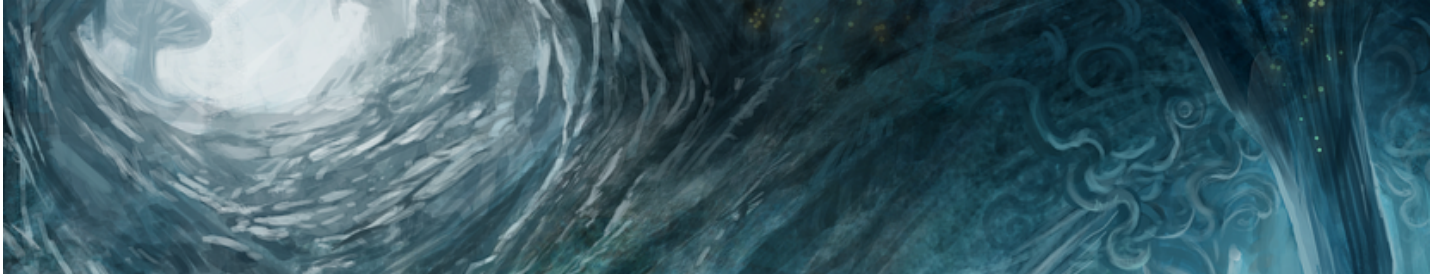


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Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier

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Editor

Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier

University of Cologne
English Department
Albertus-Magnus-Platz
D-50923 Köln/Cologne
Germany

Tel +49-(0)221-470 2284

Fax +49-(0)221-470 6725

email: gender-forum@uni-koeln.de

Editorial Office

Laura-Marie Schnitzler, MA

Sarah Youssef, MA

Christian Zeitz (General Assistant, Reviews)

Tel.: +49-(0)221-470 3030/3035

email: gender-forum@uni-koeln.de

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Article Publishing

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There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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Editorial

By Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky, University of Cologne, Germany

1 In her seminal *Fantasy: A Literature of Subversion*, critic Rosemary Jackson calls fantasy “a literature of desire” (3), one that “traces the unsaid and unseen of culture, that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (4). This argument, made in 1981, still holds true today. Fantasy literature abounds with creatures signifying desire, landscapes offering room for its exploration, and narrative techniques that facilitate what Tolkien calls “secondary belief” (49) into these worlds and the characters roaming them.

2 This issue of *gender forum* features articles on highly diverse fantasy novels. It features those that fall into urban fantasy, a setting that unites the supernatural with the world as we know it, those that play out in novels with fully realised secondary worlds, and those that see characters travel to the past to turn history into fiction. What all of these novels have in common is that the fantastic is often used as a means of exploring the boundaries of gender stereotypes and well-trodden genre markers. The exploration of the “unsaid and unseen” is thus also at the same time a critical re-evaluation of genre tropes and an actualisation thereof. The essays collected in this issue thus critically engage with the question of limits in a setting where everything is possible.

3 In “Why *Were* You Born?: An Analysis of the Anti-Feminist Implications of the Film Adaptation of *Coraline*”, James Curtis examines how an author’s attempt to write against gender-specific stock characters is reversed in the text’s film adaptation. Positing that Gaiman has the ability to create strong, independent female protagonists who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome harrowing situations, Curtis presents a critical analysis of Selick’s 2009 adaptation of *Coraline*. Gaiman’s feminist stance is lost as Selick introduces a new character called Wybie who not only helps Coraline, but in fact takes over much of the action-oriented plot and plays a pivotal role in securing the film’s happy end. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie’s presence in the film often undermines Coraline’s strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman’s original story of much of its feminist thrust.

4 Joshua Yu Burnett’s “Of Liberation, Lost Cities, Disappearing Feminists, and the Ascent of Ronald Reagan: Gender in Samuel R. Delany's *Neveryóna*” presents an insightful analysis of the effect of real-world politics onto the creation of serialised fantasy novels. While *Tales of Nevèryon* was written between 1976 and 1978 – at the height of second-wave feminism – *Neveryóna* was written between June 1980 and November 1981, when Ronald

Reagan's political ascendance both reacted to and pushed back against the gains made by social movements such as second-wave feminism, Black power, and others. Burnett argues that the change of protagonists in the series, from woman warrior Raven to teenaged Pryn, and the complete absence of the female heroic figure, ties in with a stark cultural shift experienced at that time. Burnett thus explores *Neveryóna* as a commentary on gender during the Reagan era, when public policy and public discourse were both actively hostile to feminism and other liberatory movements.

5 Danielle Russell offers this issue's final contribution. In "Liberating the Inner Goddess: the Witch Reconsidered in Libba Bray's Neo-Victorian Gemma Doyle trilogy", Russell, following Jackson's central argument, argues that what "has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" in the primary world is foregrounded in the secondary world. Engaging both with Victorian gender politics and stock representations of witches and goddesses across the ages, Russell posits that the figure of the mother – biological and surrogate – dominates in the trilogy. Tension and suspicion distort the mother/daughter dynamic, while the desire for that bond haunts the series' protagonist Gemma and her friends. Desired but elusive, the idealized mother is exposed as being unattainable. Bray's depiction of the Victorian family critiques a particular kind of family: one constructed in a way that permits abuse. However, the trilogy offers an endorsement of alternative definitions of family in general and mothers in particular. These are families of choice, built upon mutual respect, affection, compassion, and active mothering.

6 The articles, featuring worlds in which everything seems possible, thus also present the limits of possibility. The literature of desire becomes all the more poignant when that particular desire is not only traced, but also denied. Titular Coraline is denied her agency, *Neveryóna* the continuing presence of its woman warrior, and Gemma Doyle her mother. Interestingly, the desire and denial thereof is a female one, thus offering the notion that fantasy lends itself well to not only voicing desires in general, but female desire in particular.

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Why *Were* You Born?: An Analysis of the Anti-Feminist Implications of the Film Adaptation of *Coraline*

James Curtis, University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract:

It is no secret that the fictional realm of Neil Gaiman is loaded with feminist possibilities. In fact, in the time since Gaiman has risen to critical attention, entire conference panels have been devoted to exploring the feminist implications of his many novels, short stories, picture books, and graphic novels. Moreover, an edited collection of essays on the subject, entitled *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* (2012), was recently published. Gaiman has been lauded for years by feminist critics for his ability to create strong, independent female protagonists, especially in his works for children. *Coraline*, Gaiman's 2002 children's novella, offers an excellent illustration of the author's capacity to create strong female heroines who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome whatever complicated (and often terrifying) situation they may have found themselves in. In 2009, the film adaptation of *Coraline* was released. Henry Selick—most known for his direction of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Corpse Bride*—was responsible for not only directing the film, but for adapting Gaiman's novel for its new medium as well. Probably the most strikingly noticeable dissimilarity between Gaiman's novel and Selick's film is the inclusion of Wyborn "Wybie" Lovat, a male character not present in the novel, who is introduced into the film for no other purpose than to provide Coraline with someone to talk to while she is exploring the "other" world (according to Selick). However, Wybie's role ultimately extends much further than Selick originally intended. In fact, through Wybie's intervention, Coraline is later able to escape the "other" world and the deadly clutches of her "Other Mother." Furthermore, it is Wybie who destroys the hand of the "Other Mother" in the real world, just before the two collectively trap the severed hand down the well at the movie's conclusion. The problem with many of Wybie's actions within the film is, of course, that in Gaiman's novel, these are things that Coraline does herself. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie's presence in the film often undermines Coraline's strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman's original story of much of its feminist thrust. Due to the anti-feminist problems that Wybie's character creates, several logical questions follow: what is Wybie's true function in the film? Was Selick's decision cultural, commercial, or merely practical? What does the refusal to allow for a strong, independent female character in Selick's film say about our current cultural climate? This analysis seeks to answer these questions while taking into account the broader social implications of Selick's decision to dilute Gaiman's feminist agenda in his film adaptation of *Coraline*.

1 It is certainly no secret that the many fictional worlds of Neil Gaiman are loaded with feminist possibilities. In fact, in the time since Gaiman has risen to critical attention, entire conference panels have been devoted to exploring the feminist implications of his many novels, short stories, picture books, and graphic novels. Moreover, an edited collection of essays on the

subject, entitled *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* (2012), has recently been published. Gaiman has been lauded for years by feminist critics for his ability to create strong, independent female protagonists, especially in his works for children. *Coraline* (2002), Gaiman's children's novella, offers an excellent illustration of the author's capacity to create strong female heroines who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome whatever complicated — and often terrifying — situation they may have found themselves in.

2 Gaiman's book tells the story of Coraline Jones, a young girl who discovers a hidden, magical passageway behind a locked door in her house that transports her into a world that is uncannily similar to her own. Through Coraline's often dark and macabre adventures in this 'other' world — adventures which are centered largely on the conflict between Coraline and her Other Mother — she progressively finds her own degree of independence and successfully develops her own unique sense of self. The fact that Coraline accomplishes these rather daunting (and arguably *adult*) tasks by and large through her own resourcefulness speaks to the appropriateness of a feminist reading of the novel.

3 Due to the vast success of Gaiman's novella, a film adaptation of *Coraline* was commissioned and subsequently released in 2009. Henry Selick — most known for his direction of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) — was responsible for not only directing the film, but for adapting Gaiman's text for its new medium as well. Probably the most striking dissimilarity between Gaiman's book and Selick's film is the inclusion of Wyborn "Wybie" Lovat, a male character not present in Gaiman's original text. According to Selick, Wybie is introduced into the film for no other purpose than to provide Coraline with someone to talk to while she is exploring the 'other' world. However, Wybie's role ultimately extends much

further than Selick original intentions for him. In fact, the problem with many of Wybie's actions within the film is, of course, that in Gaiman's book, these are things that Coraline does herself. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie's presence in the film often undermines Coraline's strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman's original story of much of its feminist thrust.

4 Through the character of Wybie, the film suddenly includes an anti-feminist stance that warrants further analysis. For example, why did Selick choose to create a character whose presence was clearly unnecessary in Gaiman's original narrative? What is Wybie's true function? Was Selick's decision of a cultural, commercial, or merely practical nature? Finally, what does the refusal to allow for a strong, independent female character that does not embody the abjection of feminine power onto an evil Other Mother in Selick's film say about our current cultural climate? This analysis seeks to explore these questions while taking into account the broader social implications of Selick's decision to dilute the source text's feminist connotations in his film adaptation.

Coraline: From Book to Film

5 To begin, let us examine some key moments in the novel that serve to illuminate the changes those same scenes undergo in their transition to Selick's screen adaptation. In the opening chapter of Gaiman's novel, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible (Coraline's downstairs neighbors) make a point of warning her about the abandoned well at the edge of the property. Following her own natural curiosity, Coraline goes off in search of the well, and we are told that she "found it on the third day, in an overgrown meadow beside the tennis court" (5). In Selick's film version, although Coraline does indeed go in search of the well, it is Wybie who ends up

showing her the well's exact location. While this may seem an irrelevant change to some, it is important to realize that, in establishing her own independent sense of self throughout Gaiman's original text, Coraline often hearkens back to two specific individual traits that she prides herself on: exploration and bravery. Therefore, by denying Coraline's discovery of the well on her own terms, Selick is effectively robbing her of her own feminine agency and also disrupting Coraline's progression towards *individuation*—the psycho-developmental process by which children construct and establish a unique sense of self—by having Wybie perform this task *for* her.

6 A similar situation occurs towards the film's conclusion. After Coraline has won her 'exploring' game with the Other Mother and has returned home safely, we discover that the Other Mother's severed hand has followed her back through the passageway and is now intent on stealing the key that allows Coraline to access the other world. If successful, this scheme would in turn allow the Other Mother to access Coraline's world at will. While Selick's film follows Gaiman's text fairly closely during this particular part of the narrative, there is one significant change. In the novella, Coraline, through her own unique intuition, surmises that she is being stalked by the hand and, in a display of wisdom and cunning, devises a plan to effectively trap the Other Mother's hand in the abandoned well for good: "She spread out the tablecloth and laid it, carefully, over the top of the well. She put a plastic doll's cup every foot or so, at the edge of the well, and she weighed each cup down with water" (154). Coraline's plan to trick the Other Mother's hand by placing the key to the other world on the tablecloth and having the severed hand fall through the flimsy, unsupported fabric into the well below is executed flawlessly. However, this illustration of Coraline's feminine power is once again frustrated in Selick's interpretation of Gaiman's novella. In the film, not only does Coraline fail to utilize her wit to

create a plan to trap the Other Mother's hand, she is also completely unaware of the fact that she is being followed to the well. Therefore, when Coraline is preparing to drop the key down the well for good, the hand suddenly springs upon her. It is then left up to Wybie — who swoops in on a dirt-bike like the very cliché of a chivalric hero, no less — to save Coraline from the creature that has invaded her home world. Not only does Wybie prevent the Other Mother's hand from retrieving the key around Coraline's neck, but it is also Wybie who ultimately destroys the hand by smashing it with a rock and tossing it down the well, trapping it there (ostensibly) for good. What we have in this scene is a perfect illustration of how, through the creation of Wybie and the subsequent actions that he performs on Coraline's behalf, Selick once again denies much of the feminist possibility of the original novella in his filmic adaptation.

7 Though Wybie's intervention raises several anti-feminist problems for Selick's film adaptation, other characters in the film and the various situations those characters create raise similar issues. For example, during the 'exploring game' in which Coraline searches for the souls of the three dead children locked inside the mirror, it is evident in the original narrative that the Other Mother does not provide Coraline with any hint as to the location of the souls. In fact, the opposite occurs in Gaiman's text; when the Other Mother offers Coraline a hint in finding the third soul, Coraline simply replies "I'm doing fine on my own" (106). This exchange is distinctly different in Selick's film adaptation, since Coraline not only explicitly asks for a clue but is also provided with one by the Other Mother. The issue with this change is that in Gaiman's novel, it is apparent that Coraline has a very strong intuition that is made manifest by her unique ability to 'explore' and to find things on her own. The fact that, in Selick's film, Coraline has to ask for help from the 'Other Mother' seems to grossly undermine her own individual abilities as a strong, positive, female protagonist. Furthermore, the reality that the only true embodiment of

feminine power in the film lies with Coraline's Other Mother — the “amoral, primal mother” (Creed 1) figure that critics like Barbara Creed liken to the inherent masculine fear of women which creates such negative manifestations of the feminine – only adds to the lack of positive femininity in the film, especially considering that Coraline is forced to draw upon this source of malevolent feminine power in order to further her own story in Selick's film.

