PhD Thesis

‘You Are the Old Entrapped Dreams of the Coyote’s Brains Oozing Liquid Through the Broken Eye Socket’: Ecomonstrous Poetics and Weird Bioregionalism in the Fiction of R. A. Lafferty (With a Comparative Reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*)

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Abstract

The fiction of R. A. Lafferty (1914-2002) is at once deeply ecological and deeply strange. Its incessant narrative inclusion of the nonhuman beings, places, and forces of Lafferty's Oklahoman and otherwise (south)western bioregion evinces an imagination profoundly porous to the local specificities and abundance of one's more-than-human context. In this way it is deeply ecological. Lafferty's fiction is also known (among his small devoted readership, which includes such luminaries as Neil Gaiman and Harlan Ellison) as one of the most uniquely off-kilter, wildly imaginative, and arcanely erudite bodies of work in U.S. literature. In this way it is deeply strange. While it is often acknowledged that Lafferty transcends the genre of science fiction (the industry in which most of his early work was published) and that his work is *sui generis*, little has been done to place him as either a U.S. author generally or an author of regional place more specifically. This thesis attempts to initiate the placement of Lafferty as a bioregional writer of the Great Plains and Southwest, whilst placing equal emphasis on Lafferty's literary mode as not so much science-fictional as *weird*, or *monstrous* (in what we will call a horror-comic or monstro-ludic key). The fusion of these concerns leads this thesis to declare Lafferty a purveyor of American Weird Bioregionalism. Toward this end, we herein assemble insights from regional western U.S. narrative traditions (the frontier tall tale and Native American storytelling) together with recent ecocritical and ecophilosophical discourses (New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology) to reconfigure contemporary Monsters Studies toward a more-than-human construal of monsters and the monstrous that reads Lafferty's weird bioregional fiction through the lens of what this thesis terms an Ecomonstrous Poetics. A chapter devoted to an ecomonstrous reading of Cormac McCarthy's southwestern novel *Blood Meridian* provides a canonical comparison to Lafferty with surprising overlap. A final chapter on Lafferty's implicit ecotheology rounds out the thesis and opens it up to further research.

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Preface

As I submit this thesis, most of us are housebound under the strictures of the COVID-19 pandemic. What could be less important right now than fiction from half a century ago by some guy from Oklahoma? If his fiction does what I argue it does in the forthcoming pages, the timing may be just right to familiarise ourselves with this rather obscure author. Timothy Morton says we're getting used to hearing nonhumans like weather and oil spills 'speak' to us. I call it 'monstration' in this thesis. Is the COVID-19 virus monstrating a message to us? Do we have ears to hear it? Reading R. A. Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction may be one path toward acquiring those ears (and eyes and nose and other senses). His work may be one more part of the mutilated map that is slowly being recovered and pieced together from many quarters of the planet, a stitched and fragmentary onto-sensual map of our more-than-human past and the fragile possibility of a more-than-human future. We may soon enough find we have little choice but to pore over such cartographic scraps as we navigate our uncertain course through this monsterscape we call the Anthropocene.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Signed: Daniel Otto Jack Petersen

Introduction

Let us begin by immersion:

> It was a flat-bottomed rowboat from some old camping trip. He was lying on his back in the bottom of the boat, and it was roped to a stump or tree and was rocking just a little in the current. And here was another mountain full of water, but an inland one of much less bulk, and the ice-cold springs ran out of its sides and down its piney shoulders to the shingle of the creek bank. Fish jumped in the dark, and blacksnakes slid down the hill to drink. Bullfrogs echoed, and hoot owls made themselves known; and far away dogs and men were out possuming, with the baying carrying over the miles. Then the boy remembered what he must do, and in his dream he unroped the boat and shoved into the stream and ran his trot line. From every hook he took a fish as long as his arm till the boat was full and nearly swamped.
>
> And from the last hook of all, he took a turtle as big as a wagon wheel. He would not have been able to get it into the boat had not the turtle helped by throwing a booted leg over the side and heaving himself in. For by this time it was not so much like a turtle but more like someone the boy knew. Then he talked for a while with the turtle that was not exactly a turtle anymore. The turtle had a sack of Bull Durham and the boy had papers, so they rolled and smoked and watched the night clouds slide overhead. One of them was named Thinesta and one was named Shonge, which chased the first and would soon have him treed or caught, if they did not run into the mountain or the moon first.
>
> "Boy, this is the life!" said the turtle. "Boy, this is the life!" said the boy. (Lafferty 1997: 269)

Contemporary speculative fiction author Jeff VanderMeer notes that R. A. Lafferty's fiction brims with 'lovely stories within the main story, little whirlpools of magnificent narrative energy' (VanderMeer 2019: 395). We have just been pulled into one such narrative eddy—one among hundreds swirling within Lafferty's short stories and novels. The scene above is one of several encapsulated dream sequences in 'Configuration of the North Shore' (1969), a tale about a man seeking epiphany from his memories and dreams. Both the quiddities and oddities of this dream scenario furnish a felicitous introduction to Lafferty's fiction and the themes of this thesis.

As to its quiddities, the passage is a lyrical evocation of ecological interconnection. It evinces a close association of 'nature' and 'culture' in its imbrication of human and inhuman activities and objects. The sensory qualities enfold the human into the more-than-human. Indeed, the biomic details are evoked aurally almost more than visually: it is implied that the sliding blacksnakes and jumping fish are heard rather than seen 'in the

dark', along with the more overt croaking of frogs and hooting of owls and baying of hounds and men. Touch is touched upon as presumably the boy lying in 'the bottom of the boat' *feels* it rock in the current. No doubt evocative of Lafferty's own adolescence in Oklahoma (cf. Sirignano 2017: 250), the sensual dream scene encapsulates how 'landscape and personal narrative intertwine into a singular trope' (Neel 1996: 109).[1]

As to its oddities, this dream passage almost casually introduces aspects of what this thesis calls an 'ecomonstrous' poetics. The naturalistically interlocking and languid pastoral scene is disrupted, however affably, by the sudden presence of an ecological marvel: the booted, talking, smoking turtle. Being a dream, the marvel is taken in stride by the boy. There is no horror overtly invoked here. The reader chuckles, yet this amused response is simultaneous with a slight ontic jolt and then ontological realignment. One's expectations of the storyworld, even an overtly oneiric one, are tweaked and then calibrated. The passage ostensibly aids the reader by explaining that the turtle is not merely a turtle but 'more like someone the boy knew'. Yet this only increases the sense of the uncanny. For what slippery kinships are insinuated in the image of a nonhuman animal becoming like 'someone' (implying a human person in common parlance) that one knows? In any case, the talking turtle goes on being named a turtle, however friendly and familiar. Whereas the description of the riverine nocturne is sensual and perhaps nostalgic up to this point, the sudden entrance of the turtle evokes wonder and perhaps a note of (droll) perplexity, feelings that are only augmented by the development of the encounter into chummy smoking and cloud-watching. The off-kilter humour of the boy and the turtle each exclaiming 'Boy, this is the life!' seems to cement the general categorial imbroglio this dream instigates.

This ecological description disrupted or transected by 'category crisis' and the uncanny exemplifies one of a number of ways that Lafferty's fiction is ecomonstrous rather than merely ecophenomenological or 'ecomimetic' as we will see. Having taken this dip into the Laffertian literary universe, then, let us proceed to a few biographical words about Lafferty. This will be followed by an outline of the thesis's aims and parameters and an overview of its chapters.

[1] Though not a particular emphasis of this thesis, Lafferty's stories and novels often feature kids playing (and even taking refuge) in Oklahoman rivers, caves, and hills—most notably in the covertly semi-autobiographical *The Reefs of Earth* (1968) and the overtly semi-autobiographical *My Heart Leaps Up* (1986).

Brief Biography of R. A. Lafferty

Raphael Aloysius Lafferty (1914-2002) was born to Irish American homesteaders in Neola, Iowa who subsequently settled in Tulsa, Oklahoma when Lafferty was four. He attended Roman Catholic schools (and remained observant his entire life), took night classes in German and electrical engineering, served in World War II in the South Pacific theatre as a staff sergeant, worked as an electrical supplies sales associate in Tulsa until his retirement in his fifties, and was a lifelong bachelor who lived with his sister who also remained unmarried.[2] Though his passion for literature began in childhood, Lafferty abandoned writing fiction after a few youthful attempts in his twenties and didn't take it up again until the age of forty-six.

> An apocryphal story has it that a young Lafferty essayed a writing class, only to be told by the instructor that he needed to get out and live life for 20 years or so before returning to the typewriter. True or not, Lafferty wrote nothing more till 1957; instead, he absorbed others' stories—from his frontier Irish kin, for instance, or from Native American or other blue-collar workmen met on the job. During WWII, he served in the 129th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, repairing searchlights and stockpiling tales from his fellow GIs as well as from tribal storytellers from the Malay Islands and Papua New Guinea. (Ferguson 2014a: 28)

Once Lafferty got started, however, this pent-up hoard of lore burst forth in a torrent of visionary (if sometimes difficult) work that almost immediately made heads turn. From 1959 to his retirement from writing in 1987, he wrote thirty-six novels (some dozen unpublished) and over two hundred short stories (some two-score unpublished) as well as essays and poems and a sizable correspondence (mostly with agents, editors, and translators).[3] As Lafferty biographer Andrew Ferguson remarks, Lafferty 'spent the first half of his life listening to others swap tall tales and the latter half channeling that liar's aesthetic into a string of wild science fiction, fantasy, and non-category tales' (Ferguson 2014a: 28). We are here focused on his works (even those published in sf publications) as 'non-category tales' or 'lafferties'.[4] When we occasionally rove into an overt instance of Lafferty's idiosyncratic iteration of science fiction (involving, say, artificial intelligence or other planets), we will do so without comment as to genre, treating it in relation to the rest

[2] See Ferguson 2014a: 28-29. Ferguson is currently writing a book-length biography on Lafferty for the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series from University of Illinois Press.

[3] The manuscripts of both published and unpublished material are preserved by the McFarlin Library of the University of Tulsa.

[4] Sf author Theodore Sturgeon remarked: 'some time ago I wrote in *The New York Times* that some day the taxonomists, those tireless obsessives who put labels on everything, will have to categorize literature as Westerns, fantasies, romances, lafferties, science fiction, mysteries' (Sturgeon 1978: 25).

of Lafferty's bioregional yarns explored in this thesis.[5] More biographical details will emerge in relation to Lafferty as a bioregional writer in chapter one.

Goals and Parameters of the Thesis

This thesis has two central prongs: 1) ecomonstrous poetics and 2) the fiction of R. A. Lafferty (with a comparative chapter on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*). More fully stated, this thesis constructs a provisional poetics of the ecomonstrous with which it performs an ecocritical reading of the bioregional fiction of R. A. Lafferty. Thus, under prong 1 we assemble conceptual insights about the nonhuman from monster theory (MT), object-oriented ontology (OOO), and new materialism (NM). Under prong 2 Lafferty's fiction itself provides its own rich conceptual material regarding the monstrous and the nonhuman. Also under this second prong, we place Lafferty as a writer of certain swathes of the US western bioregion (namely, his 'native' Oklahoma and contiguous states of the Great Plains and Southwest). Finally, arising from the second prong but relating back to the first is a succinct engagement with some of the theological sources of Lafferty's ecological vision as preliminary to further research. The central object of study, then, is Lafferty's fiction, specifically its bioregional ecopoetics and (in a more preliminary way) its ecotheological aspects. The central conceptual fields deployed toward this end are *monster studies* and *ecocriticism*.

Concisely stated, I take ecocriticism to include its 'widest definition' as 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human' throughout culture (Garrard 2012: 5). More particularly, I concur that ecocriticism is 'concerned with showing how literature is embedded within and mutually symbiotic with the encompassing more-than-human world that enables, enriches, sustains, alters, and in turn is altered by it', not to the exclusion of 'social and cultural' concerns but nevertheless 'subsuming them within the context of the larger natural world and evolutionary history' (Lynch 2008: 13-14). This is what is meant here by an ecocritical reading of Lafferty's fiction.

Note, however, that this thesis does not purport to be a full-blown bioregional study of Lafferty's fiction, either in terms of physical bioregion or cultural bioregionalism. I

[5] There is much to be said about Lafferty's accidental and exuberantly subversive relation to sf and Ferguson's 2014 article remains the state of the art essay on the matter (Ferguson 2014b; cf. Ferguson 2019: vii-viii).

hope to situate Lafferty as a bioregional Oklahoman/(south)western writer, but my main emphasis is on ecomonstrous poetics generally in Lafferty's fiction—his evocation of the nonhuman through monstrous imagery and effects—and where possible I try to indicate the bioregional flavour of this poetics. A different kind of study of Lafferty in relation to his engagement with the historical, social, and biomic vicissitudes of his Oklahoma life-place will have to await further research. That said, this thesis does make a solid start toward receiving Lafferty as a bioregional writer, one whose fiction evinces unique approaches to bioregionalism. It is hoped that it inspires further research of Lafferty in this regard.

Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction does not, in any case, primarily depict communities struggling to live in practical harmony with their bioregions. Rather, his fiction stages a continuous series of destabilising encounters with the nonhuman that accomplish two main things: 1) an ever-renewed and surprising 'monstration' of the enduring strangeness and plenitude of the nonhuman, and 2) a (re)orientation of the human as enfolded and permeated by the more-than-human.[6] In this sense, Lafferty's body of work serves more like a prelude or provocation to ecological ethics. It prepares human imagination to think, feel, and live as more-than-human. Importantly, however, while Lafferty's fiction may well foster Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of 'topophilia' in the reader, that 'affective bond between people and place' (Lynch 2008: 13) will always be seasoned with frisson and will in no way preclude the nonhuman playing ontic pranks on the human just by being itself. All of that said, Lafferty's ecomonstrous tales do tend toward an ethical call upon humans, mainly to acknowledge their entanglement with nonhumans and consciously participate in what Donna Haraway calls 'sympoiesis'—making the world together (Haraway 2016: 58 ff. and passim). On occasion Lafferty's stories also broach issues of anthropogenic ills and ecological crisis—albeit not so much to offer practical answers as to provoke us to address the questions.

As to the thesis's conceptual apparatus, the stance adopted here is experimental. That is, this thesis seeks to forge a working hypothesis toward an emerging theory of poetics: namely, the ecomonstrous.[7] The reasons for the emergence of this concept will be explored in chapters two and three, but here note that the theoretical fields drawn upon (MT, NM, and OOO) are put *in service of* an ecomonstrous poetics and not the other way

[6] We will explore 'monstration' (the portentous and exorbitant *showing* of nonhumans) in chapter two.
[7] I here use 'poetics' in the broadest sense to indicate the study of any aspect of literary artistry and its effects and I do not tie it to any particular movement (cf. Buchanan 2010: 369; Cuddon 2013: 545).

round. An ecomonstrous poetics, I suggest, already exists in the work of R. A. Lafferty (and, in a different but complementary key, Cormac McCarthy). The theoretical tools here brought to bear upon this literary phenomenon may be supplemented (and critiqued) by still other discourses in due time (as will be partially demonstrated in the theological chapter that concludes this thesis). Hence, I do not here pledge any particular allegiances to new materialisms or object-oriented ontologies, but instead find these movements to be very fruitful instigators in the analysis of the monstrous and nonhuman in literature.

Finally, although theological underpinnings run deep and central for Lafferty, leaving discussion of them largely to the last, even at the cost of brevity, is a very intentional strategy. I am firmly convinced that one cannot truly appreciate Lafferty's innovative deployment of his theological resources without first experiencing something of their literary fruits at some length and breadth. His ecotheology posits not so much a top-down infusion of earthly things with heavenly realities as much as a sacramentality that surges up from within things simply by their *being earthly*. Indeed, Lafferty's fiction evinces something like an exuberant liturgy of the nonhuman, the cataloguing of which is renewed so unceasingly that it becomes exorbitant (hence, the need for the category of the monstrous as we will see). Thus, we will attend to this inhuman plenitude at great length in Lafferty's fiction before provisionally investigating the theological soil from which his vision grows. This sketch of Lafferty's ecotheology naturally opens out to further, future research, some indications of which will be suggested.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter one situates Lafferty as a writer of Weird Bioregionalism. Through an array of examples from his fiction, it is suggested that his ecomonstrous poetics is rooted in the storytelling traditions that grew up in response to the ecological eccentricities of the U.S. western region—narrative techniques and lore in which Lafferty was reared. It is found that Lafferty's fiction inhabits a precarious but fruitful place of tension between settler and dweller perspectives. That is, he fuses the narrative impulses of both the frontier tall tale and Native American storytelling to create an 'un-settler' approach that evokes belonging amid more-than-human 'strange strangers'. An 'ecotone' on Lafferty's short story 'Cabrito' is appended as a transition to the thesis's discussion of monsters and the monstrous.

Chapters two and three outline Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics along two fronts. Chapter two promulgates a conception of monsters and the monstrous that largely departs from contemporary monster theory by figuring the monster fundamentally as uncategorisable exorbitance rather than as demonised alterity. This allows us to see the nonhuman evoked monstrously in Lafferty's fiction without the implication that it is thereby figured as evil or to be rejected. Then, aided by an overview of the ecological numinous and ecological uncanny as found in Lafferty's novel *Past Master,* we construct a more-than-human sense of monsters and the monstrous that contacts us from beyond human psychology and culture. With this positive construction of monstrosity in place, we draw on a semiotic discourse of 'monstration' and 'adduction' to develop a response of ludic and amplificative creativity and care to the monster's impact upon us rather than loathing and exclusion. The chapter concludes with insights from Cherokee, Choctaw, and Kiowa monstrous imaginaries, which exemplify the ecomonstrous theory developed in this chapter and found in Lafferty's fiction.

Chapter three traces the tensions between the emphasis on entanglement in new materialism and the insistence on withdrawal in object-oriented ontology and outlines the engagement with monsters and the monstrous in these respective schools of thought. It is found that monstrosity in the Nonhuman Turn (an umbrella that covers both NM and OOO) is both productive (i.e. not reducible to strictly negative valences) as well as located *out there* in the landscape, in biomes, and not just within human culture. It is suggested that Lafferty's fiction fitfully but fruitfully fuses the tensions in NM and OOO, exhibiting simultaneously the vibrance of material entanglement and the darkness of object withdrawal, thus creating a new monster of bioregional vibrancy-tenebrity as evidenced in the weird antics of nonhumans in Lafferty's stories 'Narrow Valley' and 'All Pieces of a River Shore'. This discussion concludes our theoretical construal of Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics.

Chapter four performs an ecomonstrous reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in order to provide a canonical comparison with Lafferty's fiction from an overlapping bioregion and era of writing. Though the tone between the two authors can be quite different, there is surprising overlap in their respective evocations of the dark plentitude of nonhuman specificity and its violent entanglement with humans—that is, both are purveyors of weird bioregionalism. After an aside on devourment as a monstrous creative process, the chapter concludes with the suggestion of a possible basic theological

resonance between *Blood Meridian* and Lafferty's fiction drawn from Teilhardian and Thomistic thought—in a word: 'zest for existence', which amounts to love of the nonhuman.

Chapter five performs in-depth readings of two bioregional stories by Lafferty, 'Continued On Next Rock' set in Oklahoma's limestone-rich northeast and 'Boomer Flats' set along the muddy banks of the Cimarron River. Both tales see human characters invited into strange and dangerous, yet potentially renewing, entanglement with nonhumans. 'Boomer Flats' in particular evinces cryptic ecotheology in a theopoeitic christomonstrous and chthonic eucharist, which opens the thesis to a fuller discussion of Lafferty's theological sources in the final chapter.

Chapter six discusses the ecotheology expressed in Lafferty's story 'Animal Fair' (1974), in which strange teenagers with 'Really Eyes' co-create a resurgent biodiversity with a crowd of nonhuman animals that have converged on a wooded draw behind a house in Tulsa. The animals themselves, along with various pseudo-human figures, suggest that we should see a nymph, angel, or spirit in everything from field and stream to factory and sewer, and that this way of seeing acknowledges the spiritual participation of all things in the divine plenitude. From this ontopoetic suggestion we outline the sacramental ontology that energises the ecomonstrous vibrancy-tenebrity so rife in Lafferty's bioregional fiction. The story reaches a rather chilling, yet nevertheless comic-apocalyptic, denouement in which humans are warned by the greater biome that they have been 'put on notice' to co-create the world better and that they are weighed in the balance. The closing scene suggests also an apophatic theology by which we must bury the seeds of Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction within us so that a more-than-human vision will grow from dark depths.

The conclusion of the thesis summarises its findings and makes suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1: ‘You are a Double-Decked, Seven-Stranded, Copper-Bottomed, Four-Dimension Liar!’: Weird Bioregionalism and a ‘Mixing Bowl’ of Storytelling Influences

Introduction

This opening chapter of the thesis situates Lafferty as a writer of what we will call Weird Bioregionalism. It is first argued that the ‘extreme’ or ‘eccentric’ ecology of Oklahoma and the western U.S. may be considered a significant factor in the shaping of Lafferty’s extreme, eccentric storytelling. To develop this, a preview of some of the theoretical contours of ecomonstrous poetics is provided along with exemplifications of it in passages from Lafferty’s fiction. Importantly, it is seen that evoking the nonhuman through a poetics of monsters and the monstrous is not tantamount to a sort of ecophobia, but rather to strange and uncanny wonder and precarious more-than-human entanglement. It is thus suggested that Lafferty’s fiction evinces a bioregionalism of ‘belonging’ among ‘strange strangers’—or weird bioregionalism. It is then shown that Lafferty’s ecomonstrous approach arises in part from his adaptation of the exaggerations and ‘lies’ of the frontier Tall Tale. Lafferty’s innovations on that form of storytelling (and subversions of its anthropocentric tendencies) are traced in further examples from his fiction, which also suggest resonances with Native American thought. This leads to an exploration of Lafferty’s relationship to his Native bioregional neighbours and their storytelling traditions. Lastly, examples of this influence are adduced from Lafferty’s historical Choctaw novel *Okla Hannali* (1972). The chapter finds that Lafferty’s hybridisation of the latent monstrous and more-than-human qualities of the frontier tall tale with the innate ecological bent of Native American storytelling places his fiction precariously but fruitfully between European settler and indigenous imaginations.

Appended to this chapter is a literary ‘ecotone’ (cf. Bekker 2019: 886). Lafferty’s compact border town tale ‘Cabrito’ (1976 [1957]) is stuffed with oral yarns that evoke bioregion through uncanny-grotesque inversions of human and nonhuman. A concise discussion of the story here acts as a transition zone between the discursive ‘biomes’ of this opening discussion of Lafferty’s cultural background and the remaining chapters of the

thesis, which more thoroughly focus on Lafferty's (and McCarthy's) ecomonstrous poetics.

Lafferty's Bioregional Imagination

While we often reference Oklahoma in this thesis, Lafferty actually rarely does so in his fiction, preferring instead to simply name cities or towns or landforms of the region and leave the reader to either intuit or research the implied location. Furthermore, his imagination roves easily and without fanfare into neighbouring areas of the Great Plains or Southwestern bioregions such as overlapping portions of Colorado, Kansas, and (perhaps especially) Texas (often pushing just across the border into Mexico).[8] Hence, Lafferty seems to intuitively evince something of the bioregional approach to place, which adheres to a 'biotically determined framework' instead of politically determined boundaries like states and counties (Lynch 2008: 17). More fully, bioregion has been defined as follows:

> A bioregion is literally and etymologically a "life-place"—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. Most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to take place. (Robert L. Thayer, cited in Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 2012: 3)

As mentioned in the introduction, Lafferty's implicit sense of bioregionalism is more about *imagination* than politics, though it is not without its implications for practice.

Indeed, in addition to actions like shopping local to support regional agriculture or encouraging ecologically responsible and responsive city planning or voting in local elections or restoring and protecting native landscape, bioregionalism also involves intellective, imaginative, aesthetic, ritualistic, and artistic orientations and practices.

[8] It is worth noting that Oklahoma's panhandle is sometimes included in the cartography of the U.S. Southwest, making the rest of the state at least contiguous with the region and thus occasionally overlapping in some ecological features (cf. Lynch 2008: 25). Hence, we will sometimes refer to Lafferty's fiction and/or bioregion as southwestern or (south)western. The brackets acknowledge that his work is not as bioregionally southwestern as, say, that by authors from the Chihuahuan, Sonoran, Mojave, and Great Basin deserts.

> ‘Bioregional practice means [...] learning the native plants and animals in one’s neighborhood [...] learning to appreciate the aesthetics of locally native plants [...] fostering bioregionally based festivals that celebrate the cycles of the natural world as they are expressed in one’s place [...] And it means developing a bioregionally focused artistic tradition, including literature, *that serves to support and foster the kind of bioregional imagination that motivates one to participate in these other sorts of activities*’ (Lynch 2008: 19, emphasis added).

An undoubtedly eccentric form of just such literature is, I suggest, Lafferty’s contribution to Great Plains and (south)western bioregionalism in particular and to the inspiration of bioregional imagination globally.

The Dizzying, Swirled, Environmental Eccentricity of the West

There is an inherent inhuman eccentricity to the western U.S. that can readily be seen to instigate strange fiction such as Lafferty’s. Along with the West’s widespread aridity, sheer wild distance has been proffered as ‘its most distinguishing environmental characteristic’: ‘The West has space, vast landscapes with minimal human impact’ (Righter 1996: 127). Yet Susan Rhoades Neel argues that ‘a far more salient characteristic of the western environment’ is its ‘extreme variability’ (Neel 1996: 113; cf. Lynch 2008: 23). Aridity and vast space are just a few (prominent) instances of the general ‘environmental eccentricity’ of the region.

> The highest peaks and lowest valleys in the continental United States are to be found in the West, as are the widest seasonal fluctuations in temperature and variation in humidity. Trace on the map virtually any component of the physical environment (type of vegetation, precipitation, temperature, distribution of animal species) and you will find the eastern part of the continent characterized by broad bands of similarity with gradual change generally according to longitude, while in the West there is a dizzying, swirled pattern corresponding largely to the region's radically varied topography. It is this environmental eccentricity that has most influenced western life and that accounts in good part for the enduring place of the West in national mythology. (Neel: 113-114)

Given that these swirling extremes of variation are what make the US West a distinct region from the East, our cultural engagements with the region must begin with ‘an acknowledgement that the western experience has been forged in an environment of profound variability and extremity’ (Neel: 114). Our ecomonstrous reading of Lafferty focuses, in part, on an onto-poetic correspondence between his extreme storytelling and the extreme environment that inspires his stories.

