what we do we still caught” (119). No matter how much they resist their signification, Berenice thinks it is impossible for anyone to escape the closed order of signs and the social meaning that is attached to a person.

However, Frankie disagrees that one cannot escape the meaning that has been built up around his or her name. She doesn’t see herself as truly Frankie anymore, but as F. Jasmine. She says she only responds to “Frankie” so that others aren’t confused, but F. Jasmine is her “true name” (125). It is as F. Jasmine that Frankie experiences a queer utopian memory. The Saturday before her brother’s wedding, “the town opened before her and in a new way she belonged.” This walk is full of utopian memory because, as she walks down the street, she misremembers all the times she has walked through town before. “It was the morning different from all other mornings she had ever known” because of her anticipation of the wedding, and because she felt like she did once when she walked around town pretending to be Mexican, but this morning was like the
“Mexican game” only she was not trying to trick people, “far from it, she only wanted to be recognized for her true self.” Unlike the first time she tried to become something else, Frankie feels as if her transformation into F. Jasmine was true and “not pretend.”

This utopian memory is characterized by idealization, or according to Muñoz, determined negation. All Frankie wants is human connection, and even though she had walked down this road many times before and felt alone, this time she remembers the town as if she were a member. This determined negation forgets all the loneliness and discomfort of the walk and, instead, “F. Jasmine forgot the wild hard glare and choking dust and miles (it must have been at least five) of wandering all over town” (61). In this utopian moment, she is able to forget the negative connotations she associates with the town and peer into a possible future where she is a member, if only for a few short hours. Moreover, it is because of the anticipation she feels about the wedding that she “felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around the town.” Her queer imagination, her ability to see herself as a member of the wedding, marrying her brother and his wife allows her to experience an idyllic connection with the town she usually feels such disdain for.

This memory is quotidian in that she feels this oneness as she walks down the street, past her father’s store, carving out a route she had probably taken daily. And yet, in this completely ordinary moment, Frankie sees past the small town she grew up in: “It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included. Therefore, many things began to happen—nothing that came about surprised F. Jasmine, until the last at least, all was natural in a magic way” (49). It was not that she had walked this trek so many times before that nothing surprised her; rather, in this queer utopian memory, it was the magic of the moment to which she attributes this predictability. Muñoz
claims that a queer utopian memory allows the subject to see “opening and indeterminacy” in the commonplace. In Frankie’s case, she is able to open up new motives (magic) to replace the negative feelings that provoke her alienation (boredom, distance).

This memory also exhibits ghosting; however, in this case the ghost stands in for the ghost of queer pain. The double ontology of the ghost resonates especially in this moment:

As she walked along, it seemed as though the ghost of the old Frankie, dirty and hungry-eyed, trudged silently along nor far from her, and the thought of the future, after the wedding, was constant as the very sky. That day alone seemed equally important as both the long past and the bright future—as a hinge is important to a swinging door. And since it was the day when the past and future mingled, F. Jasmine did not wonder that it was strange and long. (61)

This moment exhibits Muñoz’s ghosting as, with the ghost of her former lonely life, F. Jasmine steps “out of the linearity of straight time.” This imagining is idyllic, though, because it is the pain that is ghosted and not the possibility for queer utopia. This moment, then, stands as an inversion of the ghosting that happens in Tony Just’s work and in Nightwood. However, it still performs the collapsing of distinctions between past, present, and future and memory allows for. This allows us to see into utopia, into the Real as “Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness in the world” and this openness makes room for queer possibilities (25).

Frankie is not the only character who lets us see into utopia. Her cousin, John Henry, is a child who is fascinated by the idea of being half-man, half-woman. He fantasizes about joining a freak show and identifies with Lily Mae Jenkins (81). His resistance to gender categorization makes John Henry a queer characters and his worldview enacts what Muñoz calls “casting a
picture” by imagining a world were distinctions between race, gender, and bodily difference all collapse. Memory is able to “do utopia” by idealization that does not “foreclose” the memory by limiting it to the realm of nostalgia; rather, by “determined negation” or an imagining that points “beyond the barriers of our current conditions of possibility” (Muñoz, 38).

