

ABSTRACT

In her middle works – *The Member of the Wedding*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* – Carson McCullers offers a radically subversive critique of heteronormative discourses of gender, sexuality, and the body. Anticipating later poststructuralist theories of gender and sexuality, she reveals these discourses to be coercive in their attempts to categorize and foreclose sexual desire. This thesis explores how McCullers’ fiction unveils and subsequently subverts the operations of these discourses. Grounding its analysis in poststructural and psychoanalytic theories of gender and sexuality, including those of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Monique Wittig, this thesis suggests that McCullers’ works contest heteropatriarchy and its efforts at regulating human desire. The first chapter explores how *The Member of the Wedding* reveals gender to be performative; it argues that gender functions as a compulsory pattern of behavior and identity that causes social alienation for those who do not conform. The second chapter examines *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and its critique of obligatory social contracts and cultural taboos regarding sexuality. It argues that McCullers exposes how dominant discourses attempt to regulate sexuality into socially appropriate categories and behaviors. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how McCullers represents all human sexuality as fundamentally queer, that is, constantly spilling over or exceeding the categories meant to regulate it. The final chapter analyzes how *The Ballad of Sad Café* comments upon cultural freakishness, revealing the grotesque body to be a manifestation of social nonconformity and a cause for social alienation. Ultimately, through its pervasive use of poststructural theory in the analysis of Carson McCullers’ works, this thesis distinguishes itself from other McCullers scholarship, much of which claims that she argues for recognition of and respect for queer beings as a marginalized

minority. In contrast, this thesis argues that her work offers a radically subversive perception of all sexual desire as fundamentally queer.

DEDICATION

For the queer you,
Whether you know her or not.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
QUEERIFYING GENDER IN <i>THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING</i>	5
THE QUEERNESS OF DESIRE IN <i>REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE</i>	34
CONSTRUCTING THE FREAK IN <i>THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ</i>	62
CONCLUSION.....	83
WORKS CITED.....	84

INTRODUCTION

In her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, published in 1940, Carson McCullers burst onto the literary scene, as a young writer whose obvious talent made her one of the most gifted and promising writers of her time. This first work, however, barely scratched the surface of what seemed to afflict the latter part of her life, her tumultuous marriage, her masculine-gendered identification, her same-sex affairs and attractions, and, lastly, her debilitating strokes causing disfigurement and partial paralysis. Her personal life indubitably found its way into her fiction, as her identity confusion, queer behavior and desires, and physical abnormality became instrumental themes of her work. Her characters exist under similar circumstances of gender, sexual, or bodily nonconformity; thus, her fiction mirrors the social processes of intelligibility and regulation which coerce individuals into heteropatriarchal identities. Her second through fourth books, published from 1941 to 1951, cover these issues with depth and sensitivity, bringing complexity to issues of gender identification, non-normative sexuality, and disfigured or anomalous bodies. While critics and audiences considered her first novel to be her most famous and her last, *Clock Without Hands*, to be her least successful, the middle books – *The Member of the Wedding*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* – offer a sustained exploration of the discourses of gender, sexuality, and the body that attempt to impose compulsory heterosexuality on all subjects.

The process of illuminating and analyzing these discourses in McCullers' three novels is significant because we have only begun to grasp them in queer theory in the past ten to fifteen years. Additionally, such an exploration shows how McCullers attempts to transgress contemporary strictures and expectations (both coercive and obligatory) through innovative characters of atypical genders, sexualities, and bodies. Her nonconforming characters, juxtaposed

with the other characters who conform to heteropatriarchal norms, illuminate the performativity of gender and sexuality while their anomalous physiologies symbolize their internal freakishness. Ultimately, the coercive forces her characters undergo within the text mirror the conditions imposed by heteropatriarchy outside the text.

In the first chapter, the gender theories of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ground the analysis of *The Member of the Wedding* in order to examine how McCullers explores the coercive forces of gender normalization and the performativity of gender. While feminists and gender critics in the past have identified *The Member of the Wedding* as a feminist work as it critiques the oppressive forces constraining female characters, the chapter argues that her work does not exclusively advocate liberation for women but rather offers a critical analysis of what gender means and how it is not an innate essence but a performance of gender scripts. The recurrence of entrapment references and imagery in the novel suggests that heteronormative gender identity is both symbolically violent and debilitating as revealed through the psychological process of foreclosure seen in the characters.

The second chapter applies the sexuality theories of Butler, Sedgwick, Foucault, and Freud to *Reflections in a Golden Eye* in order to analyze how McCullers explores and subverts heteronormative discourses of sexuality. Such discourses seek to regulate sexuality, categorizing desires into culturally intelligible categories which are assumed to be distinguishable and private. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, McCullers instead posits that all desire is queer in nature, and her position is substantiated through a systematic dismantling of heteronormative mythology. The chapter uses Freudian theory, as adapted by Butler, to explain how McCullers explores the psychological process of foreclosure of non-normative desire, the homosexuality taboo, and the incest taboo, in order to demonstrate not only *that* characters are alienated but *how* and *why* they

are. Using the lens of Sedgwick's theory of triangulation, the chapter argues that *Reflections in a Golden Eye* does not simply depict non-conforming sexuality; rather the novel suggests that all sexual desire is queer, that is, desire itself exceeds all normalizing categories that attempt to regulate it, and it is quite public in this excess.

The third chapter uses theories on the materiality of physical bodies to analyze *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Specifically, the chapter uses Elizabeth Grosz's theory of the mind-body relationship as a "Möbius Strip," in which mind and body interpenetrate each other. In the novel, McCullers reveals the body to be an inscription of social and mental processes. Likewise, McCullers reveals the way in which society regulates and disciplines physical bodies based on social expectations for gender, sexuality, or physiology in public spaces. The chapter addresses how society, in *Ballad*, creates categories of "the freak" and "freakishness" in a way that produces human alienation and self-loathing. The theories of Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* and the works of Anne Fausto-Sterling, Elizabeth Grosz, and Diana Fuss additionally illuminate the way in which McCullers represents the physical body and how it relates to gender norms and sexual freakishness.

While other critics have identified the sexual or gender ambiguity of McCullers' novels, their criticism often falls into categories of LGBT advocacy. Many lesbian and gay critics, as well as some recent queer critics, have identified how her work attempts to elevate the status of gender, sexual, and bodily nonconformists compared to their heterosexual, conforming counterparts. Their honest and progressive endeavor has certainly shed light on McCullers' critiques of compulsory heterosexuality. However, this thesis focuses primarily on McCullers' subversion of all identity categories and her perception of all sexual desire as fundamentally queer despite the efforts of normalizing discourses and practices that attempt to impose a

compulsory heterosexuality upon desire. McCullers deconstructs the entire system of classification, so that gender, sexuality, and even the body itself can be perceived as shaped by systems that aim at coercion and conformity.

QUEERIFYING GENDER IN *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING*

The Southern Gothic tradition in American literature often discloses a personal fascination with the grotesque, as freakishness and the macabre find their way into the works of literary icons like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Tennessee Williams. The works of Carson McCullers likewise reveal a captivation with the darkness of the human condition, including the physical and internal grotesquery of human life. Despite the many freakish absurdities of her fiction, her novels reveal the everyday processes of social interaction to be more monstrous and queer than the apparently grotesque. In *The Member of the Wedding*, Carson McCullers illuminates how a specific process, gender acculturation, mandates and regulates sexual conformity, and she concurrently subverts those coercive and compulsory methods revealing heteronormativity to be more "queer" than "natural."

Analyzing the use of gender subversion in McCullers' novel reflects not only on her own biographical experience as a gender-bending person but on the heteropatriarchal zeitgeist under which she was writing. An exploration of her personal involvement with gender roles and the cultural weltanschauung regarding sexual and gender categories of the mid-twentieth century pulls *The Member of the Wedding* out of the universe of the purely literary and into the universe of the writer and reader alike. The theoretical or philosophical issues raised in her work encourage readers to ask questions queer theorists have only recently begun to ask: what is gender, and how does it work upon us? Frankie, the protagonist of the novel, asks similar questions about what social forces trap her and bring her into cultural intelligibility, and by the end of the novel she discovers how heteronormative gender roles force her reluctantly into accepting her fate as a woman designed to marry and to mother. By revealing the processes of

gender normalization to be unnatural, coercive, and damaging, Carson McCullers subverts the very ideals on which heterosexuality and patriarchy are founded.

Carson McCullers originally conceptualized *The Member of the Wedding* in 1939, but the novel was not fully developed and published until 1946. Prior to and during the novel's creation, America had fallen further into a recurrence of the separate-spheres ideology that had characterized the late-Victorian Era. The nostalgic ideas of masculine virility and feminine gentility preceding the First World War – the era of “compulsive masculinity” noted by historian Theodore Roszak – recurred after the stock market crash to pull American out of the Depression (qtd. in Eaklor 37, 62). During this time the police commenced “cleanup campaigns,” or bar raids, to eradicate gender aberrance from the public sphere, forcing the queer community underground again as the remaining public (once underground during Prohibition) resurfaced (59). In fact, Vicki L. Eaklor continues, “[t]he repeal of Prohibition, usually seen as liberating, was also ‘the most significant step in the campaign to exclude the gay world from the public sphere’” (59). Then in the 1930s, the Hollywood Code, or the Hays Code, began enforcing the “sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home,” so that the mid-thirties (excluding a brief reprieve during the Second World War) to the mid-sixties became one of the hardest periods of American history for so-called gender deviants (65). During this period, the public continued to read the works of sexologists Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, maintaining the idea that there are two, and only two, human sexual natures, male and female (Herdt 3).¹ If one appeared to deviate from one's “natural” gender, then he or she was considered to be suffering from the illness of sexual inversion or homosexuality.² The pervasive ideas of these two sexologists circulated in the minds of the public, so that at different moments of Carson McCullers' life, she recognized elements of both inversion and homosexuality in herself.

The concern over the extent to which Carson McCullers' novels are autobiographical seems to have been put to rest by Virginia Spencer Carr's biography of the young novelist, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*, which concludes that they were heavily influenced by her biography.³ All of the major themes of her works – love triangles, unrequited love, freakishness, physical alienation, a yearning for membership, etc. – mirror themes of her life, alongside familiar settings with seemingly familiar characters. The case of gender aberrance in the face of social coercion is no different story; the very nature of McCullers' unrelenting nonconformity seems to have stemmed from her childhood aversion to compulsory gender roles, which carried through into adulthood. McCullers' childhood friend, Helen Jackson, recalls that “at the age of nine Lula Carson hated more than anything else being made to do ‘sissy things with sissy little girls’” (Carr 22). She was often involved in “tomboyish sports” with the other neighborhood children, and by the time she was a young adult (of about sixteen or seventeen years of age), she was dressing consistently in masculine clothing (23). In her group of friends, “[u]sually Carson was the only girl, but she dressed in dungarees or a pair of [her male friend's] fatigues” (38). McCullers' masculine affinity carried over into her habits as well, as she embraced heavy liquor drinking and smoking publicly in spite of social decorum (77). Her masculine attire and habits continued up to and after her marriage to Reeves, when McCullers was typically found in “a man-tailored coat” or dress shirt (77). Like Frankie, however, McCullers did not dress consistently as a man or a woman, but blurred the lines, sometimes wearing a long skirt and sometimes Reeve's shirts (77, 98). She idolized the “masculine female” like film star Greta Garbo and friends Erika Mann and Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach who behaved in similar fashions (100). For her entire life, McCullers never relegated herself to one gender or another, living beyond the classifications in a transgressive, albeit unintelligible, state.

Her novels, especially *The Member of the Wedding*, reveal the tension between attempting to live a gender-transcendent life in a gender-coercive matrix that enforces normalization.

Much of the previous scholarship on *The Member of the Wedding* interprets the text as either as a bildungsroman without regard to sexuality or as a purely homosexual text belonging to the gay community.⁴ While Carson McCullers' provocative text may serve as both a bildungsroman and a homosexual work, her texts are never exclusively anything. The central reason for the dichotomous interpretations of the text is due to McCullers' exquisite, albeit necessary, coding of sexually aberrant content. Without knowledge of traditional methods of sexual coding (for instance, the "red carnation" in "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather or the not-so-subtle mentions of Krafft-Ebing in *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall), the text might appear uninterested in the matrices of gender and sexual coercion. Viewed with the lens of queer theory and in view of McCullers' biography, the text opens up for the reader in new, exciting ways, which reveal how Carson McCullers, as early as 1946, not only depicted characters of aberrant genders and sexualities but subverted the very coercive and compulsory methods which enforced sexual conformity.

With the Oscar Wilde trials in the United Kingdom in 1895, the line between literature and criminality quickly blurred. During his trials, the prosecution used his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as evidence of his sodomitical, and thus criminal, character.⁵ Radclyffe Hall, author of the previously mentioned novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, faced similar criminal accusations, though hers regarded obscenity in literature instead of criminal sexual practice. Her literary oeuvre, like that of Wilde, was viewed in court as legitimate evidence to condemn her character. *The Well*, along with the publisher, was seized in America in 1929, and the Judge during the trial decided "that the book should be banned because the 'depraved' relationships are

idealized and extolled and, what bother[ed] him most, because lesbian love and lesbian lovers are not held up to shame” (Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* 401). The charges against *The Well* were eventually overturned, but judicial opinions concerning obscenity in the arts persevered. A 1927 law, the “padlock-bill” of New York State, according to Jonathan Ned Katz, considered:

[A]ny person who “presents or participates in, any obscene, indecent, immoral or impure production ‘which would tend to the corruption of the morals of youth or others’ was guilty of a misdemeanor. The same was true of anyone presenting any work ‘depicting or dealing with, the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion [. . .].” (90)

This law lasted in New York until 1967 (91).

Not surprisingly, Carson McCullers, writing in the 1940s, coded the supposed “corruption” of her novels to avoid negative and possibly criminal repercussions. The most evident use of code in *The Member of the Wedding* is the use of code words familiar within the gay community to connote aberrant sexuality or gender identification. Lori J. Kenschaft, in “Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers ‘As a Lesbian,’” notes the use of “lavender,” “the shell,” and “queer” as homosexual coding, the last of which was already in use by 1946 as a code word for gay (221). The very first line of dialogue within the text comes from Frankie, who says, “It is so very queer,” immediately setting the stage for the double interpretation of the novel (*Member 2*). Frankie also codes sexual and gender aberrance when referring to “a feeling she could not name” (2). From the Middle Ages, where we first find records of criminalization for sodomitical acts, until the publications of sexologists at the end of the nineteenth century, records and writers often referred to homosexual acts as “peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum,” or the horrible sin not to be named among

Christians.⁶ When the sexologists like Hirschfeld, Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and even Freud started adopting newly created terminology for sexuality and gender “conditions,” the fear of naming sexuality started to fade. That Frankie cannot name her feeling serves a dual purpose of literally coding homosexuality in the work by not naming it since it is the sin which is not to be named but additionally suggesting it covertly by referring to the tradition of not naming homosexuality specifically.

The least-often analyzed form of coding in *The Member of the Wedding* is the construction of a child protagonist. The narrative use of Frankie, a twelve-year-old girl, does lend itself to interpreting the novel as a coming-of-age tale or as the account of an unreliable narrator in a puzzling world; nevertheless, the selection of an adolescent allows McCullers to name more specifically normative sexual or gender rebellion. Frankie’s inquisitive questions and behavior concerning gender and sexual coercion become permissible because children are held to different societal standards than adults. Similar evidence of adolescent allowances in literature is found in another text written under the ever-watchful eye of censorship, *The Captive*. In 1926 when the play *The Captive* was originally under review for obscenity by the “play jury” (an early rating system), it passed because the French playwright “[set] it off against the simple innocence of a little sister or the refreshing normality of Jacques and the charming francoise Meillant [sic]” (Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* 83). Without employing childlike innocence as a code for more provocative content, “[the play] might [have] degenerate[d] into commercial exploitation of a revolting theme” (83). McCullers’ Frankie, a naïve adolescent, serves a similar role in *The Member of the Wedding*.