In fact, the more and more stories and novels one reads by Lafferty, the more this 'dizzying, swirled pattern' of western bioregions emerges. Yet he can also encapsulate this vertiginous variety in a single swirling passage, such as the following from his story 'Eurema's Dam' (1972) about a boy who, in his alleged stupidity about learning his right from his left hand, displays a whole scope of knowledge most of us will never even glimpse:

> When, about the middle of his ninth year, Albert made a breakthrough at telling his right hand from his left, he did it by the most ridiculous set of mnemonics ever put together. It had to do with the way a dog turns around before lying down, the direction of whirlpools and whirlwinds, the side a cow is milked from and a horse is mounted from, the direction of twist of oak and sycamore leaves, the maze patterns of rock moss and of tree moss, the cleavage of limestone, the direction of a hawk's wheeling, of a shrike's hunting, and of a snake's coiling (remembering that the mountain boomer is an exception, and that it isn't a true snake), the lay of cedar fronds and of balsam fronds, the twist of a hole dug by a skunk and by a badger (remembering pungently that skunks sometimes use old badger holes). Well, Albert finally learned to remember which was right and which was left, but an observant boy would have learned his right hand from his left without all that nonsense. (Lafferty 2019: 153-154)

The sweep of faunal and elemental motion together with the esoteric minutiae of floral and lithic 'twist' and 'cleavage' and 'maze patterns' induces biomic vertigo (a sensation that will become important for our construal of the monstrous in chapter two). Some of the details are regional, such as Lafferty's sly inclusion of Oklahoma's state lizard, the 'eastern collared lizard' (native to most of the surrounding states of the west and southwest), known locally as a 'mountain boomer'.[9] Similarly, that skunks sometimes den ('pungently') in abandoned badger burrows is a somewhat obscure fact difficult to verify, but nonetheless accurate.[10] This arcane specificity amid the twisting, whirling rhapsody of inhuman profusion, and the way these ecological eccentricities swirl round and intersect and even make strange a basic human concern (and prove the boy to be 'observant', after all, on an almost preternaturally-natural level), all leans and lists in the direction of the exorbitantly ecomonstrous.

Oklahoma's natural history and ecology contribute to the West's 'extreme variability' and eccentricity in various ways. Consider the state's geology: 'given its eons at the bottom of the sea, the surface of Oklahoma is essentially rolling, punctuated by

[9] Eastern Collared Lizard | Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Retrieved from http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/wildlife/nongamespecies/eastern-collared-lizard

[10] See Storer, Tracy I. and Usinger, Robert L. 1963. *Sierra Nevada Natural History: An Illustrated Handbook*. Berkley: University of California Press, 353.

cuestas, hills, mesas, and mountains' (Baird and Goble 2008: 5);[11] millions of years of deposition over 'lush and dynamic' swamps and marshlands produced the state's 'treasure of coal, petroleum and natural gas' (3);[12] it is also home of the Great Salt Plains, whose springs are eight times saltier than seawater (7); Oklahoma is a land of natural aquifers, but is also prone to droughts (6, 9), producing not only salt springs but springs in which 'water bubbles to the surface laden with iron, bromide, and sulfur' (7).

Indeed, Lafferty weirdly rhapsodises his region's hydrogeological profusion in his story 'Love Affair with Ten Thousand Springs', which opens with a man named Ranwick encountering, with 'sparkling suddenness', a spring:

> It came out of the ground lopsided. It formed a pool that was ledged and bottomed and clear for six feet of its width, and then dropped off into green darkness and apparently considerable depth on the other half. No more than half of the water coming out of the gushing spring was overflowing the pool to tumble down the rock-layered hills. Some of it was finding another channel down inside the hill again, to come out at still another level somewhere below. (Lafferty 1976a: 34)

This naturalistic description, interesting enough in itself, soon moves by degrees through ecophenomenology to a weird 'erotics of landscape' (Shaviro 2009: 17) and more-than-human empathy:

> Ranwick enjoyed the gushy small spring which was really quite loud at this short range, and he tried to place the spring with her kindred. All the springs share a sort of cousinship, but there are degrees of kindred. She was a bit like Iron Mountain Spring which would always remain as a type. There was the sexiness of the iron-water sparkling in the daylight, and there was flintstone derision and mockery in the crooked grin of the spring. Ranwick could feel the mist-water on his face and hands. He could smell the brittle and blue skin of the snake-doctor dragonflies as they hovered over this new-hatched pool. He could empathize with the shock of this born-blind water breaking out of its underground darkness to its first dazzling daylight, and he could hear interior rocks being rattled by the resonance of the tumbling water. (Lafferty 1976a: 34)

A kinship is posited among what are conventionally considered 'inanimate' nonhumans[13] (even the preceding naturalistic description showed the aqueous landform to be nothing less than lively), which segues not only into a mineral and aqueous entanglement described

[11] Albeit, Lafferty's fiction often focuses more on flats, bottoms, draws, plains, chimneys, caves, and rimrock.
[12] 'The state's coal today comes entirely from strip mines' (Baird and Goble: 5). Lafferty writes ecomonstrously of wild alien (Irish) children playing with Oklahoma Indian children in the canals formed by these strip mines in his novel *The Reefs of Earth* (1968).
[13] Here with the famous Iron Mountain hot springs of neighbouring Colorado.

as sexy and sardonic but also into a sensual granularity of touch, smell, and hearing, evoking an almost impossible intimacy of inhuman detail.[14] (Can one smell a dragonfly's 'skin'? And how does one sense that it is 'brittle'?)[15] Perhaps most surprising is the sudden empathy with an element, where the human character/reader finds themselves strangely glimpsing the subjectivity of endarkened underground water encountering sunlight for the first time and the 'shock' of it.[16] Both this excerpt and the one from 'Eurema's Dam' above show Lafferty's bioregional knowledge to be not abstract or academic (or even 'sublime' in a grand and aggrandising sense) but intimate, lived, and loved, and not to the exclusion of weird wonder.

Geology is not the only way Oklahoma exemplifies the swirling West. 'Notwithstanding a landscape sculpted by primal, creative forces, few natural features of the state affect Oklahomans more than the weather' (Baird and Goble: 8). Oklahoma is known for its dazzling lightning storms and deadly tornadoes as well as sudden shifts between heat and extreme cold.[17] 'What accounts for the variety in Oklahoma's weather? The answer is that the state is situated in a zone where three climatic regions—humid, sub-humid, and semiarid—meet and mingle' (8-9). This mingled climatic zone is shared with portions of neighbouring Kansas and Texas (Baird and Goble: 9) and is thus another manifestation of place as bioregionally rather than governmentally demarcated (including shared cultural practice across those states: e.g. both storm chasing and storm sheltering).[18] Landscape and weather variations are matched (perhaps even outmatched) by the region's 'level of biodiversity' found in the 'plenitude of Oklahoma's plant, animal, and bird life' (Baird and Goble: 9). Featured fauna in Lafferty's fiction include deer, snakes, cattle, catfish, bison, bears, badgers, prairie dogs, pumas, peccaries (or javelinas, a southwestern pig-like species), 'kit foxes' (a southwestern species of fox) and a host of regional birds such as the bullbat (or nighthawk) and the scissor-tailed flycatcher (Oklahoma's state bird).

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[14] On the necessary inclusion of smells and the rest of the senses beyond sight in ecological aesthetics, see Lynch 2008: 177 ff.; cf. Hyde 1996.

[15] As might be expected, snake doctor is a regional name for dragonfly. Lafferty here supplies both terms. Cf. Garrison, Neil. July 24, 2017. 'Nature & You: Insect sometimes called a "Snake Doctor"'. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from https://oklahoman.com/article/5557180/nature-you-insect-sometimes-called-a-snake-doctor

[16] The more overtly monstrous or marvelous element of this story is that Ranwick consorts with giant nymphs indwelling the various natural springs of the region (large enough to carry Ranwick on their shoulders), but this folkloric element remains steadfastly evocative of the actual inhuman elements of water and earth, indeed enhancing our engagement with them by making them strange.

[17] Western author Larry Woiwode notes that the Great Plains region is 'semiarid', its 'precipitation often arriving in cataclysmic thunderstorms and blizzards' (Lopez and Gwartney 2010: 176).

[18] Lafferty's fiction fairly frequently engages lightning in particular and occasionally sudden weather shifts. See especially his story 'Oh Tell Me Will It Freeze Tonight?' (1976). As with many other ecological phenomena in Lafferty's fiction largely not engaged in this thesis, his evocations of weather will have to await future research.

The Cross Timbers ecotone is notable as a dense 'mosaic of forest, woodland, and prairie' that runs from Kansas down through Oklahoma to Texas. This 'unique vegetation zone' constitutes a naturally occurring dividing line between forested regions to its east and the plains to its west (Baird and Goble: 9). And, of course, the 'tallgrass prairie is a major element of Oklahoma's biosphere' (10). Lafferty is fond of specifying local species of trees and grass in addition to fauna.[19]

The biodiversity, like the weather, is again a phenomenon of mixture—the region is a junction of biomes:

> Oklahoma's biodiversity is enriched by its wildlife, including birds and many other animals. Zoologists observe that the range of native Oklahoma animal species is probably greater than that in any equal area in the United States. They attribute that phenomenon to the junction of the prairies, the plains, and the Rocky Mountains within the state, which produces a wide variety of unique habitats. (Baird and Goble: 11)

All of this inhuman intersection and intermingling anticipates and likely inspires what Lafferty considers, as we will see below, Oklahoma's 'mixing bowl' of storytelling, a junction of cultures and modes, which Lafferty adopts and adapts (Sirignano 2017: 257). Let us suggest that the bioregion's ecodiversity also influences what we will consider a central element of Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics: exorbitant and productive *mixture,* or what Cherokee scholar Christopher Teuton calls 'monsters created by the mixing of the Middle World' (Teuton 2012: 79). In these respects, we can begin to see how Lafferty's narratives 'grow from natural limits and potentials' of the Oklahoma and Great Plains bioregions (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 2012: 3).

That is, Lafferty's fiction is an expression of (south)western 'natureculture'. This concept originates with Donna Haraway and has now become a term of art in ecocritical discourse. It is argued that ecosphere and human society are to be thought 'not in isolation […] but *through* one another', such that 'culture and nature become a hybrid compound, congealing, to use Haraway's term, into *natureculture*s. This natural-cultural plexus is the cypher of our world, and therefore the necessary terrain of every critical analysis' (Iovino and Opperman 2014: 5, emphasis in original). From this it follows: 'With every turn of the season, touch of the hand, or gaze into the vast blue sky, nature and culture together have made this place called the West' (Neel 1996: 106). As such, this thesis studies how

[19] The hardy flora of sagebrush, chaparral, and mesquite also show up in Lafferty's fiction (by which 'southwestern' notes also seep in).

Lafferty, along with his cultural-narratological resources, helps 'make' the West in collaboration with the region's nonhumans.

Ecomonstrous Poetics, Tall Lies, and Weird Bioregionalism

Lafferty's ecopoetics is even more fundamentally strange than the breakout moments of dizzying, inhuman plenitude that we have witnessed in excerpts so far. To begin to develop an understanding of this, let us here preview some theoretical elements of the ecomonstrous, to be more fully developed in chapters two and three. Related to the ecological and narratological mixtures mentioned above, note that a central aspect of ecomonstrous poetics focuses on imagery and narration that privilege what Jeffrey Cohen calls uncanny or exorbitant 'category crisis' (or 'category confusion'). This categorial instability or surplus has become one of the key enduring concepts in monster theory (Cohen 1996: 10; cf. Mittman 2013: 2; Weinstock 2020: 1). As Cohen notes, a monstrous body is one that refuses accepted classificatory orderings and structures, such that monsters are 'disturbing hybrids' with 'incoherent bodies'; the monstrous body is 'suspended between forms' and thus 'threatens to smash distinctions' (Cohen: 6). As will be seen, the notion of monstrous category crisis is fruitfully akin to the tall tale's habit of narrating a 'category mistake' wherein the properties of one kind of thing are ascribed to a categorically different kind of thing. For example, one yarn tells of a winter so cold that words spoken outdoors froze in mid-air and didn't thaw until springtime (Brown 1987: 23). Such tall yarns or 'lies', while humorous, also evince monstrous category confusion at the levels of both narration and imagery. There is no particular monster present in this yarn, of course, yet monstrosity is manifested in the narrative form. There is a kind of shock in the mind as it is tries to picture this confusion of categories (aural speech doesn't have any properties to which the atmospheric physics of freezing could apply). The imagination reaches a certain limit and transgresses it (cf. Caron 1986: 29).[20] Freezing words, talking turtle, sexy water. The typical result of the tall tale's category mistake is laughter, yet this is mixed with a hint of frisson or wonder. The heart jumps a little at the weirdness of the lie.

[20] The willingness in the listener to transgress is dependent in part on the artistry of the teller, who usually succeeds by the surprising and pithy assertion and insertion of the outrageous lie—such that it is almost pictured in the mind, however fleeting or faulty, before the listener's rational defences are raised.

The goal, of course, is entertainment, pure and simple, a diversion and a laugh, especially in harsh (from a Euro-settler perspective) frontier conditions. But that doesn't mean other effects aren't simultaneously (and sometimes unconsciously) achieved. Of significance for ecocriticism is the fact that this monstrous category mistake is located 'out there' in the landscape, the air, the seasonal climate. And this is true of the American tall tale generally: the form is fundamentally built around human-nonhuman contact and context on the land of the frontier (cf. Boatright 1961:95). This points to another key aspect of monsters and the monstrous to be outlined in chapter two: exorbitance. The monstrous is an excess that doesn't fit. The more-than-human world of the extreme and eccentric West, for example, pushes in on the psyches of frontiersmen or homesteaders and won't fit mimetic storytelling, but demands to be vaguely, weirdly accommodated through the exaggeration of the tall lie. Ecocritics may well wonder in what sense such 'lies' can be vehicles for ecological verity in literature. At a sort of folksy and practical level, the particular ecomonstrous exaggeration we have cited uniquely encapsulates a geographical truth: the region can reach temperatures that will challenge human survival (cf. Caron 1986: 35). But the ecocritical implications of the tall tale mode also press into stranger and deeper territory.

Anticipating discussion in chapter three, let us note that the tall tale's embrace of category crisis and exorbitance as means of narrating the world exemplifies what object-oriented ontology (OOO) theorist Timothy Morton calls 'antiecomimesis' (Morton 2011: 169). Very roughly, antiecomimesis (or 'weird ecomimesis') is a way of writing the environment that seeks to acknowledge it as perpetually strange and, to some degree, ontologically opaque, rather than making 'nature' seem familiar and accessible, even when the latter is done out of reverence. In a similar vein, Lafferty's bioregional myth-making and yarn-spinning, influenced by both frontier and American Indian storytelling, evoke the presence and reality of Great Plains ecology, but in ways that perpetually disturb and dismantle the privileging of human perspective and projects. Like words frozen in the winter air, Lafferty's (south)western biomes 'misbehave' by being categorically monstrous in their (sometimes violent) liveliness, agency, and interiority.[21] Such inhuman mischievousness and mystery in Lafferty's tales may make readers laugh and shudder simultaneously. Despite being deeply intertwined with humans, the inhuman entities of Lafferty's bioregions remain what Morton calls 'strange strangers' through these

[21] Key to this use of 'monstrous' is that it doesn't *necessarily* indicate moral repugnance or malevolence. This means that the nonhuman can be evoked as monstrous without in any way implying it is objectionable or to be rejected. This will be further explored in chapter two.

antiecomimetic narrative techniques (Morton: 167). In this ecological vision, it is not that humans cannot integrate with nonhumans, but that the inexhaustible ontology of nonhumans requires humility and a profound sense of the weird wonder of coexistence (Morton: 165).

We glimpse a convenient encapsulation of strange stranger coexistence almost as an aside in Lafferty's story 'All But the Words' (1971). It is a tale about scientists seeking to contact extraterrestrial life somewhere in the universe while overlooking the *terrestrial* aliens[22] their 'translation devices' have already revealed to them:

> They could now interpret roughly the thought processes of earthworms and ferns and even crystals. They could record and even verbalize the apprehensions of metals under stress and, to an extent, the group consciousness of gathering thunderheads. Any language, terrestrial or distant, could be given a cogent interpretation. But something more was required. (Lafferty 2013: 124)

Among the extraterrestrial researchers there is precious little pause for awe or wonder at this string of weird little category crises on our own planet: in what sense do these different kinds of nonhumans (invertebrates, plants, minerals) have 'thought processes'? What kind of stress are metals under (perhaps those forged into bridges and buildings?) and what strange verbalisations could express their apprehensions? Do thunderheads only gain consciousness as they gather? What portentous awareness do they possess?[23] These are, of course, tall tale lies in science-fictional garb. Yet the antiecomimetic category mistakes spark sudden weird wonder and thereby suggest secret lives and liveliness in things we are not wont to ascribe interiority and agency to.

The scientists in this story do, however, intuit that there is 'something more' to be known from this discovery of inhuman interiority, which an instrumental view can't grasp. One of them eventually names it:

> Rapport is what we want, and we don't have it. We can study the dragonfly, but are we ever really concerned with the dragonfly's concern for his family? We don't really like the monstrous miniatures. We've no sympathy with the terrified arrogance of the arachnid; how can we have sympathy for really *strange* creatures? How can we talk to an alien if we don't even like to talk to our own kind? (Lafferty 2013: 126, emphasis in original)

[22] This theme will be reprised in chapter three when we outline Ian Bogost's 'alien phenomenology' in which aliens are the nonhumans all around us (Bogost 2012: 34).

[23] These onto-whimsies strangely anticipate contemporary discussions of 'panpsychism' (cf. Shaviro 2015) or 'polypsychism' as OOO theorist Graham Harman suggests (Harman 2010: 206).

The characters in this story may not have it, but rapport with 'monstrous miniatures' (as well as monstrous gigantisms) abounds in Lafferty's fiction. As we saw in the empathy with the spring water and dragonflies in 'Love Affair With Ten Thousand Springs', the 'really *strange* creatures' are actually right here with us, intersecting us always in terrestrial coexistence.

So we will now proceed to use terms such as exorbitance, category crisis, antiecomimesis, and strange stranger to analyse Lafferty's fiction. By these terms we are naming aspects of an ecomonstrous poetics to be more fully developed in subsequent chapters. Before moving on, however, let us note a possible point of tension. One of bioregionalism's key concepts is 'reinhabitation' (Lynch, Glotfelty and Armbuster 2012: 4). It is acknowledged that reinhabitation can be problematic in that Euro-settlers seeking to become 'native' can appear to be the 'culminating gesture' of 'manifest destiny'; nevertheless, if we do dwell here, it is argued, we 'should not do so as perpetual newcomers, as sojourners with no sense of belonging' (Lynch 2008: 20). Lafferty's fiction admittedly complicates this notion by simultaneously embodying both belonging and sojourning: it expresses a deep sense of knowledgeable and affectionate inhabitation of the Great Plains bioregion while, by that same token, figuring human dwellers as 'perpetual newcomers' or 'sojourners' among the wonderful 'strange stranger' depths of bioregional weirdness. This remains something of an unresolved (and arguably fruitful) tension in his fiction. I suggest, however, that Lafferty's sense of belonging-sojourning serves not only to preserve wonder but, perhaps paradoxically, to temper any lingering colonialist connotations that could infect notions of reinhabitation. That is, one effect of the perpetual strangeness of Lafferty's bioregional imagination (especially as influenced by Native American storytelling as we'll see below) is that the destabilised sense of wonder it induces can help nudge those of European descent toward listening to the land's prior human inhabitants to anchor our ideas of belonging.[24]

So then, akin to Graham Harman's discussion of H. P. Lovecraft's weird fiction in terms of what Harman calls Weird Realism (Harman 2012), let us suggest that Lafferty's fiction evinces a Weird Bioregionalism. 'The stories we tell about ourselves and the land we inhabit influence how we think of and treat that land, simultaneously determining and

[24] As Tom Lynch notes, 'the efforts of European settlers in North America to become more native to their places should in no way serve to displace those who have an obvious claim to being the first among natives' (Lynch 2008: 234).

revealing the degree to which we feel estranged or at home there' (Lynch 2008: 22). But this doesn't mean bioregional fiction will always feel homely. Indeed, it may feel unhomely, *unheimlich*, uncanny. Lafferty's ecomonstrous (*oikos* + *monstrum*) poetics is the practice of homemaking (*oikos* + *poiesis*) in a very strange house, amongst a very strange family (cf. Hume and Rahimtoola 2018: 134). His ecopoetics is one of being *at home with the strange*.

'Damn You, Ginger, Why Didn't You Tell Me You Weren't People?'

A subsequent dream sequence from 'Configuration of the North Shore' encapsulates something of this antiecomimetic sense of belonging amid strange strangers. It begins, as did the talking turtle dream, with the promise of being a pastoral nocturne—and this time the location is named: a river in San Antonio that winds through parkways and bridges. The boy is in a canoe watching 'the lights of the restaurants and little beer gardens' go by in the company of a girl with 'green eyes and a pleasantly crooked mouth' (Lafferty 1997: 270).[25] This is a homely and pleasant evocation of dwelling in one's bioregion, with an added touch of biotically specific whimsy, for there were 'live-oak trees overhanging the water, and beards of Spanish moss dragged the surface as though they were drifting through a cloud made up of gossamer and strands of old burlap' (ibid.).[26] However, from this combination of bioregional detail and poetic fancy the dream shifts toward the unhomely:

> The girl's name was Ginger, and she strummed on a stringed instrument that was spheroid; it revolved as she played and changed colors like a jukebox. The end of the canoe paddle shone like a star and left streaks of cosmic dust on the night water as the boy dipped it.
>
> They crossed the Mississippi, and were in a world that smelled of wet sweet clover and very young catfish. The boy threw away the paddle and kissed Ginger. It felt as though she were turning him inside out, drawing him into her completely. And suddenly she bit him hard and deep with terrible teeth, and he could smell the blood running down his face when he pushed her away. He pushed her out of the canoe and she sank down and down. The underwater was filled with green light and he watched her as she sank. She waved to him and called up in a burst of bubbles. "That's all right. I was tired of the canoe anyhow. I'll walk back."
>
> "Damn you, Ginger, why didn't you tell me you weren't people?" the dreamer asked. (Lafferty 1997: 270-271)

[25] Hear the human-inhuman echo here with the 'crooked mouth' of the (female) spring in 'Love Affair'.

[26] The plateau or escarpment 'live oak' and the Spanish moss it benignly hosts on its massive low limbs are native to portions of Oklahoma, Texas, and Mexico, among other places (Miller 2006: 92).

The dream pitches first toward musical kaleidoscope and astral phosphorescence, then pivots on a pulse of youthful romance ensconced in bioregion—kissing amid the smell of 'wet sweet clover and very young catfish'—and from there the scenario tips easily into nightmare, a moment of unexpected monstrosity (where the smell of fresh blood intrudes upon the bucolic odours), though not without its comic effect. This shifting series of approaches to ecopoetics (standard pastoral→cosmic pastoral→monstrous pastoral), strung seamlessly together through phantasmagoria, dislocates rather than locates the reader and complicates our sense biomic harmony.[27] (The fact that it also aptly emblematises the fearful and alien qualities of budding romance only more fully layers the human into the inhuman.) Read in the context of the rest of Lafferty's fiction, and even of the previous dream of the turtle, the dreamer's exasperated question is not an affirmation that Ginger (with her apparent nonhuman qualities, such as fangs and breathing underwater) is not 'people', but that the boy must come to understand this term in a wider scope.[28]

The outré details of the scene are insinuated so dryly and fluidly that once again we laugh, but we laugh somewhat uncomfortably—and thereby the trembling of both frisson and chuckling become conflated. This conflation, crucial to Lafferty's aesthetic and ontology, is made explicit in his story 'Days of Grass, Days of Straw' (1973), in which he amends St Paul's injunction to 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling' to 'work out your salvation with fear and chuckling'; that is, 'in scare-shaking and in laughter-shaking' (Lafferty 2019: 425, 438; cf. Philippians 2:12). This unresolved tension between horror and comedy 'generates the ambivalent *frisson* that tonalizes and charges both modes bisociatively' (Lincoln 1993: 29, italics in original). This dual-charged horror-comic mode obtains throughout Lafferty's bioregional fiction and thus bespeaks his particular iteration of the ecomonstrous (distinct from McCarthy's more purely horrific iteration, though not entirely without overlap).

As we have already seen and will continue to see, Lafferty's bioregion is frequently evoked in these uncanny and monstrous ways, but without the conceit of being a dream sequence. Lafferty instead externalises the dream elements into the outer landscape, evoking weird and unexpected flashes of interiority and agency in nonhumans that both call upon and elude our attention. Lafferty is far from the first Oklahoman to see the region

[27] Dislocation is one of Morton's techniques for antiecomimesis (Morton 2011: 169). It is also key to American Indian tales of Coyote (Burkhart 2004: 15).

[28] This wider sense of more-than-human 'people' resurfaces in 'Animal Fair' (1974), discussed in chapter six.

as a dreamscape (though he may well be the first among settlers to thoroughly do so). In her essay 'Oklahoma: The Prairie of Words', Creek poet and artist Joy Harjo writes:

> What Oklahoma becomes, in a sense, is a dream, an alive and real dream that takes place inside and outside of the writer. […] Our words begin inside of the dream and become a way of revealing ourselves within this landscape that is called Oklahoma. […] The stories and poems are in motion within the red earth—which has the boundaries that dreams have. (Harjo 1981: 44)

For Harjo, the dream moves in (human) poets and storytellers *and* within Oklahoma's red dirt.[29] Thus, Lafferty's externalisation of the phantasmagorical betokens an aspect of his weird bioregionalism that connects to Native American perspectives. Before exploring more of these connections, however, let us proceed to further outline the influence of the American tall tale on Lafferty's antiecomimetic craft.

Tall Tale Headquarters: Lafferty and the Ironic-Heroic Frontier

Lafferty reminisces in an interview about his deep family connection to this national art form:

> I think I got the tall tales from my father, who was a great tall tale teller. He first came to Oklahoma as a boy, and he homesteaded with these other young fellows. […] They'd each homestead a hundred and sixty acres, and they'd build a shack on the four corners together there. About all they had for entertainment was tall stories. That was repeated so many times on so many frontiers. You get the tall stories of the mountain men and the campers and the trackers and so forth. Well, there's just the basic American stories, and they keep getting handed down. I think I got mine from three master storytellers I happened to be related to. (Schweitzer 2017: 239)

So Lafferty is steeped in this storytelling mode by familial, geographic, and cultural context. The tall tale is in his DNA and thus it's no surprise that its expression in his fiction is more intuitive than intentional, as he explains in several interviews (cf. Schweitzer 2017: 239-240; Sirignano 2017: 227). This should be kept in mind. Certain qualities and contours of the tall tale, as outlined below, shape Lafferty's fiction due more to authorial psychology than conscious craftsmanship. It is more an impulse than a strategy with Lafferty.

[29] Harjo notes that the name Oklahoma derives from a Choctaw word meaning 'red people' (43).

