The Transcorporeal South: Bodies and Ecologies in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSCORPOREAL SOUTH: BODIES AND ECOLOGIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

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This dissertation proposes that transcorporeality offers an alternative to Cartesian dualistic modes of embodiment in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Opposing the division between mind and body as theorized by René Descartes, transcorporeality advances the body’s porosity, maintaining that the individual is enmeshed within the material world and that this entanglement consubstantiates consciousness. Examining the works of Descartes, focusing especially on the ways that Cartesian ideas have been applied in Southern culture, I contend that a Cartesian definition of subjectivity, based upon self-evident reason and independence of the mind from the body, does not accurately represent the experience of individuals considered overly embodied, whether marked by race, gender, disability, or sexuality. Consequently, Cartesian dualism has provided a philosophical foundation for oppressive, discriminatory, and exploitative systems including colonialism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism.
I conclude that these authors resist the division of mind from body, presenting an alternative, embodied definition of subjectivity that recognizes that material, bodily, and environmental contingencies consubstantiate consciousness. This perspective developed by Stacy Alaimo, Maurice Meleau-Ponty, and Mikhail Bakhtin informs this alternative. Walker Percy critiqued a Cartesian mind/body division at the root of the “malaise” among Southern writers. The splitting of the body from the soul does prove an essential aspect of each author’s consideration of what it means to be human. But, while Binx, Percy’s protagonist, can forget his embodiment, existing in the world as an unmarked White male, Hurston’s, Wright’s, and McCullers’s characters’ embodiment exceeds normative bounds to resist racist, sexist, social and environmental restrictions. Where Binx’s problem is grounding himself in space, Janie, Bigger, and Mick must seek an environment large enough to support their growth. When these characters embrace embodiment, Binx proceeds into the healthcare profession with an understanding of the body extending beyond a Cartesian medical model that divides mental/physical, Janie pulls in her horizon, Bigger gains the ability to recognize the “White mountain” as embodied people, and Mick grows to exceed the gender-based restrictions society imposes upon her. In doing so, each offers a new embodied alternative to subjectivity that acknowledges its materiality and contingency.

Each of these authors envisions a permeable, ethical, fully embodied South, no longer peopled by ghosts, reaching beyond itself, turning away from insularity, engaged in intra-active growth, and becoming. A complex web of historical, political, biological, ecological, and economic networks enmeshes the characters in these novels. Their integral selves emerge inseparable from this web, substantiated but not determined. A much more dynamic conception
of subjectivity materializes that does not depend on dualistic racist and sexist hierarchies. New modes of being redefine what it means to be Southern.
THE TRANSCORPOREAL SOUTH: BODIES AND ECOLOGIES IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

BY

TIFFANY MORGAN MESSICK
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Because this dissertation demands the acknowledgement of the Other and insists upon the notion that knowledge is not self-evident – the property of an isolated, rational cogito – but emerges through intra-action with the world and others – circulated, negotiated, and mediated – I cannot fail to acknowledge those who have graciously assisted me in this journey.

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Introduction

READING SOUTHERN BODIES: FROM CARTESIAN DUALISM TO TRANSCORPOREAL INTRA-ACTION

It [humankind], this strange new creature, not only has an environment, as do all creatures. It has a world. Its world is the totality of that which is named. This is different from its environment. An environment has gaps. There are no gaps in a world.

~Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*

The identity of the human body can never be viewed as a final or finished product as in the case of the Cartesian automaton, since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment. The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies.

~Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*

In his essay “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind,” Walker Percy rejects Descartes’s splitting of the soul (or mind) from the body or matter. The mind – body/matter split proves an essential aspect of Percy’s consideration of Southern consciousness. Percy attributes the moral degradation of modern society to the rise of Cartesian reason and scientism above the transcendent, mystic doctrine of Christian prophecy. Percy laments Descartes’s mechanistic account of the universe. Unlike Percy, I view anthropocentrism and the nature/culture divide as the ethical dilemma Cartesian dualism poses. This divide has historically been misused and misinterpreted in American thought to justify the privileging of White males by attributing autonomous rationality to them while disadvantaging women and Blacks.
socially, economically, and ecologically by associating both groups with the body through labor – physical and maternal.

Because Percy’s views represent patterns of Southern philosophy, and *The Moviegoer*, begins my dissertation, I will commence with an inquiry into Percy’s analysis of Descartes. To Percy, Descartes divests the cosmos of wonder, spirit, and mysticism, reducing it to parts and mechanisms, which results in alienating the spiritual seeker from their world – no longer a part of the cosmos and the transcendent order of being. Percy asserts that Descartes has separated humankind from the cosmos and reduced the wonder of existence to rational scientific principles. Percy seeks to reinvest the universe with transcendent wonder by asserting that humans create their own world by naming it into existence: “Its [humanity’s] world is the totality of that which is named” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 289). By naming their world into existence, Percy’s namer operates as a Cartesian cogito that thinks itself into existence.

I share Percy’s concern over, and part of his critique of, Cartesian dualism. But I also contend that Percy merely replaces “I think therefore I am” with “I name” without effectively bridging the divide between mind and matter. Percy’s namer/“new creature” remains abstracted from their environment as an objective namer, much like Descartes’s cogito. The basis for subjectivity remains the ability to transcend one’s environment through rational thought. The world of Percy’s “new creature” exists separate and above environment. Percy further maintains and strengthens the divide between mind and matter by insisting upon the namer’s immateriality: “A material substance cannot name or assert a proposition” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 287). I argue that Percy’s disembodied namer/new creature’s disembodied objective autonomy eschews markers
of identity and subjectivity, such as race, gender, ability, and class. By eschewing these physical markers, Percy denies the contingencies of material reality and embodiment and the capacity of environment to make and unmake character.

This dissertation proposes transcorporeality as an alternative contemporary philosophy. Transcorporeality pertains to fluidity between material and theoretical bodies, challenging dualities and dichotomies. Transcorporeality assumes inter- and intra-connections, intra-actions, entanglements, and transits between human and other-than-human bodies.¹ Most importantly, transcorporeality contends that matter and the material world are not blank slates for human consumption and inscription, not uncontested ground for human development. Transcorporeality cautions against the imposition of human purpose and value upon nature. Nature has a purpose of its own. Conversely, rationality does not render humanity distinct from nature’s dirt and mire.

Percy affirms that the individual exists “situated in the universe, but not as an organism” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 289). I argue that Percy’s namer is fundamentally just as disembodied and ungrounded as Descartes’s cogito because Percy’s grounding evades the ways in which we are all of us enmeshed in material reality and thus denies our status as organisms in an environment. Environment consubstantiates consciousness. Yet Percy’s “new creature” (humankind) speaks itself and its world into existence much as a Cartesian cogito thinks itself into existence. Descartes proclaims that “the entire universe can be said to be an entity originating in

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¹“Intra-action,” a term used to replace “interaction,” describes the acting of human and non-human bodies upon one another. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad 141).
God’s thought, that is, an entity created by a single act of the Divine mind” (The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, hereafter CSM, II 97). God thinks the universe into existence, as detailed in the Genesis account of God’s creation of the world. Indeed, God speaks the world into existence. Percy’s namer – his “new creature” – assumes the same disembodied autonomy as the creative divine over the material world. Ultimately, Percy contends there are “no gaps” (defined as existential “unknowns”) in the world the “new creature” names, elevating abstract world above material environment (Signposts in a Strange Land 289).

Percy grounds the individual semiotically and symbolically, through the act of naming, but not materially. Continuing to perpetuate the divide between mind and matter, Percy believes that naming is a process independent of environment, insisting that language and naming are not merely the instinctual responses of an organism adapting to its environment. Percy cites that “all solitary biological organisms have instinctive responses” and specifies that chimps like Nim and Washoe do not acquire language but are conditioned to respond to clues in a certain way by trainers – an instance of behaviorism (Signposts in a Strange Land 289, 281-2). Percy continues, “I can draw you a picture of an organism responding to a stimulus. Can you draw me a picture of an organism asserting a sentence?” (Signposts in a Strange Land 276). Percy thus maintains a fundamental distinction between “the responding organism” and “the languaged human” (Signposts in a Strange Land 282). This distinction maintains the
division between nature/culture that Descartes insists upon when he also separates human and animalkind.²

Percy’s account poses several difficulties. His “new creature,” in naming their world, objectively distances themselves from their environment and abstracts themselves out of reality, rather than grounding themselves in material reality. In sharply distinguishing between human intelligence and that of other organisms, Percy further strengthens the Cartesian divide between nature and culture – the “gap between biology and grammar” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 282). Percy’s endeavors to prove that humans are “more than organisms in an environment” reacting instinctively, more than “matter in motion” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 276, 278). But such efforts to elevate what is human above environment have unfortunate consequences, disregarding unknowns in environment and dismissing the impact of environment upon consciousness and subjectivity. When Percy elevates humans above environment and insists on coherency, he casts gaps in the environment as imperfections and flaws.

Yet these very gaps constitute selfhood. As Stacy Alaimo, a leading theorist of transcorporeality, observes, “The process of making meaning is an ongoing one, a process that includes nonhuman nature as a participant rather than as an object of inquiry” (*Bodily Natures* 43). The flaw in Percy’s semiotic response to the Cartesian splitting of mind and body is its continual delineation of the human and the cultural against a background of mute matter and cordonning off material reality from language.

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² For discussion over Descartes’s language test that seeks to prove that apes and other animals lack cognition and the reasoning abilities of the cogito, because animals do not possess the capacity for language, see Sankey, “Descartes’s Language Test and Ape Language Research,” and Sykes, “Walker Percy, Language, and Homo Singularis.”
Language, when elevated as the hallmark of reason and the basis of subjectivity, reduces materiality and nature into forms of cultural representation. Transcorporeality insists matter matters. Matter constitutes the very stuff of being. Percy creates a namer, however, as disconnected and abstracted as Descartes’s cogito because Percy still insists upon the superiority of the mental and upon the immateriality of the namer and knower. Percy’s semiotic world denies the way the individual’s sense of selfhood is profoundly interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood.

This dissertation undertakes to examine precisely the “gaps” in environment or “unknowns” that Percy attempts to exclude from his account of the human and to consider the impact of these gaps on subjectivity (Signposts in a Strange Land 289). This consideration demands a much fuller account of connections between the human and environment, the more-than-human. Actual environmental contingencies demonstrate the ways in which environment constitutes the self and highlight the intersections between race, gender, ability, and place in Southern literature.

Towards this end, I will discuss how Walker Percy’s The Moviegoer, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Richard Wright’s Native Son, and Carson McCullers’s The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter represent the body’s interchanges with its environment and the ways in which environment constitutes selfhood. While Percy’s Binx Bolling struggles to place and ground himself in the physical, material world and to connect his integral self with his body, the (Black and/or female) characters in the other novels are overly embodied and embedded – marked by race or gender or both – and cannot disassociate and detach themselves from environment in the same way Binx
Bolling – White, affluent, and male – does. Hurston’s Janie, Wright’s Bigger, and McCullers’s Mick resist the flow of unjust powers with their bodies and attest to the effects of injustice – racial and environmental. Each author illustrates how power structures mediate the human relationship to the natural world and materiality and the ways in which these mediations sustain or enervate the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable minorities.

**Cartesian Dualism**

My project first engages with the theoretical framework of Cartesianism. The Cartesian self as subsequently interpreted in Western thought is universal, rational, autonomous, discarnate, invulnerable, and coherent. Subsequently, in the West generally and in America particularly, this definition of Cartesian selfhood has been misinterpreted to deny subjectivity to those individuals marked by race, gender, or both. Charles W. Mills explains the association of White maleness with the cogito:

> Classically individualist, indeed sometimes – self parodically – to the verge of solipsism, blithely indifferent to the possible cognitive consequences of class, racial, or gender situatedness (or perhaps, more accurately, taking a propertied White male standpoint as given), modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology was for hundreds of years from its Cartesian origins profoundly inimical terrain for the development of any concept of structural group-based miscognition. (‘White Ignorance’ 13)

White propertied males, free from the negative consequences of class, race, and gender divisions, have the luxury of thinking themselves into existence without the difficulties or influence of these “negative” markers that constitute and shape selfhood. Val Plumwood explains that Descartes defines nature in opposition to reason: “Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the non-human world, matter,
physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness” (19-20). According to Plumwood, this system of thought has created a process in which humans with privileged status use denial, hyper-separation, instrumentalization, objectification, and homogenization as methods to manage racial, gender, and class differences. Culture, including language and reason, become the property of privileged individuals, to be used by them for their advantage, and everything else becomes nature, including non-privileged individuals.

In contrast to White males, gendered and raced individuals cannot divest themselves of their embodiment in the way a White male seemingly can. In this Cartesian tradition, women and people of color become overly embodied. In America specifically, Cartesian thinking has been used to deny Blacks and women the same autonomy as White males. The structure of American racism is one of Cartesian ejection, in which the White man associates himself with mind and culture and associates African Americans and women with the body and nature.

Sarah Hoagland asserts that “Cartesian methodology, a methodological inward-turning, promotes a cognitive dismissal of all that lies outside the bounds of sense, and results in a highly sophisticated Eurocentrism” and that “within this tradition epistemology is a strategic practice of maintaining power relations by denying epistemic credibility to objects/subjects of knowledge who are marginalized . . . and thereby denies relationality” (25). In this way Cartesianism denies marginalized non-White individuals the rational faculties belonging to the cogito.

In much the same way, Cartesianism, as it has been interpreted, functions socially and culturally to marginalize women. Samantha Frost observes that
Feminist scholars have pointed out, historically, this Cartesian understanding of the passivity of matter was figured in racialized, gendered, and class terms that in turn were used to justify racial, gender, and class inequalities. Women, the lower classes, and people of various cultural or national origins were construed as trapped in and by the body because they were perceived as lacking the wherewithal to distance themselves from the body's operations and to steer a rationally-defined course for their behavior and actions. That is to say, the "others" of modernity were construed both as subject to the determinations of the biological or animal functions of the body and as vulnerable to a kind of behavioral determinism, a vulnerability which derived from the inability of a weak intellect. (72)

Because Cartesianism, construed in this fashion, defines subjectivity and existence as the ability to reason, it denies both to marginalized individuals. This construal constitutes a type of Cartesian sexual/biological determinism. Thus, an examination of a Cartesian definition of selfhood provides insight into the ways in which Americans who are neither White nor male are denied subjectivity and, in turn, the ways in which non-White and non-male Southern authors seek to subvert the Cartesian self.

Although the kind of Cartesianism described above has influenced much of Western culture, it has particularly influenced American – and Southern American – culture. In his assessment of the intellectual character of America, Alexis de Tocqueville affirms the applicability of Cartesian philosophical thought, stating:

If I seek amongst these characteristics that which predominates over and includes almost all the rest, I discover that in most of the operations of the mind, each American appeals to the individual exercise of his own understanding alone. America is therefore one of the countries in the world where philosophy is least studied, and where the precepts of Descartes are best applied. (3)

Tocqueville observes that in America, the individual’s understanding or reason serves as the foundation of subjectivity. A century later, in 1930, the Nashville Agrarians established a tradition of Cartesian thought in the South and specifically in Southern literature--a tradition that Percy continues. In the South especially, Cartesianism lent
weight to imaginary dualisms of American race and gender, in which the White man represents culture; women and African Americans, nature. Because rationality forms the foundation of Cartesian subjectivity, and the mind supposedly operates independently from the body and its environment, women and African Americans are denied subjectivity as natural rather than rational beings – bodies rather than minds.³

Yet, Southern Cartesianism presents problems for White males as well as for women and Blacks. Percy’s protagonist in *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling, experiences his White, male disembodiment as alienating and consequently endeavors to overcome a Cartesian divide between the mind and body even as he struggles to come to terms with his embodied selfhood. Hurston, Wright, and McCullers embrace the same struggle against Cartesian definitions of subjectivity to assert their selfhood; however, they do so from the position of a more fundamental alienation. They propose a new definition of the self – embodied and entangled in networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, biological, and ecological. Their protagonists (Janie Starks, Bigger Thomas, and Mick Kelly) each describe a divided self – a fractured sense of consciousness – upon realizing that their authentic embodied self does not cohere with the Cartesian definition of subjectivity, rendering them non-subjects. This dissertation undertakes to understand how marginalized, overly embodied individuals

³ Patricia Hill Collins notes the naturalization of Black men in the White mind: “Because Black men did hard manual labor, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as big, strong, and stupid. White elites reduced Black men to their bodies, and identified their muscles and their penises as their most important sites” (56-7). The visual emphasis on Black women’s bodies and especially buttocks can be traced throughout American popular culture, dating back to the Hottentot Venus, the “anthro-erotic sensation” of the nineteenth century. See Pieterse 94; Gilman, “Black Bodies”; hooks, *Black* 62-64. Whites associate Black men and women with the unthinking body (a natural object) rather than rationality.
confront/reject oppressive Cartesian standards of subjectivity while achieving and asserting selfhood by transcorporeal standards.

Although often I speak in this dissertation of a Southern Cartesianism distinct from Descartes himself, certain elements of this thought tradition can definitely be traced back to Descartes. Descartes separated mind from body with his famous Enlightenment utterance: “Cogito, ergo sum.” This assertion posits that the individual is not embedded but separate and independent from their body and the material world. Descartes separates the mind from the body in Meditation VI, detailing two types of substances: matter, the essential property being spatial extension, and mind, the essential property being thought:

On the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing [that is, a mind], and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it. (CSM II 54)

The mind, according to Descartes, was a "thinking thing" (res cogitans) and an immaterial, incorporeal substance. Descartes continues to elaborate upon the distinct properties of matter:

We shall perceive that the nature of matter, or body considered in general, consists not in being something which is hard, heavy, colored, or which affects the senses in any way, but simply in being something which is extended in length, breadth and depth. (CSM I 224)

Citing this passage in Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy Part I, Peter Machamer et al. assert that, “having extension alone as its principal attribute, we may infer that matter is passive and inert” (26). Machamer et al. conclude that Descartes, “having rejected motion as a proper property of bodies,” ascribes bodies “no power or force that is part of
what they are” (26). In this way, external bodies (or matter) do not act upon or influence the immaterial mind or will; consciousness is altogether disconnected from material interactions, although consciousness can act upon the material world. In fact, according to Descartes, consciousness does not depend on the material at all: “From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist” (CSM I 127).

Descartes thereby disposes of material concerns as well as social and physical environment as they relate to consciousness. “I think therefore I am” implies that rationality forms the basis for personhood and autonomy is freedom from the burden of materiality/embodiment. Descartes states, “It consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force” (CSM II 40). Descartes does not attribute force to matter as an intrinsic property, and so material concerns cannot determine rationality (intellect) or personhood. This gives rise to the Cartesian subject and Cartesian individualism, which holds that mental states are fixed solely by virtue of states internal to the agent (or to the mind of that agent).

**Cartesian Nature and Cartesian Bodies**

Cartesian individualism and its implications for the material world have been widely influential in Western thought; they have exerted an especially strong, although contested, influence on Southern culture. Accordingly, in the next sections of this introduction I will offer an overview of the implications of Cartesianism for several topics important to my dissertation, beginning with non-human nature and the human body.
The inertia that Descartes attributes to matter extends to the natural world of non-human living things. Richard Westfall explains that “physical nature, for Descartes, is ‘inert and devoid of sources of activity of its own’” (31). In *Principles of Philosophy IV*, Descartes expounds that there exist no occult forces in stones or plants, no amazing and marvelous sympathies and antipathies, in fact there exist nothing in the whole of nature which cannot be explained in terms of purely corporeal causes, totally devoid of mind and thought. (CSM I 279)

Descartes also describes nature as composed of machines – automata – that operate like clockwork and affirms that “all knowledge of nature must be drawn from mechanics” (CSM I 289). Descartes calls upon humankind to apply their rational autonomy to become “masters and possessors of nature” – pitting intellect against nature, casting nature as inferior in its corporeality and unthinkingness, and upholding the active immateriality of the mind over and above the passive materiality of nature (CSM I 142). While Descartes contends humans are self-determining, his mechanistic account of nature is quite deterministic. Natural laws ensure that nature operates mechanistically.

In Descartes’s thought, many of the characteristics of the non-human natural world apply as well to the human body. In *Treatise on Man*, Descartes aims to understand the human body as a machine, making the supposition that “the body is nothing else but a statue or earthen machine” (CSM I 99). Descartes’s theory of the body does not allow for dynamic exchange and interaction with the world around it but, rather, theorizes the body as a self-contained system, offering a non-relational, closed, and finished view of embodiment akin to concepts of the classical body. Descartes holds that impenetrability is a property of the body by virtue of its extension: “For the real
extension of body is such that it excludes any penetrability of parts” (CSM II 297-8).

Christine Battersby describes the Cartesian body as a finished house and container that repels everything external to it: “The self is inside the body in much the same way that a body is inside a room or a house. Bodies are containers that protect against and resist external forces, whilst also holding back internal forces from expansion or extrusion. All that is other is on the outside” (341). The closed Cartesian body does not permit growth and expansion but emphasizes containment. Sociologist Ian Burkitt affirms the Cartesian body’s closure:

The closed and rationalized Cartesian body is therefore severed from its sensual connections with the world and its collective associations with other being. . . . The person of rationalism and classicism is firmly encased in his or her closed bodily shell, alone with his or her doubt, uncertainty and fear. (49)

The body, impenetrable, acts as a container and shield, impeding its own connection to the outside world. By denying the impact of external forces, Cartesianism effectively denies the full experience of embodiment. Lynn Meskell outlines an alternative to the rather static Cartesian view:

An embodied body represents, and is, a lived experience where the interplay of irreducible natural, social, cultural and psychical phenomena are brought to fruition through each individual’s resolution of external structures, embodied experience and choice. Thus, subjective bodily experience is mitigated by factors such as social constraints, practicality, contingency and free will: this dialectical position potentially circumvents the determinism associated with extreme social construction, Cartesianism and essentialism. (159)

In contrast, Descartes dismisses the influence of external forces, upholding impenetrability like rationality as an essential ideal. For this reason, neither embodiment nor environment constitutes consciousness.
When Descartes classified the body as impenetrable, he also, perhaps inadvertently, established a new understanding of biology as a determinative force, not subject to social and environmental forces and factors. Just as the mechanisms of a clock determine its movements, so organs determine the functions of a body, as Descartes argues:

I should like you to consider that these functions (including passion, memory, and imagination) follow from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels. (CSM I 108)

Mechanism does not allow for biological contingencies, anomalies, or evolution. Conversely, a part that functions incorrectly does not do so due to external environmental causes/forces, but internally. In this view of the body, Stacy Alaimo explains, “the human body is sharply delineated from the background of the environment— magically sealed, impermeable, isolated” (Bodily Natures 106). In this way Descartes’s theory of selfhood has given rise to dangerous essentialist notions of biology. Anomalies and contingencies constitute malfunctions.

**Race and Cartesianism**

While Descartes wrote of the cogito as universal, much of the philosophical tradition following him has relegated non-White racial groups outside of consciousness – as “natural” beings barred from the domain of human transcendence, rationality, and subjectivity. Here Cartesian dualism—if not Descartes himself—has inclined thinkers to separate nature from culture (intellect), animal from human, and such divisions have been historically interpreted to classify Blacks as non-cogitos, more natural and animal than human. To take one of the more outrageous yet revealing instances, Immanuel
Kant interprets mind/body dualism in biological and racial terms, linking certain physical attributes permanently with certain psychological attributes. Kant details the “Negro’s” characteristics:

Humid warmth is generally preferential to the robust growth of animals. In short, there arises from these conditions the Negro, who is well-fitted to his climate—that is, strong, fleshy, nimble, but, under ample care of his motherland, lazy, soft and dallying. (2:438, 93)

Kant associates physical strength with the growth of animals, laziness, and natural environment. Kant then relates intellectual capacity directly to race: “The Negro race, one could say, is exactly the opposite of the American . . . . They acquire culture, but only a culture of slaves; that is, they allow themselves to be trained. It can be educated, but only to the education of servants, i.e. they can be trained” (320-1). Kant theorizes that a “Negro” race cannot create a culture of its own because of a deficient intellect. Finally, Kant places Whites at the pinnacle of the racial hierarchy he establishes, claiming that Whites possess the most intellectual and cultural capacity:

The race of the Whites contains all incentives and talents in itself; and so one must observe it more carefully. To the White race belong all of Europe, the Turks and the Kalmucks. If ever a revolution occurred, it was always brought about by the Whites, and the Hindus, Americans, Negroes never had any part of it. (25:1187, 320–1)

In Enlightenment thought, Whiteness became linked to reason and culture, and Blackness became linked to corporeality, primitive instinct, and nature.

Timothy Reiss observes that Descartes himself insists on the homogeneity of human minds, speaking in universal terms of the cogito (whatever thinks exists) and excluding discussion of slavery or race (16). John Harfouch discusses the implications of race in Cartesian dualism, noting that when Descartes is questioned in the Second Set of
Objections to explain how “the natives of Canada, the Huron and other primitive peoples” (CSM II 89) have no conception of the innate idea of God, he responds that while such peoples might "reject the name, they concede the reality" (CSM II 99). Harfouch points out that Descartes could have denied that the Hurons possess the capacity and a mind (86). Descartes instead upholds the notion of the homogeneity of human minds by affording the Hurons the same rational capacity as his cogito.

The problem with Descartes’s thought as applied to race lies in the implications of denying the significance of external contingencies upon consciousness. Homogeneity denies the ways in which racial and gender differences – Black bodies navigating racist environments – substantiate consciousness. Charles Mills demonstrates the ways in which the universal disembodied subjectivity implied in Descartes’s proof of existence does not accord with the reality of Black subjectivity. For “the Cartesian sum” the “allegedly universal predicament” is “the knowledge of one’s own existence” and Descartes’s proofs “involve a whole program of assumptions about the world and (taken-for-granted) normative claims about what is philosophically important” (“Non-Cartesian Sums” 8). The primary philosophical dilemma that faces the Cartesian subject is proving its own existence. As Mills explains, this normative assumption hardly describes the plight of the non-White sum in the United States:

Contrast this sum with a different kind, that of Ralph Ellison’s classic novel of the Black experience, Invisible Man. What are the problems that this individual faces? Is the problem global doubt? Not at all; such a doubt would never be possible, because the whole point of subordinate Black experience, or the general experience of oppressed groups, is that the subordinated are in no position to doubt the existence of the world and other people, especially that of their oppressors. It could be said that only those most solidly attached to the world have the luxury of doubting its reality, whereas those whose attachment is more precarious, whose existence is dependent on the goodwill or ill temper of others,
are those compelled to recognize that it exists. The first is a function of power, the second of subjection. If your daily existence is largely defined by oppression, by forced intercourse with the world, it is not going to occur to you that doubt about your oppressor's existence could in any way be a serious or pressing philosophical problem; this idea will simply seem frivolous, a perk of social privilege. (“Non-Cartesian Sums” 8)

The philosophical concerns of those who have continually been forced to strive to proclaim, “I am,” and do not have the luxury of confronting the universe, having more pressing entanglements to consider, will vary radically from those whose personhood has never gone unrecognized. Mills asserts that Descartes’s assumption, holding that the most pressing philosophical problem facing the individual is existential doubt, denies the experience of persons whose status as a cogito, as an individual, and as a subject has been rejected. For these persons, asserting their individuality and subjectivity proves critical. Paradoxically, these individuals already experience attachment and embeddedness in ways that assume and assure being.

Under the influence of a Cartesian heritage dividing nature and culture, American traditions have historically emphasized a stereotypical association of African Americans with nature, animalism, and primitivism. Kimberly Smith argues that “the slave system forced slaves into an intimacy with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it” (10). African Americans became the “true American peasantry” (10). Smith notes that White American “primitivists” believed there to be an intrinsic connection between nature and ‘primitive peoples’ like peasants” (10, 98). Slavery solidified the association between Blacks and nature and primitivism in the minds of their overseers, firmly placing Blacks on the (“inferior”) nature side of the Cartesian nature/culture divide.
As slavery became the dominant social, political, and economic system in the American South, Whites continued to circulate this racist notion of natural primitivism by comparing Blacks to monkeys scientifically and culturally. American scientist and creator of the Peale Museum of Natural History Charles Wilson Peale rhetorically asked his audiences when viewing the stuffed orangutan exhibit, “How like an old Negro?” David Brigham contends that Peale’s question illustrates the fact that “the boundary across species was mediated by differences within the human species. Blacks stood a step closer than Whites to apes in Peale’s view of natural hierarchy” (130). Similarly, J. Stanley Lemons notes the heavy “impact of the scientific racism that argued that non-Whites, especially Blacks, were less than human; the result was an increasing emphasis of monkey-like characteristics” (104). Patricia Hill Collins describes the malignant nature of these comparisons: “Viewing Africans and animals alike as embodied creatures ruled by ‘instinct or bodily impulses’ worked to humanize apes and dehumanize Black people” (100). Descartes denied speech, language, rationality, a soul, and consciousness to animals, asserting that animals are reflex driven, instinctual, while humans are responsive and responsible rather than reactive. Descartes specifically refers to apes as an example of an “irrational brute” (CSM II 140-1). Though Descartes never explicitly discusses race or makes an overt association between Blacks and apes, the idea permeated scientific thought in America and in popular culture.

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4 For discussion of Descartes’s view of animals as unthinking automata, see Thomas, “Descartes on the Animal Within, and the Animals Without.”
Comparisons to primates asserted that Blacks did not experience the same independence from and autonomous mastery of nature enjoyed by the Cartesian subject in the White American consciousness, supposed to specially manifest the characteristics of the cogito. Black proximity to nature, accordingly, alienates African Americans from the realm of the rational, transcendent cogito. In this way, White Americans connected Blacks with the body, the land, and animality – more natural being (inert and unthinking) than rational cogito. This biological determinism reinforces a Cartesian mechanistic view of biology that does not allow for the play of contingencies, anomalies, or evolution.

**Cartesian Gender**

Many of the Cartesian philosophical elements that have denigrated Blacks have also historically mired women in nature and been employed to classify women as irrational non-cogitos. In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Starks must fight against the Cartesian divide between nature and culture (knowledge) in her interactions with her husbands, especially Jody Starks, who states his belief that men have to think for women because women are like “chilluns and chickens and cows” and cannot “think none theirselves” (71). Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, laments that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (53). Hurston intimately connects Janie’s wisdom with nature. To gain subjectivity, Janie must fight against Cartesian dualism to assert herself as both natural and knowing. In Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick Kelly closely ties her identity to music, and she desires to become a composer like Mozart – her favorite. Society, however, associates the role of composer with masculinity and culture and deems it an inappropriate role for Mick. Her brother
Bill Kelly chides her foolishness in believing she could make a violin herself from a cracked ukulele strung with guitar and banjo strings (The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter 44-45). Instead, society associates her with her bodily nature – specifically her abnormally tall, unfeminine height that transgresses discrete Cartesian bodily borders. In their quest for identity, both Janie and Mick must ultimately define themselves in opposition to Cartesian standards of subjectivity.

In epistemological terms, traditional dualistic subjectivity implies the capacity to adopt the stance of a neutral, independent observer. This neutrality, however, is available only to those whom society does not mark as different. However, like race, gender marks women as other. Joanna Hodge describes how Cartesian subjectivity does not account for gendered difference:

Women are thus subjective in a different sense from that in which the bearer of epistemological processes is subjective. The subjectivity attributed to women is not convertible into objectivity, and therefore does not bring with it the attribute of rationality. To women is attributed the kind of subjectivity which must be contained and controlled by moral prescriptions and by physical and intellectual constraints, in order to prevent women from transgressing the roles and rules laid down in cultural expectation and practice by the bearers of full rational subjectivity. (165-6)

Hodge affirms that Descartes’s “functionalist views of the body” are primarily responsible for the conception of women as irrational – the opposite of men:

Functionalism has been used primarily with respect to the specific female function in reproduction, rendering that single element central to the definition and process of being a woman, whereas the unique male capacities have not been similarly argued to be the only proper occupation of men. (159)

A Cartesian view of the body as a machine links women to their biological function as child bearers as their primary identity. Childbearing is a natural process associated with the body. Thus, Cartesianism, as it has been misrepresented and misused in American
culture, closely identifies women with natural, biological processes rather than rational processes and functions. Because women’s essential social and cultural function has historically been perceived as childbearing, society questions their ability to perform other roles. Furthermore, women’s culturally perceived greater physical penetrability than men prevents them from aligning with Descartes’s conception of embodiment as closed. Sarah Gleeson-White contends that, “according to this [Cartesian] corporeal schema, a woman’s body is fluid while a man’s is hard; fleshy while his is taut; penetrable while he (the penetrator) is impenetrable” (Strange Bodies 47).

Developing a similar theme, Mikhail Bakhtin posits that, “while the female body is grotesque, the ideal virile body is analogous to the classic body, an ‘impenetrable façade’” (29). Openness equals vulnerability and weakness. Jane Flax analyzes how Cartesian philosophy intermeshes “the desire to know . . . with the desire to dominate,” whereas feminine “nature is posited as pure otherness which must be conquered to be possessed and transformed into useful objects” (28). Common phrases in the English language such as “Mother Earth” and “barren, virgin, and fertile land” attest to social and cultural links between women and unthinking, passive nature. Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau boldly proclaims that the “laws of nature” created woman “to please and be subjected to man” (693). In similar fashion, White male Americans connected women with the body – biologically subservient to man and more natural being than rational cogito.

**Cartesian Disability**

Along with raced and female bodies, I examine the interrelation between disabled bodies and their ableist environments. Cartesianism as it has been inherited, with its
insistence on an intact and whole body, fosters a model of disability in which physical
disability should not impact consciousness and yet which also assumes that the inability
of a mind to master a deficient body reflects a deficiency of mind. While insisting that
“being requires no place and depends on no material thing,” the Cartesian model of
embodiment contends that disability signifies a mind lacking the full human capability
of an intact self, capable of instructing the body properly (CSM II 32). Simultaneously, a
Cartesian view of the body has advanced the misperception that disabled individuals’
“machines” operate ineffectively and need repair. In this line of thinking, dependency
upon any kind of external aid constitutes illegitimacy. Thomas Abrams explains that the
Cartesian model of disability fails to account for the ways in which disability works to
constitute the self:

As with Heidegger’s critique of Descartes’s metaphysics, this project denies that
the autonomous, rational subject in an extended world is the best way to explain
what it means to be a human being. This is so because it ignores a whole lot of
human Being beforehand. It is a substantial abstraction, so to speak. Disabled
phenomenology demands that we locate personhood in the midst of the
interaction order, in the shared human life world. It is in this shared world where
human lives are given meaning and, it is here where action – rational, irrational
or otherwise – takes shape. The emergence of personhood does not take place in
an immaterial environment: resources need to be mobilized, bodies need to be
shaped and reshaped and barriers need to be removed. There is, then, a political
economy of personhood. In this space, disability can take shape as insufficiency
and lack, as a partial mode of existence and as less-than-human, or it can take
shape in more life-affirming ways. This establishes a space for disability studies
to do the good work it is already doing, albeit with newly honed philosophical
purpose. (125)

Abrams affirms that Cartesian metaphysics fails to consider the politicization and
economization of disability. Political and economic disenfranchisement function as
environmental factors to impact the emergence of personhood. In this way, reducing the
human experience into mind and body, as Cartesianism does, casts disability as deficient and inadequate rather than dynamic.

Whether in the realm of disability, gender, or race, the limitations of Cartesianism as it has been applied in American culture, especially in the South, are many. The legacies of Cartesianism, however, prove powerful enough throughout the literature and culture examined here to be necessary points of reference—and often sites of resistance—for my analysis.

**Critical Background: Transition to the Embodied Subject**

**Heidegger**

This dissertation also draws upon other thinkers who have responded to Descartes’s mind/body dualism paradigm. While my approach most closely aligns with Stacy Alaimo’s recent theories on transcorporeality, other twentieth-century thinkers help build a bridge to these theories through their critiques and alternatives to Cartesianism. German philosopher Martin Heidegger believed Descartes presented the world to us “with its skin off,” and so he endeavored to correct this error by philosophizing a fully fleshed-out world, beginning with the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 (1.3: 132). According to Heidegger, reason does not provide a sufficient basis for selfhood or consciousness because it misconstrues our fundamental character, which is “being-in-the-world” (1.2: 53). Because Heidegger believes being-in-the-world and one’s openness to the world constitute consciousness, the self cannot be conceived as an autonomous Cartesian ego but is embodied, contingent, constantly evolving and engaged with one’s environment:
Being-in is not a “property” which Dasein sometimes has and sometimes does not have, and without which it could be just as well as it could be with it. It is not the case that man “is” and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship-of-Being towards the “world”—a world with which he provides himself occasionally. Dasein is never “proximally” an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a “relationship” towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only because Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is. (1.12: 84)

An individual can neither “be” without the world nor decide to disengage from a relationship with the world. Heidegger’s emphasis on environment and “being-in” anticipates transcorporeality’s premise that the individual is necessarily enmeshed in the world and cannot become disentangled.

**Bakhtin**

While Heidegger grounded the cogito in the physical, material world, Mikhail Bakhtin recognized the openness of the body to the world, insisting on its continuous growth and becoming in his 1940 book, *Rabelais and His World*, a work of literary and cultural criticism. Bakhtin’s theory of embodiment allows me to track the development of characters’ embodied subjectivity. Janie Starks’s body extends into the pear tree and grows as the pear tree grows, consubstantiating her subjectivity. In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas’s very name signifies excessive embodiment. Mick Kelly’s height exceeds the standard expectation for women, transgressing restrictive standards of femininity.

Bakhtin defines the classical body, focusing on examples in Renaissance art and literature especially, as smooth, slim, self-contained, and superficially unmarked (320–322). In contrast, Bakhtin describes and even celebrates the grotesque body as exemplified in fifteenth-century French writer Francois Rabelais’s *Gargantua and
Pantagruel: a body in flux, defying social hierarchies, constantly emerging, opposing stasis, and testing the limits of being and embodiment by exceeding Cartesian bounds:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque. (Bakhtin 26)

Bakhtin insists upon the body’s openness, and that openness offers possibilities for growth and emergent becoming. Unlike Cartesianism, which encourages a purging of all irrational excesses, Bakhtin celebrates bodily excesses, not as irrational, but generative. Bakhtin’s discussion of the body paves the way for the transcorporeal conception of embodiment as emergent with the world – never finished. Bakhtin also demonstrates a generative form of subversion by employing the body to pose a challenge to existing power matrices.

Transcorporeality similarly undertakes to discover the effects of power structure on the body and the body as a site of resistance. Bodily immersion within power structures has real material effects within a social/material landscape of all-encompassing networks of power and knowledge, substances and forces, environments and institutions. The bodies of Janie Starks, Bigger Thomas, and Mick Kelly, as well as Kate Cutrer in The Moviegoer, manifest the consequences of poverty, sexism, and racism. The visible presence of their material bodies reflects the complex historical,
economic, ecological, biological, and cultural forces that have shaped and constituted their embodied selves and identities.

**Merleau-Ponty**

In 1945, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty further fleshed out the phenomenological nature of being, publishing *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty suggests that there is an “organic relationship between subject and world” and that there are “intentional threads” which run from the body to objects (*Phenomenology of Perception* 152, 136). These threads partly constitute the self as subject. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of interconnection between the body and the material world facilitates examination of literary characters’ enmeshment and entanglement. The subject is molded into the world such that the nature of the world determines that mold, not the subject. To Merleau-Ponty, the self is necessarily embodied. He seeks to instantiate “other landscapes besides [his] own” that are mutually interwoven (*The Visible and the Invisible* 141). He proposes the radical openness of the body to other bodies: “Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies?” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 142). The generality of flesh embraces what Merleau-Ponty terms “intercorporeity” – the co-institution of two landscapes in the same “space-consciousness” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 141). The flesh that covers our bodies also covers the world: “It is through the flesh of the world that one can understand the lived body” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 250). One cannot separate the flesh of the world from one’s own and “be” without the lived body. Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world” and “lived body” provide fundamental philosophical foundations for transcorporeality.
Transcorporeality

The most important theoretical framework my dissertation engages with is transcorporeality. Unlike Cartesianism, transcorporeality decenters the autonomous, disembodied, human subject/actor that Descartes upholds, insisting instead upon the interconnection between body and mind as well as the body’s penetrability and, consequently, the role of the body, external forces, and environment in the substantiation of the self. Consciousness is no longer self-evident but experiential. Knowledge emerges consubstantially via the individual’s intra-actions with their environment and others. The individual does not exist separate and above nature as prime mover but is enmeshed in a matrix of political, economic, biological, social, and ecological networks that both shape humanity and are shaped by humanity.

Transcorporeality arises at the intersection between recent theories of Ecocriticism and New Materialism. Ecocriticism came to the fore in the 1980s as the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. New Materialism emerged a decade later in the 1990s as an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and politically committed field of inquiry dedicated to the critical interrogation of the imitations of linguistic and social constructionist frameworks. According to New Materialist thinkers, the prominence given to language, culture, and representation has come at the expense of exploring material and somatic realities. Drawing upon both theories, transcorporeality aims to examine the intra-actions of the material body with the environment and more-than-human nature to develop a non-anthropocentric ethic. As Stacy Alaimo explains:
[Transcorporeality] grapples with the ways in which environmental ethics, social theories, popular understandings of science, and conceptions of the human self are profoundly altered by the recognition that “the environment” is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves. (Bodily Natures 4)

Transcorporeality contends that nature, when conceived of as the opposite of culture upon the basis of Cartesian dualism, has served as a repository of essentialism and stasis—associated with corporeality, mindlessness, and passivity. As an alternative, transcorporeality seeks the transformation of gendered, racial, ableist, heteronormative dualisms—nature/culture, body/mind, object/subject, resource/agency—that have been cultivated to denigrate and silence othered minority groups. Alaimo defines transcorporeality as “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (Material Feminisms 238).

Transcorporeality insiststhat “time-space” promotes an environmental ethic grounded in material reality:

Epistemological “space” becomes ethical in environmental philosophy and feminist theory because it repels presumptions of human mastery that would reduce the stuff of life to mere “resources” for human consumption. Epistemological space needs to be contiguous space—it is always as close as our own skin—and yet it offers ample room for the more-than-human world to act, and, more to the point, to intra-act, in surprising ways. (Alaimo, Material Feminisms 251)

In this way the individual is always grounded in space and place; enmeshed and environmental factors (formerly thought of as “external”) play an integral role in constituting the self.