Aside from coding, Frankie’s age becomes useful for McCullers in addressing the compulsory and coercive nature of gender construction. The adolescent in the world, especially

in the universe of the novel, is granted freedom to behave however he or she wishes, without regard to gender. John Henry exemplifies the freedom of a child from the constraints of gender expectations. When Jarvis and Janice give Frankie a doll upon their return from Alaska, she refuses it. She would never want a doll, and she is astounded that Jarvis would not know better, calling out, “Imagine bringing me a doll!” (*Member* 16). John Henry, on the other hand, welcomes the doll, as he sits “rocking it in his arms” (15). He even puts it on the back porch so that he will be sure to bring it home with him (16). Later in the novel, John Henry puts on a jonquil dress costume of Frankie’s from her playwriting days and wears it around town (118). There is no mention of disapproval of John Henry, a young boy, wearing a dress. If he were an adult, however, his attire would never be accepted and would only be permitted as a laughable, pitiable characteristic. We see this contrast with the conversation concerning Lily Mae Jenkins, the strange man who “turned into a girl” (76). Lily Mae, according to Berenice, “prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo” (76). His whole nature and sex, as a result, changed into that of a female, and Berenice passes him off as utterly unimportant: “You can live without knowing him” (76). The novel reflects how children are excused from socially expected gender-appropriate behavior, but adults are not, revealing how gender itself is not natural but constructed.

The gender essentialism/constructivism debate originally gained popularity with the publication of *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, in 1949. Her provocative line, “What is a woman?” encouraged nations of men and women to start questioning what is the basic nature of woman, and, of course, is there one? She made it clear how the category of gender was socially constructed because men need the category “woman” to define who they are. Through the appropriation of Hegel’s Master/Slave Dialectic, she addressed how the ideal relationship

between men and woman would be one of “reciprocal recognition” (Bauer 186). Despite being progressive for the time, Beauvoir maintained the polar categories based on anatomical distinctions although she did view the specific requirements imposed by those categories as socially constructed.

The concept of challenging sexual categories as well as gender constructions was never popularly circulated until the publication of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler in 1990. Until this publication, feminists either fought *against* the materiality of the body by asking that people consider the mind separate from the body or fought *for* the materiality of the body by asking that it be viewed as beautiful, strong, and natural in its own right. Butler, however, in a provocative effort to dismantle the politics of identity, introduces the concept that sex itself is not produced by nature but rather by a system of categorization which “brings the subject into being” or makes it intelligible (Brady and Schirato 13).⁷ Monique Wittig notes a similar concept, identifying “the compulsory character of the category itself (which constitutes the first definition of the social being in civil status)” (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 5). To exist, virtually and legally, one must become sexed intelligibly, which occurs by marking “male” or “female” on the birth certificate, driver’s license, passport, or other identification documents.

According to Butler, “sex” is a construction invented to give validity to gender. Sex masquerades “as an *origin* and *cause* [of] those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (*Gender* viii-ix). In other words, gender requires a construction of sex as “prediscursive” – as not constructed or as “natural” – so that gender and nature become less distinguishable (7). Naturally, one cannot deny the materiality of the body, but as Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter*, the interpretation of the

body reveals the social construction of sex itself. For example, the myth of sexual identification encourages us to focus on genitalia or testosterone and estrogen levels, resulting in the idea of only two sexual categories when the varieties of sexual differences are, in fact, much more varied. The materiality of the body exists, but how we interpret and categorize it reveals the unnatural construction of sexual identity and subjectivity based on the “natural” materiality of the body (*Bodies that Matter* 11).

Can materiality itself serve to reveal the category of sex to be constructed and not natural, as it appears? In *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling explains how sex becomes a more-clearly enforced label when the materiality of the body is originally unintelligible. The natural intersexed body is often surgically altered “to fit, as nearly as possible, into one or the other cubbyholes” (Fausto-Sterling 8). A whole team of doctors, from psychologists to endocrinologists, may now play a role in *determining* the sex of a child, but it is “our beliefs about gender – not science – [which] define our sex” (3). Sex, like gender, is a cultural system of intelligibility which often masquerades as natural, allowing us now to collapse the two terms into one – gender – since they represent similar operations of performativity.⁸

McCullers, in *The Member of the Wedding*, reveals the unnaturalness and constructedness of the system of gender through the interactions of Frankie and Berenice. Frankie, a twelve-year-old girl on the cusp of adulthood, demonstrates the shift out of the realm of adolescence, where gender nonconformity is tolerated, into the realm of adulthood, where gender conformity is coerced. Her crusty elbows and crew-cut hair are still permitted, revealing remnants of adolescent freedom, but Berenice, representative of society en masse, starts to pressure Frankie into gendered intelligibility.

Frankie herself is quite aware of her suspended location between realms. She separates herself from childishness when mocking the neighborhood kids – “just a lot of ugly silly children” – with whom she used to play only last summer (*Member 9*). When Frankie stands outside in the dark with John Henry after one of their rows, she starts to get scared. She thinks about the three ghosts she used to believe in, convinced she does not believe in them anymore, but she still finds herself scared. Recognizing that her fear is inappropriate for her age, she uses John Henry as a scapegoat, and invites him over because “it seemed to [her] *he* looked scared” (7 emphasis added). Simultaneously, Frankie cannot be seen as an adult. All her efforts – the dress, the plan to travel, the attempt to be a “date girl” –backfire, because she is simply too young to live successfully in the adult world. She no longer belongs to either world.⁹

Berenice, witnessing Frankie’s emergence into adulthood, assumes the role of society in training (coercing) Frankie into a culturally intelligible body by socially coercing gender performativity. The coercion starts when Frankie asks her if she thinks she will be pretty when she grows up. Berenice jokingly responds, “Maybe. If you file down them horns an inch or two,” but her jest reveals a step in gender performativity: behavior modification (*Member 19*). This comment is followed by, “I think when you fill out you will do very well. If you behave” (19). In addition to repeated behavior modification, meaning enforcing the proper behavior for a woman, Berenice adds body requirements. Frankie already worries about her body, having the figure of a “big freak” with scrawny shoulders, but now that Berenice has confirmed that she does not currently have a feminine body, her self-consciousness is multiplied (2). Berenice, the voice of social order, stays in Frankie’s mind, especially on the day she travels to town as a young adult for the first time (or so she thinks). Frankie knows Berenice would find her actions ridiculous for

her age, and “[s]o the Berenice voice sounded, heard but unnoticed like the buzzing of a fly” (58).

When Frankie returns home, Berenice illuminates the solution to all of Frankie’s problems: “What you ought to begin thinking about is a beau” (77). Frankie, transitioning into adulthood, needs to become a woman so that she can become publicly intelligible. What is woman but the opposite of man and the heterosexual component to man? Monique Wittig, in *The Straight Mind*, introduces the notion that in heteropatriarchal society, woman is expected to be the sexual dependent of man; woman is the complicit tool of man in the heterosexual contract (qtd. in De Lauretis 54). Berenice’s comment to Frankie reveals how a woman, to come into being, needs to be a member of the heterosexual system, tied “serflike” to a man (Shaktini, *On Monique Wittig* 16).

The voice of social coercion appears again to address the freakishness of a mixed-gender figure, Frankie in a dress. When Frankie fashions her dress for Berenice and John Henry, convinced that she will be praised, Berenice shocks her with brutal reality; Frankie is a peculiar blend of genders. Berenice clarifies, “You had all your hair shaved off like a convict, and now you tie a silver ribbon around this head without any hair. It just looks peculiar” (*Member* 84). Frankie tries to fix it by saying that she would shower and curl her hair, making it look clean and feminine, but Berenice does not concede: “And look at them elbows [. . .] Here you got on this grown woman’s evening dress. Orange satin. And that brown crust on your elbows. The two things just don’t mix” (84). Frankie’s efforts go unnoticed by Berenice because the dress cannot undo Frankie’s masculine attributes. John Henry, on the other hand, unfettered by an understanding of societal expectation, finds her beautiful. To be a woman, you have to be wholly woman. Berenice reacts harshly to the amalgam, when previously Frankie without a dress

receives no berating. To Berenice, it is better to at least be consistent instead of a blend of both genders.

Consistency, as Berenice indirectly reveals, is the key to appropriate gender performativity. Judith Butler appropriated the concept of performativity and applied it to gender construction in *Bodies That Matter* (which she later developed further in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*). A person is not born into a gender and does not possess a gender, but *performs* gender by citing previously established symbols or utterances of specific genders, such as wearing a dress or stating aloud whether one is a girl or boy. Butler notes that girls are “compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the production of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm” (Brady and Schirato 48). Identity is never fixed in place; it must constantly be reaffirmed.¹⁰ Thus, we are coerced into reciting our gender through the way we dress, act, and speak, to name a few. When we meet someone new, we reaffirm our identity as a specific gender (not to mention a specific sexuality) to indicate our identity to another. We, essentially, recreate it with every citation. Problems arise, as indicated by Berenice’s disapproval of Frankie’s appearance in the dress, when the citations are not consistent. Frankie cites femininity through the dress, but her crusty elbows and crew-cut hair cite masculinity. In society, Butler clarifies that we have an “expectation of singularity” (Brady and Schirato 48). Frankie despairs of ever fulfilling the demand of “singularity”: “Yet always I am I, and you are you. And I can’t ever be anything else [. . .] And does it seem to you strange?” (*Member* 109). Not only should Frankie cite only one consistent gender at a time, her gender citations *should* be consistent throughout her entire life.

These performative restrictions on how Frankie can or should behave cause her a great deal of anxiety, revealing the text to be much more than a coming-of-age tale. Her story, often

valued solely as a bildungsroman or as a uniquely gay or lesbian text, reveals itself to be the depressing psychological account of the Other – or sexual misfit – in a society of compulsory normalization. Frankie is an unintelligible, suspended character dwelling in between the intelligible realms of adolescence and adulthood; she represents the emotional and mental anguish of not being physically intelligible but also not accepting the limitations of intelligibility. She is not recognized as an adult (even though she desperately wants to be), but she does not understand the violent foreclosure necessary to become a recognized adult and feels turmoil at having to accept it.

Foreclosure, according to Butler, defines the restriction of not being able to act or speak in a certain way (Brady and Schirato 112). To be a woman, one must not act or speak as a man, and the process of ripping away the opportunity and freedom to behave or speak in certain ways is a violent process, which Butler notes as “symbolic violence” (113). To become intelligible in the world of the novel (and our world as well), one must have two elements: normalization by dint of foreclosure. Anita Brady and Tony Shirato, in *Understanding Judith Butler*, clarify:

So when Butler refers to the contemporary body being constructed via regulatory systems and forms of normativity, she is referring to the twin operations of production and foreclosure, whereby “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas.”(9)

Butler notes that foreclosure derives from early pre-Oedipal prohibitive practices, like the incest taboo and its less-recognized precursor, the homosexuality taboo. Freud spoke often of the incest taboo and how our desires are guided away from our family members as we focus our initial desires on suitable mates outside the family. The unwritten “rule of exogamy” reveals our

recognition and fear of the possibility of incest (Butler, *Gender* 41). This shift from familial desires to exogamic desires comes from the social taboo against mating within the family. Interestingly, however, Butler notes that the awareness of the incest taboo requires a prior prohibited practice of homosexuality (*Gender* 70). For the young boy to have an Oedipal complex or for the young girl to have an Electra complex, the subject must have been driven to desire the opposite sex (gender) through a previous prohibited practice, the homosexuality taboo. Because of these two prohibitive practices of foreclosure, gender construction becomes “a laborious process of becoming naturalized, which requires a differentiation of bodily pleasures and parts on the basis of gendered meaning” (70). What Frankie does not realize is that she has already experienced symbolic violence against homosexuality and incest; however, McCullers appears to be fully aware of both foreclosures.

Frankie’s mother died during childbirth, revealing an initial foreclosure against homosexuality. In the psychoanalysis of Freud, the desired objects are always originally parents. The option to desire her mother is ripped away from Frankie through her mother’s death; therefore, her mother’s death mirrors the prohibition of homosexuality as the possibility of same-sex eroticism is ripped away from Frankie. The remaining individual, her father, does become a desired object. She shares a bed with him (not sexually) until the age of twelve, when he suddenly says to her, “Who is this great big, long-legged, twelve-year-old blunderbuss who still wants to sleep with her old Papa” (*Member* 22); as the mother’s death mirrors the homosexuality taboo, the father’s subsequent conflict with sharing a bed with his daughter mirrors the incest taboo. McCullers appears to have anticipated Butler’s insights, writing in 1946 of the precursor taboo against homosexuality as manifested in her mother’s death and Frankie’s homosexual foreclosure.

Unaware of her initial foreclosure against homosexuality and incest, Frankie, for the first time, feels on the border of violent restraint in her life as she nears adulthood. During their “last queer conversation,” it is actually Berenice who clarifies what Frankie has attempted to express in vain:

We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. (113).

Everyone is caught in some way or another, but Berenice identifies how she and “all colored people” are caught even worse because of the restrictions enforced upon them. She equates foreclosure – “they done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself” – and being caught, noting how limited options and possibilities are like drowning (*Member* 114). Honey, possibly coded as a gay man because he is described as “almost lavender in color” and “usually a natty dresser,” feels especially trapped (35, 122, 114). Frankie resonates with Berenice’s expression of feeling caught and speaks honestly about not wanting to be trapped (113). She furthers the conversation, however, in recognizing that no matter how caught we are (into normalizing categories), we are all alone, alienated, and isolated. We may be caught into acting a certain way (appropriate to gender and sexual norms) or looking a certain way (white and able-bodied), but we “don’t know what joins [everybody] up” (115). No one seems connected, or, if they are, we cannot figure out how.

In McCullers’ novel, gender is a tool of entrapment. People are told that they have options, that they have free will to choose how to live their lives, but because of coercion and

compulsory mandates, freedom is an illusion. This is “the irony of fate” (*Member 12*). Frankie first mentions “the irony of fate” when she notices moths flying against the screen to get at the light: “Those moths could fly anywhere. Yet they keep hanging around the windows of this house” (12). Frankie thinks that the moths could be free, but they are fated biologically to spend their lives against the screen seeking light. Gender coercion functions in the same way; Frankie ostensibly has the freedom to behave, dress, or speak as she wishes, except the overwhelming force of normalization (the light) pulls her in one direction. Frankie, in her good-bye letter to her father, associates “the irony of fate” with the phrases “It is inevitable” and “do not try to capture me” (141). Fate is a cage; normalizing forces seek to entrap her, to “capture her,” and so she flees. She, naturally, fails. Fate is not optional. Likewise, as we see with the Fair and the prison (to which runaways mythically gravitate), her remaining options are just as enslaving.

Society offers Frankie one “choice” to become an adult; yet, to become an intelligible adult, she must become a woman. Society is broken into two polar categories, male and female, based on anatomy. Gayle Rubin, quoted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, notes that the “sex/gender system [. . .] has tended to minimize the attribution of people’s various behaviors and identities to chromosomal sex and to maximize their attribution of socialized gender constructs” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 28). Frankie, biologically “female,” has the option of womanhood. Lily Mae Jenkins is subject to the same coercive demands because of “his” physical anatomy. Regardless of the fact that “he” dresses like a woman and sexually desires men, and even regardless of the fact that Berenice claims that he “turned into a girl,” Berenice continues to use masculine pronouns (*Member 76*). He will always be a “he” because, due to his penis, there is no other option.