In an idyllic moment, John Henry experiences a utopia that is a critique of the present and maps a new world upon the one in which he lives. His misremembering of the world around him is a determined negation because what he imagines is “false” but gestures towards how he thinks the world should be. During some of their “queer conversations,” Berenice, John Henry, and Frankie would sit around the kitchen table and “criticize the Creator,” tell of the world they imagined. McCullers describes John Henry, full of jouissance:

And Holy Lord God John Henry’s voice would rise up happy and high and strange, and his world was a mixture of the delicious and the freak, and he did not think in global terms: the sudden long arm that could stretch from here to California, chocolate dirt and rains of lemonade, the extra eye seeing a thousand miles, a hinged tail that could be let down as a kind of prop to sit on when you wished to rest, the candy flowers. (96)

John Henry’s utopia is particularly queer and characterized by childhood fantasies. This “mixture of the delicious and the freak” glorifies the quotidian pleasures of childhood and turns them into a vision of a world where queer desires are enacted. Although Berenice insists that “the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved,” John Henry would “add his two cents’ worth” about this (97).

Chocolate, lemonade, and candy flowers gesture toward a “lifeworld of queer relationality,” a “utopian potentially” (Muñoz, 6). Earlier in the novel, John Henry claims that the world should be made up of people who are half man/half woman and wishes to live with
the freaks at the carnival. In his vision of utopia, John Henry imagines freakish bodies that can perform multiple tasks and are uncontained. In the world he paints for us here, different bodies can enjoy simple pleasures that are outside of “global terms” and are predicated on the moment. In his utopian scream, John Henry communicates both ecstasy in the possibility of such a future, as well as a critique of the present that denies non-normative embodiments and desires.

Although not linguistic, this utopian scream is a “felicitous speech act,” an articulation that does something as well as says something (Muñoz, 9). This scream isn’t a song or a tantrum, it is a picture constructed to show how John Henry sees the world. However, as Muñoz points out in *Cruising Utopia*, when we deconstruct felicitous speech acts “we see all the things that eventually go wrong and the failure or infelicity that is built into the speech act” (9). Lacan would call this act an utterance, or parole which is also always characterized by failure. This inevitable disappointment, both Lacan and Muñoz agree, is no reason to abandon hope in acts that gesture towards utopia. Although John Henry never gets to live in a world of chocolate dirt and lemonade rain, the utopia he imagines is an inevitable failure worth striving for.

Muñoz sees a “primary linkage between queer desire and queer politics” (48). By imagining worlds where their desires are included, Frankie and John Henry are able to critique the world that will not include them. Frankie’s walk down the street as F. Jasmine allows her to remember the town as if she was a member, as if the queer pain of isolation did not exist for her. In his freakish scream, John Henry is able to remember a world that includes his desires but are not completely unlike the world of the novel. “Queer world-making,” Muñoz claims, “hinges on the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia and to include such pictures in any map of the social” (40). Although they live in a small southern town where queer
desires alienate characters from their community, Frankie and John Henry are able to “cast pictures” of utopia on the world around them.

Although Lacan realizes how language can produce violence and censorship, he also believes that memory can remain “alive under censorship” as long as there are still people who are willing to revolt and for whom such power relations still have meaning. For Muñoz, queer utopian memory derives its power from its ability to operate within the very framework it opposes. By tracing the chain of signification in queer utopian memory, we might see traces of other worlds within structures of meaning that often resist queerness. Nightwood lets us imagine utopia by using ghosts to render visible a queerness that is not defined by hegemonic discourse and The Member of the Wedding uses idealization in order to present a queer utopia that is not complete unlike the real world, but makes room for new queer significations. These texts, as Muñoz says, “not only allow us to imagine utopia but, more important, whet our appetite for it” (48). Thus we begin to crave new significations and to want to build new queer utopias. These utopias might be impossible, but only the impossible lasts forever.
CHAPTER THREE

So Queer Becoming-Animal: How the Queer Child is Rhizomatic

“...she will make an innocence for herself; a fearful sort of primitive innocence. It may be considered ‘depraved’ by our generation, but our generation does not know everything.”