Ethically examining the intra-actions of race, gender, disability, class, and place, transcorporeality enables understanding of the ways in which some individuals are
advantaged and disadvantaged by environment. Addressing racial disadvantage, Kimberly Ruffin defines environmental othering as “an ecological burden on those who are racialized negatively, and they suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status” (3). Racial environmental othering includes the “ways that people of color have been denied access to the privileges of the environment (i.e. ownership of land, freedom to choose where one lives, access to National Parks, etc.) and disproportionately bear the burden of pollution and environmental waste” (2). Transcorporeality undertakes to examine the dangers inherent in intra-actions between bodies and environments as well as the impact of waste substances on material bodies in ecologically othered populations. Parrish claims that Black people have “greater experience at the flashpoints of a disturbed nature” (33): African Americans have “labored in agrarian monocultures and a variety of extractive industries” while not gaining much advantage from this economic activity, instead finding themselves “developing and hazarding [their] skills within its flux” (21-2). Rather than recognizing people of color as victims of environmental abuse, society may view populations of color (and the poor) as responsible for environmental degradation.

**Transcorporeal Bodies and Biology**

Within the transcorporeal framework, the human body is porous, not a discrete entity. Moira Gatens explains that the human body

can never be viewed as a final or finished product as in the case of the Cartesian automaton, since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment. The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies. (110)
Openness and porosity mean that the body continually undergoes processes of change and transformation, exceeding distinct, impenetrable Cartesian borders. Sara Shostak emphasizes the porosity and materiality of the transcorporeal body: “The environmental genetic body is porous; it absorbs what it touches in the air, soil, and water and is changed at the molecular and morphological level by these absorptions” (2338). Biology and culture mutually evolve contingent with one another, constituting one another. Human embodiment is the phenomenal product of an emergent dynamics resulting from the synergistic, diffusive relationships among its parts. As Vicki Kirby asserts:

If we translate the separation of culture from nature into the mind/body split, it seems that the Cartesian subject can admit that s/he has a body (that attaches to the self), and yet s/he is somehow able to sustain the belief that s/he is not this body. This denial is necessary because to contest the latter and all its possible consequences would at least suggest that it might be in the nature of the biological body to argue, to reinvent, and rewrite itself—to cogitate. (220)

Transcorporeality posits the embodied self as an ever-evolving, knowing, natural landscape. In its processes and intra-actions with the material world, the body interprets, analyzes, reflects, and reinvents. Reason, far from being a function separate from the body, is grounded in patterns of bodily experience. The body exists as a result of many mutable biological structures that are not self-contained but open to alteration in response to the world. The body’s many membranes are permeable, allowing for becoming with the world.

Transcorporeality further contends that biology emerges consubstantially with and through environmental and social forces. Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins assert, “[W]hereas human sociality is itself a consequence of our received biology, human biology is a socialized biology” (36). Biology mutually constituted with culture is
significantly less determinate and static and far more mutable than essentialism dictates. The trillions of cells in the human body constantly renew and alter themselves in response to social and environmental intra-actions.

A transcorporeal understanding of the body and biology has major implications for our understanding of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. I will introduce these implications below, then explore them at much greater length throughout my readings of Walker Percy, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Carson McCullers.

**Transcorporeality and Race**

Transcorporeality regards race as substantial yet not essentialist, not founded in a determinist conception of biology. Racism, by this view, is not based on anything intrinsic to raced bodies, but rather grounded in material environments that restrain (and sustain) Black lives. In “How Real Is Race?” Michael Hames-Garcia argues:

> [T]here are important reasons not to eliminate all considerations of biology and the body from our discussions of race . . . . In particular . . . an important dimension of what race is and how it functions results from the interaction of social ideologies of race with visible human difference. (324)

Raced bodies have been made visible, as such, by their encounters with places, substances, and forces, even as they may be transformed through these encounters. Biology, not fixed but mutative and dynamic, substantiates emergent selfhood but does not determine it. Because transcorporeality recognizes the intra-action of these forces with the body, my project interrogates how racism can materialize across actual bodies and environments by demonstrating material connections between specific bodies in specific places. To take one specific type of interaction, environmental othering renders Black populations more vulnerable to harm from environmental hazards. As I explore in
Chapter 2, the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* devastates the Black migrant workers who, by the nature of their work and work site, are in closest proximity to the environmental disaster. In Chapter 3 I interrogate Wright’s portrayal of White oppression as a natural, environmental force, yet I also note that nature facilitates Bigger Thomas’s reconnection with a force outside of White control. My project thus seeks to track instances of environmental othering, the distribution of harm, and the material agency of environmental hazards and their role in constituting consciousness – becoming and unbecoming.

**Gender, Homosexuality, Biology, and Environment: Natural Desires**

Environmental othering also affects gendered and queer bodies and becoming. Queer and female bodies intra-act with their sexist and homophobic environments. I am especially interested in how these bodies exceed discrete, essentialist, Cartesian boundaries and societal constraints to grow and become with the world. Transcorporeality aims to deconstruct the Cartesian division between nature and culture that casts women as “natural” beings – mute, irrational, and lacking agency – and in doing so, it not only recasts women as agents of culture but also demonstrates the agency, force, dynamism, and contingency of biology and nature. Nature is not mute. Therefore Janie Starks’s naturalness – her organicist epistemology – fosters a political, social, and environmental consciousness, giving her a voice. Janie promotes alternative matrices of power and knowledge. Her way of knowing promotes an ethical view of more-than-human nature over Cartesian mastery of nature.

An essentialist view of biology holds that gender is determined and that the primary function of sex is procreation. Transgenderism and homosexuality both defy
these notions regarding biology as immutable and determinative. Bernice Hausman insists that transgender theory must examine the body as “a material entity, beginning with an interrogation of those categories, like gender, that have contributed to the body’s contradictory status by serving as an alibi for a notion of identity that exists as pure information” (212). In “Naturally Queer,” Myra Hird cites examples from biology to challenge and question the “naturalness” of heterosexuality, asserting that “the vast majority of cells in the human body are intersex” while observing that “most of the organisms in four out of the five kingdoms do not require sex for reproduction” (85-86). Biology can no longer maintain assumptions that nature is static and culture limitlessly malleable. Such lines of analysis are especially important in Chapter 4 where I analyze several non-gender-binary characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Mick Kelly, to cite one example, transitions from female to male and male to female continually as she moves toward adulthood; her queerness and her bodily becoming, transition, and growth are central to her epistemology.

**Disability and Environment**

Transcorporeality calls for a fully fleshed-out narrative of the self that allows the body and its abilities and disabilities to enact constitutive roles in the formation of the self. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, “Disability studies reminds us that all bodies are shaped by their environments from the moment of conception. We transform constantly in response to our surroundings and register history on our bodies” (524). Transcorporeality, along with ecological studies, advocates placing ability/disability in wider contexts of social embodiment. Hence Alaimo asserts, “Disability studies may be enriched by attending to the ways in which built environments constitute or exacerbate
‘disability,’” and “how materiality . . . affects human health and ability” (*Bodily Natures* 12). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson claims, “The changes that occur when body encounters world are what we call disability” (524). This kind of focus and attention allows us to trace material/social interchanges between body and place.

Mobility aids such as wheelchairs challenge Cartesian paradigms of the sovereign subject as intentional agent and the body as naturally bounded and self-contained. Indeed, the body can no longer be thought as entirely natural, distinct, or universal but only in terms of its permeability and connectedness; the demarcation of inside and outside becomes increasingly meaningless. In Chapter 1, focused on Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, I analyze the ways in which the wheelchair that Binx’s half-brother, Lonnie Smith, uses extends his embodiment and facilitates his intra-actions with others and the material world. I also analyze the role of the wounded body and its radical openness in Binx’s ethical evolution as Lonnie’s vulnerability – his chronic illness and handicap – helps Binx to connect to his own body, others, and the material/natural world. Disability may not only limit but also enable. In Chapter 4 I demonstrate that John Singer’s deafness in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* affords him extraordinary transgressive capacities to express his interiority bodily through the use of his hands.

**Chapter Summaries**

To conclude my introduction, I offer brief summaries of each major chapter ahead, both to preview key themes covered and to offer an initial sketch of how the Cartesian and transcorporeal theories described above will unfold in specific literary analyses. In Chapter 1 I examine Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* with a focus toward embodiment, disability, and intra-actions with nature. I argue that transcorporeality
offers Binx Bolling an alternative theoretical framework to address the problems confronting him arising from Descartes’s mind/body dualism – namely disembodiment – and to conduct his “search” for meaning and identity (10). Binx initially believes that he exists separate from and above nature and others. But transcorporeality contends that the individual remains always enmeshed in their environment and that environment and the self consubstantiate one another. This contention strikes Binx as true. Recognizing his entanglement – the inseparability of nature, biology, and culture – Binx begins to understand himself in relation to his environment and others. Binx’s search ends in his choice to pursue medical school and a career as a physician, a choice consistent with transcorporeality. Becoming a physician, Binx begins to accept the body’s permeability and the contingency of bodily signifiers as valuable truths, clues to the search. Wounded bodies – his own and others’ – ground him in time and space – in the material world. Having witnessed his half-brother’s porosity (Lonnie’s susceptibility to viral pathogens in the environment) but also Lonnie’s emergent becoming, Binx begins to view the body as a site of knowledge and becoming, inseparable from the mind/soul. Binx slowly recognizes that he exists not as a discrete entity but that his self emerges in his intra-actions with his environment, nature, biology, and others, and in this way Binx slowly progresses toward overcoming the Cartesian divide between self and other, body and mind, nature and culture, and mind and matter to place himself in the world. Medicine has the potential to restore Binx to embodiment and to the material world in which he is enmeshed.

Chapter 2 explores Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a focus on Janie Starks’s intra-actions with nature and her racist, sexist environment; her
natural epistemology and embodiment; and her entanglement within economic, natural, biological, and social networks. Through these intra-actions, Janie overcomes a Cartesian split in consciousness as she comes to assert her subjectivity. Janie’s body “knows”; unlike Binx, her understanding of bodily knowledge as it substantiates selfhood is innate and intimate. Janie’s epistemology is an organic, transcorporeal one, premised upon the conviction that sexual and biological determinism do not fix her relation to her environment, nature, and others. Marked by her gender and her race, Janie cannot separate her consciousness from her embodiment as Binx does. She faces another obstacle to emergent selfhood that Binx does not – ecological othering. She lives and exists in the contact zone between ecological disaster and humanity on the muck in the Florida Everglades. Janie advocates for the more-than-human world, both flora and fauna, and intra-acts with both, facilitating a mutual becoming – a blooming. Through her body and its intra-actions with nature, “pulling in the horizon” (193), she acquires the capacities and abilities of the political, biological, and natural systems and forces that she cannot fully control but also which cannot fully determine her.

Chapter 3 considers Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, specifically attending to Bigger Thomas’s embodiment, his intra-actions with his racist environment, and his relationship to nature. Like Janie, Bigger overcomes a Cartesian fractured sense of self and asserts his subjectivity. I adopt a transcorporeal framework to interrogate the ways in which Bigger’s environment – coopted by Whites – becomes and unbecomes his selfhood, vitalizes and devitalizes his Black life. I argue that Bigger slowly rejects determinism and ultimately recognizes a larger ecological reality beyond “No Man’s Land,” beyond White cooptation, in which he can place himself in relation to others and
his environment more freely (Native Son 76). As such, Wright’s environmentalism functions as a precursor to transcorporeality. Bigger begins to view nature not as an oppressive White force, determining his being, but a force that substantiates his being. Whites no longer entirely direct nature’s agencies as a prime mover. Wright employs water, soil, and animals in Native Son as ecological metaphors, and together they demonstrate the flow and blockages of power relations across Black bodies – like Bigger’s – and racist environments – like Chicago’s Black Belt.

Chapter 4 probes Carson McCullers’s The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. McCullers’s grotesque bodies exemplify transcorporeal embodiment in their openness and emergent becoming. Like Binx, Janie, and Bigger, Mick Kelly must overcome a fractured Cartesian sense of self. Her embodiment, intra-actions with her sexist environment, and relationship to nature aid her in this quest and in asserting her subjectivity and identity. Through her range of characters, McCullers’s depictions of unbounded, grotesque bodies resist and exceed normative limitations in their intra-actions with their ableist, homophobic, sexist, and racist environments. McCullers affirms the transitive and transformative nature of porous embodiment that endows the individual with promising capacities over and against the finished, impenetrable Cartesian ideal of embodiment. McCullers clearly demonstrates the ways in which economic, social, political, natural, biological, and ecological networks intra-act to substantiate embodied selfhood, posing both difficulties and expansive possibilities. Embodiment in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter denies determinative notions of sex and race (biology), emphasizing the fluidity and resistant dynamism of both. McCullers’s characters continue to grow despite and
because of their environments, and the body proves central to their intra-active becoming.

This dissertation has been, throughout, a process of discovery in which theoretical concepts and literary analysis have continually interacted. I began the work sparked by Walker Percy’s objections to Cartesian thought, an inquiry reflected in my opening discussion of Percy in this introduction. But I soon realized that the Southern literary texts I had chosen for inclusion in the dissertation demanded a much fuller critique of Cartesianism than Percy offers, and hence I made the turn related in this introduction to phenomenological, ecological, and transcorporeal theories. Collectively, these texts reveal much about how the lived-in, mediated, experiential, unbound body of the Other proves foundational to the formation of the self and subjectivity; they also show much about the body and its intra-actions with racist, homophobic, ableist, and sexist environments. Theoretical inquiries certainly informed my analysis of the texts, but textual analysis also drove theoretical discovery.

The Cartesian foundation of subjectivity – reason – separates the subject from the body. This definition of subjectivity, fundamentally lacking physical characteristics, denies the lived-in experiences of raced, gendered, and disabled bodies navigating hostile environments. Southern literature, specifically Walker Percy and the Nashville Agrarians, engage with Cartesian dualism in a Southern American context from an ethical standpoint, but their observations and objections center upon the loss of a pastoral way of life – the rise of scientism above a Christian system of beliefs – rather than the decentering of the autonomous, hegemonic cogito on the moral grounds that it denies the subjectivity of overly embodied, marked Others. I sought to conduct a study
of engagement with Cartesian dualism in Southern literature from the contrary side, the side of the unacknowledged other as opposed to the sovereign (White, male) subject that withdraws his acknowledgment, hoping to discover how these Others resist oppressive dualisms to assert their embodied subjectivity.

In the novels I discuss, White male power and control often operate as supernatural disembodied forces. A disembodied ethos like that of Descartes attempts to elevate pain and bodily distress into the predicament of a universalized philosophical subject. In doing so, it effectively evades the embeddedness, vulnerability, and trauma experienced by minorities. I must here draw a distinction between Descartes himself, who attributes to the cogito no features of race and gender, and Cartesianism – a philosophy that has evolved beyond Descartes’s original thought through cultural and social usage to function as a system of hierarchical divisions along lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and species. While Cartesianism asserts that autonomy comes from being free of embodiment, a transcorporeal understanding asserts that emancipation depends upon being well attached. Whites’ favorable relationality to the material world facilitated by their socioeconomic position affords them the ability to control the making and unmaking of hyper-embodied, marked minorities and regulate the nature of their attachment and relationality to their environment. A disembodied system of values, like that which upholds White power and superiority, treats differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability as deficiencies. An incorporeal ethics denies the expansive possibilities and the reality of porosity, asserting that the body’s inability to maintain discrete physical boundaries creates gaps through which immorality enters. Porosity – openness and not boundedness – is the truth of the
human condition, as close as our membranous skin. Our intra-actions with others and our environment constitute consciousness – our world.

To resist the mythos of White disembodiment, we must recognize that our bodies inextricably link with other bodies and remain interconnected with our environments. Transcorporeality insists that humanity bears responsibility for the relationalities of becoming that we participate in and that implicate us. For this reason, we must invoke the material body in the construction of the South to map the entanglements of power and place. A disembodied ideology fails to acknowledge that minds – whether privileged or oppressed – are inextricably connected to bodies and that bodies bear witness to their own oppression. We must read corporeality as part of the social text in order to grasp the full story as told in Southern American culture as well as in *The Moviegoer*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Native Son*, and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. 
Chapter 1

Walker Percy’s Netflixer: Transcorporeal Epistemologist

_The Moviegoer_ (1961) would be more appropriately re-titled for the twenty-first century, _The Netflixer_. Walker Percy’s moviegoer, Binx Bolling, would not even have to leave his apartment to embark on his search for community today. More than half a century after the publication of Percy’s novel, a great many individuals now exist as disembodied cogitos online every day, grounded neither in space nor in time but floating in the ethernet. The danger that Percy dramatizes, of “slipping clean out of space and time” (53) and becoming anyone, anywhere, presents more of an actual existential threat than ever before.

As such, Walker Percy and his character Binx offer opportunities to explore the grounding of a form of Cartesianism in Southern American culture that may have contemporary as well as historical significance. I begin my dissertation with the most recent novel, Percy’s _The Moviegoer_, because it exposes with unique directness the Cartesian structure of Southern epistemology and its pitfalls. Although the South is a region particularly haunted by its history, possessed by a distinct sense of place, and historically resistant to scientific, technological, and industrial advances – all of which would seem at odds with the Cartesian legacy that has removed the individual from
history, time, and space – Cartesian skepticism and disembodiment have proven seminal to Southern epistemology.

Seeking coherence Binx’s disembodied cogito struggles to connect mental reality to physical reality, unable to make meaning out of his own flesh, physical experiences, and the material world outside himself. As a detached observer, akin to Descartes’s cogito, Binx abstracts and disassociates himself from himself, his body, his environment, and others and initially attempts to cure the malaise through rational, objective observation.

However, many of Binx’s ecological and social observations also bear a meaningful relationship to tenets of transcorporeality, particularly the idea that our bodies and the material world are porous and constantly intra-acting with one another. This intra-action may aid him in his effort to overcome and decenter his fractured, abstracted consciousness – the mind/body split. For Binx to detach himself from the Cartesian, White, sovereign, autonomous, male subject, he must confront fear of his body, nature, his environment, and others--especially women.1 Gestures toward transcorporeality point Binx toward a more ethical and reciprocal relationship with himself, his body, nature, his environment and others, helping him to deconstruct the Cartesian, dualistic paradigm that previously structured his interactions and relations with the human and more-than-human world. Particularly because of his intra-actions with his chronically ill, disabled half-brother, Lonnie, Binx becomes dependent upon the wounded body as perceivably more real than the Cartesian body to reinsert himself into

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1 For discussion of White maleness, the cogito, and Western subjectivity, see Mills, “White Ignorance” 13-38; Hoagland 95-118; Harfouch 32.
the physical world and connect himself with his own body. Lonnie’s disability provides unique insight into the way human bodies are networked – enmeshed in nature, biology, politics, economics, history, and culture – and how consciousness arises from embodied intra-actions. Lonnie’s disability shocks Binx out of his everydayness and indifference. His search culminates in his decision to attend medical school to combat the malaise, treating wounded bodies with the force of corporeality.

**Percy’s Cartesian Malaise**

Binx searches for a cure to an affliction he has identified and named the “malaise,” a sense of disembodiment, detachment, and disassociation. The affliction causes Binx anxiety that he might become “no one nowhere” (58). The malaise results in disorienting symptoms: a fragmented consciousness, a division between mind and body, and anxiety over becoming a mere abstraction. In a 1986 interview, Percy identified Binx as a “victim of Descartes,” who split mind from body (Lawson 160). The Cartesian self is only embodied and material in the sense that the incorporeal soul is contained in a corporeal machine. The human body, according to Descartes, are complex machines. Mechanical motions of their parts, following “from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels,” cause its actions and physiological functions (*CSM I* 108). The mind or soul directs the mechanical forces of the body according to its own dictates, but the body does not substantiate the soul. Binx lives as an automated machine and finds this existence meaningless.

Binx fails to live and achieve according to social expectations and gender norms which dictate that a man must embody physical and mental toughness – to remain
“soldierly in outlook” or as a machine – and find meaning in life’s experiences thereby (28). As a result of these expectations, Binx strives to conduct himself as a rational observer – an abstracted cogito and machine – reductively formulating and categorizing all experience. But the malaise that results from these efforts robs his experiences of meaning and dissociates Binx from himself, his body, others, nature, and the more-than-human world. Taught to behave as if he were impenetrable, Binx responds with anxiety when his body, others (especially women), and nature threaten to expose his porosity and render him vulnerable, decentering his consciousness. Eventually Binx seeks communion with his body, others, and nature, but throughout *The Moviegoer*, he struggles to relinquish his Cartesian, abstracted sovereignty and allow for the extension of his self into the more-than-human world and a decentered consciousness. The instability of bodily signifiers – the contingency of corporeality – frightens Binx. He embarks on a search for meaning to discover the bodily sensation of aliveness, a search for the experience of a lived-in body. Binx divides his search for a cure between mind (vertical search, especially in books) and body (horizontal search, like wandering the neighborhood). Barbara Filippidis explains the dualistic reasoning behind Binx’s search:

> The two searches which Binx pursues, the vertical and the horizontal, function as an image of man’s dual nature of both spirit and organism. As Binx explains his two searches, the vertical involves a quest for a transcendent vision revealing the nature of the universe; the horizontal involves understanding his personal significance as he exists concretely in the here and now. (10)

Binx seeks communion, attachment, a way to “stick himself in the world,” in his search for a cure to the malaise (143). However, his search continues to reflect the Cartesian dualism that alienates him from his body and the world.
Walker Percy also explicitly addresses the Cartesian themes I see in Binx in his nonfiction, philosophical writings, specifically his collection of essays, *Signposts in a Strange Land*. Percy diagnoses modern American society as suffering from what he, and later Binx, name “the malaise.” Percy defines the malaise generally as loss – the loss of memory, history, identity, community, a consensus of values and beliefs held in common. Alienation, detachment, solipsism, impoverished consciousness and communication, and moral decline, Percy asserts, are all symptomatic of the dehumanizing malaise. The pathogen, Percy determines, is an idolatrous misapprehension of science – alienating scientism. While science can locate and diagnose biological ills, scientism – an excessive belief in the power of scientific values to the exclusion of all other spiritual powers – (according to Percy) alienates individuals from their bodies and each other by transforming humankind into objective observers categorizing, analyzing, and abstracting experiences through the scientific method rather than as subjective participants in the world. Binx suffers from all of the problems above.

Percy further asserts that science denigrates the possibility for a belief in Judeo-Christian values – in an American ethos founded upon myths and symbols signifying a shared meaning previously agreed upon through which the meaning of life and “man’s place” in the world might be communicated (“Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” 207). While I do not share Percy’s concern to return to “Judeo-Christian values,” I would emphasize that Percy indicts Descartes for providing the foundation for this scientific ethos by “dividing reality between the res cogitans, the mind, and the res extensa, matter,” disconnecting human beings from the physical world and separating the soul
from the body, resulting in a fragmented sense of consciousness (“The Fateful Rift” 274). Hence, Percy and I generally agree that Descartes’s Enlightenment philosophy, with its emphases upon doubt and innate rationality as the only way of knowing and discovering truth, leaves humankind without a habitable body and world and a deranged sense of subjectivity resulting from radical isolation and the dominion of the kingdom of the self.

Southern Cartesianism

I need to first take a detour, however, through the South to explore how the malaise is not only distinctively modern but Southern. Seemingly, the strong sense of community, historically characteristic of the South, should prevent the sort of Cartesian isolation and solipsism Binx experiences. In Cartesian thought, the *res cogitans* exists outside time and space and outside of the body, immaterially. The South’s close relationship to the land, its rootedness in the soil, and immersion in the material should enable the Southern individual to resist the ontological rootlessness Percy attributes to Cartesianism – abstraction out of time and place. Conversely, the South’s aversion to science and technology should shield the South from some of the mechanistic dehumanization of Cartesian abstraction as well. As W. J. Cash explains, science threatened the South’s Christian system of beliefs:

The South, men said and did not doubt, was peculiarly Christian; probably, indeed, it was the last great bulwark of Christianity. From the pulpit the word went forth that infidelity and a new paganism under the name of Science were sweeping the world. (83)
To the Southerner, the scientism that Percy philosophizes against deforms mystery and wonder – the soul, the familial, relational, and communal – into universal facts and measurements.

Nevertheless, Cartesian theories affected the South in fundamental and destructive ways, creating a philosophical environment which made it possible for the South’s unique history to unfold, cultivating (sometimes paradoxically) Southern attitudes toward placeness, the body, and nature that pose stumbling blocks for Binx on his path to embodied selfhood. An ontological system of control informed by Cartesian mind/body dualism facilitated the South’s agricultural way of life. As Tomoji Shogenji explains, Cartesian skepticism separates the individual from the natural world:

> Cartesian skepticism questions our belief in the natural world. Of these types of beliefs, the target of the Cartesian skeptic is perceptual beliefs because they are the most fundamental about the natural world. So, if our perceptual beliefs cannot be trusted, then our beliefs about the natural world are in serious doubt. (1)

Our senses may deceive us as to the reality of our natural environment. Seemingly, the South’s dependence on the land and its agricultural knowledge should ground Southerners in their environmental reality, inoculating them against Cartesian abstraction. However, the South’s relationship with nature remains fundamentally Cartesian. Though Cartesian skepticism, separation of mind from matter, and mechanization alienate humankind from nature, Descartes paradoxically proposes that human beings, as rational thinking things, order our environment through the application of knowledge to become “masters and possessors” of nature. The

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2 For more on the Cartesian separation of man from nature and the role of Cartesianism in the rise of anthropocentric control of nature, see Moore 594-630.
relationship between humanity and the environment has been determined by what Morris Berman calls “the Cartesian paradigm” (24). The "Cartesian paradigm" is defined by a control of nature, which can be traced to Descartes’s own Meditations:

> It is possible to arrive at knowledge which is most useful in life and that instead of the speculative philosophy taught in the schools, a practical philosophy can be found by which, knowing the power and the effects of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us as distinctly as we know the various trades of our craftsmen, we might put them in the same way to all the uses for which they are appropriate and thereby make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature. (CSM I 142-3)

Descartes urges humans to utilize their rational faculties to master their environment and employ its resources to their own benefit. Carolyn Merchant explains that according to the Cartesian paradigm, knowledge and understanding of being are inherently connected to the structures of machines and that the presuppositions of this paradigm lead analogously to another element of the machine — “the possibility of controlling and dominating nature” (228). Carrying out this logic to the furthest extent, Merchant concludes that the mechanistic Cartesian theory of matter processes reality into parts – parts of machines that are “dead, passive, and inert” (229). Nature operates as a machine, without agency.

Vincent Blok explains how control over nature exacerbates our separation from it. According to Blok, control and domination afford the master an objective position of autonomy separate and above nature:

> Human being is understood here as apart from nature and consists in the will to master and exploit the natural world as a commodity for human needs. This human as-apart-from-nature attitude of modern mankind is characterized by a fundamental dualism between humankind and nature, whereby humans create and project values onto an in itself valueless world, i.e. humanity is the Cartesian maître et possesseur de la nature. What this human-as-apart-from-nature
attitude fails to see, according to Casey, is our lived connectedness with the world around us. (928)

Rather than participating in nature, humankind removes and disconnects itself from nature by objectively ordering it, rather than recognizing nature’s own agency.

“Appropriate” uses of nature serve humankind in a thoroughly anthropocentric manner. Nature, the body, and indeed the bodies of others then exist separately to serve the cogito, functioning according to its will. In the South, a warped appropriation of Descartes’s theories has provided a philosophical framework and justification for associating African Americans with nature and the body – lacking rational faculties – rather than culture and intellect, despite Descartes speaking of humankind universally.3

Descartes held that each of us was two things: an angel and an animal, as it were, a pure soul and a bestial body, as Maritain details in The Dream of Descartes. Colonialism externalized this dualism, so that some people (educated Europeans, primarily) were supposed to be pure minds while others (the people whom Europeans were encountering all over the world and on whom they were imposing their dominance) were supposed to be mere bodies. White Southern men, believing in their own rational autonomy, ordered their world by mastering nature, which included enslaving African Americans, and putting nature to an “appropriate” use, which for African Americans meant field work. Mastery of nature ensures the master conceives of nature as other, allowing white Southerners also to regard African Americans as other. This warping of

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3 See John Harfouch’s Another Mind-Body Problem: A History of Racial Non-being for discussion of Kant’s linking of supposedly inferior physical characteristics such as an “excess of flesh” in the African race to “stupidity,” situating his solution to Descartes’s mind/body problem in nature and culture (123-5).
Cartesian ideals provided the ontological framework which made rationalizing slavery and the violence inflicted upon Black bodies possible.

A Cartesian denial and devaluation of the body – not only Black bodies but bodies generally – resulted in a split in Southern consciousness throughout its formation over hundreds of years. Despite their connection to the land and their agricultural existence, Southerners valued the mind – reason and logic, however flawed – and soul above the utilitarian, servile body. W. J. Cash observes, “One might say with much truth that it proceeded from a fundamental split in his psyche, from a sort of social schizophrenia” (58). Cash characterizes the split in pathological, diagnostic terms, much like Percy later. Lillian Smith too remarks upon the influence of the split upon her own consciousness as a Southern girl: “They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my ‘soul,’ taught me also to split my conscience from my acts” (27). Smith’s Southern upbringing taught her at an early age the wisdom of bodily disassociation as integral to the purity of the soul. Masters of nature, White Southerners attempt to master and subdue their own bodies. Binx’s relation to human bodies, his own and othered bodies, as I will discuss subsequently, reflects this disassociation.

The Southern epistemology of place’s organizing principle – domination – erodes the possibility of organicism, being in and with nature. The land serves the Southern master’s capitalistic interests. The Southern agriculturist constructs an identity founded upon the warped Cartesian premise, “I conquer, therefore I am” (ego conquiro) presented by Dussel (3). Of course, Southerners promote an ideal of stability conferred by dwelling in a fixed place/region, yet the actuality has often deviated from this ideal. Writing in 1846, John Bentley Mays remarked that since 1609 his family “never tilled
the same plot of Southern ground for more than two or three generations” and that “rootlessness [is] our most durable heritage” (184). Mays asserts that “homeplace was always more noble ideal than historical fact in the southern mental landscape” (184). In reality, Southerners depleted the soil and the land rather than rooting themselves in the soil, and this depletion was directly tied to the South’s “peculiar institution” of slavery.

John Gorham Palfrey, a free soiler and member of the House Agricultural Committee during the 1840s, warned against the ecological consequences of slavery. Palfrey contrasts “nature's Edens” in the South – speaking ironically – with Northern spaces cultivated by free farmers (8). He juxtaposes a locale in southern Pennsylvania with another in northern Virginia, criticizing the ecology of slavery:

> The comparison therefore illustrates remarkably well the different results, as to agricultural industry, of the free institutions on one side of the line, and the domestic institution on the other. On the one side, the exhausted soil, the great wastes and barrens, the slovenly grain and tobacco fields, whereas north of the state line one sees a “smiling valley, [with] the heavily nodding heads of the golden harvest.” (11)

Although Palfrey was hardly a disinterested party, his nineteenth-century account attends to problems that have subsequently been validated. Plantation agriculture reshaped topography with unforeseen ecological consequences, stripping the land of vegetation and extracting its fertility. Eugene Genovese affirms that,

> Although the land of the Black Belt ranked among the finest in the world and although cotton was not an especially exhausting crop, the depletion of Southern soil proceeded with a rapidity that frightened and stirred to action some of the best minds in the South. (88)

Plantation agricultural practices quickly diminished the South’s soil fertility. The relationship between Southern landowners and the land is not reciprocal and perpetuates a Cartesian mastery of nature over rootedness.
The Southern agricultural way of life – the rootlessness and the vast isolation of the frontier – also resulted in a sense of Cartesian individualism in the Southern psyche. W. J. Cash argues that the South was a frontier society for longer than any other section of the country, challenging the romantic myth of Southern pastoralism and Southern community:

Inevitably, then, the dominant trait of this mind was an intense individualism. The frontier had loosened his bonds as completely as it is possible to imagine them being loosed for man in a social state. At every turn a man was thrown back wholly upon his own resources — all these combined to give his native individualism the widest scope and to spur it on to headlong growth. He had to be self-reliant, and his success in self-sufficiency bolstered his feeling of lordly self-certainty. (31-3)

This “lordly self-certainty” is a Southern incarnation of Descartes’s transcendent, autonomous cogito or reason, grounded in nothing outside itself save God, and affirms the Southerner’s separateness. Cash describes this Cartesian individualism as the “bedrock of the Southern pattern and the Southern character” and a “frontier tradition” (207, 349). Cash’s insight indicates the extent to which dualistic ideology frequently attributed to Descartes influenced Southern ways of knowing.

History, like the land, might be thought to shield the Southern individual from Cartesian abstraction outside of time and place by providing a sense of attachment, but the aftermath of the Civil War resulted in Southern history becoming an abstraction by which the South not only justified its loss (the Lost Cause) and the brutal reality of slavery but also rationalized post-war racism and disenfranchisement. In a Cartesian sense, this imagined history removes the Southern individual from reality, alienating them from wide swaths of lived, embodied experiences in the region they call home. White Southerners sought to make sense of the apparent fragmentation of their world
by attaching identities to physical ballasts – bodies, region, and nation – to secure themselves. Steven Hoelscher argues that “such identity anchors for White southerners seeking social order were invariably geographical, with the imagined history of the region offering the prime source material; they were also inevitably political, with the fiction of absolute racial difference becoming the region’s governing principle” (663). But Hoelscher stresses how much these apparent physical ballasts were imaginary, contending that imagined geographies and imagined histories sustained imagined communities: “At bottom, those foundations or imagined communities were constructed, not wholly out of new cloth, but from the hazy boundary separating experience from myth” (663). In this way the South’s sense of place aligns with Cartesian abstraction outside of extended space.

Percy draws upon the Southerner’s apparent orientation to space, a paradoxical effect of Cartesian displacement. Binx depends on the imagined communities and histories on the screen and the physical movie theater, attempting to orient himself. The movie theater serves as a ballast, but the movie theater’s placeness and identity are fictional, imagined, and abstracted out of reality. The movie theater, rather than anchoring Binx’s disembodied cogito, becomes in his imagination an “Urwomb” – the fictional mother of all other theaters, thronged with Cartesian “spirit presences of another day” (167-8). Woods Nash argues that Binx’s moviegoing serves as a metaphor for his Cartesian mind (“The Moviegoer’s Cartesian Theater” 153). Nash contends that “the Cartesian self is a purely thinking thing whose mind is like a theater” and that Binx, “seated in that theater, entertains ideas, or mental objects, which stand like a solid screen between the self and the nonmental world outside” (153). Binx does create a
Cartesian boundary between himself and the world through his moviegoing.
Furthermore, the movie theater illustrates Binx and more generally the South’s displacement – their Cartesian sense of place. Binx attaches an imagined identity to the theater in hopes of identifying himself thereby, but the imaginary presences with which he peoples the theater are more real to him than he is to himself. The spirit-presences haunting the theater create and increase the imagined placeness of the theater, but to little avail. Binx explains that this imagined placeness is distinctly Southern, but the perception of this place, rather than grounding Binx’s cogito in time and space, alerts him to the disembodiment of himself and all others. Binx describes placeness in terms of the genie-soul or unique, irreplicable quality of a locality:

Nobody but a Southerner knows the wrenching rinsing sadness of the cities of the North. Knowing all about genie-souls and living in haunted places like Shiloh and the Wilderness and Vicksburg and Atlanta where the ghosts of heroes walk abroad by day and are more real than people, he knows a ghost when he sees one, and no sooner does he step off the train in New York or Chicago or San Francisco than he feels the genie-soul perched on his shoulder. (109)

Binx mythologizes places and their history, abstracting them out of reality so that the spirit of a place, or genie-soul, becomes more tangible to him than the actual place.
Furthermore, as Martyn Bone points out, Binx, an obsessively dualistic thinker, invents an immaterial North and South that fundamentally oppose one another:

By deriding “the North” in ghostly metaphors, rather than analyzing it as a materially produced “place,” Binx avoids the possibility that New Orleans (and Gentilly) might be subject to the same social, economic and cultural processes as Chicago (and Wilmette). Furthermore, by rhetorically reinventing “the South” through comparison with a negative binary opposite named “the North,” Bolling again obscures his own involvement in the capitalist production of a postsouthern form of built space. (“The Postsouthern ‘Sense of Place’” 70)
Not only does the genie-soul not anchor Binx’s disembodied cogito, but it threatens his selfhood further by abstracting him out of reality, of actual time and space. Binx does not acknowledge that the same environmental, social, cultural, and political processes that affect the North affect the South, preferring to abstract the South outside the influence and impact of these forces. This Cartesian thinking obstructs Binx’s quest to place himself concretely in a material, physical, present reality.

In the South, where Percy sets most of *The Moviegoer*, the situation for Binx is no better. The “placeness” of the South, particularly New Orleans, does not anchor Binx; he continually wanders adrift. In fact, the imagined placeness of New Orleans seems to prohibit Binx’s attempt to orientate himself in reality. New Orleans is too fraught with imagined history, imagined identities, and imagined geography. The theater he, Lonnie, and Sharon attend to see *Fort Dobbs* is a “ghost of a theater” (98). Through his depiction of Binx, Percy warns against the total non-placement that Cartesianism (as it has been inherited) proposes, detached from time, space, and history. Percy recognizes how easily one can dwell in a particular place and yet remain out of place, as he remarks that Descartes himself has done: “Total nonplacement would be to do what Descartes did, [living] anonymously among the burghers of Amsterdam” (“Why I Live Where I Live” 3). Though Percy marks Binx’s journey with several real geographic locations, documenting street names and districts like Pirate’s Alley and the French Quarter, Binx remains disorientated. His illusionary sense of place reflects a Southern Cartesian perspective on place.

The Southerner’s connection to the land supported the South’s entire social order but did not foster an ethical connection to their environment that recognizes social and
environmental forces as formative to the self. Kincheloe observes that “the [Southern] individual is separate from his environment,” impervious to its influences and forces (232). Therefore, “the idea of a socially formed individual is theoretically incorrect in the eyes of the southerner” (234). Kincheloe continues: “Southerners have seen themselves as free moral agents. Exterior forces of which they had no control did not, they have believed, determine behavior” (231). From the Southern perspective of radical individualism, social conscience poses a threat to each individual’s God-given, innate moral center. Innate wisdom that derives from God, independent from environment, coincides with Cartesianism. Hocutt describes the separation of thought and physical environment/physical body:

Because thinking is immaterial, according to Descartes, so must be the ideas (i.e., the concepts) that the mind uses. This means that our ideas cannot have come into our minds by way of the physical senses. Instead, they must have been placed in us before our births by God. In other words, they must be innate. The role of the physical senses is not to produce ideas but merely to activate them when they are needed. (82)

Environment does not factor into knowing except to activate knowledge which already exists within. Hocutt continues to assert the cogito’s independence from environment:

But the new Cartesian hypothesis still postulates a virtual miracle by making everything innate; and it still makes a commitment to solipsism, while thumbing its nose at evolutionary biology, by supposing that the operations of the brain are autonomous, independent of the environment. (93)

Environmental agency and environmental forces do not substantiate the thinking self, and the cogito remains the source of innate wisdom. To the Southerner, like the Cartesian self, outside forces – social, environmental, economic – do not influence the discovery of truth or the development of selfhood (the cogito). The individual acts upon the environment rather than is acted upon. Nature remains passive.
Percy’s “San Andreas Fault” – and Beyond

Percy’s own views on Descartes do not always offer a clear path to an embodied knower. His namer, for example, exercises mastery over their environment in the act of naming, confirming the Cartesian separation between nature and culture (humanity). To Percy, the act of naming occurs at the intersection of mind and matter, allowing the “namer” to overcome the Cartesian divide between mind and body and self and other:

In the joy of naming one lives authentically. No matter whether I give a name to, or hear the name of, a strange bird; no matter whether I write or read a line of great poetry, form or understand a scientific hypothesis, I thereby exist authentically as a namer or a hearer, as an I or a Thou—and in either case as a co-celebrant of what is. (“Naming and Being” 134)

Recognition of “what is” (materiality) and the Other (Thou), Percy contends, affirms the individual’s existence in the world rather than merely unto himself, as Descartes does. But Percy has merely replaced Descartes’s thinking thing (cogito) with his “namer” – a thinking thing which expresses thought. The underlying impulse remains that the namer relies upon his own resources and own authority, ordering the natural world to become “master of nature” (CSM I, 142-3). Ruth Hubbard confirms, “The Judaeo-Christian world view has been exceptional – and I would say flawed – in setting man (and I mean the male of the species) apart from the rest of nature by making him the namer and ruler of all life” (48). By naming, self-determining humanity projects meaning onto nature’s otherness, seeking an official truth that rejects alternative matrices of knowledge inherent in the transcorporeal body and in the natural world. This prudential conception of reason (right to rule) cannot ground well-intentioned interactions with nature and the material world.
According to Percy, the namer lacks materiality. His formulation of the “namer” thus only perpetuates the mind/body split and continues to uphold the immaterial above and against the material – the intellectual over the corporeal. A “third element” connects sign and signified in Percy’s account, yet this element remains essentially synonymous with Descartes’s cogito, as Percy’s theorization shows:

A material substance cannot name or assert a proposition. The initiator of a speech act is an act-or, that is, an agent. The agent is not material. Peirce’s insistence on both the reality and non-materiality of the third element is of critical importance to natural science because its claim to reality is grounded not in this or that theology or metaphysics but in empirical observation and the necessities of scientific logic. (“Fateful Rift” 52)

In Percy’s view, human beings, immaterial linguistic agents, engage in culture against a mute background, as Percy insists the “sign user’s world is not the same as the environment or the cosmos” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 96). While Percy acknowledges the body is an open system, he still insists that our ability to use language (signs) separates us from our environment.