On the surface, this pastime is the telling of exaggerated lies for amusement, but some argue that the practice reveals something pervasive about the (Euro)American psyche (cf. Caron 1986; Wonham 1993). Indeed, one enthusiastic historian of the form sweeps aside the likes of Emerson, Whitman, and Longfellow, claiming of the American frontier: 'this age and this continent demanded a popular literature of heroic proportions, one which the professional men of letters could not supply' (Boatright 1961:95). In that sense, the tall tale could be considered the premier storytelling mode of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, even more than the nostalgic genre of westerns that grew up only after the frontier was declared closed (cf. Mogen 1993: 27-28). As suggested above, the exaggerative poetics of the tall tale arises in direct response to the perception that frontiersmen were discovering an 'exaggerated' or exorbitant landscape that called forth and shaped, as some would have it, the unique (Euro)American character (cf. Das and Tendler 2017: 10, 34; Wonham 1993: 18). This heroic conception of the mode follows from a certain strain of tall tales in which the vaunted character of (Euro)Americans is one of conquering (if not outright vanquishing) such inhuman exorbitance and plenitude: 'The famous image of Davy Crockett standing proudly next to his stack of 150 bearskins, the legend of Paul Bunyan clearing miles of virgin forest with a single stroke of his ax' (Spurgeon 2009: 87; cf. Caron 1986: 27). However, the tall tale may be more ironic than heroic. If 'the magnificence of the land itself inspired a tendency toward […] "giganticism" in the American imagination', the tall tale was also fuelled by the discrepancy between the colonisers' 'high ideals' and the lived reality of settlers: the frontier tall tale 'articulates incongruities that are embedded in the American experience' (Wonham: 20).

Perhaps Lafferty fuses the irony and heroism ascribed variously to the tall tale, especially in regard to the nonhuman. Lafferty's stories do not so much lionise humans as lionise *lions*, so to speak. That is, the Laffertian tall tale affirms and maintains the gargantuan surplus and strangeness of American nonhumans rather than conquering them with rapacious or bloodlusty human heroism. As a character announces in Lafferty's story 'Tongues of the Matagorda' (1982):

> I also have an heroic story-adventure to tell [...] It is not that I myself am a hero either inside or outside of the story. It is that I have been in places that were themselves heroic, that I have washed in heroic sunshine and heroic water, and I have walked on heroic hills, aye, and in heroic skies. (Lafferty 1982: 95)

Of course, filtered as they are through Native American ideas, Lafferty's tales depict 'heroic' land as something of a trickster figure as often as not. Thus, Lafferty explores the inherent incongruities of American experience in an ecological (if also postcolonial) key.

Lafferty notes the role of 'another Irishman named McGuire' and how his familial homestead became a breeding ground for the tall art form:

> There was nothing to do but to try to scrape out a living and tell tall stories. This McGuire started the first store around there and it was tall tale headquarters. Everybody, even the Texans and the Indians added to the mixture. From the uncle Ed Burke I picked up quite a bit of Indian lore much later, as he had gone to work as a stenographer (he was the only one for a long ways around) at the Wichita Indian Agency at Anadarko, Oklahoma nearby. But the tall tale element was from verbal rather than written sources with me. (Sirignano 2017: 257)

This last point is significant in that it is the quality of the oral tales that are more evident in Lafferty's fiction than the formal, stylistic, and thematic elements of the written tall tales that arose later in newspapers and then bound collections. The latter often involved an Eastern narrator reporting the words of a 'backwoods' raconteur (cf. Brown 1987: 40 ff.; Wonham 1993: 42 ff.), whereas the narrative voice in Lafferty's stories *is* that of the homegrown raconteur.[30] Lafferty further indicates (Schweitzer 2017: 240) that it is the 'spontaneous' method and 'attitude' of the oral version that influenced his own writing rather than the later written tall tales, which reached their apex in the writing of Mark Twain (cf. Wonham: 12).[31] This is why, to take one stylistic and formal example, Lafferty's narrators so often address the reader, as if they are speaking to a live gathering in a bar or around a campfire.[32] This interactive gesture 'comes closer to the oral genre by figuring the tall tale as a collaborative encounter over the price of confidence' (Wonham 1993: 39).[33] We will continually see Lafferty as confidence man (a related trope often seen in his fiction) trying to gain the reader's trust and draw them into participation.[34] Additionally, Lafferty's characters frequently spin (often a multiplicity) of yarns within the

[30] It's worth remembering that Lafferty remained in Oklahoma lifelong rather than being in the ilk of western writers who, as 'former residents of the hinterlands move to the big city and write stories about the colourful if rapidly fading life they left behind' (Lynch 2008: 27).

[31] Twain, whom Lafferty read when young along with Dickens, Chesterton, Melville, and others (Sirignano 2017: 257), is a key author to compare with Lafferty at some point. However, that comparison is out-with the purview of this thesis. But see Lafferty's very strange (if slight) engagement with Huck Finn below.

[32] Of course, this also reflects interactive and participatory aspects of Native American oral storytelling (cf. Brill de Ramírez 2016: 332).

[33] In this regard, Wonham explicates the tall tale philosophically as a communal interpretation of truth, a 'collaborative game' that occupies a zone between truth and lie (Wonham 1993: 9, 23, 30-31, 48).

[34] From the liar's perspective, the calculated risk is that 'even if some among the audience call your bluff, others won't, and they'll be hooked forever' (Ferguson 2013a).

overall yarn spun by the narrator, adding still further to the oral quality as we witness storytellers in action (see the ecotone on 'Cabrito' below).

Having established that homesteading frontier life is the background of both the national and Lafferty's personal espousal of the tall tale, let us suggest a few of Lafferty's innovations upon the mode.

Formal Features and Formal Innovations

Roughly, the tall tale or 'yarn' is a 'lie' that both teller and (at least some of the) audience know is a lie. It involves artful overstatement and absurdity, usually beginning with realistic and accurate local detail that subtly builds toward, or sometimes suddenly shifts into, the wildly exaggerated. The exaggerations may be merely 'stretchers' that narrate the highly improbable or they may be 'whoppers' that narrate the physically (or even categorically) impossible. The tales may contain exorbitant violence or feature incredible feats of skill. Humans and nonhumans alike may be giantised or otherwise comically exaggerated or made strange. Originally narrated orally in barrooms, campsites, storefronts, and so on, the tall tale was often competitive, one narrator seeking to outdo others with how high he could stack the lies in his tale. Or it involved audience participation, the teller trying to catch out any 'greenhorns' in attendance gullible enough to fall for the yarn before it reached its climax. Frontier insiders in the audience were implicitly invited to play along with the spinner's lies. Such is the mode in outline. (Cf. Caron 1986; Brown 1987; Wonham 1993; Boatright 1961).

As commentators on the form have noted, the telling of a tall lie requires genuine artistry. One can't simply make a gross exaggeration and expect to wow the audience.

> No old-time cowboy would expect to amuse you by saying that the outfit for which he worked owned a billion acres of land, as gross an overstatement as this would be. He would say that they used the state of Arizona for a calf pasture; that it took three days to ride from the yard gate to the front gallery; that the range reached so far that the sun set between headquarters and the west line camp. (Boatright 1961: 97) [35]

[35] Compare a note on giantism from monster theory: 'This unsettling oscillation between incommensurable frames is the essence of gigantism' (Cohen 1999: xiii).

Or if the 'folk humorist' wanted to convey that a man had exceptional strength, it was 'detailed concretely what the hero would do: he would fight a rattlesnake with his bare hands and give the snake three bites to start with' (ibid.). Note that the artistic exaggerations always require emphasis (even if backhanded) on the nonhuman, either as made suddenly, wonderfully weird (through giantism or anthropomorphism or some other means) or as put into unbelievable contest with humans. The tall tale is, then, in its way, a form of ecopoetics.

Lafferty sometimes performs 'tall talk' (as opposed to the longer form of the tall *tale*) in his stories as asides and one-liners (cf. Brown 1987: 67). In 'The Man Underneath' (1971), a story otherwise wholly concerned with the rise and fall of a magician, Lafferty mentions the man's turn toward complete downfall by means of something small (a nickel) and illustrates this with a tall etiological lie about a quintessential western landform: 'The Grand Canyon began with a prairie dog burrow and once it was started there was no stopping it'—and just so were the fortunes of the magician laid low (Lafferty 2015: 36). 'The Man Who Never Was' (1967), another tale largely concerned with humans, opens with one man roaring at another: 'You are a double-decked, seven-stranded, copper-bottomed, four-dimension liar!' The man so accused—a 'cattle buyer in the Cimarron valley' (Lafferty 1968: 86)—accepts this appellation happily enough. 'He was pleased when praised for his specialty. He was the best liar in the neighborhood, and had the most fun out of it' (85). This man, Lado, offers to let his accuser, Runkis, call him out on any alleged lie he's told and he'll 'make it come true' (ibid.). Runkis responds that there are too many of Lado's outrageous lies to choose from. With this call and response set up, the story launches into a stack of tall one-liners:

> "I could make you produce that educated calf you brag about."
> "Is that the one you pick? I'll whistle him up in a minute."
> "No. Or I could call you on the cow that gives beer, ale, porter, and stout each from a separate teat."
> "You want her? Nothing easier. But it's only fair to warn you that the porter might be a little too heavy for your taste."
> "I could make you bring that horse you have that reads Homer."
> "Runkis, you're the liar now. I never said he *read* Homer. I said he *recited* him. I don't know where that pinto picked it up." (Lafferty 1968: 85-86)

Each of these stacked lies involves nonhumans behaving impossibly. Rather than giantism or impossible contest (and conquest), here we have, as noted above, an instance of what the philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle called a 'category mistake', resonant with Cohen's 'category crisis' (Brown: 23; Cohen: 6). As Caron notes, the tall tale's 'humor of radical

discrepancies and incongruities' (Wonham 1993: 20) actually involves a 'strain' on language to the point of 'violence'—and thereby the very form embodies a ubiquitous element of its content (Caron 1986: 28-29, 32-33). There is no violence (beyond that to language and thought) in these brief bursts of tall talk, but they showcase Lafferty's familiarity and facility with the form even as casual asides. Note how, in Lado's second and third lies, he builds on the initial whopper with a supporting one-liner of heightened detail or specificity that only augments and amplifies the weirdness and humour of the original claim (the *taste* of the beer from the cow's teats; the horse's *recitation* rather than reading of Homer).

However, it is when Lafferty more fully incorporates frontier tallness into the main narrative, innovates upon it by inclusion of grotesquery or the uncanny, and mixes up its frontier heroics with perspectives more akin to indigenous peoples that his stories thoroughly take on their ecomonstrous dimensions. In these ways, Lafferty *weirds* the tall tale if you will. He also hews to the extreme versions of its structural characteristics. Carolyn Brown notes that the tall tale often follows the pattern 'of increasing absurdity, impossible climax, and formulaic end' (Brown 1987: 20; cf. Boatright 1961: 99). The last move in this pattern is often a joking assertion of the tale's facticity with which the listeners are meant to play and laugh along. Brown also notes, however, that there is an essential flexibility and adaptability to the tall tale that can break or exceed this pattern (cf. Wonham: 49) and thus: 'Many yarns end on their most impossible point' (20, 21-22). Lafferty's fiction tends to follow this latter custom, as we saw in the micronarratives of the boy and the talking turtle and the boy and the fanged girl. Other examples include when a pleasant landscape in Lafferty's story 'Narrow Valley' (1966) suddenly contracts upon a family of would-be homesteaders and the yarn ends at the point of their comic flattening. Or in the story 'Oh Tell Me Will It Freeze Tonight?' (1976), the tale concludes at the moment when a giant thunderbird from the Winding Stair mountains bites a man in two and gobbles him up. Fear and chuckling, scare-shaking and laughter-shaking.

When we laugh at the grotesqueries but without the release of an overtly kidding conclusion, the nonhumans of the yarns thereby remain 'strange strangers', not reducible to our human need for narrative closure. And to the degree that American frontier tall tales relate humans to allegedly 'virgin' or 'free' or 'uninhabited' land, Lafferty's adaptation of the form troubles these notions, assigning strange and unpredictable agency and interiority to the land itself and to its nonhuman inhabitants. Furthermore, though Lafferty's tales incorporate the requisite local detail, it is often the case that certain marvellous asides not

of the tall genre are casually introduced as well—such as that a character is followed by a doppelganger in 'Cabrito' (1976) or that a character has golems in his employ in 'Cliffs That Laughed' (1969)—keying these already tall narratives to the uncanny by mere offhanded implication. According to James Caron, this would make Lafferty's fiction generically hybrid in that Caron insists that the tall tale deploys a 'very specific use of fantasy' that can be distinguished from 'the fantastic element' in its 'narrative kin', the 'folk tale, legend, or myth'—that is, the tall tale is a 'sub-species of hoax' rather than of myth (Caron 1986: 27). We might say that many of Lafferty's stories amount to mythopoeic hoaxes—a rather perplexing literary chimera. By such moves Lafferty renders the tall tale, already calculated to amuse by astonishment and even repugnance, even more unsettling and uncomfortable. And all such innovations enhance the ecomonstrous effects of Lafferty's fiction. Indeed, they show his fiction itself to be monstrously hybrid or liminal at the level of narrative form and style.

Hilarity, Precarity, Tentacularity: Huck Finn Fishing On a Cloud With a Sentient Computer

To conclude this section on Lafferty and the tall tale, let us note a rare and fleeting engagement with Mark Twain in a story that also exhibits just how dizzyingly tall Lafferty could stack the lies. The tale is 'Bird-Master' (1983) and it is part of a cycle of tales about the Institute for Impure Science in which recurring characters (including—indeed, almost starring—a cigar-smoking sentient computer named Epiktistes) conduct bizarre experiments in the manipulation of space and time. Uniquely in the cycle, 'Bird-Master' shares the narration among several members of the Institute in an almost round robin fashion.[36] This passage of the story is narrated by Epiktistes the 'ktistec machine' or 'thinking machine'. Epikt (as he is called for short) is a giant 1970s-era computer housed in the Institute's large building, but equipped with ambulatory 'extensions' in a variety of comic forms such as moustachioed dapper gentleman, ancient scribe, cosmic gambler, alligator, dog, and dragon. Epikt here narrates about a fine day spent with the titular liminal ten-year-old:

> Yesterday I sat with the Bird-Master on a cloud-bank and we fished together in a cloud below us. Several of my own mobile extensions can be airborne, and I had selected

[36] Other Institute stories are told by a third person narrator, except the one novel in the cycle, narrated entirely by Epiktistes the sentient computer. Cf. *Arrive at Easterwine: The Autobiography of a Ktistec Machine* (1971).

> the Old Time Brave Aviator in Goggles and Boots. And the Bird-Master seems to get up into the air pretty much whenever he wants to. To me the Bird-Master has always been Huck Finn, one of the ninety-nine personalized human archetypes that were set into my classification system at my beginning. He is freckled, his hair is between tow-colored and red, he grins, and he snaps his blue eyes back and forth. He looks like a scarecrow that is indwelt by a cornfield-sprite. He is the freckled color of straw and cornhusks, and his eyes are like blue cornflowers bobbling on short stems. He is almost always barefooted, but yesterday he was wearing a pair of bird-feather shoes. A man saw him wearing a pair of such shoes once and wanted to know whether Bird-Master could have many such pairs of shoes manufactured if the price was right. Bird-Master took the matter up with the birds, and they told him that they would not make shoes for anybody except himself. They were gift shoes for him to wear on the nine chilly days that come before the bird-migration, they said. (Lafferty 1983: 33)

There's no use comparing this to Twain, of course. Lafferty is neither doing pastiche nor paying tribute, but rather is playfully appropriating this now 'archetypal' American figure from the perspective of an 'artificial intelligence' (throughout this cycle, Epikt has way too much personality to be considered 'artificial' in any sense). Epikt's vision makes the archetype strange. He perceives 'Huck' (Bird-Master) as an inhuman assemblage, a scarecrow of bobbling cornflowers and cornhusks and bird feathers that (folding in the folkloric) is inhabited by a cornfield sprite that talks to birds (his gift-giving friends rather than those he frightens away). Here we have boy and talking computer engaged in rustic recreation rather than boy and talking turtle. The latter is a marvel but still within the frame of (weird) pastoral, whereas the former exhibits Lafferty's recurrent expression of a (weird) natureculture that entwines human and inhuman not only with biota and biome (the latter inclusive of abiota) but also with technology and manufacture and arts and crafts.

The scene is ecomonstrous in its exorbitant tangle of more-than-human category confusions (goggled and booted computer fishing on a cloud with a boy; talking birds that make shoes) but also the narrative mode itself is monstrous. Discussing a different tale, Ferguson identifies 'one of Lafferty's favorite techniques: The Big Lie. Instead of starting small and working your way up, just start with a whopper and then keep lying exuberantly' (Ferguson 2013a). Epikt's anecdote above exemplifies this by building on its opening whopper about sitting on a cloudbank. Moreover, in the larger story, the anecdote itself is stacked on top of an already teetering series of whoppers that preceded it (all told within the story's first few pages): to wit, the (ostensibly Cheyenne) legend of a whistling ghost-elk that omens both death and bird migration; the claim that the 'boneless spirit' of the boy called Bird-Master migrates seasonally between his winter bones in North America and his summer bones in South America; and the appearance and then dissolution of a truly gigantic giant (its big toe a hundred feet high), which turns out to be comprised of millions

of birds and bugs orchestrated into the shape of a giant by the Bird-Master.[37] The remark that 'tall stories simply grow taller, and the enjoyment comes in watching them teeter as they grow' (Wonham: 35) seems almost hilariously understated in the face of Lafferty's towering excesses.

And the exuberant lies are very far from through in this tale, as witnessed in the unfolding cloud scenario:

> It was while we were hooking and pulling speckled carp out of a pond in a hollow in a cloud that the Bird-Master told me that he had a fear of falling, and that all the birds had it too. "Heck, Epikt," he said, "that's the way that most birds die, by losing their nerve and crashing to the earth. It takes a lot of nerve to fly. Airy-dynamics and stuff like that don't do it; nerve is what does it. Birds live dangerously, and so do I. That's what I like about chumming with the birds. Say, Epikt, I'm going away with the birds late tomorrow, I think. Look in at my summer bones now and then while I'm gone. They'll be in the same place they were last year."
>
> "I have seen your summer bones after you've slipped them off," I said, "but I still don't believe in them. There's something wrong with the whole business." (33-34)

Whereas the dream sequences in 'Configuration of the North Shore' insinuated weird details into pastoral scenes, here it is pastoral details (hooking speckled carp from a hollow) that are insinuated into a very dreamlike scenario (fishing on a cloud). To his expressed perplexity about the boy slipping his bones, the Bird-Master replies that Epikt is the one with rooms full of electronic 'brains' at the Institute, so he should be able to figure out what's troubling him. Anyhow, the boy remarks, 'you find something wrong with as slippery a kid as I am slipping out of his bones for a little while, or for half a year? Where is your sense of proportion, Epikt?' (34). Indeed, why Epikt should be capable of this deadpan narration of a wild yarn but suspicious of one of its outré details is baffling (and amusing). Should the reader experience similar qualms, their sense of proportion is chided also. After all, it is *nerve* rather than 'airy-dynamics' that enables birds to fly and not crash to their deaths.

The narrative hurtles on to another little embedded joke:

[37] I'm even eliding several tall asides such as that Bird-Master has been ten years old for as long as any of the adults can remember. Epikt, as raconteur addressing the reader, provides this prodigy with a punchline: '"And why does he remain only ten years old no matter how many years go by?" I can answer that last part myself. He remains only ten years old because nobody older than ten can understand bird-talk' (Lafferty 1983: 32).

> "Bird-Master," I said to him, "you have told me that the Whistling Elk gives the signal for the birds to fly south. But there are no elks in Brazil. Who gives them the signal to fly north again in the springtime?"
>
> "The Whistling Tapir," he grins. Nobody can throw a fast answer at you with a slower drawl than can the Bird-Master. (34)

Biome calls to biome in bioregional variations of folklore. And the narrative hurtles on again, daring, Jenga-like, to stack yet another whopper on top. Epikt recalls:

> Last winter (the first winter of my life) I found the Bird-Master's summer bones in a little cave in a nearby hill. They were guarded by a badger named Anthony, and they were sometimes savaged by a wolverine named Gulo. The Wolverine Gulo was also the Devil Gulo who sometimes came out of the animal body and prowled around the neighborhood seeking whom he might seduce. There were terrible animal fights between the badger and the wolverine, and people came and watched them fight and bet money on them. But nobody except myself found the Bird-Master's bones in that little cave. Nobody else could have gone in there, and I had to make a very slim mobile extension of myself to do it. (34)

In yet another energetic little whirlpool of narrative (as VanderMeer put it) we have locals betting on fights between numinous wild animals with names—the guardian badger Anthony and the demonic wolverine Gulo—and a computer spelunking to spy on a boy's alternate pair of bones. Epikt's overall narrative nearly topples sideways here, yet weirdly reinforces itself with repetition and development of a more complete mythos (making the earlier mention of the boy's winter and summer bones more than a one-liner).

Finally, this particular scene with the ostensibly Huck-esque character winds up with a final bump of both fine detail and fantasia:

> Crows brought sticks of wood up to us as we sat there on the cloud-bank. And the Bird-Master laid them to build a fire. Then a Thieving Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*) brought us a cigarette lighter that he had stolen and kept in his nest. So we lit a fire. The Bird-Master pulled out a frying pan that he kept in a fold in the cloud there, and we had a fish fry. (34)

If Lafferty has here identified the wrong species of magpie for the region[38] and endorsed a now discredited folkloric belief about their behaviour, [39] nevertheless the magpie is a western bird and the nod toward scientific terminology mixed with myth is characteristic.

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[38] Cf. Trost, C. H. .1999. 'Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*)', version 2.0, in *The Birds of North America* (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. https://doi.org/10.2173/bna.389

[39] Cf. Barber, D. 18 August, 2020. 'Do magpies really steal shiny objects?'. Retrieved from https://www.sciencefocus.com/nature/do-magpies-really-steal-shiny-objects/

Furthermore, the inclusion of cigarette lighter and frying pan builds on the previous references to natureculture. More importantly, perhaps, is that this delightful homely scene increases the sense of unhomely because such an outdoors pastime should/could not take place on a cloud between a thinking computer and a magical boy. The violent strain of category crisis is encapsulated in the lovely surreal line: he 'pulled out a frying pan that he kept in a fold in the cloud there'. It is rustically down to earth and up in the faerie air at once. In this section of the story 'Bird-Master', then, an archetypal pastoral scene/person has been summoned, only to be transmuted into strange strangeness through a teetering pile of lies. Weird Bioregionalism.

There is actually one more scene before a different narrator takes over.[40] Epikt and the boy see the ghost elk appear on the fields below them in gigantic—or miniature—form, they can't decide which. We'll return to that and a few other passages from 'Bird-Master' in chapter two. Let us here note that as much as the whole kaleidoscopic sequence above teeters on the brink of narrative collapse, it does in fact hold (tenuously yet doggedly) together by means of the reinforcing repetitions, which weave things a little tighter at every pass. This wobbly cohesion obtains even if (to put it in terms of the outmoded folkloric understanding of the corvid species mentioned) the micronarratives also tend, magpie-like, to make the overall tale accrete ever new facets, amassing a mess of nested narratives from shiny trinkets collected from all over.[41] Nevertheless, even though its narrativity and imagery are dizzying and swirling like the eccentric variety of western U.S. ecology, it does suggest connections, even if they are too many, too complex, and too strange for our humble humanity to comprehend. After all, as Anna Tsing remarks in regard to living in the present 'precarity' of vast and intricate more-than-human networks: 'If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell contaminated diversity, then it's time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices' (cited in Haraway 2016: 37).[42] Much of Lafferty's body of work seems to epitomise precarity: it displays a fruitfully exuberant-horrific 'rush of troubled stories' that models the style of thinking many ecocritics argue is needed in our turbulent times.

[40] As if the tale were not convoluted enough, the new narrator denies the occurrence of much of what Epikt has narrated, attributing it to Epikt's poetic fancy!

[41] Granted, this tale is exceptionally riotous and metafictional in Lafferty' corpus, but it is not alone in that regard, nor the knottiest or weirdest.

[42] I am adapting the term precarity here to indicate not merely the political/economic vicissitudes of modernity, but of ecology more generally.

In this regard, 'Bird-Master' bears some resemblance to what Choctaw author and playwright LeAnne Howe calls 'a Choctawan way of seeing the world', in which 'everything is everything' and things tend toward symbiotic connections in a way akin to 'symbiogenesis', 'the merger of previously independent organisms' (Howe 2002: 33-34; cf. Haraway 2017). Lafferty's resonance with this way of seeing is often quite unsettled and unsettling in the manner we have witnessed here. Yet, I suggest this is because his imagination pushes past frontier 'settlement' of the land into the strange stranger complexity and vibrancy of dwelling, of belonging. (Indeed, we could perhaps say that Lafferty evinces a poetics of 'un-settlement' and 'un-settler' culture.) As Texas/New Mexico Choctaw writer and artist Roxy Gordon wrote:

> Everything exists and everything will happen and everything is alive and everything is planned and everything is a mystery, and everything is dangerous, and everything is a mirage, and everything touches everything, and everything is everything, and everything is very, very strange. (Howe 2002: 33)

Lafferty's exorbitant imbroglios do tend toward exuberant interconnection and development of new stories, new identities, however strange (cf. Howe: 34, 42) and as such his works 'generate richer, quirkier, fuller, unfitting, ongoing stories' (Haraway 2016: 40). They are something of a teetering and perhaps backhanded exemplification of Howe's elucidation of the Choctaw term *nukfokechi* as a story that 'brings forth knowledge and inspires us to make the eventful leap that one thing leads to another' (Howe: 32).[43] On this note, let us proceed to the influence of Native Americans and their storytelling on Lafferty's fiction.

Lafferty and His Native American Neighbours

Native American characters feature somewhat frequently in Lafferty's fiction, including among his most anthologised and beloved stories such as 'Narrow Valley' (Pawnee), 'In Our Block' (Shawnee), and 'Nine Hundred Grandmothers' (in coded science-fictional form).[44] Even when Native Americans are not present in the tales, resonances with their

[43] Or what Donna Haraway calls 'tentacularity', the recognition that the world is 'wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings, passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying' (Haraway 2016: 33).