In any dichotomy, one term gathers meaning by contrast to the opposite term: passive is defined by not being active; private is anything that is not public; and woman is anything opposite of man. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains in her discussion of sexuality the paradox of bipolar categories. Heterosexuality needs homosexuality to draw its boundaries, to solidify its borders. What would heterosexuality be without a way to describe what is it not? Likewise, the category of “the homosexual” is highly solidified “because of its indispensableness to those who define themselves as against it” (*Epistemology* 83). Both categories need each other to define what they are not. In Hegel’s Master/Slave Dialectic, the Self is thrown into question by the presence of an Other. Once the Other is defined, however, as Slave, the Self can rest because it clearly has become the opposite, Master (Bauer 96). The societal norm functions in the same way; it no longer wishes to destroy the Other (it likes having a Slave), but it wishes to keep it at bay, solidifying and making intelligible the boundaries. Man needs woman to define itself, and this paradox explains society’s demand for a highly gendered matrix. Intelligibility needs other intelligibility to define itself; it is in the best interest of the heterosexual norm to keep homosexuality defined and regulated so that its own borders will be discernible and anything but queer.

Frankie not only feels caught within her half of the bipolar gender categorization; she finds herself torn between what she desires from the world and what the world desires from her. Desire, as analyzed through the lens of queer theory, often connotes a sexual desire, but Frankie’s desire transcends physical desire to reflect a spiritual desire, an existential desire. For Hegel, desire derives from the Master/Slave Dialectic, “whereby consciousness seeks to know and comprehend itself through the mediation of otherness” (Brady and Schirato 14). Desire becomes a yearning to discover and affirm the Self by dint of navigation through a world of

Others. Frankie, in bouts of frustration throughout the novel, returns to the same impossible notion of “want[ing] to be recognized for her true self” (*Member* 56). During Part II of the *The Member of the Wedding*, when Frankie (now F. Jasmine) travels around town to tell strangers about her upcoming trip, she feels her desire finally fulfilled: “the need to be recognized for her true self was for the first time being satisfied” (59). During this day-trip, she feels a connection between herself and the world of strangers around her as if every Self could be individually recognized:

F. Jasmine looked at [the old colored man], he looked at her, and to the outward appearance that was all. But in that glance, F. Jasmine felt between his eyes and her own eyes a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other – and there even came an instant vision of his home field and country roads and quiet dark pine trees. (50)

In Frankie’s mind, she achieves spiritual, transcendent desire through the omniscient connection with the people around her (Brady and Schirato 15). Frankie believes she achieves her spiritual desire – the desire to be recognized by the Other as who she really is – in this mutual look of recognition in which the old Black man seems to recognize Frankie as an outsider, like himself.

Her illusion of fulfilled desire, however, is shattered when she realizes that in the eyes of the soldier she is nothing more than a sex object. Her transcendental attempt to achieve the spiritual desire of being recognized as who she really is cannot be achieved because of the way she, a member of the female gender, is reduced to a sexual function. The world of the novel desires Frankie to be a prop of her gender, as first Berenice and now the soldier make clear. McCullers foreshadows the conflict of desire during the conversation between Frankie and the soldier at the Blue Moon. As the soldier makes innuendos and flirts with Frankie, she only hears

a strange “kind of double talk” which made no sense to her (*Member* 127). As he finally leads her into his room, she violently returns to reality, no longer seeing the connection she thought they had. He was no longer “a member of the loud free gangs who for a season roamed the streets of town then went out into the world together,” but “unjoined and ugly” (128). All he saw of her was sex, and not coincidentally he catches her by “grasp[ing] her skirt,” the marker of her gender (130).¹¹ Her attempts at transcending sexual or gender desires for spiritual desires fails violently as gender categorization ensnares her once again.

What ultimately overwhelms Frankie, sending her into a world of delusion, are the manipulative tactics of normalization imposed upon adolescents on the cusp of adulthood. The normalizing society instills in Frankie two central myths, tools essentially, to keep people in line: first, if you are different, you will be alone and no one will love you; second, if you are different, no one will take you seriously or treat you like an adult. Interestingly, Frankie craves more than her desire to be recognized for herself; she yearns for the chance to be a part of something and the opportunity to be taken seriously as an adult.

McCullers introduces Frankie as a loner, a “member of nothing in the world” (*Member* 1). Instead, she was alone, and because of her isolation, “she was afraid” (1). When Frankie reveals herself to be a “big freak” because of her height, and she notices how different she is not only from the other children but from even adult ladies, she again gets afraid and invites John Henry to stay the night (2, 6). Her freakishness always results in a fear of isolation, driving her to groups of people, yearning to belong. She desperately craves to belong to the older group of girls who are members of the clubhouse: “Frankie knew all of the club members, and until this summer she had been like a younger member of their crowd, but now they had this club and she was not a member” (10). Frankie once again finds herself left out when Berenice’s friends, T.T.

Williams and Honey, come to pick her up. They have their own routine, an adult routine of drinking and dancing, in which Frankie cannot participate. After they leave, she stands alone until she thinks of ghosts (38). Then, Frankie sets her sights on her brother, Jarvis, and his fiancée, Janice. Finally, the unexplainable feelings of needing to belong define themselves into the phrase, “*They are the we of me*” (39, italics in original). Everyone has a group of his or her own – members of a lodge, a church, a business, an army, and even a chain gang – “except her” (39). Now, Jarvis and Janice will be her *we*, and they will travel around the world together (39).

Frankie clings to the deranged notion that the bride and groom will invite her along with them because she needs to believe that she is not a freak. Freaks, people who are different, will always be alone; if she is a member, she cannot be a freak. The girls of the clubhouse alienated her because she was different: “too young and mean” (*Member 10*). Berenice’s “we” leaves her out of their group because she is a child (and probably because she is white). Frankie realizes that she cannot even belong with the other little kids anymore because of her height: “Already the hateful little summer children hollered to her: ‘Is it cold up there?’” (16). Frankie knows better than anyone that freakishness means exclusion. This is made clear the first time McCullers introduces the Freak Pavilion. Frankie, recalling how different and freakish they all were, comments to Berenice and John Henry, “I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding” (18). Frankie’s comment seems to be more of an inquiry than an assessment, as it comes out of fear that she might belong with the freaks. Her anxiety bubbles to the surface as she asks, “Do you think I will grow into a Freak?” (18). Berenice fails to reassure Frankie, virtually telling her it is out of her control (19).

What Frankie knows without recognizing it is that belonging to a group is not enough to prevent her from being a freak. The group must be desirable and respectable. The freaks at the

Freak Pavilion do belong to a group, as does Frankie with John Henry and Berenice in the kitchen during the summers, but this grouping is “queer” and undesirable: “But the old Frankie had had no we to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice – and that was the last we in the world she wanted” (*Member* 39). After all, belonging to a group of social outcasts, like the child and the black maid with a glass eye, only makes one more of an outcast by association. For this reason, the we of Jarvis and Janice becomes so appealing. Both the groom and the bride are perfect specimens of social desirability. Jarvis, “a good-looking blond white boy,” and Janice, being “brunette and small and pretty,” represent social excellence complete with perfected gender performativity (27).

Frankie’s dream, however, shatters when Jarvis and Janice do not welcome her along on their honeymoon. All of her opportunities of belonging (as she sees it) have disappeared, and her only option is to leave town. Before much time has passed, she grows afraid of being alone. She first imagines seeing Jarvis and Janice, as if they had come back for her, but the mirage fades. Then she thinks about who she can invite along with her – Honey, Evelyn Owen, or John Henry – so that she will not have to be alone. Finally, she determines the only way to ensure membership (and fulfill her gender expectations) is to marry: “[. . .] [S]uddenly it seemed she might as well ask the soldier to marry with her, and then the two of them could go away” (*Member* 146). The myth succeeds in convincing Frankie that not only is isolation frightful but the way to avoid it is to be “normal” via marriage. The Law, luckily, interferes revealing that even marriage has appropriate and inappropriate circumstances, one of which concerns her young age. Though she does not marry the soldier, the novel concludes with Frankie’s delusion that as long as she is a member (and of a respectable group at that, like Mary Littlejohn), she will not be a freak.

The second myth, an equally powerful force in normalization, convinces Frankie similarly that to be a respectable and recognized adult, one must be “normal,” at the very least “gender normal.” To be recognized as an adult, one must become intelligible, and “‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler, *Gender* 16). Frankie, when Jarvis and Janice come to visit before the wedding, tries her hardest to be taken seriously by them. She craves their approval and wishes that they would see her as an equal adult in their party. The idea of how to become a visible adult hits her suddenly in the middle of their visit as Berenice recalls, “The next thing I realize you busted back through the kitchen and run up to your room [and] [y]ou came down with your organdie dress on and lipstick an inch thick from one ear to the next” (*Member* 26). Her attempt, however, fails, and her perceived immaturity is revealed through the gift exchange of a doll, yet another tool of gender coercion. Frankie reveals that she had hoped for something exotic from Alaska but finds herself disappointed in a standard gift, not only intended for young children but for girls (16). The gift of the doll reflects society’s reinforcement of gender expectations, through a miniature prototype complete with dress and large eyelashes so that the girl child can practice the caregiving and maternity that are expected of her (15-16). Jarvis and Janice still see her as a child, and her refusal of the doll (and thus femininity and maternity) only pushes her farther into immaturity in the eyes of society.

Her fears are compounded, and society’s demands are reinforced, when the three discuss Lily Mae Jenkins. Berenice identifies Lily Mae Jenkins as an amalgam of opposite-gendered attributes, from his male anatomy to his sex-object choice and female attire. Regardless, she quickly dismisses “him” as unimportant: “Well, you don’t need to know Lily Mae Jenkins. You can live without knowing him” (*Member* 76). Berenice, and by extension society at large, does

not take Lily Mae Jenkins seriously, making his unintelligibility equal his unimportance. Butler, writing on cultural intelligibility, notes:

Inasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (*Gender* 17)

Lily Mae Jenkins essentially loses his identity in that his identity is irrelevant and quickly pushed aside out of recognition by Berenice’s dismissal. He is excluded from the norm, because “a specifically dominant order neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize” elements of “human practice, human energy, and human intention” (Williams 125).¹² Frankie witnesses his disappearance from the conversation, reinforcing the myth (made into a reality) that gender variance results in alienation and insignificance.

While McCullers does not provide us a solution – there is no happy ending or axiomatic message at the end of the novel – she anticipates the work that later queer theorists, particularly Judith Butler, have only recently undertaken. She subverts categories of “normalcy” to demonstrate the unnaturalness of identity construction regarding gender. Ideally, the exposure of coercive forces would challenge the interpellation of future subjects into normatively gendered, sexual identities. As Raymond Williams illuminates in *Marxism and Literature*, “alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control” (113). By identifying the coercive forces and their machinations, and, further, by subverting them, McCullers reveals them as unnatural, hegemonic, and restrictive constructs.

McCullers' use of Berenice as a representative of social order serves to subvert the naturalizing discourse of gender construction, not to mention heterosexuality. When Berenice forcibly pushes Frankie into her appropriately gendered behavior and appearance, McCullers illuminates, contrary to popular belief especially during her time, that gender has to be guided and constructed. The female body does not naturally correspond to female-gender identification and neither (as we see through Lily Mae Jenkins) does a male body naturally correspond to male-gender identification. Berenice's effort to force Frankie into a gender box reveals the process of gender identification to be a limiting and unnatural one. Similarly, performativity reveals the unnatural construction of a gender identity. The very need to cite repeatedly a certain identity exposes how unnatural gender classifications are. Frankie cites femininity through the dress or lipstick to affirm a femininity not naturally occurring, and this citation must be repeated because it fades or is forgotten over time. Gender conformity, in this light, becomes a Sisyphean task, where the relief of the downhill trudge only occurs through the ephemeral affirmation of an appropriate gender identity.

McCullers furthermore subverts the "normal" and expected coupling of oppositely gendered people. When Frankie contemplates the upcoming wedding of Jarvis and Janice, she always feels uncomfortable and "queer": "It is so very queer" (*Member 2*). The thought of the two together discomfords her, like "a tightness in her that would not break" (19). It is only after she determines to join them, deforming the normal couple into an odd ménage-a-trois, so to speak, that she can feel comfortable about it. McCullers additionally subverts "normal" sexual coupling of oppositely gendered people. Frankie's first sexual experience with Barney MacKean is described as "a queer sin," which is "secret and unknown" (23). Her reaction to the episode in the garage could be argued as a naturally expected reaction from a twelve-year-old girl, but the

use of “queer” coupled with its unspeakability mirrors the way homosexual acts were treated prior to and at the time of the novel. McCullers often uses “queer” in the place of what *should* be normal, reversing the stigma and displacing it from the aberrant or deviant sexuality to the compulsory, normative sexuality.

The two most compulsory institutions of womanhood during the time of the novel (and arguably still today) are marriage and motherhood, and McCullers moreover subverts both female requirements. *The Member of the Wedding*, like all of McCullers’ novels, has a lack of successful marriages and an equal lack of successful mothers. Berenice discusses her four marriages, all of which ended terribly; though her first marriage to Ludie Freeman was filled with love, he died, leaving her scarred. The other three marriages progressively worsened:

The first was a sorry old liquor-drinker. The next went crazy on Berenice: he did crazy things, had eating dreams in the night and swallowed a corner of the sheet; and what with one thing and another he distracted Berenice so much that finally she had to quit him. The last husband [. . .] gouged out Berenice’s eye and stole her furniture away from her. (26)

Even though the entire novel builds up to and climbs down from the climax of the wedding, McCullers presents marriage as an unsuccessful and, in fact, destructive practice. By the end of the novel, marriage becomes a form of resignation. As previously mentioned, Frankie considers marrying the soldier just so she will not be alone, and Berenice decides that “she might as well marry T.T.” as if she had nothing better to do (148-149). Motherhood, on the other hand, hardly exists at all in the text, but its very absence reveals how it, like marriage, destroys. Frankie’s own mother died during childbirth, and John Henry’s mother never even makes an appearance. The only mother in the text is Berenice’s mother, Big Mama, who is a mystical, unsettling, and,

frankly, a scary person whose character's importance has absolutely nothing to do with being a mother at all (120). McCullers subverts the institutions of marriage and motherhood by showing how dangerous or damaging they are and by refusing to hang her characters on such compulsory tropes.

Through the struggles of young Frankie as she makes the transition into adulthood, Carson McCullers exposes the hidden practices of heteropatriarchal gender regulation. Berenice and other societal influences coerce Frankie into performing the only gender option available to her; however, as she resists compulsory gender and sexual identification, she learns that to resist means to live alone and to be insignificant. Unfortunately, Frankie resigns herself to a life of gendered acculturation, ultimately adopting a coerced gender identity, but McCullers seems to expect more of us. After all, through the illumination and subversion of regulatory gender and sexual matrices, *The Member of the Wedding* serves as a guide to current readers on how gender identification, albeit "normal," is not natural.

Endnotes

¹Vicki Eaklor records the pervasiveness of Freud's theories: "The writings of Sigmund Freud, often distilled and simplified, became immensely popular in 20th-Century America" (35). Jonathan Ned Katz identifies that in 1939, upon the death of Havelock Ellis, Random House's first four thousand sets of *Sexual Inversion* sold out within two weeks (*Gay/Lesbian Almanac* 548).

²Freud did, later in life, conclude that "distinctions between sexual orientation, 'masculine' and 'feminine' role-playing, and physical gender are hopelessly confused," but it was unfortunately his earlier works which endured (Katz, *Gay American History* 158).