-Felix Volkbein of Nightwood

As many critics have already noted, Nightwood is a novel that rips words like “animal,” “primitive,” and “beast” from their negative connotations. Barnes seeks to take her readers down to the ground, back to primitive roots that don’t know the hegemonic structures of modern life. Although the connection between “beast” and “queer” may strike some readers as homophobic, Barnes contests that beastliness is a desirable state as it is unconcerned with the rules of society and thus, in a sense, innocent. In McCullers’s novel, Frankie fantasizes about the theaters of WWII and associates becoming a soldier with adventure in a wild and exotic land. Themes of wildness and exoticism also surround queerness. Associating wildness with queerness may seem to uphold oversimplified and normative notions that see all otherness as the same. However, when McCullers associates queerness with wildness, she is re-defining both of those ideas. Going against popular conceptions of the wild and exotic, McCullers exposes what is wild in some of the most basic human tendencies and what is exotic in a small southern town. Also, the way she uses wildness to work towards a re-definition of queerness is similar to Barnes’s use of beastliness. Both authors seek to reveal the uncontained and unscripted nature of human development by collapsing distinctions between human and nature. The convex children of Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding show how normative narratives of sexual development and identity formation upheld by traditional psychoanalysis forces some queer
children to undergo a “becoming”—a transition with no clear beginning, end, or set trajectory—that troubles the binaries between nature and culture.

Deleuze and Guattri don’t like roots. They don’t like systems that branch out, that tell us what’s coming next. The rhizome, they explain, is not like a tree. The rhizome is an “image of thought,” material in its conception but still malleable. The rhizome allows for multiple avenues, for multiplicity, and for sideways thinking. The rhizome is not based on filiation: it can start and stop anywhere, continue on somewhere completely new. It can rupture; it can become unrecognizable. The rhizome is not hierarchical, it does not move up and down. It spreads every which way. Nora Flood knows something of the rhizome. As she looks upon Dr. O’Connor, dressed in a wig and nightgown in his bed, “It flashed into Nora’s head: ‘God, children know something they can’t tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!’” But this thought is only an image of thought, a feeling of a thought, a plane that butts up against other planes: “this thought, which was only the sensation of a thought, was of but a second’s duration as she opened the door…” (85-86). Nora’s “sensation of a thought” is rhizomatic in that it breaks down binaries (wolf, girl) and maps difference, different bodies onto a material plane, a plane that looks like a bed but is still a plane.

Mapping the Convex Child

Freudian psychoanalysis traces the unconscious according to normativity, which means it uses a narrative of development already available in order to explain all development. In order to see the queer child’s development for itself, Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding show how psychoanalytic tracings can fail and the child can map his or her own development despite these failures. The rhizome is “unlike the roots of a tree” according to Deleuze and Guattri’s
Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus. The rhizome is altogether different from the root, it is “altogether difference, a map and not a tracing.” Unlike a State apparatus that traces, that feigns clairvoyance, the rhizome maps. The rhizome does not reproduce structures. “Make a map, not a tracing”, they say, “The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome.” The rhizome is nonlinear and is thus able to establish relationships of power, exchange, and transference. It maps connections instead of (re)making them. Thus the rhizome has the potential to reveal where psychoanalysis traces queer children instead of mapping them.

Unlike a tracing, a map “is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious.” This is an important divergence from Freudian psychoanalysis which assumes a ready-made unconscious that needs to be explained with a tracing and not mapped. The rhizome helps us see how embodiment, culture, and other states of consciousness shape the unconscious. It helps us see how being produces an unconscious. Instead of “making” connections, the rhizome “fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency. It is itself a rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (12). The rhizome is also concerned with enfolding subjects and objects and, like the fold, the rhizome works on a level of precariousness. So to trace rhizomes or unfold folds of the queer child is a project that allows for constant discovery, surprise, and change.

An open map is just what the doctor ordered, a prescription written for Professor Freud. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari offer the rhizome as a way out of a problem that they locate at the
center of childhood psychoanalysis. They use “Professor” Freud’s Little Hans as an example: “Look at what happened to Little Hans already, an example of child psychoanalysis at its purest: they kept on BREAKING HIS RHIZOME and BLOTCHING HIS MAP, setting it straight for him, blocking his every way out, until he began to desire his own shame and guilt, until they had rooted shame and guilt in him…” (14). Chocking Hans’s fears up to neuroses and Freud’s pet project, castration anxiety, Freud sees only the narrative he had created and superimposed on Hans. Freud ignored a multiplicity of other connections to be made, and forced the one connection, Hans’s fear of horses, into the realm of the Oedipal, concluding that he was over-stimulated by his mother and feared horses because of their phallic power. Thus this diagnosis was a tracing, as most Freudian diagnoses are tracings, copies of a narrative that Freud wrenched from Greek mythology.