[44] In speaking of the indigenous peoples of America, where possible I will indicate a specific nation or 'tribe': e.g. Cherokee, Choctaw, Kiowa, etc. (cf. Clark 2009: xi). However, it is sometimes preferable to have a wider inclusive term that suggests 'pan-Indian' commonalities, as is the practice amongst Native Americans themselves (cf. Momaday 2008 [1976]; Deloria 2006). 'We've always shared knowledge across tribal

outlook are evinced (as with the Choctawan resonances in 'Bird-Master' above). It is not surprising, then, to learn that Lafferty had American Indian classmates all throughout his Oklahoma schooling—notably Osage, Cherokee, and Choctaw—and Native peoples remained his regional neighbours throughout his life (Lafferty 1991: xvii). Indeed, Lafferty casts his affinity for American Indian people and culture as somewhat predestined. In his preface to the 1991 University of Oklahoma Press edition of his 1972 novel *Okla Hannali*, he makes the droll remark, 'My own earliest Indian connection goes back to the year 1899, fifteen years before I was born' and explains:

> At that time four youngish Irishmen from Iowa homesteaded on adjoining quarter sections somewhere north of present-day Snyder, Oklahoma. They built a shack in the middle of the section where the four quarters came together, and they lived there together. They were Hugh Lafferty, my father; Ed Burke, my mother's brother; Frank Burke, my mother's cousin; and a man named McGuire. Ed Burke took a job at the Anadarko Indian agency (he was a stenographer as well as a farmer) […] He learned a lot of Indian lore, most of it apparently true. My father was also full of old Indian stories. My mother came down to Oklahoma several years later than he did, and with a high school diploma and a teacher certificate, she became a school teacher. With a third or so of her students Indian or mixed-blood, she also learned quite a bit about Indians. (Lafferty 1991: xvi)

We may surmise that Lafferty integrated all three of these familial sources. Coming from homesteaders makes Lafferty firmly of settler-culture descent. Yet his fiction gives us reason to believe he could critique as well as embrace that identity.

Notable in this regard is his celebrated story 'Narrow Valley' (1966), which satirises the 19th century U.S. 'land allotment' act from a historical and also contemporary Native perspective (cf. Baird and Goble 2008: 153; Kaye 2011: 145-146). The tale amusingly lampoons a white homesteading family, the Ramparts, as they encounter a modern Pawnee man, Clarence Little-Saddle, and the very strange parcel of inherited land he occupies. Consider an amusing exchange between Clarence and the young children of the large family.

> "Is there any wild Indians around here?" Fatty Rampart asked.
>
> "No, not really. I go on a bender about every three months and get a little bit wild, and there's a couple Osage boys from Gray Horse that get noisy sometimes, but that's about all," Clarence Little-Saddle said.
>
> "You certainly don't intend to palm yourself off on us as an Indian," Mary Mabel challenged. "You'll find us a little too knowledgeable for that."

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traditions' (Teuton 2012: 149). Thus, I will also employ terms such as Native American, American Indian, First Americans, etc.

> "Little girl, you might as well tell this cow there's no room for her to be a cow since you're so knowledgeable. She thinks she's a short-horn cow named Sweet Virginia; I think I'm a Pawnee Indian named Clarence. Break it to us real gentle if we're not." (Lafferty 2019: 25-26)

When Mary Mabel challenges 'If you're an Indian where's your war bonnet?', Clarence retorts: 'How come you're not wearing the Iron Crown of Lombardy if you're a white girl? How you expect me to believe you're a little white girl and your folks came from Europe a couple hundred years ago if you don't wear it?' (26). They continue on like this, amusingly subverting stereotypes point by point.[45]

In the majority of Lafferty's fiction, we encounter Native American characters like Clarence who are contemporary figures of modern life, not 'magical Indians' or related tropes (or, in some cases, these tropes are initially proffered only to be undermined). However, Lafferty also wrote an entire historical novel of the travails and joys of the Choctaw people of pre-statehood 'Indian Territory' in the 19th century. *Okla Hannali* (1972) is a 100-year 'epic' that centres around the slightly larger than life Choctaw 'mingo' (leader) Hannali Innominee, a composite of Native American men Lafferty had researched, and in some cases knew the descendants of (Sirignano: 264). His portrait of this people is very clearly one of warm reverence and admiration, largely unmarred by sentimentalism and committed to accuracy about the times, conditions, and events as Lafferty understood them. While there are moments and elements of both folkloric storytelling and what settler culture might call magical or supernatural events in the novel, these are understated and seamlessly woven in with an otherwise quite sober historical narrative (though not without bursts of humour and adventure) focused on lived experience during that changing century. Thus, the novel also largely avoids exoticism. Due to its heft as a historical work and its lengthy, sympathetic portrayal of an interesting and somewhat eccentric protagonist, the closing chapter of the novel is genuinely poignant. It is elegiac toward what seemed to Lafferty to have been lost in American Indian culture, Choctaw and otherwise, but also hopeful that these peoples and their cultures live on in the modern world in ways still to be fully realised.

Cherokee-Chickasaw poet, novelist, and scholar Geary Hobson wrote the foreword to the 1991 reissue of *Okla Hannali* (the only book of Lafferty's to have never gone out of print). Hobson is noted for having coined the term 'white shamanism' to signal the

[45] We will return to several more scenes from 'Narrow Valley' in chapters three and four.

appropriation of Native American beliefs and practices by European settler culture for the purposes of popular guru spirituality. The poems, novels, and films spawned by such appropriations had little respect or concern for the original and (just as importantly) *continuing* contexts of these beliefs and practices among indigenous cultures (Hobson 1980c: 100 ff.; cf. Hobson 2002). Yet Hobson considered *Okla Hannali*'s appearance in the 1970s 'a major contribution to the surprisingly small body of good fiction written about American Indians over the past generation' (Hobson 1991: xi).[46] Hobson concludes his foreword with a sarcastic contrast between Lafferty's novel and the whitewashed histories that prevailed in the school systems of Lafferty's home state:

> *Okla Hannali* is an excellent fictional rendering of American Indian views (and in this case more particularly, the Choctaw view) of American history and Indian Territory during the last century. Anyone who has endured the milksop, watered-down, enwhitened view of Oklahoma history as taught in high schools all around Oklahoma is advised to read this book with extreme caution. Such readers are further enjoined to not be surprised to hear that there are indeed Indian versions of American history. *Okla Hannali* very handsomely provides such a version, and more of them are needed. (Hobson 1991: xiii)

This is only one Native American scholar's view of the novel, which eventually needs to be put into conversation with other Native readers. Nevertheless, it perhaps provides a good starting point for examining Lafferty's inclusion of Native American characters and elements into his fiction. Whatever failures, omissions, or misapprehensions may be found to obtain in Lafferty's cross-cultural themes, it seems he genuinely empathised with indigenous views of American history and geography.

As we have already suggested, the strategy of reading Lafferty's adaptation of tall tale in conjunction with insights from Native American Studies furnishes a bivalence between the Westward-moving frontier vision of European settler culture, canonised in Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis', and the 'Eastward-facing' perspective of the prior inhabitants of the land (cf. Das and Tendler 2017: 70). The latter, in contrast to frontier mentality, provides a sense of ancient dwelling and subsequent settler invasion with its concomitant strategies of Native 'survivance' (cf. Vizenor 2015). Lafferty's fiction seems alive to both orientations toward the American West and thus may be read as exemplifying an aspect of the 'Mosaic West' that emphasises multicultural region over Eurocentric frontier (cf. Righter 1996; Barilla 2007); that is, a 'relational West' consisting

[46] Hobson makes this statement in full awareness of what is sometimes referred to as 'The Native American Renaissance' in literature, which emerged in 1968-1970 (Hobson 1980a: 1-2).

of ‘a changing mosaic of relationships among different peoples and different environments’ (Neel 1996: 114; cf. Lynch 2008: 26). The *biotic* or more-than-human mosaic of the region is, of course, of uppermost concern in this ecocritical thesis, but I have outlined Lafferty’s relation to American Indians here in order to show that his inclusion of their ecological vision is grounded in real-life familiarity and relationships. Let us now outline some relevant aspects of Native American storytelling.

Lafferty and Native American Storytelling

Lafferty had his own theory about the flourishing of the tall tale in his native Oklahoma in particular. In an interview he remarked:

> I have a theory that the American Tall Tale had its shaggiest growth right here in Oklahoma, for the reason that this was a mixing bowl in the decade that the Tall Tale was the most flourishing. From the first land opening here, the “Run” in 1889, for the ten years through the other openings, this was the last block of free land left anywhere and people came from all the other states and territories to file on it. And this brought on a cross-fertilization of all the regional tall tales from all the frontiers as well as from all the settled regions. (Sirignano 2017: 257)

Accordingly, we treat Lafferty’s body of work as a ‘mixing bowl’ of narrative techniques and perspectives. Admittedly, the Land Run or Land Rush context—or ‘land-grubbing ruse’ (Nelson 2014: 645)—of this era of tall tale fecundity implies problematic human relationships to nonhumans as well as to other humans, the land’s prior inhabitants (cf. Kaye 2011: 143ff.; Baird and Goble 2008: 153 ff.). Yet recall Lafferty’s previous comment about this rush of narrative cross-fertilisation: ‘Everybody, even […] the Indians added to the mixture’ (Sirignano 2017: 257). As such, Lafferty’s frontier-inspired fiction is capable of mixing in at least some elements of the counter-narratives of the colonised, especially, for our purposes, in regard to ecology.

As we have already begun to see, this is so not by Lafferty merely appropriating and pasting in Native American stories, but by the creative energy the Native American view exercises on and through Lafferty’s imagination. LeAnne Howe calls the constructive narrative energy of First Americans ‘tribalography’: ‘Native stories are power’ and thus ‘America is a tribal creation story, a tribalography’—and this is so not merely for Native Americans: ‘our stories also created the immigrants who landed on our shores’ (Howe

2002: 29). Thus, Native stories created Lafferty, so to speak, and significantly co-shaped his craft. Howe's main focus is on how Native stories inspired and shaped the United States' Constitution, asserting more generally: 'American Indians are certainly the ghostwriters for the event, the story of America' (42). But Howe also quotes the Dakota Sioux (or Yanktonai) author Susan Power in regard to the Native American shaping of the U.S. *literary* tradition: 'We are American history, we are American literature' (Howe: 45). Given this claim, Power opines: 'I don't just want to learn how the writing of [Ojibwe author] Louise Erdrich was influenced by William Faulkner […] but additionally how so much of the material produced by white Southern writers and African-American writers reflects Native oral traditions' (45). To at least some small but meaningful degree, this is our purpose here: to see how Native Americans are not only characters in but 'ghostwriters' of Lafferty's works. After all, even if settler storytelling has tended to marginalise or erase Native existence, on the contrary, avers Howe, 'a tribalography is a story that links Indians and non-Indians' (46).

Gagoga: Cherokee 'Liars'

Acknowledging that Native American culture is not monolithic, let us provisionally take some cues from a few of the prominent Native nations of Lafferty's native Oklahoma.[47] To begin with, Cherokee scholar Christopher Teuton informs us during his discussions with the Turtle Island Liars' Club[48] that the Cherokee word for storytelling is *gagoga*, which means 'literally "he/she is lying"' (Teuton 2012: 2).

> What it means to be a *gagoga*, a storyteller, is a topic to which the members of the club frequently return. There is no exact word for "storyteller" in the Cherokee language; the term *gagoga* arises out of a tradition of punning and wordplay within Cherokee. What first may appear as a derogatory name for bearers of tribal oral tradition has its roots in the grammar of the Cherokee language. Cherokee puns allow for a sometimes necessary slippage of meaning in language, and the club relishes the rich irony of speaking "lies" and being called "liars," knowing full well that stories are the foundation of Cherokee culture. (Teuton 2012:7)

This group of 'liars' evinces a 'dry humor—razor sharp and subtle' in the conversations and storytelling sessions that make up the book, which are liberally peppered with laughter

[47] 'Descendants of Indian nations now in Oklahoma represent much of the entire indigenous experience in North America, because their ancestors came from throughout the present United States' (Clark 2009: xi).

[48] A group of traditional, yet very contemporary, Cherokee elders who meet regularly near Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

(3). Most of the material they narrate is made up of 'traditional stories in multiple and varied formats: myths, legends, animal stories, family stories, and those about beliefs, medicine, and the spirit world' as well as 'oral history and personal-experience narratives'—all of which is not without moments of the uncanny and frequent bursts of humour. While there are scattered instances of the knowing 'lie' (in the sense of fabricating) that is found in the frontier tall tale (e.g. 131), the link between tall tales and these various forms of Cherokee 'lying' is more basic. 'Among Cherokees, telling "lies" refers to storytelling generally, but in particular to telling stories that stretch the imagination and belief' (7). As one elder in the book elaborates: 'when people hear the stories of a *gagoga* they often say, "That can't be true." Stories of ancient time when animals could talk and when monsters roamed the earth' (7-8). Cross-culturally, we might suggest that this Native storytelling or 'lying' is the doppelganger of the frontier tall tale—it is the mind-and-heart-stretching storytelling that the American landscape inspires in its *prior* human inhabitants. Let us suggest that such Native American 'lies' haunt and transform the influence of frontier lies in Lafferty's fiction.

Shukha Anumpa: Choctaw Hogwash

The Choctaw, for their part, have *shukha anumpa*, or Choctaw hogwash. As Tom Mould explains:

> *Shukha* means "hog," *anumpa* "talk"—literally "hog talk," though the English term "hogwash" may provide a better translation. *Shukha anumpa* couples two seemingly disparate groups of stories within one category: humorous stories and animal tales. (Mould 2004: 40)

A 'hog story' (40) is one of the 'make-up stories', a phrase which has a 'double meaning': as an adjective it means hog talk is 'made-up stories, not literally true', but perhaps more profoundly, as a verb it means that *shukha anumpa* are 'constantly being created' (41-42). This suggests the creative power and energy of Native stories that Howe identified. Hence: 'Narrators are expected to adapt the stories creatively, to invent not merely recite' (43).

One way this continuous creation is exemplified is in the ready wit of the storyteller. One contemporary Choctaw says of those who tell 'make-up stories', 'I guess they're like Indian comedians' (41). Mould observes: 'The Indian comedian is always ready with a story, a joke, or some sly, witty, obscene, raucous, but always humorous

observation' (42).[49] In this 'situational joking' (42), real 'incidences are taken by the narrator and exaggerated and contorted to make them ludicrous and subsequently hilarious' (43). Indeed: 'Stories are exaggerated to the point of outrageousness' (176). Clearly this sense of exaggeration and hilarity overlaps with the tall tale, and the contortion to the point of the ludicrous or outrageous shares the tall tale's encroachment on monstrous exorbitance. The monstrous exaggeration remains comic, however. 'The demand of *shukha anumpa* is, above all else, to be funny, and consequently to provoke the audience to laughter' (43). The intent of the humour 'can be described as good old-fashioned ribbing' about 'human foible', laughing together 'at missteps, misjudgments, and naiveté' in 'recognition that not conforming to [our shared] ideals is natural and naturally funny' (176-177).

Human foibles, yes, but we shouldn't forget that *shukha anumpa* bridges the 'disparate groups' of humour and animal tales (recall the link to animal stories in *gagoga* storytelling as well). Many of the Choctaw animal tales are about violent pranks that one animal plays on another, such as the raccoon convincing the possum to burn the fur off his tail (212) or other grotesqueries, such as when a bear cuts a piece of flesh out of his side to put in the stew for his guest the rabbit—when the rabbit attempts to return the favour on a different occasion, it dies as it begins to cut a piece from its much smaller body (219). Yet these are generally intended to be as funny as other *shukha anumpa*. Mould even observes: 'Death is common and not particularly tragic, for the animal will surely return the next time these tales are told' (192). Furthermore, whatever morals humans may draw from the tales, the anthropomorphisms remain strange because they focus so insistently on nonhuman animal anatomy—and, in any case, they suggest ontological resonances and slippages between humans and nonhumans as all good anthropomorphisms do (cf. Bennett 2010: 119-120). Also of obvious interest is that, in addition to humorous stories and animal tales, *shukha anumpa* can include 'tall stories', which, Mould suggests, comports with the mode as it's known outside Native American cultures (Mould: 44).

So, a 'model of the *shukha anumpa* emerges. The stories are above all else, humorous. They are also made up—either exaggerated or outright fictional. And they are either passed on or continuously created' (45). Furthermore, as to the impact of Choctaw hogwash: 'Each story has its own multiple interpretations, its own particular issues and dilemmas' but at the 'broader level' they are all 'metaphors for living' with the moral of

[49] Recall that the Bird-Master with his Tapir punchline showed he could 'throw a fast answer' in a slow drawl.

you ‘got to be careful’ (177). We will see all of these aspects evinced in the joking stories that Hannali tells below, but a more-than-human sense of ethical ribbing through the sly, raucous, ludicrous, and often grotesque pervades all of Lafferty’s fiction. It is perhaps also worth noting the distinction Choctaws make between *shukha anumpa* and ‘elder stories’, a ‘category that sits opposite *shukha anumpa*’ (Mould: 47). Elder stories are ‘imbued with the authority of the past’ (50). On the other hand: ‘*Shukha anumpa* is not viewed with such awe and respect’ (52). Thus, unlike with elder stories, which require formal closure, ‘with contemporary stories, the end is left open. Discussion is encouraged, even demanded’ (Mould: 50). The two narrative modes are not in conflict, however. The levity of *shukha anumpa* does not diminish the gravity of elder stories. On the contrary: ‘Indian jokes are embedded deeply in the cultures […] and they serve as secular prayers to ground and revitalize tribal people’ (Lincoln 1993: 163). Let us suggest, then, that Lafferty’s stories again echo a ‘Choctawan way of seeing the world’ (Howe) through performing open-ended, interpretive, contemporary ‘hog talk’ in tandem with respect for ‘elder’ knowledge (including that of the prior inhabitants of Lafferty’s home in the American west). Lafferty’s stories too serve as ‘secular prayers’ that can ground and revitalise.

As we turn again to Lafferty’s fiction, let us note that this attention to Native American resonances in his works is not without contemporary ecocritical import. It builds on the acknowledgement that ‘new materialist ecological thought, and material ecocriticism, could be considerably enriched by entering into dialogue with older forms of nonreductive materialism, such as that which is articulated through Aboriginal narratives and practices of country’ (Rigby 2014: 284).[50] At the widest level, I suggest that Lafferty’s fiction displays an implicit resonance with ‘indigenous cosmovisions based on ancient and ancestral indigenous knowledge’ (Adamson 2014: 254). Indeed, it may be said that Lafferty shares with his Native neighbours a general pre-modern ‘enchanted’ view of existence (cf. Taylor 2007: 25 ff.), which nevertheless fully and innovatively engages the modern world (cf. Oppermann 2014: 23).

Hannali’s Hogwash

With a Big Red Heart I Exaggerate

[50] Rigby, an Australian, is prompted to suggest this in her discussion of Australian indigenous views of ‘country’.

The confluence of exaggeration in tall tales and the stretch of imagination in American Indian storytelling—and the rough humour in both—is exemplified in various scenes in *Okla Hannali*. For example, just after the narrator has relayed the 'stretcher' that a she-bear adopted and co-mothered Hannali as a rather unbeautiful child, a scene ensues in which Hannali's son asks him: 'How was it go to be a child then?'[51] Hannali answers in his rolling, run-together way (a conceit that has a certain oral and visual power in these passages in particular).[52]

> "Everything was larger then," Hannali would tell his son, "the forest buffalo were bigger than the plains buffalo we have now, the bears were bigger than any you can find in the Territory today you call that a bearskin on that wall it is only a dogskin I tell you yet it's from the biggest bear ever killed in the Territory the wolves were larger and the foxes the squirrels were as big as our coyotes now the gophers were as big as badgers the doves and pigeons then were bigger than the turkeys now." (Lafferty 1991: 5)

Teuton notes that in his elders' stories of creation, 'the animals were larger than they are now' (Teuton 2010: xi). It's as if Hannali here ties his tall, more-than-human nostalgia for his childhood to the very time of creation. Hannali's son is onto his father's happy lies though. 'Maybeso you exaggerate,' he suggests. Hannali responds: 'Of course I do with a big red heart I exaggerate'—'the new age has forgotten', he laments, but Hannali still remembers that the corn, the men, and the women all once stood taller (5). Whereas settler culture exaggerates in response to the discovery of an exorbitant 'new' land, Hannali here exaggerates out of a desire to maintain a sense of the exorbitant *old* land, which, by the 19th century, is well under threat by the worldviews of newcomers.[53] This posture is a crucial source of Lafferty's tall imagination: like Hannali, Lafferty exaggerates from a capacious heart overflowing with the memory of all the Earth was and continues to be (or could become, if threat is averted), at least to those with tall enough eyes to see it.

Boasts of monstrous size then shift into tales of jocund grotesquery. Hannali's son responds to his father's self-consciously exaggerated recollections: 'You are joking it all,

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[51] This grammar is Lafferty's iteration of what is sometimes called 'Red English' (Lincoln 1993: 10 and passim). Lafferty renders Red English in varying degrees with his Native American characters (some sound no different than non-Indian characters) and it comports with the unique and non-standard grammar often exemplified in the discussions with contemporary storytelling elders in *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club* (Teuton 2012).

[52] Hannali's speech in particular is Lafferty's most extreme version of Red English, based on his claim that 'Hannali did not speak in that manner because he was a clod, but because he was a Choctaw' and 'all Chocs run sentences together with no intonation for either period or question' (Lafferty 1991: 5). But it is only Hannali's speech that Lafferty renders this way in the novel.

[53] It is not incidental that Geary Hobson's groundbreaking collection of contemporary Native American literature is titled *The Remembered Earth* (1980).

Father.' 'Not like we joked then,' says Hannali, 'all the stories were funnier' (5). To prove it, Hannali relates an old yarn about a man 'who laughed till he split open', a common expression that here becomes grotesquely literalised through the piling up of lies. The man kept laughing until 'one lung went flying out', followed by his stomach and then the rest of his entrails and organs. When onlookers urge the man's wife to help him, she remarks that if she puts everything back in before her husband's done with his laughing fit, she'll just have to do it all over again. Better to wait until he's through. Hannali says to his son, 'who will tell a story like that now'? Hannali assures him, 'things were funnier then my son' (5). As Jeff VanderMeer observes: '"Visceral" is a key word when thinking of Lafferty's triumphs, alongside "weird"' (VanderMeer 2019: 396). Here the combination of the literally visceral with rip-roaring humour just increases the sense of the weird.

That Hannali passes these tales from the past on to his son in dialogical performance suggests a resonance with Teuton's observation about the Choctaws' Native neighbours: communal 'lying invokes a Cherokee cultural process of interpreting contemporary experience in relation to the cultural truths traditional stories express' and thereby 'the connections and disconnections found between the teachings of oral traditional stories and contemporary stories are a deep source of wisdom, humor and irony' (Teuton 2012: 8). For example, in contrast to the heroic bent of frontier tall tales, which emphasise the power of gifted humans to violently conquer the land (recall Bunyan's dead trees and Crockett's dead bears), Hannali's *shukha anumpa* giantises the inhuman/more-than-human and dismembers the human. It is thus a source of irony and wisdom for interpreting contemporary existence. Of course, Hannali's exuberance must be kept firmly in mind as the jokes and yarns of Lafferty's fiction put human characters through a seemingly endless series of dismemberments, devourments, and decentrings. The apparent diminishment of humans in Lafferty's fiction does not arise from pessimism—not in any final sense—but from a worldly and spiritual fullness that brooks no human exceptionalism. As Ferguson has argued, the destructions Lafferty's fictions perform are 'always in the context of carnivalized creation [...] he dismembers so that we may all re-member' (Ferguson n.d., 'Lafferty and His World': 42; cf. Ferguson 2014b: 545, 556).

The Grisly Demise of Pickens the Green Indian—Until the Next Story

Also of ecocritical interest, *Okla Hannali* introduces a folk character called Pickens the 'green Indian', whose tenderfoot exploits (or anti-exploits) are swapped amongst Native 'liars'.[54] All too easily swindled by his fellow Natives, Pickens is an intertribal figure of fun: 'Pickens is a Cherokee when the Creeks tell the story, a Creek when the Choctaws tell it, and a Choctaw when the Chickasaws tell it. None of them will admit that an Indian that green could be one of their own' (Lafferty 1991: 112).[55] All of the Pickens yarns are trading tales where Pickens comes into the Territory laden with bundles of various goods for parley gifts and for trade and is eventually conned or cajoled out of them to some extreme degree. In his comic errors and failures, Pickens also shades toward the 'antiheroic comic teacher and holy fool' of Trickster tradition (Lincoln 1993: 5)—or tales of Coyote, who 'is made fun of for his actions, actions that arise from dislocation *vis-à-vis* the world around him'; his stories 'are meant to show Coyote's mistakes', the root of which is fundamental: 'He has forgotten his relations' (Burkhart 2004: 15-16). Understood as such, the Pickens yarns of comic-grotesque dislocation mirror and backhandedly endorse their positive counterpart: *nukfokechi*, stories that energise the deep and wild connectivity of the Native universe (Howe 2002: 32 ff.).[56]

One Pickens yarn of ascending lies (and descending fortunes) tells of when some quick-tongued Caddo men take Pickens' bundles one by one, as well as the mules that he packed them on until 'Pickens was left alone and destitute in the wilderness' (Lafferty 1991: 113). Not alone for long, Cheyennes also come asking for parley gifts. When Pickens explains he has nothing left, the Cheyennes protest that he still has his little sack of corn to eat, water jug, and clothes—which, of course, they take from him one by one. After taking the shirt off his back, 'still other Cheyennes took the hat off Pickens' head, the

[54] I have not yet come across this specific figure in American Indian humour and storytelling. There is, however, a somewhat similar recurring figure of fun called Ashman among the Choctaw (Mould 2004: 176, 180-183).

[55] On intertribal and intra-tribal kidding and teasing see Lincoln 1993: 23, 25-26, 41, 163 (cf. Tedlock 1975: 107; Mould 2004: 177). In his story 'Marlene', Geary Hobson provides a contemporary example: '"Is that something you guys from the Paralyzed Tribes celebrate every summer?" she asked, smiling as she kidded me in the age-old way about being from one of the Five Civilized Tribes' (Hobson 1980b: 93). Says Cherokee elder Sammy Still: 'We cross that line between tribes […] We have a good time sharing stories. We laugh at each other; we're always laughing at each other. We're always making fun of each other. And so, I guess that's what people don't understand… you know, Native Americans, we like to *laugh*. And we do. We do' (Teuton 2012: 149).

[56] Most of Lafferty's ecomonstrous tales probably fall somewhere between these poles.

trousers off his shanks, and the clout from his loins' (114). When another also comes to take his shoes, Pickens pleads, 'How can a man walk in this terrible country without shoes?' This Cheyenne replies drily: 'a man that hasn't any corn to eat or water to drink or clothes to wear and the sun burning like it is today, that man isn't going very far anyhow', and so takes Pickens' shoes 'and left him to die in the wilderness' (114). But this dark humour is only getting started. Now the stretcher becomes a macabre whopper as the raconteur narrator eggs us on in oral tall tale fashion:

> You think that was the end? You don't know those Plains Indians. A Pawnee came and said, "How can a man with meat on his bones say that he has nothing for gift," and he began to cut the meat off Pickens' bones to feed to his dog. "What will I have to cover my bare bones with," Pickens' dead body asked, "if you cut all the meat from my bones?"
>
> "If I'd gone as far with it as you have," the Pawnee told Pickens' dead body, "I don't believe I'd worry about my bones." And, as it happened, he needn't have worried. A Comanche came and began to break loose Pickens' bones and toss them in a hamper on his horse. "What will be left of me if you take my bones?" said Pickens' bones. "Am I a philosopher?" asked the Comanche, "how do I know what will be left of you? We will break these open and my wifes will make soup from them. Thank you." And the Comanche carried off all Pickens' bones. (114)

Here is a comedy of dismemberment and devourment of the human, a trope we will see frequently in Lafferty's works. The human eaten by or otherwise merged with the nonhuman is a key rhetorical strategy of his ecomonstrous poetics—of which we have a foretaste here (to pun gruesomely). In that regard it is worth suggesting that it is not only dogs (and humans) who eat Pickens here—in a sense, the 'terrible country' itself has gobbled him up through their actions. This is a theme we will also revisit.