³Young McCullers even experienced a freak show at the Chattahoochee Valley Fair, like the Freak Pavilion in *The Member of the Wedding* (Carr 30).

⁴Laura Fine, in "Gender Conflicts and Their Dark Projections in Coming of Age White Female Southern Novels," interprets *Member* as a coming-of-age tale. Both Vicki M. Sherouse, in "Short, Important Books for Older YAs," and Richard Peck, in "Communicating with the Pubescent," call for the use of *Member* as Young Adult Fiction for its depiction of an adolescent perspective. Aside from those who find *Member* a purely adolescent perspective on society, several critics note the significance of the adolescent as she reveals the difficulty of entering a racially or sexually segregated world. See Lori J. Kenschaft, Pamela Bigelow in "Carson McCullers: Overview," Gary Richards in "Carson McCullers and Gay/Lesbian (Non) Representation," and Sarah Gleeson-White for the latter perspective. For gay and lesbian readings, see Jan Whitt, author of "The 'We of Me': Carson McCullers as Lesbian Novelist," who proposes a reading of McCullers' work as an allegorical portrayal of alienation caused by sexual confusion. Mab Segrest, in "Lines I Dare to Write: Lesbian Writing in the South," and

Barbara A. White, in *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Literature*, also posit lesbian readings of her work, indicating the significance of identifying the connection between alienation and non-conforming sexuality. More recently, critics like Sarah Gleeson-White, mentioned above, and Rachel Adams, in “‘A Mixture of Delicious and Freak’: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers,” have shifted the discussion from lesbian and gay readings to queer readings to include a wider range of sexualities and cultural freakishness.

⁵See *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* by Moises Kauffman.

⁶Editor Rictor Norton quotes the Latin phrase from William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Common Laws of England* (1765-1769) to establish English public opinion of sodomy in his article “Legal Precedents in Blackmail Cases, 1792.”

⁷Butler continued her dismantling of identity politics in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* and *Undoing Gender* in 1993 and 2004, respectively.

⁸Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly collapses sex and gender into one category: “I do this, in order to reduce the likelihood of confusion between ‘sex’ in the sense of ‘the space of differences between male and female’...and ‘sex’ in the sense of sexuality” (*Epistemology* 29).

⁹In *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, Sarah Gleeson-White, too, recognizes the significance and tension within Frankie who is suspended between realms: “To exist on the threshold obtains within it grotesque possibilities of becoming” (12). She further recognizes the importance of adolescents to McCullers herself, who sees them “as sites of resistance” (12).

¹⁰Judith Butler notes the complex relationship between performativity and consistency: “[P]aradoxically, it is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes as well the instability of the very category that it constitutes” (*Imitation* 331).

¹¹Frankie is literally caught by her dress previously in the novel, also by the soldier, during her first visit to The Blue Moon: “She got up from the booth, but the soldier reached out toward her and caught a piece of her dress” (*Member* 68).

¹²The element of exclusion is an intrinsic attribute of the dominant social order: “[I]t is in fact about the modes of domination, that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice” (Williams 125).

THE QUEERNESS OF DESIRE IN *REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE*

In 1990, nearly fifty years after the original publication of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick illuminated a long-standing paradox regarding how identity categories are defined and applied it to categories of sexuality. Jacques Derrida previously developed the paradox of *différance*, identifying how we derive the meaning of a word by recognizing the absence of its opposite (for example, “active” meaning the absence of “passive”). Sedgwick applied the same theory to the politics of sexuality. She demonstrates in *Epistemology of the Closet* that the category of “the homosexual” is highly regulated and defined “because of its indispensableness to those who define themselves as against it” (83). Because the very classification of heterosexuality is defined by its opposite (i.e. homosexuality), the heterosexual majority *needs* the homosexual minority so that heterosexuality may be clearly defined and distinguished as the “normal” form of sex. She continues:

For surely, if paradoxically, it is the paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between “the homosexual” (minority) and “the heterosexual” (majority) are fortified, in this [the twentieth] century, by nonhomosexuals, and especially by men against men, that most saps one’s ability to believe in “the homosexual” as an unproblematically discrete category of persons. (84)¹³

Indeed, as Foucault has suggested in his *History of Sexuality*, the dominant discourse on sexuality replaced the idea of homosexuality, previously a perverse act which anyone could commit, with the idea of the homosexual as a perverse sexual “type” who has a distinct sexual identity. This newly “invented” sexual identity is defined and distinguished as a social category different from the “normal” heterosexual “type.” In its remarkable insights into the complexities of sexual desire, Carson McCullers’ second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, anticipates the

work of Foucault and Sedgwick. The novel concerns itself with sexual classification and seeks to upset and subvert contemporary categorical definitions and assumptions about sex, both heterosexual and homosexual. By showing the ubiquity of queer desires, by decentering heterosexual desire and subverting heterosexual mythology, and by presenting desire as sexuality that spills out of private realms and into public ones, she successfully demonstrates that all forms of sexual classification are unsuccessful attempts to “normalize” queer desire. Thus, an application of the queer theories of Foucault, Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Luce Irigaray illuminates how *Reflections in a Golden Eye* depicts the very processes of “normalizing” desire – which McCullers represents as queer by nature – as it transcends classifications.

The intermingling relationships of the characters on the army base reveal that the very spilling of “queer” desire from private into public space has already taken hold by the start of the novel. The term “queerness,” as specified by Judith Butler, is “by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 64). *Reflections in a Golden Eye* depicts the queerification of desire through a collection of figures on an army base whose lives have tangled together irremediably; their relationships reveal that desire, reserved for the private, has seeped into the public realm. Captain Penderton lusts after Major Langdon, his wife Lenora’s lover, and Major Langdon’s own wife, Alison, watches the intermingling of the families on the social outskirts as she commits herself to a sickbed for most of the novel. Her servant, Anacleto, adds color to the text as a flamboyant, often stereotypical, character driven by his devotion to Alison, the Major’s wife. Shortly into the novel, we find that Captain Penderton’s sights change from the Major to Private William, an absentminded soldier on the base. Meanwhile, the Private assumes the role of voyeur after he becomes fascinated with Leonora, Captain Penderton’s wife. He watches her closely (even at her bedside while she sleeps) until he

finally is caught by Captain Penderton, shot, and killed. The text deconstructs classifications of sexuality, as the characters rarely classify or even come to an understanding about their own desires or urges, leaving the reader in doubt as to who feels what or what those feelings mean. The confusion of their feelings, coupled with the blurring of private and public spheres, turns all assumptions about sexuality on their head, revealing desire itself to be terribly complicated, queer, and unquestionably public, no matter how segregated and private we try to make it.

Despite McCullers' and current queer theorists' understandings of desire as queer and unclassifiable, society systematically works to regulate and "normalize" sexuality through processes like "foreclosure," which Chapter One explores.¹⁴ Due to its location on an army base with military figures, *Reflections* reveals how sexual desire is regulated by the process of foreclosure, which Judith Butler defines. Foreclosure is a process, in its simplest form, of not permitting someone to behave in a certain way, and it is one of the first steps in the larger process of normalization (Brady and Shirato 112). What makes the army base especially important is that the location makes explicit the process of making active members of the nation into proper citizens. McCullers' use of the army base as her setting emphasizes how normalization is intrinsically linked to national politics. As Brenda Cossman, quoting Steven Seidman in *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging*, writes, "Normalization [. . .] is a strategy that neutralizes the significance of sexual difference and sexual identity, 'rendering sexual difference a minor, superficial aspect of a self who in every other way reproduces the ideal of a national citizen'" (8). Individuals, like Captain Penderton, are coerced into making their sexual difference ineffective and unrecognizable as they become active members of the nation, and the army base serves to heighten the regulatory effects of society upon him.

Functioning as a microcosm of society, the characters of *Reflection* undergo the very processes of “normalization” that are established from birth. As Chapter One suggests, Butler identifies these regulatory processes of “foreclosure” which occur during the initial homosexual and incest taboos. Later social contracts of normalization regarding sexuality – homosociality, homoeroticism, and homophobia – derive from these two taboos which demand foreclosure at an early age through “symbolic violence” (Brady and Shirato 112-113). Freud’s psychoanalysis identifies an initial sexual desire toward a member of the family. As all so-called “healthy” children develop, their desires for a parent “naturally” shift to someone outside the family; Butler, in her analysis of Freud’s work, identifies how this shift of object desire occurs because of the social taboo against incest (64). Butler then identifies a missing element in the “naturally” occurring development of a child’s desires, for the incest taboo requires a prior restriction on homosexuality (70). For a boy to develop an Oedipal attraction for his mother, his desires must have originally filtered through a foreclosure of possible desires for his father. Therefore, the first processes which “normalize” sexuality by violently restricting desires are the homosexuality and incest taboos.

In *Reflections*, the army base recreates these initial taboos in a “rigid pattern” just as the men are recreated, broken down, and reborn as “real” men “built one precisely like the other” (*Reflections* 1). McCullers represents her characters’ military rebirth as the birth of the child, just as she represents the “brotherhood” that forms among them as the familial relations which surround a child in early development. Major Langdon, the best friend and cuckold of the protagonist Captain Penderton, credits the army with rebuilding men – “it might have made a man of [Anacleto]” – but for the rebirth of the soldiers, societal taboos must be instituted (124). The homosexual taboo, already so well-ingrained, is only implied through the thought processes

of the soldiers and the jokes about Anacleto. When Private William starts to leave the barracks at night, “[i]t was guessed that the soldier had found himself a woman” (98); homosexuality reveals itself to be so tacitly forbidden that it ceases to exist as an option for a soldier. The characterization and jokes about Anacleto’s perceived perversity further depict the social taboo against homosexuality. He often prances about the Langdon home, “chattering to himself” in broken French or practicing ballet moves with visions of grandeur (42-43). He is promptly called “a rare bird” by Morris Langdon, and the officers at social gatherings relentlessly spread jokes about his strangeness: “[A] joke sneaked its way through the party—a story to the effect that the little Filipino thoughtfully scented Alison Langdon’s specimen of wee-wee with perfume before taking it to the hospital for a urinalysis” (43; 83).

With the homosexuality taboo evidently established, the subsequent incest taboo becomes especially important on an army base, as the social contract forbids the men from sleeping with their “brothers.” The aggressive rituals of machismo, physical training, and cultivating mutual dependency in battle encourage soldiers to form bonds similar to a brotherhood, so that their homosocial bonds on the base substitute for familial bonds. Given the initial taboo, the incest taboo doubly heightens the homosexuality taboo because a violation of it on an army base would be a violation of both taboos. As Captain Penderton’s infatuation with Private Williams develops, he yearns to be among the other soldiers: “[H]e now experienced a pleasure in imagining himself as an enlisted man” (*Reflections* 121). His previous desires for power and promotion in the ranks faded into desires for “the hubbub of young male voices, the genial loafing in the sun, the irresponsible shenanigans of camaraderie” (121). Captain Penderton, often “lust[ing]” after the “camaraderie” of the soldiers, comes dangerously close to violating both

taboos; the precariousness of balancing both taboos results violently in the death of Private Williams, his temptation (105).

Once the homosexuality taboo and the incest taboo are established, society is left with a complex web of sexual social contracts to continue the regulation of certain desires. The characters on the army base must balance these social contracts, known as the homosocial, the homoerotic, and the homophobic, to keep their desires within socially appropriate forums. Sedgwick, who often writes about male-male desire, identifies the homosocial as “social bonds between persons of the same sex,” but these bonds are significant because they function as “the affective or social force” holding relationships together (*Between Men* 1-2).¹⁵ Sexual desire between men – the homoerotic – functions as an adhesive of such social bonding, making male-male sexuality an integral part of all male bonding. The interaction of male-male desire (homoeroticism) and male bonding (homosociality) yields tension when the social contracts dictate a foreclosure of acting upon the sexual desire. The fear that acting upon such sexual desires will have harmful or destructive consequences is homophobia. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, homophobia developed as a means to regulate “the male homosocial bonds that structure all culture” (184); these homosocial bonds, she continues, are “at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds” (187). Thus, there is a “continuum between [the] homosocial and [the] homosexual” which dictates levels of permissibility regarded male-male desire (*Between Men* 1). Allan Bloom, quoted by Sedgwick, identifies the contradiction between a necessary presence of sexual desire in the homosocial and the subsequent foreclosure of such desires through homophobia: “[In] [w]estern hegemonic culture, the stimulation and glamorization of the energies of male-male desire [. . .] is an incessant project that must, for the preservation of that self-contradictory

tradition, coexist with an equally incessant project of denying, deferring, or silencing their satisfaction” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 56). As a result, the characters of *Reflections*, living under the same social contracts of desire and regulation, must navigate and uphold the intersecting social contracts or risk destructive consequences. A false step would result in dishonorable discharge and social exile, and *Reflections* reveals the internal turmoil of Captain Penderton and Private Williams in balancing these requirements.

The homoerotic tension prevalent in Western male communities, and the more important social phenomenon of foreclosure, takes center stage in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, as McCullers explores the effects of balancing the various social contracts through the thoughts and actions of all the characters. Each character negotiates the boundaries between homosociality, homoeroticism, and homophobia differently, demonstrating the difficulty and complexity of all sexual feelings (feelings that are often overlapping and difficult to define) especially given the delicate and often misleading curtain between public and private.

Captain Penderton appears to be largely an expert in foreclosing his feelings and urges at the beginning of the text; after all, he is described as living in “a constant state of repressed agitation” (*Reflections* 119). From an early time in his life, the Captain recognized a development of same-sex eroticism: “When he was a child of seven he had become so infatuated with the school-yard bully who had once beaten him that he stole from his aunt’s dressing-table an old-fashioned hair-receiver as a love offering” (*Reflections* 53). As we gather from the text, he ignored these urges to the best of his ability, and he continued to follow the expected social timeline, advancing rapidly in officer’s ranks and getting married to the beautiful, charismatic Leonora, despite never feeling a sexual attraction for her. He preferred to “square the circle,” so to speak, instead of welcoming the difference (10). We then discover that their sexual

relationship does not develop as Leonora had expected: “When she married the Captain she was still a virgin. Four nights after her wedding she was still a virgin, and on the fifth night her status was changed only enough to leave her somewhat puzzled” (17). Leonora, seeking pleasure elsewhere, turns to Major Morris Langdon, and we soon learn that the Captain follows suit, “as he was just as jealous of his wife as he was of her lover” (33). The Captain then sets his sights on Private Williams, but maintains a respectable boundary, allowing himself to be satisfied only with scopophilia. The Captain demonstrates the overwhelming power of the social contract, repressing as best as possible homoerotic urges for the sake of the homosocial; he even encourages homophobia – which Kosofsky described as characteristic of homosocial bonds in a patriarchy – to solidify the bond. Anacleto, the effeminate house servant of Alison Langdon, often finds himself the target of homophobic jokes crafted by the Captain himself. One joke depicts Anacleto calling the General with a request that the morning *reveille* be cancelled, referring to himself as the “garçon de maison” in broken French (107). The officers find humor in his disregard for military rituals and his fondness for the ostentatious use of French. Although we are fully aware of the Captain’s feelings for the Major and the Private, the others on the base only see the Captain who is married to Leonora and who laughs heartily at jokes crafted at Anacleto’s expense. His outward appearance allows him to successfully navigate socially inappropriate feelings in socially appropriate ways to maintain the balancing act of homoeroticism, homosociality, and homophobia.