To Percy, bodies mechanistically and passively react to stimuli in their environment. His theory reductively discounts the dynamism of matter intra-acting with forces of the physical world. Material organisms are only passive receptors and mechanistic reactants: “An organism exists in its environment in only one mode, that of an open system responding to those segments of its environment to which it is genetically programmed to respond” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 109-10). It also reinforces divisions between mind and body: “Noxious elements such as cancer-causing agents do not exist as a part of the sign user’s world” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 100). To Percy, the individual disconnects from the cosmos and the environment upon becoming conscious.
This immaterial consciousness shows its superiority over the merely reactive organism by naming and creating an entire world separate from its environment:

Here’s another trait. It, this strange new creature, not only has an environment, as do all creatures. It has a world. Its world is the totality of that which is named. This is different from its environment. An environment has gaps. There are no gaps in a world. (“The Fateful Rift” 52)

Percy again separates the individual’s consciousness from its environment, and this separation, I argue, is reflected in Binx’s naming. Percy’s depiction of Binx suggests that his naming actually helps to generate, not to manage, “the malaise.” Binx names the search and the stages of his remedy: “certification, rotation, and repetition.” He names himself a “seeker” and Lonnie a “wayfarer” and a “pilgrim.” He names Mrs. Schexnaydre’s dog “Rosebud,” names the theater an “Urwomb,” and names the enemy he endeavors to evade “everydayness.” Upon achieving financial success with his secretary Sharon in his stockbroking business, he remarks, “Our name is Increase” (94). In Percy’s philosophy, free consciousness and authentic selfhood, permitting freedom from environmental constraints, should be facilitated by Binx’s obsessive naming. But even as Binx continues naming and creating his world, he struggles to achieve authentic, embodied selfhood because he remains uncertain how to be in the world and not of it. In this predicament, the expectation that his consciousness should remain free is more a problem than a solution.

Binx thus invariably perceives the material as obstructive. The faceless suburb where Binx resides, which he keeps as “impersonal as a motel room” (78), reflects his desire to keep the material from being an obstruction. In his interactions with the material world he is merely a consumer. The world consists of a plethora of products
humans use and then discard. This view of the world as material and ephemeral is also the worldview of the material as a product.

**Cartesian Disembodiment in The Moviegoer: Binx as Cartesian Cogito and Victim**

Binx’s conception of embodiment reflects a Southern propensity to separate conscience (mind) from action (body) and a Southern Cartesian denial of the body. To Binx, disembodied ghosts and “automatons” people the world (100). These automatons resemble Descartes’s cogito with its mechanical body. Kate unconsciously eats “mechanically ... like someone at the automat” (27). Attempting to interact with those around him, Binx converses as if with machines, too rational and detached to believe in the mystery and wonder of the search:

> For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead. It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. (69)

These automatons lack consciousness. Hyper-rationalization and abstraction divides consciousness from corporeality, causing these individuals to function as ghosts in the machine – detached observers, objectively analyzing their bodily experiences rather than living (or thinking!) in their bodies.

The disembodied ghosts Binx encounters and his fear of becoming a disembodied ghost himself further reflect Binx’s difficulty resisting the Southern Cartesian denial of the body: “There are only a few solitary moviegoers scattered through the gloom, the afternoon sort and the most ghostly of all, each sunk in his own misery” (53). The moviegoing ghosts have no physical connection to their bodies and thus lack any
definitive reality at all. Misery, or the malaise, has caused somatization. Mired in everydayness, a lack of conscious attention causes the individual to forget the significance of their own corporeality, their own selfhood, and their own identity. The fear of disembodiment thereby may be most openly acknowledged by Binx when he reflects on the experience of moviegoing: “There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville. So it was with me” (53). Binx’s reflections connect the malaise to disembodiment, implicitly suggesting embodiment has the potential to combat the malaise and everydayness.

Disembodiment fundamentally contributes to Binx’s moral confusion and ennui, and disembodiment produces disembodied values. At the same time, the Cartesian ideal that informs his search for meaning leads him to experience anxiety over embodiment as well. When Kate insists that she and Binx travel north to Chicago, the personal “rays” of five million Chicagoans threaten to invade, penetrating his body and psyche. Meanwhile, Kate seems “impervious” (135). In this instance Percy pits North against South and body against mind. Neither maintains a healthy relationality with their porous body, which could bring them into communion with the physical world. Transcorporeality threatens both, rather than providing an empowered sense of embodied selfhood. Binx recoils from the permeability of bodies.

Binx denies natural epistemology as a threat to his sovereign rationality. The malaise pervades the breathable air as fog, settling on the street (17). Binx equates the gaseous malaise with the proliferation of car exhaust and the malicious glint of the sun. Nature mocks Binx’s discontent. “Terrible wastes to the North” threaten to infiltrate the
South, polluting it ecologically, politically, ideologically, and morally (141). Lake Michigan confronts Kate and Binx on their journey: “Here the Lake is the North itself: a perilous place from which the spirit winds come pouring forth all roused up and crying out alarm” (136). Nature flows through mortals in the form of winds, which debilitate. The North encroaches upon the South’s borders, altering the Southern Cartesian sense of place and the South’s epistemological authority. Such an encroachment might foster a transcorporeal awareness, but Binx experiences it primarily as a threat.

Nature in the South still poses a threat to Binx as well. Binx’s natural and biological heritage, his mother and her swamp (located somewhere near Pearl River in Louisiana), frighten Binx rather than evoke within him meaningful feelings of attachment. Binx views biology as deterministically destructive. He describes the swampland which is his “worthless” patrimony as a “bushy back lot, tunneled by hog trails and a mysterious car track or two” (76), suggesting desecration and adulteration of the maternal womb by bestial intruders. Anna’s defeat of her husband, Dr. Bolling, depreciates the land in Binx’s estimation. Planning to sell the lot to Mr. Sartalamaccia, Binx bears no connection to the land he has inherited. Recalling trips to the swamp that ended in drinking and poker binges with Kate’s fiancé, Walter, Binx does not experience wholeness and communion with nature, preferring a superficial and consumeristic encounter with female bodies as a means to re-animate the flesh: “All I could think about in that swamp was how much I’d like to have my hands on Marcia or Linda and be spinning along the Gulf Coast” (38). The water of the Mississippi Sound appears horrifyingly “milky” to him when he stays at the fishing camp with his mother and Sharon, a display of lactophobia (88). Dr. Bolling did not even purchase or conquer the
little swampy expanse himself. Judge Anse, Binx’s uncle, built the fishing camp. Nature should be a site of knowledge for a seeker like Binx, but he does not perceive that the swampland provides no clues to the search.

Part of Binx’s aversion to nature relates to gender issues, a point I will consider in depth shortly, but in the South of The Moviegoer women as well as men have difficulties with embodiment. Anna displays an aversion to nature hardly less than Binx’s, finding the prospect of a connection with nature absurd:

I went with him [Dr. Bolling] one Christmas morning I remember. Mile after mile and all of it just the same. Same old brown levee in front, brown river on one side, brown fields on the other. So, when he got about half a mile ahead of me, I said, shoot. What am I doing out here humping along for all I’m worth when all we going to do is turn around and hump on back? I said good-by mister, I’m going home— you can walk all the way to Natchez if you want to. (122)

Binx’s mother bears an aversion to nature. Rather than an intimate connection to nature, Anna views nature as something out there and separate – outside herself. Anna also declines to sleep outside. To Anna, nature is purposeless. Thinking with the transcorporeal body (as walking facilitates) does not entice her. “Nothing is said about getting back to nature” after this instance (60). The chiggers deter Anna. Nature bites, burrows, and sucks. Witnessing his mother’s aversion to nature dissuades Binx from seeking natural epistemological authority. He inherits his mother’s aversion. When Binx arrives at the camp, “ablaze like the Titanic,” it signifies natural disaster and death. “Crab carcasses” litter the table, and Jean-Paul has eaten lungs (94-95). Binx’s brother Duval drowned the previous summer, likely in the same swamp.
Like his mother, Binx repudiates his father’s attempts to attend to the body and connect with nature. Binx observes that confusion mars his father’s relationship to the body and nature:

He made a mistake. He was trying to sleep. He thought he had to sleep a certain number of hours every night, breathe fresh air, eat a certain number of calories, evacuate his bowels regularly and have a stimulating hobby (it was the nineteen thirties and everybody believed in science and talked about “ductless glands”). I do not try to sleep. And I could not tell you the last time my bowels moved; sometimes they do not move for a week but I have no interest in such matters. As for hobbies, people with stimulating hobbies suffer from the most noxious of despairs since they are tranquillized in their despair. I muse along as quietly as a ghost. (60)

Binx’s father relates to his body as an object of study and a machine, rather than a source of wisdom that substantiates the self. Initially, Binx affirms returning to nature is a mistake and instead “muses” along as a kind of Cartesian disembodied ghost. Later, though, he will discover that his father’s tortured effort to merge mind and body – science being associated with theory, reason, and the mind and Romanticism with the sublimity of nature – is an important clue as he becomes less Cartesian. For most of the novel, though, Binx’s observations affirm his conception of nature as deterministic, endeavoring to devour humankind. On these issues, Kincheloe observes that “Southerners are suspicious of deterministic ideas, centering themselves on the notion of individual will” (231). This Cartesian skepticism influences Binx and his relation to nature, preventing him from understanding and appreciating his own transcorporeality not as deterministic but emergent.

Binx perceives the flux between man and nature negatively as banal waste, in very biological terms, and celebrates the degree to which he and his culture can rise above material realities. Binx states, “My armpits never stink. I pay attention to all spot
announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving. Yesterday a favorite of mine, William Holden, delivered a radio announcement on litterbugs” (11). Binx pragmatically distinguishes himself from the muck and muddle by connecting himself to the radio, to technology, instead of stinking, deadly, trashy biology/nature. Often, he refers to the entanglements of the past as litter (33, 89, 124). To Binx, the pig that he and lab partner, Harry Stern, experiment on has no identity or purpose, no embodied soul (38). Consequently, the result of the experiment bears no relation to the mystery and wonder of life. Kidney stones are material obstructions that prevent the kidney from flushing the body of toxins. The world and the century Binx lives in ae full of toxic waste – “merde” – and he is complicit in creating more waste. Dissolving, filtering, purifying this waste as the kidney purifies the blood could provide insight to a search for the interrelation of mind and transcorporeal body, but if materiality is determined by theoretical reasoning rather than through experience, then there exists no possibility for purification, and unconscious humans will continue to consume wastefully. The toxic malaise will continue to settle.

Binx interacts with his environment only in limiting ways. The environment and its stressors only present a threat to Binx, rather than emergent possibilities. A more reciprocal relationship with his environment would allow Binx to be more than an organism reacting to his environment and more than a master of nature. But with rare exception, Binx is too threatened by this decentered version of selfhood to see it as a source of insight into human existence in its interpersonal dimensions. The physical body’s permeability causes Binx anxiety. The irony here is that if Binx were to accept his vulnerable condition as constitutive and instructive, then a decentered consciousness
could foster empathy and an ethical relationality between himself and others and the physical world, replacing fear.

**Feminine Epistemology as an Impediment to “the Search” and Embodied Selfhood**

While Descartes describes the cogito as existing without physical traits such as gender, seemingly providing the philosophical foundation for radical equality, this discounts environmental forces such as sexism and patriarchal culture that substantiates female subjectivity. Susan Bordo parallels “the Cartesian masculinization of thought” and “the flight from the feminine” (97–118). She contends that Cartesian dualism positions feminine thought as irrational, inferior, and impure:

This was, of course, precisely what the seventeenth-century masculinization of thought had accomplished—the exclusion of “feminine” modes of knowing, not from culture in general, but from the scientific and philosophical arenas, whose objectivity and purity needed to be guaranteed. Romanticizing “the feminine” within its “own” sphere is no alternative to Cartesianism, because it suggests that the feminine has a “proper” (domestic) place. Only in establishing the scientific and philosophical legitimacy of alternative modes of knowing in the public arena (rather than glorifying them in their own special sphere of family relations) do we present a real alternative to Cartesianism. (114)

This masculinization of thought associates women with a lack of reason and impurity of thought. Kate’s “irrational” thinking and behaviors oppose standards of objective purity. She attempts suicide and demands that Binx take her on an impromptu trip to Chicago; opposing Cartesian reason, the heart and not the head motivate Kate’s actions. Kate attempts to apply her feminine way of knowing to an arena outside the domestic, and consequently Aunt Emily and Binx dismiss her. Her attempt to assert herself as a knower poses a threat to Binx’s quest to make meaning because of her “irrationality.” Yet Kate’s way of knowing might be helpful in Binx’s quest, rather than a hindrance. If
Binx were to overcome his fear of the feminine and progress to view women as organic beings with interiority, then he might have some hope of bridging the divide between self and other and mind and body. Instead, he links his fear of nature with the feminine.

Women have long been relegated to nature, outside the transcendent realm of rationality and the autonomous self. From Aristotle to Hume, to Plato and Sartre, Western thought has associated reason with maleness, so much so that feminists have sought to disassociate themselves from nature (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 4). Via the traditional association of femininity with nature, female epistemology presents a perceived threat to Binx’s integral selfhood. Women participate in very limited but consistently threatening ways in Binx’s semiotic community. Binx’s father, Dr. Bolling, who is never named, bequeaths to Binx his fearful resistance to the feminine. Curiously, Dr. Bolling’s fascination with nature and natural processes provide an escape from his wife. Leaving the home to walk for hours alone, sleeping outside apart from Anna, the father flees the feminine, even as he associates with the natural realm traditionally linked with femininity. Suicidal, Dr. Bolling starves himself to escape the feminine until World War II provides another more heroic and acceptable evasion tactic. Dr. Bolling dies unable to resolve his fear of the feminine and recognize himself in the Other.

To engage in his search for meaning, Binx resists the epistemology of the women surrounding him: Kate Cutrer (cousin/wife), Anna Castagne (mother), and Emily Bolling (aunt). Feminine epistemology challenges Binx’s sense of autonomy and self.

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4 For discussion of Cartesian subjectivity, gender, feminism, aculturalism, and ahistoricism, see Bordo and Norton, *Feminist Interpretations of Descartes*. 
Kate inquires about Binx’s search because she understands the two are mutual seekers, but Binx declines to respond, skeptical about her epistemological capacity:

She can only believe I am serious in her own fashion of being serious: as an antic sort of seriousness, which is not seriousness at all but despair masquerading as seriousness. I would as soon not speak to her of such things, since she is bound to understand it as a cultivated eccentricity. (58)

Binx denies Kate’s feminine epistemology as “antic” (46). Likewise, Binx subjects the affliction (malaise) to his willful act of naming while simultaneously freeing himself to construe and conceive of it as he wills, on his own abstract terms. As namer, Binx asserts the distance between himself and the experience of the phenomenon (malaise) he has discovered, but this hardly inoculates him from the malaise. Moreover, he imposes his names on others; Kate must utilize Binx’s terms – “repetition,” “certification,” and “rotation” – to conceive of the malaise. Percy underscores the absurdity of Binx’s status as sovereign male in Binx’s compulsion to resist the female knower’s epistemology that is most like his own: Aunt Emily’s stoic Cartesian denial of the body.

Binx remarks of his aunt, “She is no longer a ‘bird.’ It is as if, with her illustrious brothers dead and gone, she might now at last become what as a woman had been denied her; Soldierly both in look and outlook” (28). Without her brothers’ guardianship, Emily becomes a cogito, stoic in her rationality. When Aunt Emily rebukes Binx for his failure to behave as a Southern gentleman, she holds a phallic letter opener that Binx bent years earlier, which he experiences as further emasculation (148). When Binx’s brother Scott dies, Aunt Emily insists that eight-year-old Binx stoically behave as a soldier – a Cartesian machine impervious to pain, laboring without tiring. In this way, Aunt Emily consistently endeavors to uphold a dualistic, hierarchical social
order of a lost South. John D. Sykes observes that Emily’s epistemology is fundamentally Cartesian. Sykes argues, “Loss of the natural world through Cartesian sundering of subject and object is complemented by fragmentation of the social order. Binx is made aware of this loss through his encounters with his formidable aunt” (Flannery O’Connor 121). Binx’s interactions with Emily further fracture Binx’s psyche and reinforce the rift between his soul and body. Emily’s insistence on negating the body affirms the physical disassociation Binx experiences as the malaise.

Meanwhile, Aunt Emily joins Binx in dismissing the seriousness of Kate’s search, denigrating Kate’s moral and intellectual progression to activism as “girlish socialism,” disapproving of her engaging with “oracular social workers” in “political conspiracy” (35). Kincheloe aptly describes the Southern epistemological resistance to social justice that Aunt Emily’s attitude evinces:

> The southern conception of justice is thus very personal and is illustrated by a suspicion of those who talk about and claim to act on the basis of “a social conscience.” Indeed, because of southern epistemological predisposition sociological ways of thinking have not come easily to Southerners. At its essence sociology is a generalizing discipline requiring, at least to begin with, that one disregard differences between individuals and between groups. (232)

Cartesianism substantiates conservative Southern notions of distinction through its dualistic, hierarchical ordering of the world. The adjective “oracular” indicates Emily’s disbelief in the validity of social change as a real phenomenon. To Aunt Emily, social workers work to promote a suspicious way of knowing. The Southerner’s moral free agency rejects the mediating impact of social, economic, and natural forces on the cogito, reaffirming a Cartesian separation between the self and the physical world.
In Aunt Emily’s clashes with Binx, there would seem to be real possibility for a dialectical relation between her status as knower and his. Aunt Emily’s mocking extends to the nature of Binx’s search (now twenty-nine years old), threatening Binx’s epistemological authority as a rational knower (cogito). Not taking Binx’s epistemological endeavor seriously, believing it to be merely an ordinary phase that young men undergo, Aunt Emily renames the search “a Wanderjahr,” (a year spent traveling abroad before college) (41). As namer, she also renames Binx in her own aesthetic mold, as she dubs him the “Student Prince,” or Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, belittling the significance of Binx’s epistemological search (38). When Aunt Emily assumes the role of namer by reductively renaming Binx’s malaise, she occupies a position of epistemological power that women are not supposed to hold. But Binx treats this conundrum, which might serve to deconstruct the male/female binary, as just another example of female illogic. Binx regards the two as literally speaking different languages (English and German); put bluntly, he discounts her counsel because her status as a cogito, since her brothers’ deaths, threatens his selfhood. Binx muses that there are no other seekers like himself in America (8). He alone seeks. He cannot accept his aunt’s assertion that he is not alone in his confusion, that his suffering is human, not unique, which should be a comfort to him.

The epistemological struggle for authority between Binx and the women in his life continues when his mother, Anna, similarly challenges Binx’s Cartesian search for a meaningful existence. As contrasted with Aunt Emily’s challenge as a female cogito, Anna’s challenge comes from a position of more traditional feminine knowing. Anna “never gets used to porch talk with its peculiar license” (104). In the South, the porch
serves as an epistemological center. Sitting on the porch, “the unnamed is named” (104). But Anna absents herself from the epistemological center of the semiotic community, unwilling and uninterested in understanding Binx’s search. Anna views her son’s epistemological efforts as humorously curious and patronizingly renames him “Dick Rover, the serious-minded Rover boy” (95). Immediately the inextricable link between milk, motherhood, and nursing presents itself. As Binx rises from his cot in his mother’s fishing camp, he muses that “the world is milk” (100), indicating the influence his unhealthy relationship with the feminine has upon his psyche. The “very bad color” (White) transmutes within Binx into a pain that covers the world as he awakens and looks out over the marsh (100). Anna’s femininity cannot help Binx much, as she “veers away from intimacy” and urges Binx to join the other men fishing, an act of male bonding (102). The milky White obscures the epistemological coherence and clarity Binx seeks. A phallic “White shaft lies straight as a ruler over the marsh” in retaliation (100). Binx’s responses to Kate tend to fall into a similar pattern as the rejection of his mother. When Kate confesses to him that he is “like her, but much worse,” attempting honesty, he reverts to Cartesian dualism, responding mentally with visions of ghosts (disembodiment), dismissing her insight, and deeming it necessary “not to pay too much attention to her” lest her epistemology influence him (33-34).

Rejecting the women who are living as embodied humans in close proximity to him, Binx seeks the feminine in disembodied and abstracted forms. Moviegoing, in particular, functions as an attempt to encounter the feminine by diving into the “mother and Urwombs of all moviehouses” (141). The feminine in the form of the movie theatre aids Binx in grounding the self in a virtual present reality. Binx renames Ms.
Schexnaydre’s Spitz dog with its “convoluted anus” Rosebud (54). A moviegoer knows that Charles Foster Kane utters the word “Rosebud” as he dies, remembering the loss of his mother. However, in doing so, Binx metaphysically distances himself from the feminine and reality, experiencing both of them imagistically on the screen and in the dark. The image of a displaced womb mimics Binx’s literal displacement while demonstrating his unhealthy relationship with the feminine.

**Binx’s Epistemological Fear of the Raced and Gendered Other**

One of the central ethical problems in *The Moviegoer* is the extent to which Binx’s semiotic community excludes or marginalizes some individuals. Binx’s anxieties over what constitutes knowledge and alternate ways of knowing find direct expression in his fear of Black and gay as well as female wisdom. Philosophically, because Descartes imagines the immaterial cogito without physical attributes such as sex or gender, Cartesianism offers a possibility for radical equality between races. However, Cartesianism as it has been interpreted and inherited divides the races in much the same way as it divides the genders, by devaluing Black subjectivity. Cartesian knowledge insists on pure rationality, denying subjective experience as valid. But racism as an external environmental force, just like sexism, constitutes subjectivity that does not align with the Cartesian definition of subjectivity, where the individual creates himself in isolation. Slavery made Black persons possessions and Whites masters in a dualistic Cartesian instance of domination. Whites denied Blacks subjectivity and personhood.

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5 For discussion on the Cartesian subject and Black subjectivity, see Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums.” For discussion of the philosophical foundations of racism, Cartesianism, and the mind/body split, see Harfouch 32.
The Cartesian subject relies only upon the certainty of their existence as a thinking thing or cogito. For Blacks, Whites have called their subjecthood into question. Blacks exist as possessions to be dominated and not persons capable of thought. Therefore, if subjecthood is defined by as being a thinking thing, Whites also call into question Blacks’ status as thinking things and the purity/objectivity of their reasoning abilities.

Binx’s anxieties surface in his interactions with Mercer, Aunt Emily’s long-time Black servant, a role that casts him as a last remnant of the epistemology of the Old South. Yet, the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement shifts Binx and Mercer’s relationship. Mercer’s knowledge of politics and current events causes Binx to become “uneasy”:

Mercer has aspirations. How does he see himself? When he succeeds in seeing himself, it is as a remarkable sort of fellow, a man who keeps himself well-informed in science and politics. This is why I am always uneasy when I talk to him. I hate it when his vision of himself dissolves and he sees himself as neither, neither old retainer nor expert in current events. (21)

The ingenious Mercer seems to envision himself participating fully in the semiotic, scientific, and political communities, but Binx remains unsure about accepting and integrating Mercer’s alternative epistemology because of what he perceives as Mercer’s lack of solid selfhood. Mercer tries to assert his racial identity discursively, affecting a “clipped speech” with “dipthongs” (20). Holding the coal scuttle, half facing the door and half facing the fire, Mercer hovers between his identity as a knower and the identity imposed upon him by Whites, a state in which Binx believes Mercer remains in an existential “limbo” (21). Mercer also attempts to think himself into existence and achieve thinking-thing status by reading a gnostic Rosicrucian treatise, How to Harness Your Secret Powers. These interactions illustrate the South’s Cartesian fragmented
consciousness and self. Binx’s amused contempt and pity present Mercer through a southern viewpoint, as a retainer. To the extent Mercer finds he must continue to conform to this role, Mercer mirrors Binx’s, and more generally the South’s, incoherence and confusion. Still, Binx cannot define himself as the opposite of a Black man, the opposite of Mercer, which the natural polarities proposed by seventeenth-century thinkers like Descartes would dictate, because Mercer proves himself to be more knowledgeable than Binx expects in science and politics.

Similarly, Binx fears the epistemology of “The Romantic”—a stranger whom he sees reading *The Charterhouse of Parma* on a train—because he suspects him of being homosexual. Mercer and the Romantic on the train classify as “less than” to Binx, their epistemology dangerously less than pure, solid, and rational. Fear renders Binx incapable of seeing himself in the Other and unable to view these others as selves.

**Transcorporeality and the Embodied Self**

Despite depicting Binx with all these limitations, in *The Moviegoer* Percy does—if only tentatively—project a future South characterized by mutuality and understanding instead of distrust and fear. In particular, viewing the novel through the lens of transcorporeality has the potential to deconstruct the border between Binx’s mental and physical worlds, between himself and others, and between his mind and body, offering Binx a means by which to achieve meaningful embodied selfhood.

Transcorporeality contends that noxious agents affect our embodied sense of self and our intra-actions with the world, which constitute the self. Stacy Alaimo describes “transcorporeality” as the constant “intra-action between human corporeality and non-human nature which necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through
the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual” (*Material Feminisms* 238). Intra-action also acknowledges the impossibility of an absolute separation or objectivity.

While Cartesian bodies insist on distinct borders and impenetrability, transcorporeality recognizes the body’s porosity. Sara Shostak describes the body in transcorporeal terms emphasizing its porosity and materiality: “The environmental genetic body is porous; it absorbs what it touches in the air, soil, and water and is changed at the molecular and morphological level by these absorptions” (2338). Biology and culture mutually evolve contingent with one another, constituting one another. By contrast, Elizabeth Wilson contends that cultural studies of the body veer away from discussing the physical, biological body in favor of examining the construction of the discursive body:

> There is a persistent distaste for biological detail. The body is read as a social, cultural, experiential, or psychical object that touches on the biological realm only lightly. The body at the center is curiously abiological – its social, cultural, experiential, or psychical construction having been posited against or beyond any putative biological claims. (*Neural Geographies* 15)

The biological body and the cultural body integrate within the theory of transcorporeality. Descartes does acknowledge that the body absorbs nutrients from food through pores, contending that food contains “natural spirits” that the heart transforms into “vital spirits” and the brain transforms into “animal spirits.” To this degree Descartes affirms that humans are animals, though separate from other animals because of their ability to reason, and that the body contains pores that absorb external

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6 “For the real extension of body is such that it excludes any penetrability of parts” (Descartes *CSM II* 297-8).
nutrients. In this way Descartes attempts to bridge the divide between mind and body to explain how the brain controls the body’s movements:

It’s easy to demonstrate that the human body contains many such spirits. First, in the stomach there’s a solution of nutrients subjected to heat; and heat is nothing but a greater than usual agitation of material particles, as I explained in Meteorology. And the spirits are created from the particles of terrestrial bodies that are the easiest to pull apart. So there must be a large quantity of spirits from the food contained in the stomach passing into the veins along with the chyle; these are called natural spirits. These spirits are increased in the liver and in the veins by heat—i.e. by the agitation occurring there. While the chyle is turning into blood, many of its particles separate off, creating more spirits. When this blood then comes into the heart, which is warmer than the veins, it immediately becomes rarefied and dilates. This is the source of the beating of the heart and the arteries; and this rarefaction causes yet more particles of blood to separate off, thus converting them into the spirits that the medical men call vital spirits. The particles of blood leaving the heart by the great artery are agitated in the highest degree and travel straight through the carotid arteries toward the middle of the brain, where they fill its cavities and—once they are separated from the rest of the blood—form the animal spirits. What separates them from the rest of the blood (I think) is the fact that the gaps through which they enter the brain are so narrow that the rest of the blood can’t get through. (*CSM III 225-6*)

To Descartes, biology still maintains an element of the spiritual in a limited capacity. This passage surprisingly aligns quite well with the transcorporeal view of the body as porous, but Descartes still does not connect the body with consciousness here. Human embodiment is the phenomenal product of emergent dynamics resulting from the synergistic, diffusive relationships among its parts. Binx’s trillions of cells – along with every other complex being’s trillions of cells – renew themselves constantly in response to environmental factors. By a transcorporeal view, the dynamic body becomes a site of knowledge rather than an impediment entrapping the soul. Aside from the above passage, Descartes defines the body as closed, not porous, separate from the mind. As Vicki Kirby asserts:
If we translate the separation of culture from nature into the mind/body split, it seems that the Cartesian subject can admit that s/he has a body (that attaches to the self), and yet s/he is somehow able to sustain the belief that s/he is not this body. This denial is necessary because to contest the latter and all its possible consequences would at least suggest that it might be in the nature of the biological body to argue, to reinvent, and rewrite itself—to cogitate. (220)

Transcorporeal thought thus sees the embodied self as an ever-evolving, knowing, natural landscape.

According to Cartesianism, the freely determining mind splits from the materially determined, and authentic consciousness means freedom from the material which constrains. But the mind can only be immaterial if it sets itself against a matter that is inert and devoid of all capacity or relation. Conversely, we are only organisms responding to stimuli if the body is an entity in and of itself. Contrarily, I propose that the body (and mind) is part of a series of open-ended systems, environmental, biological, economic, and political, that it cannot master but through which it can access and acquire its abilities and capacities – the ability to generate and compose, rather than merely consume. Alternative conceptions of materiality that accentuate the lively, active, emergent, agential aspects of nature foster ethical/epistemological stances that generate concern, care, wonder, respect, caution (or precaution), epistemological humility, kinship, and difference instead of apathy, contempt, and fear.

It should come as little surprise, then, that in The Moviegoer Binx’s own body, not his mind, discovers the search. Physical discomfort and intra-action with the physical world confronts Binx with his abdication from existence:

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7 For discussion of the inertia and passivity of Cartesian matter, see Coole, “The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh” 92-5.
I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for me, as I shall explain later. What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best. My shoulder didn’t hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally, as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it. (13)

In this best/worst of times, awareness of the body rips him from everydayness and awakens him to transcorporeal possibilities. Once he returns to health, everydayness lulls Binx into a somatic state again, and he becomes unconscious of his own embodiment again.

During Binx’s service in the Korean War, a similar pattern of awareness and obliviousness recurs when he is wounded. Binx experiences transcorporeal embodiment but cannot actualize this revelation as soon as destruction no longer threatens his body. As Nash observes:

When the malaise-ridden, ghost-like Binx was shot, he was suddenly forced back into his flesh—forced to feel and to acknowledge that part of him—and, in that way, restored to “the world” that had been “lost” to him. Disaster returned Binx—though temporarily, he admits—to his own embodiment and to the physical world of which he is a part. (“Searching for Medicine” 121)

The incontestable, heightened reality of the body in pain, as Elaine Scarry theorizes, shocks Binx out of the imminence of everydayness. His credo becomes, “I hurt, therefore I am.” Remembering his epiphany, Binx experiences a subsequent moment of bodily and material awareness, and hence he rediscovers the search:

But this morning when I got up, I dressed as usual and began as usual to put my belongings into my pockets: wallet, notebook (for writing down occasional thoughts), pencil, keys, handkerchief, pocket slide rule (for calculating percentage returns on principal). They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues. I stood in the center of the room and gazed at the little pile,
sighting through a hole made by thumb and forefinger. What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible. I bathed, shaved, dressed carefully, and sat at my desk and poked through the little pile in search of a clue just as the detective on television pokes through the dead man’s possessions, using his pencil as a poker. (14)

Remembering and seeing his own otherwise usually invisible hand, Binx continues to search for other clues. Gary Ciuba points to Bolling’s possessions, which consistently indicate “what he would call being ‘stuck’ in the world. They locate him at a place and an hour, serve as coordinates on the axes of his existence” (68). These material items provide a clue rather than an obstruction to the search, indicating the importance of the material in Binx’s search for embodied selfhood.

Binx exists in the room, seeing the room and all the material objects in the room as they are, without imposing expectations on the space or the objects. A sense of place consistent with transcorporeal ethics recognizes the more-than-human world and its forces as significant – the individual not a master above and against environment, but enmeshed. Alaimo asserts:

Epistemological “space” becomes ethical in environmental philosophy and feminist theory because it repels presumptions of human mastery that would reduce the stuff of life to mere “resources” for human consumption. Epistemological space needs to be contiguous space—it is always as close as our own skin—and yet it offers ample room for the more-than-human world to act, and, more to the point, to intra-act, in surprising ways. (Material Feminisms 251)

The body figures prominently in a transcorporeal epistemology of place and would repudiate Binx’s impulse to master his environment. Alaimo defines transcorporeality as “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (Material Feminisms 238). Existing in this embodied,
environmental space addresses Binx’s anxiety of slipping out of time and place and has the potential to allow Binx to flow, emerging coextensively with time and nature.

**Binx, Binx Senior, and Nature’s Remedy**

Binx’s father provides other possibilities for tracing transcorporeal ethics in *The Moviegoer*, albeit sometimes as much by making the wrong choice as the right one. Dr. Bolling attempts to cure himself by connecting with nature and his body. He searches, going on nature walks for miles, and builds a duck camp, “Roaring Camp” (63). Binx’s father, like Binx, often observes his body objectively rather than as an embodied soul, measuring and monitoring his calories, bowel movements, and hours of sleep (60). Binx concludes that 1930 science – objective, dissociative monitoring and measuring – contributed to killing his father (62). Binx notes the physical symptoms of the malaise his father presents:

My father had trouble sleeping and moved out with us. He tossed like a wounded animal, or slept fitfully, his breath whistling musically through the stiff hairs of his nose—and went back inside before morning, leaving his bed tortured and sour, a smell which I believed to be caused by a nasal ailment known then as “catarrh.” The porch did not work for him and he bought a Saskatchewan sleeping bag from Abercrombie and Fitch and moved out into the rose garden. Just at this hour of dawn I would be awakened by a terrible sound: my father crashing through the screen door, sleeping bag under his arm, his eyes crisscrossed by fatigue and by the sadness of these glimmering dawns. (60)

Binx links his father’s spiritual torture both to his father’s body and to the dawn, describing it as nature – animal. Nature reflects his father’s unease, we might say, empathizing with Dr. Bolling.

Though aware of the connection between physical and mental health, Dr. Bolling never finds the answers he seeks in nature. Consequently, he sinks into depression, a scientist too abstracted from reality. Dr. Bolling’s actions represent an important gesture
toward transcorporeality and overcoming abstraction, but his failures point to a society that has little space for embodied knowers and knowing. Dr. Bolling has expectations which he imposes upon nature, the expectation of a cure, of transcendence, that are not met, and so he cannot engage with nature, including his body, on its own terms. The societal and familial expectation that men should be tough and not feel emotional or physical pain disassociates him from his own body. As psychiatrist Walter Glannon explains, “The gap between these expectations and the failure to meet them may lead to the perception of expectations as stressors and to negative beliefs about one’s abilities, both of which can contribute to depression” (249). A more holistic approach to health accounts for environment, accounts for the embodied self being an extended thing. Society and Dr. Bolling’s wife and family project societal attitudes and expectations regarding fulfillment and masculinity that put him in an anxious and depressed state.

Binx’s mother, Anna, contributes to the environmental threat his father experiences by perpetuating social attitudes regarding standards of achievement and masculinity in the home. Anna reductively attributes her husband’s depression to an overactive nervous system, which is supposedly a female malady, without considering that his depression is a prolonged nervous response to a perceived threat in his (domestic) environment in the form of failed expectations and shattered assumptions about masculinity. Cartesianism, as it has been inherited and misinterpreted, associates women with the body (nerves) and men with the mind (will power), possessing the mental power to rationally overcome the body’s anxiety. As Anna remarks critically, “His nervous system was like a high-powered radio. Do you know what happens if you turn up the volume and tune into WWL?” (105). Being a man, Dr. Bolling should have
control over his nervous system and his body. No one identifies Dr. Bolling by his first name, indicating he is not a “namer” exercising mastery over his body and his environment. Anna believes her husband is too sensitive and that he should tune out, turn down, and avoid overstimulation.

Binx’s mother and his Aunt Emily continually propose a cure, continually relate to Binx that his father should have been “happier” had he “gone into research” (42). This cure only continues to reify the Cartesian binary between men and women. Anna, like Aunt Emily with Binx, does not accept being an ordinary doctor as meeting her expectations and believes there is more prestige in research at the pinnacle of the medical profession. The two women attribute Dr. Bolling’s depression to his failure to forge an identity marked by high achievement. Dr. Bolling’s dislocation and lack of identity stems from this perceived failure to enact success by societal and familial standards. Binx’s father fails to uphold the tradition he has inherited and live according to expectations. The 1864 death of Alex Bolling (Binx’s great-grandfather) during the Civil War creates an ethic of masculine stoicism – mind over matter/denial of the body – in the Bolling family. The tale of Binx’s failure is suggested by a family photograph of Binx’s father with the other Bollings, which Binx never tires of looking at. The other Bollings have adapted and “coincide” with themselves, but Binx’s father fails to coincide because he has not achieved the same status or adapted the same masculine toughness:

Judge Anse with his drooping mustache and thin cold cheeks, the hard-eyed one who is still remembered for having publicly described a Louisiana governor as a peckerwood son of a bitch; Dr. Wills, the lion-headed one, the rumpled country genius who developed a gut anastomosis still in use; and Alex, serene in his dream of youth and of his hero’s death to come. But my father is not one of them. (21)
Dr. Bolling’s inability to accept and to conform to societal expectations affects his intra-action with the Bollings. Though he too enters the medical field, he does not conduct important research but is an only an “ordinary” doctor, without an exceptional identity – not a surgeon or medical researcher – and so fails to achieve according to the conventional societal standards that plague him (105). Binx’s father fails to commune with the other Bollings and significantly poses at a distance from the others in the photo. His uncertainty and insecurity indicate that Binx’s father perceives the other men as a threat. Judge Anse nobly upholds the law and speaks aggressively like a man, asserting dominance. Dr. Wills ferociously resembles a feral lion boasting a genius intellect and has achieved at a high level in the medical field, developing a medical apparatus that is widely used. Alex identifies with the war hero, happily internalizing the ideal of masculine strength – physical and mental. A “proper Bolling” is a “go-getter” (33). Kate recognizes that Binx, like his father, is not a “proper Bolling.” “Too much fellow feeling” makes him “nervous and uneasy” after too much time with good boy Stanley Kinchen (138). The same social expectations that threatened his father threaten Binx’s selfhood as well and manifest as an environmental threat in the form of the malaise.

As an alternative, Binx’s father might have endeavored to alter the relation between his mind and environment by forming and accepting his own expectations. Instead, his perceived lack of control over his environment and his nervous system leads Dr. Bolling to attempt to exert more control over his body by measuring and monitoring his bodily activity to compensate. Ultimately, Dr. Bolling stops eating. Without control over his environment, Dr. Bolling asserts what control he can over his own body. Had he internalized a new set of expectations that allowed for becoming, the expectations of
others might no longer have posed an environmental threat and no longer provoke a maladaptive depressive response. Glannon counsels, “The key to treating depression may be in adjusting one’s perception of and relation to the environment so that one’s goals and expectations from others are set within reasonable limits” (249). The sufferer can intra-act with their environment and others in adaptive rather than maladaptive ways.

The possibility for a more reciprocal relationship between Dr. Bolling and his environment, changing how he could have intra-acted with his environment and others, actually occurs to Binx. He makes a note to himself to research the link between science and romanticism, the literary tradition founded upon a return to nature. For Binx, his father’s struggle to merge nature and science and mind and body offers an important clue. Managing his own relation to his environment by accepting his own expectations and not projecting them onto nature would allow for Binx to “stick himself in the world” and to feel as though he is somebody, somewhere (143).

**Kate: Transcorporeal Guide, Medical Subject**

Another character with the potential to serve as transcorporeal guide and aid Binx in his search is his cousin Kate. Kate, privy to Binx’s search, helps him to recognize the downright absurdity of his abstract and schematic approach to “the search,” in which he undertakes “rotations” and “repetitions” and alternates between the “vertical” and the “horizontal” search. Kate makes Binx aware that he has become as abstracted and absurd as a girl Kate knows called BoBo, who, Kate relates to Binx, located and named every iron deer in Westchester County, making monthly rounds to visit them. Iron recasts the deer as completely unnatural, the antithesis of a natural deer. Bobo then
collects and names them, mastering nature. Though irritated, Binx admits to himself that he does “sound like BoBo and her goddamn iron deer” (82). BoBo’s obsession becomes a perfect objective correlative of Binx’s search, which denatures both him and the mystery of the human journey. Kate challenges Binx to embrace nature and an embodied existence, aware that the scientifically oriented search takes him away from himself, into a bodiless, “nowhere” existence.

Kate’s audacious invitation for Binx to travel with her to Chicago is also illuminating. Determined to have a purely physical “fling” and escape from the longing of the spirit, Kate directs Binx to take her north by train. Contracting Binx’s services, she warns him, “Just don’t speak to me of love, bucko” (198). Kate wants a purely bodily experience. Their inability to carry it off well, however, belies the inability to separate their bodies from their minds in their intra-actions. The two endeavor to employ their “poor flesh” as a tool to bear the burden of the spirit’s needs, and they fail. With Kate, Binx cannot – as with secretaries in the past – use the body as a means to an end, the antithesis of living in the body. Thus, neither successfully masters their body. Living solely in the mind and consuming the fleshly material world – putting it to their own appropriate uses as masters – no longer suffices. He and Kate are therefore poised on the verge of breakthrough to a new embodied mode of living.

But to realize such a breakthrough, Kate must contend with another effort, revealing but insidious, on the part of medical science to exert control over her body, specifically, scientific development and medical overprescription of the barbiturate Nembutal. The Cartesian medical model does not take into account cultural or environmental forces but treats the body in a mechanistic manner. A more sophisticated
The transcorporeal model takes many environmental factors into account. Much of what ails Kate stems from cultural attitudes towards women and her sexist environment. The chemical Kate ingests to manage her nerves, sodium pentobarbital (Nembutal), is prescribed to treat insomnia and anxiety. The malaise has a very real chemical, and for Kate, unmistakably corporeal component. She would not have been alone in her struggle; David Herzberg notes “the 1950s ‘epidemic’ of anxiety and neurosis” (49). Kate would also not have been alone in her addiction to Nembutal. As a licensed psychiatrist, Percy likely had familiarity with these drugs and patients with mental illnesses similar to what Kate experiences.