8 While many of the changes that Selick made do seem to smack of an anti-feminist agenda, some could argue that Gaiman's original novel cannot, in itself, be entirely feminist in nature due to one glaring problem: the male black cat who serves as quasi unofficial guide to Coraline, even in Gaiman's original narrative. However, I would argue that the two versions differ significantly in their portrayal of the cat's gender and in the level of involvement that the cat has in Coraline's dark quest for individuality. For example, in Gaiman's original novel, there are literally only two words throughout the entire narrative that serve as gender markers for the cat: “his fur” and “he” (53, 137). In every other instance in which the black cat is described, the cat is simply referred to as “it.” This predominant lack of a gendered referent serves to indicate the lack of emphasis that Gaiman placed on the cat's gender; in other words, while Gaiman might have wanted his readers to know that the cat was male for the purposes of visualization, the cat's gender itself was clearly not important enough to maintain as part of its identity beyond these two brief instances. Furthermore, though the cat is decidedly male in the novella, it is difficult to separate him fully from Coraline, especially when we are told that the cat's voice “sounded like the voice at the back of Coraline's head, the voice she thought words in” (35). Therefore, in Gaiman's novel, the gender of the male cat is often trivialized and even diluted through the author's identification of the cat with Coraline herself, demonstrating how Gaiman's

conceptualization of gender in the novel is not nearly so polarized as it is in Selick's film adaptation.

9 However, this is not the case with the film adaptation; in fact, the very opposite is true in Selick's version. Coraline initially identifies the cat as 'Wybie's,' and although Wybie tries to deny that relationship, the cat is always seen with him whenever Coraline is in the real world. Furthermore, the cat is given a distinctively male voice — actor Keith David — which even further lessens the gender ambiguity. This decision seems, on Selick's part, to serve to identify the cat as more decidedly male than he was in Gaiman's original narrative. The problem with this is that — in a similar fashion to what Selick did with Wybie — the cat often helps Coraline in ways that he did not in Gaiman's original novel, and the ways in which he helps her serve to undermine Coraline's feminine agency in much the same way that Wybie does in other scenes. One rather overt instance of this type of situation comes near the film's conclusion, in a scene in which Coraline discovers the third and final soul of the ghost-children in the mirror during the 'exploring' game that Coraline engages in with her Other Mother. As Coraline attempts to snag the final soul from an elusive rat that is escaping with it, she ultimately fails in her endeavor. Just as she is giving over to despair, the cat appears with the rat in its mouth. While this same sequence of events happens in Gaiman's novel, there is one significant change. In the film, Coraline loses the stone given to her by Miss Spink — the stone that allows her to see the souls of the ghost-children — in her pursuit of the rat, thereby concurrently losing her source of female-bestowed power. This never happens in the original text, and while we are left with the possibility that Coraline might have had to spend even more time searching for the final soul, we are also left with the possibility — and likelihood, given Coraline's distinct independence, intuition, and bravery in the novel — that she would ultimately find the last soul on her own,

even without the cat's help. However, in the film, Coraline is robbed of the tangible source of her feminine power and, because of this bereavement, she has no choice but to rely on the male cat's assistance.

10 A further example of this sort of masculine reliance comes just after this scene, when Coraline is attempting to find her real parents and to escape the twisted world of her Other Mother. In the novel, Coraline uses her own wit and intuition to discover her parents' location: "If she had stopped to think, she might have known where they were all along. The other mother could not create. She could only transform, and twist, and change [. . .] and, Coraline realized with surprise...[that] she knew exactly where her parents were" (124). In this section of the text, Coraline uses her impressive deductive powers to ascertain that the snowglobe on the mantelpiece of the Other Mother's living room is not present in her own world, leading her to the realization that her parents are actually trapped within it. However, in Selick's adaptation, Coraline is at a loss as to where to find her parents, and it is ultimately up to the cat to physically *point* to the snowglobe that the Other Mother has entrapped Coraline's parents in. Here, Selick has once again denied the feminist possibilities of this particular scene by tailoring it to include Coraline's *need* for the cat in her search for her real parents, and it is this continued reliance on male power that serves to further implicate the idea of anti-feminism at work in Selick's adaptation.

11 In addition to these anti-feminist sequences in Selick's film version of *Coraline*, there is the issue of Selick's creative decision to include Wybie in his screenplay, something he explains as happening because "Coraline needed someone in her real world to talk to" (Selick, "Interview"). The word *need* is telling here, especially given the previous evidence of Coraline's continual "need" for masculine assistance throughout Selick's film adaptation. Furthermore, his

decision is fairly questionable when one takes a look at Selick's other popular films for children. To be specific, anyone who has seen either *The Nightmare Before Christmas* or Selick's film version of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1996) knows that Selick, at least at one point, was content with having his *male* characters not only engaging in fantastic, solo adventures without the "need" for someone to talk to, but he also seemed perfectly content with having those same male characters occasionally bursting into random moments of solitary song and dance as well. Given these previous artistic choices, Selick's reasoning behind his decision to include Wybie in his own adaptation of *Coraline* seems, at best, highly suspect.

Coraline and the Construction of Gender

12 Following the notoriety of post-structuralist discourse during the 1960s and 1970s, increasing attention has been paid to the ways in which language functions in social constructionism, or the way that civilizations create and reinforce socio-cultural ideals and norms. Arguably, one of the most prominent focal points for these types of critical discussions has revolved around the question of gender and identity. Judith Butler, who has produced some of the most important critical work on the socio-linguistic construction of gender in her seminal texts *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), tells us that the construction of gender involves "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (9). In other words, the gendered subject is formed through its performance — or lack thereof; according to Butler, even the absence of gender markers is itself a kind of 'performance.' The way that this articulation of gender construction ties into the film adaptation of *Coraline* is two-fold, and at the heart of the problematic nature of the film is, once

again, the creation of a secondary character not present in Gaiman's original novel — Wybie..

As Lindsay Myers notes in her own analysis of the film:

This essentially peripheral character and his equally peripheral Other-World double are awarded most of the significant moments in the story. Wybie provides Coraline with the spy doll, the Other Wybie pulls Coraline from the dungeon in which the Other Mother has imprisoned her, the Other Wybie pushes Coraline into the tunnel so that she can return home after the Other Mother has threatened to keep her in the Other World, and the real Wybie miraculously appears in the nick of time at the end of the film to save her life. (248)

In other words, Wybie is the primary mover in the film version of *Coraline*, appearing time and time again not only to guide Coraline through her adventures in both her own world and in the uncanny realm of her Other Mother but also to *literally* save her from danger when her life is threatened. Because of this repeated intervention, Wybie becomes the hero of Selick's filmic narrative, and Coraline remains a passive participant in her eponymous story. The way that this ties back to Butler's articulation of gender construction is that Selick, in his adaptation of Gaiman's unquestionably pro-feminist text, perpetuates a gendered discourse of male empowerment over and against any notion of positive female strength and agency, relegating Coraline to a static position that forces her to rely on others — almost always male characters — to move her along her own narrative and save her from the malevolent forces that seek to destroy her. In doing this, Selick undermines Gaiman's original intent for his novella, which was to create a strong, independent heroine who overcomes whatever obstacles are placed in her way.¹ Instead, Selick creates a passive victim who is more akin to the typical, helpless fairy-tale princesses of the 18th and 19th century than to Gaiman's brave, autonomous young heroine.

13 However, Wybie's inclusion in Selick's adaptation has certainly not gone unnoticed by other critics, and the resulting observations have been accordingly condemning. In Brit

¹ "I wanted it [the novel] to have a girl as a heroine [. . .] who had seen what lay behind mirrors, and had a close call with a bad hand, and had come face-to-face with her other mother, [and who had] rescued her true parents from a fate worse than death and triumphed against overwhelming odds" (Gaiman xiii).

Mandelo's "Doing Damage to the Text: Gender in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*," she also draws comparisons between the film and Gaiman's novella. Like others, she makes note of the ways that Wybie transforms the feminine empowerment inherent in Gaiman's original narrative, asserting that, in Selick's inclusion of Wybie and his repeated intervention in Coraline's adventures, "individuality is made into a duality" (n.p.). In other words, Mandelo focuses on the ways that Wybie's character forms a male counterpart to Coraline's femininity, resulting in the creation of a normative, heterosexual power dynamic that diminishes Coraline's individuality in favor of the creation of their gendered partnership. However, by effectively making Wybie the hero and primary mover of the film, I would argue that Selick creates a repeated need for male salvation which places Coraline in a dependent position that goes beyond the creation of a heterosexual duality and effaces her identity *entirely*. In other words, the way that Selick's film constructs gender on a fundamental level is to assert that females are the passive recipients of the action that their male counterparts must inevitably initiate and perpetuate. In this way, the females in filmic narratives like Selick's never push any of the "boundaries" or "fixity" (to use Butler's terms) that lie at the heart of heteronormative, conservative gender constructions and, therefore, only serve to perpetuate stereotypical notions of gender and normative sexed positions. Should they do so, they are relegated to monstrous-feminine roles that the Other Mother embodies. While this depiction is vastly mitigated in Gaiman's text by the positive agency and power of Coraline, Selick's film adaptation presents us with no positive female lead characters and instead gives us only a passive young girl who is not very bright in comparison to her literary counterpart and a demonic mother-figure whom critics like Creed show only perpetuate paranoid masculine fears regarding female power.

14 Needless to say, this construction of gender is problematic at baseline. However, what is potentially even more disturbing is that Gaiman's narrative — and Selick's subsequent adaptation — is a story created for children. One of the predominant concerns for scholars of children's literature and culture is how adults construct the figure of the child and what those constructions say about society as a whole. In Myers' "Whose Fear Is It Anyway: Moral Panics and 'Stranger Danger' in Henry Selick's *Coraline*," she notes that "Selick's *Coraline* is first and foremost the story of the Other Mother's abduction [and that] Coraline's discovery of the door and practically everything that happens thereafter is not ascribed to Coraline but rather to the calculated machinations of the Other Mother" (247-f.). In other words, Myers claims that Selick's film adaptation constructs a figure of the child that both disempowers children and caters to adult fears about child welfare and kidnapping. In this way, Gaiman's original intention of creating a strong, independent character for children to identify with is subverted in favor of quelling adult anxieties surrounding the safety of children. However, this is certainly not the only problematic construction of childhood in Selick's adaptation. If, as I have been arguing, Selick's film adaptation asserts an active, masculine agenda over and against a passive characterization of the feminine, then this problem extends to the generic issues inherent in the film's status as children's media. In other words, Selick is not simply creating a problematic representation of gender in his filmic adaptation; he is also extending that representation to the construction of childhood and sending a deeply troubling message to children — the message that young boys are responsible for "saving" and guiding young girls and that those same, seemingly helpless girls can never be capable of attending to life's problems without the assistance of their male counterparts. The disturbing nature of this message is compounded by the fact that Selick's *Coraline* adaptation won the BAFTA Children's Award for Best Feature Film, was nominated

for Best Animated Feature by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the reality that the film itself still stands as the second highest-grossing stop-motion picture of all time.²

The Abject Maternal in *Coraline*

15 Much of what has been written by children's literary critics in response to Gaiman's original novella centers around the point at which psychoanalysis and the Gothic intersect. Of course, this is only fitting since the world of "otherness" that pervades Gothic and horror literature make the genre incredibly predisposed to psychoanalytical readings. One major theoretical figurehead that several Gothic critics draw upon is Julia Kristeva, whose work on the abject (which draws largely on Freudian and Lacanian theory) gives scholars an effective theoretical lens through which to view the "otherness" most often associated with Gothic and Horror literature. Kristeva's theories on the abject center heavily on the maternal: "the abject confronts us...within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold the maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (13). Because of this connection between the mother/child and abjection, one subgenre rife with scholarly possibilities is Gothic narratives written specifically for children — narratives like Gaiman's original novella and Selick's subsequent screen adaptation. In her *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, [and] order. [That which] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). In other words, Kristeva's notion of the "abject" embodies everything that exists outside of the individual's sense of self — both physically and psychologically speaking. This can include everything from blood and

² "Animation—Stop Motion." *Box Office Mojo*.
<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=animationstop.htm>>

bodily waste to various physical, mental, or emotional manifestations of all that seeks to deny the autonomous, living nature of the self.

16 Critic Jerrod Hogle makes an important observation regarding Kristeva's theories as they apply to Gothic texts when he states that "the Gothic depicts and enacts these very processes of abjection, where minglings of contrary states and culturally differentiated categories are cast off onto antiquated and 'othered' beings" (296). There is no doubt that the abject in both Gaiman's original text and in Selick's film adaptation is embodied by the figure of the "beldam," or Coraline's Other Mother — whose very name explicitly demarcates her "othered" nature. Although the abject or "othered" status of the beldam is virtually indisputable, the way that critics have posited the purpose of this abjection has varied. For example, Myers asserts that the figure of the Other Mother — especially in Selick's film version — embodies the anxiety-ridden parental fear of the potential kidnapper, the wicked individual who comes to steal the child away. Deriding Selick's take on the beldam, Myers argues that his characterization of the Other Mother "essentially transforms the heroine's journey of empowerment into a panic-ridden battle against the evil 'out there'" (249). Gary Westfahl's in-depth critical review of the film posits Selick's characterization of the beldam as part of a wholesale effort to "condemn motherhood" (n.p.). While I tend to agree with both Myers and Westfahl in their analyses of this abjected maternal figure, I would also argue that it is important to recognize that the purpose that the beldam serves in the two versions of the story is distinctly different. Specifically, in Gaiman's original text, Coraline's Other Mother becomes the repository for all of the unwanted traits of her real-life mother — traits which Coraline, as a young girl in the process of forming her own self-identity, will inevitable define herself both with and against.