Private Williams, unlike Captain Penderton despite all his internal confusion and sexual attraction toward other men, does not successfully navigate the expected social contract required of him. His unsuccessful navigation of such a contract could be a result of his rejection of the contract itself; he has no desire to form a homosocial bond with the other soldiers; in fact, “he

kept to himself and was something of a mystery to the other men” (*Reflections* 3). After being in the army for two years, “hardly half of his sleeping mates even knew his name” (99). Then, while finishing a job for Captain Penderton, he becomes enamored with Leonora as he watches her undress through the window. While his infatuation with a member of the opposite gender classifies him as “normal” according to sexual expectations of McCullers’ time, his scopophilic obsession turns “healthy” sexual appetite into perversion. It is ultimately his trespassing into Captain Penderton’s home to gaze at Leonora which leads to his murder, but his death indirectly results from his unsuccessful navigation of the social contract. Though the social contract demands foreclosure, and is in fact built upon initial foreclosures, it also demands active participation in heteronormative sexuality. The Private’s fascination with Leonora stems from the novelty of the female body since he has never been exposed to or driven socially to explore what his era viewed as healthy heterosexual urges: “He had been brought up in a household exclusively male [. . . and] [f]rom his father, who ran a one-mule farm and preached on Sunday at the Holiness church, he had learned that women carried in them a deadly and catching disease [. . .]” (20). His father foreclosed the one socially acceptable form of sexuality, raising a man unable to navigate the sexual social contracts of heteronormative sexuality.

Socially acceptable navigation of the social contracts should theoretically result in acculturated heteronormativity. Here, Carson McCullers challenges yet another cultural assumption: what is healthy heteronormativity? Does it exist? Michael Warner, a preeminent queer theorist of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, describes heteronormativity as “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society”; subsequently, if heteronormativity is an illusory construct that imposes itself upon all sexuality, then the agenda of a subversive text is shattering this illusion or myth (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 64). *Reflections*

in a Golden Eye is as much a critique of such heterosexual mythology as it is a proponent of alternative forms of sexuality. McCullers' subversive demonstration of not only myriad forms of non-heteropatriarchal sexual practices but also the preponderance of unproductive and unsuccessful heterosexual couples reveals all sexuality and desire to be complex, troublesome, and destructive, as she personally felt it to be. Essentially, through her use of queer desires, she reveals all desire to be queer.

In her successful dismantling of heteronormative sexuality, McCullers engages with and subverts some of the heteropatriarchal mythologies which sustain it in a number of ways. Feminist and queer readings of McCullers' novels have focused on her subversion of socially sanctioned institutions, the first being the heteronormative myth of healthy marriage. Pamela Bigelow, in her critical overview of McCullers' works for the journal *Gay and Lesbian Literature*, identifies how the author "challenges American society's insistence on the inviolable sanctity of heterosexual marriage by revealing the dysfunctional underside of that institution" (para. 8). *Reflections* substantiates Bigelow's claim by providing the reader with not a single happy, faithful union. The two married couples of the text (aside from the brief mention of other pairs at military events), include an adulterous wife (Leonora), an adulterous husband (Major Langdon), a jealous yet pathetic wife not assertive enough to salvage her marriage for the heterosexual ideal (Alison), and an apathetic husband who almost encourages his wife's affair so that he may remain close to her male lover (Captain Penderton). While the marriages all clearly fail to meet the expectations of the heteronormative myth of a healthy relationship, McCullers makes sure to have them appear normal and functioning to the society within the text. The military officials and soldiers of the army base make no indication of knowing about the affairs, demonstrating the disjunction between appearance and reality. This disjunction reflects the

subversive agenda of the text, revealing that appearances of society (an assumed harmonious heterosexual ubiquity) are not the underlying actuality.

A second myth of heteronormativity involves a fixation with productivity, claiming that heterosexual unions are productive and that each of those unions should (re)produce successfully.¹⁶ The connection between normal sexuality and productivity is not a new concept, and, in fact, it can be dated back to early sexologists of the 1880s and 1890s, who sought to redefine normal based on terms of productivity (Eaklor 142). Alison Langdon throughout the text is revealed to be neurotic, sometimes attacking herself with violent masochism and sometimes committing herself to bed for days at a time. During one of her episodes, she suddenly leaves Penderton's home, where she and her husband had been visiting, in a violent outburst: "They found Mrs. Langdon unconscious and she had cut off her tender nipples of her breasts with the garden shears" (*Reflections* 32). While her outburst could be attributed to insanity, as it is in the text by her husband, McCullers strategically provides us an alternative explanation for her violent outburst. After Alison's death, Leonora recounts a trip the couples took to North Carolina where Alison exhibited inner-strength, confidence, and sheer gusto, commanding a little plow horse as if she had trained it for years (128). The metamorphosis Alison undergoes to arrive at the hypochondriacally insane woman we see during the novel can only be attributed to her unsuccessful and unproductive marriage with Major Langdon. His long-term affair with Leonora and the loss of their child are textual clues revealing heterosexual marriage to be filled with despair and unproductivity – the opposite of what the heteronormative myth promises.

The final cultural assumption of heteronormativity explored by McCullers in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and perhaps the most significant, is the expectation that heterosexual desires are universal and the exclusive normal urge in all humans. Recalling Michael Warner's statement

about heteronormativity, heterosexual authority allows the entirety of society to assume heterosexual ubiquity (Brady and Shirato 64). The characters of the novel dismantle this sexual assumption by exhibiting a mixture of same-sex desires, scopophilic desires, or even a lack of sexual desire, but no character subverts heteronormativity better than Captain Penderton due to his sheer lack of interest in and fear of heteronormative sexual activity. As previously mentioned, Captain Penderton shirks his marital duties, so to speak, by neglecting to consummate his marriage with Leonora (*Reflections* 17). Furthermore, Leonora uses her female sexuality as a weapon against him during their first fight of the novel, not coincidentally after calling him an “old prissy”:

[Mrs. Penderton] pulled off her jersey, crushed it into a ball, and threw it into the corner of the room. Then deliberately she unbuttoned her breeches and stepped out of them. In a moment she was standing naked by the hearth. [. . .] While the Captain looked at her with the stunned indignation of a man who has suffered a slap in the face, she walked serenely to the vestibule on her way to the stairs. [. . .] She was halfway up the steps before the Captain recovered from his shock. Then he ran trembling after her. “I will kill you!” He said in a strangled voice. “I will do it! I will do it!” (14-15)

Her naked body and the teeming, vibrating life and sexuality within her skin serves to stupefy the Captain beyond recovery until she leaves the room. While heterosexual urges underlying heteronormativity typically serve to heighten and intensify a situation (between two members of the heteronormative), the sexuality Leonora uses against the Captain seemingly pushes him to retreat. Once he does recover from his shock and horror at her naked body, his subsequent response is violent rage. The emasculating epithet – “you old prissy” – reflects a questioning of

his manhood; therefore, Captain Penderton, in an effort to salvage his masculinity and refute the homophobic remark, turns to misogynistic violence. Sedgwick identifies how homophobia and misogyny are closely related, revealing his sudden urge to kill his wife to be a byproduct of the homosocial in society, which includes both homophobia and misogyny.¹⁷

Though Carson McCullers successfully subverts “normal” sexuality by challenging the mythology of heteronormativity, subversion of said sexuality is only one of the ways in which McCullers anticipates queer theory in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Alongside the dismantling of heteronormativity, McCullers brings alternative forms of sexuality to the forefront, displacing the standard hierarchy of heterosexual majority and homosexual minority and furthermore replacing “homosexual” with all that is “queer.” As mentioned above, Butler defines “queer” as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 64). Past critics of Carson McCullers’ work have tried to claim her as a lesbian writer, a homosexual writer, a feminist writer, and so on, but her texts reveal a distinctive effort to avoid classification of any sort; this effort becomes especially clear when studying the non-heteropatriarchal, complex, and ambiguous sexualities of the characters of *Reflections*.¹⁸ Since the exploding interest in queer theory, however, critics have reinterpreted her work as queer in its portrayal of a variety of sexual desires, yet even those ideas maintain regulatory categories of sexuality and gender. What McCullers ultimately explores in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is that all desire is queer, and this queer desire transgresses both heteropatriarchal and homosexual definitions of sexuality.

To understand how McCullers suggests that all sexuality and desire is queer, the definitions of the terms themselves have to be clarified, despite the overwhelming history of various interpretations. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick identifies one of the difficulties

of reclassifying and reconceptualizing sexualities, whether heterosexual or homosexual: the definition itself. Since some of the first efforts to define and classify sexuality in the late-nineteenth century, theorists, psychologists, and experts from a variety of fields have debated the very definition of the term. Sedgwick notes the current focus on “the gender of object choice” in classifying an individual’s sexuality, and, according to Andrew Parker in “Unthinking Sex: Marx, Engels, and the Science of Writing,” Sedgwick herself defines sexuality by a centering on genital sensations (Sedgwick 8; Parker 20). Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, provocatively introduces the notion that sexuality is a historical construction, while others, especially in the current Gay Rights Movement, focus on congenital sexuality or innate sexual orientation as the grounds for insisting upon equality. Most agree, however, that despite the ontological debate, sexuality concerns desire. The discussion of sexuality as a definable term, however, is further complicated by the difficulty of explaining “desire” itself.

The discussion of how to interpret and define “desire” has taken many forms, especially as it pertains to homosexuality or non-conforming sexualities. In her monograph, Sarah Gleeson-White entertains a discussion of “narcissism” when analyzing some of the sexually non-conforming characters of McCullers’ novels. She identifies how traditionally, “[n]arcissism is dangerously implicit in cultural perceptions of homosexual passion,” noting how the use of “homo” meaning “same” adds to the popular conception (55). She concludes, however, that in *Reflections* McCullers confronts the misconception of homosexual desire “to depict grotesque alternative desires and behaviors without collapsing into stereotypical and therefore damaging imagery and language” (55). With a focus on how McCullers depicts both members of a homosexual pair, she suggests that the intense focus on highlighting differences between Captain Penderton and Private Williams prevents the attraction between the two from being a narcissistic

desire. Perhaps Captain Penderton's desire for the private is not narcissistic in nature, but Gleeson-White's determination to prove the legitimacy or appropriateness of his homosexual affections (by disproving narcissism) detracts from the overall notion that desire, of all sorts, is queer. By attempting to "straighten up" the queer eroticism between the Captain and the private, Gleeson-White encourages a conforming reading of non-conforming characters. Her deconstruction of narcissism, as pertaining to Captain Penderton's character, becomes complicated by the question of "desire" as Hegel describes it. For Hegel, "[d]esire [. . .] is understood as or stands in for reflexive consciousness, whereby consciousness seeks to know and comprehend itself through the mediation of otherness" (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 14). Desire, then, is an understanding of the self as seen or understood by others, a "subject's (continual) discovery of itself in the world" (15). One can easily see how desire, in this sense, often becomes conflated with "identification," where desire for and identification with an object become dangerously indissociable. For Freud, the issue was simplified: "a simultaneous desire for and identification with the same object would be a logical impossibility for Freud" (Fuss 53).¹⁹ However, since Foucault's provocative *History of Sexuality*, which complicated all understanding of sexuality by analyzing it as an instrument of power relations, desire and identification have become entangled to the point where same-sex desire, as we see in Gleeson-White's argument, becomes popularly conflated with narcissism.

So how are readers to interpret sexuality in *Reflections* if sexuality itself cannot be clearly defined by sexologists, philosophers, or contemporary queer theorists? McCullers, I believe, would smile at this question, for an ambiguous definition of sexuality is exactly the outcome of *Reflections*. The text ultimately reveals heteronormativity and all sexual categories to be insufficient as desire spills beyond boundaries of not only what is heterosexual but also

homosexual. Although the complicated historical definitions of sexuality may not be something that McCullers herself anticipated, they mirror the reconception of sexuality offered by *Reflections*.

Sexuality, in *Reflections*, is first complicated by the persistent ambiguity of sexual acts and desires. The only actual sexual, and seemingly “normal,” consummation in the text is between Leonora and Major Langdon, an affair which occurs outside of two marriages and, thus, involves not just two but four lovers. So how can we read *Reflections* as a queer text when no explicit queer acts take place? This question prompts the return to the definition of queer as anything outside or against the dominant, and, in this case, the heteronormative.

Queer sexuality in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* turns the hetero-/homosexual dichotomy into a test of triviality, as the characters explore sexual avenues of scopophilia, borderline bestiality, infantilism, and sadomasochism. Such varied sexuality shatters the mythology of normative sexuality during McCullers’ time period, which “naturally” takes place in the bedroom between one man and one woman under the sheets in the missionary position with the lights off. The perverse nature of the characters, when revealed to be ubiquitous in various manifestations, undermines the very myth that perverse sexuality does not exist in our society, much less on an army base. The prevalence of queer desires and sexualities additionally shatters the bipolar sexual classification, the hetero/homo divide, revealing that queer desire exceeds these categories.

One of the central perversions of the text is scopophilia, from whence pleasure is derived by gazing, often sexually, at another. After Private Williams clears some land for Captain Penderton at the novel’s start, he remains on their property, fixated on the couple’s interaction through the window. During this episode, “[t]he soldier kept his eyes on the Captain’s wife”

(*Reflections* 28). Something within him seemed to awake upon the first view of a naked female body – a sexual awakening, no doubt – and during the remainder of the novel, the private repeatedly enters their home at night to gaze again at Leonora. The first time he enters their home, he crouches by Leonora’s bedside for hours enraptured by fixing his eyes upon her: “The young soldier felt in him a keen, strange sweetness that never before in his life had he known” (58). The scopophilia of the Private is mirrored by the Captain’s own sexual gaze at the Private. The Captain slowly restructures his days around watching the Private’s every move:

One afternoon he drove before the barracks and saw the soldier resting alone on one of the benches. The Captain parked his car farther down the street and sat watching him. [. . .] The Captain watched the soldier until the call for supper. Then, when Private Williams had gone inside, the Captain still sat in his car, looking at the outside of the barracks. (104)

The Captain relishes the perverse joy watching the Private brings him, and his passionate obsession eventually pushes the Captain to pass repeatedly in front of the soldier just to look in his face (121). The queer sexual fulfillment of the gaze reveals sexuality, of any gender-object choice, to exist outside the bedroom and within even an ostensibly passing glance.

Queerness additionally permeates the novel through the use of horses as a sexual tool or instrument for deriving pleasure. While a critic may question whether the characters’ relationships with horses can be classified as pseudo-bestiality, the horses undeniably play an integral part in the sexual satisfaction of the characters. Captain Penderton, on his hysterical rampage on horseback, starts poised and in control of the beast, but as the horse gains freedom and speed, the Captain is eventually overwhelmed, losing control of his body. The climax of his ride reads as a symbolic orgasm, as his mind seems to temporarily leave his heaving body:

His eyes were glassy and half-open, as in delirium, but he saw suddenly as he had never seen before. [. . .] He was conscious of the pure keen air and he felt the marvel of his own tense body, his laboring heart, and the miracle of blood, muscles, nerves, and bone. The Captain knew no terror now; he had soared to that rare level of consciousness where the mystic feels that the earth is he and that he is the earth. Clinging crabwise to the runaway horse, there was a grin of rapture on his bloody mouth. (*Reflections* 76)

The Captain is not the only one to find sexual arousal with the partnership of a horse; Private Williams, too, serves to displace sexuality out of a clinical, safe sphere of civility into a wild, savage realm of nature. On his personal rides through the woods, the soldier sunbathes lethargically on a rock in the center of a field, but “[s]ometimes, still naked, he stood on the rock and slipped upon the horse’s bare back” (59). The Private recognizes with pride the “sensual, savage[ry]” of his naked body in full control of a horse (60).