Enabling this proliferation of misinformation regarding the addictive properties of medications then and today are economic, political, and medical institutions. Alaimo notes that “[p]owerful entities, such as the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, greatly influence what knowledge is produced and how it is delivered to the public” (20). The networked, immersive relationship between biology and politics here becomes apparent. As the 1950s came to a close and the 1960s began, barbiturates became “women’s drugs” (Herzberg 49). Herzberg asserts that in the public consciousness

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8 For discussion of the Cartesian model of medicine and the lack of consideration given to environmental and cultural forces, see Larson 124-8 and Hewa and Hetherington 129-39.
9 Harris Isbell, pharmacologist with the Addiction Research Centre in Lexington, Kentucky, in a series of papers published in 1950, conclusively demonstrated that barbiturates taken regularly in large quantities produce all three of the characteristic symptoms of addiction: tolerance, physical dependence, and psychic dependence or habituation (Isbell et al.). Despite this, the use and prescription of barbiturates continued to rise, peaking in the 1950s. Production of these drugs reached the quantity necessary for the treatment of 10 million people in 1955 (Lopez-Muñoz et al. 338-9).
10 Herzberg attributes the delay in warning the public about Nembutal to the undue influence of medical and pharmacological financial interests over Congress: “The most obvious reason was the determined opposition of commercial and professional interests, including virtually every organized medical, drug industry, and druggist trade group: the American Medical Association, the American Pharmaceutical Association, the American Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, the National Wholesale Druggists’ Association, and even the American Dental Association” (94).
during the 1950s, anxiety became “a social illness best cured through a return to proper
gender roles—especially for men” (62). Straying from their domestic roles, with a desire
to assert themselves politically and economically, as Kate does, taking an interest in
“girlish socialism,” was thought to literally make women ill (*The Moviegoer* 35). Male
physicians quickly named the disorder anxiety and began tranquilizing women. Many
women “listened to ‘experts’ telling them that their nameless problems were medical
illnesses” (Herzberg 79). Herzberg elaborates upon the ways in which the ideology
behind the practice of prescribing barbiturates upheld restrictive gender roles:

> Easy access to tranquilizers would be the worst possible thing for men, who if
> anything needed to be energized rather than further relaxed. Tranquilizers
> smacked of bed rest, the quintessential cure for women who needed to be
> returned to their “natural” passivity. (62)

Consequently, in the 1950s and early 1960s, women were prescribed and used
tranquilizers at rates twice that of men (Herzberg 73).  

In keeping with the times, Binx and Aunt Emily initially dismiss Kate’s illness.
Aunt Emily makes Binx aware of her discovery of the empty whiskey and Nembutal
bottles but claims that she “is not really worried”: “Kate is just fine. She is going to come
through with flying colors. And she and Walter are going to be happy. But as time grows
short, she is getting a little nervous” (*The Moviegoer* 24). To Aunt Emily, Kate merely

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11 Parry, “Use of Psychotropic Drugs,” 802, 808. See also Mellinger, Balter, and Manheimer
“Psychotherapeutic Drugs,” 448; Mitchell Balter and Jerome Levine, “The Nature and Extent of
Mellinger, Balter, and Manheimer, “Patterns of Psychotherapeutic Drug Use Among Adults in San
Francisco,” AMA Archives of General Psychiatry, November 1971, 393—94; Balter and Levine, “Character
and Extent of Psychotherapeutic Drug Usage in the United States,” in Psychiatry: Proceedings of the V
World Congress of Psychiatry, Mexico, D.F., 25 November—4 December, 1971, ed. Ramón de la Fuente
and Maxwell Weisman (New York: American Elsevier, 1973), 87—88; Parry et al., “National Patterns of
suffers from pre-wedding jitters, which marrying and satisfying her wifely duties will soon alleviate, bringing Kate the sense of fulfillment she currently lacks.

However, Kate recognizes that doctors and the medical establishment contribute to and exacerbate her illness. Rather than validating her symptoms, reading both her psychic and bodily narratives holistically, thereby providing her with the affirmation of self and guidance she seeks, she presents as an “authentic neurotic” playing a role and charming the doctors, seeking an identity in her illness. Kate fears that her visits with Dr. Mink will “make her sick” and avoids therapy sessions and later abruptly ends treatment during a moment of manic exultation (24, 79). Yet in other moments, Kate regards her office visits as a path to identity. She delights when doctors recognize her symptom as an indicator of a particular neurosis because she wishes to live authentically. Kate reveals exultantly to Binx that she has realized, during a session with Dr. Mink, that she is no longer afraid because she no longer feels that she “must be such and such a person” and does not have to be the “joyous and creative person” featured in Mink’s articles that she has read. Most revealing, however, is her pride in discovering “secret reasons” for Mink that are his “own favorite reasons” (79). She proclaims she has been freed from Mink’s and society’s expectations regarding how she should live a fulfilling life.

Nevertheless, Kate cannot mold her symptoms entirely to her will, any more than a medical professional can. Binx has observed Kate’s depressive and manic cycles and knows that “these exalted moments . . . are often followed by spells of the Blackest depression,” and he senses that she is “already . . . laboring ever so slightly at her exaltation” (79-80). Kate displays symptoms of bipolar illness, thus revealing why she
and Mink have not progressed in her psychotherapy. Dr. Mink has a “favorite” psychiatric construct which he employs to classify Kate – anxious neurotic with a typically feminine overactive nervous system requiring suppression. As a result, he does not treat Kate’s bipolar disorder but rather attributes it to overstimulation.

In her enthusiasm for therapy and her desire for authenticity then, Kate has become a willing specimen – a data set substantiating Dr. Mink’s social and medical construct rather than what she truly is, a troubled human being who might benefit from a more dynamic psychiatric construct. Kate observes, “I am always at my best with doctors. They are charmed with me. I feel fine when I’m sick. It is only when I’m well that—,” ironically indicating she does not benefit from treatment and that her interactions with doctors are neither authentic nor dynamic (57). Kate presents with symptoms that she knows doctors will be pleased to recognize as legitimate, as she attempts to gain recognition of selfhood from the patriarchal medical establishment. Predictably, she concludes her conversation with Binx filled with fear, anxiety, and dependence, pleading to know, “Is everything going to be all right?” (Moviegoer 116).

Kate becomes dependent upon Dr. Mink’s formula to name her anxiety as authentic, and this physically manifests in her chemical dependency. Kate does not have children but does have political and social ambitions. Antifeminist thought contends that Kate experiences anxiety and depression because she has rejected her natural role as mother. Feminist thought attributes her mental anguish to her inability to achieve her mental, political, and economic potential because society denies her capability. Kate’s treatment perpetuates the false dichotomy between nature and culture, positing the crisis as either
medical or societal, biological or political. But health care is simultaneously social, cultural, political, biological, and medical.

Kate’s affliction is biopolitical. Neither a purely political nor a purely biological cure suffices. Kate’s frustrated ambitions and intellect and lack of autonomy should not be pathologized. However, her lack of autonomy does contribute to her legitimately life-threatening feelings of depression and her suicidal ideation. Surviving the accident which killed her former fiancé, Lyell, profoundly traumatizes her and also reflects the social and medical complexity of her situation. Kate confesses to Binx, in her “wan analytic voice,” that the fatal crash was “the happiest moment of her life” because she views freedom from married life with Lyell as liberating (43). She is at her best when everything is at its worst. Her “wan” tone conveys illness. Kate’s “analytic voice” connotes her mental and physical disassociation. Her body performs all the routine actions she would normally undertake – eating breakfast, bathing, and reading the paper – as though nothing has occurred or changed. She speaks of the incident ironically. Nothing in this exchange indicates that Kate has processed this tragic event in a healthy way by allowing herself to experience it. Her fiancé’s death in the crash marks a turning point in Kate’s life after which her mental health declines. The irony masks the seriousness of Kate’s despair. She continues to deny any intent behind her suicidal ideation, but her mixing alcohol and Nembutal indicates real illness, not female antics. A transcorporeal, ethical approach to Kate’s care would ensure that psychologists not dismiss her complaints as female problems necessitating treatment with women’s drugs but assess her concerns holistically and that her physician discloses information about the addictiveness of barbiturates like Nembutal to her. Percy critiques the
ineffectiveness of this kind of treatment as Cartesian. Psychiatrists still discuss mental illness in terms of mental ego and physical neurons.

An effective treatment for depression and bipolar disorder would benefit from an approach that does not rely solely on talk therapy – intersubjectivity – which dismisses biology. Studies confirm the combination of pharmaceutical and psychotherapeutic intervention works more effectively than treatment with either pharmaceuticals or psychotherapy independently (de Jonghe et al.; Keller et al.; Pampallona et al.; Thase et al.). The organic relationality, or connection, fostered by antidepressant medication (improvement in communication between brain and gut) translates into empathetic intersubjectivity outside the body between patient and psychologist. As Elizabeth Wilson suggests, “Psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology are not competing ideologies of depressive malady—they are different lines of attack into the same bioaffective system” (“Organic Empathy” 387). Language (talk therapy) strengthens the organic connection between the central nervous system and the gut, and drugs facilitate intersubjective affinity because the biological and psychic realms share a relational logic. Kate’s (mis)treatment at the hands of the medical establishment provides rich material for arriving at just this kind of conclusion, difficult as such an insight might be for Binx or even Kate herself. Treating mental illness as a bioeffective disorder rather than conceptualizing it in terms of mental ego and physical neurons separately offers an effective alternative to a Cartesian model of medicine, rigidly separating mind from body.
Disability and Corporeality in *The Moviegoer*

Lonnie, Binx’s half-brother, teaches Binx more about embodiment than any other character, as a transcorporeal guide. Lonnie’s chronic illness (described only as a viral infection) constantly reminds Lonnie of his own embodiment. Lonnie cannot transcend embodiment as a disembodied cogito. Because of this, Lonnie involves his physical body in his spiritual quest for meaning, linking the two intimately. Lonnie must use a wheelchair as a mobility aid due to illness. Furthermore, he continually fasts, despite his failing health, to offer his sufferings to God. Binx describes Lonnie’s life as a “serene business” – a life of the spirit (94). Lonnie’s wounded body inoculates him against the malaise and imbues his life with the kind of meaning that Binx seeks. Lonnie functions as the answer to Binx’s search for a means to fuse body and mind. Biology is not so inept at treating the metaphysical ills, then, as Binx has believed. Citing Lonnie’s disability and illness, Brent Cline and Robbie Bolton propose that the spiritual wounding of the flesh signifies to Binx the ethical responsibility he bears toward others (135). The physical body transfigured becomes a sacramental body.

Such readings venture dangerously into a tradition of mortification of the flesh that is premised fundamentally upon a mind/body split, yet such a split is even more categorical and contradictory in Cartesian thought. Cartesianism has advanced the misperception that disabled individuals’ “machines” operate ineffectively and need repair because the machine no longer follows the will of the cogito correctly. Patrick Ojok and Junior B. Musenze argue that Descartes “assumed that the soul was in the body akin to a captain piloting a ship, giving the soul the primacy of existence with a mechanical body whose essence was to obey the soul while performing the activities of
the soul when in its ‘normal state’” (2). Descartes elaborates on his famous theorem: “From this I recognized that I was a substance whose whole essence and nature is to be conscious and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing” (CSM II 32). Steven Edwards asserts that, “according to the Cartesian thesis: the mind has ontological priority over the body; the body is subject to the causal relations to which other physical things are subject; and the body has no constitutive role in relation to the self” (“The Body as Object” 47). For Lonnie, crippled by an undefined illness and navigating the world with the aid of a wheelchair, this definition of selfhood marks his dependence as a deficit. Edwards elaborates further that the Cartesian view holds that a “legitimate person owes their existence and individuality to no other thing” (Disability 100). Centering the cogito in something other than the privileged certainty of “self-evident intuition” proves difficult for disabled individuals, although this difficulty underscores precisely how much is taken for granted in Descartes’s “dependence on no material thing” (CSM II 100). Lonnie’s wheelchair extends and decenters his self, thereby constituting his self in part. Consistently conscious of their corporeal differences and physical difficulties, disabled persons do not find independence from the body to be self-evident. A healthy body is essential to assimilating into everydayness and hence, ironically, also the foundation for the assumption of disembodiedness.

From this Cartesian perspective arises the misapprehension that the disabled body does not serve the will of its master, whereas normative bodies do.12 Able-bodied
individuals often perceive themselves as free while disabled persons are slaves to their bodies. This conception of disability defines Lonnie as wheelchair bound, passive and without agency. Yet Lonnie’s wheelchair challenges the illusion of a naturally bounded and self-contained body that is somehow diminished by the reliance on an external technology. While disunified in mind and body in ways disturbing to Cartesian mind-over-body norms, the unpredictable additions and absences from a normative body schema that Lonnie experiences enable him to enact a new stratagem for being – a continual state of becoming. His sense of “placeness” differs from the normative able-bodied individual’s, his wheelchair functioning as an extension of embodiment. But the disorganization of Lonnie’s being, however far it seems from the norm, actually reveals that norm – and the possibilities that lie beyond it. Margrit Shildrick explains, “The wheelchair user is not simply dependent on technology in a very transparent way but is brought into being through that usually unacknowledged context of variable, dynamic, and often conflicting energies and forces” (20). Lonnie’s body is more than natural and not distinct, but permeable – the boundaries of interiority and exteriority increasingly meaningless. Normative Cartesian standards of embodiment do not prescribe the nature of Lonnie’s possible connections. Disability forces the disabled individual to relinquish the illusion of sovereign selfhood. Acknowledging that a human body is not a discrete, bounded entity, we can consider the ways that material technologies constantly disorder boundaries. This allows for Lonnie to intra-act and interact in transformative, unstructured ways that normative standards prohibit. As Margrit Shildrick asserts, “Difference allows us to think of ethics as the affirmation of multiple transformative possibilities rather than adherence to any fixed standard, be it of embodiment, practices,
or affects” (24). The dependencies experienced as inherent by those who are disabled do not attest to diminished capabilities but to the flow of energies that are a dynamic source of becoming with others.

Our entanglements render all of us vulnerable and our bodies porous. Lonnie’s biological and social entanglements, ever present and apparent, render him more vulnerable and more conscious of his own vulnerability. In turning away from a knowing sovereign subject and insisting that we are all enveloped by the flesh of the world, Merleau-Ponty seeks to instantiate “other landscapes besides my own” that are nonetheless mutually interwoven (The Visible and the Invisible 141). Lonnie’s anomalous embodiment does make Binx aware of the presence of others and his own ethical responsibility toward others. Vulnerability is the shared condition of becoming. Lonnie’s intra-actions with others are vulnerable in nature because of his dependence upon and constant proximity to others who care for him.

By undoing the limits of the embodied self, Lonnie challenges Binx’s need for corporeal integrity guarded by discrete bodily borders. The first time Percy introduces Lonnie, he is seated in his wheelchair and goes into a fit of excitement over Binx’s arrival. Lonnie’s spirited expression of joy indicates, alongside Binx’s description of Lonnie’s character, that Lonnie is present and the most genuinely, authentically alive person in the novel. This introduction also communicates Lonnie’s decentered self – a decentered alternative to normative embodiment and sovereign selfhood that Binx typically finds threatening. Through Lonnie’s intra-actions with biology, technology, and the people on whom he depends for care, Lonnie is continually becoming. Lonnie demonstrates alternative vulnerable ways of embodiment that allow for transformation
and becoming. The wheelchair extends Lonnie’s self into the material world while serving as an anomalous physical extension of his corporeal self. Lonnie cultivates a more reciprocal relationship between himself and his wheelchair, lovingly bumping Binx’s cot to initiate an intimate conversation with him (110). Lonnie’s wheelchair has semiotic and spiritual meaning to him as illustrated by his Sunday “flights” with Binx: “Then we take a ride. The ride is a flying trip over the boardwalk and full tilt down the swamp road. Lonnie perches on the edge of his chair and splits the wind until tears run out of his eyes” (112). Lonnie’s wheelchair allows for him and Binx to share a communal flight. Through his wheelchair and Binx’s benevolent actions, Lonnie experiences and internalizes joy. Unlike Binx’s hand, which is invisible to him, and his wallet, which contains identity cards that “might belong to any man” (13), Lonnie’s wheelchair conveys Lonnie’s integral relationship to the material and the ways in which the material is constitutive of the self. Lonnie transgresses this border between the human and more-than-human world with his wheelchair daily, not bound by consumer expectations. Along the same lines, Lonnie’s radio, though a material artifact, holds mystery and joy for him. He consistently toys with the transistor attempting to tune the radio to the right frequency, as if tuning in to a natural/spiritual frequency which constitutes his selfhood. He delights in the possibility of winning a new Zenith Trans World Radio. The transistor radio melds into the crook of his wrist, becoming a part of him, a tool by which to navigate the ambiguity and precarity of his existence.

Binx does not bear the same relationship to the material as Lonnie does. While Binx’s material possessions offer fleeting glimpses into a solid self, Lonnie’s wheelchair extends his self into the material world and shapes his navigation of the landscape of the
self and the more-than-human world. The material world threatens Binx and he continually retreats into abstraction as a Cartesian cogito. Binx’s MG vehicle is infested with the malaise, restricting and inhibiting his interaction with Sharon and his environment. Binx remarks, “The sun strikes the water with a malignant glint” (113). Binx does not like cars, and his preconceptions and expectations of transportation limit the emergent possibilities of becoming and communion with Sharon and the more-than-human world in this instance.

Lonnie is continually becoming as a result of the affective social and biological forces constituting his self and his experience. Others continually assist Lonnie, as his wheelchair, siblings, and mother undertake to complete his physical actions in part. Lonnie does not operate under the same illusion of mastery over his environment that Binx does, and his sense of agency and relationship to his environment necessarily differ as well. Able-bodied persons structure social and physical environments without chronically ill and disabled persons like Lonnie in mind. The Smiths must arrive early to church to roll Lonnie into a special place next to a column, and his brother, Roy, must help him to the communion rail and steady his face to receive the sacrament (108-9). Lonnie has a special place in the church and practically everywhere he goes – unlike Binx, who fears having no place, becoming “no one, nowhere” (58). Lonnie’s disability and anomalous being assure that Lonnie cannot become “no one, nowhere”; he can never claim the invisibility and lack of identity normatively embodied persons like Binx can. With each communion, unction, and physical act of ethical devotion, Lonnie affirms the integrity of the flesh and his commitment to continual becoming.
In contrast, as a consumer, Binx’s interactions with the world around him are based on his expectations of results and his need to distract himself from his alienation. Lonnie humbly accepts places on their own terms for what they offer. He accepts the swamp for what it offers him – flight – while it offers Binx a reminder of his failed masculinity. Lonnie’s relationship to nature noticeably differs from Binx’s. The swamp and the wind seemingly carry and support Lonnie during his flight. Binx cannot fish with Roy, Kinsey, and the Rigolets and does not engage with the swamp on its own terms, insisting on his terms in an attempt to control his environment and the anxiety it causes him. But the creatures of the marsh respond to Lonnie’s flight with a “din of croaking and pumping,” seemingly communicating with Lonnie (112). Lonnie “searches” the swamp, communing with it, while Binx considers the swamp disconnected from his own search (112). Binx gauges satisfaction of place not by the immediate experience, but by the degree to which experience conforms to the image created in his mind and on the movie screen. This method of appraising environments, as a consumer evaluating a product, represents a very anthropocentric endeavor because humankind, either consciously or not, exerts its will on the environment. Lonnie cannot exert his will in the same way Binx desires. He must navigate his environment through the agency of his anomalous embodiment coextensively with others and his wheelchair rather than challenge his environment willfully.

However, all of this does not make Lonnie a departure from the norm so much as a dramatic demonstration of the norm. Transcorporeality demonstrates that the body’s permeable borders always continually intra-act with environmental and biological forces from which it is inseparable. Extreme unction and anointment cannot be
separated from medicine either. An unguent or ointment (medicinal preparation) heals the skin. The biological reconfiguration of Lonnie’s body reveals truths to him inaccessible to the able-bodied Binx. So, Lonnie’s biology, his illness, transforms his body into a site of knowledge. Lonnie accesses the full reality of his existence. Confronted with the perils of corporeality, Lonnie and his body do not sink beneath everydayness. Moreover, Lonnie’s physical dependence upon others ensures he physically interacts in meaningful ways with others. To the extent Binx internalizes any of this, the wounded body proves crucial to Binx’s physical search. Lonnie understands the body as a meaningful physical sacrament. His disability defines his experiences and interactions, constituting a paradigm shift in subjectivity toward empathetic selflessness. Binx does show his appreciation for Lonnie’s way of becoming in some definite ways, observing, for example, Lonnie’s belief in his ability to “offer sufferings in reparation for men’s indifference” (137). Lonnie offers a physical remedy to the intellectual malaise. Tracing the social and material interchanges between Lonnie’s body and place can aid Binx in understanding not only ethical embodiment but the ethical nature of place that constitutes embodiment. Lonnie cannot remain abstracted inside his head, separate from the material world and his body. His disability ensures he cannot forget his body as Binx does because he exists on a precarious threshold of tenuous existence.

**Transcorporeality and Binx as Physician**

Aside from Woods Nash, critics have not focused on Binx’s decision to begin medical school, but his profession affords him the opportunity to actively practice a transcorporeal epistemology. Notwithstanding the malpractice of the physicians
attending to Kate, the patient and practitioner can constitute one another in dynamic intra-action. A new paradigm, effectively grounded in the emergent body as a site of possibility and of becoming in every exchange, capacitates an ethical, fully embodied epistemology. Nash discusses Binx’s journey to redemptive medicine:

That divorce occurs vertically as a person is lifted from the earth, so to speak, and attains the vantage of a God’s eye-view—[sic] a perspective from which one can “unify” observations thereby “understand more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae” (82). During the “years” in which he conducted his vertical search, Binx tells us, he “stood outside the universe and sought to understand it,” living “as an Anyone . . . Anywhere” (70). For Binx, to live as an Anyone Anywhere is to adopt the posture of a “pure” scientist. (“Searching for Medicine” 121)

Furthering Nash’s assertion, I note that living as an Anyone Anywhere is also to adopt the posture of a Cartesian knower disconnected from the body. The Moviegoer is a diagnostic novel. Medicine, finally, allows Binx to search actively for a physical cure to the malaise in others and not only in himself. After a year of medical study, Binx no longer occupies himself by frequenting the movie theater. The centrality of the wounded body to the search leads Binx to medicine. Medicine lies at the end of Binx’s path.

Initially, with his characteristic irony and dry wit, Binx explains to Kate that, in continuing the search, “you begin to understand more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae” (82). Binx is irritable when he utters this response, annoyed that Kate has compared him to BoBo with her unnatural iron deer, and his tone is flippant, not genuine. He does not believe Kate can understand the search—her “woman’s despair” prevents this—and abruptly stops the conversation, telling Kate, “Never mind,” and taking care to “be no more serious” than Kate (70). This exchange indicates that the nature of the search is to study specimens with supreme rational objectivity, but by the
end of the novel, Binx begins to move toward attachment, toward the study of embodied souls, entering a new phase of the search as he enters medical school.

In contrast to Kate’s attending physicians, Binx understands Kate’s symptoms, her eyes “gone to discs” (32). By the end of the novel, he can respond ethically and acknowledge her illness as more than “woman’s despair” (70). Binx acknowledges her interiority as inseparable from her exteriority, and Kate “looks after him,” acknowledging, certifying, and validating Binx’s embodied selfhood as well (201). She and Binx discuss a long-term treatment plan and he commits to “be with her a great deal” as part of this treatment (233). Binx negotiates Lonnie’s treatment plan with him as well, considering Lonnie’s interiority and exteriority as consubstantial just as with Kate. He treats Lonnie’s spiritual grief over his feelings of envy toward able-bodied others while at the same time accounting for his physical illness and recognizing how Lonnie’s physical illness contributes substantially to his spiritual self. Binx recommends the Eucharist instead of fasting as a more “positive” cure (111). Receiving the body of Christ represents a transcorporeal act sanctifying the porosity of the body and the integrity of the flesh, as Graham Ward elucidates, “continually moving out and being enacted elsewhere, and so it continually transcends strict identifications that it imposes on itself or are imposed on it” (255). New life in Christ renders the human body extended. Theologian Mayra Rivera, in her “account of transcendence in the flesh,” positions “openness ... to new incarnations” amid our “encounters with” and our “relations to multiple others” (97, 117). Along the same lines, in his treatment plan for Lonnie, Binx begins to perceive embodiment in non-normative, limited ways as permeable and emergent, and begins to view that permeability as positive rather than
exclusively threatening. While Binx’s relationships to Kate and Lonnie are very personal, they signify Binx’s evolving ethical approach to relations with others.

Witnessing Kate’s addiction, it is unlikely that Binx will consider it ethical to recommend the same treatment to other women and dismiss their complaints as “womanly despair” (201). Agreeing to “be with Kate a great deal” indicates that Binx legitimizes her illness – not biologically determined by her sex – and understands she requires a more holistic treatment than sedation, unlike Dr. Wills who maintains that all uteruses in Feliciana Parish are diseased and must be removed (123). Having witnessed the ways in which the self is an extended thing through his intra-actions with the anomalously embodied Lonnie, Binx’s evolution foreshadows that he will treat the body as more than an assemblage of parts – a machine – and his patients not as specimens but embodied souls, confronting the gender divide and the mind/body divide and the divide between self/other. Binx tentatively begins to move beyond his existence as a Cartesian victim to place himself in the world, reconsidering his dualistic attitudes toward the body, nature, gender, and race. Transcorporeality would ensure that Binx understands that he does not operate as an autonomous namer, naming and identifying bodies and diseases, but as a faithful negotiator, inventing and discovering possibilities, upholding the integrity of the flesh, and instantiating other landscapes besides his own.
Chapter 2

“WE AIN’T NATURAL WID ONE ’NOTHER”: OVERCOMING THE CARTESIAN GENDER DIVIDE IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) illustrates the geographically, socially, and psychologically fractured southern consciousness from a Black, female perspective. Janie experiences a split in consciousness and envisions a healed, future self and future South, envisions healing the rift, just as Binx does. Both struggle to reconcile their mental and spiritual realities with their corporeal, material reality while Southern Cartesianism alienates both from their environment and community. Both characters face gender-identity obstacles founded upon unrealistic and restrictive standards stemming from Cartesian dualism. Janie experiences the split in vastly different ways from Binx, however. Whereas societal expectations insist that Binx act sovereignly, rationally, and autonomously to preserve social order, society defines Janie and other women in *Their Eyes* as natural bodies, not rational beings.\(^1\)

While Binx, in spite of his questioning, reaps certain social and economic benefits of the Cartesian separation between nature and culture, society forces Janie onto the nature

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\(^1\) The visual emphasis on Black women’s bodies and especially buttocks can be traced throughout American popular culture, dating back to the Hottentot Venus, the “anthro-erotic sensation” of the nineteenth century. See Pierterse 94; Gilman, “Black Bodies”; hooks, *Bone Black* 62-64.
side of the divide, labeling her irrational and unknowing. Janie understands, however, that the body is a site of learning and that the body knows. She does not separate the corporeal and the rational, and this is the source of her wisdom, evolution, and becoming.

These social differences between White and Black and men and women generate altogether different epistemological challenges— challenges far more fundamental for Janie than for Binx. Binx experiences anxiety over how to construct a more coherent definition of personhood than Descartes allows, how to become more than a disembodied, rational, thinking thing. Janie must not only struggle to identify herself as knowing but must also assert her status as human. Yet this foundational difference between race and gender also catalyzes a more fundamental challenge to Southern Cartesianism, which more closely approaches transcorporeality than Binx’s approach. While Binx separates his search for knowledge into two components, the vertical (books/culture) and the horizontal (observing the physical world outside himself/nature), Janie, rather, “pulls in the horizon” (193) to herself, immersing herself in the natural world in her search for selfhood. Deriving empowerment from nature rather than Cartesian rationality, Janie recognizes the intimate, positive entanglement of the human and natural worlds but also understands that this interconnectivity poses threats, intuitively comprehending that nature is a politicized landscape, not separate from the sociopolitical climate, and a tool for oppression. In response, Janie exercises her ecological knowing as a form of resistance. She perceives nature in transcorporeal terms as agential and accessible in its shared materiality, and her actions exhibit a transcorporeal belief that race, biology, and sex do not determine her future. James
Saunders asserts this same idea in part, proposing that Hurston’s rebellion against biological determinism is central to understanding Janie’s three relationships. Saunders cites sociologist Miriam Hirsch, who traces the pattern of thought surrounding the theory of biological determinism and female inferiority through Freud. However, Saunders does not connect biological determinism, natural determinism, and racial determinism in the way that transcorporeality does. Nature, race, and gender, mixing together in the floodwaters, consubstantiate Janie’s identity but do not determine it or her future.

Janie transforms the negative association between women and nature that Nanny reasserts with her mule metaphor into an empowering, transcorporeal form of feminist advocacy. Advocating against sexism and biological determinism inherent in Nanny’s “mule talk,” Janie insists that women and mules possess capacities that extend well beyond their ability to labor and celebrates female naturalism as both cultural and intellectual (53). Defending Matt Bonner’s mule from unjust, abusive treatment, Janie confirms and upholds the transcorporeal connection between humanity and the more-than-human world. Janie recognizes the mistreatment of the mule as ethically immoral and empathizes with it, turning from anthropocentrism (56). Julie A. Haurykiewicz links the mule directly to women’s empowerment in Their Eyes and Janie’s ability to voice her interiority, pointing out that muliebrity, as defined by the OED, is “the state or condition of being a woman” or possessing full womanly powers (45). Animal rights and women’s rights advance together in the novel. The mule is intimately connected with Janie’s growth and interiority.
However, despite Janie’s activism and wisdom, Hurston suggests limits to Janie’s organic epistemology. Consistently and disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards such as domestic violence and natural disaster, Janie adequately assesses neither the risk of living on the low-lying floodplain of the Glades nor the threat of living with Tea Cake, her abusive spouse. In both these instances, Janie defers to hierarchical Cartesian ways of knowing, allowing Tea Cake to operate as knower for her, instead of relying upon nature and her body and trusting her own organic wisdom. When he beats Janie, he lays claim to his male authority over Janie’s naturalism – once again valuing culture over nature. Later, when Tea Cake decides not to evacuate when the hurricane makes landfall, he trusts money over nature’s warning – culture over nature. Hence Hurston shows as much by negative example as positive practice that transcorporeality can potentially deconstruct the division between male and female, nature and culture.

**Janie’s Organic Epistemology and Cartesian Violence**

Initially, Janie’s confidence in her own organic way of “understandin” and “knowin” emerges experientially from her encounter with the pear tree. Hurston writes:

> Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness. (11)
Janie’s epistemology affirms the integral, ethical connection between the individual and their environment. Rather than a reintegration with nature, as the Romantics conceived, which retains primary agency for human knowers, Janie’s redoubling self allows nature to instruct her and flow through her. Leila Hajjari, Hossein Aliakbari Harehdasht, and Parvin Ghasemi follow the metaphorical development of Janie’s pear tree in a Romantic context rather than through the “rubrics of African American culture” (35). They emphasize the protagonist’s connection with the pear tree as a synecdoche for nature and draw a connection between her infatuation with the pear tree and the three stages of her life to demonstrate her growth from innocence to experience. While they connect Janie’s developing self and her way of knowing to nature as many other critics do, they do not account for the problematic racist and misogynistic conception of Black women as natural and unknowing, primitive rather than rational. As Crispin Sartwell observes when he compares the relationship to nature idealized by the Romantics with the organic relationship that Janie enjoys with nature, “When Thoreau engages in the project of re-unification of himself with nature, he is seeking his other” (360). Thoreau exists separate and above, whereas Janie cannot distance herself from nature; rather, Janie does not objectively observe nature, distancing herself, but participates in nature.

Hurston herself worked to rehabilitate African Primitivism to a White audience by showcasing a Bahaman dance cycle in St. Louis in 1934 for the First National Folk Festival, announcing to the audience that the Fire Dance “still is done as a New Year’s Day dance by Negroes in Southern Florida” (Kraut 444). Anthea Kraut observes the

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2 For discussion on the link between Cartesian dualism and subjectivity and Black primitivism, see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* 55-7.
significance of Hurston’s efforts to dispel the myth of Black bodies as the antithesis to the thinking cogito and dismantle the Cartesian divide between nature/culture and mind/body:

In disclosing a transatlantic tradition of Black cultural practices, diaspora not only troubles stereotypes of Black dancing bodies as unthinking, uncivilized exotics; it also replaces the hierarchies and dichotomies on which primitivism rests with a model of Black influences and exchange not wholly dependent upon any White arbiter. (450)

Kraut emphasizes the link between Black female bodies and absence of thought. To Descartes, the body is matter and thought is not one of matter’s attributes.

Hurston continues this work of rehabilitating primitivism in American culture and liberating it from Cartesian dichotomies in Their Eyes. Janie and Tea Cake witness the Bahamans dance in the Everglades. Janie respectfully observes and does not mock the cultural display:

When she heard the subtle but compelling rhythms of the Bahaman drummers, she’d walk over and watch the dances. She did not laugh the “Saws” to scorn as she had heard people doing in the season. She got to like it a lot and she and Tea Cake were on hand every night till the others teased them about it. (139)

Janie appreciates the Black bodies and the cultural significance of the dances, rather than attempting to separate herself from the perceived unthinking primitivism the others scorn. Janie does not view the body as unthinking.

A sharp contrast exists between Janie’s epistemology and Cartesianism, which views nature and the body mechanistically, as unthinking matter separate from the cogito – the immaterial source of thought. Jaques Maritain, the twentieth-century Catholic philosopher and influential critic and interpreter of Descartes, elaborates upon
the separation between nature and the individual that Cartesianism engenders.  

Cartesian skepticism casts doubt as to whether our environment exists. Our senses deceive us. Yet contradictorily, Descartes advises that we utilize our rational faculties to order our environment and employ its resources to suit our own uses – to operate as “masters and possessors of nature” (CSM I 142). Because Descartes insists that mind and matter are distinctly different substances, his philosophy does not sufficiently explain how it is possible for the two to interact, aside from the intervention of “spirits” (CSM III 225-6). Still, Descartes does hold that our ability to reason affords us the capacity to master and possess nature. To Descartes, Maritain contends, the exterior world is “perfectly clear to our human perception, being nothing but geometrical extension, perfectly subject to our spirit in cognition before being perfectly subject to it in practice” (Three Reformers 74-75). Maritain accuses Cartesian thought of distorting the functions of the intellect, leading to violence.

Maritain criticizes the Cartesian mind and “Cartesian analysis,” which engages in “cutting up and leveling down,” thereby ignoring and destroying “the originality and diversity of natures, and violently bring[ing] everything back to . . . simple principles” (Three Reformers 73). The result, a “mystical covetousness of the earth,” Maritain professes, produces violence toward nature, the body, and others (Dream of Descartes 100-2). Similarly, Thomas F. Woods asserts that the Cartesian intellect seeks not to understand but to conquer nature; having received all its knowledge by infusion from God, it can adopt no other posture toward the external world (158). Woods further

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3 See Ch. 1 n2.
observes in his assessment of Jonathan Swift’s critique of Descartes, “The Cartesian soul, gazing only upon itself to find truth and value, resorts to tyrannical violence, crushing human communities when its will is opposed” (160). Janie experiences this tyranny when each of her husbands attempts to exercise their will over her, doing violence to her own embodied experience.

“Gazing only upon itself,” Cartesianism demands that the individual empty the self. Cartesian purging systematically rids the self of what is incoherent and excessive. Hurston’s Janie Woods presents a dramatic alternative to Descartes – affirming an expanding self that extends into the material to seek wholeness by incorporating nature. Actualization depends not on the achievement of an essential self, represented by the cogito, but a self which is multitudinous and unbound. Janie’s actualization is not centered in the cogito, but rather is fully embodied. Thomas McGlamery affirms the body’s centrality to Janie’s resistance and identity as she walks past the porch sitters in the very beginning of the novel: “Her body, or more accurately, her body parts—her hair, her breasts, and her buttocks—are taken as markers of an essentially undiminished ‘strength’” (79). Her physical “progression” past them toward her house reflects that “her interior life is in order in a way that those of her observers are not” (79). Janie’s body provides a source of strength, resistance, and wisdom and exudes her interiority. It is hardly an accident that Janie’s Black female knower stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian cogito, which, as it has been inherited and interpreted, is identified as essentially White and male. In a passage worth quoting at length, Sartwell, in his literary criticism of Their Eyes, describes how essentialism defines that which is Black as incoherent and excessive in Their Eyes:
The coherent, true, internal self is an artifact that must be manufactured technologically. And it has been manufactured, by a thousand invisible disciplines, a thousand fables that account for themselves as objective pieces of knowledge, themselves organized into a coherent structure for comprehending the world. The selves described by Descartes or Kant are not discovered by a serial stripping away of the detritus of lives until a core is revealed; such selves are achieved in a refusal to allow oneself, and technologies for the refusal to allow others, to be anything else, a refusal that is required, for example, for psychological re-manufacturing of distorted or disoriented or incoherent selves. A fragmented self of the sort that Hurston celebrates comes very close to the way the Western tradition conceives of madness of the other of the coherent subject. And of course, one way the coherent self is made is by the ejection of its madness and fragmentation. But another way it is made is in the racial ejection: What gives the White self whatever coherence it seems to possess is the ejection into the other of whatever shows the self in its fragmentation. (156)

Like Sartwell I maintain that the Cartesian definition of subjectivity does not accurately encompass Janie’s experience. The Cartesian definition of subjectivity limits and constrains. The Cartesian self seeks inwardly and Janie’s self exists excessively, extending into the corporeal. Others, beginning with Nanny to Tea Cake, consistently attempt to contain Janie’s self and her body. However, Janie resists their attempts. In her excessiveness, her self defies Cartesian coherency. Along similar lines, Michel Foucault argues that people expect continuity, unity, consistency, and coherence because the expectation of homogeneity is the product of Cartesian philosophy, which has been ruled by "the sovereignty of the subject" (12). Because Cartesianism, as it has been inherited and interpreted, denies “natural, unthinking” Black women subjectivity as non-cogitos, Janie’s self does not conform to the Cartesian definition of subjectivity. Janie’s emergent self extends beyond the realm of individual subjectivity and does not depend upon exercising sovereignty; rather, her self recognizes the reciprocal interconnection with others and the material world.
Nanny’s Flight from Nature

Of course, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* depicts not only Janie’s organicist insight but also the “technologies” and “disciplines” that attempt to destroy it. Nanny (as well as Janie’s three husbands) attempt to quell Janie’s excessive selfness by exercising their own sovereignty, asserting their own knowledge above and against Janie’s organicist epistemology. Upon Janie’s first instance of natural self-discovery, which takes place underneath the pear tree, Nanny attempts to separate Janie from nature. Nanny warns Janie she will become a mule if her sense of selfhood grows and expands too far, becomes too strong:

“So de White man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fah it tuh be different wid yo u. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (53)"

However, even in Nanny’s instructive fable, the mule does not passively accept mastery; rather, it resists oppression, “fighting every inch in front uh de plow,” (53) thus indicating nature’s strength and ability to recognize injustice. Although Nanny repeatedly tries to demonstrate to Janie the foolish, imprudent madness of her pear tree vision, Janie draws strength from nature in the form of the mule’s wisdom, opposition, and persistence. When Janie places “the cooling palma christi leaves” on Nanny’s head as a headache remedy, they “wilt down and become part and parcel of the woman,” indicating Nanny’s proximity to nature despite the fact that she has been forced to internalize capitalistic notions of survival and security (17). Every decision Janie makes based on her pear-tree wisdom fosters the growth of an incoherent, ecstatic self and is madness from a socioeconomic standpoint.
While the “blossoming pear tree” symbolizes and affirms Janie’s intimate relationship to nature and ever-expanding horizon, Nanny’s application of the mule metaphor represents her comparatively closed horizon and fear of nature. Her escape from the plantation with her baby (Janie’s mother, Leafy) and her concealment in the swamp epitomize her view:

... so skeered and worried all de time. De noise uh de owls skeered me; de limbs of dem cypress trees took to crawlin’ and movin’ round after dark, and two three times Ah heered panthers prowlin’ round. But nothin’ never hurt me ‘cause de Lawd knowed how it was. (18)

To Nanny, nature poses a threat for her and Leafy and becomes painfully, terrifyingly intertwined with her own sexuality. Marse Robert rapes Nanny and impregnates her. Nanny flees captivity with Leafy to avoid being separated and lashed after “Mistis” discovers her husband’s indiscretions. Later, Nanny asserts that Leafy’s teacher imprisoned Leafy in the woods overnight and raped her, resulting in the pregnancy that produced Janie. Still, Nanny’s relationship to nature is not entirely negative. Nanny names her baby Leafy – a name that evokes nature – in hopes that Leafy will enjoy health, abundance, and growth and to commemorate Leafy’s precarious beginning in the forest against formidable odds. Leaves have medicinal, healing properties and offer Nanny and Leafy protection. Nanny wraps Leafy up in a moss blanket for warmth, security, and comfort. However, for both Nanny and Leafy, fertility and their status as Black women render their proximity to nature under White control dangerous.

Nanny had attempted to redirect Janie’s search away from nature and toward the material as commodified by the prevailing socioeconomic system. As Janie reflects on her life after the death of her second husband, Jody, she begins to understand:
Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (102)

Nanny attempts to limit Janie’s access both to nature and to her own body – Janie’s sources of knowledge. Nanny believes Janie would prosper and remain safe if she understood that for a Black woman, the social and political world opposes and threatens her being and her connection to the natural world. To save Janie from the same fate that her mother suffered, Nanny renames the horizon and marriage for Janie by consigning her to the land, marrying her to Logan, who possesses an impressive sixty acres, a mule, and a house. Logan will provide Janie with financial security, which in Nanny’s experience is the only kind of security Janie can hope to as a Black woman. Nanny’s words indicate the extent to which she embraces the capitalistic philosophy of the prevailing White class. Though Logan will also attempt to exercise oppressive control over Janie, just as White men do, Nanny does not view him as an oppressor because he will afford Janie an amount of respectability and comfort that neither Nanny nor Leafy could hope to attain. Conversely, Janie proclaims almost immediately upon her marriage to Logan, “... ain’t takin’ dat ole land tuh heart” (31). Janie’s organic way of knowing differs dramatically from her grandmother’s, and she rejects the unnatural capitalistic values her grandmother has been subjected to and forced to internalize, caring nothing for Logan’s wealth and possessions.