17 Previous scholars have written extensively on the psychological development and construction of identity in Gaiman's *Coraline*³, so rather than re-hash their arguments here, I would simply like to point out that these analyses were all written before the release of Selick's film adaptation and therefore cannot take the changes he made into consideration. These changes, as discussed previously, have largely to do with the way Coraline constructs her identity. Particularly for adolescents like Coraline, the process of individuation is a crucial psycho-developmental in childhood. In psychological terms, individuation is:

A state in which a person is differentiated, to some degree, from other parts of his or her social and physical environment. This state can be produced by both individual and social factors, as well as by physical aspects of the environment. If a person chooses to become more individuated, he or she must be cognizant of others in the immediate environment and, on the basis of social comparison processes, must determine how he or she can differ from them. (Barbaranelli 75)

However, Kristeva gives us a nuanced articulation of individuation that is not present in this general definition. She tells us that "for a man and for a woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is [the] vital necessity [...] of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances" (*Black Sun* 27-30). In light of Kristeva's distinctive description of individuation, we can see that Coraline's unaided conquering of her Other Mother in Gaiman's original text provides a liminal space in which the "matricide" inherent in her own psycho-developmental process of identity creation is physically acted out against an abjected mother figure. However, in Selick's film adaptation, we must remember that it is Wybie who helps Coraline throughout her adventures in the uncanny world of the beldam, and it is also Wybie who physically overpowers the Other Mother's severed hand at the end of the film. In terms of the differences

³ See David Rudd's "An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity," Elizabeth Parson's "The Other Mother: Neil Gaiman's Postfeminist Fairytales," and Richard Gooding's "Something Very Old and Very Slow: *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form."

between the original text and the film adaptation, we have — on the one hand — the inherently psychologically beneficial purpose of the Other Mother in Gaiman’s original text, who serves to allow for the essential component of matricide in the process of Coraline’s individuation. On the other hand, in Selick’s version, we have an evil stepmother-like figure whom — when all is said and done — seems to be there for no other purpose than to serve as a chauvinistic representation of the malevolent potential of feminine power and to be the hackneyed monster (or some other formulaic embodiment of “evil”) that Wybie, and *not* Coraline, defeats and conquers. Psychoanalytically speaking, what this does to Coraline is to severely impede the progress of her own process of individuation and to deny her the opportunity of acting out the matricide that Kristeva asserts is an essential step in the task of constructing a sense of self. While Selick would have us believe that all of this is done in the service of children’s entertainment by providing a companion for Coraline to talk to during her adventures, the fact remains that the negative psychological and gender-regressive implications of his creative decisions run much deeper than simple film marketability and venture into the realm of the culturally dangerous. It is certainly disturbing to consider that, in order for a film to be commercially viable in contemporary society, the underlying narrative must be changed from a story of feminine empowerment to the repetitious, obsolete tale of the rescued fairy-tale princess, or as Westfahl bluntly puts it, to “the story of a girl who succeeds mostly through dumb luck and by being rescued by a male knight in shining armor” (n.p.).

Conclusion

18 While I have spent the majority of this analysis pointing out the ways in which Selick’s adaptation of Gaiman’s novella could be considered anti-feminist, the larger issue is, of course,

what the popular acceptance of this particular type of adaptation says about our own culture. Contemporary feminist concerns point to a veritable ‘war on women,’ citing gender-equality regressive legislation, political and social inequities, and a general antagonism towards the modern, independent woman. While I certainly do not believe that Selick’s film serves as a conscious contribution to this specific notion of feminine antagonism, I do believe that it is an illustration of why it is important to examine and analyze the ways in which females are portrayed in popular media, especially in films made for children. It is, after all, more than a little disturbing to consider that the message that popular filmmakers are sending to children is one in which boys are completely capable of being strong, independent heroes, whereas girls must always rely on help from their male counterparts. Clearly, there is a significant, gendered tension perceivable in a thorough critical analysis of the film adaptation of *Coraline*. While I have attempted to point out the many examples in Selick’s adaptation that illustrate this gendered imbalance, what I have been pursuing here has not been my attempt at a critical diatribe against Selick’s possible chauvinism. Rather, I have simply aimed to point out, among the things I have already discussed, the problematic nature of representations of femininity in a cultural climate in which the social concerns of feminism itself are still very clearly ongoing. Ultimately, what is important is that we continue to actively question the ways in which we construct, portray, and receive gender performance in popular media, and that we persist in critically analyzing the rationale behind the major changes that occur during the transition of a narrative from book to film.

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Of Liberation, Lost Cities, Disappearing Feminists, Forgetting, and the Ascent of Ronald Reagan: Gender in Samuel R. Delany's *Neveryóna*

By Joshua Yu Burnett, North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract:

It is no secret that the fictional realm of Neil Gaiman is loaded with feminist possibilities. In fact, in the time since Gaiman has risen to critical attention, entire conference panels have been devoted to exploring the feminist implications of his many novels, short stories, picture books, and graphic novels. Moreover, an edited collection of essays on the subject, entitled *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* (2012), was recently published. Gaiman has been lauded for years by feminist critics for his ability to create strong, independent female protagonists, especially in his works for children. *Coraline*, Gaiman's 2002 children's novella, offers an excellent illustration of the author's capacity to create strong female heroines who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome whatever complicated (and often terrifying) situation they may have found themselves in. In 2009, the film adaptation of *Coraline* was released. Henry Selick—most known for his direction of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Corpse Bride*—was responsible for not only directing the film, but for adapting Gaiman's novel for its new medium as well. Probably the most strikingly noticeable dissimilarity between Gaiman's novel and Selick's film is the inclusion of Wyborn "Wybie" Lovat, a male character not present in the novel, who is introduced into the film for no other purpose than to provide Coraline with someone to talk to while she is exploring the "other" world (according to Selick). However, Wybie's role ultimately extends much further than Selick originally intended. In fact, through Wybie's intervention, Coraline is later able to escape the "other" world and the deadly clutches of her "Other Mother." Furthermore, it is Wybie who destroys the hand of the "Other Mother" in the real world, just before the two collectively trap the severed hand down the well at the movie's conclusion. The problem with many of Wybie's actions within the film is, of course, that in Gaiman's novel, these are things that Coraline does herself. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie's presence in the film often undermines Coraline's strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman's original story of much of its feminist thrust. Due to the anti-feminist problems that Wybie's character creates, several logical questions follow: what is Wybie's true function in the film? Was Selick's decision cultural, commercial, or merely practical? What does the refusal to allow for a strong, independent female character in Selick's film say about our current cultural climate? This analysis seeks to answer these questions while taking into account the broader social implications of Selick's decision to dilute Gaiman's feminist agenda in his film adaptation of *Coraline*.

1 From 1979 through 1987, Samuel R. Delany turned his attention from his previous work in science fiction to another project, the *Return to Neveryón* series, which uses the tropes of sword-and-sorcery, a frequently derided subgenre of fantasy, to explore such intellectual issues

as semiotics, queer theory, psychoanalysis, emergent capitalism, race, and – most importantly for my purposes here – gender¹. Sword-and-sorcery, which traces its roots back to the pulp works of Robert E. Howard, creator of the iconic Conan the Barbarian², is

often set in some prehistoric civilization—what Delany calls "an aspecific, idealized past" and generally feature scantily clad sword-wielding heroes and/or heroines (with the physiques of bodybuilders or swimsuit models), magicians who wield sorcery for causes of good or evil, and fantastic creatures such as dragons or demons. Quests, intrigue, and quasi-mythical deities are often sprinkled into the mix as well. (Tucker 91)

Delany himself describes sword-and-sorcery as “written with a sort of verbal palette knife—and adjective-heavy, exclamatory diction that mingles myriad anachronisms with other syntactical distortions meant to signal the antique (Delany, “Alyx” 62). It is typical of Delany's work to fuse together marginalized genres with complex intellectual concepts; for example, his novel *Trouble on Triton* [1976]³ uses far-future science fiction to explore Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia.

2 However, the *Return to Nevèrÿon* series is unique within Delany’s work in that it marks his sole engagement with the sword-and-sorcery genre, as well as, for the most part, the end of his literary production in genre fiction. Nevèrÿon, fittingly for a sword-and-sorcery setting, is located in some undefined pre-industrial past. Yet Delany departs from sword-and-sorcery convention in making it a seemingly non-Western past. While typical sword-and-sorcery works

¹ Although I am not using it directly for any citations, I do want to acknowledge the excellent website “The Nevèrÿon Lexicon” as a wonderful resource for tracking down specific people, places, and incidents with the first book of the series. Sadly, the site currently only covers that first book, and, while no date is listed, the fact that it is a hand-coded webpage rather than some sort of Wiki indicates that it is probably rather old and thus unlikely to be

² Indeed, Delany has cited Howard’s work as leading him to write the *Return to Nevèrÿon* series: “Before I read Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Conqueror* books and stories, I really thought they would be the Nevèrÿon tales, or at least something like them. But I discovered that, rich and colorful as they were, they weren’t. So I had to write them myself” (Delany, “The Art of Fiction”)

³ *Trouble on Triton* was first published as simply *Triton*, and was not published under its full title until 1996. However, *Trouble on Triton* is Delany's preferred title for the novel, so I will use it here.

draw on Celtic and/or Germanic histories and mythologies, Delany, writing under the name "K. Leslie Steiner," a fictional scholar, in the preface to *Tales of Nevèrÿon*, suggests that Nevèrÿon's origin is Mediterranean, Mesopotamian, Asian, or African⁴ (11). The name Nevèrÿon itself is also ambiguous; Jes Battis has suggested it "could mean (n)every-one, or never-one, or everyone, or simply *never*, simultaneously" (478), although I would argue that it is "never" which is the most apropos reading, highlighting Nevèrÿon's artificial nature as a fictive place and time designed to reflect and comment upon our own despite its supposed location in the past. Indeed, the thematic concerns of the series – patriarchy, racial and class strife, and unfettered capitalism – are very much appropriate to its time, which is to say, the 1970s and 1980s. *Nevèrÿona* is the first of the series published during the Ronald Reagan era, and as I will argue, it represents Delany's exploration of these themes, takes on a special intensity and reflects on the most harmful and reactionary elements of Reagan's Presidency, including, particularly, the period's backlash against identity politics-based social movements. In Nevèrÿon, emergent (cultural) technologies such as writing and market-based monetary exchange are transforming the landscape, as is the anti-slavery crusade of Gorgik the Liberator, the central figure of the series (though not the protagonist of all of its individual stories, novellas, and novels).

3 Nevèrÿon is racially stratified along binary lines, but the contours of those racial lines are largely reversed. "Barbarians" are light skinned with blond hair and blue eyes, and make up most (but not all) of the country's slaves and underclass. Black skin, by contrast, is normative, and most (but not all) nobles and powerful merchants are black. Additionally, Nevèrÿon is a patriarchal space; while the country's nominal ruler is the (now aging) "Child Empress",

⁴ In fact, Nevèrÿon's cultural geography – it has a black majority and a white minority who comes from the *south* – does not so neatly fit into any such real-world historical setting. What is important, then, is establishing Nevèrÿon's non-Western setting.

ultimately it is a "dozen-odd old men who finally rule *everything*" (Delany, *Neveryóna* 292, emphasis in original). Yet Nevèryon is also bordered by two more matriarchal spaces. First, the Ulvayn Islands, whose Rulvyn people formerly followed a system where men were "rather prestigious creatures" (Delany, *Tales of Nevèryon* 92) yet women largely controlled the tribe; however, this system has been disrupted by the transition to a money economy, where exchange, formerly largely done informally between women, now requires a man as intermediary, reinscribing the culture's former matriarchy with a patriarchy where "the center of the family itself *was* a man" (Delany, *Tales of Nevèryon* 94). Secondly, there is the Western Crevasse, a mysterious matriarchal land located somewhere outside of Nevèryon; it is home to fierce women warriors and timid men largely preoccupied with appearing pretty. While the Western Crevasse remains an unapologetic matriarchy, its existence, and that of its women warriors, is widely considered a myth by the people of Nevèryon.

4 In this article, I will be analyzing *Neveryóna* [1983], the second volume (and sole novel, with the other three volumes collecting linked short stories and novellas) in the series.⁵ *Neveryóna* marks a fascinating thematic switch from the first volume, *Tales of Nevèryon*, in terms of gender. While *Tales of Nevèryon* was written at the height of second-wave feminism – *Neveryóna* was written the very moment when Ronald Reagan's political ascendance both reacted to and pushed back against the very gains made by social movements such as second-wave feminism, Black power, organized labor, and others. This stark cultural shift is reflected in the different narratives of the first two volumes of the series.

⁵ While I will make reference to *Tales of Nevèryon* [1979], the first book in the series, as a basis for comparison in my analysis of *Neveryóna*, I will not be analyzing the final two volumes, *Flight from Nevèryon* [1985] and *Return to Nevèryon* [1987].

5 This shift between the two books, and the two moments which produced them, can be seen in several ways. *Tales of Nevèryon* “Delany’s sequence begins with a connection...among powerful women” (Battis 480), those being Gorgik’s mother, the so-called Child Empress Ynelgo, and the Vizerine Myrgot. However, all three women are notably absent from *Neveryóna*, with Gorgik’s mother long dead, the Vizerine unseen and unmentioned, and Ynelgo only briefly referenced and described as “an aging woman who must bear...the idiotic title Child” (61), thus emphasizing the infantilization, already evident in *Tales of Nevèryon*⁶ she suffers despite her title⁷. *Neveryóna*’s protagonist is Pryn, who is not a woman but a fifteen-year old girl. Pryn is both brave and intelligent, yet she is also notably vulnerable in her youth and femininity within the aggressive patriarchy that is Nevèryon. The adult woman who is seen most in the novel is Raven, one of the (in)famous woman warriors of the Western Crevasse. Raven serves as one of the protagonists of *Tales of Nevèryon*, along with Gorgik the Liberator, an anti-slavery crusader/BDSM practitioner. Raven is positioned in that book as both a fierce warrior and an even fiercer critic of Nevèryon’s patriarchal ideology. She fights against male power while wielding a double blade sword, whose sharp inner slit is implicitly connected to a vulva, reversing the sword’s usual phallocentric symbolism. I have argued elsewhere that prior critics of *Tales of Nevèryon* have erred in either omitting Raven from their analyses or by mentioning her only in passing. In *Neveryóna*, by contrast, Raven (apparently) never appears, yet her absence looms over the entire narrative, forming an absent presence that is every bit as significant to *Neveryóna* as Raven’s actual presence is to *Tales of Nevèryon*.

⁶ I discuss this infantilization in my essay on *Tales of Nevèryon* (see Works Cited).

⁷ Interestingly, Ynelgo is, in a sense, doubly absent from the novel. First, does she not appear. Second, the main mention of her comes through Gorgik’s attempt to secure an audience with her to discuss his anti-slavery campaign; when the attempt is successful, we learn that Ynelgo will not even be present for *that* meeting, but rather it will be held with Lord Krodar, one of her main ministers (70-71).