Although psychoanalysis has itself become a hegemonic structure, the editors of Curiouser, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, think that, hermeneutically, psychoanalysis “can help to complicate the stories that circulate as ‘truth’ in the therapeutic enterprise.” However, in order for this to work, we must rely on a more fluid vision of psychoanalysis, one that does not keep one position or occupy one space of analysis, a psychoanalysis based on multiplicity. Bruhm and Hurley suggest that psychoanalysis “makes interest,” it makes different facets of the mind interesting, it makes us want to delve deeper, know more about that which seems unknowable. “The art of making interest,” they claim, “is nothing less than an act of story making. And the art of psychoanalysis, in its best form, is the art of exploring the unconscious of narrative itself” (xxi). If we agree that psychoanalysis is best when it explores the unconscious of narrative instead of using narratives to explore some fixed idea of the unconscious, then the
rhizome, with its resistance to tracing, is certainly useful. The rhizome makes the story, it does not reveal the story as its own already-made entity.

Memory, then, is important here because memories are what we use to create stories. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between long-term and short-term memory. Short-term memory would be the seeds of queer utopian memories, a pause to make a connection that we might miss in the long-term. They explain: “Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure.” What the rhizome creates can look and be nothing like what it is made of; therefore, it is “an antigenealogy.” The rhizome is “short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (21). It is the “antigenealogy” of the rhizome that makes it particularly useful for queer theory. This allows it to operate outside of “straight time” and make meaning outside of the Oedipal family. This is not to say that Freud and his theories are in and of themselves useless in a queer psychoanalysis, but the way in which they are deployed ignore a range of other psychic possibilities, possibilities that have been ignored in order to hold up the structure of the Oedipal family and recreate its image. The antimemory or short-term memory of the rhizome helps us see the more immediate connections and relationships that are often overlooked when using long-term memory.

A long-term memory sets up dualisms. When seen from afar, a man looks like a man and not a woman or a wolf. However, the rhizome allows us to map this connection differently, to see how the unconscious might produce a man becoming-animal. Often we mistake a man for just a man, a child for a child instead of a horse because we assume the privileged and unassailable position of the human within the world. Deleuze and Guattari disagree, they claim: “In contrast to natural history, man is now no longer the eminent term of the series; that term
may be an animal for man, the lion, crab, bird of prey, or louse, in relation to a given act or
function, in accordance with a given demand of the unconscious”(235). Sometimes the
unconscious demands a becoming-animal which Deleuze and Guattari differentiate from being
an animal, placing emphasis on becoming at all times. If we are mapping and not tracing, then,
we are always mapping what is becoming and not what is. Mapping assumes the potential for
change at any moment; it makes room for the unexpected.

Becoming-animal is a response to the tracing psychoanalysis has foisted onto the
unconscious. Today, we might be more inclined to dismiss claims that there is a transcendental
unconscious, to believe that we build the unconscious throughout our lives. However, Freud and
his predecessors have had such a major influence on how we think about the mind that Freud has
begun to affect the unconscious itself. Deleuze and Guattari explain:

We wish to make a simple point about psychoanalysis: from the beginning, it has often
encountered the question of the becoming-animal of the human being: in children, who
continually undergo becomings of this kind; in fetishism and in particular masochism,
which continually confront this problem… They do not see the reality of becoming-
animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing. (259)

Coming out of traditional psychoanalysis, the claim that becoming-animal “represents nothing”
seems absurd. Everything represents something, signifies something that we already know and
can understand. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* works to think around the tracings of
psychoanalysis and give more power to the patient. Deleuze and Guattari chide Freud for not
even considering the possibility that the Wolf-Man was really a wolf. Becoming-animal, they
claim, is real. These Becomings are “neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But
which reality is at issue here?” The reality that denies Becomings-animal are the very same that
deny queerness. It is a reality that assumes a “natural” state of being, a “normal” psycho-sexual
development, that every child is a straight child. But children can be queer, can become queer.
Adults can undergo a becoming-child—something we call regression—and this can last for a
moment or forever.