In addition to leaving a “natural” adult sphere to enter the wild, animal realm, sexuality broadens to include a recognition of sexual desire for youth, bordering on the pederastic. Captain Penderton’s fixation on Private Williams appears to be the yearnings of a middle-aged man for a firm, virile, and youthful male body, both sexually and nostalgically; however, the portrayal of Private Williams, and the Captain’s fascination with him, circulate around the soldier’s infantile character. His vacant mind reflects the naiveté of childhood (or the psychosis of a deranged man), but McCullers leaves additional character traces to imply his child-like nature. In the barracks at night, other men snore, curse, or groan, but Private Williams is only heard to occasionally unwrap a candy bar (*Reflections* 3). Then, on the morning after he first saw Leonora, he appears with “white traces of the milk he had drunk for breakfast” on his face (23).

Even Captain Penderton notes the childishness in the soldier, claiming to despise his “childish page-boy bangs” (103); nevertheless, the Captain, as discussed, has trouble articulating his feelings toward Private Williams honestly.

Lastly, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* demonstrates a final facet of queer sexuality – as subversion of heteronormativity – through the inclusion of sadomasochism. As mentioned, Captain Penderton’s horseback rampage quickly becomes sexual, yet a key instrument to the sexual episode is its inherent violence. The violence and sensuality heighten as the Captain aggressively pulls the reins, twice, on the freely galloping horse. Then, after his climax and after exhaustion overcomes the horse, the Captain continues his violent attack on the horse which just provided him sexual fulfillment:

Slowly and methodically he tied the horse to a tree. He broke off a long switch, and with the last of his spent strength he began to beat the horse savagely.

Breathing in great gasps, his coat dark and curled with sweat, the horse at first moved restively about the tree. The Captain kept on beating him. Then at last the horse stood motionless and gave a broken sigh. (77)

While the Captain appears from this episode to derive pleasure from sadism, for most of his life he found a fulfillment of his desire in masochism. As mentioned, he as a child fell in love with his school-yard bully, and even horse riding “was another one of his ways of tormenting himself” (53, 74). His constant self-restraint serves to complicate our understanding of sexuality as an exclusively pleasurable, genital satisfaction. In fact, each of the ways in which McCullers make sexuality queer – scopophilia, bestiality, infantilism, and sadomasochism – unite to successfully topple heteronormativity from imposed reality to revealed mythology.

Despite the evident queerification of sexuality in *Reflections*, the actual presence of an identifiable sexual category remains fairly concealed. Captain Penderton never self-identifies as a homosexual (and when he addresses his feelings for Private Williams, they are always ambiguous and strangely confused). Even the (arguably) most stereotypically homosexual character of the text, Anacleto, never claims a category for himself, and a category is never imposed by the omniscient narrator. What, then, are we to make of the sexual ambiguity prevalent within McCullers' novel, a novel which clearly supports the equality and advancement of sexual minorities in place of compulsory heterosexuality? While her lack of clarity can be attributed to coding, a psychological difficulty in expressing the terminologically inexplicable, and an attempt to frustrate readers' expectations under heteronormativity (all of which I demonstrate in what follows), the central outcome unquestionably becomes one of her greatest contributions to budding feminists and queer theorists: an exploration of the psychological and literal danger of attempting to foreclose desire.

The ambiguous description of sexuality or sexual categorization in the text, upon first glance, could be attributed to the historical necessity for coding. Lori J. Kenschaft, in "Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers 'As a Lesbian,'" identifies the use of gay and lesbian coding in *The Member of the Wedding*, noting that her texts used codes to signal subversive sexual content to disenfranchised readers (221-222). The use of terms like "queer" and "lavender," both used in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, signal a gay and lesbian subculture (221). The use of coding, as illustrated in the first chapter, became a literary necessity during the time when McCullers was writing each of her novels. Explicit characterizations of gay or lesbian content historically did result in trials, book banning, jail time, and, as was most often

the case, social exile. A intentional result of coding, however, serves the additional purpose of making her characters more ambiguous and, thus, more difficult to classify.

Even though McCullers denies us the option of classifying her character due to narrative ambiguity (using only coded words and vague descriptions to hint at sexuality), she does much more to illustrate the unclassifiability of sexuality in *Reflections*. Captain Penderton himself is unable to define or make intelligible his feelings toward Private Williams. Similar to McCullers' use of coding, the Captain's internal confusion serves two purposes: it comments on the psychological difficulty of understanding socially restricted feelings, and it reifies her stance against sexual classification. First, Captain Penderton never seems to understand the way he feels about Private Williams. After the Captain waits at the stables for the Private to return, he notices his "fine, skillful hands and the tender roundness of the soldier's neck" (*Reflections* 84). The feelings, however, remain unclear: "The Captain was overcome by a feeling that both repelled and fascinated him – it was as though he and the young soldier were wrestling together naked, body to body, in a fight to death" (84). The Captain has no forum or language to use to describe his emotions; he has never been socially prepared to recognize what might be sexual attraction for another man. Thus, he navigates the feelings the only way he knows how; they are similar to lust ("naked, body to body") but they must be anger or play ("wrestling [. . .] in a fight to death") because men do not lust after each other (84). Captain Penderton later reveals that he does not understand the source of his feelings, and toward the end of the novel after the Captain has had a month to ruminate on his feelings, he still expresses unexplainable emotions:

For a long time now he had ceased to attribute his feelings for Private Williams to hate. Also he no longer tried to find justification for the emotion that had so taken possession of him. He thought of the soldier in terms neither of love nor hate; he

was conscious only of the irresistible yearning to break down the barrier between them. (131)

Captain Penderton's inability to classify his desires for Private Williams depicts the near impossibility of expressing that which has no language, no definitions, and no social conventions for its expression: another tactic of heteronormativity. What his psychological inability to classify also accomplishes is another reification of McCullers' agenda; perhaps his desires should not be classified.

The final reification of McCullers' stance on classification involves the reader's response to the text. The ambiguity of the actions and the lack of explicit emotions and terms for sexual expression or classification serve to frustrate the reader. Whether we read the text from McCullers' own time period or from a twenty-first century perspective, we expect (and socially demand) classification of her characters. The scramble to claim McCullers herself as a lesbian writer, a feminist writer, or a homosexual writer at large reveals the social compulsion to label and define her and her texts. Her characters undergo the same tug-of-war as readers scramble to classify Captain Penderton as impotent, homosexual, or narcissistic, because McCullers goes to such lengths to make ambiguity and lack of classification such an integral component of her text. Through adjusting her readers to unclassifiable emotions, characters, and relations, she arguably produces, one reader at a time, the world queer theorists and poststructural feminists have envisioned for decades: a world that accepts the queerness of desire itself, eschewing the various labels that attempt to foreclose it.

So by this point it has been established that McCullers anticipates queer theory by subverting heteronormative myths, by complicating the definition of sexuality, and by challenging the social compulsion to classify acts, desires, and people. Perhaps her greatest

contribution to our understanding of sexuality, however, is her dismantling of a false attribute pervading nearly every discussion of sexuality to date: privacy. Just as McCullers upsets heteronormative assumptions about “normal” versus queer sexuality, she also upsets myths of assumed private sexuality. Sexuality is rarely ever a private matter, and it inevitably spills over into other realms of life, other relationships, and other people’s sexuality. McCullers, who often experienced an open sexuality (not always by choice), presented this often unexplored facet of sexuality in *Reflections* just as she encountered it in real life, through an inescapable triangulation.

Historically, sexual triangulation has been a tool of patriarchy used for centuries to ensure exogamy and to unite tribes (Butler, *Gender* 41). According to Levi-Strauss, the exchange of women between men (where two men and a woman form the sexual triangle) allows societies to “facilitat[e] trade” and “consolidate the internal bonds, the collective identity” of the tribe, all while avoiding a violation of the “pervasive cultural” incest taboo (qtd. in Butler, *Gender* 39, 42). While the literal exchange of women to regulate patriarchal systems occurred quite purposefully, McCullers would argue that a sexual triangulation of sorts occurs naturally. One member of a relationship fantasizing about another, an outsider developing feelings for a member of a couple, or an observer viewing a sexual exchange between two others all constitute examples of sexual triangulation, all of which occur naturally and unavoidably in a community of people. In *Reflections*, every central figure becomes entangled in the sexual relationships of others, revealing how false the assumption is that sexuality is a private relationship.

Captain Penderton’s wife, Leonora, serves as the “exchange,” so to speak, between the Captain and his initial infatuation, Major Langdon. The Captain, in fact, encourages this exchange because it brings him closer to the object of his desire, his wife’s lover: “In the last

year he had come to feel an emotional regard for the Major that was the nearest thing to love that he had ever known” (*Reflections* 33). The Major has infiltrated the assumed private relationship between the married couple, and the Captain has likewise entered indirectly into the affair between Leonora and Major Langdon. Similarly, the Major’s wife, Alison, cannot escape involvement. Through her marriage, she indirectly becomes involved in the affair as well, for which the Major is the “exchange.” As a result, a strange bond is formed between the two women: “There began one of those peculiar friendships between the wife who has been betrayed and the object of her husband’s love” (35). Meanwhile, Private Williams enters the scenario by voyeuristically obsessing over Leonora, watching her at her bedside. His very presence complicates every previously mentioned relationship, adding levels of triangulation to “private” sexuality. Even Alison becomes involved with the Private and Leonora when she sees him enter the Penderton’s home. Her involvement with the two (even though she believes the man to be the Major) creates another level of sexual involvement as she spreads the word to the Captain, and, ironically, she is horrified to find out that the Captain knew about his wife’s affair all along and did nothing: “You don’t mean to sit there and tell me you know this and do nothing about it?” (114). She discovers that nearly everyone is involved to some degree in the sexual relationships of others. As McCullers reveals, sexuality is never a private relationship, despite heteronormative (and even homosexual) claims of private, regulated sexuality. Thus, the myth that sexuality can ever be contained and separated from other realms and other people is likewise toppled.

Lastly, the issue of Private Williams’ murder must be addressed, as well as the institutionalization of Alison, and their demises seem to be quite explainable: collateral damage. While the novel subverts heteronormativity and advocates a reconceptualization of queer

sexualities, the characters still live in the universe of the novel where compulsory heterosexuality (and all compulsory normativity) work in a procrustean manner to normalize society. Alison, deemed insane by her husband, needed to be sacrificed. Her institutionalization functions as collateral damage of a normalizing, foreclosing patriarchy (her demand for a divorce clearly indicates a threat to patriarchy and contemporary systems of normalization). The Private's death functions similarly; he, a scopophilic, needed to be killed for the safety of all heteronormative families. His death, however, serves a secondary purpose, one which might illuminate the severity and danger of heteronormative mythology: homosexual panic.

Homosexual panic is a historically loaded term which was often used by psychologists as a defense for homophobic hate crimes. In his introduction to *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, Jonathan Ned Katz cites Dr. Kempf as the originator of "homosexual panic," which he defined as "an anxiety attack [. . .] 'due to the pressure of uncontrollable perverse sexual cravings'" (391). While the defense was specifically used as a justification of violent acts (intended to ward off unwanted sexual advances), it psychologically refers to "the supposed uncertainty about his own sexual identity" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 20).²⁰ In *Reflections*, a member of the base would view the Captain's murder of the soldier as appropriate and necessary; in the universe of the novel, Private Williams' death becomes a necessary purging of a pervert, a criminal, and a potential murderer (for all they knew, he could have planned to assault or kill Leonora). The reader, however, is led to a different conclusion. Given the Captain's history of romantic feelings for the private, coupled with his overwhelming adherence to heteronormativity as seen through his constant repression and obsession with appearances, the soldier's murder conforms to the psychological classification of homosexual panic. Of course, we can never really know why he killed the Private, but to explain it simply as a defense of Leonora goes against the rest of the

novel. For the sake of unity, the murder must be connected to his sexual feelings for Private Williams, and, thus, it must be a violent, final repression which destroys the temptation. The violent ending indicates that attempted foreclosure of queer desires leads to literal danger, revealing collateral damage to be a necessary byproduct of heteropatriarchal social contracts.

Reflections in a Golden Eye, thus, exposes how heteronormativity forecloses desires in an effort to regulate and “normalize” that which is queer. These foreclosing forces work in tandem with social contracts of homoeroticism, homosociality, and homophobia as well as heteropatriarchal mythology to suggest that all desire is or should be heterosexual in nature. Once exposed, McCullers then subverts these oppressive practices by constructing a world where heteronormative desires are juxtaposed with non-conforming desires, like scopophilia, bestiality, infantilism, and sadomasochism. The resulting *mélange* implies a certain queerness of all desires, desires which cannot be contained, regulated, or classified; as her novel suggests, the attempt to do so is not only impossible but dangerous.

Endnotes

¹³Sedgwick continues the explanation of the paradox rather astutely: “[H]eterosexuality both requires and repudiates homosexuality in order to sustain its normative status. [. . .]Term B is constituted as at once internal and external to Term A” (*Epistemology* 71).

¹⁴For a full definition of “foreclosure,” see Chapter One (11-12).

¹⁵Eve Sedgwick and Luce Irigaray have identified that an additional glue of homosocial bonds in society is misogyny, or the systematic repression of women. Luce Irigaray likewise reveals homoeroticism to be a fundamental element of all patriarchal cultures (qtd. in Butler, *Gender* 40). Irigaray claims that the very first exchanges of women among men were based on a homosocial desire, a desire to solidify unions between men through the sexual exchange of women. Through the sharing of female sexual organs, men bond together indirectly; the woman’s body serves as a circuit or route through which men’s homoerotic desires are satisfied while the restriction against “direct” homosexuality is honored. Irigaray, in “This Sex Which is Not One,” continues her theory that the exchange of woman satisfies male erotic impulses by demonstrating that the mere construction of the female category satisfies homoeroticism. The category of female is masculine because the female (and her sex organs) exist purely for the male: “Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies” (Irigaray, “This Sex” 364). Following this logic, Irigaray concludes that man’s desire for woman is really a narcissistic desire for man. The female sex organ becomes “a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing” (“This Sex” 363). In reading Irigaray, Butler concludes that male heterosexuality is homoerotic and homosocial, for through the woman, he satisfied an eroticism for his own male body and a bonding with other male bodies behaving similarly (*Gender* 13). Irigaray, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*,

ultimately classifies all forms of sexuality as simply “hommo-sexuality” because even female homosexuality is simply a “process of specularizing the phallus” (Butler, *Gender* 40; *Speculum* 103).

¹⁶We see remnants of this myth of productivity in contemporary arguments against gay couples who, opponents argue, cannot reproduce and straight couples who choose not to have children.

¹⁷In *Between Men*, the link Sedgwick makes between homophobia and misogyny specifically refers to male-against-male homophobia: “homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so” (20). Though Leonora is the agent of homophobia in the episode through her emasculating comment, Captain Penderton’s reaction is a result of his own fear of identifying his queer desires.

¹⁸Lori J. Kenshaft reads McCullers’ works through a specific lesbian lens, while Gary Richard reads McCullers’ work as especially liberating for gay males, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak popularized an early feminist reading.

¹⁹In fact, for Freud, identification always preceded desire and remained an intrinsic determinant of desire (Fuss 53, 37).

²⁰Sedgwick clarifies the homosexual-panic defense as evidence of pervasive cultural homophobia masquerading as individual homophobia: “the ‘homosexual panic’ defense rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness” (*Epistemology* 19).

CONSTRUCTING THE FREAK IN *THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ*

When discussing the notable life of Carson McCullers, typically the topics of gender and sexuality arise as they stand at a shocking distance from cultural expectations. Her affairs with women, her love triangles with her bisexual husband and other men, and her choice of fashion, traipsing around New York and Georgia in men's button-up shirts and slacks, make her life by comparison to contemporaries a little avant garde, daring perhaps. Before the conversations end, however, those who are familiar with her life cannot avoid mentioning how her physically debilitating medical conditions largely shaped her life and her works. While the presence of physical abnormality, or freakishness, in her works is largely an autobiographical feature, it additionally contributes to a conversation only recently approached by queer theorists and feminists like Judith Butler, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Elizabeth Grosz. It is important to recognize how gender, sexuality, and the material body intertwine to create a mutually reinforcing matrix of subjectification. When analyzing how a text navigates gender or sexuality, one must attend to how the physical body constructs a society's definition of the "natural" or "unnatural."