6 In *Neveryóna*'s opening sequence Pryn rides a dragon, a typical staple of fantasy fiction including sword-and-sorcery which undergoes a "postmodern transformation" (Kelso 292) from symbol of power, freedom, and magic to a weak creature only capable of taking off for flight from cliffs. Nevèryon's dragons, we are told, were "[n]ever a hearty breed...They'll probably be extinct in a hundred years" (Delany, *Neveryóna* 257), and they require the Empress's protection. True to this reversal of the dragon's traditional symbolism, the flight, while thrilling, also proves a disappointment. Pryn had expected to land on a ledge from which the dragon could take off again, yet she instead lands in a flat clearing, meaning the dragon will never be able to fly again unless somehow assisted back to higher ground and another ledge. What's more, riding the dragon is Pryn's first act after she has run away from home at the age of just fifteen. Certainly, running away from home is an act of freedom and defiance for young Pryn, but it also leaves her vulnerable as a young girl alone in Nevèryon, which she comes to find is a land of slavers, pimps, bandits, and murderous intrigue. Neither riding the dragon nor running away from home then can be simplistically read as representing freedom, although Pryn herself might wish we could. In the clearing, Pryn meets "Norema the tale-teller" (Delany, *Neveryóna* 16), a prominent character from *Tales of Nevèryon*. By the end of that book, Norema has become Raven's lover, and the two of them have joined together with Gorgik the Liberator and his then-lover, the barbarian Small Sarg. I have argued that this union of the two couples "form a sort of queer matriarchal assemblage....[that] represent[s] the possibility of resistance that transcends the individual limitations of both, invested through Gorgik in attacking structural oppression (in the form of slavery) and through Raven in attacking patriarchy's ideological domination" (Burnett 266-267).⁸

⁸ I cite myself here not for vanity, but because, as previously indicated, most other critics who have published work

7 Yet in this opening scene of *Neveryóna*, Norema is alone. Gorgik and Small Sarg, long gone, are not even mentioned, and even Raven has left Norema behind, reducing the possibility of a queer assemblage, resisting slavery and patriarchy, to a lone woman in the wild, bemusedly watching a teenaged girl riding a wild dragon. Upon encountering Pryn, Norema tells her a curious story about an infamous former Queen known as Mad Olin, who, despite her seeming titular power as Queen becomes a prisoner and is subjected to truly horrific psychic torture, which is what eventually leads her to become "Mad" to begin with.⁹ Norema then also tells Pryn of her search for Raven:

My friend wore blue stone beads in her hair and a black rag mask across her eyes; and she killed with a double-bladed sword. We were companions and traveled together several years...I told her tales, and after a while she grew more interested in the tales than she was in me. One night, sitting on her side of the campfire, cleaning her double blade, she told me she was going off the next morning to see if one particular tale I told were true. The next day when I woke, she and her bedroll were gone – along with her double-bladed sword. (17)

While Norema initially assumes Raven will soon return, she does not, thus dissolving their partnership and its potential for resistance. In running off to seek out a tale, Raven herself essentially turns into a tale, or a legend – the legend of the woman warrior from the Western Crevasse, slaying men with her double-bladed sword. Indeed, as the novel progresses her existence is denied by Madame Keyne, who, in the novel, represents the development of neoliberalism. When Pryn mentions the story of Raven to Madame Keyne, Keyne dismisses Raven's existence out of hand, saying, "Your blue-beaded, double-bladed hero, coming to save

on the series have virtually ignored Raven, an omission I consider inexplicable and hope will be further addressed by additional critical work.

⁹ In the context of *Neveryóna*, the import of this story does not become clear for several hundred more pages. In the context of this essay, it will take several paragraphs for me to return to it. Yet the story becomes significant enough to both that its first appearance is worth mentioning here.

you from the hands of wily men – and women...does not exist. Indeed, she would be quite tarrying if she did” (163).

8 Since this transition of Raven from fierce warrior to half-believed legend occurs between books, it is quite abrupt and jarring. One might say it disproves my previous contention of Raven, Norema, Sarg, and Gorgik as representing a queer assemblage that is capable of resisting Nevèryon’s patriarchal power structures. However, as indicated above, I argue that instead, this seemingly abrupt shift reflects the two adjacent, but very different, times in which the two books were written. Indeed, despite the nebulous “distant past” setting of the novels, Delany has made clear that “[t]he Nevèryon series is, from first to last, a document of our times, thank you very much” (qtd. In Kelso 293). Such a move as using a fictional past or future to comment on the present day is, of course, one of the hallmarks of the various genres of speculative fiction, including sword-and-sorcery.

9 If we go simply by publication dates, there does not seem to be that significant of a difference; *Tales of Nevèryon* was published in 1979, and *Neveryóna* in 1983. Both dates might be placed within the Reagan era in terms of American culture and politics, with 1979 marking the beginning of Reagan’s Presidential campaign and 1983 marking the eve of his reelection in a landslide of historical proportions. Luckily for us, however, Delany’s practice in writing is to, at the conclusion of each book or story, list the dates and places where they were written, and these dates are far more revealing. In *Tales of Nevèryon*, the dates for the five stories are as follows: October 1976 (78), November 1976 (138), May 1978 (160), June 1978 (213), July 1978 (245). For *Neveryóna* (which is a unified novel rather than a collection of stories), the date given is July 1980-November 1981. Thus, instead of moving from 1979 to 1983, we are instead moving from 1976/1976 to 1980/1981 – from a high point of feminist and queer activism in the United States

to the dark days of the Reagan era. While the 1976-1978 period of *Tales of Nevèryon*'s writing encompasses, for example, the election of Harvey Milk to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in 1977 and the publication of bell hooks's first book, a collection of poetry, in 1978, the period of *Neveryóna*'s writing encompasses the arrival of the first reported case of what would later become known as HIV/AIDS, which occurred almost at the mid-point of *Neveryóna*'s writing, in June of 1981¹⁰ ("HIV/AIDS Epidemic") – the beginning of certainly the lowest point for queer communities in the modern United States. Thus we can read *Neveryóna* as a commentary on gender and queerness in the incipient Reagan era, when both public policy and public discourse turned actively hostile toward feminism and other liberatory movements.

10 This change is seen throughout the novel largely through a series of forgetting, most of which are centered around extraordinary women – particularly, but not exclusively, Raven. Indeed, if Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is the acknowledged classic literary exploration of remembering, we might call *Neveryóna* the *unacknowledged* classic literary exploration of forgetting. In the novel, Delany explores the ways in which forgetting is a gendered (and often raced) act which, even when not conscious or deliberate, serves to reinforce and reify the power of the dominant over the oppressed. One such woman is Pryn's own great aunt, who largely raised her. Pryn's aunt is a fictional example of the unfortunate real-life history of women inventors and innovators who never receive credit for their work. She met Belham, a barbarian inventor, at the end of his life, and the two initiated an extraordinary partnership:

¹⁰ Delany directly addressed the horrors of HIV/AIDS in New York's queer communities in "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or: Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Five," one of the three novellas making up *Flight from Nevèryon* [1985], the third volume in the series. In the novella, distinctions between Nevèryon and the real world are collapsed as the narrative shifts back and forth between narratives of a fictional plague striking queer communities in Nevèryon and the real plague of HIV/AIDS devastating the queer communities of New York City. While beyond the scope of this essay, "The Tale of Plague and Carnivals" represents perhaps the most spectacular and affecting piece of writing in the series, and deserves more recognition as one of the classic literary statements on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States.

One of the things the barbarian had done was help her build a wooden rack on which stretch fibers might be woven together. She'd hoped to make some kind of useful covering. But the funny and fanciful notions, the tales and terrifying insights, the world lighted and shadowed by the analytic and synthetic richness the two of them could generate between them – that was the thing! (Delany, *Neveryóna* 12)

In other words, the two of them have invented the loom – an essential and indeed revolutionary piece of pre-industrial technology. As if that were not enough, Pryn's aunt also goes on, troubled by the lack of durability in the loom's initial products, to invent spun thread following Belham's departure: "Why not *twist* the fibers first before stringing them in the rack? The... 'thread' she twisted made a far smoother, stronger, and – finally! – functional fabric" (12). Following this additional innovation, the loom becomes a sensation which spreads all around Pryn's hometown of Ellamon, and, later, Nevèryon itself. However, credit for this extraordinary achievement is consistently denied Pryn's aunt – although Belham himself became at one point "easily the most famous man in all Nevèryon" (309). Although they should know better, it is denied among their neighbors in Ellamon, where it quickly becomes "known" (13) that "weaving and spinning had been going on for years" (13), until "the aunt's claim to authorship became a kind of local joke" (13). In wider Nevèryon, Pryn's aunt is completely unknown, and when Pryn tries to tell the story of her aunt's invention, the friendly but nefarious Earl Jue-Grutn dismisses the story by claiming, "[w]eaving...is one of those practices that's invented and forgotten and invented again" (295), despite the fact that he had met Belham personally and knew him to be a brilliant inventor. All of this leaves Pryn's aunt a "bitter woman" (11) obsessed with being "remembered as something other than an old, odd woman claiming credit for impossible things" (230). The contrast between the aunt's bitter anonymity and Belham's remarkable fame is striking, and that the contrast falls along binary gender lines is telling. The recovery of forgotten women innovators – essentially nonfiction analogues of Pryn's aunt – was a major concern of many

second-wave feminists (given the gender and racial dynamics at play in *Return to Nevèryon*, one thinks of Alice Walker's "Looking for Zora," in which she recovers Zora Neale Hurston as a feminist hero following Hurston's critical savaging by Richard Wright, latter-day poverty, and burial in an unmarked grave), and such concerns are evident in *Tales of Nevèryon*, which details, for example, Norema's role in inventing a system of writing and in the philosophical insights of the brilliant woman Venn. Yet by *Neveryóna*, written during the anti-feminist backlash of the early Reagan era, this project of historical reclamation seems to have ended in bitterness. In *Tales of Nevèryon*, Venn is a major figure, with "The Tale of Old Venn," the second and longest of the book's five stories focusing on her (79-138). In *Neveryóna*, however, she is absent, and like Raven her name keeps recurring in her absence throughout the novel.

11 Venn herself constitutes another example of an extraordinary woman and incipient feminist being forgotten in *Neveryóna*. While Venn is not completely forgotten like Pryn's aunt – she is remembered by the influential merchant Madame Keyne (152) and the powerful Earl Jue-Grutn (313) – she too suffers a notable erasure. In the novel's mid-section, Pryn has left the capital city of Kolhari for the small rural town of Enoch¹¹. While there, she learns of two local landmarks – Belham's Bridge and Venn's Rock. The two landmarks are intertwined; Belham's Bridge, which seems far too large and grand to have been built in service of the tiny Enoch – is held up by Venn's Rock, which is massive and was apparently transported there, somehow, from far away (225). As with the invention of the loom and spun thread, the bridge/rock pairing represents an extraordinary achievement – both in that the bridge could be constructed and that

¹¹ The Enoch section constitutes perhaps the saddest part of the narrative; at this point, the fifteen-year old Pryn is pregnant and is taken in by a kindly local family. However, after receiving their kindness, Pryn is subsequently exiled to a dank hut outside of the town which is reserved for prostitutes, which the locals expect Pryn to become. The exile, though devastating to Pryn, comes not from cruelty but from the locals' limited vision of women's roles: "she was a foreign girl about to have a baby, and they could think of no other place for her" (239).

the rock, necessary to the bridge's support, was brought there at all. And yet, as with Pryn's Aunt, Venn (and, in this case, Belham) have been forgotten entirely by the locals:

Pryn looked up the six-meter block, almost as wide and nearly as thick. 'She must have had some job getting it from there to here!'

"'She' who?" Tratsin asked.

'Venn,' Pryn said, surprised. She turned back.

Tratsin sucked first one finger, then another, watching her and looking almost as puzzled...

'I mean, if it's Venn's Rock, I just thought Venn must have had *something* to do with putting it here. Just like it's Belham's Bridge—' She looked up again. 'Didn't Belham build it?'

Tratsin looked at her oddly, and ran another finger in her mouth. 'I don't know. Was there someone named Belham? And Venn?' (226)

Intriguingly, the contours of forgetting that surround Venn's Rock and Belham's Bridge are quite directly related to the politics of the Reagan era. The locals' desire to forget the details surrounding Venn's Rock and Belham's Bridge is spurred by its role in the suppression of labor unrest:

When I was a boy they called in the soldiers, and they came marching across the bridge up there, to flush out the quarry workers who'd holed up in the hills – and they killed the leaders and carried their bodies, roped to long poles, back down across it, and we hung out watching from the bushes. Everybody thought they were going to put collars back on the rest of us like there used to be in my father's father's time. (227)

After this traumatic experience of oppressive state violence, the people of Enoch try their best to forget the details of the bridge, since they cannot stand to remember the trauma associated with it yet cannot remove it from their environment; only the soldiers wish to remember more about the bridge except that it is there, because "[t]he soldiers won, after all" (228). Aside from the obvious traumatic nature of this experience, the desire to forget is associated with a socially stratified work ethic by Tratsin, a character inculcated with the inherent value of work despite his marginal and vulnerable position within Nevèryon's ruthless capitalism: "You can't work your best with memories like that plaguing you. Why go over them?" (228). This combination of

suppression of labor activism, the inculcation of “work ethic” rhetoric to laborers to prop up a deeply unequal and indeed violence capitalistic system, and the imperative to forget details that do not serve the governing elite’s hegemonic narrative, recall labor relations during the administration of Ronald Reagan in the United States, along with his ally Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Tellingly, Reagan’s most infamous act of labor suppression, the firing of approximately 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, occurred on August 5, 1981 (Glass). Thus, the event occurred within the period of Delany’s writing of *Neveryóna*. One local, who derides the hegemonic ideology of work ethic, argues that, “[w]hat's wrong with Enoch is we forget too much” (228); such a statement could easily be amended to fit Reagan-era America. Reagan's entire political career, after all, was built upon a nostalgic rewriting of “small government” and “freedom,” a vision which can only be believed if one actively forgets such conservative *big* government intrusions onto freedom as the government sanction of slavery, segregation, and disenfranchisement.

12 An additional example of forgetting within *Neveryóna* is found in the story of Mad Olin. This story, as mentioned above, leads directly to the first mention of Raven, as it is told by Norema to Pryn. It subsequently recurs in dramatic fashion towards the end of the novel, when Pryn’s journey has reached the Garth Peninsula in Nevèryon’s “barbarian” south¹². Upon her arrival, Pryn is mysteriously invited to dine with the family of the local nobleman, the Earl Jue-Grutn. The Earl’s family, though seemingly charming and initially welcoming to Pryn, prove both oppressive and menacing, a menace which is most clearly displayed by the Earl’s

¹² In Nevèryon, the dominant population is dark skinned, while the so-called barbarians, who are mostly marginalized, have blond hair, light skin, and blue eyes. Interestingly, Delany gives us the origin of the term: a northern lord named Babara and named the entire region after himself, although nobody but his fellow northerners ever used the term, eventually leading to the dominant northerners to terming the region’s inhabitants as “barbarians” after Lord Babara.

interaction with an older woman slave named Bruka, who the Earl convinces to take a drink from his own mug only to later have her brutally beaten for the act¹³. A menacing mystery hangs over the entire visit: why have these nobles invited Pryn, who is notable only for being literate, into their home? The mystery eventually resolves, more or less, around two factors: an astrolabe, worn on a chain around the neck and given to Pryn by Gorgik, and the aforementioned “curious story” of Mad Olin. The two, it turns out, are connected, and, indeed, are illegible without each other: the astrolabe itself, is merely “a sign in a system of signs” (322) which makes no sense in the absence of the other signs in the system – signs which, it turns out, are revealed by the story itself.