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4 For more on Cartesianism, “the divorce of Nature and Society consolidated in early capitalism,” and “the world-shaking material divorce of the direct producers from the means of production,” see Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (56–7).
To Janie, the horizon that Nanny pinches and chokes is her own expanding consciousness. Through the horizon Janie understands, conceives, reasons, and thinks. In her mature view, the self is not stagnant but emerges consubstantially with nature. The pear tree’s “first tiny bloom ... call[s] her to come and gaze on a mystery,” stirring epistemological and ontological inquiries which “emerge and quest about her consciousness” (10). Janie thereby communes with the world, meditating on nature’s manifestation of her interiority. This extended metaphor offers a vital connection between nature and the self. At this moment Janie understands the birth of her natural, conscious intellect: “She thought for a while and decided her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate” (10). Janie’s sense of self exists indistinct from the pear tree: “Janie saw her life like a tree in leaf” (8). She imagines, “Oh to be a pear tree -- any tree in bloom!” affirming the capacity “to be,” to become and emerge (11). Thus, Hurston establishes at the beginning that being one with nature is not separate from Janie’s pursuit to become a knower. From the time of this discovery for the rest of her life, Janie must overcome the interruptions of those who deny her organic wisdom and attempt to corrupt her truth. Nature thinks and reasons: “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (8). The network of tree branches and roots resembles the neural networks and pathways that record experience. The tree experiences, codes, and makes meanings of those experiences. Like the tree, Janie’s body conceives thought. Following this pattern, Janie’s connection with nature informs her knowing, supporting her cognitive and intellectual evolution. Janie challenges the safety and containment Nanny advises, seeking the horizon instead.
Unnatural Love – Cartesian Intimacy and Sexual Determinism

Like Nanny, Logan does not represent the horizon and attempts to constrain Janie’s organic self. Logan experiences Janie as natural, separate from himself, an animal, a capital investment to utilize on his farm, a mule subject to his rational will, incapable of cognition. She finds her marriage does not resemble her pear tree experience: “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (32). Janie learns with Logan that “marital relationships do not replicate the rhythmic and sacred patterns of the natural world” (Bealer 316). Janie’s understanding of marriage blooms under the pear tree, while Logan bases his understanding of love on his objectification of nature.

Logan, though in close physical proximity to nature, does not commune with nature but attempts to master it. With “his often-mentioned sixty acres” (21) and a mule, Logan Killicks bases his relationship to nature on the benefits he can reap from it. Not surprisingly, Logan associates Janie with his mule, insisting she work in the fields. Logan believes if he achieves success according to the same White capitalistic values that oppress him, he will free himself from oppression. His treatment of Janie demonstrates a Cartesian desire to measure Janie’s worth and ability as mere corporeal matter, an extension of the exterior world to be mastered and subjected to his spirit. As such, he wishes her to remain unable to derive strength from nature and witness the mule’s resistance. If Logan cannot exercise autonomy and mastery fully in society

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6 For discussion of Descartes’s view of animals as unthinking automata, see Thomas, “Descartes on the Animal Within, and the Animals Without.”
because of White oppression, to feel successful he must exercise it where he believes he can – at home over Janie, his land, and his animals.

Jody, Logan’s successor in marriage to Janie, similarly attempts to legitimate himself in White estimation by rising within the capitalistic system of economic and social control, engaging in land speculation. If he works hard enough to achieve the same success by the same standards, Jody believes White society must acknowledge his status. Franklin Frazer, Hurston’s contemporary and fellow sociologist, criticizes a sociological trend he names the “Black bourgeoisie” – a class of Blacks who managed to engage in capitalism to enter the middle class – for internalizing and adopting White middle-class social and economic values. Jody fits into Frazier’s interpretation of the Black bourgeoisie in the manner in which he shows off with his money, his “citified, stylish dress,” which Janie remarks does not “belong to these parts” (27). Janie notices that Jody acts “like Mr. Washburn,” Janie’s grandmother’s White employer, thus foregrounding Jody’s aspiration to fit into and be accepted by the White middle class (27). Frazier argues, from a sociological standpoint, that the Black education system produced the Black bourgeoisie by teaching Blacks White middle-class social and economic values. Students in this system, Frazier remarks, seized upon business-oriented courses as a means to rise into the middle class and gain acceptance (84). Hurston adopts Frazier’s theory, depicting Jody establishing a town by opening a store; building himself a sparkly White house; installing himself as mayor, postmaster, and landlord; and lighting the town like God on the first day of creation. Jody’s Cartesian impulse toward mastery over the land as a capital resource indicates his lack of desire to understand nature. Jody cannot understand Janie’s organic epistemology, having
internalized a capitalistic system of values, but Janie forces him to acknowledge her status as knower.

Janie’s organic epistemology has implications not merely for her own self-development but also for gender relations and, more specifically, local politics. Against the frame of patriarchal capitalism (Logan’s and Jody’s), Janie’s utopian revelries arise as potent critiques. Her ecstatic connection with nature fosters her political consciousness. Moreover, Janie exemplifies an ethical intersubjectivity with more-than-human nature, specifically Matt Bonner’s overworked mule. Janie’s advocacy on the mule’s behalf illustrates that knowing and politics are not separate but rather integrally intertwine with nature. The mule signifies Janie’s own intellectual progression and political awareness, linking culture or intelligence to the natural world in contrast to Nanny’s philosophy. Janie “is a born orator” – a knower – proclaims Hambo after hearing her oration on the virtues of freeing the mule (58). The mule talk she engages in is political, cultural, and transcorporeal as Janie expresses a consideration for more-than-human life. Her speech also demonstrates her knowledge of sexual and local politics. Sharon Davie connects the mule to the politics of displacing racial and gender hierarchies in Their Eyes as well, tracing the presence of the “free mule” in the oral tradition of African American storytelling:

The free mule stories accomplish a somewhat different displacement of hierarchies: the mule is tied to moments of displacement that build on one another through repetition and transformation of key words and images. In the process, a vision of reality as indeterminate, as too transient, diverse, and inconsistent ever to be fixed in hierarchy, emerges. (448)

However, Davie clarifies she does not believe that “hierarchical, binary thinking should (or could) be banished” (448). I argue that this hierarchical, binary thinking derives
from Descartes’s mind/body dualism and that these divides, including racial and gender, should be overcome.\textsuperscript{7} Like Davie, I agree that the mule in this instance does just that to an extent, overturning the balance of political power in Janie’s favor.

Freeing a mule to Janie parallels Lincoln’s freeing the slaves. Janie does not consider herself above or separate from the mule. She states:

They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin’ dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin’ ‘im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid ’em. (57)

Janie recognizes that this mistreatment is unethical, challenging the mule baiters who view the mule as beneath them and unworthy of humane treatment. Because the Black woman is “de mule uh de world,” according to Nanny, when Janie voices her objection to the mule’s treatment she effectively rejects the sexist mistreatment of Black women as well. Janie’s speech also impacts Jody, although with mixed results. After Janie’s animal-rights advocacy speech, Jody decides to buy the mule from Matt Bonner to free the mule. Thus, Jody seemingly affirms her ethical position but appropriates Janie’s political ambition, later forbidding her to attend the “dragging out” when the mule dies.

\textsuperscript{7} Frost explicates the relationship between Cartesianism and biological/sexual determinism arguing that “Descartes’s portrayal of the body as essentially unthinking underpins the modern understanding of the human self as a rational, free, and self-determining agent” and that “historically, this Cartesian understanding of the passivity of matter was figured in racialized, gendered, and class terms that in turn were used to justify racial, gender, and class inequalities.” Frost continues to explain that because of Cartesian attitudes towards embodiment, “women were construed as trapped in and by the body” and “lacking the wherewithal to distance themselves from the body’s operations and to steer a rationally-defined course for their behavior and actions” and “subject to the determinations of the biological or animal functions of the body and as vulnerable to a kind of behavioral determinism, a vulnerability which derived from the inability of a weak intellect” (72).
But the seeds of political change have already been sown. The “free mule” becomes the talk of the town, and Sam remarks to Jody, “Dat’s uh new idea ’bout varmints, Mayor Starks” (58). The idea is Janie’s and it incites political change upsetting the “natural” hierarchy. As Nanny has linked woman to the mule, Janie’s political activism is not only informed by nature but by a feminist notion of freedom. Janie’s activism marks a transcorporeal shift in Janie’s identity upon her continuing revelation that she is enmeshed in a natural and political network. Stacy Alaimo aptly describes this kind of change in her theory of transcorporeality:

The substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity. As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become the very stuff of the crises at hand. (Bodily Natures 20)

Janie recognizes the substance of her self is economically, politically, culturally, socially, and ethically interconnected with that of the mule. Janie, upon witnessing the cruelty displayed toward the mule, recognizes that her subjectivity cannot be disentangled from the status of the mule and that advocating for the mule equates to advocating for her self. Janie intuits that the same systems that affect her also impact the mule. The mule is neither wholly natural (since it is sterile and only exists as an intervention of culture) nor wholly cultural (although it is a product of culture and science being bred specifically by humans). To Bonner and many others in the town who mockingly tease Bonner, the mule embodies a dumb brute. Janie understands the mule’s biosentience (its resistance to mastery) as possessing consciousness and identity – neither of which are separate from her own – and aspires to commune with it. The mule refuses to plow
and refuses to be mastered, acting intelligently and courageously – an act of resistance that also signifies woman’s powerful connection to nature. Woman, like the mule, consciously resists. Though Jody acquiesces and frees the mule, his epistemology is anthropocentric and capitalistic, and ultimately, he fails to understand Janie’s organic way of knowing. Jody frees the mule but continues to constrain Janie.

Even Tea Cake, Jody’s successor, who desires to understand nature and enjoys intimate proximity with it and more than any other suitor understands Janie’s organic epistemology, ultimately acts in ways that reflect his deferral to capitalism and dualistic, hierarchical thinking. Bands of Seminoles evacuate the Everglades when they perceive a hurricane approaching, but Tea Cake, observing them, dismisses their natural knowledge and decides he and Janie will ride out the storm to make more money on the muck. Seminoles do not believe in ownership and their society is not a capitalistic one but one intimately connected to nature. Blacks have been made the means of capitalism. The Bahaman man fails to convince Tea Cake to leave the muck despite alerting Tea Cake to the wisdom of the Seminoles. The Bahaman’s society is similarly on the margins of the White American system of capitalism. He too operates according to a different system of values that oppose capitalism by insisting that the land is not a commodity for human consumption. Both the Bahamians and the Seminoles possess the same biosentience that Janie does. However, Tea Cake rejects both the Bahaman’s advice and the Seminole’s intuition; he chooses to believe that “Indians are dumb anyhow” (206). The Seminoles “don’t know much uh nothin’, tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own this country still... de White folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous,” Tea Cake claims (208). During the hurricane “the people in the big houses” feel “uncomfortable
but safe because there were seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed” (210-211). Tea Cake trusts the people in the big houses to “do the thinking” (210). Tea Cake depends upon the authority of the rich White people who possess the muck by their capitalist ownership, believing he and Janie must be safe if the plantation owners have yet to abandon their prospective profits. Tea Cake’s ecosentience surfaces elsewhere in the novel, as we will see, but here he fails to act upon it, conceding instead to White capitalistic mastery.

Although White supremacy marginalizes Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake, none of the three can completely reject the Cartesian dualism underpinning it, especially regarding their attitudes towards women. In casting matter and nature as “fixed” and inescapable, Cartesian biology lends ontological support to essentialist and deterministic notions of woman’s inferior abilities. While these notions extend to race, this fact, sadly, seems to condition the Black men in Janie’s life to treat her, as a woman of color, all the more demeaningly. The people closest to Janie thus deny her the ability to think, to learn, and to control her own body. Each of Janie’s three husbands make assumptions about her competencies, physical and mental, based on her biology as a Black woman. After he is voted mayor of Eatonville, Tony announces that Janie will now make an acceptance speech. Logan determines that a Black woman’s aptitudes make her suited only for field work. Jody determines Janie’s natural, corporeal knowledge is irrational and renders her unfit to engage in “mule talk” or speech making (53). Jody, threatened, silences Janie because her wisdom threatens his authority and supposedly superior standing as a male in a position of power in the community. Jody considers himself, not Janie, intelligent enough to speak publicly: "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife
don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (43). His statement conveys a Cartesian belief in a natural hierarchy of labor along gender lines and hence the separation of natural female emotion from rational male intellect.

In addition to silencing Janie and denying her selfhood, Hurston suggests that the Cartesian impulse toward rational order, classification, measurement, and conquest develops into violence when Janie endures physical violence, first at the hands of Nanny and subsequently from her husbands. Nanny slaps Janie when Janie fails to understand Nanny's materialistic concerns and to concede to the prevailing Cartesian system of physical and epistemic control. Similarly threatened by Janie's becoming knowing, Logan too reacts violently:

Don't you change too many words wid me dis mawnin', Janie, do Ah'll take and change ends wid yuh! Heah, Ah just as good as take you out de White folks' kitchen and set you down on yo' royal diasticutis and you take and low-rate me! Ah'll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh! You better dry up in dere! Ah'm too honest and hard-workin' for anybody in yo' family, dat's de reason you don't want me! . . . Ah guess some low-lifted nigger is grinnin' in yo' face and lyin' tuh yuh. God damn yo' hide! (30)

Jody attempts to violently reassert his mastery over Janie as a Cartesian “master and possessor.” Jody reacts violently as well when Janie a third time asserts her knowingness, “playing the dozens” in Jody's store in front of customers. Jody physically strikes Janie to assert his control and reestablish his Cartesian hierarchy of values. The "doll-baby" is an object that lacks cognition – brain, mind, language, consciousness – and Jody uses the reference to posit his notion of the unthinking woman (29). In Jody's patriarchal worldview, feminine knowledge, which he believes “lacks” thinking, is less worthy of the human. Jody oppressively equates Janie's intellect with "chillun and
chickens and cows” (71). Thus, Joe feels that he must think for her. He, unlike children and animals, “sees one thing” and “understands ten” while Janie “sees ten things and don’t understand one” (71). Sharon Davie affirms that in this scene “Hurston creates the framework for a multilayered irony by reminding readers of another Western cliché of otherness: women’s animality and supposedly inferior ability to reason” (449). Janie responds, “Ah knows uh few things, and women folks thinks sometimes too!” asserting her knowingness, but at this point, when Janie is just twenty-four years old, she retreats inward rather than acting on this assertion (71). I argue that this Western cliché is linked to Cartesian dualism and that Hurston resists this cliché by embracing and emphasizing Janie’s connection to animals and nature rather than refuting it. Janie’s wisdom derives from the fact that she exists not separate and above the more-than-human world but that she communes with it.

**Ecological Love Relationships and Janie’s Natural Intellect**

Technologies of capitalist domination and the disciplines of parental power and patriarchal marriage suspend, but do not end, Janie’s search for embodied knowledge. Janie eventually applies her natural wisdom to her quest for intercommunion, “a bee for her bonnet,” seeking ecological balance. Ecology, while a scientific discipline, endeavors to “think about nature as connected in an evolving and interactive way,” as ecocritic Diane McColley explains (58). A properly functioning ecological system requires mutual participation, not a hierarchical division of parts. Along similar lines, intersubjectivity refers to an ecologically balanced male-female relationship characterized by mutuality and indwelling. Janie’s first two marriages, founded upon Cartesian and capitalist values, reflect ecological imbalance, not intersubjectivity and transcorporeality. While
Logan works close to the land, his wealth dictates his unnaturally capitalistic relationship to it. Similarly, Jody’s materialism indicates even more fully a Cartesian disassociation from nature. Both also strive to enforce a Cartesian gender hierarchy of labor, knowledge, and control. Janie learns with Logan that “marital relationships do not replicate the rhythmic and sacred patterns of the natural world” (Bealer 316). Janie recognizes right away that Joe “does not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” (Their Eyes 29). After Jody slaps her, she is not “petal open with him anymore” and experiences “no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (71-72). Their relationship continually devolves into object-subject ownership.

Janie’s materiality differs substantially from Nanny’s, Logan’s, and Jody’s. Her transcorporeal selfhood resists objectification, so that by the point in her life when she meets Tea Cake, the shift from object to subject has already significantly progressed. Mary Helen Washington asserts that in Janie’s first moment of independence, immediately after Jody’s death, the reader views Janie not as autonomous subject but again as visual object, “seeing herself seeing herself,” draping before herself that “hidden mystery” that attracts men and makes her superior to women (13). Shawn E. Miller asserts that by marrying Tea Cake, Janie “completes her journey from object to subject” (75). I note, however, that Janie insists on her subjecthood before meeting Tea Cake and before Jody’s death when she confronts Jody in his shop: “But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together” (79-80). From this moment forward Janie publicly refuses to exist as an object
one of Jody’s possessions. This marks a change in her status in Eatonville society from one of Jody’s objects to a subject wielding a certain amount of autonomy.

Finally, with Tea Cake, Janie initially finds a partner who understands her embodied selfhood. Their relationship very nearly approaches political, social, and ecological balance, as for the first time in her life Janie finds someone who acknowledges her natural intellect as legitimate and does not try to invalidate it by asserting the superiority of Cartesian rationality. Janie finds in Tea Cake the possibility of a relationship that will not separate her from nature, her source of knowledge: “He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (106). To Janie, her relationship with Tea Cake accords with her pear tree vision. The pear tree anchors Janie’s organic epistemology and in this way Tea Cake affirms her status as a knower, instead of demeaning her intellectual capacity. Donald Marks associates Tea Cake and Janie’s marriage with organic life and Janie’s other two marriages with capitalistic death (154). Passing time in a nonlinear, anticapitalist way means Tea Cake understands and lives in Janie’s “bloom time” with her. Rather than trying to order the world rationally as a Cartesian self, Tea Cake engages in communal rituals of disorder like gambling, horsing around in the muck instead of harvesting, planting seeds, and playing checkers. Leisure activities like hunting and fishing as well as stealing and misusing his wife’s funds to gamble demonstrate Tea Cake’s anticapitalist disposition.

Tea Cake does not regard Janie as a possession, forcing her to labor as Logan and Jody do for his own capitalistic gain; rather, he returns her to nature on the muck – a sort of alternative, utopian locus of value in which corporeality converges with the natural. They share the same ecological space on the muck, Janie voluntarily working
beside him. Even Tea Cake’s last name “Woods” evokes his affinity with nature – an affinity that mirrors Janie’s. Tea Cake speaks to Janie in ecologically loving terms of growth, rather than in capitalistic terms of ownership and objectification. He comes bearing natural gifts of trout and strawberries, saying to Janie, “Look lak we done run our conversation from grass roots tuh pine trees” (142). When they live in the muck, their relationship appears ecologically balanced. The fertile environment surrounding the couple nourishes their regard for each other and amplifies their happiness. Tea Cake even plants Janie a garden.

**Transcorporeal Shortcomings**

Despite the naturalism, pastoralism, and ecological harmony associated with the muck and Janie and Tea Cake’s marriage, I would argue that Hurston never fully integrates transcorporeal thinking; many insights are either implicit or incompletely developed. In a Cartesian separation of nature and culture, Eatonville’s hierarchical social, economic, political, and gender inequalities seem to dissolve “on the muck.” Yet, the feudalistic landowner-tenant laborer system “on the muck” is inherently racist and just as economically unbalanced as the capitalism of Joe Starks, which Janie actively derides. The fact that White overseers direct the lives of the workers “on the Glades” represents a notable absence in the text. Hurston does not indict the bosses and landowners. Economic stability, technological progress, and political power prove less important to the people “on the muck” than “dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and los-day” (185). Playing behind the boss’s back gives Janie and the other migrant field workers a sense of freedom; nevertheless, they remain firmly in the grasp of social, political, and economic inequality under the oversight of a White agriculturist.
Janie does not register her precarious position as a violation of her transcorporeal ethics, indicating a blind spot and an inability to understand how destructive capitalistic forces operate inseparably with nature and require an ethical intervention.

While Janie’s transcorporeal sense of ethics spurs her to activism on behalf of the mistreated mule, she does not recognize the mistreatment of migrant field workers like herself, because she labors under the illusion of freedom in the natural environment of the untamed Florida Everglades. The atmosphere of the Everglades promotes inhibition and liberation. Janie and the others accept the non-mechanistic social order, including its culture of domestic violence and poverty. Hurston romanticizes the community on the Everglades as a kind of brotherhood that is free of the constraints and class divisions imposed by a petit bourgeois society like that of Eatonville. The people on the muck seem unconcerned with the inequity of the economic situation, but rather with the possibilities for play and interaction the Everglades offers. This illusory freedom dissipates after the hurricane and during the clean-up, when White domination asserts itself once again with a vengeance.

Just as Janie fails to recognize the mistreatment of herself and the other migrant workers as a threat, Janie’s organic epistemology falters once again when she fails to recognize Tea Cake as a threat. Janie’s transcorporeal sense of ethics helps her navigate the gender politics of Eatonville astutely, but on the muck, with Tea Cake, she is not as successful at advocating for herself and for women, despite her ecosentience. While the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie presents an ecological balance in the respect that the two perform the same work and immerse themselves in the natural environment of “the muck,” their relationship is not equitable and veers toward
Cartesian disparity and mastery rather than ethical transcorporeality, dangerously normalizing domestic abuse. While Jon Woodson explains, “Hurston endows the male characters that appear in the first half of her novel with a specific pathology that would squelch the female self,” he, like many critics, does not treat Tea Cake’s violence as belonging to this pathologic cycle of domestic abuse (632). Already on their honeymoon, Tea Cake steals from Janie. On the muck, he beats her to ensure his possession. Janie’s social and economic standing, which had afforded her some protection in Eatonville, can no longer shield her from Tea Cake’s violent masculinity in the Everglades.

Although Tea Cake acknowledges Janie’s organicist epistemology and budding selfhood, he still exhibits this pathology throughout their relationship and marriage. When Tea Cake hits Janie because Mrs. Turner disapproves of him and attempts to set Janie up with her brother, Hurston writes, “Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (*Their Eyes* 147). Tea Cake’s abusive behavior violates the otherwise ecological balance between the two. Tea Cake perpetrates this violence to reassert and advance his superior social status as a male: “Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss” (148). Accordingly, the next day the community of field workers admires Tea Cake and affords him a new elevated status:

> Everybody talked about it the next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams (99).
The community acknowledges this instance of violence as socially acceptable. Tea Cake’s behavior, however, replicates the “pathologized” violence of Janie’s two previous husbands, even though he claims his actions stem from love and understanding. Donald Marks affirms that Tea Cake’s behavior does not violate the social, ethical, and moral standards of the community on the muck, but he criticizes Tea Cake’s violence as an unacceptable threat to Janie’s selfhood:

Hurston clearly accepts the organicist ideology of romantic pastoralism over the mechanistic one of bourgeois capitalism, for it is with Tea Cake in the community "on the muck" that Janie is most content. Yet both ideological positions are under-cut by the violence the author finds inherent in the heterosexual relationships she uses to represent them. Even in what Hurston considers the most viable organic community, sexual violence is accepted and justified as a sign of passion. It is not until Janie has killed Tea Cake and all of her lovers are out of the novel that she is able to find real peace and independence. (156)

Marks recognizes Tea Cake’s behavior as abuse and contends that “Hurston further rationalizes Tea Cake’s behavior by having other characters, both men and women, enviously view the beating as something erotic, as a sign of passion and strength they themselves do not have” (156). This strength derives from the body. I argue this is a dangerous misreading and misrepresentation of embodied selfhood. Tea Cake’s violence does not coincide with transcorporeality. Every instance of physical and psychological abuse threatens Janie’s embodied selfhood.

Disconcertingly, Hurston neatly absolves Tea Cake of responsibility for this abuse when rabies transforms Tea Cake into a dog, into a beastlike character. Many scholars writing on Their Eyes maintain that rabies transforms Tea Cake into something completely foreign and unnatural. Isiah Lavender argues that after the dog bites Tea Cake, Tea Cake becomes something “horribly other” and “inhuman” (228). Erik Curren
asserts that the infection transfigures Tea Cake into a “homicidal devil” (18). However, the mad dog represents the element of human rage already exhibited in Tea Cake’s violent behavior. The virus metaphorically represents the hateful, angry inculcation of White capitalistic values – an infection, present in the environment, that penetrates the skin and flows in Tea Cake’s bloodstream. The mental state of rage is both animal and human. Humankind cannot claim consciousness as a distinctly human quality, nor can lack of consciousness be discounted as necessarily non-human. Tea Cake's transformation after the dog bite does not result from an entirely foreign element invading his psyche (as the body’s permeability renders it inseparable from the natural world) as much as an exacerbation and disinhibiting of a latent force already evident in his personality before the storm. Tea Cake has internalized White values, laboring for a White agriculturist, despite the muck’s seeming isolation from the threat of White domination. Yet here Hurston distinguishes between culture and wilderness by dispatching the anger that she cannot allow Tea Cake to exhibit consciously. Instead, biology invades Tea Cake’s brain, altering his consciousness, rendering him overtly animalistic, disassociating him from his rage.

Hurston largely resists a deterministic form of naturalism but relents at the moment when Tea Cake must be called to account. Hurston, I argue, essentially gives Tea Cake a pass because of his sociohistorical subject position. Hurston conveys the abuse that Tea Cake perpetrates as socially mandated and a result of inculcated racial hatred and violence. Finally, this mandate activates Tea Cake’s latent sexism. The illusory divide between animal rage and human consciousness – inherent in the rabies infection – places the responsibility upon wild nature, a force beyond control, rather
than Tea Cake and his violent Cartesian impulses. The animalistic self, then, proves incompatible with the human self and must die to achieve wholeness. Tea Cake attacks the mad dog to amputate the element of rage from his own consciousness. But this animal manifestation of Tea Cake’s fury resists destruction and bites Tea Cake. After he kills the mad dog, the storm dies down as well, seemingly restoring the natural balance upset by Tea Cake’s violence toward Janie.

Rabies and the hurricane render Tea Cake and Janie victims not of sociology but of naturalism, largely absolving Tea Cake of responsibility; domestic violence is a sociological issue. In a transcorporeal sense, because domestic abuse occurs in unsafe, risky environments and is a social epidemic which affects the physical health of numerous women, society must treat it ethically as a public health issue and acknowledge the complex entanglement between politics and women’s bodies. The Cartesian separation of the individual from their environment denies the individual’s entanglement and the impact of intra-active sociological, ecological, economic, and environmental causes. While many, like Donald Marks, argue for the natural/organic egalitarianism that characterizes the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie – evidence for which certainly abounds – this ecological reading does not entirely account for Hurston’s politics. Adam Gussow accounts for the intersecting sociocultural and ecological impetuses that motivate Tea Cake’s violence, arguing that the Everglades muck is a “carnival of self-expression and egalitarianism” and that playful, “purgative,” immersive violence is part of becoming “mucked up” that must ultimately be rejected (257-8, 233). Tea Cake instructs Janie in the use of “righteous violence” that facilitates her becoming by fulfilling her passions and sharpening her resistance (Gussow 264).
While I agree that Tea Cake’s violence is culturally and ecologically situated, I disagree that social and cultural processes alter the meaning of violence to define it as “intimate” rather than abuse, the former being generative, acceptable, and desirable (233). This assessment mitigates the sociological impact that endemic violence has on the Black community on the muck.

The violence endemic to the Black community, illustrated by Logan’s, Jody’s, and Tea Cake’s behavior, results from racial, social, political, ecological, and economic networks intersecting. Janie’s trial scene illustrates her entanglement in these networks clearly. While the “White women form a protective wall” around Janie upon the reading of the jury’s verdict, the “negroes hang their heads” (Their Eyes 188). The White community defines Black men as animalistic and threatening and readily believe Janie’s account of events; however, the Black community remains skeptical. In the Black community, the violence Tea Cake enacts represents a culturally and socially acceptable expression of love. In her work “bringing together environmental, climate, and reproductive justice,” Giovanna Di Chiro defines reproductive justice as involving not just “bodily self-determination and the right to safe contraception” but also “the right to safe environments,” which requires an availability of “good jobs and economic security, freedom from domestic violence and forced sterilization, affordable healthcare, educational opportunities, decent housing, and access to clean and healthy neighborhoods” (2). Janie’s acquittal marks an important instance of political resistance against domestic abuse. The court finds Janie not guilty, determining that she acted in self-defense. However, the verdict does not suffice, given that the social and cultural environment Janie resides in condones Tea Cake’s abusive behavior. After Tea Cake
beats Janie, Sop-de-Bottom admires Tea Cake’s ability to leave his mark on Janie: “You sho is a lucky man. Uh person can see every place you hit her” (147). Tea Cake’s abuse becomes a public rather than a private issue that requires a still wider collective approach.

Transcorporeality locates the bodily meanings of sexual violence and recognizes the effect of abuse on the embodied subjectivity of the victim. The bruises left on Janie’s body negatively affect the social relationship she fosters with the community on the muck. The women grow jealous of her, socially alienating her. Ann Cahill, writing about female bodily integrity and physical abuse, further proposes the positive possibilities embodiment offers following (and despite) experiences of sexual violence:

However, embodied subjectivity is not static. It is an ongoing process; therefore, the violent actions of an abuser, while profoundly destructive to the victim’s being and intersubjective personhood, need not be the final word. The being of the abused is transformed by the experience, but that transformation is not necessarily the self’s final development. (9)

The self continues to transform after experiencing abuse, and the experience does not permanently define the individual’s embodied sense of self. Janie’s embodied sense of self continues to expand and transform even after experiencing physical abuse. Though Janie has endured abuse at the hands of all three of her husbands and experienced profound changes to her sense of embodied selfhood, she understands ultimately, upon returning to Eatonville after the trial, that this abuse need not determine her sense of selfhood, that her embodied self will continue to emerge and evolve, contingent with the natural world, evidencing her transcorporeal awareness. She persists in failing to recognize, as is evident in her deep grief over his loss, that Tea Cake’s actions and their marriage were abusive. Increasing transcorporeal awareness would allow for this
recognition and aid Janie in deconstructing the gender divide by recognizing the biological, environmental, and social conditions that perpetuate it even on the supposedly Edenic muck. Such an awareness would also include social attitudes toward abuse and women, poverty, and the lack of legal, institutional, and community resources.

**Abuse and the Transcorporeal Self**

Hurston does not frame the issue of domestic violence in sociological terms, but a transcorporeal view of Janie’s experiences advocates a social awareness of the issue.

Sociologist John Murphy affirms that:

> postmodernists undermine the dualism, or Cartesianism, that is ubiquitous to mainstream sociology. With the demise of Cartesianism, key sociological ideas must be reformulated. Essential to dualism is that only knowledge untrammeled by situational contingencies is treated as valid. As already suggested, subjectivity is thus assumed to be indicative of opinion (doxa), while objectivity is associated with truth (episteme). Further, information that is interpreted is believed to be biased, unscientific, and likely to undermine reality. (602)

A Cartesian view of domestic abuse discounts experiential knowledge as valid. Because of the situational, contingent, subjective nature of domestic abuse, society doubts women’s experiences and the effects of dualism govern its treatment as a social issue. The community on the muck understands Tea Cake’s beating Janie from a Cartesian view. Dualism in the form of the gender divide guides the community’s reaction. Tea Cake rises in the community’s estimation while the women ostracize Janie out of jealousy. Concern for Janie’s subjectivity – validating her subjectivity instead of ostracizing her – would undermine the reality of love and upset the state of gender relations on the muck. The second National Family Violence Survey, conducted from 1975-1987, found that married African American women were 2.36 times more likely
than married White women to experience severe partner violence (Hampton and Gelles). In 2011, the Centers for Disease Control found that more than 4 in 10 Black women experience abuse at the hands of a partner (“Prevalence” e11-e12). From the 1970s until the present day, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and other sociological studies have documented the disproportionate prevalence of sexual violence among the Black community (Gaquin; Greenfeld et al.; Tjaden and Thoennes). While comparable statistics were not gathered prior to the 1970s, the data reflect patterns similar to those described in *Their Eyes*.

Ecology contributes to the prevalence of sexual violence against Black women. Sampson suggests that community context shapes “cognitive landscapes or ecologically structured norms regarding appropriate standards and expectations of conduct” (270). Violence is an adaptive behavior – a result of social and economic realities. Tea Cake’s behavior does not violate their social standards of acceptability. Rather, Sop-de-Bottom expresses the community’s admiration for Tea Cake’s ability to assert his masculine dominance over Janie physically (147). Similarly, the experience of violence and the expectation of violence affect beliefs and attitudes. The African American community has historically experienced violence as a means of oppression. Janie’s previous experience with violence inures her to the danger she faces in her abusive marriage with Tea Cake.

Hurston echoes the unfortunate reality that women often face adverse consequences for speaking about abuse, such as loss of community or income or being accused of false testimony. There is no community activism or outrage when she appears bruised to continue to work the fields with Tea Cake. The women on the muck
express animosity toward Janie after Tea Cake’s abuse, whereas Tea Cake’s behavior increases his communal ties and his status in the community. Similarly, the Black people watching the trial where Janie testifies that her actions were in self-defense do not believe her and “pelt her with dirty thoughts” (185). Janie does not seek legal help and likely would have received none. Because of discriminatory practices, adequate access to law enforcement protection, healthcare, and community resources such as women’s shelters still proves problematic for women of color today as well as in the 1920s and 1930s. Not every community provides shelters, and where they do exist, they are often full. For many community shelters, funding is often limited (Cammack and Pujol). Healthcare workers must be willing to assist and act as interventionists, but all too often there are too few healthcare workers to provide even basic services for poor Black communities. Often victims of abuse might feel more comfortable seeking medical care before seeking legal advice, if they seek legal advice at all. This means medical professionals must learn intervention strategies and act, even when the patients do not present with extreme physical injuries but rather show other psychological and emotional indicators. In minority communities, racial issues might take priority, making sexist issues less of an immediate concern. For this reason, it is important for society to recognize the way violence affects raced and gendered bodies. Friends and family, law enforcement, communities, and medical professionals would have to intervene as well.

**Janie’s Healthcare Advocacy**

The Cartesian model of healthcare proves problematic in the central Florida bourgeois community of Eatonville as well as in the Glades working-class community, directly impacting Janie’s second husband, Jody, as well as Tea Cake. The mind/body
split proves foundational to the biomedical model that dominates Western medicine. The Cartesian model of healthcare is biologically, materially, and environmentally reductive. Because the Cartesian model of the body is closed and mechanistic, a Cartesian medical model does not sufficiently account for external social, environmental, racial, and economic factors affecting health. Arthur Kleinman summarizes the consequences of a Cartesian medical model:

Thus mind-body dualism, with its supporting ideas of the body as a machine and rejection of matter (physical stuff) encompassing spirit, points the way towards the transformation of medical care into industrial models such as servicing automobiles or the training of airline pilots in safe practices. (410)

This model does not account for harmful environmental factors connected to socio-economic status or race. This thinking proceeds from Descartes’s urging that humans act as “masters and possessors of nature” – of their environment (CSM I 142-3). This paradigm suggests that the consequences for humanity and nature have been disastrous, and Hurston advances this idea in her environmentalism. Psychologist John Heron explains, “Modern medicine is still primarily Cartesian: the body as a self-contained mechanistic system that is the locus of disease processes” (98). In contrast, clinical psychologist Neeta Mehta describes how the modern medical model has evolved to consider environment and to view the body as an open system rather than a machine. Mehta argues, “Living systems have come to be seen as systems (of which mind and body are a unit) which are integral parts of larger systems, in permanent interaction with their environment” (209). With its focus on the body, environment, and nature as integrally connected, Hurston’s portrayal of embodiment aligns with transcorporeality. Both Jody’s and Tea Cake’s interactions with the healthcare system illustrate the
consequences of a Cartesian medical model that treats the body as a closed system and not a connected, open system.

A non-Cartesian approach to health and the environment that does not view the body as a machine separate from nature, nor nature as an object, offers an ethical alternative. While Hurston mythologizes Eatonville – an actual city in Florida where Hurston spent her childhood from 1894-1906 – her fictional account aligns with historical fact. Hurston depicts the very real social, environmental, racial, and economic factors contributing to the lack of access to adequate healthcare Jody experiences. The biological legacy of slavery renders African Americans more susceptible to certain chronic diseases, like kidney failure, which strikes Jody and causes his death. To this day, kidney failure, high blood pressure, and diabetes affect African American men at greater rates than White men because of “poverty, less access to health care, [and] exposure to environmental toxins” (Martins et al. 727). Alaimo explains, “Casting racism as environmental exposes how sociopolitical forces generate landscapes that infiltrate human bodies” (Bodily Natures 28). Trancorporeality thus urges a non-deterministic perception of biology in which biology constantly evolves and changes, intra-acting with political, social, economic, and ecological forces. Poverty-associated malnutrition, environmental hazards, pollution, and lack of access to clean water and safe sanitation all contribute to instances of chronic ailments such as kidney illness.

Hurston quite possibly drew upon her environmental knowledge of Eatonville when depicting Jody’s illness. Hurston witnessed many anthropogenic disturbances undertaken to develop the Everglades for agricultural and capitalistic gain. Hurston worked in a Polk County phosphate mining camp in 1928 and wrote an unpublished,
unperformed drama called “Polk County.” Mining such as this can contaminate the water supply with heavy metals. The most common cause of kidney failure stems from toxic exposure to environmental pollutants in food or the water supply, such as heavy metals like arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, nickel, lead and mercury (Soderland et al. 254). In 1954, 16 years after the publication of Their Eyes, the Florida Board of Health condemned Eatonville’s water facilities. Mayor C. H. Crooms replaced the condemned system (“Eatonville Mayor”). Phosphate mining and anthropogenic disturbance contributed to the poor water quality. The most common metal pollution in freshwater comes from mining companies, which typically use an acid mine drainage system to release heavy metals from ores because metals are very soluble in an acid solution. After the drainage process, they disperse the acid solution, containing high levels of metals, into the groundwater (Tchounwou et al. 133). Urbanization contaminates groundwater as well. As more and more people move into cities and towns, several factors cause pollution: the physical disturbance of land due to construction of houses, industries, and roads, as well as contamination from drainage wells leaking agricultural pesticides, heavy metals, and toxins. As with a Cartesian approach to health, a Cartesian impulse toward industrialization and mechanization has influenced Western attitudes towards environment. Kevin Deluca asserts, “The first stasis point revolves around humanity’s relation to nature. To put it plainly, in

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8 For discussion of urbanization and water contamination, see Chang, Effects of Urbanization on Groundwater: An Engineering Case-Based Approach for Sustainable Development.

9 For discussion of Descartes’s mechanistic conception of the physical world and its negative impact upon ecology, see Kureethadam, The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis: Descartes and the Modern Worldview.
environmental circles it is still a Cartesian world, wherein the founding act is human thinking (cogito ergo sum) and the earth is object to humanity’s subject” (71-2).

Jody, in an effort to become a “big voice” and develop Eatonville into a city, creates a similar anthropocentric disturbance by bringing electric streetlights and a store and urbanization to Eatonville (46). His efforts also include a drainage ditch which runs through town in front of his store. Neighboring Polk County’s publicity department promoted the region as a “small empire” in which investors could expect to profit from agricultural and mining resources that could be sold throughout the eastern corridor (Nicholls 47). Today phosphate mining occurs throughout central Florida (Polk, Hillsborough, Manatee, and Hardee Counties), a region covering approximately 1.3 million acres of land known as the “Bone Valley.” Heavy metals from lumber mill processing, urbanization, and phosphate mining — if we imagine these industries of central Florida as also existing in Hurston’s fictional Eatonville – could have contributed to Jody’s kidney failure.

Both Jody and Tea Cake mistrust the healthcare system, refusing to seek treatment and remaining unwilling to listen to conventional medical advice. Jody’s refusal saddens Janie because she knows “what he needed was a doctor, and a good one” (Their Eyes 82). Instead, Jody insists on consulting a root doctor who has a reputation as a “two-headed scoundrel” and “multiplied cockroach” that “sells gophers,” not because Jody has a connection with nature and does not attempt to possess nature, but because he mistrusts the American healthcare system (82-3). After Janie summons a doctor from Orlando against Jody’s wishes, he informs Janie that Jody needed medical attention two years ago and his kidneys have begun to shut down (83). Highlighting this
mistrust, Hurston critiques the inadequacies and inequalities in the healthcare system. The Cartesian model of healthcare opposes Janie’s understanding of embodiment not as a mechanism but consubstantiated by environment.

Tea Cake likewise mistrusts the Western Cartesian model of medicine, and this mistrust contributes greatly to his death. Surveying the desolation wreaked by the hurricane with Tea Cake, Janie anxiously wonders, “How kin Ah find uh doctor fuh yo' face in all dis mess?” (167). Tea Cake replies with a stoicism similar to Jody’s: “Ain’t got de damn doctor tuh study 'bout. Us needs uh place tuh rest” (167). When the couple settles on the muck again, Janie again insists upon medical treatment for Tea Cake, remarking that the storm has caused “plenty of fever” (174). Tea Cake again refuses medical attention, even accusing her of getting tired of providing personal medical attention to him: “Ah ain't goin' tuh no hospital no where. Put dat in yo' pipe and smoke it. Guess you tired uh waitin' on me and doing fuh me” (182). While Tea Cake’s rabies, as we have seen, naturalizes domestic abuse, Hurston’s treatment of healthcare services actually undercuts any naturalization of Tea Cake’s seemingly inevitable doom and emphasizes his unwillingness to seek out medical treatment. The American Red Cross is on hand in the Everglades to help with the aftermath of the hurricane, as Janie explains to Tea Cake when he leaves their shelter to assist in relief efforts, but is virtually absent in the Black community (169). Later, the doctor states that some “shots right after it happened would have fixed him right up” (177). The medical treatment both Jody and Tea Cake needed existed but suspicion toward Western medicine in the Black community precipitates their unnecessary deaths. By recognizing that ecological violence afflicts Black and other minority communities just like Eatonville
disproportionately, we allow for a fully embodied ethos to guide future social-environmental policy that redresses biological and ecological othering.

The health crisis following the hurricane, particularly as compounded by the response of the White residents of central Florida and organizations such as the Red Cross, reflects a Cartesian division between Black/White and nature/culture as well. Hurston initially suggests that nature temporarily supersedes the Cartesian nature/culture division during the hurricane, but she exposes the economic disparity between the migrant farmers and White agriculturists during the aftermath. Supposed divisions between human and animal, the living and non-living, collapse into ecological collectives before and throughout the storm, temporarily replacing carefully regulated racial and class dichotomies. Tea Cake reassures a man that a rattlesnake will not bite him: “Common danger made common friends,” Hurston’s narration suggests; “Nothing sought a conquest over the other” (156). The floodwaters are also “full of things living and dead,” indifferent to the distinction (156). The indistinction extends to physical bodies. Tea Cake exclaims, “Shucks! Nobody can't tell nothin’ ’bout some uh dese bodies, de shape dey's in. Can't tell whether dey's White or Black” (171). Nature supersedes Cartesian boundaries and divisions. Nature, culture, biology, and technology all swirl together in the flood waters.