The joke about the philosophy needed to know what's left of Pickens after all his physical properties have been scattered is a laugh out loud moment that opens onto possibilities rather than merely being dismissive. Laughter induced by clownish behaviour can be a way of *opening up* a community and 'revealing higher truths' in Native culture (cf. Tedlock 1975: 107, 109). Indeed, the raconteur narrator informs us the yarn is not quite finished and Pickens' metaphysical question is answered by one more whopper to top all:

> No, no. That wasn't all of it. An Anadarko came by and caught Pickens' soul in a sack made out of a deer's stomach, and carried the soul away.
>
> And that was the end of the green Indian named Pickens—until the next story. (114)

Beyond the humour that even Pickens's disembodied soul is susceptible to being 'taken in' by other Indians, this weird picture of his soul's survival of his scavenged bones is fraught

with categorial confusion: it can be caught and carried in a sack. That the sack is made of deer stomach is not lost on an ecomonstrous reading. The nonhuman devours the human right down to the soul in this image. I suggest that this unsettling yet comic combination of metaphysics and dismemberment is really an antiecomimetic way of affirming embodied, biomic life. Even in this denouement of devourment, an irrepressible exuberance of narrative persists as we anticipate 'the next story'.[57] Indeed, Lafferty's violent denouements are almost always expressions of 'comic apocalypticism', which is 'open-ended and episodic' rather than a prognosis of foreclosed doom (Garrard 2012: 95-96). His ecomonstrous poetics does not obliterate the human, but rather digests it into the nonhuman for further journeys, further stories.

Conclusion

We have construed Lafferty's fiction as exhibiting a form of Weird Bioregionalism that features perpetual ecomonstrous encounters with nonhuman strange strangers in the life-place to which he belonged. His 'un-settler' approach sits productively between European and indigenous orientations toward more-than-human America. Let us now proceed to an ecotone that transitions us into further explorations of Lafferty's (and McCarthy's) ecomonstrous poetics in the remainder of the thesis.

[57] Recall that the animals who die in *shukha anumpa* 'will surely return the next time these tales are told' (Mould: 192). Here Lafferty applies this macabre eternal return to a human character.

Ecotone: Cabrito: Isn't That A Good Story? Give Me A Peso

Lafferty's early southwestern border town tale, 'Cabrito',[58] is an extremely compact piece (around 2500 words) yet packed with nested narratives and bioregional details, which are interwoven with folkloric elements of the uncanny and grotesque. It provides a felicitous transition from our discussion of Lafferty's weird bioregionalism to the following chapters on what monsters and the monstrous mean in an ecomonstrous poetics.

The story centres on a recreational excursion in an unnamed Mexican border town 'across the river' from a U.S. air base. The central characters are a Norwegian-American pilot named Airman Lundquist and his companion, referred to only as the Irishman, as well as a local tavern proprietor called simply Amata. It opens in a small 'taberna' that features a pair of mirrored walls that visually triple the space and the people occupying it. The narrator draws understated attention to something highly strange happening in the mirrors:

> An odd thing (hardly worth mentioning) is that, though the images of the other six persons followed them in detail, those of Airman Lundquist did not do so exactly. There were (though none at first noticed it) three Airman Lundquists, each telling a different story and drinking a different drink. (Lafferty 1992: 189)

The three different drinks are named and also that one Lundquist is telling World War II stories, another of an estranged wife in Minnesota, and another of being stood up for a date that very evening. The raconteur narrator wryly remarks: 'But except for these little things Lundquist and his two images were very similar as mirror images always are' (190).

When the two men depart to 'go get some cabrito' (whole roasted goat kid, a cuisine of Mexico and other Latin American countries), there is an amplification of these fantastical elements:

> He left with his companion, the Irishman, and it seemed as if the two images of the Airman also followed, but invisibly. And all the rest of the evening they were following, for these as you have already guessed were fetches. (190)

[58] Written 1957, published 1976 (Ferguson 2013b).

A ‘fetch’ is an uncanny doppelganger from Irish folklore by way of Old Norse legends (Sayers 2017). Lafferty, a voracious student of languages, would plausibly have known of this cultural connection and thus consciously made his central characters a Norwegian and an Irishman. ‘In Ireland, a Fetch is the supernatural facsimile of some individual, which comes to insure to its original, a happy longevity, or immediate dissolution: if seen in the morning the one event is predicted; if, in the evening, the other’ (Sayers: 205). The appearance of Lundquist’s fetches on this night of tavern hopping comports with the evening/dissolution equation, as will be seen. Furthermore, the fetch’s etymological roots in the Old Norse word *fylgja*, in which ‘the idea of “follower” is paramount’ (Sayers: 206) resonates with the fetches in this tale, for ‘all the rest of the evening they were following.’ Augmenting folklore by tall exaggeration, Lafferty doubles the double and thereby sketches a strange triplicity in the main character.

The men venture a ‘rough ride out’ by horse and buggy to the place that sells cabritos:

> The driver's name was Trevino and the horse was named Jaime. They went out past the end of the town and then they were like a boat in a sea of cactus with only a narrow moon shining on the narrow road. Jaime trotted at a terrific rate, a hundred, then five hundred, then a thousand paces a minute; and after an hour they left the road and went down a wagon road and came to a great barn-like building in the dark. There were a dozen buggies there and two dozen taxis and cars. They went in and the two fetches of the Norwegian followed them. (190)

Here quotidian (human and nonhuman) details combine with a dreamlike landscape and reiteration of the folkloric element. Through this rural byway of nonhuman noctilucence they press further into the border of the unknown. Indeed, the nonhumans just traversed are now ingested as they drink a regionally concocted alcohol, ‘an old essence of cactus juice that had popped more skulls than it could remember’ (note the odd attribution of agency and memory to the drink itself here).[59] The place is oddly lit by the cooking of the titular cuisine: ‘Rows and rows of cabritos were turned on big spits over the fiery furnace which was almost the only light in the room’ (190).[60] One of the proprietors, a woman named Amata, offers to tell the men a story for a peso, and if they like it, another story for another peso, and then a third for only half price.

[59] Lafferty often used the American slang ‘popskull’ for cheap hard liquor.
[60] It is worth doing a Google image search of ‘cabrito’ to get the full macabre effect of this dish.

When her son Paco interjects, ‘Mama, tell them the one about las animas,’ Amata reminds him that she must tell the stories in order (190). A proliferation of jostling and competing narratives ensues. Amata first relates the stretcher that the authorities once queried the local butcher on how he produced so many cabritos without raising goats, and he baffled them with his response that he was too poor to know this was ‘biologically impossible’ (191). Amata proceeds:

> But this is the real story that he didn't tell them. They aren't cabritos at all, they're dogs. A dog and a kid look just alike when they're skinned. You see all the dogs running around under the tables? Well, we feed them the bones from the cabritos. Then we butcher them and make cabritos out of them. The bones of these we again feed to the dogs so we have a never ending supply and are never at any expense for food in raising them. Isn't that a good story? Give me a peso. (191)

A furious ‘old lady’ reprimands Amata for telling ‘the dog story’ again and reassures the customers: ‘it is a lie. We do not serve dog meat here’ (191). When the men ask if the old woman is her mother, Amata claims to be enchanted with eternal youth and that the old woman is actually her granddaughter! As if the lies and fantastical elements are not already stacked to a dizzying enough degree, we are reminded: ‘The Irishman and the Norwegian listened attentively, and the two fetches of the Norwegian were entranced and crowded closer’ (191).

Peso received, Amata proceeds to the second story, which supersedes the first in alleged verity even as it outstrips its outlandishness. In the telling, Amata proves herself a quick-footed raconteur with her interactive listeners:

> “Well, the first story was a lie. But this is a true story. Those aren't really cabritos, they're animas. Did you know that an anima and a cabrito look just alike when they're skinned?”
>
> “I had thought the anima would be naturally skinless.”
>
> “Well, it is. When the soul is pulled out of the body it is just like the body only smaller. The same four limbs and all, but only the size of a cabrito, for the soul is the body in miniature. There is a place near here where there is an old volcano and there it is very shallow. There are seven brothers named Ibarra who are devils, and they thought of a way to make money. They take the animas and break their joints so they will look more like cabritos. Then they haul them up and load them on wagons. They take them around and sell them to places like this.” (191-192)

There is an overt diabolical element here, but the monstrosity of this second yarn does not consist merely in its inclusion of devils. Souls depicted as miniature bodies substantial enough to be broken at the joints, stacked on wagons, sold, roasted, and eaten is a vivid

and weird category crisis.[61] Things normally thought of as invisible or supernatural are made gruesomely earthy. The wily enterprising devils, for their part, are portrayed as all too human:

> "What do they do with all the money they make?"
> "They spend it on whisky and girls. And they gamble a little. Then the next night they go down again and get seven more wagon-loads of souls. Do you like that story? Give me a peso." (192)

Of course, we mustn't miss the association of this bizarre and mythical enterprise with a regional landform, the volcano, its capacity as holder of souls and haunt of demons only implicit.[62]

The men are served their cabritos, 'barbecued, sauced, peppered, bursting with juice', and 'soon they were down to picking the bones'; but they are warned by Paco that they are likely to 'throw up' when they hear the third story (192). Amata continues the formula—the 'first two stories were lies but this is the truth'—and tells what is essentially a warning story, implying the men are in imminent danger. She claims fewer people (and vehicles) leave than arrive, some of the last customers of the night (and their horses) being kept for serving the next day.

> Los hombres we put in one vat, and los caballos in another. And there we chop them up just to the size of cabritos. You can make six out of a man and thirty-one out of a horse. And this is what we serve our fortunate patrons on the next night. Wasn't that a good story? Give me a half peso, or more if you want to. (193)

Murder and unwitting cannibalism are now on the cards. In light of Amata's second and third stories, it is fascinating to note that in one recorded story of an Old Norse fetch (which would often emanate in animal form rather than mirrored human form) a man dreams 'of a bloodied goat' and is told that he saw his own spirit in that slaughtered animal and thus witnessed his doom (Sayers: 207). Humans on the menu (and in the meat) with nonhumans is a gruesome exemplification of human-nonhuman entanglement.

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[61] Resonant, of course, with the strange materiality of Pickens's soul stuffed into a sack made of deer stomach.

[62] Landscape is frequently encountered as *loci horridi* in both Lafferty and McCarthy (cf. della Dora 2016: 64). However, as will become clear in the next chapter's construal of the monstrous (and even more so in chapter four on *Blood Meridian*), this signals not a univocally diabolical landscape so much as one of sacred ambivalences and weird 'infernal' depths of inhuman ontology.

'Is it true?' the men ask. Amata replies with a formula similar to Hannali's: 'The last story is always true until it is superseded' (Lafferty 1992: 193). The final paragraph appears to close the matter in a way that defies closure:

> They got away safely, the last ones to do so that night. But the two fetches of the Norwegian were not so lucky. They stupidly allowed themselves to be caught just before they could jump on the back of the buggy. And despite their screams they were put in a vat and chopped up to the size of cabritos. And they were barbecued and served to the fortunate patrons the next night. (193)

If a fetch is 'a premonition made manifest', 'the apparition of a still living person about to undergo a change of fortune' (Sayers: 207), the screams here are somehow disturbing, even if the dissolution of a portent of dissolution seems auspicious. The fetch, after all, can omen good *or* ill. The human characters narrowly escape, but is it at the cost of fortune altogether, of destiny, of meaningful future for good or ill? Perhaps Lafferty suggests we need our fetches, our triplicity, and to lose them is a fate worse than death: a disenchanted world (cf. Oppermann 2014: 23).[63] 'Living-with and dying-with each other potently' in more-than-human entanglement is, on the other hand, what Amata's gruesome-exuberant yarns affirm (Haraway 2016: 2). Perhaps in the Anthropocene our *animas* really are being stolen right out of the volcanic earth and sold for the debauchery of devils.

'Cabrito', then, exemplifies ecomonstrous poetics. It narrates human-nonhuman entanglement through grotesquery and an atmosphere of the uncanny and liminal; it opens unsettling and unsettled questions of who's eating who; and all this strangeness and destabilisation is achieved through the 'precarity' of an unresolved multiplicity of more-than-human narratives (cf. Haraway 2016: 37). This glut of storytelling responds to a 'world where *matter* performs its narratives'; hence, stories proliferate in which 'the human is essentially co-opted, hybridized, and entangled with alien beings, always in negotiations with other agencies, other bodies, and other natures' (Oppermann 2014: 31, emphasis added).[64] As Andrew Ferguson remarks about 'Cabrito': 'though this time it's only the reflections that get consumed, the warning is clear: keep eating at Lafferty's shack, and eventually you'll be the one on the plate' (Ferguson 2013b).

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[63] We have thus far encountered mention of nymphs, sprites, and fetches, and this is not the last we'll see of European references folded in with tall tale and Native American elements. I suggest that for Lafferty, these folkloric beings are immigrants too, who are becoming 'native' by their incorporation into existing indigenous American stories and places. Indeed, Lafferty doesn't only read European myths into the 'new' country, but reads the 'old' American land into the immigrant myths. They are stirred in to the bioregional 'mixing bowl'.

[64] See the discussion of 'storied matter' in chapter three.

Yet the chopping up and devourment we've already encountered several times in Lafferty's works is ultimately ludic, not nihilistic, a hacking away of hubris with dark humour. As Barbara Babcock says of Native American clown traditions, 'clowning seems to counter the fear of nihilism by playing with chaos', for holy clowns navigate 'a different kind of "nothing" that appears openly comic, rather than locked into tragic closure', a form of 'negation' that she relates to Derrida's deconstruction (cited in Lincoln 1993: 42-43). Lafferty's stories-superseding-stories invite readers to play along: 'learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (Haraway 2016: 2). Though humans (or at least emblems of humans) may be bitten and bled, end up in vats, or be stripped, flayed, and broken down to little vulnerable souls, an abundance abides—the land itself. The (south)western rivers and cactus prairie alike roll on, biomes undiminished (for now), even if the place of humans within them is made ludically uncertain. The stories roll on too, multiple, layered, telling truths through lies, carried by both humans and nonhumans, the living and the dead.

Chapter 2: 'We Take the Place of the Monsters They Have Lost': Lafferty's Ecomonstrous Poetics and Monster Theory

Introduction

By now I hope that our use of the term 'monstrous' has taken on an intuitively apt meaning in our reading of Lafferty's fiction. Nevertheless, that implied meaning and deployment is not necessarily common or agreed upon. The consensus among contemporary scholarship of Western monsters seems to be that monsters have always been a problematic symbol in the West, from the ancients battling and vanquishing (often female) chaos monsters in order to establish civilisation (Felton 2012) to imperial construction of ethnic monsters to establish colonialist superiority and domination (Braham 2012) and modern era monsters that symbolise abnormality for the establishment of normality (Six and Thompson 2012).[65] There are undoubtedly valences of wonder and pleasure involved in the Western monstrous imaginary (cf. Daston and Park 1998: 68, 190), but whether these signify anything beyond a desire for dreadful spectacle (keyed to the maintenance of cultural hegemony) does not appear to be widely explored in scholarship. On the other hand, a handful of chapters in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, which focus on monsters from Africa, South America, India, China, and Japan, suggest valences of the monstrous that move beyond iterations of pure malevolence or demonised alterity.[66] These suggest instead a spectrum of monstrosity that includes the sacred, diabolical, sapiential, and ludic as well as a geo-textural, cosmographic sense of the monstrous. These latter non-Western views are much closer to the conception of monsters required for an ecomonstrous poetics.[67]

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[65] There are stirrings of more ecologically construed monsters within this field in the very recently released *The Monster Theory Reader* (2020) edited by Jeffrey Weinstock, which includes an explicitly ecocritical essay by Anthony Lioi and Donna Haraway's more-than-human meditation 'The Promises of Monsters'.

[66] Noteworthy also is that most of these non-Western monsters are tied to bioregional elements, even if those are not necessarily explored thematically in the essays.

[67] We will occasionally indicate resonances between the Laffertian ecomonstrous and, in particular, Japanese and Chinese monstrous imaginaries in the footnotes. Donna Haraway follows a similar strategy of drawing from a wide range of non-Western monstrous figures (including Japanese and Native American) to recover the sense of monsters and the monstrous needed for ecological thinking (cf. Haraway 2016: 101 and passim). See next chapter.

In any case, for a clearer understanding of what we mean by an ecomonstrous poetics, I find it necessary to reimagine the monster on at least two fronts: as nonhuman/more-than-human and as non-evil. These concerns are conjoined. We are here reading literature that represents the nonhuman through monstrous imagery and effects. Thus, if monsters and the monstrous can only signal (as according to much of mainstream Western scholarship on monsters) the ways we define ourselves over against the demonised alterity of others—that is, if monsters are strictly symbols of a society's projected anxieties, fears, and exoticised desires—then a vision of monstrous ecology could only signal how we define our humanness fearfully and antagonistically over against nonhumanness. In such a case, the ecomonstrous would equate to the ecophobic (cf. Estok 2014). Yet it should be clear by this point that a merely anxious, antagonistic evocation of the nonhuman is not what an ecomonstrous poetics amounts to in the fiction of Lafferty (nor of McCarthy, as I will argue). If this interpretation of Lafferty has traction, then it would seem to demonstrate that an ecomonstrous poetics need not equate to an ecophobic poetics.[68]

The scope of this chapter consists, then, in first sketching a constructive outline of what this thesis takes the monster to be: in a word, any object, force, figure, vision, or experience that induces some sense of vertiginous, category-defying excess—without inherent moral valence. The monstrous is an encounter with uncategorisable exorbitance. I suggest that this is just what we witness, to varying degrees, in Lafferty's vision of a strange, entangled, more-than-human (south)west (of which more examples are furnished in this chapter). Support for this view is developed from explications of an ecological numinous or ecological uncanny. We find a sort of abstract or emblematic template of this 'return of the ecologically repressed' in Lafferty's science fiction novel, *Past Master*, which can be applied to his bioregional fiction more generally. A further invaluable discourse is then explored, that of 'monstration' and 'adduction', which suggests a response to the monster of awed and receptive creativity and play and care rather than aversion and rejection. I suggest this ethos is implicit in Lafferty's ecomonstrous stories, which ludically 'amplify amplitude' in regard to the nonhuman and also merge humans with nonhumans. Finally, the chapter turns to indigenous conceptions of monsters for

[68] Even with the recent field of the ecoGothic, the emphasis is largely on 'cultural fear of nature' and 'eco-anxiety' (Smith and Hughes 2013: 8, 11), themes appropriate to the Gothic, but which do not capture the breadth of ecomonstrous poetics. That said, I do consider the ecoGothic a sister field of the ecomonstrous. The Gothic Nature conference in Dublin in 2018, at which I presented a paper on *Blood Meridian,* was heartening in its merger of monsters and ecocriticism. The organisers have now launched a journal of the same title (for the inaugural issue of which I was only able to make time to write a book review).

further support and expansion of the monster as conceived in Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics: namely, that the monster signifies a spectrum of phenomena and beings ranging across the sacred, diabolical, material, dangerous, energetic, and mysterious and that the monstrous is therefore not to be merely abhorred but rather consciously and creatively *included* in our worldview and praxis.

Feeling Our Way to the More-Than-Human Monster

The Monster is *More-Than*

The basic underlying concept of the monster in an ecomonstrous poetics is exorbitance, excess, or what we might also call 'surplus' (but *gross* surplus, a glut or profusion that *overwhelms*). In a word: the monster is *more-than*. Simpliciter. This is to some degree attested to in current monster scholarship, even if its ecological and ontological implications are not always appreciated or explored. Asa Mittman argues that in conceiving of the monster we must 'look to the impact(s) of the monstrous', which are 'rooted in the vertigo of redefining one's understanding of the world' (Mittman 2012: 7, 8). He elaborates:

> Above all, the monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us (often with fangs at our throats, with its fire upon our skin, even as we and our stand-ins and body doubles descend the gullet) to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization. (Mittman: 8)

The qualifying phrase 'above all' is important here. This idea of the monstrous as vertiginous impingement upon worldview is paramount.[69] As Mittman notes, there is no form or aspect or attribute of the monstrous that is universal to all its iterations, except this: its fundamental impact on our categorical understanding of the world (6-7). This is drawing, of course, on Jeffrey Cohen's influential idea that the monster is the 'harbinger of category crisis' (Cohen 1996: 6).[70] Certainly, the vertiginous, devouring, category-defying

[69] Note this monstrous vertigo's resonance with the 'dizzying, swirled pattern' of 'environmental eccentricity' in U.S. western topography and ecology (Neel 1996: 113-114).

[70] Similarly, Patricia MacCormack identifies *ambiguity* as the most basic definition of the monster (MacCormack 2012: 293). 'To have an object [...] which cannot be described and placed into a category

sense of the monstrous that Mittman outlines above looks very like the Laffertian monstrous we have already encountered in chapter one and in the ecotone on 'Cabrito'.

An implication not always explicitly traced out from this is that the looming, devouring monster challenges not only our epistemology, but our ontology—that is, not only our systems of categorisation as regards knowledge but also as regards *being*, what exists. The monster is an encounter not only with an exteriorisation of our own interior fears and anxieties but with the *actual world* outside our psyches and outside our systems, an encounter, that is, with the very thing(s) we try to categorise. It is important to fully apprehend that the monster imperils not only our *social* views, but our view per se. Mark Fisher, explicating the weird fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, notes that 'the weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it' (Fisher 2016: 61). This teeming exorbitance comes not just from within the human, but from a 'real externality', which Fisher argues is 'crucial to the weird' (Fisher 2016: 16). 'Lovecraft's stories are obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through in encounters' with a dizzying variety of monsters and monstrous phenomena (16). Such monstrous encounters 'frequently involve a catastrophic integration of the outside into an interior that is retrospectively revealed to be a delusive envelope, a sham' (16). The sham interior for an ecocritical reading would be the idea of a hermetically sealed human mind or culture, the 'delusive envelope' of anthropocentrism. If we embrace this fixation on a real (more-than-human) outside that breaks through and reveals us to be already implicated with it, then anything less than a porous sense of humanity in the face of monstrosity will be unfit for ecocritical readings of monsters and the monstrous in literature.[71] Indeed, recall that natureculture requires that human and inhuman be thought 'not in isolation […] but *through* one another' as a 'hybrid compound', and that this 'natural-cultural plexus is the cypher of our world, and therefore the necessary terrain of every critical analysis' (Iovino and Opperman 2014: 5, emphasis in original). It follows that natureculture is the necessary terrain of the critical analysis known as monster theory. That is the view this thesis adopts.

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alongside other like objects is the primary concept which structures all other elements of monstrosity—that is the ambiguous, the neither-neither—neither this, nor that, but not "not" these things.' (303).

[71] Vine Deloria's contrast of Sioux psychology's emphasis on an 'outer situation' with Jung's tendency to be 'completely intrapsychic' is relevant here: Sioux 'traditions do speak profoundly of rocks, animals, and so forth, but these things do not necessarily function as symbols that lead back to the Self', but rather, 'following the Sioux tradition, are also tangible intersections with a reality that looms in front of us' (Deloria 2016: 181).

Let us consider a bizarre more-than-human exemplification of this monstrous exorbitance and porosity by returning to Lafferty's story 'Bird-Master'. We mentioned that the tale opens with the appearance of a nearly mountain-high giant (the boy calls it the Shaggy Giant), which is then seen to be a 'material illusion' as the adult members of the Institute for Impure Science (see chapter one) demand that the boy disperse his illusory giant: 'It broke up into clouds of birds and insects and bugs, and then into smaller and smaller clouds. Then, with a final sigh of large and small wings beating in the receding distance, the material illusion was gone' (32). This dispersal in fact makes way for much taller claims than that a mere giant had appeared on the horizon. Though there was a 'preponderance of pigeons' in the Shaggy Giant, the boy explains to the adults (Aloysius Shiplap and Valery Mok) that different giants require different configurations: 'When I do the Ravening Bear I use mostly ducks and geese. When I do the Ghost of the Dead Leader I use a lot of shrikes and sea-terns. When I will do the Valery Mok mock-up that I am planning I will use mostly larks mixed with saber-billed butcher birds' (ibid.).[72]

Aloysius confirms that the nonhumans 'get their intelligence to assemble in such astonishing order' from the Bird-Master, for he has seen the boy make a drawing, pose like the drawing, and then whistle the winged things into that shape, which 'appears in the sky made out of clouds that are made out of marshaled birds and insects and even buggier bugs. The things he makes in the sky seem to be alive and vocal, and yet they show all the defects of his drawings' (33). That last detail only adds to the comic grotesquery as we now picture the giant assemblages in the shape of a child's drawings. Characteristically natural-cultural, the giant shapes may be automotive as well as anthropic or ursine, for the boy also 'can do a two-toned Ford Imperial Runaround perfectly, and set it to bumping over convincing bumps in the sky' (33). Epikt the narrator comments: 'But all these things are made up of living pieces, birds, bats, insects, and non-insectuous bugs. And all of them, in their thousands and millions, are regimented together to make a convincing image from whatever angle it is seen' (ibid.). Epikt then supplies one more rather whimsical whopper, that when the Bird-Master makes the giant called The Ghost of the Dead Leader, 'he does it complete with monocle' and for this locusts 'must combine their diaphanous wings to make the glass for that monocle' (33).

[72] Many of these species are from Papua New Guinea and Australia, where Lafferty served in WWII, thus strangely linking bioregions in dreamlike associations.