13 The story of Mad Olin, the Earl tells Pryn, is an “engine” designed to raise the local lost city of Neveryóna, which was apparently once located off the coast of the Garth Peninsula. In the story, Olin is, by rights, queen of all Nevèryon, but “[s]ome evil priests shut Olin, her family, and her twenty-three servants in an old monastery in the Garth peninsula” (20). After a prolonged captivity, the priests decide to have Olin killed by her own servants, but their plan is foiled by one ingenious servant who, upon being ordered to kill her mistress, gets the priests to promise to pay him one gold piece, and then, if she fails, the next servant will be paid twice that amount, and the next servant twice *that* amount, and so on (20-21). The servant instructs Olin to kill her, as the priests will kill her even if she succeeds. Finally, the last servant, also Olin’s uncle, helps her escape with the vast amounts of money the exponential growth of the first

¹³ Pryn subsequently frees Bruka, who escapes, in Pryn’s most effective act of resistance in the novel. However, the efficacy of this act of resistance is undercut when the reader is shown Bruka’s hopelessly romanticized notion of Kolhari, which she plans to run away to; she describes the city’s imperial Court of Eagles as a place “[w]here everything is decided fairly. With real eagles, too” (357). Pryn, not having the heart to tell Bruka the truth about the Court, further mythologizes it, describing an eagle that is “huge. Its wingspan would block the sunlight away from the brewery. Its feathers are gold and iron. Its beak and claws are clotted with gems...But they keep it hidden” (357). Also undercutting Pryn’s act of resistance is its impossibly small scale – she is able to free only a single slave, who is old and has just been brutally beaten – in contrast to the large-scale freeing of slaves carried out by Gorgik and Small Sarg in *Tales of Nevèryon*.

servant's ploy has made possible (22-23). Unfortunately, all of this killing leaves Olin psychologically scarred:

[I]n less than a year she had stabbed, strangled, bashed out the brains, poisoned, beheaded, and done even worse to twenty-two of her most faithful bondsmen and bondswomen, who were also the closest things she'd had to friends. After that she began to act very strangely and behave quite oddly...Often, after that, she was known as Mad Olin" (22)

Subsequently, the now-Mad Olin raises the sunken city of Neveryóna and hides her vast fortune there, under the protection of the sea-dragon Gauine (26-27). Notably, Gauine is female in the story. Like Raven, she offers protection to women in peril from patriarchy – and, also like Raven, she is long-absent and widely regarded as a legend. The story also mentions Pryn's astrolabe as "the circle of different stars" (265), which is revealed to have been part of Venn's proposed "engine" for raising Neveryóna from beneath the sea's waves, along with the story. Venn proposed spreading the story of Olin's fabulous, lost wealth to encourage adventurers from all over Neveryón to come to the Garth Peninsula in the hopes that they might find a way to raise the city. The astrolabe is also part of the same design; "[i]t's a map of a nonexistent coast, under an imaginary constellation on an impossible sky in...the middle of a ring of meaningless numbers" (326). In other words, it is a mystery which cannot be solved, designed to intrigue its finders enough to draw them to the Garth Peninsula in order to decode its actually meaningless mysteries. After the mystery is revealed, the Earl and his family reveal their true menace, apparently drugging Pryn (342-344). After she manages to escape, Pryn then relives the story of Mad Olin's raising of Neveryóna in an apparent hallucination, yet Pryn's reliving of the story goes badly awry. When Pryn attempts to repeat Mad Olin's words ("Oh great Gauine, I have come to give my treasure..." (349)), the hallucinatory Gauine menaces her and "was terror itself" (349), forcing Pryn to take the astrolabe and throw it "as high and as hard as she could" (349)

and flee without Mad Olin's supposed treasure. When Pryn later wakes, the astrolabe is indeed gone, but everything else about her experience after fleeing from the Earl's home appears to have been hallucinatory.

14 The forgetting that occurs in the story of Mad Olin/the drugged Pryn differs from the others in that it represents a sort of deliberate forgetting – the invention of the story is a fiction which distorts the (apparently) true story of the lost city of Neveryóna and of Mad Olin, who is a real figure in Neveryón's history, thus causing it to be forgotten. It also differs because its forgetting is, at least initially, perpetrated by Venn (herself a victim, as discussed above, of the forgetting of women). Yet curiously, the spreading of Venn's invented tale of Mad Olin's lost wealth obscures the story of the *actual* Mad Olin; the fiction displaces and replaces the real woman. The real Mad Olin could hardly be described as a lost feminist hero à la Pryn's aunt; she earned her moniker when she “had presided at a banquet... at which she served her own twin sons, their flesh roasted, their organs pickled” (*Tales of Neveryón* 51). Indeed, the fictive account leaves her far more sympathetic, the victim of patriarchal oppression by the evil priests¹⁴. Yet we see here that the erasure of a real woman by a fictive version of herself can serve patriarchy; the reason the story was written was so that the Jue-Grutns, who own slaves, trick/goad women slaves into “earning” a beating, and drug a fifteen year old girl, can get “heroes” to raise Neveryóna, thus benefitting the Jue-Grutns' own ends. Pryn experiences the threat that this erasure of the real woman by the fictive one during her hallucination, as we see in the menace that greets her repetition of Olin's supposed formula for summoning Gauine.

¹⁴ The exact counters of Mad Olin's “real” story, and how it differs from the fictive one, are not entirely clear. There really is a monastery that once housed “evil” priests in the Garth Peninsula, and real examples of such royal intrigue as her supposed imprisonment are seen regularly throughout the series. What does clearly appear to have been invented is the story of her acquiring great wealth through murder of her own servants and exponential growth, as well as the story of her hiding that wealth with Gauine.

15 The most important example of forgetting, though, involves Raven herself. Raven constitutes a Derridean trace, or absent presence in the novel. Like a Derridean sign, Raven is defined by the difference between her and other characters/signs. In *Tales of Nevèryon* she at once contests Nevèryon's patriarchy and simultaneously reminds us of the strictures of that patriarchy by representing its inverted form, an aggressive and violent matriarchal order. In *Neveryóna*, her absent presence is literalized: she becomes one of the novel's central figures precisely because of her absence, and what that absence represents, thus following Jacques Derrida's assertion that "what is no longer deferred is also absolutely deferred. The presence that is thus delivered to us in the present is a chimera...The sign, the image, the representation, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusions that sidetrack us" (154). Raven's chimeric appearances in the novel are nearly constant, from the vulnerable Pryn's image of Raven as a "protective demon" (46) to a Western Crevasse-style double bladed knife which Pryn spots among a mummers' camp, only to be told it's merely a prop used in skits (377). Raven, has become so absent that she has all but vanished even from memory, save for a conflation with Pryn that often serves to emphasize that Pryn is *not*, and cannot be, Raven.

16 Following Pryn's meeting with Norema, and her consequent realization of Raven's absence, Pryn encounters traces of Raven's possible presence throughout *Neveryóna*, yet all such traces prove to be elusive, fictive, and chimeric. When Pryn first approaches the capital city of Kolhari, Pryn looks down upon the city from a ridge, finds it "ominous" (32), and longs for Raven: "She wondered if the tale-teller's friend – was it Raven? – with her blue beads and her mask and her double blade had ever stood like this, on this rise, this road, looking down on the city as the earth heaved from dark dawn to morning" (32). This marks the first time following her meeting with Norema that Pryn longs for Raven's presence, and the matriarchal fierceness,

bravery, and resistance to patriarchy that Raven represents to her. Yet in this moment, her longing does not serve her well: it causes her to miss the approach of three young men who are also approaching Kolhari. While she tries to hide after hearing the beats of their horses' hooves, she is too late, and is seen. Pryn initially fears they are slavers, which proves to be a misrecognition, yet they do imprison her: fearing she could be a spy, they declare, "If you don't come with us...we'll kill you" (34). It is through her encounter with these young men, who Pryn eventually comes to realize are every bit as lost in and ill-suited for the complexities of Kolhari as she is, that Pryn is introduced to Gorgik the Liberator, who they are seeking out so they might join in his anti-slavery crusade. When they arrive at Gorgik's supposed headquarters they announce themselves with the fictive names "the Southern Fox...the Red Badger...[and] the Western Wolf" (37). They subsequently give Pryn the fictive name of "the Blue Heron" (37), but only after dismissing her as a "kid" (37) whose presence they had forgotten. Again, Pryn summons Raven in her memory, presumably due to the connections of the color blue and a woman's name being taken from a bird (Heron/Raven). This implicit connection of Pryn to Raven through the name "the Blue Heron" is only one of several confluences that occur between Pryn and Raven in the narrative, yet these confluences serve not to connect the two but to emphasize their disconnect. While Raven is both a fierce fighter and wholly secure in her identity, Pryn is, even as she is named "the Blue Heron," helpless, and the name is given so carelessly and obviously falsely as to make it absurd.

17 Another invocation of Raven comes through the character of the Wild Ini, who serves as the novel's nearest analogue to a Raven who is actually present, but in a degraded form which retains Raven's violence and menace yet is stripped of her social and ideological import and critique. The Wild Ini appears in one of Pryn's most vulnerable moments in the novel, as she is

being menaced by a pimp named Nynx who she first met at the Bridge of Lost Desire, a space for queer encounters and prostitution. As Nynx threatens Pryn, the Wild Ini slits his throat. Pryn longs for her to be Raven: “If my rescuer had been a black-haired woman with a rag mask and double-bladed sword, Pryn thought as they left the bridge and crossed to an alley’s narrow entrance, I *wouldn’t* protest” (89, emphasis in original). Yet Raven’s familiar features are instead replaced by a “gaunt, pale-haired murderess...not more than three years older than Pryn, for all her sunken eyes and tightly muscled frame” (89). While Raven is notable in *Tales of Nevèryon* for the anti-patriarchal critique of Nevèryon, which she calls “this strange and terrible land” (Delany, *Tales of Nevèryon* 173), that accompanies her violence, the Wild Ini’s violence is reduced to simple, apolitical sadistic pleasure; she has no interest in critique, but instead, as she tells Pryn, “I do what I like. And I like to kill people. A lot!” (Delany, *Neveryóna* 90). The Wild Ini, we learn, rescues Pryn in the service of Madame Keyne. Initially, this might be seen as a sort of feminist act – a fierce woman rescues a more helpless woman in the services of a politically powerful woman – a reading seemingly strengthened by the revelation that Madame Keyne’s home is a “chatja nivu” (109), a term originally meaning a house “a woman refuses to cook for a man” (109) but has also taken on other meanings such as “any lack of support a woman may show a man” (109) as well as lesbianism. However, this is a misreading given that Keyne is a neoliberal agent¹⁵ who opposes Gorgik’s liberatory anti-slavery crusade, which she derides, in terms hardly compatible with any meaningfully liberatory feminism, as a “muzzy dream of equality, freedom, and joy” (141). What’s more, while Keyne initially claims she has summoned

¹⁵ Delany extensively explores the connection of emergent market capitalism and neoliberalism to the socio-cultural subjugation of women in “The Tale of Old Venn,” the second story from *Tales of Nevèryon*. Additionally, Keyne’s primary objective in *Neveryóna* is the construction of the New Market, which will bypass the city’s queer communities, as represented by the Bridge of Lost Desire, which is adjacent to the Old Market, and for whose construction Keyne razed an entire neighborhood.

Pryn to her home because she is interested “in the careers of exceptional young women” (94), she eventually admits that, in fact, the invitation was part of a complex game of jealousy. Keyne then asks for a kiss, for which she exchanges some coins; Pryn later connects this kiss to instances of sexual harassment and abuse by men: “First the Fox’s wandering hands, then the pimp on the Bridge of Lost Desire, the coins Madame Keyne had given her for a kiss – the two soldiers at the inn in the night...!” (239). Thus, again and again, Keyne, despite being a powerful woman, is connected to the structures of patriarchy. What’s more, she employs the Wild Ini, whose love for killing stems not from liberation (as is the case with Raven) but from complicity in oppression; she began by killing “other slaves” (121) on behalf of her masters. While the Wild Ini goes on to protest that she only did such killing to avoid being killed herself, the obvious pleasure she takes in killing belies this claim.

18 In this, the Wild Ini represents, as I have said, a degraded version of Raven, a vision of Raven as seen through a cracked mirror, in several ways. Her violence is meaningless and connected to oppression, as opposed to Raven’s clearly meaningful violence, connected to resistance, the fight against patriarchy, and queerness. Raven is a matriarchal warrior who kills men to fight against the ideological dominance of patriarchy; the Wild Ini also doesn’t “like killing women as a rule...I much prefer men” (105). Here, “I much prefer men” has a double meaning – she prefers men for killing and as lovers¹⁶, in contrast to Raven, whose now-dissolved queer relationship with Norema is implicitly connected to her anti-patriarchal resistance. If, then, the Wild Ini is the novel’s nearest analogue to Raven, the message is indeed bleak: the possibilities of Raven’s queer, feminist critique and resistance, so present during the 1970s with

¹⁶ The Wild Ini’s heterosexuality is made clear in her rejection of the advances of Radiant Jade, a queer “barbarian” woman also in the service of Madame Keyne. Tellingly, she conflates having sex with men and killing men; she chides Jade, “Why do you lean against me so...I do not love women the way that you – and Madame Keyne – do. For that kind of love, yes, just as with killing, I prefer men” (148).

its movements of queer liberation and second-wave feminism, are replaced now by subservience to patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist structures (Keyne) and nihilistic destruction (the Wild Ini).