Ecological communal welfare breaks down almost immediately in the aftermath of the hurricane, however. When Tea Cake and Janie reach a bridge – the highest point of elevation – they find it already too crowded to gain refuge there: “White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room” (156). Once the immediate threat has passed, White “masters and possessors” assume control over the
environment of the Glades once more (CSM I 142-3). Two White men with rifles force Tea Cake and other Black men to inter the corpses, separating themselves from biology and corporeality. Janie’s activism may expose the inadequate access to healthcare and relief, but Hurston calls attention to ecological disasters – whether toxins in Black towns or racist inequalities in hurricane response – as not merely natural, but social and political.

**Environmental Othering, Natural Disaster, and Technology**

Such an understanding of the intra-action between nature and culture in fact pervades the social context of Hurston’s novel. While Hurston mythologizes the events of the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane, her fictional account aligns with historical fact. Contextualizing and grounding in history and place, the social issues Janie and Tea Cake’s plight raises prove essential to establishing a non-Cartesian racial and environmental ethic and to resisting the racism and alienation from environment and nature implicit in Cartesian dualism. As philosopher Carlos Prado explains, “Descartes thought truth was ‘ahistorical,’ unaffected by historical changes and developments. Truth was entirely independent of interpretation and of how interpretation might be influenced or determined” (8).

Hurston acknowledges the social injustice of the historical flood in her account of the corrupt burial process. However, Hurston ultimately decides to steer away from extensive social commentary on larger racial issues, avoiding addressing the vast racial discrepancies in the death tolls – the overwhelming majority of the victims were Black migrant workers. Contextualizing the full extent of the environmental othering and racial disparity surrounding the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane concretizes both. Existing
“naturally” as Janie and Tea Cake do on the muck, in the low-lying area of the floodplain, threatens the couple’s survival. While Hurston focuses on the private injustices that Janie overcomes, the inclusion of the historical hurricane and flood exemplifies the confluence of racism, technology, nature, biology, and politics in society at large and the body’s enmeshment in all of these networks. Political and social networks converge with environmental and biological networks to produce a devastating effect on Black bodies.

The grossly miscalculated anthropogenic disturbance, caused by dredging and draining of the land, and misuse of technology for capitalistic gain over community welfare drastically and unnecessarily compounded the devastating loss of life after the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane. Severe weather events like the actual 1928 hurricane, which raged through the Everglades, disproportionately affect impoverished African Americans living in the areas closest to the floodplain (Neely 112). Critics have devoted very little attention to the presence of technology in Their Eyes Were Watching God, but while the presence of technology in Janie’s Eden would taint its pastoralism, technology shaped and created Belle Glade, and the intra-action between nature and technology amplified the destructive power of the 1928 Lake Okeechobee hurricane.

Hurston emphasizes in various ways the inextricable link between humanity and the technology, the ways in which technology creates us, altering our environments and biology, even as we create technology. Hurston witnessed anthropogenic ecological disturbances occurring in the Florida Everglades in the form of logging, turpentining, phosphate mining, wetlands drainage, and monoculture farming while living at a boarding house at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Loughman, Florida, in
1928 during the course of her anthropological research on African American folklore, collected in *Mules and Men* (Plant 42). The lumber mill, of course, mechanizes the natural environment of the Everglades. White agriculturists used machinery to dig canals and drainage ditches and build dikes redirecting the flow of the Kissimmee River beginning in the 1880s continuing through the 1920s (Douglas 312–328; Kleinberg 8–15). Hurston conveys an Afro-futuristic anxiety dominated by technology, although to counter the stereotype of African Americans as unaffected by progress and backwards effectively, Hurston also cannot merely dismiss technology. Jody brings light and technology to the citizens of Eatonville in another effort to establish his status as a “big voice” – a disembodied deific power (*Their Eyes* 28). In Hurston’s epistemology, technology represents another means to control nature, Blacks, and women. Technology under White control threatens Black lives. Not surprisingly, then, Janie retreats to the muck, away from the lighted city of Eatonville and seemingly away from technology, as both oppose her natural self and nature.

But even in the Everglades, intra-action between technology and biology – dredges, earth-moving equipment, drilling machines, and railroads – was intensive in the period preceding and including the events depicted in *Their Eyes*. Beginning in the 1880s, Philadelphia developer Hamilton Disston initiated an effort to drain the wetlands around Lake Okeechobee. From 1904 until his death in 1910, Gov. Napoleon Bonaparte Broward campaigned upon a drainage platform. Kenneth Hughes describes the position of the United States government and the Navy on draining the Everglades going back still further into the 19th century:
In 1848, when St. Augustine resident Buckingham Smith compiled an engineering report for the United States government, outlining the advantages of draining the Everglades for agricultural use, navy Commander Levin Powell wrote to Florida’s United States Senator J. D. Westcott expressing his "entire conviction of its practicability." Powell wrote that a canal or cut from one of the rivers on south Florida’s eastern side would connect Lake Okeechobee with the Atlantic, would open navigation to the interior, and would effect the desired Everglades drainage. Expounding upon such attributes as the rich soil and tropical climate of the region, Powell expressed his opinion that the results of such a work as this were beyond mere speculation. In conclusion, he stated, the Everglades “would be reclaimed to the use and enjoyment of man.” (36)

Henry Flagler completed the Florida East Coast Railway in 1912, sparking a land boom in the Everglades alongside the growth of agricultural industry and tourism in the area (Neely 57). In 1855, the Florida legislature formed the Internal Improvement Fund (IFF), a state agency that used public money to entice private developers to drain land; the IFF promoted the settlement of the area surrounding Lake Okeechobee. Accusations of corruption and collusion abounded. The IFF granted construction contracts to dredging companies with close associations to the organization’s board (Landry 80). Hurston suggests this kind of activity in Eatonville, as Jody must “force through a town ditch to drain the street in front of the store,” acting as master and possessor of nature (Their Eyes 46).

Meanwhile, beginning in the 1880s, entrepreneurs redirected the flow of the Kissimmee River and dug massive canals around Lake Okeechobee to drain the acreage to the south. Government officials and city planners did understand the environmental risk drainage would pose to individuals on the flood plains, namely poor migrant workers. Despite the environmental risks, Janie and Tea Cake stay. Despite the environmental risks to those closest in proximity to the contact zone with the least resources, Florida government officials continued to pursue profit. The resulting “muck”
yielded large crops of beans. Florida, aware of the risk of flooding, built dikes between 1923 and 1925, yet the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane claimed some 2,500 victims (Douglas 312–328; Kleinberg 8–15). Approximately 75%, or 1,875 of that total, were Black migrant workers, and *Their Eyes* does much to show why this was so (Neely 112). White agriculturists operating as “masters and possessors” make Blacks a tool in their domination, weaponizing Blacks’ proximity to nature for their own gains (*CSM I* 142-3).

In a display of disembodied authority, Whites violently coerced African American men into disposing of the bodies, distancing themselves from physical bodies, nature, biology, death, and disease while forcing Blacks into immediate close contact with these forces. Health concerns mandated the quick disposal of all the bodies into mass graves. White unidentified victims were interred in a mass grave in the city cemetery in West Palm Beach. Family members were afforded the opportunity to identify loved ones, while 674 Black victims were disposed of without consulting families. Yet between the use of lime and decomposition, bodies became racially indistinguishable, as a survivor noted: “After the first few days colored and White were indistinguishable. All had lost their skin” (Mykle 199). The Red Cross felt compelled to create a “Colored Advisory Committee” that had, among other tasks, the object of verifying the “rumors” that the aid was not being equally apportioned among Blacks and Whites (Kleinberg 213). W. E. B. Du Bois and the Associated Negro Press examined the conduct of the Red Cross and eventually exonerated the organization (Kleinberg 172). But Grace Campbell, member of the American Negro Labor Congress, stated to *the Chicago Defender* that only 20% of

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10 For the next 60 years, until 2004, the mass grave remained unmarked, located at the corner of Tamarind Avenue and 25th Street in West Palm Beach, Florida (Kleinberg 228).
relief was being dispersed to African Americans (Kleinberg 179). Understanding one’s own transcorporeality means addressing one’s own ecological impact in conjunction with, not at the cost of, one’s human rights. Hurston indicts the use of technology to master nature. Nature, in the form of the “Old Okeechobee,” “roll[s] the dikes” (Their Eyes 162). In this instance the intermeshing of technology and nature threatens Black individuals’ right to exist naturally.

The Cartesian rationale of mastery prevails to the extent that, though the Black community on the muck plays more than works, an epistemology in direct opposition to capitalism, they fail either to recognize the technological, anthropological interventions of the White agriculturists as a threat or to comprehend their existence at the flashpoint of nature, technology, and politics. When Janie and Tea Cake finally decide to flee their living quarters near Lake Okeechobee, they look back at the lake to realize the dike that protects them has crushed the “cabins” they and other farm workers live in:

The monstropolous beast had left his bed. . . . He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. (161–162)

The migrant laborers, their material possessions, and shanty cabins are in much closer proximity to the floodplain than the agriculturists’ big houses. Yet “[t]he folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn’t worry” (158). The migrant workers on the muck accept the risk of working in low-lying flood zones as natural, confronted by the precarity of their existence daily, immersed in a material world controlled by Whites actively denying them access to economic and
political resources. A Cartesian view of subjectivity\textsuperscript{11} denies the migrant workers’ enmeshment and the impact of economic, political, and natural networks converging the way they do in the novel and did during the historical Okeechobee flood. The White agriculturists utilize the Black migrant workers – mere bodies and not cogitos – as machines to extract capital gain from the land.

A transcorporeal view of embodied subjectivity recognizes the threat posed to Black bodies when economics, nature, and anthropogenic disturbance in the form of technology intersect. The workers on the muck, however, do not recognize the threat, trusting instead to the capitalistic wisdom of the landowners. Susan Scott Parrish proposes that, despite their biosentience, Janie and Tea Cake’s risk epistemology renders them unable to recognize and protect themselves from race-based ecological threats like the Lake Okeechobee hurricane of 1928. Parrish borrows a term from Frank Boas’s (Hurston’s anthropology mentor) anthropological theories, “means-consequence,” to describe rural African Americans’ struggle to determine the difference between the consequences of physical and anthropogenic natural disturbances because they themselves are so often the “means” utilized by Whites to cause disturbances to the land (35). Risk infiltrates every aspect of their daily lives. African American laborers have assisted in creating an environmental risk for themselves farming the drained Everglades, inhabiting shacks not protected by the dikes in the lowest lying areas of

\textsuperscript{11} For discussion on the Cartesian subject and Black subjectivity, see Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums.” For discussion of the philosophical foundations of racism, Cartesianism, and the mind/body split, see Harfouch 32.
Belle Glade, and trusting White capitalists who casually assumed that monetary gains from crop sales would outweigh the ecological damage.

“Risk epistemology” goes far to explain why Janie’s organic epistemology fails her when the hurricane looms imminent. She does not consciously register concern internally any more than she voices any concern. Instead of assessing the risk knowingly, she defers to Tea Cake’s reasoning that the money is too good to seek shelter elsewhere and that the “rational” White agriculturists know better than the “natural” Seminoles because they have conquered the land as owners. Janie trusts Tea Cake and White male agriculturists as knowers to assess the risk for her, acquiescing to Tea Cake’s mastery. Rather than rely on her ecosentience, in this instance Cartesian dualistic, hierarchical thinking prevails. Despite Janie’s pleas to stay in the house where Motor Boat has taken refuge and ultimately survives, Tea Cake insists they leave, and once again Janie defers to him as a knower. Later, when Tea Cake acknowledges that they should have listened to Lias and that they should have left when the Seminoles did, she consoles Tea Cake, telling him he “didn’t know” (162). Tea Cake’s Cartesian rationalization endangers himself and Janie while the Seminole’s natural wisdom ensures they seek safety much earlier. The Seminoles understand that nature cannot be mastered by dikes and human intervention, but Tea Cake and Janie trust to Cartesian reason and gamble that the White landowner’s mastery of the land affords them safety. Though Janie fails to recognize the threat that the drastically altered landscape of the floodplain on the muck, the White agriculturists, and ultimately Tea Cake pose to her embodied selfhood, her organic epistemology reaches full bloom after the flood, after Tea Cake’s death. Having navigated societal, economic, biological, natural,
technological, and political networks and learned how each intersect and enmesh her, she gains transcorporeal wisdom.

**An Ecological, Transcorporeal Future**

The horizon, once representing perpetual futurity, in the end represents a present which connects history with the future, corporeally and ecologically. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s answer to the sovereignty of the Western cogito fluxes with nature, understanding that social, economic, ecological, biological, and technological forces weather the self unevenly and imperfectly. Weathered, Janie returns to Eatonville to impart the transcorporeal wisdom she has gained. Janie’s telling incites the same awareness in Phoebe, who grows “ten feet higher” and vows to seek “satisfaction” by demanding Sam take her fishing, symbolizing her insistent desire for an ecologically balanced partnership. Phoebe’s embodied self exceeds Cartesian bounds just as Janie’s does. Janie naturalizes the space at Eatonville, filling it with life and ridding it of the emptiness Jody left, by planting Tea Cake’s seeds, symbolizing renewal and growth. Pulling in the horizon to herself, Janie envisions a future in which society no longer ecologically, geographically, and politically others Blacks – the future moment of Black female bodies in America. Having traveled “tuh de horizon and back,” Janie’s organic epistemology has evolved beyond the pear tree of her youth to engage in communion with her body, others, and the horizon.
Chapter 3

EARTH, AIR, WATER: BIGGER THOMAS’S ATTACHMENT AND ENTANGLEMENT

Like many other readers, I find Naturalism a useful lens for reading Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). Naturalism, however, is all too often associated with a simplistic determinism, which continues to imply a Cartesian binary that sets unthinking nature opposite immaterial human reason.¹ Adding a transcorporeal lens, I suggest, offers an approach to the text that moves beyond both deterministic materialism and Cartesian idealism. The environments we inhabit will always constrain and sustain our embodied selfhood and actions, but, as Bruno Latour observes, being “well-attached” proves integral to “emancipation” (218). Interrelations with the environment contribute to abling/disabling, exposing/concealing, and capacitating/incapacitating human lives. Such interrelations are framed by sociological as well as natural determinants—ones that in the United States are profoundly affected by racial identity. Hence, Wright’s *Native Son* chronicles the ways in which whites endeavor to control, fix, and limit environmental attachments for Blacks. Like Binx in Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, must attach himself to the physical world. Unlike Binx, however, Bigger cannot experience embodiment without

¹ See Ch. 1 n2.
the shameful, hateful filter of a White lens and must struggle for selfhood in an environment co-opted by Whites that devitalizes Black life.

In my reading of *Native Son*, transcorporeality’s idea of embodiment as a process of material, relational, and intra-active becoming and of the human as always intermeshed with a more-than-human world and its agency informs Wright’s Naturalism. Insofar as Cartesian thought privileges mind over body, the conscious self over the material world, and racist Cartesian traditions extend this privileging to White over Black, such thought imagines power as flowing largely in one direction. Naturalism as understood through a transcorporeal framework, on the contrary, asserts that power relations depend upon dynamic flows and interdependencies between mind and body, ideal and material, so much so that these supposedly separate categories intertwine, immanent with one another. Power hierarchies certainly exist, but only by blocking natural flows across bodies and environments. Wright’s materiality – particularly as expressed through ecological metaphors including soil, water, animals,

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2 Frost explicates the relationship between Cartesianism and biological/sexual determinism, arguing that “Descartes’s portrayal of the body as essentially unthinking underpins the modern understanding of the human self as a rational, free, and self-determining agent” and that, “historically, this Cartesian understanding of the passivity of matter was figured in racialized, gendered, and class terms that in turn were used to justify racial, gender, and class inequalities.” Frost continues to explain that because of Cartesian attitudes towards embodiment, “women, the lower classes, and people of various cultural or national origins were construed as trapped in and by the body” and “lacking the wherewithal to distance themselves from the body’s operations and to steer a rationally-defined course for their behavior and actions” and “subject to the determinations of the biological or animal functions of the body and as vulnerable to a kind of behavioral determinism, a vulnerability which derived from the inability of a weak intellect” (72).

and air – resists Cartesian dualistic thinking by stressing interconnection between physical and mental phenomena. Meanwhile, Wright’s insistence on the centrality of Black bodies demonstrates Bigger’s entanglement in social, biological, ecological, and political networks; the White obstruction of flows of power that denies Bigger agency; and the interdependency of White and Black communities that belie White supremacy.

Through representations of soil, water, and air, then, Wright traces the limits of White power and Bigger’s emergent becoming and growth. Eventually, Bigger begins to find his own ways to tentatively place himself in the world in relation to people and his environment. When he longs to merge with the waters that breathed life into him, Bigger finds nature is a source of sustenance, potentiality, and comfort – more than the manifestation of disembodied White control.3

**Rendering Environmental Judgment: Wright’s Ecology**

As Wright documents in *Black Boy*, reading the works of Theodore Dreiser influenced his interest in Naturalism: “All my life had shaped me for the realism, the Naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them” (250). Wright and his generation witnessed a revival of literary Naturalism, which communicates a belief in the power of one’s heredity and environment acting together as inseparable forces to determine behavior. Yet Wright registers his opposition to deterministic biology, the idea that Bigger’s biology determines his fixed self irrefutably, in “How Bigger Was Born”:

But before I use Bigger Thomas as a springboard for the examination of milder types, I’d better indicate more precisely the nature of the environment that

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3 For discussion of White maleness, the cogito, and Western subjectivity, see Mills 13-38; Hoagland 95-118; Harfouch 32.
produced these men, or the reader will be left with the impression that they were essentially and organically bad. (16)

As applied to African American experiences, Naturalism speaks to the extent to which environment constrains Black identity, but without being immutably determined.

Though Wright sets *Native Son* in the diminishing environment of South Side urban Chicago, Wright clarifies immediately after the above passage that the Bigger Thomases he has known in his life are a product of a “Dixie environment” displaced to the North by the Great Migration. Wright explains that the environment of the South is separated into two worlds – White and Black (13). Blacks are oppressively “residentially segregated” (14). This separateness forces Blacks to seek “compensatory nourishment” (15). So undernourished, Wright explains, “Bigger’s organism is conditioned” to “hope for little and to receive that little without rebellion” (22, 14). When the glitter and promise of “fulfillment” and “possible achievement” that Chicago offers, non-existent in the South, present themselves to Bigger, removed from the “daily pressures of the Dixie environment,” he rebels violently, striving to “realize himself” (17, 16, 27). The lack of nourishment Bigger receives in “Dixie” produces violent hopes within him once he glimpses the illusion of material prosperity and the abundance of “the greatest possible plenty on earth” (22). Ultimately, though the materiality of Chicago incites Bigger’s actions, the environment of the South produces Bigger’s consciousness. Hence, although *Native Son* is the one novel in my study set outside the South, its understanding of White and Black psychology and sociology is rooted in the Southern experience.

Written, after all, by a Mississippi-born author who chose to live much of his later life as
an expatriate, Wright’s most famous novel may suggest that the challenges of the Cartesian South are also those of the United States more generally.

Wright stresses how racist environments limit Black development while allowing that different environments might facilitate very different and much more positive developments. During a radio interview, Wright proclaimed his intention “was to render a judgment on my environment. That judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings” (*Conversations* 64-5). When criticized by Ralph Ellison about the lack of individual agency in *Native Son*, Wright replied:

I don’t mean to say that I think that environment makes consciousness ... but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped ... the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions. ("How Bigger Was Born" 22)

Wright’s literary Naturalism holds that environmental agencies can capacitate as well as incapacitate Black lives, and hence *Native Son* functions as a precursor, of sorts, to transcorporeality and its interrogation of raced risk-laden bodies and racial environmental othering. In transcorporeal terms, no self exists except through constant and constitutive intra-action between the body and its environment – in Bigger’s case a racist environment. *Native Son* renders indistinct not only the line between nature and culture, but the division between environmental degradation and racial oppression as well.

I see environmental justice movements as essentially parallel to Wright’s environmentalism, as their focus on the environmental othering of minority communities likewise emphasizes the ways that human-made (racist) environments
constrain the lives of humans (particularly those belonging to minority-race communities). Ecocriticism of this kind suggests that environmental crisis and human oppression are the outcomes of centuries of concerted effort to subdue nature – including non-White races, non-male genders, and non-human species. The apparent inevitability of such outcomes, however, is closely tied with unquestioned assumptions about race, gender, species, and the Cartesian divide between culture and nature.

Environment does clearly substantiate selfhood, even as human industry deterministically shapes environment, but neither of these acknowledgments means that selfhood must be substantiated in just one way or that human industry has a single determined outcome.

Succinctly put, Wright’s ecology of place asserts that destructive White co-optation of environment destroys the health of the human ecology. In Native Son, Wright employs several ecological metaphors consistently throughout, including soil, water, air, and animals, that continually emphasize the interdependence between humanity and the natural world to consubstantiate one another, thus recognizing humanity’s transcorporeal entanglement. Simultaneously, Wright connects environmental and racial justice issues, creating awareness of Black ecologies – the radically different relation to place and matter experienced by Chicago’s Black, as opposed to White, population. At the most basic level, to maintain an ecological balance and adapt to their environment, organisms, including the Black population of Chicago, must conserve their energy budgets for growth. Oppressed Blacks residing in the Black Belt, such as Bigger, necessarily devote all their energy reserves to simply maintaining
their physical needs – to basic survival – in the cramped, cage-like habitat of the Black Belt that the Daltons have constructed.

**Bigger’s Environment**

Whites order Bigger’s environment, confining him to the Black Belt in an attempt to ensure that his sense of embodied selfhood and consciousness cannot grow beyond the Black Belt to threaten White Chicago. Instead of engaging in a mutual, intra-active becoming with his environment, Bigger’s environment, designed by Whites to constrain its Black inhabitants, substantiates his unbecoming. Desmond Harding affirms that Whites constrain Bigger’s environment, stating:

> [T]his is an environment controlled by a dominant White culture, and it is this social order that constricts and denies determinative control of the boundaries of both space and place, not only for Bigger Thomas but for the marginalized communities of the South Side. (379)

Whites determine space and place, but Harding denies that environment determines Bigger’s self, arguing that “Bigger Thomas possesses an individual consciousness in all its subjectivity independent of . . . the theory of architectural determinism” (379). Harding contends that though Whites determinatively constrain Bigger’s environment, Bigger’s individual subjective consciousness remains his own, undetermined and independent of environment, but ultimately Bigger’s Cartesian effort to isolate himself to come into a new consciousness fails.

Harding’s assertion maintains a Cartesian separation of consciousness from space and place, or environment. I contend that while environment does not determine consciousness, it does consubstantiate it so that subjective consciousness is never completely independent of environment. Bigger cannot attach himself well or place
himself in relation to his environment because Whites warp and restrict the nature of Bigger’s relationality to the extent they deem appropriate. Whites geographically separate themselves from the “natural” Black population in order to maintain physical and epistemological control. The separate and unequal, cage-like environment of the Black Belt reinforces the notion that its inhabitants are animals, necessarily subject to White control. This geographical separation physically reinforces a Cartesian divide between animal nature and human culture.

The oppression Bigger experiences throughout the novel unmoors him from reality by denying him the right to fully understand his relations to the physical world — people, places, non-humans, and even material objects — except as the Whites authoritatively deem appropriate. Although environment conditions Whites as well as Blacks, powerful Whites such as the Daltons define their “environment” as something outside themselves that they can rationally order and master, and this mastery, though built on an illusion, does have far-reaching environmental consequences. Before hiring Bigger to be their chauffeur, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss how best to introduce him into their domestic space, as though introducing an animal into a new habitat:

“Don’t you think it would be a wise procedure to inject him into his new environment at once, so he could get the feel of things?” the woman asked, addressing herself by the tone of her voice to the man now.
“Well, tomorrow’ll be time enough,” the man said hesitantly.
“I think it’s important emotionally that he feels free to trust his

4 Patricia Hill Collins notes the naturalization of Black men in the White mind: “Because Black men did hard manual labor, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as big, strong, and stupid. White elites reduced Black men to their bodies, and identified their muscles and their penises as their most important sites” (56-7). Whites associate Black men with the unthinking body (a natural object) rather than rationality. Georges Dicker affirms that Descartes defines the body as a material unthinking substance – res extensa (87).
environment," the woman said. “Using the analysis contained in the case record the relief sent us, I think we should evoke an immediate feeling of confidence.” (Native Son 48)

The Daltons recognize that Bigger’s inclusion in their home environment will necessarily alter his environment. Less clear is whether they recognize the possibility that their relationship with Bigger might change them.

The family professes to be social workers, open to interconnection across race lines; meanwhile, they perpetrate environmental violence on the Black community by their discriminatory rental practices as landlords. The Daltons, though well intentioned, directly contribute through property ownership to the environmental othering of the Black community. Mr. Dalton refuses to rent to Blacks in any area except the Black Belt but considers himself a philanthropist because he has donated ping-pong balls to the South Side Boys Club, as though this could possibly transform South Side Chicago into a safe and stable environment (393, 294). The couple speak about Bigger, in his presence, without acknowledging him or soliciting his view, effectively muting him, and observing him like an animal out of its natural habitat. Reliquaries of power and privilege, they believe that they alone can speak for and manage the natural organisms in their environment.

During Bigger’s trial, Mr. Dalton pleads ignorance regarding his role in oppressing the Black community. Responding to a question from Bigger’s lawyer, Mr. Boris Max, as to whether the living conditions of Bigger’s family contributed to his daughter’s death, Mr. Dalton replies that “Blacks are happier together” and wouldn’t want to live outside the south side of Chicago, and that it would be “unethical to charge negroes less rent” (328). Mr. Dalton’s understanding of the larger environmental forces
that threaten Black lives is too limited for him to understand his own complicity, even when those forces confront the micro-environment of his own home. While Mr. Dalton wants to create an environment that is welcoming and non-threatening for Bigger, he remains ignorant of the impact of the dangerous environment of the Black Belt entrenched within Bigger’s very self-identity. The Dalton’s material wealth causes Bigger discomfort and anxiety as a physical manifestation of the Dalton’s power and mastery and Bigger’s oppression. Mr. Dalton, so accustomed to mastery over his environment and so unaccustomed to environmental risks and disturbances, cannot accurately assess the implications of introducing Bigger – someone conditioned to environmental violence – into his home.

Bigger’s environment, coopted by Whites, pathologizes Black behavior. Landlords like Mr. Dalton who engage in discriminatory rental practices confine Blacks to an unsafe, unstable area – the Black Belt – that essentially functions as a Pavlovian maze, crippling to Blacks’ development of self-awareness and self-actualization. Bigger describes the disembodied, seemingly divine power Mr. Dalton wields over him and his family, enmeshing them in a sordid material reality:

He looked around the street and saw a sign on a building; THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt, and he owned property where White folks lived, too. But Bigger could not live in a building across the “line.” Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. (173)
Bigger recognizes that Mr. Dalton directly participates in constructing the devitalizing, dangerous environment of the Black Belt.

The environmental conditions in which the Daltons’ real estate properties participate were a matter of historical fact. The rot that destabilizes Bigger and his family members’ lives was ubiquitous throughout the Black Belt, which was established during the Great Migration of Black families from the agricultural South to urban Chicago beginning circa 1910. City officials placed restrictions on where Black people could live, mandating multiple families share one-room kitchenettes. Discriminatory housing practices such as redlining and exclusive zoning to single-family housing maintained racial segregation in Chicago (Cooley 50). These areas quickly deteriorated into over-crowded, disease-ridden, poverty-stricken detention zones. Wright condemned the practice:

The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavement, at a profit. . . . The kitchenette scatters death so widely among us that our death rate exceeds our birth rate, and if it were not for the trains and autos bringing us daily into the city from the plantations, we Black folk who dwell in northern cities would die out entirely over the course of a few years. (12 Million Black Voices 111)

Like Wright, St. Claire Drake and Horace Cayton elaborate upon the conditions Black Belt residents lived in:

The trend toward kitchenette living was speeded up by the fact that between 1930 and 1938 houses in the “worst” areas were continuously disintegrating or being demolished. . . . For each one-room household the landlord provided an ice-box, a bed, and a gas hot-plate. A bathroom that once served a single family now served six. A building that formerly held sixty families might now have three hundred. The poorest and most unstable elements often inhabited the basements of the kitchenette buildings, where rents were lowest. (576)
Rental practices such as this endanger Black families so that White landlords may yield a greater profit. Black lives disintegrate as the building does around them. Finally, as Cooley affirms, thousands in the slums of the Black Belt died of tuberculosis because of the filthy conditions (41).

The Chicago Housing Authority, established as a result of the Housing Act of 1937 (passed just three years prior to the publication of Native Son), sought to provide an environment that would improve the lives of impoverished Chicagoans, acknowledging the deplorable living conditions of Black Belt residents and the need for intervention. The organization worked to ensure accommodations included sufficient private space and proper ventilation to prevent the spread of disease in stagnant air. Yet crowded, unsanitary living conditions in Black communities continued to be a breeding ground for diseases, the tuberculosis epidemic among them. This instance demonstrates the transcorporeal principle that a body is a site in which social power and material/geographic/more-than-human agencies intra-act, almost always with negative consequences for people whose bodies are objects of racist prejudice.

The Daltons and other Whites imagine that the constructed urban environments that they have actively participated in creating are, somehow, products of “nature.” But of course, their actions at various points—for instance, their consciously trying to construct a hospitable micro-environment when they employ Bigger—belie any clear division between “natural” spaces and constructed urban environments. Wright’s reconception of “environment” offers a wider deconstruction of this division, facilitating a reimagining of space and place in the way Native Son resists conventional
environmentalist thinking about nature by conceiving of constructed, built spaces and nature as inseparable, bridging the illusory divide between nature and culture.

The most important of Wright’s ecological metaphors is that of the jungle. Usually a “jungle” is conceived of as natural, but Wright’s use of the metaphor leads with cultural appropriations of the term. Ecocritic Lawrence Buell compares Wright’s style of describing the urban environment to works like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (138-42). However, Buell’s ecocritical analysis of *Native Son* creates a modern, urban divide that undermines Wright’s ecocritical depth. *Native Son*, a work of “ghetto” or “urban fiction,” is “sparse,” Buell argues, in “environmental detail” (138). I would argue Buell separates the ghetto from environment synonymous with nature. Wright does not separate “urban” and “natural environments” but rather recognizes their interconnection, blurring the illusory boundaries between “natural” and constructed environments.

Repeatedly, Wright compares Chicago itself to a jungle. Bigger tries to convince Bessie that hiding in one of the abandoned buildings on the South Side will be safe and says, “It’ll be like hiding in a jungle” (*Native Son* 214). Yet Bigger’s characterization also implies a racialized affinity—of Black people with natural jungles—that adopts an all-too-familiar trope. In a newspaper article concerning Bigger’s case, the journalism refers to Bigger as a “jungle beast” (279). Both the newspaper article and Bigger’s own description of his environment place Bigger firmly on the natural side of the Cartesian divide between nature and culture, an association between Blacks and wild nature that has been repeatedly employed to justify their oppression and assert that Blacks are
genetically inferior in their intellectual and cultural capacities to Whites. The implications of this construal of the jungle metaphor are many. Life in the jungle is also a fight for resources and survival, seemingly justifying White attempts to isolate Blacks to a concrete jungle and thus destroy competition from Black communities. Meanwhile, Bigger’s understanding of the urban jungle, whose expansiveness makes him as an individual difficult to locate, mainly signifies Bigger’s sense of anonymity and lack of selfhood.

Still, correlating the jungle only with savagery and primitivism offers only a limited and limiting conception of the meaning of “jungle.” Incredibly complex, biologically diverse communities thrive in the jungle, and this multiplicity of organisms and an intricate web of relations are also signified in Wright’s employment of jungle metaphors. Certainly, Bigger’s participation in the ecosystem, defined as a transcorporeal network of relations including human beings, nature, artificial constructions, and social and political forces, is crippling uncertain. Yet Wright’s employment of the metaphor of jungle repeatedly points to the ways that the city environment is neither purely natural nor entirely racially constructed. The urban jungle of Chicago environmentally others its Black inhabitants constantly, demonstrating the affective ways racially marked bodies navigate toxic environments.

Hungry Bodies

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5 For discussion of the link between animalism and Africanism, see Collins 100. For discussion of Descartes’s view of animals as unthinking automata, see Thomas, “Descartes on the Animal Within, and the Animals Without.”
Wright’s frequent references to the body and Black skin and the Black Belt of Chicago communicate the human being’s entanglement within biological and environmental networks. But this does not mean Bigger is merely a passive receptor of racist conditioning. Transcorporeal intra-actions between biology, culture, and environment substantiate behavior and selfhood without determining it, always transforming contingently. Indeed, Bigger’s raced body’s intra-actions with his racist environment force us to reconsider biology’s fixedness and determinedness, thereby challenging Naturalist readings of the novel.

Scorning the Western philosophical focus on human rationality over physical embodiment and as separate from biology, Wright demonstrates the centrality of physical bodies to human experience. Bigger’s very name connotes excessive corporeality. While Descartes insists that one of the body’s properties is impenetrability – “the real extension of body is such that it excludes any penetrability of parts” (CSM II 297-8) – Bigger’s body defies the Cartesian model of embodiment as closed. Bigger’s entanglement and bodily intra-actions with his environment demonstrate transcorporeality, even as these entanglements are often detrimental and rarely if ever reciprocal. For Descartes, environment is the “realm of matter and energy” and operates in a prescribed “mechanical” way as described in Principles, Part I. The material effects of poverty and racism do no operate mechanically but much more immediately and profoundly shape Bigger’s consciousness. White society insists on the containment of Bigger’s excessive corporeality and forces him to live in a cage – the Black Belt of
Chicago. Still, awareness of one’s own entanglement marks a positive first step toward ethical consciousness and environmental and racial justice. Bigger’s body alerts him to his own transcorporeality, and the result is a shift in consciousness. Chauffeuring Mary and Jan around his part of town, the couple asks him to sit and eat with them, and this alters his sense of embodiment at the atomic level: “It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered; and when he realized why, when he understood the cause, he could not chew the food” (74-5). Though well intentioned, Mary and Jan are intent on observing Bigger in his environment, and this produces a physiological response in Bigger’s body — anxiety. White domination enters Bigger’s body, interrupting its life-sustaining functions, and in this moment Bigger comes to a new comprehension through his own body, which organically understands White oppression and his own entanglement.

Human embodiment comprises Wright's primary subject matter in Native Son, and Wright purposefully chooses to make his protagonist a fully embodied, Black human being. Wright prominently features Bigger Thomas’s body: Black, male, shamed, regulated, desiring, hunted, and striving for consciousness. Bigger's bodily hunger facilitates his awareness of and nascent resistance to environmental othering, as he walks towards the Daltons’ house (street cars no longer running at that late hour), down the streets of their White, affluent neighborhood street: “As he turned into Drexel Boulevard and headed toward Dalton’s, he thought of how restless he had been, how he was consumed always with a body hunger” (142). As he moves from the cramped, cage-

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6 For discussion of the Cartesian focus on bodily containment and closure, see Burkitt (22) and Mark Johnson (49).
like habitat that the Daltons have constructed for Blacks to the spacious environs that they have built for themselves, Bigger becomes consciously aware of his hunger for self-actualization and survival.

Wright’s frequent references to the “tension” Bigger experiences under the control of White oppression suggests a response centered in the body. Fearful of brushing against the White housekeeper who answers the door upon his entering the Daltons’ house, Bigger attempts to shrink his body, holding his breath as he walks past her (46). Rather than an intra-active and relational becoming that allows Bigger to grow, Bigger experiences an uncomfortable unbecoming, limited by societal restrictions. Meeting the Daltons for the first time and listening to them discuss his employment, Bigger consciously notes his body’s physiological response to White autonomy: “It made him uneasy, tense, as though there were influences and presences about him which he could feel but not see” (48). Simply sitting in a chair makes Bigger feel “angry and uncomfortable” as he waits to be summoned into Mr. Dalton’s study (47). Aware of his body, he tries to reposition himself more comfortably but feels as though the chair “collapses under him,” so he “sinks distrustfully down again” (47). Bigger shrinks uncomfortably from his shameful Black embodiment in the opulent White household.

This bodily awareness Bigger experiences even more acutely because of his employment with the Daltons spurs him to theorize a mode of being for himself and all Black people that transgresses the mind/body split and allows them to act with autonomy. The morning after murdering Mary, Bigger eats breakfast with his family and rides the streetcar to return to work at the Daltons. Staring out the streetcar window,
Bigger laments that this split affects all Black people like it does him and that an answer – a path to freedom – may lie in overcoming the split:

Dimly, he felt that there should be one direction in which he and all other Black people could go whole-heartedly; that there should be a way in which gnawing hunger and restless aspiration could be fused; that there should be a manner of acting that caught the mind and body in certainty and faith. (109)

Instead of fusion, the tension caused by containment returns. Speaking with private investigator Mr. Britten, who at the time gives no indication of suspecting him, Bigger anticipates that it will take all his bodily strength to resist containment, describing “a tension, a supreme gathering of all the forces of his body for a showdown” (157). Even when not in the presence of Whites, in Bessie’s company, Bigger still feels “tense inside,” “as though he had been compelled to hold himself in a certain awkward posture for a long time” (218). The effects of oppression produce a prolonged physiological response. Racism becomes an environmental factor affecting organs, so that Whites control the nature of Bigger’s inhabitation of his own body. Yet increasing awareness of White control fuels Bigger’s bodily hunger and bodily resistance.

Bodily awareness and consciousness are continually interconnected throughout Wright’s depiction of Bigger. As Bigger’s hunger grows, so does his knowledge of environmental othering. For example, during a surreptitious visit to the local drug store while evading the law, Bigger reads the paper to gain information about the murder and finds a shaded map of the South Side Chicago search area that police have covered – a visual representation of Bigger’s containment. The unshaded portion of his environment, Bigger notices, is shrinking rapidly. Consequently, he flees to the snow-
covered rooftop of an abandoned flat. There, crouching in the snow behind a chimney,

Bigger’s hunger alerts him to his skin’s transcorporeal porosity:

He felt in his hunger a deep sense of duty, as powerful as the urge to breathe, as intimate as the beat of his heart. He felt like dropping to his knees and lifting his face to the sky and saying: “I’m hungry!” He wanted to pull off his clothes and roll in the snow until something nourishing seeped into his body through the pores of his skin. (232)

Bigger’s hunger again facilitates his understanding of his own entanglement. His literal hunger for bodily nourishment is inseparable from his duty to resist containment and grow. Bigger’s hunger represents his growing wisdom. He learns that human embodiment is both the means by which being becomes possible and the attribute that makes humans vulnerable. His own Black skin – his porosity – renders him particularly vulnerable to threatening elements in his environment, whether natural like the snow or human like the police. In this moment, driven by bodily hunger, Bigger reflects on his connection with the natural, more-than-human world.

**Bigger’s Cartesian Act of Creation**

Implicit in my reading of Bigger’s bodily hunger, intensified by contact with the Daltons and the police manhunt, is that Mary Dalton’s murder represents both a consequence of environmental othering and the catalyst of a kind of new awareness. How does Wright show this terrifying process unfolding? To begin with, Bigger finds that objectification underneath the White gaze causes him to disassociate himself from his own Black skin. While chauffeuring Jan and Mary, Bigger views his skin as a marker of ignorance under White scrutiny:

He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a Black skin. It was a shadowy
region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the White world from the Black that he stood upon. (68)

Even after Jan seeks to acknowledge Bigger’s embodiment by shaking Bigger’s hand and directing Bigger not to call him “sir,” Bigger cannot “meet Jan’s gaze” (67). His feelings of disembodiment stem not from the luxury of inhabiting an unmarked body and forgetting his body (as is possible for Whites), but from necessarily focusing so intently on his body that he observes it with cold rationality, as an object from the perspective of an outsider. Bigger’s body thus loses its identity as a body and becomes a symbolical “badge of shame.” Conversely, Mrs. Dalton floats as an ethereal disembodied entity in a flowing White gown with a supernatural authoritative presence: “a White blur,” “silent, ghostlike” (84). Further, her blindness – inner vision – seems to reinforce transcendence above corporeality. Mr. Dalton similarly rules as “somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god” (164). Disembodiment comes to represent authoritative and autonomous selfhood and a state of conscious subjectivity to Bigger, reiterating his status as an object. This sense of shame extends to other Black bodies.

So, while at times exposure to the Daltons’ material opulence cultivates awareness of his Black physicality, Bigger’s disorientation in their presence also swings toward an opposite extreme: alienation so profound that he experiences a kind of radical Cartesian disembodiment, detached from his environment and his community akin to Janie’s “inside and outside selves” (112). Masaya Takeuchi describes Bigger’s divided selves as male and female, dominant and passive (56). I argue these classifications align with Cartesian dualism and that Bigger’s act of murder is fundamentally Cartesian. Takeuchi asserts that “only in retrospect the next day is Bigger able to construct a
version of the murder as a willed expression of male potency” and that Bigger murders Mary Dalton to “fuse” his two selves to become “bigger” than he is (65).

A Cartesian sense of self relies upon wholeness, a Cartesian purgation of all that is excessive, fractured, or incoherent until an integral, unified core reveals itself. Consequently, Bigger’s epistemology mimics the White ideology he has internalized, affirming White expectations and standards of Black selfhood. To resolve his ontological confusion, Bigger strives to create himself ex nihilo, but his creative act is an inversion of the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am.” As conditioned by a racist White society, Bigger is overly embodied and so cannot abstract himself into the realm of the transcendent cogito. He must therefore employ his body to assert autonomous selfhood as the only tool at his disposal. Wright presents it as the first act in Bigger’s life that is unmediated and authentic, through which Bigger believes he gains epistemological autonomy and selfhood. I kill therefore I am. This act of self-creation coincides with the Cartesian belief in the power of the sovereign individual to derive himself through meditation:

The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself.... He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time . . . . He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them. (Wright, Native Son 105)

Bigger finds that his act of creation firmly grounds himself in time, although it abstracts him out of time and place. Like a Cartesian thinker, Bigger now exists outside the physical world apart and above his family and others – a new world of his own creation: “To those who wanted to kill him he was not human, not included in that picture of
Creation; and that was why he had killed it. To live, he had created a new world for himself, and for that he was to die” (285). A Cartesian barrier separates and isolates him. But he is also separated and isolated in other ways. The heinous violence that Bigger perpetrates affirms the notion that Blacks are instinctively brutish rather than intellectually rational and thus not human, lacking a thinking self. In this way, Bigger’s killing himself into existence is a mimicry of thinking oneself into existence and neither an effective reversal nor a complete rejection of Cartesianism’s dualistic definition of selfhood.