So here the monstrous figure of the giant is traded in for a monstrous gigantesque of nonhumans more generally. Now the fact that a 'Master' is ordering, marshalling, and regimenting the nonhumans into these comic gigantesques could seem to indicate they are the epitome of anthropocentric anthropomorphism. But note how Epikt characterises himself and the Bird-Master: 'The Bird-Master is a good friend of mine, probably because neither of us is entirely human. Well, the Bird-Master looked human much of the time; and several of my own mobile extensions are as human-looking as artifice can make them. But I am a Ktistec Machine. And many persons have doubts about the Bird-Master's humanity' (32). So both the narrator and the main character narrated about are pseudo-human at most. (Indeed, as we saw in chapter one, the Bird-Master 'slips his bones' to fly with the flocks and thus succumbs to more-than-human hybridity.) Thus, the liminality and alterity of these two characters really suggests participation and assimilation with nonhumans rather than mastery.[73] Furthermore, although humans (and here bears and cars) are already made strange when giantised, Lafferty takes this further by depicting these 'defectively' drawn giants as comprised of incredible masses of winged nonhumans. Thus, instead of affirming that the 'giant is humanity writ large' (Cohen 1999: xii), these exorbitant assemblages envisage quite the reverse: that the giant is *non*humanity writ large. As such, Bird-Master and his giants may be seen as antiecomimetic evocations of avian (not to mention insectile and chiropteran) plenitude in the bioregion.[74]

Or, put differently, these vertiginous, categorially confusing assemblage-giants envisage in a wonderfully weird way that humanity itself is just one of the forms that the natural world takes: 'rather than considering nature to be a cultural construct, human culture may be more appropriately considered as a natural construct, ultimately responding to, and enabled and constrained by, the same forces and limits that affect the cultures and behaviors of all other species' (Lynch 2008: 14). Our vast human empires are temporarily amassed constructions of more-than-human forces. Indeed, the dissipation of the giants into clouds of bugs and birds is a rather striking (perhaps somewhat chilling) image of de-anthropocentrism.[75]

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[73] Indeed, Lafferty's story about a computer narrating a tall, flexuous, mythopoeic vision of more-than-human giants and interconnections finds a strange echo in Morton's recurring suggestion that we can only (fractionally) 'see' hyperobjects like climate, global warming, and the Anthropocene through various forms of computer modelling uncannily akin to aboriginal 'dreamtime' (e.g. Morton 2013: 3, 47, 73-74, 133, 137).

[74] 'At least four hundred species of birds have been identified' in Oklahoma and they are considered a key instance of the region's uniquely abundant biodiversity (Baird and Goble: 11).

[75] Recalling that Lafferty's horror-comic mode invokes 'fear and chuckling', scare-shaking and laughter-shaking.

The Monster is Not (Necessarily) Evil

The above imagery also illustrates that the monster, though it threatens categorial boundaries, is not first and foremost—nor essentially or necessarily—*evil*. It may elicit awe or horror, perhaps even madness (as in Lovecraft), but it is not ingrained with a moral valence. This point is absolutely crucial to grasp for an ecomonstrous poetics. A given monster *may* be considered evil or morally repugnant by either transgressing moral norms or by possessing a diabolical nature.[76] But to have one's worldview thrown into crisis (which is the essence of monstrosity) is not the work of malevolence, but of exorbitance. Something may show itself disturbingly beyond our categories, but we cannot by that fact alone identify whether that thing is good or evil. More troubling, perhaps, is that even when proximity to the monster is deadly, it does not follow that the monster is a force of malevolence. To exist is to be vulnerable to the monster, quite apart from the moral intentions of anyone or anything. Thus, conceiving of the monster as fundamentally an exemplification of exorbitance entails that it is *not* fundamentally evil.[77]

Monstrum Tremendum

Furthermore, the worldview-smashing monster may manifest in the form of an exorbitant revelation or epiphany: for example, one's sudden grasp of the almost unfathomable depth of geological and evolutionary time, or the awful size and scope of the cosmos; or a particularly numinous and visionary religious experience (such as Julian of Norwich's vision of Christ bleeding prodigiously over all the earth;[78] or Nicholas Black Elk's vision of a sky teeming with millions of varicoloured plummeting horses[79]); or any encounter so

[76] Yet even demons are traditionally construed as 'fallen' angels—that is, beings that were originally good but who acquired their present evil state through moral choices—such that evil is a contingent rather than necessary aspect of their ontology.

[77] This comports with Japanese conceptions of the monster or *yokai*: 'although they may cause mischief, mayhem, and even commit murder, *yōkai* are not necessarily defined by bad behavior' (Foster 2012: 136). Like the monster as we are describing it, *yokai* primarily 'demonstrate the multivalence of the mysterious and the weird' (Foster 2009: 2). As such: 'Yōkai defy definitive categorization—they are ambiguously positioned beyond (or between) good and evil' (15).

[78] Cf. Julian of Norwich. 1998 [1670]. *Revelations of Divine Love*. London: Penguin Books.

[79] Cf. Neihardt, John G. 2014 [1932]. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

awesome and mind-expanding that one's worldview is shown forcefully to be 'fragmentary and inadequate'—one feels vertiginously disrupted or broken in upon, swallowed alive into a world far larger and stranger than one had conceived.[80]

Take, for example, Lafferty's story 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay' (1976). On an allegedly uninhabited planet whose ground is mostly clay, an astronautical explorer called Colonel Crazelton experiences a strange (and strangely Plains-like) vision:

> Colonel Crazelton was suffering impressions of world after world after world of implicit clay that was almost being called into animation. These worlds bucked and buckled like drunken water. They were seas, and Colonel Crazelton was seasick. The worlds were clay-colored oceans, and they heaved with billions upon billions of half-animated Indians. Indians making up the heaving world-waves, with their buffalo and their small game! What else was roiling and boiling in that clay-sea? There were the fast and snazzy cars waiting for the archangel of cars to come and evoke them into metallic animation. There were the later horses, clay-maned, snorting out of that underfootness. There was the crowding, churning multitudinousness of it all. (Lafferty 1976b: 69)

This vision epitomises vertiginous monstrosity: a heaving continuum of clay, fauna, and (natural-culturally) cars and angels! All is in a ructious flux of 'half-animated' becoming that exhibits the liminality and category crisis of the monstrous, while the sheer overwhelming scale and multiplicity of the scene ('world after world after world', 'billions upon billions') invokes monstrous excess or exorbitance.[81]

The monstrosity of the epiphany is also due to its impact and meaning. The story in which it occurs is one of recognising with dizzying profundity that aboriginal biomes and peoples are always 'already there' or 'there first' (52, 53), preceding all colonialist projects—and *continue to persist*, no matter how seemingly invisible or 'implicit' to

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[80] This too resonates with the central Japanese term for monster, *yokai,* which etymologically indicates 'strangeness, mystery, or suspicion' and is thus 'invoked as a technical term for things beyond the realm of explanation' (Foster 2012: 135). This supple term 'has become an umbrella signifier that can be variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or *any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence*' (135, emphasis added). 'This inclusiveness is significant: in distinction to many conceptions of monstrousness in the West, the category of *yōkai* is vexingly diffuse' (ibid.). This inclusive/diffusive sense of monstrosity is not vexing for reading Lafferty, but welcome.

[81] In many Native American creation stories or 'emergence stories' (Mould 2004: 61), the humans arise from out of the ground. In some Choctaw versions, people 'came from the bosom of the earth, being formed of yellow clay' (Mould: 65). In the Cherokee story, Dayunisi the water-beetle retrieves a handful of mud from the chaotic watery underworld, which grows into the world we occupy. Christopher Teuton comments: 'The mud that Dayunisi brings to the surface represents not only land, but raw, experiential knowledge and energy that must be accounted for and shaped in order for the world to spread and grow' (Teuton 2010: xiv). This resonates with the buckling, watery clay surging toward animation in Lafferty's vision here.

colonialist eyes (cf. Anner 2001). One of the clay people later mocks the Colonel: ‘Yeah, can’t see us very well, can you, Colonel Weak-Eyes?’ (73). But in this monstrous moment the Colonel sees more than his mind can bear. ‘I’m breaking apart into pieces,’ he moans, ‘Reason fails us, and what is left? No world is firm, no foundation is solid. I am falling endlessly into a bottomless pit’ (69). His sanity is threatened not just by the overwhelming vision but that it seems, at least in that moment, to be the real landscape not only of the planet but of the cosmos: ‘We can't take a step anywhere without stepping on an implicit Indian face in the heaving clay,’ he worries, ‘without treading buffalo hump—oh, this is insanity!’ (70). And the vision is not only extensive but abyssal. The ‘bottomless pit’ into which Crazelton is pitched ‘isn't just the surface, it’s the immeasurable depth also. You could dig a well forever and not come to the bottom of Indians’ (Lafferty: 72) nor to the bottom of the earth from which human and nonhuman animals are emerging. In all these ways he is swallowed into the more-than-human ‘crowding, churning multitudinousness of it all’. Hence, like the roiling multiplicity of the Bird-Master’s giants, here the animated ground that grounds all creatures surges forth as another (bioregional) iteration of the Vertigo Monster.

Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday relates an ecomonstrous visionary scene of sky rather than earth, which nevertheless has strange resonances with the antiecomimetic faunal commotion and animated clay in Lafferty’s scene above. It tells of the Kiowa ‘storm spirit’ in a mythopoeic evocation of how the Oklahoma plains can go from ‘bright and calm and quiet’ to ‘black with the sudden violence of weather’ (Momaday 1976 [1969]: 49).

> This is how it was: Long ago the Kiowas decided to make a horse; they decided to make it out of clay, and so they began to shape the clay with their hands. Well, the horse began to be. But it was a terrible, terrible thing. It began to writhe, slowly at first, then faster and faster until there was a great commotion everywhere. The wind grew up and carried everything up into the sky. The Kiowas were afraid of that awful thing, and they went running about, talking to it. And at last it was calm. Even now, when they see the storm clouds gathering, the Kiowas know what it is: that a strange wild animal roams on the sky. It has the head of a horse and the tail of a great fish. Lightning comes from its mouth, and the tail, whipping and thrashing on the air, makes the high, hot wind of the tornado. But they speak to it, saying “Pass over me.” They are not afraid of *Man-ka-ih*, for it understands their language. (48)

The exorbitant writhing of this clay-storm (like Lafferty’s clay-sea) is a ‘terrible, terrible thing’ and an ‘awful thing’, a ‘strange wild animal’ breathing lightning and ‘whipping and

thrashing' the sky. Yet the Kiowas make peace with this hybrid monster of Oklahoma meteorology, including it in their language and cosmography—though it is no less dangerously monstrous, no less a vertiginous category crisis, for all that it is accepted and respected.

We may consider such exorbitant bioregional epiphanies and mythographies to exemplify an ecological iteration of what Timothy Beal (drawing on Rudolf Otto) calls *monstrum tremendum* or 'monstrous sublime' (Beal 2002: 6, 117). He notes that the experience of horror is sometimes described in ways reminiscent of religious experience. 'Both are often characterized as an encounter with mysterious otherness that elicits a vertigo-like combination of both fear and desire, repulsion and attraction' (Beal: 7; cf. Del Toro and Zicree 2013: 66; Petersen 2017: 126, 135). Note yet again the language of the vertiginous, although here it is keyed not as much toward redefining one's categories and worldview as toward sheer encounter with mystery, with uncanny or numinous alterity, and the concomitant disconcerting fusion of fear and desire. Adapting Otto's phrasing, we might say there is a numinous 'wholly other' that arises *from within* the shared house (*oikos*): namely, the nonhuman (Beal: 4). As Otto remarks in regard to the monsters Behemoth and Leviathan in the book of Job, 'the monstrous is just the mysterious in a gross form' (Otto 1950 [1923]: 82). That *gross form* is flesh and bones and thus can be the site of an *ecological* numinous.

Or, in Freudian terms of the uncanny (*unheimlich*, unhomely): 'The *unheimlich* is the other within, that which is "there" in the house but cannot be comprehended by it or integrated into it'—and thus, encounters with monsters 'make one feel *not at home at home*' (Beal: 5, emphasis in original). Crucially, however, the *oikos* home or house can be expanded from personal and social psychology 'to the entire cosmos (the world ecology as "house")' (5). We may thereby even conceive of 'a return of the ecologically repressed' (Beal: 161) or an uncanny resurgence of what Wendy Wheeler calls the 'biosemiotic unconscious' (Wheeler 2014: 73). That is, if we think in terms of a *more-than-human* self or 'we' or 'us' (cf. Bennett 2010: 110 ff.), then that which is repressed in an ecomonstrous poetics is the presence and agency of nonhumans, which returns to haunt us as the *ecological* uncanny.[82]

[82] Indeed, Deloria suggests that 'modern industrial man has largely exchanged the *unconscious of nature* for the unconscious of his collectivity' while Native traditions have not (Deloria 2016: 154, emphasis added).

Return of the Ecologically Repressed: 'We Take The Place Of The Monsters They Have Lost'

Lafferty's science fiction novel *Past Master* conveniently emblematises the ecological numinous and uncanny in a sort of abstract or symbolic way that applies more concretely to his bioregional works. Andrew Ferguson, in his introduction to the Library of America's new edition of *Past Master*, kindly references my own work and aptly encapsulates an ecomonstrous reading of the novel. He notes that since its publication in 1968, there are certain 'elements in *Past Master* that have come more strongly to the fore—in particular, the ecocritical or even "ecomonstrous" aspects of the work':

> The latter term, a coinage by Lafferty scholar Daniel Otto Jack Petersen, describes the ways in which monstrosity is mapped onto the environment—not merely as compensation for and irruption of repressed psychological factors, though there's plenty of that here too […] but also in the wider sense of an encounter with the natural world and the nonhuman more generally. (Ferguson 2019: xv)

I suggest we can conflate or collapse these repressions and encounters through notions of the ecological uncanny and ecological numinous.

A key character in the novel in this regard is an oceanic, shapeshifting, 'eutheopathic'[83] seal/man called Rimrock.[84] Rimrock's race, the 'ansels', are metamorphic natives of the planet Astrobe who take bipedal, quadrupedal, and pinnipedal (fin-limbed) form as needed. In their liminal and eutheopathic capacities, Rimrock says his seal-like people haunt the watery unconscious of their utopian colonisers.[85]

> "Regular people have sealed off the interior ocean that used to be in every man," Rimrock said. "They closed the ocean and ground up its monsters for fertilizer. That is why we so often enter into peoples' dreams. We take the place of the monsters they have lost." (Lafferty 2019: 80)

[83] Lafferty's coinage: *eu* = good/well; *theos* = deity; *pathos* = (strong) feeling/emotion—a feeling of divine goodness (no doubt with shades of empathy, sympathy, telepathy).

[84] There is a southwestern echo here, all the weirder in naming a seal-like oceanic being. Rimrock is a landform that features occasionally in *Blood Meridian* as well. Lafferty's use of the geomorphological feature as a first name is not, as it happens, original. *Rimrock Jones* is also the title of a 1917 southwestern novel by Dane Coolidge (and 1918 silent film), featuring the titular character as hero.

[85] The interstellar immigrants from Earth have orchestrated the planet into a utopia they call the Astrobe Dream or the Golden Dream.

Crucially, Rimrock makes this claim at the climax of a mythopoeic (and occasionally comic) account of his people's long evolutionary rise from marine to amphibious existence (and who now persist in a mysterious symbiosis with the human colonisers that is never fully articulated). Rimrock encapsulates the origin of the ansels thus: 'Our legend is that we are the people who climbed all the way to the sky, broke holes in it, and climbed out into a strange world that is above the sky. This world that you know, the noon-day world [...] is the world above the sky. You do not feel it, but we do' (78-79). It is in this *feeling* of deep-time inhuman origins that the eutheopathic ansels enter humanity's unconscious and replace the inner monsters humans have lost (because they ground the monsters of more-than-humanism up to fertilise a humanistic utopia).[86]

Rimrock chides the utopian humans that they will not likely feel the wonder of his origin legend:

> To your viewpoint, we came up out of the ocean onto the land. But it is yourselves who do not appreciate the magnitude of it. You did it so long ago that you have forgotten it, both in your minds and your underminds. But how can you forget that you live on the top of the sky? (80) [87]

To correct this forgetfulness, our 'underminds' are haunted throughout the novel by the strange evolutionary wonder that the ansels represent.[88] 'Out of the mind's cellar', for example, a series of vivid and uncanny capsule dreams are scattered throughout the novel, each involving emblematic nonhuman animals: fox, lion, chicken, spider, hawk and other kinds of nonhumans such as cockle shells, volcanoes, talking toys, and one moment where a person dreams that 'a thunder came and sat down at the table with him' (64-65).

More viscerally, the planet's 'feral regions' are an externalised horror-comic dreamscape of exorbitant (and exuberant) more-than-human category confusions and grotesqueries in which monstrous predators both fleshly and ghostly abound. Yet even the utopians know they cannot clear out such outré things and places, much as they would like to, for 'the feral strips are part of the balanced ecology of Astrobe. Destroy them, and the

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[86] Cf. Anthony Lioi's call to adopt the Asian 'dragon of wisdom' as an emblem of 'ecological wisdom' (Lioi 2007: 22, 23). I.e. monsters are not limited to being omens of ecological revenge or destruction but may also be guides and reminders of ecological knowledge and praxis.

[87] In some Choctaw creation or 'emergence' stories, humans were formed underground and only reached 'the surface through a long passageway' and 'ever afterwards, remembered the hill from the summit of which they first beheld the light of the sun' (Mould 2004: 65).

[88] On carrying our oceanic origins within us, see Alaimo 2014: 188-189.

balanced plant and animal life will go out of balance' and 'civilized Astrobe' would be 'ruined' (111). As Ferguson remarks, quoting the novel:

> In fact, from the ecomonstrous point of view, "the civilized world of Astrobe is really of no consequence. . . . It is but a thin yellow fungus growing on a part of the hide of the planet. Should this shaggy orb shiver its hide uncommonly but once, the Golden Astrobe civilization would be destroyed instantly." All the accomplishments of the Utopian architects, all the pinnacles to which they have pushed humanity (or pushed humanity off of), are as nothing in the face of deeper ecological might. (Ferguson 2019: xvi)

Thus, the ecomonstrous phantasmagoria of the feral regions uncannily evokes this ecological plenitude and power—as well as the haunting porosity of the human enveloped by the nonhuman.

Yet the novel evinces more-than-human vulnerability too. Perhaps the most poignant moment of ecological uncanny is Rimrock's brief description of what 'occupations' ansels follow in certain vast, filthy, un-utopian cites like Barrio and Cathead (voluntarily populated by those who refuse to participate in the Golden Dream of the 'civilized' cities). Of he and his fellow ansels (with mention of humans too, the 'poor lungers') Rimrock relates:

> Some are in communication, since each of us is a communications center. But most of us work as commercial divers, underwater welders, pier-builders, that sort of thing. Water is still our first element, but the waters around Cathead where I work have become so foul from the uncontrolled industries that they bother us. The poor lungers of Cathead cough up their lungs from the contaminated air. We suffer in our five bladders from the contaminated water. It is a rare treat for us to get away for a day or two in clean air or in clean ocean. (Lafferty 2019: 80-81)

The picture of these eutheopathic numinous nonhumans working in such industrial deprivation haunts the human conscience in regard to anthropogenic ills. Ansels are themselves exorbitant category confusions of human-animal dream-flesh. As such, these beings exemplify how monsters can haunt us not only with intimations of evil or terror, but *eutheopathically*, with good/divine pathos and even inhuman fragility.[89] There's is a 'good haunting' that makes us feel our uncanny entanglement with the inherent (and sometimes exuberant) grotesqueries of bodily and ecological life in general and the frisson of

[89] Foster notes that certain Buddhist entities are 'both frightening and benevolent, of monstrous proportions and supernatural proclivities' (Foster 2012: 136).

anthropogenic damage in particular. In the latter case, monsters may even become objects of pity, mercy, duty—as well as admiration. For Lafferty, the ansels represent the monsters we try to grind up and dissipate in our hearts (our deep, oceanic interiors), which nevertheless numinously contact us from our *exterior* evolutionary and ecologically-interconnected world.

Following the template of *Past Master*, let us say, then, that monsters are uncanny and numinous irruptions in our 'ecological imaginary'. An ecological imaginary (or environmental imaginary), adapted from the concept of the social imaginary, is a given culture's taken-for-granted views of its natural environment (cf. Hagerman 2010). Importantly, an ecological imaginary is not just about how humans perceive nature, but 'how the natural environment shapes the attitudes, discourses, and practices of the people who dwell there' (Cidell 2010: 933). Ecomonstrous irruptions in the ecological imaginary reaffirm an uncanny sense of human concerns moulded by nonhuman contours, of 'the human social economic arrangements *shaped by* and adapted to the geomorphic ones' (Kirkpatrick Sale, cited in Lynch 2008: 20, emphasis added).[90] We see this numinous, irruptive, natural-cultural co-shaping again and again in Lafferty's bioregional fiction.

Monsters Will Monstrate: PhenOMENology And The Monstrosity Of Adduction

Let us now tether Lafferty's emblematic ecomonstrous to a theoretical discourse that will prove fruitful throughout the remainder of the thesis. Exploring the limits of semiosis and communication, Igor Klyukanov's recent essay 'The Monstrosity of Adduction' notes that scientific 'abduction' ideally proceeds from hypotheses to best explanation to testing and then demonstration of 'true knowledge'. However, Klyukanov complicates this demonstrative chain of investigation by noting Shane Ewegen's admonition that 'one would do well to hear the root "monstrum" in "de-monstration"' (Klyukanov 2018: 135). For although this scientific methodology is understood to turn 'presented experience' into 'unproblematic' knowledge, 'when we talk about experience as present, we should, above all, view it as *pre-sent*, or monstrated' (135, emphasis added). Klyukanov offers Garnet Butchart's remark as an explication of this: 'Monstration is the fact of showing that has

[90] Thus, 'culture is *not* of our own making, infused as it is by biological, geological, and climatic forces. […] These impinge on us as much as we impinge on them' (Bennett 2010: 115).

already begun, but has not yet made sense' (135). Whatever this 'pre-sent' monstrating experience is, it does not require us to make sense of it before it can show itself. Given this, Klyukanov rehearses the familiar Latin etymology of 'monster' as rooted in *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn) to innovatively disclose yet another monster lurking in academic terminology: 'Thus, "monstration" is also a divine omen, foreboding, and warning. In this respect, we can see monstrosity in "phenOMENology" as the study of anything that appears' (135).[91]

Drawing then on the Greek bloodline of 'monster', Klyukanov elaborates:

> The word 'monstrosity' in Greek is 'teras', understood as 'wonder', 'marvel', and 'divinity'. A 'teras' is a wondrous sign through which the divine shows itself in some manner. In other words, a 'teras' is to be understood as the appearance of something (divine) in something else to which it does not properly or naturally belong (human). 'Such showing must thus be understood in terms of excess, indeed in terms of eminent excess, of an access inhering in the very thing of which it is in excess. ... So understood, a monster is precisely the belonging together of a divine excess and the mundane thing through which such an excess shows itself.'[92] And, it is this 'belonging together', this connection, that we see, or fail to see. (Klyukanov: 136)

Belonging and not-belonging converge in the *teras,* and particularly through a coupling or cobbling or cohabitation of exorbitant excess and the mundane, which thus induces conceptual and experiential vertigo.[93] Such is Lafferty's weird bioregionalism, a belonging amid strange strangers. For the *teras* is not merely 'from beyond', it is *in the house with us* (and we with it). 'In other words, monstrosity appears as the sublime that "exceeds nature within nature"' (Klyukanov: 137; quoting John Sallis). Importantly, Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics emphasises that this excess is an access that inheres in *anything* 'mundane', all earthlings whatever (cf. Ewegen 2014: 106). Put in terms of the ecological numinous, the *teras* monster is the 'wholly other' *inside the house* with us. Put in terms of the ecological uncanny, it is 'that which is "there" in the house but cannot be comprehended by it or integrated into it' and such monstrous excess makes 'one feel *not at home at home*' (Beal: 5).

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[91] This moves quite suddenly into the radical suggestion that monsters are literally everywhere, in everything, as each thing 'appears' or shows itself. Cf. MacCormack: 'Teratology […] celebrates the singularity of each monster while showing that we are all monsters in our singularity' (2012: 307). (An ecomonstrous poetics reads this as a more-than-human 'we'.) We will return to this notion in chapter three.

[92] Ewegen 2014: 106.

[93] 'A τέρας is a terrestrial sign through which the excessive character of the divine manifests itself' (Ewegen 2014: 106).

The Ghost-Elk Will Whistle and Birds Will Eat Men's Souls for the Journey

Consider one more scene of the boy and the computer fishing on a cloud, which we elided in our discussion of 'Bird-Master' in chapter one. Recall that the story has already indicated a numinous nonhuman being in the legend of the ghost-elk that whistles to inaugurate the seasonal bird migration (and concomitant human deaths). From their vantage on the cloud:

> The Elk appeared on the moors below, right on the edge of our weed-patch. He looked like a painted elk. An elk painted by a good artist is as noble an animal as there is in the world, but a run-of-the-moors elk is unkempt and blear-eyed and grubby, and a loud-mouth. But this elk was noble, and there was something puzzling about his size down below there. He stood up taller than the tall trees around him, but I had the feeling that if he were in a growth of toadstools he would stand up only about as high proportionally above them as he stood above the trees. (Lafferty 1983a: 34)

This wry and antiecomimetic literalisation of a 'sublime that exceeds nature within nature' is difficult to even picture. There is an elk that looks painted rather than natural (and a humorous refusal to romanticise the latter), which stands below them simultaneously gigantic and miniature—a 'belonging together' of numinous excess and the mundane. 'This unsettling oscillation between incommensurable frames is the essence of gigantism' (Cohen 1999: xiii). Thus, this passage's ecomonstrous category crisis along multiple vectors crowns a series of destabilising tall lies (see chapter one) with a woozy omen of inhuman magnitude.

The boy, Bird-Master, describes yet further inhuman excesses and grotesqueries, which this exorbitant portent portends. Speaking of the elk:

> He will test all the sixteen winds, and then he will test them again. And then, in a couple of hours or days, when he is satisfied with the conditions, he will give the whistle. And the night after he gives the whistle, several persons in the neighborhood will die; and the birds will eat the souls of the persons who have died to gain strength for the migration. And sometime on the following day (probably tomorrow) the birds will rise and begin to turn in mills and turmoils, the geese and ducks flying the highest in the mills, then the swifts and swallows just below them, then the crows and hawks and eagles, then the shrikes and larks, and all the other birds lower than these. Then

> they will all peel off from the rotating mills and fly south in their formations according to their species.
>
> "And I will fly with them." (34-35)

Excesses on excess as phenomena that are very 'natural' (migrations and murmurations) are rendered weird and monstrous as the human is unceremoniously devoured into intra-inhuman rituals. That is, the strange wonder of bioregional plenitude is yet again revivified by ecomonstrous poetics. Yet the human, if it can succumb to porosity and transformation as Bird-Master can, may soar with this inhuman exorbitance (that is, humbly and strangely participate in flourishing ecological coexistence). When asked how he will do it, the boy replies: 'Heck, Epikt, when I slip out of my bones I can fly with the swiftest birds and never get out of breath' (ibid.).