19 *Neveryóna* ends with two final chimeric invocations of Raven. Pryn herself becomes a chimeric Raven by the novel's end; it is the group of absurd supposed anti-slavery campaigners she encounters when she first arrives in Kolhari who name her "the Blue Heron" (37) to fit in with their own grandiose, self-appointed nicknames. However, at the end, when Pryn is struggling to recall Raven's name, she recalls "*Blue Heron...*?" (375; emphasis in original) before realizing, "that had been *her* name" (375). Yet Pryn, like the Wild Ini, cannot be – or replace – Raven. The Wild Ini has Raven's warrior fierceness but lacks her queer feminist ideology. Pryn, in the novel, appears to be beginning to develop a feminist consciousness, but it is still developing – and, as seen through the regular peril she finds herself in, she lacks Raven's warrior fierceness. This slippage between "Raven" and "Blue Heron" occurs amidst another chimeric invocation, in which Pryn, disguised as a slave at a celebration where, amongst performing mummers, she sees Vatry, a friend of hers from her time in Kolhari, meeting with a maybe-Raven:

She walked toward Pryn. Her breasts were not large, but they were definitely a woman's, not just muscular pectorals, for all Pryn tried to read them as such...Between frayed slits, her eyes were intensely blue. Pryn thought for an awkward moment: *Her hair's blue, too!* But it was only sun-dappling slipping across the blue beads she wore chained in her hair...Pryn stood astonished. (373)

After longing for Raven for so long, and being told so many times that Raven does not and cannot exist, Pryn spots an apparent actual Western Crevasse woman. Yet when she speaks to Vatry about this woman, Vatry denies her existence, saying, "There wasn't any woman here – *or* man" (375, emphasis in original). Pryn is initially baffled by this denial, but when she realizes the truth of the matter, the explanation is disappointingly, almost pathetically banal: the Western

Crevasse woman and Vetry are smuggling a bag of bouncing balls, made in the distant south and popular among children in the north, to Kolhari. Pryn further suggests that Vetry, who is neither a dark-skinned native of Nevèryon nor a light-skinned barbarian, and who, like Raven, refers to Nevèryon as “this strange and terrible land” (376) is herself from the Western Crevasse. Vetry, in response, neither confirms nor denies this, but deflects the question by dismissing the double-bladed knife Pryn has seen as a mere prop (376-377). This leaves the truth of her identity, and her refusal to answer the question, up for speculation. Yet either way, the scene is just as melancholic and just as disappointing: either Pryn is mistaken, and she still has failed to find any actual presence of Western Crevasse women in all the traces of Raven she has seen scattered across her journey, or she *has* finally found her Western Crevasse women, and their ferocious reputation for resistance and feminism has been displaced, leaving behind only petty, meaningless crime – which is, perhaps, the more disappointing of the two options.

20 This scene closes the novel, except for a brief conversation between Pryn and Vetry about heading back north. It reflects the ultimate disappointment of Raven’s (absent presence/present absence) from the narrative. This greatest of anti-patriarchal women/queer warriors, who once seemed so poised to challenge Nevèryon’s power structures, has been supplanted by the banal thing possible: the smugglers of a frivolous child’s toy. The undercurrent of disappointment for the lost possibilities of queer and feminist liberation movements, trampled over so recently by the crushing landslide of Ronald Reagan’s first election, and by the anti-feminist, anti-queer backlash which both led to and was further fueled by that election, which has run through *Nevèryóna* has, at the novel’s conclusion, reached its apex. In all of this, Delany’s greatest insight into the present he wrote in is to link the right wing backlashes of the Reagan era to forgetting – forgetting of the lessons of the 20th century’s great liberatory movements,

forgetting of compassion in (not) responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis, conscious/strategic forgetting of the sacrifices, gains, and benefits of organized labor. And, ultimately (though Delany could hardly have predicted this in 1981), the forgetting of the Iran-Contra scandal, which allows Reagan to retain his demigod status among American conservatives. Forgetting, then, is the major literary theme of *Neveryóna* – and the political legacy of Ronald Reagan.

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“Liberating the Inner Goddess: the Witch Reconsidered in Libba Bray’s Neo-Victorian Gemma Doyle trilogy”

By Danielle Russell, Glendon College, York University, Canada

Abstract:

Jackson’s perceptive assertion that fantasy is a “literature of desire” which “traces the unsaid and unseen of culture” is particularly applicable to Libba Bray’s neo-Victorian trilogy. In these narratives, what “has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” in the primary world, is foregrounded in the secondary world. The act of mothering, as opposed to the institution of motherhood, is a key element of the fantasy world. Raised in India for sixteen years, the central character Gemma Doyle is brought to England to establish herself as a Lady. The detailed description of Victorian England is from an outsider’s perspective—one who cannot, and will not, be typecast as the damsel in distress despite her increasing social and physical vulnerability. Plunged into the politics of polite society, she must navigate its demands while struggling to meet the concomitant demands of her family. The process is further complicated by the fact that Gemma is not just a daughter and a debutante but a High Priestess. Bray incorporates a magical realm where all things seem possible. The shift from powerless to all-powerful raises a utopia/dystopia comparison between the matriarchal realms and patriarchal London. Gemma discovers, however, that all choices come at a price and oppression is practised by both men and women. The figure of the mother—biological and surrogate—dominates in the trilogy. Mothers who betray their daughters under the guise of protecting them abound. Tension and suspicion distort the mother/daughter dynamic and yet the desire for that bond haunts Gemma and her friends. Indeed, the dark forces of the realms use the illusion of her mother to lure Gemma. Desired but elusive, the idealized mother is exposed as being unattainable. Social demands render the mothers powerless; (willingly or reluctantly) they become agents of patriarchy, policing their own daughters. Families in Bray’s texts are damaged and damaging. Fathers are charming but self-absorbed; mothers are largely absent and yet both are longed for with an almost ferocious intensity. Bray’s depiction of the Victorian family critiques a particular kind of family: one constructed in a way that permits abuse. The trilogy offers an endorsement of alternative definitions of family in general and mothers in particular: families of choice built upon mutual respect, affection, and compassion, and active mothering. Bray implicitly extends her interrogation of the family beyond the Victorian period; her pointed criticisms resonate in the twenty-first century.

I don’t yet know what power feels like. But this is surely what it looks like, and I think I’m beginning to understand why those ancient women had to hide in caves. Why our parents and teachers and suitors want us to behave properly and predictably. It’s not that they want to protect us; it’s that they fear us.
(Bray, *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, 207)

1 Gemma Doyle’s epiphany about the Victorian discomfort with powerful women implicitly invokes the fears surrounding the figure of the witch. Gemma is the central character in Libba Bray’s best-selling neo-Victorian trilogy: *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003), *Rebel*

Angels (2005), and *The Sweet Far Thing* (2007). Raised in India for sixteen years, she is brought to England (following her mother's death) to establish herself as a Lady. As a consequence, her description of Victorian England is from an outsider's perspective—one who cannot, and will not, be typecast as the damsel-in-distress despite her increasing social and physical vulnerability. Plunged into the politics of polite society and Spence Academy (a finishing school), Gemma must navigate their demands while struggling to meet the concomitant demands of her family. The process is further complicated by the fact that Gemma is not just a daughter and a debutante but a High Priestess.

2 Despite the fact that the trilogy encompasses both real world settings and a magical realm, the revelation occurs in the non-magical landscape as Gemma's friend, Felicity, defies a group of men surrounding them. In this instance, the specific term witch is not employed but it, and other labels—crone, sorceress, priestess—will be used throughout the narratives to describe women who wield magic—Gemma and previous members of the matriarchal Order of priestesses who control the realms. Bray incorporates anxieties focused on (and through) the stock literary representation of the witch as a social outsider, transgressor of societal norms, and threat to the patriarchal order. She also explores the corrective possibilities of the witch: the subversive potential to challenge and transform that oppressive social order. Mothering—the act of engaged nurturing—as opposed to the institution of motherhood—as defined by patriarchal voices—is linked with a new concept of witchcraft/magic in Bray's trilogy. The willingness to assume responsibility for the well-being of others ameliorates the magical woman. It permits a reconceptualization of the relationship between power and femininity. Gemma will discover the missing ancestors—the hidden goddesses—who will help her escape the burden encoded in the label *witch* and embrace her own inner power.

3 The daughter of a witch and the prophesized restorer of the matriarchal Order who once controlled the magical realms, Gemma Doyle births a new, more democratic world in the final book. Bray links the ambiguity of the witch with the maternal throughout the trilogy. Witchcraft and motherhood have a long literary tradition of clashing. Annette Schimmelpfennig, referring to the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” and Snow White's stepmother, points out, “the role of the mother as the child's nurturer and guardian is perverted. Instead of nurturing the children the witch feeds on them...” (paragraph 8). The scenarios in the fairy tales are extreme but the “role as mother makes the witch even more menacing as a monster because it is a betrayal of

confidence...” (paragraph 16). The threatening nature of the witch negates her motherhood; the menace she represents, however, is not limited to the witch’s own pregnancy. Historically, mothers-to-be were viewed as physically and psychologically vulnerable to manipulation by witches, concludes Diana Purkiss, but they also had the potential to distort (or even abort) their own unborn children (100). The mother must avoid

unfeminine feelings of rage, frustration and fury [associated with witches] if she is to avoid miscarriage. These feelings characterise the witch as the opposite of what the early modern woman should be...the witch is the dark other of the early modern woman, expressing and acting on desires that other women must repress to construct their identities as mothers. (100)

In a telling twist, Bray depicts mothers within patriarchy who do adhere to the pressures to subdue the very emotions identified by Purkiss; in doing so, they fail to nurture their daughters.

4 The figure of the mother—biological and surrogate—dominates in the trilogy. Mothers who betray their daughters under the guise of protecting them abound: Gemma’s mother fails to prepare her for her role by withholding potentially dangerous knowledge; Felicity’s mother fails to protect her from sexual abuse at the hands of her father in order to maintain the family’s social status; and Pippa’s mother barter her off (in marriage) to the much older Mr. Bumble in order to hide Pippa’s ‘bad blood’ (she has epilepsy) and pay off her father’s gambling debts. Tension and suspicion distort the mother/daughter dynamic and yet the desire for that bond haunts Gemma and her friends. Indeed, the dark forces of the realms use the illusion of her mother to lure Gemma. Desired but elusive, the idealized mother is exposed as being unattainable. Social demands render the mothers powerless; (wittingly or reluctantly) they become agents of patriarchy, policing their own daughters.

5 Freedom from surveillance is found in the secondary (magical) world; it provides the opportunities denied to women in the primary (real) world. More than the absence of being controlled, however, the realms offer the ability to exercise control, to exert power; it is (at least initially) a space of wish fulfillment. In response to Gemma’s questioning what the realms are, her mother explains they are “a world between worlds. A place where all things are possible” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 254). It is a transformative and creative space she clarifies: “‘it’s where the Order came to reflect, to hone their magic and themselves, to come through the fire and be made new. Everyone comes here from time to time—in dreams, when ideas are born.’ She pauses. ‘In death’” (254). For the non-magical, the realms are a dreamscape and the space

where they transition from the living to the dead. They function as a space which facilitates escape. Indeed, fantasy as a literary genre has often been called escapist—a kind of vicarious wish fulfillment for the reader.¹ Bray plays with this expectation. She initially employs this (potentially) simplistic model of contrasting spaces of power and powerlessness but it soon proves to be a more complicated issue in the trilogy.

6 Fantasy as a form of escape or emotional/psychological compensation need not be a negative but it is a rather limited definition. Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* offers insight into the varied potential of fantasy. Jackson argues "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3). Compensate does suggest wish fulfillment but Jackson's subsequent assertion that "the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" raises another possibility (3). Fantasy can articulate counter-narratives; it gives voice to the silent and shines a spotlight on the hidden. More than compensating for what is not, fantasy draws attention to what could be. As a vehicle for cultural criticism, works of fantasy can engage with real world issues, not simply to "make up" for them, but to draw attention to the need for change (or at least informed debate). The mechanism is identified by Jackson as the "introduction of the 'unreal'" being "set against the category of the 'real'—a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference" (4). Contrast serves as catalyst.

7 Fantasy, Ursula Le Guin insists, "is true....It isn't factual, but it is true" (44). Le Guin acknowledges that the truths fantasy reveals can be uncomfortable—"its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phoney, unnecessary, and trivial in the life [adults] have let themselves be forced into living"—but it is necessary (44). In this context, fantasy holds us accountable for our own (witting or otherwise) complicity in creating and/or sustaining the conditions fantasy critiques. "All fantasy," Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue, "is political"; either as a conscious choice or by virtue of the fact that it, "like any cultural text," reproduces "dominant ideology" (102). Bray's works of fantasy encode the dominant ideology of the Victorian period in order to decode the dominant ideology of the 21st century. The choice of

¹ For a further discussion of this issue, see Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature*, Brian Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, or Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' *A Short History of Fantasy*.

fantasy and a different historical period create a degree of detachment from the ‘real’ world of the reader. Distance, oddly enough, can permit closer examination.

8 Despite being named for a British monarch, neo-Victorian novels have a transatlantic appeal and are a particularly effective vehicle for social criticism of 21st century, Western society. Alexia Bowler and Jessica Cox address this seeming paradox in “Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past”:

While adaptation(s) can be thought of as inhabited by literary and cultural ‘ghosts,’ this echoing of voices and ideas performs an intertextual weaving with the present moment and exhibits a simultaneous recognition of and departure from that past, allowing us the space in which to grapple with the renewed crises we face in negotiating our (past) modern identities. (3)

The past informs our present, not only in terms of its continuing legacies, but also by creating a space in which to explore possible outcomes of current problems or anxieties. Marie-Luise Kohlke cautions that “to make a claim for the neo-Victorian as some sort of inherently radical political project would be too ambitious” (10). She points out, however, that the neo-Victorian does repeatedly raise important questions of social justice and may yet prove instrumental in interrogating, perhaps even changing, current attitudes and influencing historical consciousness in the future” (10). Diana Birch’s *Our Victorian Education* offers a similar insight into the continuing relevance of, and potential for change generated by, the Victorian period. Birch reasons, “Victorian ideas can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place” (144). More significantly perhaps, “they can serve a still more useful purpose in suggesting ways in which we can begin to extricate ourselves from our difficulties” (144). “Passionate voices,” Birch concludes, “warned Victorian educators [of the need for] a flexibility that can make room for the individual pupil [and] we should still be listening” (145). Cries for a respect for individuality and understanding of the construction of prescriptive categories such as (but not limited to) class and gender were largely unheeded in the Victorian period. By infusing magic into the Victorian period and, implicitly, drawing upon 21st century, real world conditions as a basis of comparison, Bray is able to interrogate those very conditions.