Thus, Bigger’s act of creation still preserves – and even reinforces – the supernatural disembodiment of White supremacy. Mrs. Dalton appears as a “White blur” causing an irrepressible fear response in Bigger’s body (89). A “hazy blue light” surrounds Mary immediately before and after Bigger suffocates her (86). Death somehow leaves Mary intact. She looks like “some person he had not seen in a long time” on the “shadowy bed” (87). He fears to touch her and gazes upon her beauty, awed and terrified. Bigger does not break Mary’s skin or spill Mary’s blood. Bessie’s death, however, differs significantly, as the shame Bigger feels regarding his own Black skin extends to Bessie. Bigger attacks Bessie’s face with a brick, turning it into a “wet wad,” a “sodden mass,” degrading her (267). Mary is “softer than Bessie” (84). Bigger’s anger is reserved for Bessie and her Black skin, whereas Mary remains transcendent in death.

The Cartesian dualistic premise that Bigger has internalized connects Black skin with primitivism, all body and no voice/intellect, and Whites with transcendent

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7 See Ch. 2 n2.
disembodiment, extends to the very mode of his violence and his perception of his victims’ bodies.

Bigger’s inverted Cartesian act of self-creation has other negative effects as well. Ashamedly deriding folk/religious traditions, such as his mother’s spirituals, and communal identity that figure centrally in African diaspora epistemologies, Bigger separates himself from Black epistemology, deeming it superstitious and inferior to “White” reason and culture. Bigger repeatedly rejects Black ways of knowing even as he endeavors to become a knower and assert his selfhood. He frustratedly perceives the Black community as unknowing: “He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded” (102). Bigger experiences and maintains a separateness from the Black community, believing that their inaction impedes his and their efforts to resist and revitalize their environment. But Wright traces Bigger’s shame directly to the influence of Cartesian categories that define whites as modern and Blacks as primitive and uncultured. For Bigger to achieve authentic selfhood, he must turn away from a White Cartesian understanding of his body and environment and attach himself to a larger ecological reality in which Whites do not determine his relation to the more-than-human world.

“Strange” Plants: Native Soil

Learning who you are and placing yourself in relation to your environment – attachment – begins in the soil for Wright. Wright frequently employs the concept of soil ecology metaphorically to convey Bigger’s struggle for existence. Plant growth depends largely upon soil ecology, and plants compete for water and nutrients contained
within the soil to sustain themselves. According to ecological theories of succession, the organisms in any space condition the ground for other successive species, which in turn alter the local biota (Glenn-Lewin et al. 14). Sociologists like Emanuel Gaziano apply this concept to their study of urban zones (883). Whites have so altered the soil, co-opting the environment, such that resources in the soil are inevitably degraded, impeding Blacks’ ability to adapt and exist organically. Bigger recognizes his maladaptive relation to his environment when he witnesses Africans in Africa harmoniously intra-acting with nature: “He frowned in the darkened movie, hearing the roll of tom-toms and the screams of Black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria” (Native Son 36). A reciprocal relationship exists between these Black men and women and the soil that nurtures them. Bigger frowns not only because of the evident racist stereotypes portrayed on screen but also because he cannot identify with the experience of being well adjusted to the soil.

On the contrary, Wright describes Bigger himself as “a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night” (31). American soil and Western civilization do not allow Bigger continuity of development, a constant “bloom” characteristic of growth and necessary for fruition. However, with the quality of the soil so diminished by White oppression, intra-active becoming and adaptation become increasingly impossible. Indeed, Bigger’s lawyer, Mr. Boris Max, describes the Black population as disconnected from the soil altogether: “But these were trees without roots, trees that lived by the light of the sun and what chance rain that fell upon stony ground. Can disembodied spirits love?” (368). In court Max rebukes Cartesian thought – “disembodied spirits” – and
acknowledges that it imperils Black lives. Without even allowing Blacks to grow roots by which to access the nutrients contained in the soil, Whites prevent Blacks’ adaptation to their environment, resulting in a fundamental imbalance in the human ecology. Max appeals directly to Whites in court to hold them accountable for this human ecological imbalance:

   Rather, I plead with you to see a mode of life in our midst, a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an existence of men growing out of the soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people. I beg you to recognize human life draped in a form and guise alien to ours, but springing from a soil plowed and sown by all our hands. I ask you to recognize the laws and processes flowing from such a condition, understand them, seek to change them. (359)

Later in court, Max argues that Blacks are “like trees ripped from native soil” that “wither and die” (366). In his defense of Bigger, Max recognizes and elaborates upon the ways in which environment, politics, and biology intra-act as inseparable forces impacting the flows of energies and power across bodies and environments.

   Soil proves an appropriate metaphor to convey Wright’s environmental concerns for another reason. As Bender et al. assert, “Soils are among the most biologically diverse habitats on Earth” (1). The more biologically diverse the soil, the more successful the ecology and the plants that grow out of it. Soil biodiversity promotes sustainability (Bender et al. 1). Ecology counters Cartesian disembodiment, advocating a connection of minds and souls to the soil and to nature. The connection Descartes proposes between man and nature/environment is one of “master and possessor” over inert, unthinking matter (CSM I 142). However, the soil metaphor connects the urban, constructed space

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8 For discussion of Descartes’s view of matter and nature as inert and passive, see Machamer et al. 26.
of the city of Chicago with a more natural rural space, transgressing the nature/culture boundary. In short, *Native Son* promotes a deconstruction of Descartes’s conception of the environment as separate – passive and subordinate to humanity’s will – and a reimagining of diverse peoples’ place within it.

The condition of the American soil does not nourish Black growth, but mutates it. Stifled growth upsets the ecological balance, creating an environmental disturbance that impacts all of society, not just Black communities. As Max explains:

> The consciousness of Bigger Thomas, and millions of others more or less like him, White and Black, according to the weight of the pressure we have put upon them, form the quicksands upon which the foundations of our civilization rest. Who knows when some slight shock, disturbing the delicate balance between social order and thirsty aspiration, shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling? (402)

Wright conceives of this social collapse as an earthquake — a natural disaster — in which a force that is simultaneously beyond our control and self-induced destroys humanity’s constructed urban spaces. Max implicates both soil and water in this anthropogenic ecological disturbance. Neither suffice to support Blacks’ existence, depleted by Whites. Hence, as I’ll explore more fully in the next section, Whites not only contaminate the soil of Black communities but also impede the flow of life-affirming water to them, who consequently struggle against dehydration, their will to live denied and their ambitions thwarted.

**Bodies of Water: Flows of Power**

As with soil ecology, Wright employs water as an ecological metaphor to convey the environmental struggle Bigger endures in the Black Belt of Chicago. Bigger as well as Max construes the “natural” environmental threat of White oppression in the form of
bodies of water. In assessing human ecologies, transcorporeality studies the “brutal flow between bodies and places that makes life in risk society a most difficult matter to comprehend” (Alaimo, Bodily Natures 104). As Monika Rogowska-Stangret clarifies, “Searching for the immanent dynamics of flows and interdependencies reveals power relations expressed in blockages of flows, slowing down or accelerating the speed and intensity of flows across bodies-environments” (64). The flow of water in Native Son certainly does prove a useful tool to track the flow of energies and power and the blockages of flows and closures of openness as they affect Bigger’s embodied selfhood. Bigger uses just such dynamics of flow to characterize his troubled relationship with White people: “White people were not really people, they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a dark swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark” (Native Son 109). The “dark swirling river” directs the flows of energies and power across bodies and environments.

Bigger also experiences White people as a “White mountain looming behind him” – snow covered, storing a reserve of hydropower to create floods (276). Wright emphasizes that humans are not separate from nature and that racism intertwines with nature and politics. The threat of the White natural force floods Bigger’s consciousness, connecting his physiological response to Wright’s overarching ecological mode of thought. Again, in court, Max describes how floods and mountains pose environmental threats that harm Black lives rather than sustain them:

When situations like this arise, instead of men feeling that they are facing other men, they feel that they are facing mountains, floods, seas, forces of nature whose size and strength focus the minds and emotions to a degree of tension unusual in the quiet routine of urban life. Yet, this tension exists within the limits of urban life, undermining it and supporting it in the same gesture of being. (358)
The “floods and seas” – the flows of energies and power that would nurture Black lives – instead subjugate Black lives under White control.

Bigger is painfully aware that Whites control the flow of life-sustaining waters in his environment but also apprehends that water represents a larger possible ecological reality beyond White control, though only rarely and briefly, for Whites as a force of nature control the ebb and flow of Bigger’s existence. Playing pool in Doc’s South Side pool house with friends Gus, GH, and Jack, Bigger experiences “feeling something like hot water bubbling inside of him and trying to come out” (39). The restrictive, oppressive environment that Bigger lives in produces a blockage of the vital flow of energy that Bigger should be able to express. Eventually the water does boil over and pour forth from Bigger in his murderous acts.

Fittingly, when the police finally arrest Bigger for his crimes, the pursuit ends on top of a water tower. Water becomes a weapon in the hands of White law enforcement, allowing them to direct the flow of power across Bigger’s Black body:

Directly above him, White with snow, was a high water tank with a round flat top. And while wondering, he knew; a furious whisper of water, gleaming like silver in the bright lights, streaked above his head with vicious force, passing him high in the air and hitting the roof beyond with a thudding drone. They had turned on the water hose; the fire department had done that. They were trying to drive him into the open. The stream of water was coming from behind the chimney where the trapdoor had opened, but as yet the water had not touched him. Above him the rushing stream jerked this way and that; they were trying to reach him with it. Then the water hit him, in the side; it was like the blow of a pile driver. His breath left and he felt a dull pain in his side that spread, engulfing him. The water was trying to push him off the tank; he gripped the edges hard, feeling his strength ebbing. His chest heaved and he knew from the pain that throbbed in him that he would not be able to hold on much longer with water pounding at his body like this. He felt cold, freezing; his blood turned to ice, it seemed. He gasped, his mouth open. Then the gun loosened in his fingers; he tried to grip it again and found that he could not. The water left him; he lay gasping, spent. (251)
The water hits and pounds Bigger’s body. Wright uses language that conveys agency to the stream of water. Still, the hose directs the flow of the water and the White firemen wield the hose. White men have weaponized nature against humanity. As Bigger contemplates his capture from atop the water tower, he views the observers on the ground as another watery threat, waiting to engulf him: “Deep down below was a sea of White faces and he saw himself falling, spinning straight down into that ocean of boiling hate” (249). The water – the force of life – betrays Bigger as he submits and is taken into custody. His strength ebbs with the flow of the water. Oceans themselves are bodies. Here they represent the depths of the hate the White racist crowd feels. Later in the courtroom, Max too uses watery terms to describe the ecological othering of the Black inhabitants in Chicago’s Black Belt and their struggle for existence: “This vast stream of life, damned and muddied, is trying to sweep toward the fulfillment which all of us seek so fondly” (365). White landlords like Mr. Dalton have “muddied” and “damned” the waters, and the stagnated waters obstruct the flow of Black life, energy, and power. Similarly, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, nature in the form of flood waters temporarily destroys the White dam of disembodied power.

Water sustains us and our own bodies are primarily composed of water. From early on in Native Son, Bigger reflects on the flow of his life as largely directed by Whites in terms of an “invisible force”: “These were the rhythms of his life; indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force” (31). Yet, when contemplating his fate in his jail cell Bigger seeks comfort
in an ecological reality beyond one controlled by White hate, and that comfort is reflected in the life-giving power of water that sustains humanity:

He turned away from his life and the long tram of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon the dark face of ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made . . . (255)

This passage alludes to the creation myth in Genesis, implying Bigger’s connection with all of creation. Through this imagery, Bigger powerfully redirects the flow of his life away from White streams, rivers, and oceans and toward the ancient, redeeming waters of creation. We all begin life in a watery amniotic sac. Life originated in the ocean. The ancient force of water does not cede to White power as a prime mover. Nor does it endeavor to blot out humanity inimically. Later, in the same cell, Bigger believes there exists “a water of mercy for the thirst of his heart and brain” and grasps for it (311). The water of mercy flows as an expression of kindness toward Bigger from Max and Jan. Bigger feels gratitude toward Max and Jan because they both have told him to “believe in himself” (311). This water affirms life, quenching thirst. Certain Whites damn the flow of White hatred.

**Airflow: Breathing in Hate**

Wright employs air as yet another ecological metaphor to depict his experience with racism. As he recalls in his autobiography, *Black Boy*:

I now knew what being a Negro meant. I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger. (219)
The greatest wound racism inflicts upon Wright is choking the “breath of life” out of his body. Whites even control access to air – a natural resource. Wright describes Bigger’s intra-action with his racist environment in much the same way. Bigger experiences the same lack of air – the same ecological othering – in the most immediate physiological terms. Bigger and Gus discuss the struggle to breathe the oppressive air surrounding them:

“Every time I think of ’em, I feel ’em,” Bigger said.
“Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too,” Gus said.
“It’s like fire.”
“And sometimes you can’t hardly breathe . . . .” *(Native Son 24)*

Bigger and Gus’s struggle to breathe again conveys their difficulty in adapting to an environment co-opted by Whites. Biology, natural and social environments, economics, and politics intra-act to produce a physiological response. The racial hierarchy persists in the stratification of the air – an anthropogenic disturbance. Bigger describes the White blockage of air flow when Max, in order to prepare him for his arraignment the next day, asks him to explain the fear and hate he feels and clarify his reasons for murdering Mary: “Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth” *(353)*. Whites restrict the essential airflow Bigger needs to survive, depriving him even of this natural resource.

In the end, after Max reassuringly shows Bigger a little mercy speaking to the condemned man in his jail cell, Bigger again experiences an ecological reality beyond racist White control and breathes more freely: “He breathed softly, wondering about the

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9 I draw an allusion here to the choking of George Floyd by White police officers in 2020 in Minneapolis, MN.
cool breath of peace that hovered in his body. It was as though he were trying to listen to
the beat of his own heart” (359). As Bigger breathes, he realizes that “he had spoken to
Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life” (359). Max “recognizes his life” as no
one has before, and this breathes peace into Bigger’s lungs (360). Max’s words offer
Bigger’s “body a taste of a short respite” (360). Just as racism produces physiological
effects in Bigger’s body, so too does restorative mercy. The flow of oxygen, less
restricted, causes him to wonder about his place in and relation to the wider world. The
air is peaceful and not oppressive. Oxygenated blood pumps through his heart as he
listens, awed, to its insistent, life-affirming beat.

Animal Nature: Bigger’s Ratlike Resistance

Wright utilizes animals – specifically rats and apes – as yet another ecological
metaphor to communicate Bigger’s growing awareness of a wider ecosystem beyond the
urban jungle of South Side Chicago. Bigger’s intra-action with animals proves a fertile
area to interrogate Bigger’s navigation of the social/material landscape of substantial,
all-encompassing networks of power and knowledge, substances and forces,
environments, and institutions. Descartes states famously in Part V of the Discourse
that animals only have a body and not a soul (the cogito therefore distinguishes humans
sharply from animals). Wright’s ape imagery in Native Son could well have been
inspired by Descartes’s example of a fighting ape as an animal lacking reflective
consciousness:

They [animals] are acting by nature, and by mechanisms, like a clock, which tells
the time much more accurately than our judgment can manage. And no doubt
when swallows arrive in the spring, they are acting in this respect like clocks.
Everything that bees do is of the same nature; so is the order we can observe in
the flight of cranes, and in the fighting of apes, if, indeed, there is any order they
are following; and finally, the instinct to bury their dead is no stranger than that of dogs and cats who scrabble at the earth to bury their excrement, even though they almost never bury it completely; which shows that they do so by instinct and without reflections. We can only say that animals do not perform any action that convinces us they can think. (The Passions of the Soul 180)

Descartes denies animals the consciousness of the cogito. Of course, depictions of Black humans as apes are entrenched in the White racist imaginary, and such depictions horrifyingly adopt Cartesian distinctions specifically to diminish Black people. Prosecutor Buckley refers to Bigger as a “maddened ape” and “a rapacious beast” (Native Son 373-74). Yet elsewhere in court this distinction between Black and White, as well as ape and human, falters. To hold Bigger accountable for his crimes necessitates acknowledging that Bigger understood the consequences of his actions. To understand, Bigger must be capable of thought. According to the usual Cartesian standards, animals cannot be held responsible for their actions because they lack the ability to think and understand. In this way, Wright interrogates the Cartesian idea that reason, the capacity to think, is the key differentiator between humans and non-human animals. Christopher Peterson affirms this idea when he argues that Wright challenges the Cartesian division between unconscious animal reaction and conscious human response in Native Son (166). The jury must acknowledge that Bigger possesses the ability to reason, to comprehend right and wrong, if they are to hold him legally accountable for Mary’s death. The ability to reason and to think accords Bigger selfhood by Cartesian standards, and the jury must admit Bigger’s personhood to find him guilty. There must be a thinking thing that understands wrongness to be held responsible — even as that very “thing” transgresses the distinction between animal and human.
Ultimately, the logical contradiction in Bigger’s trial and conviction challenges Whites’ status as rational human beings as much as it does Blacks’ status as non-rational. If Bigger is merely a beast with no capacity for thought, he cannot possibly understand that murder is wrong and by law cannot be held responsible. Yet the court, a system of justice constructed by Whites, does not hold that Blacks’ supposed primitivism – as the Cartesian divide between primitivism and culture proposes – absolves them of responsibility. When the court facilitates Bigger’s conviction, the court recognize Bigger’s capacity to reason. The criminal justice system and society at large only recognizes Bigger’s rationality and humanity as limited – a destructive force – and deny that Bigger could possibly contribute in a positive way to the furtherance of his community or theirs. Further, the court fails to recognize that the toxic environment that Whites have constructed for Bigger has warped his humanity and constituted his violent consciousness.

Of the White characters in the novel, Bigger’s lawyer Max comes closest to recognizing Bigger’s ambiguous nature as both animal and human. Max reminds the court that humans are animals and must also adapt themselves to their environment: “We are dealing here not with how man acts toward man, but with how a man acts when he feels that he must defend himself against, or adapt himself to, the total natural world in which he lives” (364). A man, like any other animal, will naturally adapt and defend itself. Max asserts that Bigger’s acts were an effort to adapt to his environment and live “organically” in the city of Chicago (365). Bigger’s crimes are a natural expression of life, no different than an undesirable plant vying for sunlight: “And it is this new form of life that has grown up here in our midst that puzzles us, that expresses itself, like a weed
growing from under a stone, in terms we call crime” (361). Max characterizes Bigger's acts not as beastlike and non-human, but as more-than-human.

Adapting and surviving in the face of environmental threats are the conditions of life that humans share with the more-than-human world, whether plant or animal, and are not condemnable. In transcorporeal terms, the human and more-than-human world continually converge. Transcorporeality also interrogates the assumption that reason and interiority are supreme faculties belonging exclusively to humans, granting them superiority over animals; reason and interiority do not belong solely to humans. Cary Wolfe argues that the “other-than-human resides at the very core of the human itself, not as the untouched, antidote to reason but as part of reason itself” (17). The court reduces impossibly complex actor networks into prosecutable dimensions. Transcorporeality, in contrast, recognizes the agency of environmental forces that constitute selfhood, calling them into account and acknowledging Bigger’s entanglement. Other actors besides Bigger himself emerge.

In struggling against the containment practices that support the dominant ways of ordering landscapes and controlling “others,” Bigger and the rat are uncannily similar environmental fugitives, calling attention to the social and environmental practices that create the slums in which both are confined, grow monstrous, and are loathed. The presence of the rat in the kitchenette metaphorically positions Bigger as a caged animal himself, a social experiment, quarantined for observation. Both Bigger and Buddy also observe the rat’s abnormal size (over a foot long) and interpret this as a result of its perverse, parasitical habits: “Eating garbage and anything else they can get” (6). Buddy's incredulous question, “How in hell do they get so big?” (6) indicates he and Bigger
reside in an environmental hell, ideal for a parasitical creature. The rat subsists off the
garbage humans produce, drawing attention to environmental concerns regarding
sanitation and waste management that affect both humans and animals.

Bigger’s initial encounter with rats is hostile. Struggling to establish their own
sense of human dignity, Bigger and Buddy respond violently when the rat transgresses
their physical boundaries and destroys the fragile human order of their apartment.
Bigger kills the rat – an event Wright describes in great detail. Most immediately, then,
Wright suggests that even in urban environments humans are not separate from nature
and that often these intra-actions become hostile. This scene demonstrates the
confluence of economics, politics, nature, and biology. Bigger’s mother exclaims,
“Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep?” (9). But the situation also
immediately underscores, yet again, the ways in which natural and human-made
environments are intertwined. The parasite possesses a kind of agency that forces
human beings to recognize themselves as part of nature. They have only experienced
nature as a threat and an intrusion because of the containment forced upon them by
their landlord, Mr. Dalton. In being compelled to kill the rat, eliminating a threat to
their environment that carries disease and could bite them, they are being brought, via a
racist ecology, to experience nature in ways diametrically opposed to preservationist
ideals of harmonious and regenerative human embeddedness within nature.

Yet even in the famous opening encounter between Bigger and the rat, Bigger
also experiences identification with the creature. He hears and recognizes the rat’s “long
thin song of defiance,” its “black beady eyes glittering,” and its “forefeet pawing in the
air restlessly” as he hunts it (4). Like Bigger, the rat defiantly resists, struggling violently
against scarcity and entrapment. Singing, the rat becomes humanlike. The parallels between the rat, trapped in the Thomas’s kitchenette, and Bigger, trapped in the Black Belt, become clear. The rat’s “glittering eyes” convey the dignity in its persistent will to live. The message the rat’s presence ultimately conveys is tolerance and understanding. Humankind must treat others – even more than human others – with empathy. Humans are not much different than their animal companions, and all life deserves respect.

The rat features ubiquitously in Native Son literary criticism. Alan France interprets the rat scene as “a struggle for phallic dominance with overtones of castration anxiety” and an act of “sexual terrorism” perpetrated by Bigger against his sister Vera (415). Helmbrecht Breinig notes that Wright’s rat contributes to the negative imagery of nature prevalent in Native Son (289). France and Breinig are unique among critics in acknowledging the rat as a biological entity, a parasitical creature, an environmental factor, and a part of nature. In the literary criticism on Wright's Native Son, this is a significant omission. A focus on the rat as a natural and biological agent that transgresses upon human culture, rather than solely metaphorical – functioning to represent Bigger’s impending fate – opens up a previously unexplored critical option. The rat and other animals referenced or alluded to in the novel thus critique racial and anthropocentric categories used to support narrow conceptions of what constitutes the human.

The rat evokes empathy, and in Bigger’s rat-likeness, he becomes an empathetic character as well. After Mary’s murder, the Dalton’s White cat embodies a menacing presence when it perches itself upon Bigger’s shoulder, “pointing him out as the
murderer” (190). Cats, of course, are natural predators that hunt rats. Another black rat appears again after Bigger’s capture: “He paused at a corner and saw a big black rat leaping over the snow. It shot past him into a doorway where it slid out of sight through a hole. He looked wistfully at that gaping black hole through which the rat had darted to safety” (288). The black rat escapes to safety at the exact moment when Bigger faces incarceration. In the end, the black rat’s ability to move beyond No Man’s Land represents a wider ecological hope that Bigger can glimpse even as it evades him. The rat represents safety and freedom.

Inside that gaping black hole exists a space where Bigger can finally nurture a more reciprocal relationship with his environment – an environment not constructed by Whites to devitalize him, in which Bigger is free to experience an intra-active becoming. Ironically, only the loathed rat can, in actuality, transgress borders and free itself. Bigger is incarcerated. Whites afford Bigger neither a safe environment nor an escape. In this moment, Bigger empathizes with the rat’s struggle for freedom and safety, glimpsing its interiority as a fellow environmental fugitive. This demonstrates Bigger’s growing sense of attachment and Bigger’s nascent ability to place himself in relation to his environment, though at the cost of his own imprisonment. The final irony is that Bigger becomes like the rat insofar as the escape of both lies in confinement, inside that “gaping black hole”: for Bigger, the incarceration where liberation of body and mind becomes possible.

**Bigger’s Larger Ecological Reality: Identification**

In his jail cell, in the days preceding his trial, Bigger desires intra-action with nature as an antidote to White oppression, to experience the flow of natural energy
across his body and acquire its capacities: “The feelings of his body reasoned that if there could be no merging with the men and women about him, there should be a merging with some other part of the natural world in which he lived” (255). Bigger does not desire Cartesian separation from nature but wishes to ground himself. Bigger imagines immersing himself in nature, gaining a “new identification with some part of the world in which he lived, and this identification forming the basis for a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity” (256). Identification with nature is not animal and inhuman, but dignified. Barred from living organically in the Black Belt, Bigger dreams of relating himself to the natural world in a much more reciprocal way. In this dream, Bigger’s selfhood emerges consubstantial with nature. This dream evidences Bigger’s environmentalism, activism, and resistance.

Jan’s forgiveness, his efforts to connect, and his recognition of his own and Bigger’s mutual entanglement further buoy Bigger’s new-found hope. Soon after their discussion Bigger imagines for himself a new identity as “part of the natural world in which he lives.” Jan visits Bigger in prison and explains that he understands Bigger’s acts:

Ever since I got out of jail, I’ve been thinking this thing over and I felt that I’m the one who ought to be in jail for murder instead of you. But that can’t be, Bigger. I can’t take upon myself the blame for what one hundred million people have done . . . . I don’t suppose you’re so much worse off than the rest of us who get tangled up in this world . . . . I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the Black men who’ve been killed, the Black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. (288)

Jan does not fully recognize Bigger’s embeddedness – that Bigger is really worse off, the mortal danger of his entanglement being greater – but he does acknowledge Bigger’s trauma and White culpability. Jan expresses his genuine desire to block the flow of
hatred and its disastrous effects. Bigger comes, in this moment, to understand that he does not exist as a totally discrete entity but that his identity is interconnected with the human as well as the more-than-human world. His burgeoning sense of self grows as he contemplates his existence in relation to his environment and others.

Inspired by Jan’s recognition of his embeddedness, Bigger begins to relate his own being to others’ being and nature; he envisions a future in which White oppression is no longer a mountain, an insurmountable natural force:

For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of. If that White looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan—then he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel. (360)

Bigger finally understands how he and others are all interrelated. He envisions a larger ecological reality that includes other men and women as well: “He was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, White men and Black men and all men, and the sun’s rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun” (362). Bigger’s thoughts have turned from Cartesian duality and ecological divisions to interconnectedness, sunshine, and growth. The success of Bigger’s “high hopes” and his attempts to place himself in the world in relation to others, animals, and places and adapt to his environment depends on all of us reaching the same revelation of interconnectedness that Bigger does and is a comment on the ecological/racial consciousness of America.
Chapter 4

BODY OF RESISTANCE: UNRESTRAINED GROWTH IN CARSON MCCULLERS’S THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

Carson McCullers utilizes the grotesque in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), connecting it with alterity and disability, to emphasize metaphorically her characters’ spiritual and physical isolation. Their physical incapacities reflect spiritual incapacities and become symbolic of regional insularity and difference as well. Jay Watson cites a “twentieth century tradition of figuring Southernness as disability, in pointed contrast to the disembodied conventions of democratic citizenship that hold sway in the modern nation” (17). However, McCullers’s incarnation of the grotesque reflects more than loneliness and separateness; it reflects transformation. I argue that the grotesque in McCullers’s writings also reflects the emergent possibilities of transcorporeality because of its focus on the unbounded body that resists limitations. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter the oddness of embodiment works to deconstruct and resist Cartesian boundaries1 while simultaneously focusing on the materiality of selfhood difference in a transcorporeal manner that powerfully promotes environmental and racial justice and

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1 For discussion of the Cartesian focus on bodily containment and closure, see Burkitt (22) and Johnson (49).
gender equality. McCullers affirms the growth, indefiniteness, and futurity of porous embodiment that endows the individual with promising capacities.

McCullers’s fiction both serves to critique and extend the transcorporeal possibilities of other authors’ works explored in this dissertation. Unlike Binx in The Moviegoer, who, confronted with rapidly changing gender norms, endeavors to define himself as a man and strive against Cartesian disembodiment in conventionally masculine ways (career and marriage), McCullers’s characters embrace embodiment and thereby resist societal gender norms. While Binx can forget his embodiment, existing in the world as an unmarked White male, the embodiment of McCullers’s characters’ exceeds normative bounds. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie’s becoming with the world very much aligns with the resistant embodiment of McCullers’s characters. However, while Janie is fully embodied, perhaps even excessively so, her body is not grotesque, anomalous, or incongruous as are the bodies in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Like McCullers’s characters, environment threatens to restrict Bigger’s growth and becoming in Native Son. Society first contains Bigger in a kitchenette in the Black Belt and then later in a jail cell, as Mick is contained in a boarding house. These restrictive spaces represent the racist attitudes confronting Bigger and the sexist attitudes confronting Mick. Where Binx’s problem is grounding himself in space, Bigger and Mick must seek a space big enough to support their growth. Insofar as Mick makes greater progress than Bigger, the reason may lie in the wider cast of misfit or grotesque characters in McCullers’s novel, who form a collective resistance to social norms.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter exhibits McCullers’s preoccupation with the body in its ubiquitous descriptions of disability, adolescence, androgyny, and gender
diversity. Such preoccupation stemmed, in part, from McCullers’s personal experience. McCullers suffered a series of strokes in 1947 that left her paralyzed down one side of her body. A final massive stroke ended her life in 1967. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is peopled with grotesque bodies. While it proves difficult to precisely define “grotesqueness,” traits most commonly associated with the grotesque include incongruity, hybridity, excess, exaggeration, and transgression. Often depictions of grotesque bodies transgress the Cartesian nature/culture divide through “monstrous” human/animal hybrids, which also disorder the social body. The grotesque exceeds harmonious proportionality as well as the distinctions that society employs to rank and classify bodies according to normative notions. In interpreting the grotesque in McCullers as resistant to social conformity, even liberating, I challenge a long tradition in Southern literary criticism, primarily beginning with Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, by suggesting that in Southern literature, the grotesque extends beyond representations of societal ills and alienation to signify growth and becoming. Like many critics, Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as alienating and isolating: “The grotesque is the estranged world” (185). Grotesque bodies are read metaphorically as a physical manifestation of modernity’s alienation. Scholars like Alan Spiegel analyzed McCullers’s grotesque bodies in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in much the same way:

> The grotesque represents the physical and mental distortions shaped by the new pressures of industrialism and the modern city (e.g., in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Jake Blount’s alienation from other human beings corresponds to his alienation from his work). (3)

This reading, however, dismisses the radically transgressive resistance of McCullers’s grotesque bodies to their restrictive environments, sexism, ableism, homophobia,
racism, and economic inequality and their powerful openness to positive intra-active transformation and transition.

**Overview: The Transcorporeal Body**

While McCullers’s use of the grotesque suggests alienation and societal ills, it simultaneously evinces growth, dynamism, and porosity like the transcorporeal body. Indeed, the recent theory of transcorporeality, as well as older work on the carnivalesque, especially by Bakhtin, provides a solid foundation for my reading of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Graham Ward proposes that “the transcorporeal body expands in its fracturing, it pluralizes as it opens itself towards an eternal growth” (252). In this way, differences empower rather than limit as they constitute the self. McCullers’s own definition of the grotesque is dynamic in its intention to convey “the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail” (“Russian Realists” 258). The soul is not separate from the material but dynamically, integrally intermeshed. Similarly, the material neither determines nor binds selfhood but is also never separable from the self. McCullers offers characters who face environmental and biological factors that threaten to limit the extension and growth of their selfhood but proposes a more transcorporeal notion of biology and environment not as solely limiting, but transformative and transforming, evolving, capacious, and continually, powerfully in flux.

Bakhtin defines grotesque embodiment as excessive so that the body exceeds discrete Cartesian borders. Bakhtin’s grotesque body is a body in flux, constantly emerging and becoming, opposing stasis and testing the limits of being and embodiment. In Bakhtin, embodiment becomes a socially conscious means of resistance; the grotesque body is “unfinished, [it] outgrows itself, transgresses its own
limits” (25-26). Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as always “in the act of becoming”: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (24). The grotesque body defies containment to explore the possibilities of embodiment.

McCullers’s incarnation of the grotesque presents such possibilities and can be further illuminated by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body. Bakhtin describes the classical body as a “finished body in the finished outside world” (321). The classical body – smooth, controlled, and “finished” – does not readily intra-act with other bodies or present the same possibilities for becoming. Merleau-Ponty proposes an intercorporeal, environmentally situated and contingently becoming body. The lived-in body, according to Merleau-Ponty, exists “connatural with the world” (Phenomenology of Perception 217). Merleau-Ponty conceives of embodiment as a mutual “becoming” or exchange between the body and the “flesh” of the more-than-human, material world, rejecting dualisms and instead insisting that the body emerges from its connections to other bodies and the more-than-human material world (The Visible and the Invisible 84). Bodies are always chiasmically entwined with the world, and flesh embraces porosity and difference (The Visible and Invisible 142,187). As Merleau-Ponty writes:

Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching, and surely there does not exist some huge animal whose organs our bodies would be, as, for each of our bodies, our hands, our eyes are the organs. Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly . . . . For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own. (The Visible and Invisible 142)
This exchange means that the world and the individual are always emerging and becoming consubstantially. Embodiment poses powerful possibilities rather than limitations.

The grotesque body, definitively unclosed and continually woven with other bodies into the evolving more-than-human world, offers even greater possibilities for discovering transcorporeality. The grotesque body, fluid and porous, with its protrusions and cavities, transgresses societal and bodily boundaries. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, transcorporeality insists that embodiment is always contingent and emergent, consubstantial with the material world. Graham Ward proposes that “the transcorporeal body expands in its fracturing, it pluralizes as it opens itself towards an eternal growth” (252). In this way, differences empower rather than limit as they constitute the self.

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* explores the grotesque extensively to depict its fully embodied cast of misfits’ struggles against restrictive, oppressive social attitudes and an environment rife with poverty, violence, and squalor that threaten to stifle their growth. McCullers depicts nearly every major character as grotesque in one way or another. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* begins with a focus on the relationship between two close friends, John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos, deaf-mutes who have lived together for several years. Singer’s affection for Antonapoulos surpasses friendship and is homosexual in nature. When McCullers introduces Singer and Antonapoulos, the two “walk silently every morning to the fruit and candy store,” and Singer consistently brings Antonapoulos fruit and eats many different kinds of fruit himself (3). A focus on the two men sharing consumption of fruit, a common slang word for a gay man, implies
their same-sex desire. Their muteness, in turn, serves as a metaphor for the necessary secrecy surrounding their relationship and homosexual desire. Antonapoulos becomes sick, and though he recovers, he begins to display signs of mental illness. Despite Singer’s care, Antonapoulos finally enters an insane asylum. Alone, Singer moves into a boarding house owned by the Kelly family. Singer is grotesque in his deafness, homosexuality, and corpulence. Antonapoulos is grotesque in his deafness and mental and physical illness. The remainder of the narrative centers on the struggles of four of John Singer's acquaintances against racism, sexism, and poverty: Mick Kelly, a tomboyish girl who loves music and dreams of becoming a musician – grotesque in her androgyny and tallness; Jake Blount, an alcoholic labor agitator; Biff Brannon, a gender-bending diner owner – like Mick, grotesque in his androgyny as well; and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, an idealistic Marxist Black physician. The four gravitate toward Singer as the center of the social body. Each depends on Singer emotionally not only for personal guidance but also for help in understanding and remedying the social ills of the world.

However, Singer is not nearly as intuitive and understanding as any of his four friends believe, partly because of the communication barrier his deafness presents and partly because of Singer’s dependence on his friend Antonapoulos. One day, when Singer visits Antonapoulos at the asylum, the orderly informs him that his friend had been suffering from nephritis and died. Singer, unable to continue without his close friend, commits suicide by shooting himself in the heart. Singer’s friends continue along their paths, endeavoring with difficulty to make sense of Singer’s tragic end. For each of them, Singer’s death throws into sharp relief the injustice and inequity of the world.
Mick quits school to work at Woolworth’s to help her parents financially. Jake leaves town. Biff continues to run his diner. Portia moves her father, Dr. Copleland, to his father-in-law’s farm, where Copeland can be cared for because he has contracted tuberculosis.

**Mick’s Resistant, Transcorporeal Gigantism**

In accord with a strictly binary Cartesianism, Mick’s identity fractures along natural and biological fault lines. Shortly after meeting Singer and just before turning fourteen years old, on the threshold of becoming a teenager, Mick realizes she has an “inside room” and an “outside room” (163). Societal expectations of gendered behavior conflict with Mick’s interiority, causing a split between her consciousness and her body akin to the Cartesian mind/body split. Yet for Mick, the interior finds expression in unusual and unconcealable physical growth. The connections Mick herself makes between her embodiment and her interior life powerfully resist deterministic notions of biology, recognizing biology as a force which continually fluxes and evolves contingently with identity. In her outline of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers describes Mick as “a crude child on the threshold of a period of quick awakening and development. Her energy and the possibilities before her are without limits” (*The Mortgaged Heart* 127). Mick expands the limits of embodiment during her unrestrained growth and, in so doing, tests societal limits and gender norms as well.

Mick’s literal physical growth, which reflects her growing sense of self, continues unbridled. At only thirteen years old she stands five-feet-six-inches tall. She remembers that her height used to worry her, but immediately afterward she proudly tells Harry, the Jewish next-door neighbor with whom Mick has her first sexual encounter, that in
the last year she has grown three and one fourth inches (111). Harry, who is shorter than Mick, warns that he once “saw a woman at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall” but assures her that she “probably won’t grow that big,” implying that her growth causes him anxiety (111). Mick nevertheless delights in her gigantism and growth: “It was like she was so strong she couldn’t sit on a chair in a room the same as other people. It was like she could knock down all the walls of the house and then march through the streets big as a giant” (250). As Sarah Gleeson-White observes of Mick Kelly, “Gigantism has an emphasis not merely on magnitude but, importantly, on growing. The giant is unbridled, expansive, and so resists conformity to enclosed models of being” (117). Biology powerfully breaks normative bounds, empowering Mick to grow to exceed normative social expectations promulgated by determinative notions of biology, though also, interestingly, linked closely with biological growth. In this instance, Mick also expands the environment surrounding her, rather than allowing it to constrain her growth, demonstrating the intra-action between environment and biology and their unboundedness. This passage emphasizes the unnaturalness of socially constructed walls and their restrictive, illusory, binding function.

Contrarily, Baby, the daughter of Biff Brannon’s sister-in-law, Lucille Wilson, symbolizes discreet, contained femininity. As Sarah Gleeson-White notes, “What comes out so powerfully in McCullers’s descriptions of society’s ideal Southern femininity is the dual emphasis on cleanliness and smallness, suggesting that the female body is both inherently dirty and in need of containment” (113). McCullers meticulously curates Baby’s ideal femininity so as to appear hideously unnatural. Baby wears “a little White dress with white shoes and white socks and even small white gloves” or a “little pink
tutu” so that with “her yellow hair she was all pink and white and gold and so small and clean that it almost hurt to watch her” (126, 164-165). This primped femininity makes the underlying embodiment seem even more disturbing when, after being shot, she lies on the dirty sidewalk, her pink panties showing, no longer clean or contained (167).

Mick exemplifies a different mode of embodiment – enmeshed, but not bound. Mick’s climb to the edge of the roof of an unfinished house illustrates Mick’s continued expansive becoming (34). Like the house, Mick’s body is unfinished and in process of becoming. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as “unfinished, [it] outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (25-26). Likewise, transcorporeality contends that subjectivity is always “unfinished because it exists in the present, . . . in the real-time unfolding materiality of our body” (Blackman et al. 16). Once on the edge of the building, Mick extends herself to become physically still larger, stretching out her arms like wings. After climbing down, she later recalls her fear of flight, fear of expanding her wings, understanding the danger of unrestrained growth – of flying too far and too high – as she gazes on a picture she drew the previous winter:

There was a picture of a storm on the ocean and a sea gull being dashed through the air by the wind. It was called “Sea Gull with Back Broken in Storm.” The teacher had described the ocean during the first two or three lessons, and that was what nearly everybody started with. Most of the kids were like her, though, and they had never really seen the ocean with their own eyes. (42)

On the roof, however, Mick “screws up her nerve and begins to climb” to new heights (34). She comes to recognize nature as a force that she cannot control but whose capacities she can acquire. Nature powerfully constitutes Mick’s emergent subjectivity alongside social environment. The human-animal (bird) hybrid suggested when Mick imagines herself as a bird on the rooftop represents not a monstrous abomination, but a
transcorporeal process of growth and transformation, the process of becoming. As Mick recognizes her entanglement with the natural world, she becomes equally ontologically entangled, viewing the bird in the same exceptionalist terms as humans view themselves. But this alternative exceptionalism facilitates the breakdown of species boundaries and identities, thus dissolving the Cartesian dichotomy that separates nature and culture.