Here the birds no longer form giants at the bidding of the Bird-Master but instead rise and rise into layers of 'mills and turmoils' before peeling off to fly south in species formation. The teeming, whirling image evokes a different, less anthropic gigantism. Lafferty, in fact, is not alone in such weird evocations of Oklahoma's birds. The strange and portentous behaviour of amassing birds is a central motif of LeAnne Howe's explication of the *nukfokechi* of tribalography, or the power of Native stories. Howe even narrates a similar liminal slippage between human and avian in visions of a 'man-bird' that omens death and the flight of the souls of the departed up with the birds (not unlike Lafferty here, minus his characteristic devourment) and of her grandmother appearing in bird form ('as a huge brown hawk about the size of a person hovering over my bed') to omen life when Howe thought she was dying in the hospital (Howe 2002: 31-32). Thus, Lafferty once again evinces a vibrant if volatile fusion of frontier tall tale with Native storytelling. Furthermore, given the para-human narrator and central character of 'Bird-Master', I suggest that Lafferty's exorbitant agglomerations of nonhumans here are evocative of forces and interests quite beyond the human. It is a monstration 'that has already begun, but has not yet made sense'. The raucous yarn thus throws something of a sidelight on ongoing inhuman projects. It is an avian phenOMENology glimpsed only out the corner of the human eye, yet tangentially entangling, even devouring, the human.

Shuddering Before the Opacity of Monsters

Even with the comic overtones, there is often at least a hint (and sometimes much more) of frisson or discomfort in the anomalies and boundary crossings Lafferty continually depicts, especially when these follow closely one after the other and amass into a narrative exorbitance that swallows the reader into the bewildering natural-cultural plexus of his bioregional storyworlds. Indeed, occasionally the shuddering may outweigh the chuckling. (Yet there is no suggestion that the inhuman monstrations are in any way malign.) This shuddering is important (cf. Smith 2011: 68-69). As Klyukanov notes, the 'immediate presence of monstrosity' is something 'that can only be felt. It is something scary and truly anomalous, i.e., crossing boundaries and showing itself in unexpected ways, and thus difficult to classify' (Klyukanov: 136). The monster is thus *scary* before it is even meaningful, a fact to be pondered more carefully by cultural critics of the monster who leap a little too quickly to the assumption that 'the monster exists only to be read' (Cohen 1996: 4). We must first be impacted by the monstrous, must feel its frisson and the attendant difficulty and complexity of parsing and explicating the monster's weird significations.[94] Ecomonstrous poetics thus acknowledges a degree of spine-tingling *opacity* in the monster. For it is the nonhuman that is monstrating through ecomonstrous imagery and it will not be reduced to a purely human symbology. Critics and scholars, be warned. Monsters are showing, but we cannot see through them.

Unclosure and Non-Demonstrative Ecstasy: Playing Along with Monsters

How then *do* we respond to monsters and the monstrous? Klyukanov argues that the 'immediate presence of monstrosity challenges our traditional logic and calls for a special kind of response' (137). That is, we must find some way to respond to that which never

[94] Karl Steel, citing this same passage from Cohen, remarks on the tendency amongst monster theorists across the millennia to read right *through* the monster's (to them) transparent symbolic body to the thing it symbolises. He deems it the 'interpretive special pleading' of a fastidious project of 'enclosing monsters into neat structures of significance' (Steel 2012: 263). It is certainly not Cohen's intention to enclose the monster so—quite the reverse. Yet his insistence that the monster is 'pure culture' conceives of the monster as an almost transitive entity, which seems to lead inevitably to a closed anthropocentric circle (cf. Weinstock 2020: 3).

stops showing. Klyukanov reiterates that we can think the scientific method 'demonstrates the true knowledge (or "shows it completely" if we look at the meaning of the verb "to demonstrate") only if we fail to hear the root "monstrum" in "de-monstration"' (137). Hypothesising toward a best explanation can't 'handle' monstrous anomaly, he argues, because monsters forbid closure. 'We can never fully account for meaning, ever strange and elusive, and we can never show (or demonstrate) the truth completely, because monstrosity will monstrate (or show)' (137). Klyukanov here implicitly imbues all meaning whatever with monstrosity. *Nothing* can be fully known because a thing never ceases showing (monstrating) and this excess of disclosure keeps any full exhaustion of its meaning perpetually elusive and strange. There is a sense here of things as so resplendent that they darken those they shine upon, of things so overflowing with disclosure that they foreclose closure in a plenum of permanent monstrosity. Let us call this *unclosure*. This is, in fact, what we find again and again in Lafferty's monstrous encounters, which open humans and nonhumans to each other without terminus. His Oklahoma bioregion thereby becomes a home that is never completely comprehended, fully accounted for, truly demonstrated, but which is instead 'ever strange and elusive', never done showing us its more-than-human plenitude.

Consider his story 'Condillac's Statue, or Wrens in His Head' (1970), a rare excursion into a European bioregion, in this case 19th century France—yet it parallels the unclosure of Lafferty's vision of the U.S. (south)west. In this fabulation, a few philosophers conduct an experiment in which they enable a local statue to slowly acquire animal senses, beginning with smell. The statue's 'stone nose' is awakened and he 'smelled for a month, and the smells informed his stone':

> Lathered horses, foam-whitened harness, green goop in the horse trough, those were smells of the little park and the big country. Wet flint stones, grackle birds and the mites on them; river grass and marl grass and loam grass; oaks and chestnuts, wagon-wheel grease, men in leather; stone in shade, and stone in sun; hot mules, and they do not smell the same as hot horses, mice in the grass roots, muskiness of snakes; sharpness of fox hair, air of badger holes; brown dust of the Orléans road, red dust of the road to Châteaudun; crows that have fed today, and those who have not; time-polished coach wood; turtles eating low grapes, and the grapes being bruised and eaten; sheep and goats; cows in milk, new stilted colts; long loaves, corks of wine bottles, cicadas in pig-weeds; hands of smiths and feet of charcoal burners; whetted iron on travelers; pungent blouses of river men; oatcakes and sour cream; wooden shoes, goose eggs, new-spread dung, potato bugs; thatchers at work; clover, vetch, hairy legs of bumblebees. There are no two of these things that have the same smell. (Lafferty 1982: 59)

The resplendence of specificity and *ekphrasis* (or 'ultra vivid description') is overwhelming here (cf. Morton 2011: 170). Just look at, or rather smell, all the micro-monstrosities Lafferty folds into the formative sensual experience of this *teras*, this marvel or anomaly of a stone statue acquiring olfactory consciousness (category crisis). The 'hyperfocus' (Buell 1995: 7) of seemingly impossible sensing again 'exceeds nature within nature' as it not only catalogues a pungent density of fauna, flora, and artefacts, but also a cascade of aromatic bivalences that distinguish the smells of stones in sun or shade, of hot mules or hot horses, the dust of one road or another, fed or unfed crows, and (oddest of all) discriminates the smell of turtles eating grapes from that of grapes eaten by turtles! Akin to the subtle (and fanciful) ecological awareness evinced in the swirling list adduced in explication of the boy learning left from right in 'Eurema's Dam', this list too nearly loses track of the human altogether (it is not even a human doing the smelling after all). Nevertheless, the artefacts and bodies of humans are enfolded, though nearly submerged, here; and the impression is that this litany of 'monstrous miniatures' (as we have seen frequently adduced in Lafferty's tales) could expand indefinitely in breadth and depth and peculiarity (the list's most esoteric smell so far perhaps being the 'hairy legs of bumblebees').[95] Monstrosity will monstrate, 'ever strange and elusive', without closure.

Relevant to what I call Lafferty's horror-comic mode, Klyukanov connects the unclosure of monstrosity directly to humour, noting that though we may enjoy 'figuring out' jokes and wordplay, the world itself is an 'unfinished joke' to which we thus can't know the 'ultimate punch line', it having not yet arrived (Klyukanov: 137). 'Yet, we still can, and must, enjoy the joke without the ultimate punch line' he says, citing Kant's argument that human reason is 'burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss [...] but which it also cannot answer since they transcend every capacity of human reason' (137). We cannot dismiss but we cannot answer. Yet this is not an impasse. Rather, we inhabit a world of ludic and comic monstrosity, an unfinished joke which we anticipatively and participatively enjoy as it unfolds toward its cosmic punchline.[96] Playing along with the world-joke is another aspect of monstrous unclosure.

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[95] Lafferty seems not to 'look past' the 'invertebrate biodiversity' of his region to its 'more obviously appealing picturesque or sublime elements', but instead evinces something of the 'intense and abiding biophilia' towards invertebrates that Lynch observes in Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony* (Lynch 2008: 142, 155). See especially Lafferty's story 'McGonigal's Worm' (1960) in which invertebrates save humanity from extinction.

[96] This comports with Ewegen's understanding of Plato's fusion of comedy and monstrosity as the method by which one ascends from language to being (Ewegen 2014: 11, 68).

Well, then, how do we play along with the monstrous world? Klyukanov asks: 'what would be the ground that relates' to the 'terrifying form of monstrosity' (137). The answer, he proposes, is adduction. Distinct from the methods of induction, abduction, and deduction, Klyukanov cites Mark Blaug's explanation that 'adduction is the nonlogical operation of leaping from the chaos that is the real world to a hunch or tentative conjecture' (138).[97] While abduction hypothesises with the aim of eventual demonstration, adduction reasons in a slightly stranger way in response to the excessive monstrous qualities of the world.

> Adduction [is] a nondemonstrative style of reasoning which fits well with the nature of monstrosity: a monster is not really known through observation, rather, 'the monster is known through its effect, its impact.'[98] In other words, adduction does not demonstrate anything, but makes it possible. It calls on us so we can feel the effect of anomaly, and this is as close as one can get to the (limit of) phenomenology of experience. (138)

When monsters show up, we are called upon; we feel; we graze the limits of experience. We don't demonstrate. Rather, we have been, as it were, demonstrated upon—impacted.

As a consequence of this impact, the adductive style of reasoning seems to echo back the monster's anomaly and unclosure. Adduction is a 'kind of reasoning that supplies new ideas [...] because adduction is a reasoning that moves by addition, and thus adduced judgments are amplicative [sic], i.e., they amplify or add something new', which goes beyond 'what can be known simply by analyzing the concepts involved' (140).[99] Impacted by monstrous excess, our thought becomes amplificative. The monstrous showing elicits leaps, hunches, conjectures, new ideas. Anomaly begets anomaly. Hence, in adduction we *amplify amplitude*. (The 'amplify' in this simple construction is our creative response; the 'amplitude' is the more-than-human monstration that 'calls on' and induces that creativity.)

It is not hard to see how the tall tale and related narrative strategies are apt art forms for amplifying amplitude. Adduction also appears to be another 'Choctawan way of seeing the world' (Howe 2002: 34). Recall that '*nukfokechi*' is that which 'brings forth

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[97] Blaug, Mark. 1992 [1980]. *The Methodology of Economics, or How Economists Explain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17.
[98] Mittman 2013: 6.
[99] New Materialist thinking overlaps with adduction's emphasis on feeling and amplification: 'new concepts arise as much through affective engagement as through rational demonstration' (Sheldon 2015: 215).

knowledge and inspires us to make the eventful leap that one thing leads to another' (Howe: 32). It would seem that Lafferty, for example, *feels* the monstrations of a world where 'everything is alive' and 'everything is a mystery' and 'everything is dangerous', where 'everything touches everything' and 'everything is very, very strange' (Howe: 33), and thus he feels called upon to leap in and 'amplify or add something new' to this exorbitant interconnectivity, be it anthropo-avian hybridities or lithic-sensual anomalies—and no matter how dangerous. To return to an example from *Past Master,* the psychic power is so strong in the feral regions that imaginative creations can become exorbitant flesh: 'When children of the feral strips play "monsters," they make monsters that can be seen and smelled, and which on occasion have eaten them up' (Lafferty 2019: 110). Amplifying the amplitude of the more-than-human world will likely gobble us up into post-anthropocentric coexistence. This is the un-settler approach to settling in the land. Yet as we will see, especially in chapter five, Lafferty's ludic-comic ecomonstrous conveys at least the possibility of renewal in a surrender to more-than-human entanglement.

So, on this understanding of monstrosity and adduction, we see Lafferty's ebullient antiecomimetic poetics leap from one anomaly to the next and back again and on again, adding amplification after amplification in tall tale exuberance. Indeed, at times Lafferty can almost seem to leap from the chaos of the world to a narrative chaos, but with each reading of a particular story or novel, the adductive ligature that lashes idea to idea and image to image becomes much firmer and more finely woven as readers participate more and more deeply. The precarity of Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction is that it sits perilously (and jubilantly) between the incomputable panoply of the world and an artful armature of (more-than-human) meaning-making.

Also vitally relevant to Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics is that encountering the monstrating monster through nondemonstrative adduction pushes Klyukanov's exposition, perhaps surprisingly, toward an explicit affirmation of what are known as the 'theological virtues' of faith, hope, and love (cf. Eberl 2016: 181). 'With adduction, we heed what is, perhaps, the main warning by monsters—always display something that is human, all-too-human: vulnerability, humility, care, faith, hope, and love' (Klyukanov: 140).[100] This is the *fundamental* warning of monsters because it is built into what they are and how they impact us (pace Weinstock 2020: 3).[101] As noted at the beginning of this chapter, many

[100] His conflation of Nietzsche and St. Paul here is fascinating and suggestive.
[101] Weinstock programmatically asserts that the monster 'compels two types of responses: to understand it and find a category to contain it—that is, to assimilate it into an existing or altered epistemological framework—

scholars have shown that there is abundant historical evidence of our tendency to use the figure of the monster as a construction of our anxieties projected onto others. Yet the monster's initial omen to us is in the contrary direction: it produces a fear-wonder (*monstrum tremendum*) that calls for humility, trust, and compassion. 'Only this way, treading most lightly, can we enter the realm of the critical' (Klyukanov: 140). Only after we heed this portent of vulnerability, may we proceed to our critical work on the monster, adductively. When we 'feel the effect of anomaly', we surrender to amplificative monstration rather than reductive demonstration.

Accordingly, in this strange and fearful (yet ludic) borderland of dizzying multiplicity and liminality, let us make a leap and conjecture that the monster is an exorbitant more-than-human omen of the excess, anomaly, and boundary-confusion of all that is beyond us, beyond culture—and thus a warning of our finitude and contingency and our need to care for others (fellow more-than-humans, all earthlings) in this web of wild fragility and power. Following the monster's own monstration of eminent excess, I suggest that the monster *is* this excess, this refulgently endarkening unclosure, before it is a signal or symbol of anything else. Lafferty's fiction, it seems to me, hews to this construal of monsters and the monstrous.

Ulvsgedi: Wondrous Mixes in the Middle World

For the final section of this chapter, we turn to Native American monstrous imaginaries to flesh out exemplifications of the monstrous that resonate with Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics in ways that are not as clearly found in European conceptions of the monster. Not unlike the non-Western monsters mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Native American monstrous manifests along a spectrum: from evil beings to sacred helpers, from the playful to the uncanny, the spiritual to the earthly—and usually relating in one way or another to bioregion. As with the influence of Choctaw *shukha anumpa* and the storytelling of Cherokee *gagoga,* I here suggest that Native American monsters influence Lafferty implicitly and that his storyworlds evince resonances with the Native American monstrous rather than directly borrowing or adapting particular Native monsters.

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or to stamp it out of existence' (2020: 3). Clearly, adduction is a *tertium quid*. Nor is it quite the same as 'giving voice to the monster', at least in Weinstock's construal, which is to hear the monster (= the demonised) tell its own story and thereby locate the 'true monster' (= the demoniser) (2020: 28). That is a worthwhile enterprise for specific strains of cultural monster theory, but it does not 'give voice' to the natural-cultural exorbitance outlined here.

There is certainly no shortage of monstrous tales among Native American nations. Commenting on the proliferation of monster legends, the Cherokee anthropologists Anna and Jack Kilpatrick remarked: 'The imagination of Cherokee storytellers appears ever to have been exercised by mythic monsters' (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1995 [1964]: 59). It is no surprise, then, to find in the Kilpatricks' landmark collection *Friends of Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokees* (1964) an entire section entitled 'Tales of Monsters' as well as another section entitled 'Uk'ten' Stories', the latter dedicated entirely to a sole notorious monster—also known as 'Uk'tan'—that is 'strikingly similar' to 'the European dragon' (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1995: 43; cf. Teuton 2012: 98). In the more recent collection, *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club* (2012), there is a section titled '*Ulvsgedi* (The Wondrous)', which includes tales of the strange and uncanny and a particular subsection entitled simply 'Monsters' (Teuton 2012: 236). Similarly, the collection *Choctaw Tales* features a section entitled 'Supernatural Legends and Encounters', which contains strange and creepy stories of devils, demons, ghosts, shapeshifters, and headless men. It also includes less generic entities such as 'Half-Horse, Half-Man', 'Manlike Creature', and 'Big Black Hairy Monster', as well as ecologically eerie places and things such as 'Big Pond', 'A Big Hog', 'The Black Stump', and 'Pile of Rocks' (Mould 2004: ix). 'Undecipherable creatures' and 'unexplainable events' thickly populate Choctaw legend and lore to the degree that 'such creatures and events are unusual but not unexpected' (Mould: 94).

Indeed, in Native American cultural imaginaries, monsters and the monstrous (in the inclusive/diffusive sense we are cultivating) are not limited to a subgenre. Moments and elements of exorbitance, hybridity, liminality, uncanny, numinous, and weird are woven throughout their storytelling, such as the transformations and grotesqueries of the 'Animal Stories' that have their own separate sections in these collections. As previously noted, Cherokee *gagoga* tell tales 'of the ancient time when animals could talk and when monsters roamed the earth' (Teuton 2012: 7-8). Yet the American Indian monstrous is not confined to 'ancient time'. Contemporary tales of personal experiences abound as well, such as a reminiscence from childhood involving uncanny encounters with the Little People and a ghost (Teuton 2012: 89-93; cf. Mould: 95-96) or the contemporary bird-human transformations that LeAnne Howe relates.

Christopher Teuton recalls learning of the centrality of Native American monstrosity in conversation with his Oklahoman storytelling elders. 'We began speaking

about monsters because monsters are a central part of Cherokee mythology' (Teuton 2012: 236). Before becoming familiar with 'a Cherokee conception of monsters', Teuton held the same Eurocentric tendencies we have noted above.

> I had always understood a monster to be an abomination—an awful mix of things that shouldn't be mixed. Frankenstein was a monster because he was a patchwork of dead human body parts brought back to life. The Minotaur was a monster because he was part human and part bull. In each case, the unification of things that should not be mixed had a bad result. (Teuton 2012: 236)

Teuton found that monstrous mixture could have a very different connotation. Of course, monsters are certainly capable of signalling malevolence in this culture. 'But, like all things in the Cherokee world, these monsters had a side to them that was beneficial to the people' (238). Native American monsters can also combine valences of the ludic and the numinous. 'The supernatural are dangerous, and only partially understood; they must be treated with respect. Stories of these beings may be told with awe, curious wonder, false bravado, and laughing relief, but they are always told with respect' (Mould: 95). All of these valences are found in Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction.

This respectful, if sometimes playful, engagement with the monstrous arises from the very structure of the Native American world. For example, in the three-level Cherokee cosmos, 'humans, animals, and plants' and all other earthlings live in the Middle World (Elohi) between the Sky World (Galunlati), a place of 'order and stability', and the Under World (Elohi Hawinaditla), 'a place of water, chaos, and mystery where things mix, but also a source of creative power and change' (Teuton 2012: 21). In this schema the mixing monstrous underworld is not some irredeemable realm to be altogether shunned, though it is dangerous and not a space we can inhabit permanently. 'We may visit this place, but it is not hospitable to human society' (Teuton 2010: xiii). Instead of avoiding it, however, the Cherokee are to wisely harness its monstrous power for creativity and change, as also with the powers from above. The 'creatures of the Middle World must negotiate both sky and water energies' to 'create dynamic balance' here between, lest the Middle World 'sink into the waters' (Teuton 2012: 21). 'Cherokees are still balancing the forces of above and below, still trying to keep this world above water for another generation,' remarks Teuton (ibid.). As such, an ecomonstrous storytelling arises from this dynamic worldview and praxis. 'Some stories tell of monsters created by the mixing of the Middle World; other

stories tell of heroes such as Solegeh.[102] *Each has its place*' (Teuton 2012: 79, emphasis added). Teuton learned that the 'mixing', the category crisis, of monstrosity is not the 'abomination' of many Eurocentric views, but an integral element of how the world works and even of our own creative and redemptive activities in the world.[103] Resonant with Lafferty's fiction, we must play with monsters—carefully—to help keep the world afloat generation by generation.

A traditional Kiowa legend puts many of these shifting valences together in a single scene, which resonates strongly with the more-than-human entanglements of Lafferty's fiction. On their ancestral migration from what is now Montana to Oklahoma, the Kiowa encountered in the Black Hills district a striking and rather awesome butte known today by its Euro-settler name Devils Tower. Not only is it a lone and peculiarly vertical upthrust, making it stark in the landscape, but its surface is completely covered in perpendicular columns that make it look almost scored and unfinished, like a vessel still being shaped on the potter's wheel so to speak. The 20th century Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday describes its towering shape against the sky in primordial terms: 'as if in the birth of time the core of the earth had broken through its crust and the motion of the world was begun' (Momaday 1976: 8). The upthrust is monstrous in its exorbitance and anomaly. 'There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devils Tower is one of them' (ibid.).

Not only does this singular earth formation engender quiet awe, it also engenders ecomonstrous storytelling. Momaday remarks that his people in that earlier time 'could not do otherwise' than create a legend 'at the base of the rock' (Momaday 1976: 8). The

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[102] From the traditional story of an exorbitant, hybrid (eutheopathic?) entity who came down 'from the heavens' in order to rescue the Cherokee from being sacrificed by a sinister otherworldly clan of priests (Teuton 2012: 55-62). This 'Cherokee culture hero, Solegeh, the Winged One, was said to have the head of a snake and wings of a bird' and it is because of Solegeh that the Cherokee call themselves 'People of the Winged Serpent' (Teuton 2012: 41). Solegeh's numinous monstrosity remained in remnants even after he returned to the heavens having delivered the Cherokee. He left 'some of his blood to remind us of his being here on earth' and 'a species of smaller flying snake', and medicine against 'the bites of poisonous snakes'—and in creative response to his gifts, Solegeh's image is inscribed on 'effigies, pendants, and other materials' (Teuton 2012: 62).

[103] China's monsters abide along a similar spectrum not familiar to many European views: 'While monsters are often conceived as freaks of nature or beings violating natural laws, this notion is a problematic one in traditional China as the inherent natural order (*dao*) was understood to be constantly transforming' (Myhre 2012: 217). Thus, while the 'category breaching invoked by monsters might involve both the transversal of ordinarily intact boundaries, as well as the transformation of monstrous beings themselves' (ibid.), '[k]nowledge of monsters, the periphery, and possible omens' was 'essential' to life 'because accurate understanding of the more unusual or subtle aspects of the phenomenal world was an indicator of access to all varieties of higher understanding' (221). Monstrous bodies thus became a kind of 'guidebook or map' (220) not only of dangers but of divinity and ritual, to the point that even 'guardian monsters' apotropaically 'defended not only human communities, but also temples and tombs' (225).

landform itself called forth the legend. The legend is that eight children—seven sisters and a brother—were playing when the boy was struck dumb and transmogrified before his sisters' eyes. He shook and began running on hands and feet. 'His fingers became claws, and his body was covered with fur. Directly there was a bear where the boy had been' (ibid.). The 'terrified' sisters ran for their lives since the bear-brother 'came to kill them', but the massive stump of a great tree 'spoke to them' and 'bade them climb upon it' and thereupon increased its height, rising into the air out of the bear's clawing reach (ibid.). The rearing were-bear then left its frenzied marks all round the great stump. (When pictured next to the actual desert butte, as it is sometimes illustrated, the bear is *gigantic*).

Yet this is not merely a tale of the aetiology of a landform during an ecologically aided escape, but of the forging of new ecological kinship, even out of a terrifying and boundary-crossing ordeal. 'The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper' and thus 'so long as the legend lives', the Kiowa 'have kinsmen in the night sky' (ibid.). Thus, ursanthropy and stellanthropy unite with transformation of landscape to create more-than-human kinship:

> The seven sisters, the bear, the rock tree, and the stars all play necessary roles in a cosmology that reaches from earth to sky and is defined by interconnectedness. Experiencing a new land compelled the Kiowa to reconsider their world, but that reconsideration maintains a sense of fundamental relationships [...] Telling a story in response to a new place creates an interrelationship between the land and the Kiowas; their cultural identity is changed through relating to the land on which they live. In a reciprocal relationship their perception of the land is also forever changed. (Teuton 2010: 67)

It is just as key to emphasise that the *monstrous* (the uncanny, numinous, hybrid, shape-shifting, category-busting) also plays a necessary role as the onto-poetic glue that holds such a vision of cosmic kinship together. Anomalies create families. The monster's hybridity doesn't just disrupt, it *fuses* and creates uncanny bonds (cf. Myhre 2012: 222).

We can also gather from this that even a culture that inherently open to kinship and harmony with its physical environment is not thereby safe from monsters (cf. Mould 2004: 63, 95). Monsters are in the warp and weft of existence and 'harmony' is in part comprised of learning to live with these more chaotic and hybrid elements of ecology and culture as well as more idyllic iterations of interconnectedness. The ambivalences and powers of monstrosity surround and penetrate human culture from above and below, manifesting

through landscape, history, and society, and therefore must be respectfully, if sometimes playfully, participated with to maintain wise and creative balance in the world. We see this balancing act in Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction again and again, where the possibility and precarity of strange more-than-human kinships between (grotesquely deconstructed) humans and (weirdly evoked) turtles and springs and goats and bison and clay and cars and computers and elk and birds and ghosts and statues abounds at a dizzying, monstrous magnitude.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have endeavoured to crack open our sense of monsters and the monstrous to include a wide range of valences that allow and encourage an ecological conception of monstrosity that does not equate to a phobia of nonhumans but by which instead the human becomes porous and vulnerable to the uncanny and exorbitant monstrations of the more-than-human world in shuddering, playful, creative participation. That is, our monstrous imaginaries, enfolded in our ecological imaginaries, are formed by inhuman influences. Category crisis though this may be in itself, our literary and artistic monsters, however scary and dangerous, are ludic and loving amplifications of the monstrous amplitude of the nonhumans that co-create them with us. Or at least, this seems to be the case with Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction and various non-Western monstrous imaginaries that resonate with it. In the next chapter, we turn to material ecocriticism and object-oriented philosophy to find that there too more-than-human monsters already dwell. A survey of certain elements of these discourses will complete our outline of the theoretical contours of Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics.