Using a short-term memory, we can see the potential and reality of a becoming.
Becoming-animal is more than just thinking-animal or imitating-animal, it is a process with no
clear beginning or end. “Becoming produces nothing other than itself,” they explain, “We fall
into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming
itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes
passes. Becoming can and should be qualified as becoming-animal even in the absence of a term
that would be the animal become” (238). Thus a woman could become a lion and a child, a child
could die and become a swarm of butterflies. There doesn’t need to be a werewolf or a witch,
these becomings are real in the short-term and, in queer time, can be infinitely real.

Children are always becoming-something. Often, they are becoming-heroes, becoming-toys, becoming-movie stars. Adults often become children in order to find love. Convex
children, though, must become something else to find what they desire, to even find their desire.
“Becoming-animal is only one becoming among others” and there are endless possibilities for
what a convex child might be becoming (272). In Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding,
becoming-animal is the way in which convex children deal with the limits of subjectivity. This is
an example of what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls “sideways growth.” It is becoming-sideways
while becoming-animal. Like Little Hans, these convex children have been blocked; the
presumptions about sexual development have traced them and left them with a botched map.
Becoming-animal is, for them, a way out of a heteronormative tracing.
Becoming-Beast

Children form assemblages with animals in many ways. In psychoanalysis, Lacan sees a connection between the child and the chimp. However, this connection is used to show the child’s human-ness as superior to the chimp’s inhuman-ness: “The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in the mirror” (Lacan, 1). The mirror, for Lacan, creates a boundary between the child and the animal. However, he does not account for the child becoming-animal. “Children are Spinozists” Deleuze and Guattari argue, and through their understanding of the interconnectedness of things, they are able to form machinic assemblages, to multiply their bodies (256). In Nightwood, Robin is figured as a queer child who is “beast turning human” (41). This becoming-beast signals Robin’s acceptance of her animality, of the folded nature of her mind and body and of human and beast.

At first, this becoming scares Robin. After leaving the heteronormative family she built with Felix and their new son, Guido, she comes upon an animal that frightens her. She goes to the circus and it is there where she meets Nora. A “powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite [Robin], she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars…” and thus Robin forms a connection with this lioness, a connection that foreshadows her own “going down” at the end of the novel. It is not that she was in the presence of this lioness, but that the lioness “regarded” Robin and “her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose straight up.” It is unclear whose eyes are flowing with tears, the lioness’s or Robin’s—the two seem to be the same creature here and this
stirs something within Robin. Only then does she acknowledge Nora sitting beside her, “Let’s get out of here,” she says and after that Nora and Robin are forever entwined (60).

Becoming-Beast in *Nightwood* is a way for Robin to escape the structures that categorize and oppress her. Robin’s beastliness has been accused of being a sign of homophobia in Barnes’s novel because certain readers see animality in a queer subject as a sign of the subject being inhuman. However, Deleuze and Guattari claim that “all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian” and through this becoming, one shirks off the structures of dominant society. They explain, “One reterritorializes, or allows oneself to be reterritorialized, on a minority as a state; but in a becoming, one is deterritorialized” (291). Robin as becoming-beast deterritorializes herself, maps her way out of the structures that see animal as less-than-human and queer as undesirable. However, Robin realizes the freedom in becoming-animal and uses this freedom to explore the desires of her mind and body.

Because Robin is what Stockton would call “a child queered by Freud” she is “dangerous.” Dangerous because she exposes the seed of queerness in all children. Stockton explains, “‘if all goes well,’ [she] will be straight, not gay, in a future incarnation, though this child can never be ‘heterosexual’ as a child” (27). Like Little Hans, Robin poses a threat to the social order, a threat that Freud tries hard to tame. Freud traces Han’s unconscious and blocks avenues he might take towards his desires:

[Hans] tries to build a rhizome, with the family house but also with the line of flight of the building, the street, etc.; how these lines are blocked, how the child is made to take root in the family, be photographed under the father, be traced onto the mother’s bed; then, how Professor Freud’s intervention assures a power takeover by the signifier, a subjectification of affects; how the only escape route left to the child is becoming-animal
perceived as shameful and guilty (the becoming-horse of Little Hans, a truly political option). (Deleuze and Guattari, 14)

Because Freud has a ready-made unconscious for Hans to follow, one that blocks passages of his mind so that the labyrinth always leads back to his mother and father, to the Oedipal, Hans undergoes a becoming-horse. This becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari claim, is a “truly political option” because it is his way out of Freud’s tracing, out of the heteronormative structures that tell him he should feel threatened by his father, he should desire his mother, he should grow up.