Freakishness comes into being through the presence of an unexpected or inconsistent body; when a body deviates from "normal" materiality through a defect, disability, or disapproved variation or when it does not align with behaviors consistent with cultural expectations, the body becomes freakish. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the last of her middle works, Carson McCullers explores how physical freakishness is a social construction dependent upon cultural definitions of "the freak." Her novella then complicates the concept of freakishness to show how it is amplified by deviations from gender and sexual norms, how the classified "freak" is then alienated by society, and finally how society drives the freak to retaliate against

other freaks as a violent manifestation of a projected self-loathing and yearning for cultural recognition.

In *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*, Virginia Spencer Carr records that Carson McCullers, from an early age, felt self-conscious about her “freakish” height and gangly limbs. In fact, when Carson was a child, other girls often shouted that she was “weird,” “freakish-looking,” and “queer,” resulting in an early anxiety and intuition about the importance of the body as a portal into certain social spheres (Carr 29-30). Despite being labeled a “freak” herself (or perhaps because of it), McCullers developed a fascination with other bodily freaks. She would often go to the Chattahoochee Valley Fair to see them, yet she worried the whole time that she would one day be there herself (30). At a later age, after moving to New York, McCullers further identified with other freaks because of her isolation as a Southerner. A close friend, Klaus Mann, recorded that, “uncannily versed in the secrets of all freaks and pariahs, she should be able to compose a revealing tale of exile” (100). McCullers found a companion in David Diamond, another friend, who shared a similar fascination with freakish bodies: “Carson and David sat together for hours poring over his picture album of strange creatures” (127). Though she felt like a freak and was identified as a freak by others, she paradoxically remained dependent on her body as it repeatedly failed her. From the age of fifteen on, McCullers suffered debilitating illnesses that left her bed-ridden, the first of which “required extensive bed rest at home and several weeks of convalescence in a sanitarium in another town” (28). She suffered rheumatic fever, but it was misdiagnosed as pneumonia. She continued to suffer various physical illnesses over the subsequent years, and in 1941, at the age of twenty-three, McCullers suffered a bizarre and temporarily incapacitating illness. She feared she might go blind as her vision was severely affected amid a series of violent headaches and stabbing pains. Doctors later determined

that she suffered her first of many strokes (139). During this time McCullers wrote *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

Six years later, after another stroke and several additional illnesses, McCullers was diagnosed with a kidney infection, and then:

The next day she suffered a third stroke. Her doctors concluded that several severe vascular spasms had resulted in a hemorrhage to the right side of the brain, thus closing off the circulation and causing varying degrees of paralysis to a large portion of the left side of the body. (Carr 292)

After this episode, her health continued to worsen, as her body deteriorated more each year following paralytic strokes that required periods of bed rest.

By struggling personally with debilitating illnesses and a deteriorating body, McCullers cultivated a theme of how the body influences the mind and regulates interactions with others. One of the most important features of the body, however, is how it interacts with the political state. In her article, “Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories,” Nan Alamilla Boyd explains “how visible, intelligible, legible bodies come to reflect, desire, and regulate the nation as a bounded political geography” (134). America during the late 1940s and early 1950s, during which McCullers wrote and published *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, had become highly politicized with increased nationalism after World War II and just before the official Cold War: “[T]o criticize U.S. policies or expose its faults was considered ‘un-American’” (Eaklor 86). The era is marked by a paranoid fascination with, and desire to eradicate, all classes deemed a threat to America’s success, leading to the name “Lavender Scare” to designate panic over sexual minorities alongside the term “Red Scare” to designate fear of the Soviet Union (72). American society during this time returned to the Victorian ideals of gender as Eaklor explains:

Gender distinctions, never deeply submerged, resurfaced with full force and combined with both consumerism and a revived “separate sphere” ideology: males produce (and consume or decide on expensive items), females consume that needed within the home as part of their role in maintaining the perfect family.

(79)

The state demanded that the body perform as its physical nature intended: a male body must behave as a man *should* and a female body must behave as a woman *should* to enforce order and control. When a body functions outside societal expectations, rendering it lost or displaced in the normative sign/signifier relationship, it becomes unintelligible, and, thus, abject. Sexual and gender deviants during this era marked a category of the abject, and Boyd notes the importance of the physical body in understanding the fate of the abject: “It makes no difference if these bodies die or if no one grieves them because, as Butler explains, abject bodies – bodies transgressive of borders and boundaries – do not matter” (136). Boyd is correct in claiming that bodies can die; however, what she does not account for is the necessity of abject bodies in the solidifying of “normal” categories. McCullers identifies the need for the abject’s presence to regulate society’s own boundaries.

The Ballad of the Sad Café, in traditional McCullers fashion, conjures up a small Southern town with roughly one street, one hangout, and one type of person, the poor blue-collar worker, wife, or child who knows everyone’s business and will most likely live in the same town until he or she dies. The plot, however, is driven by a central figure, Miss Amelia Evans, who one quickly discovers is the center of the town, functioning in an unexpected role of doctor, lawyer, shop owner, liquor maker, and philanthropist (but only when it comes to doctoring). She is extremely tall, “with bones and muscles like a man” and short hair, making her a nearly

“handsome woman” despite the fact that she is cross-eyed (*Ballad* 4). Based on the description, one would classify her as a freak, given the gender-bending, masculine nature of a female character in a Southern town in the mid-twentieth century. Adding a physical defect, being cross-eyed, to the characterization only further distinguishes her from her counterparts in the eyes of the reader. Nevertheless, her fellow townspeople regard her with esteem and respect; most of them either buy their supplies and food at her shop, drink her liquor, or visit her as their town doctor. She appears to be an integral part of the community socially as well, for the story starts with several men drinking with her on her porch stairs (6). Occasionally, a townspeople comments on her “queer marriage,” “queer-eyed” appearance, or need of gender reform, but at the beginning of *Ballad*, she appears to be one of the townsfolk (5, 28, 30).

Miss Amelia’s influence in the community, in fact, is substantiated by the presence of Cousin Lymon, the hunchback. As the men drink on the porch steps, one of them notices something coming down the road. The process of intelligibility is literally exercised as he is at first described as “something,” then “a calf,” then “somebody’s youngun,” until finally “they saw clearly *what* had come,” not who (*Ballad* 6). Lymon, to whom the text often refers as “hunchback,” is “scarcely more than four feet tall” with “crooked little legs,” a “great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders” (6-7). The men and Miss Amelia only stare at him when he greets them, and the first words from one of the men is a derogatory classification like “prissy” when he cries: “I’ll be damned if he ain’t a regular Morris Finestein” (9).²¹ Although his presence shocks the men, Miss Amelia decides to take him into her home. Over the next few days the townsfolk speculate that she must have robbed and killed him (why else would she let a man like that in her house?), until they realize that Miss Amelia actually cares about Cousin

Lymon. Once he is established as a permanent fixture of Miss Amelia's life, her power and influence become clear:

In all these years no one had so much as touched a hair of Cousin Lymon's head, although many had had the itch to do so. If anyone even spoke crossly to the hunchback, Miss Amelia would cut off this rash mortal's credit and find ways of making things go hard for him a long time afterward. (50)

Because she, holding power in the town, adopts him as an honorary townsman, he is not classified as a freak, revealing the classification itself to be a category defined by those in power (in this case, another otherwise categorized "freak").

What exactly is the nature of "freakishness," then, if it is a constructed category? Is the body not undeniably, physically formed, beyond the possibilities of cultural construction? Here a dilemma arises which is similar to the distinction between the materiality of sex (actual anatomy) and the interpretation of that materiality (making social classes based on interpretations of anatomy). Miss Amelia's external freakishness – her height, her crossed eyes, her muscled arms, and her short hair – are external manifestations reflecting and interacting with a cultural, internal feeling of freakishness. Cousin Lymon's external freakishness, too, reflects an internal sense of his own freakishness, his sinister desire to destroy people. He frequently pits friends against each other with a sadistic *schadenfreude* (*Ballad* 40). He, too, exudes sexual ambiguity as he later becomes infatuated with Marvin Macy, Miss Amelia's ex-husband, and he follows Marvin at his heels for days: "For since first setting eyes on Marvin Macy the hunchback was possessed by an unnatural spirit" (52). Louis D. Rubin, in "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Pain," substantiates the assertion that the physical manifests the internal sense of freakishness for "their physical grotesquery merely makes visible and identifiable their isolation and anguish" (118).

Literarily, then, physical freakishness serves to reveal an internal experience of freakishness to the readers and to the other characters of the text.

The relationship between the body and the mind, however, does not stop there. Not only does their external freakishness represent an internal strangeness (Miss Amelia's internal masculinity overriding her supposed "natural" femininity and Cousin Lymon's sinister nature), but it helps to produce and reproduce each character's sense of internal freakishness. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz critiques the longstanding Western belief that mind and body are separate, independent entities. She identifies how Christianity traditionally has devalued the body and elevated the mind, finding corporeality of a "lower-order," akin to what is animal or base about humanity (8). As a result of such reasoning, the body has become "a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects)" (9). We have historically perceived the body as such a communicative tool, rendering it passive and subject to the whims of the mind. Because of the systematic devaluing of the body in contrast to the mind, it has been traditionally believed that the body simply reflects the morality of the mind or inner spirit: "This is why moral characteristics were given to various physiological disorders and why punishments and rewards for one's soul are administered through corporeal pleasures and punishments" (Grosz 5-6). It is for this reason that Marvin Macy becomes the third freak of the novel. Marvin Macy, based on appearance, should be the most moral character in the novel:

For Marvin Macy was the handsomest man in this region—being six feet one inch tall, hard-muscled, and with slow grey eyes and curly hair. He was well off, made good wages, and had a gold watch which opened in the back to a picture of a

waterfall. From the outward and worldly point of view Marvin Macy was a fortunate fellow. (*Ballad* 27)

Subverting expectations of mind and body, Marvin Macy is in fact the most immoral character of the novel. The quote continues, “But for a more serious and thoughtful viewpoint Marvin Macy was not a person to be envied, for he was an evil character” (27).²² Just as Miss Amelia’s behavior does not match her body (according to a society which holds her to female standards), Marvin Macy’s behavior does not coincide with his appearance (in a society which expects his handsome body to reflect a moral soul), making him a “freak” in society.

Despite popular beliefs about the inconsequentiality of the body’s impact on the mind, scientific advancements, especially in genetics studies, have expanded the discussion, recognizing that genes play a role in how we interpret our interactions with others. More people in popular debates claim that biological predispositions, for example, account for certain attributes, taking the discussion into a debate over nature or nurture.²³ Grosz’s work in *Volatile Bodies*, however, disrupts the popularly debated dichotomy; she reveals that the body and the mind are not two separate entities at all but interacting and influencing sides of the same coin. To demonstrate her argument, she appropriates the image of the Mobius strip from Lacan. This image depicts a ribbon wound in a figure eight shape yet with the inside of the ribbon naturally becoming the outside so that when you follow it with your eye, there is no distinguishable outside from inside and, therefore, no distinguishable boundary between the two. The Mobius Strip becomes a metaphor for the interrelations of the mind and the body, where the two are so dependent upon and so shaped by each other that they become indistinguishable (Grosz xii). What we see as the body contrary to the mind or even to the world is actually a product and

process of internalizing and interacting with the mind and culture, rendering the body both a passive and active agent of “inscription” whereby cultural phenomena imprint on the body.²⁴

In reconceiving of the body as an agent of inscription, Judith Butler claims, “the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions” (*Gender* 131). Such taboos and regulations function as boundaries on the body, so that the soul, according to Michel Foucault, masquerades as “within” the body when it is an inscription “on” the body, making “the soul [. . .] the prison of the body” (qtd. in Butler, *Gender* 135). These cultural inscriptions on the body take the form of appropriate gendered regulation (like circumcision, which literally mars the body with cultural values and fears), heterosexually coerced behavior (like reproductive demands on the female body), or physical confinement, dictating social spaces where the body may or may not be permitted. While Grosz’s and Foucault’s ideas of inscription seem impractical when viewing the body outside of theory, Grosz identifies how cultural inscription occurs daily (and violently) in twentieth-century America:

In our own culture, inscriptions occur both violently and in more subtle forms. In the first case, violence is demonstrable in social institutions, keeping the body confined, constrained, supervised, and regimented, marked by implements such as handcuffs, the traversing of neural pathways by charges of electricity in shock therapy, the straight jacket, the regimen of drug habituation and rehabilitation, chronologically regulated time and labor division, cellular and solitary confinement, the deprivation of mobility, the bruising of bodies in police interrogations, etc. Less openly violent but no less coercive are the inscriptions of cultural and personal values, norms, and commitments according to the morphology and categorization of the body into socially significant groups. (142)

Though Grosz identifies cultural inscription in our society through her theorizing, Carson McCullers' depiction of the body – specifically the “freakish” body, and its interaction with the universe of the novel – reveals similar processes of inscription. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* brings characters' bodies into being through processes of social inscription, and these bodies are subsequently regulated as Grosz outlines above. The bodies of Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon are culturally inscribed in specific ways because of their freakishness, resulting in reproduced freakishness and an amplified conflict with “normal” society.

Miss Amelia, as previously indicated, is freakish in how her behavior conflicts with her socially constructed female sex; however, by embracing this inconsistency or inner-masculinity, Miss Amelia crafts her body based on cultural ideals of masculinity. She develops her muscles, cuts her hair short, wears masculine clothes, and forms homosocial bonds with other men by drinking with them on the porch steps. Before the culminating fight with Marvin Macy, she constructs a punching bag, depicting active inscription on the body (*Ballad* 61). Throughout the text, she repeatedly finds comfort in habitually feeling the muscles of her arm; the way she has molded her body (as if counteracting cultural demands of feminine delicacy) reveals the personal importance of her body's actions upon society and society's actions upon her body. Miss Amelia becomes Carson McCullers' Mobius strip.

Cousin Lymon, too, complicates boundaries between body and mind, as his physical freakishness reproduces freakishness. When he begins to cry on the porch steps, one of the twins calls him “a regular Morris Finestein” (*Ballad* 9). Stumpy MacPhail responds by saying, “Well, he is afflicted [. . .] There is some cause” (9). His physical deformity, according to Stumpy, causes his sensitivity, and his sensitivity is freakish in itself for a man, which we see through the use of Morris Finestein as derogatory. Cousin Lymon's freakish body, when interpreted by

society, produces additional freakishness, yielding a vicious cycle of interaction between the body, the mind, and the larger society.