As Mick resists bodily borders and the boundary between human and more-than-human nature, she also resists the discrete biological border between the sexes with her androgynous mode of being. Refusing to wear dresses, preferring to wear khaki shorts and tennis shoes, and enrolling in mechanical shop “like a boy,” Mick is androgynous in appearance and behavior (104). McCullers introduces Mick as a tomboy who is “like a very young boy” at first glance (18). Later Biff observes that Mick “is at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl. And on that subject why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes” (132). To Biff, a gender-bending diner owner, Mick appears to be both a boy and a girl, in a transitional, liminal state of becoming. Her “overgrown” stature indicates her body exceeds normative limits of female embodiment. When Mick’s older sister, Hazel Kelly, yells that someone should “clamp down” on Mick’s masculine tendencies and make her wear female clothing, Mick responds, “That’s why I wear shorts. I’d rather be a boy any day” (42). Mick tells Harry she will join him in fighting fascists (another male activity). She brags she “could dress up like a boy and nobody could ever tell. Cut my hair off and all” (245). The “cold air” makes Mick physically as “strong as Samson” (249). Feeling that she is both a boy and a girl, Mick expresses a desire and ability to become a boy.
Mick continues to hybridize, expand, and transform the spaces in her environment, rendering them porous. When she listens to radio broadcasts through the walls and windows of wealthier houses in her neighborhood, the walls become porous. Sound wields a capacity for transgressing its physical container. She then converts the walls of an unfinished, vacant home into a writing space where she lists the names of well-known figures—Mozart and Edison—attached to her dreams (becoming a musician/inventor) from the “inside room” (her mind and heart). Yet, in writing on the walls of the unfinished house, she lays claim to its hybridity, neither wholly private nor public. She also writes “PUSSY” on the wall where boys have “wee-weed,” marking their territory with “pretty bad words” (37-8). Her biology—the word “pussy”—seems to define and limit Mick. However, when she writes her initials underneath the word, I argue, she powerfully reclaims the space from males who have marked the territory and reclaims the word from those who use it derogatorily. Thus, she asserts that her biology will not limit her, but that female biology is powerful.2 She writes the “dirty” word next to the names of renowned male figures, including one of her favorite musicians, indicating that the word deserves a place next to the names of these great men. She dreams of becoming a musician and an inventor, and her female biology here connects to her becoming. Domestic walls do not enclose the space and separate humanity from

2 Frost explicates the relationship between Cartesianism and biological/sexual determinism arguing that “Descartes’s portrayal of the body as essentially unthinking underpins the modern understanding of the human self as a rational, free, and self-determining agent” and that “historically, this Cartesian understanding of the passivity of matter was figured in racialized, gendered, and class terms that in turn were used to justify racial, gender, and class inequalities.” Frost continues to explain that because of Cartesian attitudes towards embodiment, “women were construed as trapped in and by the body” and “lacking the wherewithal to distance themselves from the body’s operations and to steer a rationally-defined course for their behavior and actions” and “subject to the determinations of the biological or animal functions of the body and as vulnerable to a kind of behavioral determinism, a vulnerability which derived from the inability of a weak intellect” (72).
nature. Through these various gestures, human corporeality and textuality extend into the more-than-human world. Word, flesh, and wood are no longer discrete, but expansive.

Nature consubstantiates Mick’s becoming. Like the bird’s medium of air, water helps Mick express her limitless energy. Biologically, bodies are primarily composed of water, and the flow, direction, and containment of that water carries important social, political, and cultural implications. Mick understands the social body is a watery body like her own. She also comprehends that the social body, driven to become smooth and ordered like the classical body to promote social coherence, threatens her own growth and becoming by attempting to constrain and destroy her transgressive body. In her oceanscape paintings, Mick conceives of societal restrictions as an environmental factor:

All the rest of her pictures were full of people. She had done some more ocean storms at first—one with an airplane crashing down and people jumping out to save themselves, and another with a trans-Atlantic liner going down and all the people trying to push and crowd into one little lifeboat. (44)

Mick understands the dangers of swimming into deep water and of transgressing the societal limits imposed upon her sex. Along similar lines, walking back to the Kelly boarding house after her expedition to the unfinished house, Mick begins talking to herself about her fear of oppression through a dream of swimming:

This is a funny thing—the dreams I’ve been having lately. It’s like I’m swimming. But instead of water I’m pushing out my arms and swimming through great big crowds of people. The crowd is a hundred times bigger than in Kress’s store on Saturday afternoon. The biggest crowd in the world. And sometimes I’m yelling and swimming through people, knocking them all down wherever I go—and other times I’m on the ground and people are trampling all over me and my insides are oozing out on the sidewalk. I guess it’s more like a nightmare than a plain dream –. (39)
The crowd’s trampling her may be seen as quashing her resistance to sexism. Waves of oppression, in the form of constrictive societal attitudes toward female bodies and behavior, submerge Mick, impeding her own flow. The nightmare corresponds to several details of Mick’s immediate experience. She lives in a crowded boarding house that does not afford her enough space to grow and become. Inside the house the oppressive weight of gender norms and Southern femininity drown her. The nightmare also has more symbolic and psychosomatic implications, evident in Mick’s fear of swimming. A fear of porosity, fearing one’s insides will become exposed, connects with a traditional concept of the social body, which must remain closed and invulnerable. The more vulnerable and porous bodies of the ill, disabled, and female threaten impenetrability of the traditional social body because of its openness. Viewed in conventional terms, the female’s penetrability, particularly the vaginal cavity, renders her more vulnerable and more porous, interpreted as a type of disability.

Yet in her imaginings—whether in art or dreams—Mick connects the social body to the ecosystem, enveloping water. Bodies of water continue to flow, and while the flow can prove destructive, water has the capacity and force to change direction. Mick herself, Mick’s environment, and the social body not only possess this same capacity but are already constantly changing by virtue of each intra-action. As Mick matures, she comes to intra-act fearlessly with water, continuing to become with the world and nature. One step in the direction of this awakening occurs at the “prom party” that Mick decides to have for her vocational school friends, all over twelve years old (103). The young

3 “For the real extension of body is such that it excludes any penetrability of parts” (Descartes, CSM II 297-8).
neighborhood kids under twelve years old arrive uninvited, however, and everyone begins to play like children instead of almost teenagers. Childhood and adolescence blend and merge, challenging sharp distinctions. After her prom party, Mick lies down beside a water pipe in a drainage ditch, enthralled, and closes her eyes (115-6). Climbing out of the ditch, Mick understands that “[n]othing was changed about the party except her” (116). Yet if the external details of the party remained traditional, contact with the drainage ditch serves as a key catalyst in Mick’s interior awakening. The water being redirected by pipes serves as a counterpoint to Mick’s efforts to grow beyond and exceed the constraints of societal limits perpetuated by deterministic notions of biology. Unlike the water in the pipes, Mick refuses to be contained or limited. Rather, she resists the attempts to redirect her own flow of energy and power. Immediately after this realization, Mick walks and reflects upon her growth protected and aided by “thick cedars”: “This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her—the real plain her” (118). This realization indicates Mick’s becoming an authentic self—not in the vacuum of Cartesian interiority, but through intra-action with the more-than-human world.

A further step toward embodied subjectivity occurs the following summer, when much later in the novel Mick suggests that she and Harry go swimming in the creek, though she still cannot swim without water wings and stays out of deep water (271). On their way, the two pass a well. Mick, thirsty, suggests a drink and Harry warns against drinking because of the risk of contracting typhoid. Mick replies, “I already had typhoid. I had pneumonia and a broken leg and an infected foot” (269). Mick does not fear the
dangers of embodiment or biology but focuses instead on sustaining her embodied self with water.

Prior to swimming in the creek with Harry, Mick does fear the water. The seagull in the portrait Mick drew for the government art class, injured in flight, presumably drowns in the sea beneath. Now, however, reaching the creek, she enters the water unafraid:

She wasn’t scared. She felt the same as if she had got caught at the top of a very high tree and there was nothing to do but just climb down the best way she could—a dead-calm feeling. She edged off the bank and was in the ice-cold water. She held to a root until it broke in her hands and then she began to swim. Once she choked and went under, but she kept going and didn’t lose any face. She swam and reached the other side of the bank where she could touch bottom. Then she felt good. She smacked the water with her fists and called out crazy words to make echoes. (272)

Immersed in the water, Mick does not fear the flow of becoming, but rejoices. Shortly afterward, she climbs a tree to great heights with facility, consistently becoming with nature, then jumps into the water from its tall limbs. Surfacing, she mentally utters an affirmation to herself: “She could swim, too. Now she could swim O.K.” (272). She has gained a new capacity to swim through the agency of the water and her body. Most importantly, Mick is responsive attuned to other watery bodies—both human and more-than-human. She understands water’s power to renew, sustain, and flow.

In the end, despite being forced to work and forego education to assist her family financially, Mick continues her process of becoming and actualizing in the material world, the dreams that had been contained in the Cartesian inside room:

Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too.
It was some good.
All right!
O.K.!
Some good. (354)

Mick affirms that her dreams, like herself, can grow through becoming to exceed containment.

**Biff’s Transcorporeal, Gender-Bending Biology: Two Bodies in One**

Like Mick, Biff Brannon exceeds deterministic notions of biology with his androgyny: in his desire to mother children, wear a woman’s wedding ring, and later wear his dead wife’s Agua Florida perfume and wash his hair with her lemon hair rinse (15, 226). Biff advocates a more contingent, transcorporeal conception of biology that does not depend upon procreation as biology’s only true purpose:

> By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men’s voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches. And he even proved it himself—the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids. (132)

In reality, as Myra Hird observes, the majority of our cells are intersex (diploid), containing two complete sets of chromosomes, one from the mother and one from the father. Only egg and sperm cells are haploid (sexed), containing one set of chromosomes (48). Within the framework of determinism, androgyny is abnormal because it denies or negates the supposed function of human sexuality: procreation. But this is not what the study of chromosomes tells us, and Biff too insists his androgyny is not biologically unnatural.

Even as Biff is consistently becoming something other than a rational, sovereign male, he gravitates toward other “freaks” and hybrids like himself. Their bodily
anomalies, absences, and excesses mean their bodies are not closed as the classical body is, but open to intra-actions with other bodies and the more-than-human world:

What he had said to Alice was true—he did like freaks. He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples. Whenever somebody with a harelip or T.B. came into the place he would set him up to beer. Or if the customer were a hunchback or a bad cripple, then it would be whiskey on the house. There was one fellow who had had his peter and his left leg blown off in a boiler explosion, and whenever he came to town there was a free pint waiting for him. And if Singer were a drinking kind of man he could get liquor at half price any time he wanted it. (22)

Biff pushes back publicly against the biological superiority of the impenetrable, closed, congruent bodies of non-freaks – White and male without illness or disability.

Like the open, transcorporeal body, Biff refuses to close his café to the night; “His place was the only store on all the street with an open door and lights inside, but he would never close up for the night—not as long as he stayed in the business” (336). His business remains open to the flow of customers. Biff’s using his business to push boundaries is evident also toward the end of his account, when he busies himself with arranging the flowers in the front window of his café:

The red pottery tub filled with the brilliant zinnias. Nothing more. He began to arrange the window carefully. Among the flowers there was a freak plant, a zinnia with six bronze petals and two red. He examined this curio and laid it aside to save. Then the window was finished and he stood in the street to regard his handiwork. The awkward stems of the flowers had been bent to just the right degree of restful looseness. (355)

The “freak flower” has two excess red petals that do not conform with the other bronze petals and its stem is not straight but oddly bent. The flower’s anomalous excess conveys nature’s power to exceed boundaries. Anomalies are not unnatural, but a physical manifestation of nature’s contingent emergence and unfolding.
Jake’s Transcorporeal, Carnivalesque Racial Unification

For a novel so invested in the grotesque, it is fitting that a carnival should figure significantly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Jake Blount works as a mechanic at the carnival – the Sunny Dixie Show. Carnivals, of course, feature anomalous, excessive bodies, individuals or “freaks” with genetic mutations or diseases displayed as unnatural horrors. Harry mentions a woman at the fair who is eight-and-a-half-feet tall. In Bakhtin’s account, grotesque bodies feature prominently in carnivals. He explains that we experience a carnivalesque subversion of societal norms. The carnival “degrades” norms, upsetting order, “to bring forth something better,” and for these reasons Bakhtin views the carnival and the carnivalesque as a positive space and experience (21).

Temporarily, “all [are] considered equal” (9) as he explains:

> Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that is does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (7)

Bakhtin describes the carnival as connective; bodies exist indiscrete from one another:

> The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). (255)

Bakhtin observes the intra-action and exchanges that take place between networked bodies, as transcorporeality proposes. The carnivalesque grotesque, then, is a strategy of resistance that expresses social equality, and so it is fitting that Jake, a labor agitator, is an employee of the Sunny Dixie Show.

McCullers’s Sunny Dixie Show shares many aspects with the Bakhtinian carnival, although in functioning as a social and political critique of Southern society, McCullers’s
carnival is especially in touch with the divided and unequal sides of that society. The fair is literally liminal, existing on the fringes of the town, defining its limits and circumscribing the town’s growth and extension. Itself located between culture and nature, the carnival marks the town as separate from nature – a cultural and industrial space. The fair encloses the town into the realm of the diseased carnivalesque, tainted by the effects of industrialism, for the Sunny Dixie Show always borders the worst residential neighborhoods, the “wasteland,” industrial areas:

During the fall the show moved from one vacant lot to another, staying always within the fringes of the city limit, until at last it had encircled the town. The locations were changed but the settings were alike—a strip of wasteland bordered by rows of rotted shacks, and somewhere near a mill, a cotton gin, or a bottling plant. The crowd was the same, for the most part factory workers and Negroes. (153)

Per Southern custom, the White factory workers do not connect with the African Americans. A disturbance results in the death of two Black fairgoers, Jimmy Macy and Lancy Davis. Local newspapers report the incident as a “labor agitation” (347). The Sunny Dixie Show carnival thus emphasizes the interconnection between culture, environment, race, and economics. In its application of Bakhtin’s carnival, McCullers exposes the infection afflicting the Southern carnival, for the Sunny Dixie Show divides the social body along racial lines and violently enforces societal norms. The extent to which McCullers’s carnival differs from Bakhtin’s provides a measure to assess how far Southern society must evolve and embrace growth beyond its normative, dualistic limits.

Still, Jake’s intra-actions with the crowd – the social body – and his resistance indicate there still exists a possibility of “bringing forth something better” (Bakhtin 21).
The carnival motivates Jake’s resistance and revitalizes him physically. At the carnival, Jake also experiences a sense of embodied connection to the social body that inspires him to continue: “After such mornings he returned to the show with relief. It eased him to push through the crowds of people. The noise, the rank stinks, the shouldering contact of human flesh soothed his jangled nerves” (154). Another encounter with the carnival makes Jake literally salivate: “Excitement made his mouth fill with water so that his words had a wet, gurgling sound” (286). The water that fills his mouth conveys how he is also, like Mick, responsively attuned to other watery bodies — both human and more-than-human.

The novel’s embeddedness in Southern regional flows of political, social, cultural, and economic power suggests further connections with national power. Jake also understands water’s power to renew, sustain, and flow. As a labor organizer, Jake aims for his words and thoughts to flow from his mouth, changing the flow of culture, politics, and economics in the South. Debating with Dr. Copeland, Jake rails against the conditions he finds his factory-worker patrons living in: “And thirty-five dollars a year means just about ten cents for a full day’s work. Everywhere there’s pellagra and hookworm and anemia. And just plain, pure starvation” (297). Jake’s diatribe evinces his awareness of the transcorporeal interconnection between capitalism, industrialism, and disease. He observes that the poorest populations in town are environmentally othered, living in closest proximity to environmental hazards. As Oliver Evans notes, the house McCullers was born in (in Columbus, Georgia) was very near cotton mills, and she had “become aware of the poverty of the workers” from an early age (9). Gary Fink documents that the Atlanta Sanitary Department condemned the Cabbagetown
neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia, where the Fulton Cotton Mill operated, as a major health hazard. Citing inadequate sewage and crowded conditions, the Sanitary Department reported that pellagra, tuberculosis and infantile paralysis plagued the village (180).

Jake Blount attempts to resist societal norms by promoting equality while visiting Biff’s café. Like Mick and Biff, Jake refutes the preconception that biology is as determined and rationally pure and sovereign as societal hierarchies insist when he attempts to bring Dr. Copeland and Biff’s café customers into affinity with racial others and therefore out of isolation:

“Don’t you know you can’t bring no nigger in a place where White men drink?” someone asked him.
Biff watched this happening from a distance. Blount was very angry, and now it could easily be seen how drunk he was.
“I’m part nigger myself,” he called out as a challenge.
Biff watched him alertly and the place was quiet. With his thick nostrils and the rolling Whites of his eyes it looked a little as though he might be telling the truth.
“I’m part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those.”
There was laughter.
“And I’m Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American.” He walked in zigzags around the table where the mute drank his coffee. His voice was loud and cracked. “I’m one who knows. I’m a stranger in a strange land.”
“Quiet down,” Biff said to him. (23)

Jake associates racial hybridity with knowing and wisdom. Biological diversity unfolds new capacities, whereas narrowing a gene pool, as European royals did, causes diseases such as hemophilia. Biology, an expansive force which cannot be contained or controlled, constantly continues to alter the becoming of the human race along with the more-than-human world. Truth stares out of Jake Blount’s eyes, indicating that hybridity is the natural, biological fact and White racial purity a mythic, unnatural,
insidious fallacy. Transcorporeality contends that real wisdom lies in understanding that human systems of order are not superior to the evolutionary processes of biology. Humanity foolishly believes it can master and control natural forces – biology and genetics – which have evolved on their own and shaped the destiny of humankind independently for millennia. Of racism in modern human societies, Greg Bear notes, “The human race had grown so cerebral, and had assumed so much control of its biology, that this unexpected and ancient form of reproduction, of creating variety in the species could be stopped in its tracks” (335). In spite of such efforts to arrest evolutionary variety, hybridity naturally composes the social body. The social body is not a classical body, closed, smooth, and impenetrable, but racially and biologically diverse.

Copeland’s Transcorporeal Materialism

Dr. Benedict Copeland, a Black physician, fights to elevate the status of his race, although, like the Southern carnival, he does not find the most direct path to a transcorporeal and hybrid understanding of the social body. Copeland exhibits a hyper-rational Cartesian view of racial purity, inverting the mythic ideal of White superiority. His notions of biology restrict his race’s possible becoming. Portia, Copeland’s daughter, recognizes her father’s fallacy and articulates the error of his ways to him:

“Take Willie and me. Us aren’t all the way colored. Our Mama was real light and both of us haves a good deal of White folks’ blood in us. And Highboy—he Indian. He got a good part of Indian in him. None of us is pure colored and the word you all the time using haves a way of hurting peoples’ feelings.”

“I am not interested in subterfuges,” said Doctor Copeland. “I am interested only in real truths.” (78)
Dr. Copeland confuses racial purity for truth. He tirelessly promotes the virtue of racial purity via the supposedly rational science of selective breeding (eugenics) among the Black community and views this work as his “real true purpose” (80). Dr. Copeland privileges human rationality—science, even the false science of racial purity or eugenics—as supreme over biology’s power to exceed conceivable bounds (80). Yet much as he preaches against it, biology wins out, as his practical work delivering babies demonstrates:

But all his life he had told and explained and exhorted. You cannot do this, he would say. There are all reasons why this sixth or fifth or ninth child cannot be, he would tell them. It is not more children we need but more chances for the ones already on the earth. Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race was what he would exhort them to. He would tell them in simple words, always the same way, and with the years it came to be a sort of angry poem which he had always known by heart. He studied and knew the development of any new theory. And from his own pocket he would distribute the devices to his patients himself. He was by far the first doctor in the town to even think of such. And he would give and explain and give and tell them. And then deliver maybe two score times a week. (74)

Dr. Copeland believes the antidote to oppression is a eugenic control so strict that it tries to contain biology. Dr. Copeland fails to realize that such control is oppressive and that fallaciously attempting to direct the flow of biology hinders becoming with the world. Biology co-constitutes his and his people’s destiny, along with social, economic, and political forces, so birth control may have a role to play, but Dr. Copeland’s obsession with obstructing biology seeks to claim sole sovereignty for eugenic rationality. Dr. Copeland’s aversion to hybridity and opening the body to other bodies isolates him to a great degree from others and even his own children.

Later, however, Copeland begins to come to appreciate the beauty and wonder of biology’s infinitely unfolding capacity to diversify life in his conversations with John
Singer: “With him he spoke of chemistry and the enigma of the universe. Of the infinitesimal sperm and the cleavage of the ripened egg. Of the complex million-fold division of the cells. Of the mystery of living matter and the simplicity of death” (140).

Dr. Copeland recognizes that cells continuously divide and renew themselves a million times over – the contingency of embodiment. In contrast, when soon afterward he laments that no one understands his “true purpose,” he becomes metaphorically disabled; he hardened himself so that each muscle in his body was rigid and strained. He sat in a corner like a man who is blind and dumb (148). While he makes his body “rigid” and impenetrable to the material world, akin to the Cartesian body immune to outside forces, being misunderstood and dismissed strikes Dr. Copeland “blind and dumb,” deficient by Cartesian standards. What actually disables him is his inability to denounce the myth of racial purity and desist trying to claim it for his people. For this reason, no one heeds his purpose, and he remains an isolated cogito poring over Marx, Spinoza, and Shakespeare, abstracting himself from the material world and preventing himself from becoming with it (90).

Still, Marx’s theories, unlike Descartes’s, promote a radical materialism that Dr. Copeland absorbs and espouses. He understands the centrality of nature and the material agency of environmental hazard to racial struggles:

Land, clay, timber—those things are called natural resources. Man does not make these natural resources—man only develops them, only uses them for work. Therefore should any one person or group of persons own these things? How can a man own ground and space and sunlight and rain for crops? How can a man say “this is mine” about those things and refuse to let others share them? Therefore Marx says that these natural resources should belong to everyone, not divided into little pieces but used by all the people according to their ability to work. It is like this. Say a man died and left his mule to his four sons. The sons would not wish to cut up the mule into four parts and each take his share. They would own
and work the mule together. That is the way Marx says all of the natural resources should be owned—not by one group of rich people but by all the workers of the world as a whole . . . . – but we own nothing that does not contribute directly toward keeping us alive. All that we own is our bodies. And we sell our bodies every day we live. We sell them when we go out in the morning to our jobs and when we labor all the day. We are forced to sell at any price, at any time, for any purpose. We are forced to sell our bodies so that we can eat and live. (190)

During this monologue, elaborating upon Marx’s theories, Dr. Copeland connects natural resources and the body to becoming with the world – existing with a purpose and developing a sense of self substantiated by nature. As Karen Barad observes, some Marxist and scientific theories are not so fully open to consubstantiation: “Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification, nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories. Matter is not immutable or passive” (151). But Dr. Copeland does seem to recognize via Marx the agency of nature: “Man does not make these natural resources” (190). And while he struggles to translate his radical theories into action, he comprehends the force of matter and its capacity to sustain and impact Black lives. Dr. Copeland understands the unsustainability of bodies being appropriated as a natural resource by the rich. Toward the end of his account, Dr. Copeland vows to Jake Blount to bring Black people into communion with one another as one body to release the flow of power from White control and appropriation: “In August of this year I plan to lead more than one thousand Negroes in this county on a march. A march to Washington. All of us together in one solid body” (303). Dr. Copeland understands both the centrality of the body to racial struggles and the body’s dependence upon other bodies for becoming. He relies upon
the social body to become strong in its combined capacities and energies and exceed its containment, its bonds.

**Singer’s Extraordinary Capacity: Disability and the Social Body of “Freaks”**

The social body of misfits gathers around the deaf-mute John Singer, becoming its center. A rigidly binary Cartesian definition of embodiment ejects anomalies to maintain discrete borders and closure. In one sense, the others all rely upon Singer to alleviate the burden of modern isolation. In another sense, he becomes the central figure of a resistant, hybrid collective. Yet Singer himself only wishes to communicate with his close friend and fellow deaf-mute, Spiros Antonapoulos. He does not seek to become the center or even a part of the social body, preferring to isolate himself with Antonapoulos, for whom his affection is greater than friendship. Even so, the other characters believe that Singer alone understands their feelings of isolation. Singer reads lips very proficiently and writes notes to respond to the visitors who seek his counsel. To McCullers’s other “freaks,” Singer’s disability renders his body “more real” because of his immersion in the material. Because Singer’s embodiment exceeds the limits of the social norm – defying society’s efforts to measure disabled bodies according to normative standards – those who confide in Singer perceive his reality and selfhood as more authentic. Singer is consistently becoming precisely because of his anomalous existence. Disability forms the necessary center around which the social body of “freaks” coheres, and consequently the further hopes of the other misfit characters center on Singer’s disability. Each relies on the disabled body as an animating force to open themselves to becoming. Curiously, according to McCullers’s outline, Singer’s “essential self does not change” (*The Mortgaged Heart* 127). But though McCullers characterizes
Singer in this way, his character is more fluid and dynamic than her plans foresaw. Yet Singer’s disability endows him with capacities outside the range of normative ability, so even if that disability remains a relative constant, Singer’s body difference transgresses normative boundaries – ways of knowing, being, and the limits of embodiment – and facilitates the extension of his embodied selfhood.

At first, Singer’s inability to speak audibly isolates him from the social body and seemingly inhibits the extension of his self. Singer feels as though his incapacity to speak orally makes him animalistic and separates him from the rest of humanity, who speak and do not vocalize as beasts do:

But he could never become used to speaking with his lips. It was not natural to him, and his tongue felt like a whale in his mouth. From the blank expression on people’s faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech. It was painful for him to try to talk with his mouth, but his hands were always ready to shape the words he wished to say. When he was twenty-two he had come South to this town from Chicago and he met Antonopoulos immediately. Since that time he had never spoken with his mouth again, because with his friend there was no need for this. (11)

Singer’s experience at school reflects attitudes toward deafness perpetuated by audism: “Like racism and sexism, audism insists that inherent biological factors determine individual traits and capacity” (Lane 364). After graduating from school, Singer rejects the belief that he lacks capacity because he cannot speak and decides to develop other capacities. To Singer, speaking does not determine his selfhood or accurately measure his intellectual, social, and personal development and growth. Singer rejects the notion that audism is preferable and that his deafness is a deficiency. In fact, dialogically Singer retains more information from conversations because he necessarily must pay closer attention to interpret communication than a hearing person. To interpret, Singer must
develop the capacity to read both lips and body language, so he becomes adept at interpreting non-verbal cues to a degree that the hearing population may not possess. He listens with his eyes and communicates with his body. The inability to speak is at once a debilitating restraint that makes impossible common ways of connection and a liberating endowment that unfolds other possibilities of communication. Despite the cultural and material demands that overdetermine his body, Singer does not submit to the belief that biology determines and constrains his capacity for growth.4

Singer’s hands access his interiority – an interiority that otherwise remains inaccessible and unextended. Singer’s ability to bodily materialize his interior self, rendering it visible and palpable, attests to his non-normative capacities. In making language, ordinarily invisible in spoken communication, visible and material in sign language, Singer’s deafness renders the transcorporeal integration of body and mind more readily immediate. Singer’s body generates the thoughts and feelings that comprise his interiority, and his interiority critically depends upon the sustainability of his corporeal body. Singer’s expressive hands become the site of interdependence between the physical and the mental. Upon first encountering Singer, Blount remarks to himself that “all his [Singer’s] body seemed to listen” (23). Singer’s disability presents expressive and interpersonal potentials that exceed those possible through normative pathways of communication.

4 See Ch.1 n12.
Society defines Singer by his disability, and while this seemingly limits Singer’s identity, his identity consistently expands even within the social body, becoming and growing through his interactions with his neighbors and their impressions of him:

So the rumors about the mute were rich and varied. The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he had received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O. A lone Turk who roamed into the town years ago and languished with his family behind the little store where they sold linens claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish. He said that when he spoke his language the mute understood. And as he claimed this his voice grew warm and he forgot to squabble with his children and he was full of plans and activity. One old man from the country said that the mute had come from somewhere near his home and that the mute’s father had the finest tobacco crop in all the county. All these things were said about him. (200)

To Dr. Copeland, Singer becomes Jewish, and Copeland feels an affirming sense of racial affinity with Singer: “[Singer] listened, and in his face there was something gentle and Jewish, the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed” (135). It seems that his disabled body’s existence outside society’s limiting norms endow Singer with the ability to embody all things to all people. The social body perceives an interpersonal connection beyond the limits of conventional social discourse with Singer.

The classical body, smooth and controlled, does not readily engage in intra-action with other bodies since it is a finished body and does not open itself to the proposition of an intimate affinity between individual and social body. The grotesque body, on the other hand, unfinished, exhibits transcorporeal openness in its dependence upon and intra-actions with the social body. Mick recognizes that only Singer transgresses the Cartesian divide between her outside and inside selves: “She went into the inside room. With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister
Singer was in both rooms” (163). Singer gifts Mick a radio. To Mick, Singer has listened to her dreams of becoming a musician and tangibly, materially, manifested her inner self. The other grotesques who seek Singer’s company likewise do not view Singer’s disability as a limitation. Rather, they admire Singer for his perceived wisdom. They believe that Singer’s muteness signifies an incredible capacity to comprehend and understand, and instead of attempting to “fix” Singer’s deafness, instead of pitying Singer, they believe his communication skills resulting from his deafness to be an extraordinary ability that they lack.

Like his disability, Singer’s homoerotic body incarnates his becoming as exhibited in his relations with Antonapoulos. Reflecting on the months when Antonapoulos has been in hospital, Singer affirms their connection in intimate terms alluding to sex and married partnership: “He thinks back over the past half-year of their separation, he acknowledges that behind each waking moment there had always been his friend. And this submerged communion with Antonapoulos had grown and changed as if they were together in the flesh” (322). In creating transcorporeal relations between the self and other, Singer’s homoerotic body exceeds its limits, defying the Cartesian perception of the disabled body as the self’s confining container. In an early description, Singer’s “huge buttocks sags down over his plump feet when he kneels” (7). The buttocks evokes homosexual desire, even as its hugeness evokes excessiveness, one of the marks of the grotesque. Singer’s fleshly self, the overflowing porosity of his body, connotes openness; it becomes the medium through which his self is joined with Antonapoulos, bringing the two into communion. Their relationship transgresses the divide between self and other.
and demonstrates the indivisibility between body and soul/mind. Singer extends his embodied self by virtue of his homosexual desire.

   Even when Singer wishes to restrain his body, as society endeavors to restrain, control, and order the disabled body, his body resists through the agency of his hands. Significantly, his unconscious conversations carried on by sign language turn inevitably to his communion with Antonapoulos:

   They would not rest. They twitched in his sleep, and sometimes he awoke to find them shaping the words in his dreams before his face . . . . And then sometimes when he was alone and his thoughts were with his friend his hands would begin to shape the words before he knew about it. Then when he realized he was like a man caught talking aloud to himself. It was almost as though he had done some moral wrong. The shame and the sorrow mixed together and he doubled his hands and put them behind him. But they would not let him rest. (206)

Singer's hands commune and extend his essential self even when he feels social pressure to remain silent. Though he feels the shame of his anomalous embodiment, his body will not be muted. Singer does not want to draw attention to himself and his difference; despite all his resistance to social norms, he has internalized social pressure. Yet Singer's hands resist the social pressure to remain hidden. Even when Singer desires to become inviolable, as an able-bodied individual is socially perceived, his transcorporeal body immerses him once again in the world, insisting that no separation exists between the interior and exterior. But in the end, without his beloved Antonapoulos, the environmental constraints that work to restrict Singer's growth and becoming do overcome his will. Without Antonapoulos, the homophobic and ableist environment of the South overwhelms Singer's bodily resistance, and he ends his life with a gunshot wound to the chest. Environments have the power to capacitate and incapacitate, and
despite Singer’s unique capacities, the small room in the Kelly’s boarding house is too small to nourish Singer’s emergent becoming and growth.

McCullers’s bodies powerfully resist containment and present possibilities for growth and transformation, enmeshed in the world. McCullers’s bodies grow beyond their limits, opposing the unnatural social restrictions imposed upon them. In their intra-actions with the social body and their environment, they exhibit a belief and hope in the possibility of growth and becoming not only for themselves but for their communities and the South. McCullers and each of the other authors I’ve discussed in this dissertation envision a future South that is a body responsively attuned to other bodies — both human and more-than-human — within national and regional flows of political, social, cultural, and economic power. This South is a permeable, ethical, fully embodied South, no longer peopled by ghosts, that reaches beyond itself, turning away from insularity, engaged in intra-active growth and becoming.

**McCullers and Others: A Transcorporeal Future**

Attending to the material and ecological reality of the South allows us to track the flow of power across bodies. In the novels I have discussed, White power and control are presented as supernaturally disembodied forces. Material prosperity and unmarked bodies allow White men freedom and relief from the burden of embodiment. As Jay Watson notes, “Material culture thus confers upon its users the privilege of relative disembodiment, allowing them to live more expansively, to devote their awareness and energies to new projects, new inventions, new acts of making that will continue to remake them in turn” (164). Whites’ detachment affords them the ability to control the unmaking of hyper-embodied, marked minorities and regulate the nature of their
attachment and relationality to their environment. Whites wield their incorporeal power to imbue minorities with the palpable reality of their own more vulnerable corporeality.

A disembodied system of values like that which upholds White privilege treats differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability as warped distortions – grotesqueries – outwardly signifying inner perversity and deficiency. An incorporeal ethics recoils from the permeability asserting that the body’s inability to maintain discrete physical boundaries connotes laxness and immorality. But the porous ebb and flow of bodies expresses the truth of the human condition – porosity and intra-action and not boundedness or consciousness define existence. The self is fundamentally intersubjective and therefore constantly transgresses its borders. An ontologically sound critical practice must, then, embrace embodiment, even as an ethics worthy of the name must celebrate differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

Not that these ontological and ethical moves are achieved easily. As my reading of The Moviegoer shows, Binx Bolling’s detachment reflects a self desperately clinging to his affluence and privilege. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston suggests that the exigencies of the flood do nothing to destabilize the hierarchies of White power and privilege. Despite the energy and chaos of the flood, when the waters eventually recede, White power appears to remain an elemental and unstoppable force that shows no promise of subsiding. Black men are violently forced at gunpoint by White men to bury the dead – to handle the bodies – a reminder of their own vulnerable corporeality and

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5 “And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it” (Descartes, CSM II 54).
hyper-embodiment. And in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas’s “White mountain” – a “great natural White force” – illustrates the seemingly deific disembodiment of White authority (289, 129). When Dr. Copeland seeks to resist White power in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, he does so by immersing himself in Marx’s abstract materialism and by studying the body as a physician, still under the spell of Cartesian mind/body separations.

Whether indirectly—as in the negative examples above—or directly—by the examples of women, people of color, differently abled individuals, or social misfits of many kinds—all of these novels testify that to dispel the mythos of White disembodiment we must return to the flesh: an ethics of the flesh that is not a system of disembodied values, but one that asserts that bodies are inseparably linked with other bodies; our affectability not bound by our skin but reaching beyond. The material world is “never merely an external place but the substance of our selves and others,” as close as our skin (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 158). A transcorporeal ethics, simply put, insists upon humanity’s accountability. Humanity bears responsibility for the relationalities of becoming of which we are a part. Environments and bodies are intra-actively co-constituted. In this way, attending to the material interrelations of bodies and place combats the imagined, abstracted placeness of the South. Attention to the intra-actions between material bodies and material objects concretizes questions of environmental and racial justice and power that all too often become mired in abstraction.
CODA: THE UNACKNOWLEDGED OTHER AND THE REAL “MALAISE”

Ultimately, this dissertation calls for a body-oriented, materially grounded approach to the too-often-idealized and overintellectualized field of Southern literary studies. In its initial conception, however, it began quite oppositely, with an interest in the intersection between modern philosophy and literature, particularly representations of consciousness, especially the tortured, guilt-laden consciousness voiced in Southern Literature. Fred Hobson makes a case for a Southern tradition of thought, asserting that “[t]he radical need of the Southerner to explain and interpret the South is an old and prevalent condition, characteristic of Southern writers since the 1840s and 1850s when the region first became acutely self-conscious” (3).

Hobson’s observations align with the dominant mode of thought in the field; the South became increasingly aware of itself as a threatened and self-contained culture after its defeat in the Civil War. With this dawning consciousness, Hobson explains, came the knowledge of their sin: “the Southerner, apologist or critic, began to perceive a certain value in his defeat, his poverty, even (if he acknowledged it) his guilt and his shame” (11). Hobson maintains that Southerners are essentially rural and attached to place – insistent on the “concrete” rather than the “abstract” (14). This assertion derives from a long tradition of Southern cultural and literary criticism beginning with W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of South* (written between 1929 and 1937) and the 1930 manifesto, *I’ll
*Take My Stand*, compiled by the Southern Agrarians, in which the South is presented as consumed by guilt and shame.

Southern writers such as Alan Tate, leader of the Southern Agrarians, and Walker Percy created an enemy in Descartes. They deemed that the Cartesian split, rending mind from body and man from nature, had alienated the Southern writer. Too much science, progress, and industrialization, spurred on by Descartes’s Enlightenment thought and mechanistic view of nature and the body, had abstracted the Southerner out of concrete time and place.

The central issue, as explored at length in Chapter 1, is summed up in Walker Percy’s essay, “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind,” in which Percy critiques Descartes’s mind/body schism as responsible for creating an “incoherent understanding of man” (271). He argues that science cannot explain what is uniquely human, cannot account for emotion, art, or faith, as it attempts to describe consciousness in terms of mental ego and physical neurons. “We are still hung up on the ancient dualisms of Descartes,” Percy complains (296). We still cannot bridge the gap between mind and matter. Percy’s answer is language. Language is uniquely human and represents more than an organism reacting to a stimulus in their environment. Language is the only place where mind and matter intersect because “it is impossible to imagine language without both” (279). Naming an item requires conscious awareness of an object first perceived by sight, registered by the brain, and finally spoken.

The problem that Percy encounters – the embarrassment that cannot be avoided – is the immateriality of the thing that names. Percy contends that the namer differs from the solitary cogito postulated by Descartes in that every assertion requires a
speaker and a listener. In my initial line of inquiry, I set out to find an alternative to the mind/body paradigm – a solution for the solipsism afflicting the Southern author and Percy’s “fateful rift.” Tate and the Southern Agrarians undertook to save the Southern mind from solipsism, but I realized that was not my mission. It soon occurred to me that Percy and the Southern Agrarians conceive of the split from their own perspective, as an affliction of Southern White males, and that to avoid the pitfalls of this limited point of view, I needed to broaden the parameters of my study to include more salient measures of identity and belonging, considering class, race, the diversity of sexuality, and gender.

I shifted my line of inquiry to interrogate the ways that marginalized others who do not enjoy the same bodily autonomy and freedom as White, cis, heterosexual men experience the mind/body split. Percy fails to locate the genesis of the Southern “malaise” deep within the Southern social fabric, but rather in an erudite, pseudo-Christian Southern stoical ideal that alienates others outside this sphere of knowing. Percy conceives of the splitting of the soul as existing primarily in White, Western academia, limiting its sphere of influence, and does not implicate the South’s social, economic, and political systems and forces in its alienation.

Despite the South’s supposed aversion to abstraction, Southern culture is rife with dualistic, abstract ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. This paradoxical phenomenon presented to me a much more fundamentally divisive and destructive Cartesian problem. Certain kinds of Cartesian dualism have given license to and accompanied oppressive, discriminatory, and exploitative mindsets. Cartesianism has been used in the service of colonialism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism. Slavery exemplifies the domination of this ontology in the South. If Blacks are not just bodies to
be exploited, not animals without consciousness, but cogitos, then Whites must
acknowledge their sin and acknowledge Blacks as persons. The scar of knowledge left by
the wound of racism—that severs mind from body, self from other, White from Black, in
the Southern American landscape—corresponds to the Cartesian sundering of a
solipsistic mind from a world of others it cannot know. Whites’ detachment affords
them the ability to control the unmaking of hyper-embodied, marked minorities and
regulate the nature of their attachment and relationality to their environment. Whites
wield their incorporeal power to imbue minorities with the palpable reality of their own
more vulnerable corporeality. A disembodied system of values, like that which upholds
White privilege, treats differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability as
warped distortions—grotesqueries—outwardly signifying inner perversity and
deficiency.

I found that characters in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Native Son, and The
Heart Is a Lonely Hunter experienced a fractured consciousness akin to the Cartesian
split as a result of their race, sexuality, disability, and/or gender— their marked bodies.
While Percy’s Binx experiences spiritual boredom (malaise/ennui), the concerns that
Cartesianism raises for the marginalized individuals in Their Eyes, Native Son, and The
Heart Is a Lonely Hunter result in a much more fundamental identity crisis and
disenfranchisement. I discovered that transcorporeality presented an alternative to the
Cartesian split, providing a definition of subjectivity and consciousness that more
accurately encompassed the reality of the marginalized individuals in these novels.

Transcorporeality challenges dualities and dichotomies by assuming inter- and
intra-connections, intra-actions, entanglements and transits between human and other-
than-human bodies. One major application of transcorporeal thought, exemplified in my chapters on *Their Eyes* and *Native Son*, is to the intra-actions of social and natural environments. Environmental othering, restricting minorities to unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, ensures that environmental health issues affect minority communities disproportionately. These entanglements prove more dangerous for minorities who are less well connected materially because of the tangible effects of racism. Even as the novels covered in my study bring these entanglements to light, they also show how the body becomes a site of knowledge and resistance to Southern ontological systems of oppression and Cartesian standards of subjectivity.

Attending to the material and ecological reality of the South, in the way that transcorporeality proposes, allows us to track the flow of power across bodies and move beyond Cartesian dualism. In the novels I have discussed other than Percy’s *Moviegoer*, White power and control are presented as supernaturally disembodied forces. Material prosperity and unmarked bodies allow White men freedom and relief from the “burden” of embodiment. As Jay Watson notes, “Material culture thus confers upon its users the privilege of relative disembodiment, allowing them to live more expansively, to devote their awareness and energies to new projects, new inventions, new acts of making that will continue to remake them in turn” (164). Individuals with ample material resources free themselves to devote their attention and power to mastering and ordering their environment.

In the end, then, my dissertation that began as an inquiry into epistemology and ontology has come, also, to consider ethics. An incorporeal ethics like that exercised by the Daltons with their discriminatory rental practices recoils from the permeability of
the body, denying the power of materiality to make and unmake character. But the porous ebb and flow of bodies expresses the truth of the human condition – porosity and intra-action, and not boundedness or consciousness, define existence. The self is fundamentally intersubjective and therefore constantly transgresses its borders. An ontologically sound critical practice must then embrace embodiment, even as an ethics worthy of the name must celebrate differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

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In this way, attending to the material interrelations of bodies and place combats the imagined, abstracted placeness of the South. Attention to the intra-actions between material bodies and material objects concretizes questions of environmental and racial justice and power that all too often become mired in abstraction. Learning through the body, Binx proceeds into the healthcare profession with an understanding of the body that extends beyond the Cartesian medical model that divides neurons/ego and mental/physical; Janie pulls in her horizon; Bigger’s particles of rock detach from the “White mountain,” becoming embodied people; and Mick grows to exceed the gender-based restrictions society imposes upon her. In doing so, each offers a new embodied alternative to subjectivity that acknowledges its materiality and contingency.
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