Robin and Hans are queer children who cannot “grow up,” though, and their becoming-animal allows them to grow sideways and forge their own paths, create their own respective unconscious.

For Robin, this becoming is a political because she and Nora are “doomed by (their) time.” Robin must undergo a becoming-Nora’s child and becoming-animal in order to circumvent the impossibility of their love. “Theirs is a time that can never arrive: the time when mother and child can be lovers in the public’s embrace; or when mother and child will inhabit the same generation,” Stockton explains, “These clear impossibilities… akin to historical prematurity of queer love in the 1930s, in a world so clearly not ready to receive it” (93). Nora and Robin exist during a time where Freudian psychoanalysis has given them two avenues: heteronormativity and inversion. Neither of these options truly describes their desire. They are not a man and a woman, they are not a woman and a man as woman. Robin “tunnel[s] back in time to where she is suspended in sideways growth. For until this famous ending, she is, throughout the novel, like a sleepwalking child, a child Sleeping Beauty, yet to be awakened to vitality and life. In loving her, her lover tries to grasp a wayward child” (Stockton, 93). Their relationship is beyond the signification of the time. Because, as Freud himself said childhood is
“the law of unlimited exchange,” Robin and Nora must become children to escape perversion. As Catherine Malabou argues in her essay “Polymorphism Never Will Pervert Childhood,” to be a child is to be beyond or before perversion, “to pervert, in short, to give oneself up to twisting and turning” but childhood sexuality cannot be twisted because “it is born from all the connotations to which, from childhood, the absence of the master signified destines the floating signifier” (64). Robin and Nora’s love is thus beyond signification and perversion, it is beyond (human) understanding.

**Becoming-Wild**

The convex children of *The Member of the Wedding* undergo becomings that reveal how normative narratives of development do not account for queer desires and embodiments. These characters build new avenues towards queerness that psychoanalysis blocks off by tracing. *The Member of the Wedding* often associates queer behavior with wildness, primal instinct, and animalism. In the “green and crazy summer” that the novel takes place in, John Henry undergoes a Kafka-esque becoming-insect(s) (3). Throughout the novel, he is transfixed by the moths that are drawn to the kitchen light. He forms an assemblage with these “butterflies” as he calls them, an assemblage on a “plane of consistency” or a plane of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari, 252). “Those beautiful butterflies,” he said. “They are trying to get in.” John Henry and Frankie watch the “soft moths tremble and press against the window screen. The moths came every evening when the lamp on her desk was lighted. They came from out of the August night and fluttered and clung against the screen.” For John Henry the moths are beautiful because they can do what he only imagines, fly to places like California and connect with other creatures around them. The morning John Henry dies of meningitis, this rhizome comes into view once again. It was a
“golden morning of the most butterflies” (162). But Frankie did not see these moths as beautiful, Frankie sees them as “caught.” “To me it is the irony of fate,” she said. “The way they come here. Those moths could fly anywhere. Yet they keep hanging around the windows of this house” (13-14). Frankie feels caught in her small town and assumes that the moths must be caught there too.

Frankie forms an assemblage with another animal, a monkey. The day before the wedding when Frankie becomes F. Jasmine, she walks through the town and comes upon an organ grinder with a monkey. She had always been fond of this monkey but it is on this day that she forms an assemblage with it. She watches as a soldier tries to buy the monkey from the organ grinder. The monkey climbs over her body and this sensation stays with her even after it is over:

F. Jasmine leaned against the brick wall, and she still felt the monkey on her shoulder and melt his dusty, sour smell; she shivered. The soldier muttered until the pair of them were out of sight, and F. Jasmine noticed then that he was red-haired and the same soldier who had been in the Blue Moon… ‘He certainly is a darling monkey… But it gave me a funny feeling to have him run up me like that.’ (68)

The “funny feeling” the monkey gives her foreshadows the queerness she feels when the soldier tries to touch her. Even the sour smell of the monkey is the same smell that she senses from the soldier. She thinks she “ought not to take herself on home” as the “hot, close smell in the hotel suddenly made her feel a little queer. Again, Frankie is resistant to this “funny feeling” and this resistance ultimately leads to Frankie attacking the soldier in his room. He came at her in a moment that was “too crazy to be realized” and when he kissed her she bit down on his tongue. Panicked, she hit him over the head with a vase. Echoes of this moment crop up throughout the novel, Frankie goes “wild.” She is becoming-wild girl in order to escape what she perceives as
the animal instincts of those around her. Although she desires a communion with another person, a pure connection more than anything, she finds the heterosexual connection the soldier tries to make with her threatening and beyond comprehension.