9 The magical realms seemingly offer a matriarchal utopia. Bray incorporates a world where all things seem possible to Gemma and her friends—a direct opposition to their restricted lives in Victorian England. The shift from powerless to all-powerful raises a dystopia/utopia

comparison between patriarchal England and the matriarchal realms ruled by the Order. Gemma discovers, however, that all choices come at a price and oppression is practised by both men and women. The Order is defined as “a powerful group of sorceresses who’d been around since the dawn of time. Supposedly they had access to the mystical world beyond this one, a place of many realms where they could work their magic” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 129). At this point, the information provided by Miss Moore is treated as folklore—mere story—but Gemma and her friends recognize its veracity. Unbeknownst to the girls, Miss Moore, is more than an unconventional new teacher at Spence Academy; she will subsequently be exposed as a former member of the Order willing to do anything to regain her lost magical power. The girls do, however, have the insight that the desire for power has corrupted the entire Order who are also determined to maintain control no matter the cost to anyone else. It soon becomes clear that the oppressive power structure has merely been inverted, not eradicated. The task of transforming the realms falls to Gemma and “all who wish to have a say”; they “shall work together to forge a constitution of sorts, a document and a government to guide the realms” (*The Sweet Far Thing* 802). Gemma is transformed by the magic but she also transforms the magic: rather than being the privilege of a chosen few, it will be the prerogative of all. This focus on inclusivity counters the traditional depiction of the witch. Justyna Sempruch notes,

witches have been construed as dangerously polluting the universal ‘norm’. Projected as homeless, they both expose and are exposed to inappropriate and noncanonical bodily forms, through which they mediate their cultural vulnerability...Defined as an awareness or consciousness of un/belonging that manifests itself as an openness (vulnerability) to heresy and deviation, the witch comes to represent not what is contained and sustained by traditional identity but rather what is transgressed... (127)

Isolation is the common condition of the witch in this context; Gemma’s insistence on community defies this tradition. The witch is no longer a social outcast; she is the catalyst for a just and egalitarian society.

10 The path to that communal role, however, is fraught with prejudice and danger linked to Gemma’s magical status. While her friends quickly embrace the positive aspects of magic, Gemma cannot escape the stigma encoded in the traditional label used to identify female wielders of magic: witch. “Despite the subtleties of radical feminists, historians and modern witches,” Purkiss laments, “the dominant image of the witch is still of a shrieking hag on a broomstick, the Wicked Witch of the West” (276). Negative connotations dominate when the

figure of the witch is invoked. Gemma and the earlier members of the Order do not fit this model but they cannot entirely escape it. “The image of the witch,” Schimmelpfenning points out, “is etched on the memory from childhood on, characterised by her portrayal in fairy tales and shaped by popular culture” (paragraph 1). Bray does draw upon fairy tales. “Hansel and Gretel” is performed in the second novel. The witch, played by a man, favours the comical over the demonic in this rendition: “the witch turns to the audience with a knowing wink” and the students “boo and hiss on cue” (*Rebel Angels*, 57). It is an interactive, non-threatening performance intensified by the witch pulling “Hansel hard into her enormous false bosom, nearly suffocating him” (ibid). When the witch’s “diabolical plan to fatten the children and roast them” is revealed, it “gives everyone the chills” (58). Comical shifts to chilling as the magic shifts from seductive to destructive.

11 The fairy tale witch returns as a comical element later in the book. Seeking assistance from a former teacher—Miss Moore—Gemma and her friends reveal their distrust of her replacement:

‘Gemma is convinced she’s a witch,’ Felicity confesses. ‘Really? Did you spy her broomstick, Miss Doyle?’ ‘I never said she was a witch,’ I protest. Ann jumps in, nearly breathless. She loves demonic intrigue. ‘Gemma told us she arrived at Spence in the dead of night—just as a terrible storm raged!’ Miss Moore’s eyes go wide. ‘Heavens! Extreme rain? In December? In England? A sign of witchery, to be sure.’ They all share a laugh at my expense. ‘Do go on. I want to hear the point where Miss McCleethy feeds children into her oven.’ (155)

The seemingly playful exchange discomforts Gemma; it undermines her tenuous confidence. It relies on and reinforces the popular image of the witch. Miss Moore’s stance will subsequently be exposed as deceptive: a skillful misdirection to mask the fact that she is Circe, one of Gemma’s competitors for control of the realms.

12 The comical and nonthreatening depiction of the witch is increasingly present in popular culture but the ‘good’ witch is not common; the norm (of this abnormal figure) seems to be the (evil) abuser of power. This assessment is at the heart of the use of the derogatory label at several points in Bray’s trilogy. The Rakshana—the patriarchal organization who previously guarded the members of the Order—plot to seize the magic for themselves but cannot enter the realms because “that was the witches’ punishment” for an earlier rebellion (*Rebel Angels* 9). At this point, the appellation could be neutral—merely descriptive rather than prescriptive; however, the Rakshana’s strongman, Fowlson uses the term in a manner which cannot be misconstrued.

Gemma draws upon magic to prevent his attack provoking the exclamation: “wot are you doing to me, you witch!” (*The Sweet Far Thing* 462). Given that Fowlson was physically threatening Gemma in an attempt to extort her, his anger is, to say the least, quite hypocritical. The subsequent threat “I’ll come for you, you little witch” reflects his feeling of being disempowered; the echo of the derogative term *bitch* in *witch* suggest a misogynistic meaning behind the expression. Hatred and outrage prompt Fowlson to hurl this insult at Gemma.

13 While it is tempting to read men as hurling the insult *witch*, female characters are also prone to using it. A counter definition of the witch is raised in the first book in the trilogy as a teacher explains the images of goddesses found in a cave near the school:

‘The quite remarkable thing about this cave is that these are depictions of all sorts of goddesses here. It isn’t just the Pagan or Roman but, the Norse, the German, the Celtic. Most likely, this was a place known to travelers who heard they could practice their magic in safety here.’ ‘Magic?’ Elizabeth asks. ‘They were witches?’ ‘Not as we’ve come to think of witches. They would have been mystics and healers, women who worked with herbs and delivered babies. But it would have made them suspect. Women who have power are always feared’... (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 126)

It is the exercise of the power, not its nature, which has led to the label of the witch. It becomes clear in the final book that the lesson is lost on most of her audience.

14 Unsettled by strange events around their school, the students of Spence Academy speculate about the presence of witches. Suspicion falls upon Brigid, the housekeeper:

‘What if she’s really a witch?’ ‘She does know a lot about fairies and such,’ Martha says wide eyed. It’s becoming a game, this suspicion. Felicity’s eyes match Martha’s. She leans close. ‘Come to think of it, didn’t the bread taste just like the souls of children? I shall faint!’ she puts a hand to her forehead... ‘But why mark the East Wing with blood?’ I ask. Cecily mulls it over. ‘For revenge. To frighten the workers.’ ‘Or to raise evil spirits,’ Martha offers. ‘What if it’s the sign of a witch or...or the devil?’ Elizabeth whispers. (*The Sweet Far Thing* 175)

Felicity tries to redirect the conversation by mocking its melodramatic quality. The irony is that the witch is much closer than the other girls imagine but Gemma is a far cry from the evil entity they fear. For Cecily and her followers, the witch represents all that is negative and threatening; while apparently lacking the misogyny of Fowlson’s curse-like use of witch, they too wield the term as an insult. It is the sign of the transgressive in society and it is significant that these Victorian girls, training to become ideal Victorian ladies—the-angel-in-the-house—locate it in the lower class, female servant. In “mainstream Western history and religion,” Sempruch notes,

“witches have been perceived, (re)presented, and depicted consistently as the ‘unthinkable,’ peculiar outcasts on the margins of culture” (127). I would add literature and popular culture to her set of sources. Servants, invariably from the lower classes, occupy marginal positions in most cultures (whether real or fictional) but this is particularly true of the Victorian period. Brigid, the housekeeper, is a “peculiar” outcast by virtue of being from the lower class, Irish (and therefore Catholic), and old—a trifecta of disempowerment in Victorian England.

15 A key historical text in the persecution of those perceived to be witches was the 15th century *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. One of the many offensive and destructive ‘conclusions’ the pair offer is that “since [women] are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft” (quoted in Schimmelpfenning paragraph 4).² Magic is a means of compensating for a sense of inadequacy and powerlessness based upon biology (and later, the concept of gender): one is tempted to apply that logic to witch-hunting. Schimmelpfenning points out that “throughout the text the terms ‘woman’ and ‘witch’ become synonyms. What begins as a treatise on the witch turns more and more into a polemic pamphlet on the evil nature of women in general” (ibid). Woman and witch are conflated in *Malleus Maleficarium*; a similar reductive strategy is employed by the Spence ladies-in-training: to be a ‘lady’ in the Victorian period is to transcend (or at least sidestep) the negative implications of class. It is inconceivable to them that the true witch is one of their class; for Cecily and her followers, there is an oddly comforting lack of ambiguity about what and who a witch is (at least until the dangers of the realms invade the real world).

16 Magic is a more complex reality in the realms and there is more ambiguity surrounding the witch. The Gorgon cautions Gemma that “power changes everything till it is difficult to say who are the heroes and who are the villains....And magic itself is neither good nor bad; it is intent that makes it either” (*The Sweet Far Thing* 367). From the perspective of those denied the power of magic under the guise of “protecting” them, the Order have become the enemy. Recognizing the crescent amulet Gemma wears—a symbol of the goddess, and the Order in particular—a centaur, Creostus, is immediately hostile, “rage snarling around his words” and he identifies her as a witch (*Rebel Angels* 186, 187). His distrust threatens to spill over into violence in their next encounter: “Creostus growls in anger. He kicks a table with his hoof, smashing it to pieces. ‘Another stalling tactic, Philon. When will you realize you cannot make bargains with

² See Purkiss for further discussion of the *Malleus Maleficarium*.

these witches?’...Creostus looks as if he would stomp us into dust. ‘We should be looking after ourselves!’” (*The Sweet Far Thing* 167). In both instances, it is only through the intervention of Philon, the former weapons master of the Order, that the violence is, temporarily, defused. Significantly, he approaches Gemma with a greater degree of respect (albeit tinged with suspicion) calling her priestess. The first use identifies her as a priestess, observing “we have not seen one of your kind in many years” (*Rebel Angels* 187). By the final volume, Philon addresses Gemma as Priestess; the title both acknowledges that she is, at this point, the only priestess and signals that she is *the* Priestess destined to restore order to the realms (*The Sweet Far Thing* 164).

17 In order to fulfil her destiny, Gemma must draw upon both her personal and collective origins. She is the daughter of a priestess, a spiritual descendant of a long line of goddesses. Seeking a guide to help her understand the magic within her and the history of the realms, it is natural that Gemma would turn to her mother for instruction. Through a series of visions she cannot control, Gemma stumbles upon the realms and her mother but the first guide she encounters, however, is Miss Moore. The knowledge Miss Moore provides is, as discussed earlier, presented as folklore—superstition, not fact—but it does provide Gemma with some insight. More significantly, Miss Moore acts as a surrogate mother for Gemma who is still grieving for her mother: “Miss Moore...holds me in her sure arms, which remind me so much of my mother’s right now, I can barely stand it” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 190). The sense of security is merely an illusion: Gemma is, unknowingly, being embraced by the being who hunted her mother to death: Sarah Rees-Toome, now Miss Moore/Circe. The allure of the illusion is so compelling that the simple gesture of fixing her hair moves Gemma: “she lifts a limp piece of hair from my still-damp face and secures it behind my ear. It’s so tender, so much like my mother that I could cry all over again” (191). The emotional void created by her mother’s death renders Gemma susceptible to the influence of surrogate mothers. In fact, it is her (untested) faith in the maternal figure of Miss Moore which allows Circe to return to the realms: desperate to save Pippa who is under attack and trapped in the alternate world, Gemma brings Miss Moore to the realms (a space she can no longer access on her own). Blinded by terror, weakened by grief, Gemma does not see through the illusion Miss Moore projects; Gemma fails to recognize that she has redirected all her suspicions towards another teacher. Indeed, Gemma has forgotten the lesson taught her by the Gorgon: the Order “were the master makers of illusion” (*Rebel Angels* 177); Gemma will learn that they are not the only source of illusion in the realms.

18 The dark forces of the realm also employ illusions in an attempt to master Gemma. The weapon of choice is logical. The desired but absent mother is the most effective tool in their arsenal. In a desperate attempt to rescue Pippa, Gemma confronts the newly released dark spirits of the realms. The response to her defiant shout “If you want me, here I am,” is the unexpected appearance of her mother: “she smiles, and everything inside me bends to her. I’m tired and uncertain but she’s here now. She’ll help me set things right” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 389). The sight of her mother is comforting; it allows Gemma to shift responsibility to (or at least share it with) an adult. The pull is strong but once she touches her “mother’s” hand, the illusion is shattered: “instantly, the thing that hides in my mother’s shape emerges, rising high as the stones themselves” (390). It is a thing, a creature, not her mother; Gemma has almost been ensnared by her own not-so-hidden desire. Resistance occurs in the nick-of-time but the longing for her mother continues to leave Gemma vulnerable to manipulation. The shape shifter Neela taunts her by assuming her mother’s appearance and voice. It is a cruel joke but the challenging question, “How will you fight when you cannot even see?” denotes a valid point (*The Sweet Far Thing* 170). Gemma must accept that her mother is gone if she wishes to resist the illusion wielded against her.

19 In fact, it is the conscious choice to release her mother that enables Gemma to withstand the first ‘maternal’ attacker. In the pivotal moment between defeat and resistance, Gemma remembers her mother’s lesson: “you have to know yourself, know what you want. That’s what Mother told me” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 392). The knowledge is sufficient to thwart the creature’s attempt to control the magic. In order to truly disempower it, Gemma must shatter her own illusions about her mother. It is the act of forgiving her mother for her past crimes, combined with the destruction of the magic transmitting runes which saves Gemma and the realms:

‘Mother...I forgive you.’ The grip loosens. The thing’s eyes widen, the hideous mouth opens. Its power shrinks. ‘No!’ I feel my strength returning. My voice grows, the words take on a life of their own. ‘I forgive you, Mother. I forgive you, Mary Dowd.’ The creature writhes and screams. I roll from its grasp. It is losing the fight, diminishing. It howls at me in pain, but I don’t stop. I repeat it like a mantra as I grab a rock and smash the [runes]....With a great gasp, the thing loses its grip on my mother’s spirit.... ‘Mother?’ I say. I’m not really expecting an answer, and I don’t get one. She’s truly gone now. I am alone. And somehow, this is as it should be. (393)

This moment marks the first step in the process of accepting the loss of her mother. It would not be possible without also accepting that her mother was a flawed human being like everyone else. In releasing her mother from the burden of perfection, Gemma recognizes the need to accept her own imperfections.