The body is further reconfigured and reinterpreted by society through a process of fragmentation, whereby segmenting the body reveals a cultural devaluing of the person in his or her integrity and an emphasis upon individual body parts. The classification of sex is a result of fragmentation, as society privileges “some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or leaving un- or underrepresented other parts and functions” (Grosz 192). The focus on the genitals alone, while ignoring the vast similarities of other body parts between the sexes, assigns subjects into categories based on fragmentation. Miss Amelia suffers from such fragmentation, as her genitals mark her permanently as female despite being more masculine in overall appearance, behavior, and occupation. Cousin Lymon, too, suffers from such fragmentation, as his hunchback becomes his sole identity in the narrative. By becoming simply “the hunchback,” or “brokeback” as Marvin Macy calls him, his identity is reduced to a body part.²⁵ Additionally, he is classified as entirely disabled by readers (as he would be in the world outside of the novel), despite having fully functioning eyes, vocal cords, hands, feet, etc. As indicated, the freak is especially prone to suffer fragmentation when even a single attribute, his hunchback, classifies as different or out of the ordinary.²⁶

Surprisingly, Miss Amelia, though subject to fragmentation, starts the novel as an accepted member of society; in fact, as discussed with the arrival of Cousin Lymon, she holds most of the power in the town, making his integration into society permissible. Despite cultural inscription on the body, both characters for the first half of the novel interact freely with society and serve as a social hub of the town as Miss Amelia’s country store is transformed into a café. Then, with the arrival of Miss Amelia’s ex-husband, a convict and a great source of tension in

the town, the community begins to dissect itself into subgroups: “Marvin Macy stood by himself on one side of the pit, and the rest of the people clustered together on the other side [. . . while] Cousin Lymon stood somewhat apart from everyone” (*Ballad* 48). Marvin’s presence weakens Miss Amelia who is torn between banishing her ex-husband and catering to Cousin Lymon’s new affection for him; without the power she used to wield, her and Cousin Lymon’s status as accepted members is shortly questioned. What once functioned as a whole – Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon included – splinters into factions, with Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy making up three distinct “freaks” and the rest of the town composing society as the new whole.

The freakishness of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy is exacerbated by an “unnatural” love triangle. Miss Amelia falls in love with Cousin Lymon, who falls in love with Marvin Macy, who was once in love with Miss Amelia. The triangulation alone is strange, but the affair becomes freakish because of the unusual coupling. Cousin Lymon’s feelings for Marvin Macy, a creature (“hunchback”) in love with a man, are expectedly interpreted as freakish: “For since first setting eyes on Marvin Macy the hunchback was possessed by an unnatural spirit” (*Ballad* 52). He then follows Marvin Macy around town finding bizarre ways, like flapping his ears, to get Marvin’s attention. Marvin Macy’s love for Miss Amelia was originally the most socially accepted as “natural.” In fact, several townspeople encouraged their relationship, cheering Marvin “to tone down Miss Amelia’s temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman” (30-31). Their coupling is transformed into a queer union, however, on their wedding day as Miss Amelia behaves contrary to gendered expectations. After the wedding, “Miss Amelia hurried out of the church, not taking the arm of her husband, but walking at least two paces ahead of him” (30). Then, on their wedding night,

Miss Amelia fiddled around the store for hours before heading upstairs with her husband, only to descend shortly after “in breeches and a khaki jacket” (31). The narrator describes the events as “unholy,” claiming that “[a] groom is in a sorry fix when he is unable to bring his well-beloved bride to bed with him, and the whole town knows it” (31). The town expects the two to consummate their marriage on their wedding night, and the absence of sex as expected in a permissible social setting makes their marriage queer.²⁷

The union between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon is queer for different reasons, mostly having to do with the coupling of queer bodies. Cousin Lymon, perceived to be a creature more than a human, is strangely paired with Miss Amelia, a border-line Amazonian woman. The town immediately casts judgment on the union, as several claim that “these two were living in sin” (*Ballad* 25). The narrator, however, takes this opportunity to give the townspeople some credit; some “good people” found “that if those two had found some satisfaction of the flesh between themselves, then it was a matter concerning them and God alone” (26). Whether the townspeople permitted the love out of respect for their union or out of fear of retribution by the powerful influence of Miss Amelia, their union continued for four years until Marvin Macy fractured the harmony, setting all “freaks” apart from the “normal” society.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the focus on the freakish characters and their interaction with each other must include the necessary component of the character of the townspeople. As “freakishness” derives its meaning from opposition to the norm, said norm must likewise be defined. Though “townspeople” clearly refers to multiple individuals, in this novel, the narrator treats them as a whole. On the first night of the café, a crowd of townsmen gather around the store watching Cousin Lymon:

[. . .] [T]hey are all alike in many ways as has been said—all having taken pleasure from something or other, all having wept and suffered in some way, most of them tractable unless exasperated. Each of them worked in the mill, and lived with others in a two- or three-room house for which the rent was ten dollars or twelve dollars a month. All had been paid that afternoon, for it was Saturday. So, for the present, think of them as a whole. (20)

The townspeople continue to function as a whole throughout the novel as they respond in unison to the actions of the protagonists: they wait in anticipation to discover what Miss Amelia did with the hunchback after his arrival; they crowd around to wait for Miss Amelia after Marvin Macy arrives; and they eagerly await the brawl between the two at the novel's end. In fact, the night of the fight, "the crowd was complete" with the arrival of the mill workers to watch the match (65). The crowd responds to the fight in unison as well, pressing their bodies against the wall during it and solemnly retreating after its conclusion (66, 68). The crowd becomes one body, and the significance of acting as one and being treated as one reveals the homosociality of like bodies.

Like bodies, as are the ones of the townspeople, need not be treated with too much individuality lest they become freakish themselves. Freakishness is determined by difference, so to highlight the freakishness of abject bodies like Miss Amelia's, Cousin Lymon's, and later Marvin Macy's, the "normal" bodies need to be as similar as possible. This, according to Butler, is a goal of heteronormativity, as bodies are brought into being through a highly structured system of regulation. Though Butler focuses on how gender, sex, and sexuality determine the intelligibility of bodies, it is undeniable that "bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (*Bodies* xi). The

homosociality of the townspeople, a bond between like bodies, is a benefit granted to those who conform to the regulations and constraints of normalization.

From the advantageous position of the norm, the townspeople are afforded a second luxury: the gaze. The categorization of one as a “freak” depends upon the society which defines freakishness; this casting of a definition by society is what allows Miss Amelia to be less freakish at the beginning of the novel when she holds power in the community and more freakish at the novel’s end when she has lost all societal power. At first, because of her power, she was not subject to the gaze of those considered to embody the norm, but with the arrival of first Cousin Lymon and then Marvin Macy, Miss Amelia begins the transition from subject to object. The gaze or “the look,” according to Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, occurs between people and constructs unavoidable hierarchies as one person becomes subject and the other object. Sartre recognizes that hierarchy is dependent upon perspective, for when I gaze at another, I become the subject rendering him an object but when he gazes upon me, I become objectified. One can never, however, be both simultaneously, because we cannot perceive ourselves as an object and as a subject concurrently: “[I]t must be either one or the other [; . . .] we cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other” (Sartre 258). Sartre’s explanation of the gaze explains the transition in Miss Amelia’s freakishness; once serving as subject, with the arrival of Marvin Macy and his stares, her outlook shifts to a recognition of herself as object of the gaze. The subject of the gaze is never freakish; what is freakish is the spectacle created by the object of the gaze.

At first, the hunchback serves as the spectacle, and object of the gaze, in the town. He is brought into intelligibility through their gazes when they identify “what” he is, but he continues to be a spectacle into the first days of the café: “His presence was still a novelty and his presence

amused everyone” (*Ballad* 22). After the arrival of Marvin Macy, however, the townspeople are solidified as a sole subject rendering all three freaks objects of their gaze: “During these weeks Miss Amelia was closely watched by everyone” (53). As the gaze continues to be directed at the three central characters, their freakishness is augmented, and its effects culminate in a final spectacle, a literal boxing and wrestling match between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy. The town anticipates the match as it would a county fair, arriving from out of town in “packed automobiles that bristled with the poked-out heads of children” and “wagons drawn by old mules” (64). Then, as the fight begins, the crowd watches hungrily with gaping mouths, feeding off of the spectacle before them. A collection of like bodies gaze at the freaks who permissibly violate each other’s bodies. The gaze becomes an immense source of pleasure, especially when the object of the gaze is what Boyd calls unimportant, “abject” bodies (136).

The town interestingly permits the abject bodies to battle against each other without caution or warning; the people of the community never attempt to dissuade either fighter from assaulting the other, indirectly granting approval of the fight. Their silent approval of freakish bloodshed speaks volumes about how they value the lives of the freakish bodies. They know Marvin Macy has committed murder before, and they believe Miss Amelia to be strong enough to kill him. In fact, though Marvin Macy “had the advantage in slyness of movement, and in toughness of chest [, . . .] almost everybody in town was betting on Miss Amelia” (*Ballad* 61). Nevertheless, no one attempts to prevent the fight, and instead they all line the walls of the café to watch. Their silent eagerness suggests approval, as if to say, “let the freaks kill each other, so long as they’re not killing us.” For the fighters themselves (and Cousin Lymon who later becomes involved in the fight), the battle is about punishment. Marvin Macy returns to town to punish Miss Amelia for the way she treats him during their marriage: she does not sleep with

him (from what we gather by looking in as do the town boys on their wedding night); she takes his gifts and money; and she humiliates him by punching him publically when he tries to touch her (30-32). Miss Amelia, however, seeks to punish Marvin Macy for coming back at all and for stealing Cousin Lymon. She has fallen in love with Cousin Lymon, and when he gravitates toward Marvin Macy, leaving her behind, Miss Amelia's heart is broken. During the fight, when Miss Amelia has nearly beaten Marvin Macy into defeat, Cousin Lymon jumps on her back, resulting in her downfall. His involvement, too, serves to punish Miss Amelia for defeating his beloved, Marvin Macy. The entanglement of the three "freaks" reveals not a direct punishment of the freak by society or the norm, but a direct punishment of freakishness by freakishness. Thus, the fight reflects the complex relationships among persons considered "queer" – that is, freakish, – and those spectators who represent the "norm."

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, details how punishment works to shape people into normalized citizens, particularly on the significance of permissible violence as a form of regulation and construction of bodies and actions. For Foucault, the body is the "raw material of life" shaped into being by culture (qtd. in Grosz 155); he views "the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for 'culture' to emerge" (Butler, *Gender* 130). Foucault's illumination of the necessary disciplining and punishment of the body explains both the direct punishment by the "freaks," to reshape a person into a submissive, regretful failure, and the indirect punishment of society, hoping to normalize the "freaks" into intelligible beings. Thus, the fight becomes "an acceptable form of torture" (qtd. in Grosz 150). Though Marvin Macy is punished after his first crimes by being physically constrained in the penitentiary, the community derives little to no pleasure from his punishment because the community does not get to witness his normalization, his rebuilding. Pleasure comes from "spectacular punishment," as

the gaze and punishment combine (qtd. in Grosz 150). The violence between Marvin Macy and Miss Amelia needs to be public; otherwise, it would mean little more than a rogue interaction between two people. Making it a spectacle broadens the episode from an isolated event to a symbolic punishment of and between freakishness.

If the “freaks” are set opposite the normalizing force of society, why would they retaliate against each other instead of directing their aggression at the force which classifies them as freakish? Foucault’s ideas are again useful, this time from “The Subject and Power.” A long-standing tool of the ruling class has been to pit the subjects against each other so that they “do not look for the ‘chief enemy’ but for the immediate enemy” (780). By focusing on the closest enemy at hand (Miss Amelia, Marvin Macy, or Cousin Lymon depending on the character), the individual overlooks the “chief enemy” (i.e. society) who classifies, regulates, and violates their bodies and minds. By targeting another “freak” as the enemy instead of society, the characters solidify with the townspeople; this choosing of sides reveals a yearning for societal recognition instead of solidarity among the outcasts.²⁸ Though Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon are by no means simply victims of societal oppression (they are first and foremost terrible people), they are undeniably incorrect in targeting Miss Amelia as their enemy. Regardless of the ontology of their freakishness or exact nature of the “chief enemy,” society benefits from the individual isolation and peer targeting of the “freak.”

Though *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, like each of Carson McCullers’ other works, exposes machinations of heteronormativity and the heterosexual contract, this work introduces a significant aspect of queer theory: the body. The queer body is revealed in her work as it still is represented in contemporary America, a freakish body, but these bodies function as more than manifestations of their internal “freakishness.” Such bodies reveal the process of inscription

whereby society regulates and manipulates the body, bringing it into being through processes of intelligibility. Such processes, as is the case with the townspeople, are not revealed to be inherently destructive until a body resists in some way, as do the bodies of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy. These queer bodies subsequently suffer the shame and alienation of being classified as freakish. Such freakishness becomes especially dangerous when freakish bodies, out of desperation, turn against each other for societal recognition. It is for this reason that punishment of freakishness becomes especially pleasurable to “normal” spectators. An assault on the freakish body, by another “freak,” reveals the process of “normalization” without any threat to the norm. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* offers current queer theorists a literary representation of how queer subjects have been and still are manipulated physically and ideologically because of bodily deformities, inconsistencies, or variations. Her text encourages the reclamation of the body as an integral and interdependent element of queer theory and philosophy.

Endnotes

²¹Morris Finestein, a Jewish and effeminate outcast in the small, Southern town, is used here to doubly reinforce the homosocial union among the townsfolk. His exclusion reveals how misogyny (used to alienate him for his lost masculinity) and anti-Semitism intersect to reinforce ideals of gender and bodily conformity.

²²After Marvin Macy returns, his evil nature officially overpowers his appearance: “He was still handsome—with his brown hair, his red lips, and his broad strong shoulders; but the evil in him was now too famous for his good looks to get him anywhere” (*Ballad* 52).

²³The use of “popular debates” is significant here to distinguish the lay-person discussion from philosophers, like “Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Foucault, Lingis, Deleuze, and Genattari” who “have affirmed that the body is a pliable entity whose determinate form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription and the provision of a set of limiting biological codes” (Grosz 187).

²⁴Grosz identifies how the process of social inscription “implies that social values and requirements are not so much inculcated into the subject as etched upon the subject’s body” (120). She contests the assumption that the body is “a mode of expression of a psychical interior” but is “a series of surfaces, energies, and forces, a mode of linkage, a discontinuous series of processes, organs, flows, and matter” (120).

²⁵Marvin Macy literally subjects others to fragmentation when he cuts the ear off a man in a bar fight and severs the tails of squirrels (27-28).

²⁶Monique Wittig finds such fragmentation favorable, for it counteracts the attempt of society to fix lesbianism into a single identity. Clare Whatling identifies the way Wittig uses fragmentation on behalf of, instead of against, lesbianism: “For *The Lesbian Body* is a text

which, rather than celebrating a unified notion of the lesbian, institutes separation, multiplicity, contradiction and the fracturing of lesbian identity into a thousand possible combinations” (qtd. in Shaktini, “The Critical Mind and the Lesbian Body” 153).

²⁷As a reminder, the definition of “queer,” comes from Judith Butler, who defines “queerness” as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Brady and Shirato 64).

²⁸Cousin Lymon especially seeks societal recognition throughout the text, telling lies and spreading gossip just to be the center of attention (*Ballad* 40). When he realizes that he does not know about Marvin Macy, he quickly grows impatient: “He could not bear to be left out of anything, even a great misery” (43).

CONCLUSION

Carson McCullers must not be viewed as irrelevant or trapped in history; her work spills beyond the era in which it was written as she anticipates contemporary discussions taking place in queer theory. Her characters prompt the reader to ask critical questions about ourselves which often go overlooked: What is gender? What is sexuality? What is the significance of the body and how is it acted upon by social discourses? With resounding force, her work responds with a cultural critique and subversion of heteropatriarchy and the myths that perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. Viewed through the theoretical lens afforded by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault, her works can be seen as liberating. In her middle works – *The Member of the Wedding*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* – she untangles and dismantles dominant discourses that mandate obligatory heterosexuality, allowing readers to see the social forces that foreclose our identities and desires while regulating and disciplining bodies. Earlier readings of McCullers' work grounded in gay and lesbian theory run the risk of boxing her and her fiction into a category (“gay” or “lesbian”) that reproduces rather than challenges dominant discourses about sexuality. Reading her work through the lens of queer theory, however, illuminates how her fiction challenge the process through which gender and sexual identities become intelligible.

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