Berenice warns Frankie, “If you start falling in love with some unheard-of thing like [a wedding], what is going to happen to you? … Will you be trying to break into weddings the rest of your days? And what kind of life would that be?” (108). This prediction comes true at Jarvis and Janice’s wedding when Frankie goes wild. She is unable to allow her desire to becoming “a member” of their wedding go unfulfilled, and yet she was unable to articulate her desire for them. As a result, “The rest was some nightmare show in which a wild girl in the audience breaks onto the stage to take upon herself an unplanned part that was never written or meant to be” (147). Frankie throws a fit and has a becoming-wild girl that, like Robin, is her only option in a world where a girl cannot marry her brother and his wife.

Although these becomings are often momentary and nearly imperceptible, they are significant tactics used in order to circumvent the normative paths towards development laid out by psychoanalysis. At the controversial end of Barnes’s *Nightwood*, in a scene described as “obscene and touching,” Robin gets down on her hands and knees in the middle of a chapel with Nora’s dog. This harkens back to Dr. O’Connor’s prediction that “one dog would find them both.” This final moment proves that, even though Nora and Robin were unable to be together within the world of the novel, Robin is either determined or destined to find her way back to Nora. What looks like terrifying madness in this scene is, under closer inspection, a fight for survival. Robin rejects the normative narrative of sexual development and, in doing so, must constantly vigilant in escaping categorization and stasis. Because the queer utopias characters like Robin and Frankie imagine have not yet been possible except within small moments, they
must continuously find ways to avoid normalization using any means possible. The becomings that prevent the characters from these novels from being made into straight stories critique any use of psychoanalysis that traces and let new paths towards queerness be mapped.
CONCLUSION

Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding aren’t straight stories—they, like their characters, are convex. These stories are messy and challenge common understanding of what love, sex, desire, and development can be. The goal of this project is to reveal the ways in which some elements of psychoanalysis are relevant to queer readings; however, I also hope it shows the ways in which the queer children in Nightwood and The Member of the Wedding negotiate normative structures and revise psychoanalysis by rejecting normative narratives of development. These queer children are able to grow sideways instead of up, and they are able to grow outside of the prescribed modes of development by dissolving the barriers between mind, body, and culture. My hope is that by using these novels to interrogate psychoanalysis, I have revealed useful ways in which to use psychoanalysis to articulate queer identity without falling into heteronormativity.

Rethinking queer subjectivity is essential in order to surpass some of the current questions surrounding queer theory. Instead of forming stable identities, these convex children are in states of constant becoming. Characters like Robin Vote and Frankie Adams demonstrate how we can conceptualize a precarious queer development that takes into account some of the many factors that shape the unconscious but are often ignored in psychoanalysis. Circuses, Freak shows, dolls, lemonade, beasts, and butterflies all have a hand in shaping queerness. Instead of sticking to the script that Freud and Lacan have laid out, psychoanalysis should forge new paths that reconsider the unconscious beyond subjectivity. Such a rethinking of psychoanalysis will allow us to map instead of trace the unconscious. The mapping that I imagine makes room for
the quotidian, the scatological, the depraved, and the seemingly insignificant factors that shape development.

Although many of Barnes and McCullers’s critics have used the nonnormative categories available to explain (and often simplify and dismiss) queer subjects during the periods these authors were writing in, I believe such readings do an injustice to the complexity of the characters and limit our vision of queerness. Again, I see the use of categories like “lesbian” and “invert” as ways to trace a fixed identity onto a queer subject. I want queer theory and psychoanalysis to move beyond identity, beyond subjectivity to a place where ontology and epistemology meet. Such changes in our understanding of sexuality and the unconscious will allow queer children like Robin and Frankie to create their own kind of queerness.
Works Cited

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