20 The mother/daughter relationship is far from idealized in Bray's trilogy. It is fraught with tension and is frequently volatile. The narrative opens with Gemma at odds with her mother—an added layer to her grief is their angry exchange just before her mother's death—and the pattern continues in the realms as her mother tries to instruct Gemma in the use of magic. Gemma wilfully defies her mother and brings magic back to the real world: "I'm thinking of my mother's warning that I'm not ready to use my full powers yet. Oh, but I am, Mother. I am" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 315). As is often the case, her mother was right; Gemma breaks the seal between the worlds paving the way for a magical invasion. Of equal significance, however, is the wrongs of her mother; Gemma discovers "my mother is not at all the woman I thought she was. I've never really known her. She is Mary Dowd. A liar and a sorceress. A killer" (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 352). The illusion of tame respectability her mother has created is shattered. She resents the burden the knowledge represents and her mother's request for forgiveness. In the moment of raw emotion, Gemma withholds that liberating acceptance but having faced the monster, she can finally release her mother. Gemma recognizes that

In some ways, the mother I remember was as much an illusion as the leaves we turned into butterflies on our first trip to the realms. I'm going to have to let her go to accept the mother I'm only just discovering. One who was capable of murder, but who fought the dark to come back to help me. A scared, vain woman, and a powerful member of an ancient Order. (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 393-394)

Gemma must resolve her own ambivalence about her mother, not only to withstand the 'mother-as-lure' approach of the dark forces, but also to come to terms with her own imperfections. Forgiveness releases both Gemma and her mother. The burden of perfection needs to be rejected.

21 The ambiguous mother resonates in Gemma's life in another significant way. She is associated with "Kali, the destroyer" in the opening pages of the first book (2) but does not appreciate the significance until much later. She discusses the Kali statue with the Gypsy Mother Elena. "You have a talisman of Kali," Gemma observes. "The Terrible Mother," responds Mother Elena but Gemma counters with, "the goddess of destruction". Mother Elena, however, has the final word: "the destruction of ignorance". "She is the one to help us walk through the

fire of knowledge, to know our darkness that we should not fear it but should be freed, for there is both chaos and order within us” (*The Sweet Far Thing* 472). Mother Elena offers a more nuanced view of Kali and human nature: the destruction of ignorance frees the way for a more genuine existence. Gemma must embrace all aspects of her personality in order to wield her power wisely. She must emulate Kali, the terrible mother, if she wishes to birth a new world. Gemma does not, of course, give birth. The distinction between motherhood as an institution, and mothering as a practice is relevant to Bray’s trilogy. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). The patriarchal institution of motherhood is oppressive, even in benign societies. It imposes and enforces strict definitions of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ mothering. Mothering, however, is a potentially empowering act entailing social responsibility and active engagement with the world. Gemma’s mothering involves tapping into her inner “Kali”. New beginnings can only come from the destruction of the old order. As Miss Moore points out “without that spark of anger, without destruction, there can be no rebirth”; the reference is to the Morrigan “a threefold goddess, often seen as a beautiful maiden, the great mother, and the bloodthirsty crone” (*A Great and Terrible Beauty* 127). This goddess represents the threat and the appeal of the witch: seductive, fertile and violent.³ Gemma’s violence is to the social order; its outlet is a refusal to accept the status quo.

22 Many titles are bestowed on Gemma while in the realms—Priestess, Most High, Lady Hope—which can be construed as ameliorating the concept of the witch. Relabelling feminine (magical) power with these positive terms does, however, arise the question of whether or not Bray rehabilitates the witch or simply sidesteps the issue. The return to the goddesses, to pagan rather than patriarchal origins, might be the key to the problem. Moving through the realms, Gemma and her friends discover

an impressive array of friezes showing women of all sorts. Some are as young as we are; others are as old as the earth itself. Some are clearly warriors....One sits surrounded by children and fawns;Another, dressed in chain mail, wrestles a dragon. Priestesses. Queens. Mothers. Healers. It is as if the whole of womanhood is represented here”. (*The Sweet Far Thing* 81)

³ This issue is discussed from a variety of perspectives in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* edited by Brian Attebery. Volume 9, # 1, 1998 is devoted to the witch/goddess.

The range of images depict greater possibilities than Victorian society offers its young women. It is a fitting development given that “in a century fascinated with angel women, divine mothers, and other paragons on the ‘virgin’ side of the good/bad dichotomy”, Jacqueline Labbe notes, “readers of Victorian [literature] suddenly found that, instead of God the Father, these texts were substituting the Wise Woman, the Fairy Godmother, as their sage of choice” (96). In Bray’s texts, inspiration comes from a multifaceted matriarchal deity; the girls (re)create themselves in the image of the goddess of their choice. By including a range of possibilities, Bray avoids the tendency to conflate goddesses into *the* goddess. Verlyn Flieger concedes that “there is ancient precedent for this kind of amalgamation [in] the intertangled gods and goddesses of India who swap genders, marry and are born out of one another” (4). The key difference, however, is that “it is seldom as the One, but as the many and in their multifarious individuality that these gods are worshipped” (4). Individuality is a central trait of Bray’s depiction of the goddesses. The experiences of the realm—good and bad—inspire Gemma and her friends to create their own opportunities, to forge new destinies in anticipation of returning to those realms. The final moments of the trilogy find Gemma sailing into New York:

there in the city’s steam-and-smoke-smudged harbor is the most extraordinary sight of all: a great copper-clad lady with a torch in one hand and a book in the other. It is not a statesman or a god or a war hero who welcomes us to this new world. It is but an ordinary woman lighting the way—a lady offering us the liberty to pursue our dreams if we’ve courage to begin. (*The Sweet Far Thing* 818)

The implicit, but unspoken title bestowed on Gemma—Lady Liberty—is particularly apt given Emma Lazarus’ poem on the bronze plaque on the statue’s pedestal. The “mother of exiles” welcoming the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” with her lamp lifted “beside the golden door” is a fitting emblem of the young woman who accessed the realms through a door of light, bringing the winds of freedom to the oppressed (Lazarus).

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**Hogan, Susan. *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy*. New York:
Berghahn, 2012.**

By Veronica Popp, Elmhurst College and St. Augustine College, USA

1 Susan Hogan's second edition of *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy* discusses alternative approaches to therapy in a fresh and nuanced way. Hogan poses the question that if feminism is the equality of all genders, then why are therapies created by men the only techniques used? Therefore, art therapy becomes a way to help evolve psychiatry within its aim to care for the whole person. Likewise, Susan Hogan in "Forward to the Second Edition" sees art therapy as an activist action to avoid the hegemonic structure associated with traditional therapies, "in order to avoid oppressing women with misogynistic discourses that are embedded in theories and practice" (xx).

2 The revisions from the earlier 1997 edition only make the text stronger. Not merely an instruction manual, *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy* is a chain of stories held together within the basis of Hogan's introduction titled, "Visions of Difference". She seeks to chronicle the effects of poststructuralist, psychoanalytical and cultural theories. Finally, Hogan's aim is to defy the repressive structures even within the community of art therapist themselves, who rely too heavily on theory and cripple the therapy. The goal is to evoke a constantly evolving treatment that is contemplative and adaptive. The first chapter lays the historical groundwork of the implementation of feminist cultural theory. Her examples include discussion of representations of women who see of themselves as lesser: for example, pro-life advertisement placed in proximity to a closed up shocked woman's face indicating that fetuses are people and women merely the carrier (21). Finally, Hogan includes a call for awareness of social justice and the dynamics of power and oppression related to race, class and gender in British art therapy.

3 The traditional conceptions of men and women within gender systems are now rooted in popular culture representation of masculinity and femininity. Hogan's aim is to challenge these binary oppositional categorizations with an individualistic and neo-liberal approach to art therapy. The collected work she chooses and edits supports her vision statement. The voices throughout the texts are incredibly diverse. Hogan's text presents practitioners, novices, graduate students and professors to collaborate on best practices of art therapy.

3 Helene Burt's essay, "Women, Art Therapy and Feminist Theories of Development" reflects Hogan's aims of client awareness as the main objective of successful art therapy. Burt provides the example of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) as an example of prejudice, "We must ask then to what degree is BPD a condition of being feminine as define by psychiatry and psychology" (79). If hegemonic women should be submissive, dependent and expressive, then BPD women are exceptions to that gendered categorization. BPD women often receive diagnoses based on their womanhood rather than symptoms, a clear gendered preconception.

4 The case studies and use of the artwork adds to the distinctions of the therapy. Specifically, Rosy Martin's sharing of her own personal path towards art therapy and photography, "Looking and Reflecting: Returning the Gaze, Re-enacting Memories and Imagining the Future Through Phototherapy" supports Hogan's argument about the stripping of the gendered gaze in photography as well as the transformative power to 'view' one's struggles and pain via photography to free oneself from trauma. In addition, Martin shares a postscript on the power of the instant share through social media to advance feedback. Although, she counters, the excess of photography may lead to a purge of its necessity. Finally, Martin is critical of photo-editing software that erased imperfections, continuing to support, "re-enactment phototherapy" to reflect on our cognitive authenticity (135).

5 Maggie Jones's powerful treatise titled, "Alice, Dora and Constance from the Eve of History," breaks down the tenacious female archetypes of women created by men and male language. Jones poses the question, "How do women make sense of, know ourselves, when we are subject to the definition of men?" (102). She adds credence to the theory of therapy to support the individual rather than to make classification assumptions on women. Jones begins this piece by breaking down male centred viewpoints on women exposing the gender patriarchal worldview. In Western Christianity, the fall of Eve became the basis of the denial of rights, education and knowledge. She exposes the hypocrisy of Freud's words on not underestimating the communal circumstances that women suffered, yet, he considered his own patient Dora a hysteric. Freud classified Dora within his own definitions due to her ending therapy before he could provide a full diagnosis. Missing from the analysis of Lewis Carroll's Alice is an easy connection to math and science as being the language dominated by men at the time, specifically Carroll, a lecturer of mathematics at Christ Church Oxford. Jones concludes that art becomes the

bridge where the losses of language between male and female can be joined together in supportive discourse.

6 Not only is this collection a critique of the pitfalls of psychiatry, it is also a critique of capitalism. The essay, “The Role of the Woman-only Group: A Creative Group for Women Experiencing Homelessness” by Judie Jackson explores how art therapy can increase the confidence of homeless women. However, Jackson also discusses the higher likelihood of homeless women to be sexually abused and to take part in sex work as adults. The art therapy group and cooperative projects led to women abused or ignored by the system of mental health practitioners the confidence to move ahead with their lives. Jackson’s piece views the relationship of women producing art and beauty rather than relying on their bodies for livelihood.

7 Similarly, “Art Therapy and Empowerment in a Women's Self-help Project” by Marian Liebmann discusses women gaining perspective on their own life’s journeys with the use of art supplies; they can be free to experiment with making a mess. Hogan fulfils her initial goal within her introduction of discussing the woman only groups, but does not withdraw in the discussion when money is the major issue for its continuance. Hogan criticises the ‘business as usual’ schema of white capitalist imperialistic patriarchy as a harbinger to the prevention of art therapy.

8 “The Pregnant Art Therapist's Countertransference” by Sally Skaife presents an ambitious beginning; however, the voice struck me as weak and undeveloped. While I do agree it is important to have the graduate student voice articulated, this piece would have benefited from another practitioner’s perspective in a co-authored piece. Skaife’s piece mediates between the exposure and the physicality of the pregnant art therapist’s experience. She discusses the patient’s documented fears of abandonment in the loss of the practitioner. Interestingly, the theme of being “on display” is discussed, but needs auxiliary progress (239). The practitioner’s pregnancy and patient’s desire for information on her life is an interconnected theme that could have been touched on further within the concept of the submissive woman. If a male practitioner’s partner was pregnant, the group would never know, therefore, the navigation of the pregnancy within the embarrassment and shame of the therapist’s sexuality needs further links to the power and privilege in childbearing and disclosure. It would be delightful to see Skiafe continue to mature her arguments in a postscript in a future addition. At this time, the piece is out of place within this text on art therapy.

9 The strongest pieces are the final three articles, by Wadeson, McGee and Hogan, which each chronicle a specific patient's experiences of interaction with art therapy as a case study. These final three could branch off to a specialist text on navigating therapy and theory. In "Many Murders: Art Therapy with a 'Traditional' Woman," Harriet Wadeson evokes the story of a woman's life, thanks to art therapy, becoming a successful and confident artist, using her therapist as role model. However, over time, the patient became her own hero by using art therapy to transcend the traditional spaces of womanhood. Continuing with McGee's piece, "A Feminist Approach to Child Sexual Abuse and Shame" claiming art therapy creates positive bodily associations for those who suffered trauma in their past. Ending with Hogan's piece, "A Tasty Drop of Dragon's Blood" about the surrender of female power in pregnancy and birth and how power was returned through art therapy provides a strong case on the continuance of research in these therapies.

10 Each essay contributes to the understanding of therapy as a process of wholeness; every practitioner also discusses their own personal involvement with the therapies and techniques. Hogan composed and edited a collection of thrilling, transformative discussions of the role of artistry and therapy. *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy* is useful to practitioners and first timers alike. While not unfounded, the conjecture that women are educated about feminism due to their womanhood is a little troubling. There is a wide disparity between genders of art therapy practitioners; perhaps Hogan bringing in a male or trans art therapist's perspective in a third edition would strengthen her argument about the need for change in the practice.

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List of Contributors

James M. Curtis is Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Director of the John U. Monroe Writing Center at Tougaloo College. He is currently set to defend his dissertation, *In Absentia Parentis: The Orphan Figure in Late Twentieth Century Children's Fantasy*, a chapter of which can be found in the Winter 2015 issue of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. His most recent work can be found in *Children's Literature in Education*, in an edited collection entitled *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney*, and in an upcoming collection on children's comics entitled *Children's Comics: Past and Present* (forthcoming June 2016).

Joshua Yu Burnett is an Assistant Professor of English at North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He earned his PhD in English Literature with a focus in African American and Postcolonial Literature from Florida State University. He is currently working on a manuscript entitled *My Left Arm, Her Twin Blades: Narratives of Resistance in Black Speculative Fiction*. His research interests center around Black Speculative Fiction, both African American and diasporic, and also include Afrofuturism, Queer Studies, the music of Janelle Monáe, resistance, and intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. His publications include *African American Review*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Ambivalent Ambiguities* (edited by Miranda Green-Bartlett and Meghan Gilbert-Hickey), and *On Writing: A Process Reader* (edited by Deborah Coxwell-Teague).

Danielle Russell is an Associate Professor in English Literature at Glendon College, York University. She specializes in American and Victorian literature. She is the author of *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space and Identity in Cather and Morrison*. Her publications include chapters on *The Song of the Lark*, *The Color Purple*, the critical legacy of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Anne of Green Gables*, Neil Gaiman's fiction, and the *Hunger Games* trilogy.

Veronica Popp is a writer, teacher and scholar. She has been published in *Lunar Attic*, *The Collagist*, *PenCambria*, *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, *New Welsh Review*, *Journal of Popular Culture* and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. Additionally, she is a Teaching Artist and Co-Editor at Young Chicago Authors on the "Chiraq" student journalist project. Popp serves on

the Modern Language Association Committee for Contingent Labor in the Profession and believes the feminization of adjunct labor is a growing concern.