Chapter 3: ‘The Experience of Planet-Fall is a Daily Thing’: Lafferty’s Ecomonstrous Poetics and the Nonhuman Turn

Introduction

In the previous chapter we laboured toward a construal of monsters and the monstrous as encapsulated in uncanny and numinous encounter with more-than-human exorbitance. This monstration of inhuman excess calls forth adduction from humans—that is, a vulnerability and care that feels the impact of the monstrous, which results in an amplificative leap of creative connectivity, as seen in Lafferty’s ecomonstrous fiction. Let us now directly map the monster onto contemporary ecocritical and ecophilosophical thinking, particularly in two schools of thought gathered together under the umbrella of The Nonhuman Turn (cf. Grusin 2015), supplemented by interspersed engagement with two of Lafferty’s bioregional stories, ‘Narrow Valley’ (1966) and ‘All Pieces of a River Shore’ (1970).

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, New Materialism (NM) and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) are placed into a feisty and fruitful tension between their respective pulls toward entanglement and withdrawal, both of which are crucial qualities for an ecomonstrous poetics. From there, a brief survey of key philosophical and rhetorical moves in both NM and OOO are rehearsed as to their relevance for the ecomonstrous. Regarding NM, monstrous discourse is found implicitly in the ‘storied matter’ of Material Ecocriticism and explicitly in Donna Haraway’s explication of her concept of the Chthulucene. Here especially, a sense of monsters and the monstrous is placed out into the nonhuman landscape. Each of OOO’s most prominent proponents, in turn, feature rhetorical strategies of the monstrous as central to their elucidation of the fundamental ontological withdrawal of objects. Harman’s weird realism, Bogost’s alien phenomenology, and Morton’s strange strangers each suggest ‘affective-contemplative techniques’ (ACTs) that play up and play into the monstrous inexhaustibility of objects and the eerie, shadowy communications and contacts that persist between all things, humans and nonhumans alike. Finally, it is suggested that an ecomonstrous poetics fuses the tensions between NM and OOO into torsions that fitfully and exorbitantly monstrate both the bright entanglements and dark withdrawals of the more-than-human world. Lafferty, as

we have seen and will continue to see, writes a sort of torsion fiction that exemplifies just such a bright-dark, showing-hiding world.

The Valley Pretending to Be a Ditch

A convenient picture of the themes of this chapter can be seen if we return to Lafferty's story 'Narrow Valley' (1966). When the settler family, the Ramparts, come to the land allotment they have filed on (the official survey of which indicates a lush valley), it appears to be a mere ditch or gulley between the fences of two neighbouring and visibly ample properties. But the Ramparts are assured by a neighbour that the apparent ditch is actually their half mile of property. Knowing the trickster nature of the land, the neighbour suggests the Rampart kids throw rocks across the apparent ditch, which they happily do.

> They winged them out over the little gully. The stones acted funny. They hung in the air, as it were, and diminished in size. And they were small as pebbles when they dropped down, down into the gully. None of them could throw a stone across that ditch, and they were throwing kids. (Lafferty 2019: 21)

The father, Robert, is about to simply leap across the apparent ditch when he's struck with vertigo and hesitates. Instead, he tries to bridge what looks like a five-foot gap with an eight-foot fence post, but this too drops down and diminishes in size without crossing the divide. As the neighbours then demonstrate, not even a rifle bullet shot right at the face of a man standing what appeared to be only six feet away on the other end of the 'ditch' can reach the far side. Then a bit of biota joins in the topologically bizarre fun:

> A bull-bat (poor people call it the night-hawk) raveled around in the air and zoomed out over the narrow ditch, but it did not reach the other side. The bird dropped below ground level and could be seen against the background of the other side of the ditch. It grew smaller and hazier as though at a distance of three or four hundred yards. The white bars on its wings could no longer be discerned; then the bird itself could hardly be discerned; but it was far short of the other side of the five-foot ditch. (Lafferty 2019: 23)

In the wry ecomonstrous poetics of this weird scenario,[104] a 'resistant landscape' (Buell 1995: 61) hides in plain sight, withdrawing from human occupancy, perception, and

[104] Recall that the Japanese term *yokai* roots monstrosity in 'strangeness, mystery, or suspicion' and 'things beyond the realm of explanation'; thus, its indexical range includes, in addition to various strange beings,

comprehension.[105] Recall that antiecomimesis 'revels in dislocation not location' (Morton 2011: 169). Yet the valley's fellow nonhumans (rocks, fence posts, bullets, birds—none of which exhaust the valley's breadth) ludically occupy it according to its own rules. Indeed, they hide *within* its withdrawal. There is something striking about the bull-bat (its plumage accurately described) zestily pursuing its own inhuman project as the humans stand stupefied.[106] Anthropocentric access and possession are mocked, yet inhuman interconnection and plenitude are slyly and very weirdly inscribed.[107] With this picture in mind, let us proceed.

Entangled Flows vs./and Weird Withdrawals

There are two key ideas from contemporary ecological thought that we will fold into an ecomonstrous poetics: *entanglement* and *withdrawal*. All entities, human and nonhuman alike, are tangled up together; and yet, an entity isn't reducible to the tangles in which it participates. It is a story of double plenitude: everything is caught up into the refulgent public plenitude of everything else; yet each thing is a dark, rich, secretive plenitude in itself. These two core tenets about all things in the world whatsoever suggest ontologies and corresponding poetics that are monstrous in the sense we have been constructing. For this entanglement-withdrawal tells a story, in turn, of double exorbitance: the world monstrates an excess of interconnected becoming even while each thing monstrates its own unfungible excess of singular being. This lively tension between entanglement and withdrawal generates construals of planetary existence that perpetually fold humans and nonhumans together in numinous, shuddering mystery that can't be reduced to non-mystery. As we have begun to see in Lafferty's fiction and will see much more of, the Great Plains and (south)west as ecoregions are figured as vast and reeling entanglements of natural-cultural biomes and biota. Yet these large-scale 'matter-flows' are shot through with a sense of the particular, peculiar secrecy of withdrawing flora, fauna, landforms, migration patterns, water pathways, and so on.

'any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence' (Foster 2012: 135). In this construal, Lafferty's valley qualifies as monstrous.

[105] The land itself thus plays along with 'the politics of allotment resistance in Indian Territory' (Nelson 2014: 645).

[106] We will see in the next chapter how some of the humans adductively play along with this land's mischievous ontology when we briefly return to 'Narrow Valley' in comparison to landscapes in *Blood Meridian.*

[107] The story's evocation of nonhumans with which we normally feel affinity (bird in flight, rolling landscape), but which become eerie through the 'wrongness' of their movement, almost makes the eponymous landform a weirdly literalised 'uncanny valley', but in relation to nonhumans rather than humans (cf. Mori: 2020).

There is, however, a complication. These two pivotal claims about the world (entanglement and withdrawal) and their respective schools of thought (New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology respectively) are currently understood as radically conflictual and only tenuously complementary. The attempt to forge them together induces a category crisis in itself. Nevertheless, though proponents from both schools have critiqued the other incisively, at least a few have suggested the desirability of developing a closer union between these important and effective ways of thinking the more-than-human world (e.g. Sheldon 2015; Bennett 2015; Cohen 2015). In any case, an understanding of Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics requires the insights of both.

Let us explore these tensions a little further. The emphasis on *intrinsic entanglement* in New Materialism (NM) secures the porosity of humans and their cultures in regard to nonhumans. The human is not separate from the nonhuman, even as regards monsters and the monstrous. Equally, however, the emphasis on *weird withdrawal* in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) secures the strange and irreducible alterity and exorbitance of the nonhumans with whom we are entangled. If things are not separate from one another (NM), they are also not reducible to one another (OOO). The latter school insists that each discrete thing possesses its own surplus of being not exhausted by its entanglements, a surplus that withdraws into dark interiority. I suggest that these are twin insights, even if they often abide in sharp contention. For example, NM considers (rightly I think) that OOO is not relational enough—or, technically, not relational at all. As OOO's founder Graham Harman admits frankly, it is a 'deeply non-relational conception of the reality of things' (cited in Bennett 2015: 227). Yet, OOO counters (rightly I think) that NM is *so* relational it effectively dissolves bounded entities into large-scale processes: 'relational process ontology raises the specter of the erasure of difference' (Rigby 2014: 288). Indeed, without durable difference between discrete relata, relationality itself dissolves. (It is no surprise, then, that many proponents of NM, notably Jane Bennett, overtly subscribe to monism.) Rebekah Sheldon perceptively notes that the dispute between OOO and NM rehearses the form/matter or being/becoming antinomies, 'the hoariest of philosophical binaries' (Sheldon 2015: 196). It is the tension between entities and energies and that tension is exponentially monstrous because it traces not only the 'belonging together' of excess and the mundane, but two such excesses pulling in opposite directions.

New materialism, for its part, features a range of innovative terminology to suggest the energies and interconnectivities of radical relationality. For example, NM deploys 'the consistent use of doubly articulated phrases', such as Haraway's 'nature-culture' or Karen Barad's 'material-discursive', which are 'designed to collapse hierarchical dualisms' and espouse a perspective that is 'emphatically *relational*' in its adherence to 'material liveliness' (Sheldon 2015: 196, emphasis in original). In fact, NM deploys a woozy swirl of terminology to describe the energies of material liveliness: 'attractors', 'flows', 'vibratory milieu', 'affective force', 'shapes bristling with receptors or catalyzing shapes meant to actualize potentiality in encounters' (Sheldon 2015: 217); or more simply: 'matter-flow' and 'matter-movement' (Bennett 2015: 226). Put less abstractly, vital materialisms[108] 'draw sustenance from a longer tradition of philosophical materialism in the West, where fleshy, vegetal, mineral materials are encountered not as passive stuff awaiting animation by human or divine power, but as lively forces at work around and within us' (Bennett 2015: 223).[109] Crucially, what matters for NM is not just the 'sensuous specificity' of things, but also 'the eccentric assemblages they form' (Bennett 2015: 233). Contra object-oriented philosophies, then, NM is a 'relation-oriented theory' (Bennett 2015: 228).

OOO finds NM's flowing materialities a little too fluid or gooey. For example, Timothy Morton protests that in NM's construal, 'some things are more real than others: flowing liquids become templates for everything else' and thus there is a failure to 'explain the givenness of the ontic phenomenon' (cited in Bennett 2015: 231). Morton's critique suggests that things do not have solid, integral 'givenness' in NM so much as they are a momentarily formed globule in the flow of the macro-assemblage. Its own proponents affirm that NM 'sees objects as a concrescence or intensive infolding of an extensive continuum' and matter as that which 'draws together what appears separate' (Sheldon 2015: 196). The phrase 'what *appears* separate' gives away the game a little, making Morton's even harsher characterisation of NM as 'the formless goo of Spinoza' not entirely unwarranted (Morton 2011: 179; cf. 165).[110] NM's fluid continuum is antithetical to OOO's 'escape pod' view of objects (Harman 2012: 245). OOO holds to a version of what Bruno Latour calls 'irreduction': 'Nothing can be reduced to anything else' (cited in Bogost 2012: 19). Conversely, for NM, nothing escapes the relational network—or rather,

[108] Jane Bennett prefers this term for the movement over 'new materialism' (Bennett 2015: 225, 237).
[109] Lafferty's sacramental ontology, explored in chapter six, will challenge this implied dichotomy between divine and material energies.
[110] Bennett relies overtly on Spinozan monism (Bennett 2010: x-xi, 2, and passim).

everything *is* the network(s). To 'put it epigrammatically,' says Sheldon, 'for Barad *relations precede relata*, which then alter relations. And properties, which we commonly understand as the possessions of individuals, are instead emergent features of entangled phenomena' (Sheldon: 202, emphasis added). That is, the Group-of-Things (or even, the Group-Thing) is more real than the things (the latter not even possessing properties of their own—only the Tangle has properties). Indeed, NM sees matter as 'a trans-individual assemblage whose motions are greater than the sum of its parts' (204). To be fair, NM does not offer visons of 'harmonious holisms'; instead, it constructs 'fractious models of systematicity' that provide 'onto-pictures that are formally monistic but substantively plural' (Bennett 2015: 229). And in turn, unsurprisingly, NM critiques OOO's object as appearing to be 'vacuum-sealed' against discourse and representation in the entangled systems (Sheldon: 205).

We may say that Lafferty's fiction certainly evinces fractious onto-pictures that don't add up to harmonious holisms, but their very refusal to cohere into fluidity is also testimony to the presence of object givenness and irreduction. Perhaps his fiction depicts 'escape pod' objects that nevertheless fall back into tangles—indeed, his 'material illusion' giants suggest this alternating cohesion and dispersal, all things in monstrous murmuration. Equally, he can picture this cohesion-dispersal in the form of strange exchanges between nonhuman individuals, as in the bull-bat and the valley above. In these ways Lafferty's fiction antiecomimetically amplifies the intense interconnectivity and individuality of his Oklahoma biome, which features a remarkable diversity of habitats hosting a teeming diversity of biota.

As Bennett notes, this conceptual conflict is to some degree a matter of theorists following either Heidegger (OOO) or Deleuze and Guattari (NM) in emphasising 'things' or 'matter-energy' respectively (Bennett 2015: 225). More specifically, Heidegger focused on 'the uncanny agency of things' and 'the incalculability of the Thing and its persistent withdrawal'; whereas Deleuze and Guattari focused on 'the positive or productive power of things to draw other bodies near and conjoin powers' (Bennett 2015: 225). (Again recall Lafferty's constant exemplification of both this uncanny withdrawal of things and this energetic conjoining of things.) Thus, OOO repudiates 'holism', which includes 'assemblage-theories of various sorts, in which circulate bits and pieces of Deleuze, Latour, Manning, De Landa, Massumi, Haraway, Shaviro, Whitehead, Spinoza, Foucault, Romantic poets' (Bennett 2015: 227). OOO is instead 'attracted to Heidegger's focus on the object's negative power, its persistent withdrawal from any attempt to engage, use, or

know it' (Bennett 2015: 226). OOO is thus 'an emphatically anti-relational ontology in which objects recline at a distance from each other and from the networks in which they are embedded, very much including but not limited to human cultural practices' (Sheldon 2015: 194). Indeed, in the estimation of Graham Harman, Heidegger's 'tool-analysis does not give us a monistic lump of being, but a landscape where individual objects are withdrawn into private interiors, barely able to relate at all' (Harman 2011: 36). Morton for his part describes object-object relations as 'closed systems affecting other closed systems' (Morton 2011: 173). Ian Bogost (another prominent proponent of OOO) goes so far as to argue 'that things never really interact with one another, but only fuse or connect in a locally conceptual fashion' (Bogost 2012: 111). OOO could thus seem the epitome of an anti-ecological point of view. Yet its most prominent proponent, Morton, is anything but, as is well known and as we will see below.[111]

In terms of their respective pitfalls, then, it would seem that OOO threatens to erase interactions and NM threatens to erase the things that interact. As an example of the latter, note Sheldon's amendment of Brian Massumi's phrase 'Something's doing' to 'There's happening doing' (214). The thing has altogether disappeared. There is only 'happening'—events with no sturdy objects. Morton contrasts this with OOO's insistence on the strange durability of the object:

> Relationism holds that objects are nothing more than the sum of their relations with other objects. This begs the question of what an object is, since the definition implies a potential infinite regress: what are the "other objects"? Why, nothing more than the sum of their relations with other objects—and so on *ad obscurum*. At least OOO takes a shot at saying what objects are: they withdraw. This doesn't mean that they don't relate at all. It simply means that how they appear has a shadowy, illusory, magical, "strangely strange" quality. It also means they can't be reduced to one another. OOO holds that strangeness is impossible if objects are reducible to their relations. Since relationism is hamstrung by its reluctance to posit anything, it tends toward obscurantism. (Morton 2011: 184-185)

Thus, OOO's own avowed non-relationality seen in quotes from its proponents above is in fact something of a rhetorical exaggeration. It is not that OOO's objects don't relate. It is that they relate very, very strangely. This insistence on the necessity of strangeness is a key notion for ecomonstrous poetics. It ensures the position of the uncanny and weird as key

[111] Note the strange resonance with bioregionalism in Bogost's remark about connections happening in 'a locally conceptual fashion'. Perhaps bioregionalism suggests something of a model for honouring object withdrawal by fusing or connecting with things in a fashion fitting to their biomically determined uniqueness.

manifestations of exorbitant more-than-human monstrosity. Thus, for our purposes, NM's welcome insistence on entanglement must be put in fruitful tension with OOO's insistence on object withdrawal, the ontological source of monstrating, shadowy weirdness in the world.

We may characterise the antagonism between OOO and NM as a tension between darkness and light, between tenebrous objects and vibrant matter, between strange singularities and brimming continuums.[112] It is a tension Lafferty's iteration of ecomonstrous poetics apparently attempts to fuse into hybrid category crisis. The ecomonstrous (in both Lafferty and McCarthy, in fact) poeticises an unstable but fruitful combination of these admittedly conflicting visions of the world: that is, the ecomonstrous evokes a *noctilucent* view of things as withdrawn 'vs./and' entangled.[113] Given that this eldritch OOO-NM mixture is ontological, the 'body' of the monstrous in this poetics includes not only the fabulated exorbitant creatures we artistically create, but also the actual exorbitant reality of landscapes, biomes, animals, weather, and so on as we become aware of these objects and hyperobjects and matter-flows and energies monstrating their uncanny vibrancy-tenebrity.

It is, after all, in the *nonhuman* that NM and OOO are united—and thus they are often associated (or at least collocated) in collections on the nonhuman turn and material turn in the humanities (e.g. Grusin 2015; Iovino and Oppermann 2014; Cohen 2013b). Indeed, Bennett, a key proponent of NM, adopts an insight from OOO in her summary of the theoretical (including, significantly, the poetical) implications of the nonhuman turn:

> Theorists of the nonhuman want to see what would happen—to perception and judgment, to sympathies and antipathies, to physical and intellectual postures, to writing styles and research designs, to practices of consumption and production, and to our very notions of self and the human, if what Graham Harman has termed the "allure" of objects were to have more pride of place in our thinking. It no longer seems satisfactory to write off this allure as wholly a function of the pathetic fallacy or the projection of voice onto some inanimate stuff. (Bennett 2015: 224-225)

In line with OOO's object withdrawal and concomitant allure, Bennett notes that things 'make "calls" upon us, demand attention. It's getting harder not to notice their powers of enabling and refusing us, of enhancing and destroying what we want (to have, to do, to be

[112] Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016) and Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) are landmark works in OOO and NM respectively.
[113] Cf. Cohen on the Derridean 'and/or' of monstrous category crisis (1996: 7).

and become)' (Bennett 2015: 224). A thing's withdrawal is a summons. Resonant with the Lovecraftian fixation on 'an outside that breaks through in encounters' (Fisher 2016: 6), Bennett proposes that the nonhuman (or, as we might say, the monster behind the monster) 'is something that we *sense*, it is something that comes from the outside. The thing's act of seeking cover is, says Heidegger, a "draft" from the "Open," a beckoning *call* of sorts' (Bennett 2015: 227, italics in original). This is the very language of Klyukanov's monster that calls upon us to feel its monstration. Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics is an adductive answer to that nonhuman call, which then *becomes* that nonhuman call as evoked *through* Lafferty's artistic productions. As Bennett adds: 'Perhaps the big project of the nonhuman turn is to find new techniques, in speech and art and mood, to disclose the participation of nonhumans in "our" world' (Bennett 2015: 225). When we read Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction, we hear (feel) the goats and turtles and valleys and birds and computers and cars and springs call upon us (albeit in very widely varying degrees according to each reader's attunement and how effective we find Lafferty's art in this regard).

The 'big project of the nonhuman turn' of which Bennett writes is precisely our project in reading Lafferty's techniques and disclosures of more-than-human participation. Whatever the monstrating allure, whether a pseudo-human girl that bites and bleeds us or a booted talking turtle or a sexy bubbling spring or the weird, hyper-vivid smells of the brittle skin dragonflies, the hairy legs of bees, bruised grapes eaten by turtles; or fishing from clouds with computers or slipping our bones to participate in the exorbitant murmurations and migrations of millions of birds (and much more, as we will see), readers sense the monstrous more-than-human Outside or Open calling upon us in Lafferty's whipping and thrashing Tornado Alley of Great Plains tall tales (cf. Baird and Goble: 8). To develop our contribution to the project of the nonhuman turn further, let us now explore ecomonstrous themes in NM and OOO in turn.

The Monsters of New Materialism

We will draw in particular on NM as it appears in the emerging field of Material Ecocriticism (ME) mobilised by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014) and in the work of Donna Haraway. The 'biosemiotics' and 'storied matter' of ME provide an ecophilosophical framework for understanding monsters as a more-than-human phenomenon. Building from these insights, Haraway's construals of a place-time she calls

the ‘Chthulucene’ provide an explicitly monstrous discourse of more-than-human making and storytelling (or ‘sympoiesis’). These theoretical contours help explicate how the fabric of Lafferty’s ecomonstrous narratives are so porous to his bioregion.

Storied Matter and Natural Play: Monstro-Ludic Realism

Material ecocriticism is an ‘ecocritical vision’ that ‘explores’ the insights of new materialism ‘in literary texts as well as in the forms this materiality assumes in the “material-semiotic” world’ (Iovino and Oppermann: 2). The latter means that ME starts from an assumption that we live in a world of ‘storied matter’:

> [The] stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a “storied matter.” It is a material “mesh” of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces. (Iovino and Oppermann: 1)

The language of ‘within and beyond’ in regard to human-inhuman entanglement again resonates with our construal of monsters and the monstrous. Indeed, if ‘all life, not just human life and culture, is semiotic and interpretive’ (Wheeler 2014: 69), a more-than-human monster theory is a necessity, for such a two-way (or poly-directional) semiosis entails that monsters can never *only* mean something human.

Furthermore, this ubiquity of story in all materiality means that Lafferty’s glut of bioregional storytelling (i.e. eddying narratives-within-narratives) is not a strictly unique human response to the monstrations of the world but is on a *continuum* with nonhuman narrative multiplicity and exorbitance. Humans are not the only creatures that signify. Stories are underfoot and overhead and everywhere betwixt, not just in our books or minds or online streaming services. Thus, ecology and human artistry have *narrative* in common: ‘It is surely right to say that biological, as well as aesthetic, life is made of stories’ (Wheeler: 77). And not only biological: any nonhuman—be it biotic, lithic, climatic, or whatever—is a ‘holder of stories’ (Cohen 2014: ix). It may be a metaphor to say that nonhumans are ‘writing’ or ‘telling’ stories with us (including monster stories), but it is one based in the way the world actually is: ‘Storying cannot any longer be put into the box

of human exceptionalism' (Haraway 2016: 39).[114] In Lafferty's yarns, the Great Plains are contributing vibrantly (and tenebrously) to the ecological web of story that Lafferty's writing happens to instantiate in a particular human form.

In this sense, it is not only the fabric of Lafferty's stories, but the fabric of the world that is inherently monstrous. For to concede a material-semiotic world is to accede to a world of categories permanently in crisis, liminal borders always being crossed, entanglement and porosity pervading all.[115] 'It is quite arduous,' after all, 'for humans to declare their agentic independence in a hybrid, vibrant, and *living* world' (Iovino and Oppermann: 3, emphasis in original).[116] Within the planetary folds of this material-semiotic hybridity, everything signifies, everything *means* something. In such a 'porosity of biosphere and semiosphere', we find that 'meaning and matter are inextricably entangled, constituting life's narratives and life itself' (Iovino and Oppermann: 5). Hence, in Lafferty's fiction (which at times can appear almost chaotic) meaning and ever more meaning engulfs human characters in all the roiling textures of more-than-human existence, an exorbitant excess that humans (and nonhumans) can never demonstratively comprehend but with which they may adductively participate.

Let us call this one iteration of Monstrous Realism. We will explore another in the section on OOO below. Suffice it for now to say that viewing matter as *really* and actually storied and semiotic—which is an important part of 'a realist reanimation [of] agency in nature' (Wheeler 2014: 75)—means that the stories of signifying matter constantly evoked in the fiction of both McCarthy and Lafferty (be they ever so phantasmagorical or strange) exemplify a form of bioregional realism that traces the real agency and meaningfulness of nonhumans as they both veer into and veer away from human culture of the (south)west.

There is ludic monstrosity in this more-than-human meaning-making as well. Wendy Wheeler cites the work of biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer in this regard: 'There is an aspect of *play* in the evolutionary process' which has been 'overshadowed' by the 'Cyclopsian focus on selection' (Wheeler 2014: 75, emphasis in original).[117] Citing

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[114] On the possibility of writing as more-than-human, see Morton's discussion of Derrida's 'arche-writing' (Morton 2016: 80 ff.).

[115] This resonates with the liminal monstrous geography of the Chinese monstrous imaginary (cf. Myhre 2012: 217-220, 236).

[116] ME's material-semiotics is also based, of course, on a belief in the lively *agency* of all kinds of nonhumans (Iovino and Oppermann: 3; cf. Oppermann 2014: 25-26).

[117] Mind the monster in that statement.

anthropologist Gregory Bateson's definition of play as 'the establishment and exploration of relationship', Hoffmeyer argues that play factors into ecological becoming:

> Thus, to the extent that the living world is engaged in an open-ended and non-settled exploration of relationships between systems… it can truly be said that nature does, in fact, exhibit play-like behavior. It therefore will be as legitimate to talk about *natural play* as a force in the evolution of life-forms, as it is to talk about *natural selection*.[118] (Cited in Wheeler: 75, emphasis in original; cf. Deane-Drummond 2018: 186)

Hoffmeyer acknowledges that Darwinian natural selection 'acts to settle things' in regard to 'some element of ongoing play' in ecological systems, but points out that natural selection thereby simultaneously opens up 'whole new kinds of play' (ibid.).[119] And this ludic ecology is not unconnected to semiotic ecology. 'These two things (stories and play) seem clearly related' (Wheeler: 75). Indeed, Wheeler radically suggests that human readers simply exemplify an already ongoing readership, if you will, in the more-than-human world: 'the development of literary meanings in narratives—which readers must *play* with to discover—imitates the processes of natural evolution' (75; italics in original). Natural selection, she suggests, determines the 'genre' of a particular natural story, which then undergoes a 'playful recombination' of patterns 'from new contexts', feeding into further selection, and so on (ibid.). In such a picture, we find ourselves enmeshed in the already ongoing play of a lively more-than-human readership. 'Living systems, we might say, are their own creative readers' (ibid.). (We have an antiecomimetic hint of something like this, but weirder, in Lafferty's 'Bird-Master' where we merely look over the shoulder of a nonhuman narrator and quasi-human (at most) protagonist as they adductively read the monstrating bioregion around them. Nonhumans reading nonhumans.)

In an essay on writing and the world, Lafferty anticipates material ecocriticism's more-than-human semiosis: 'it is a condition of nature to produce inter-category communications or "conversations"', Lafferty avers, and lists among these naturally produced inter-category conversations various productions that we usually call cultural, such as 'electronic media', writing, filmmaking, and the music industry: 'So we have dramas, live and electronic; we have lyrics and literatures. These things are not additions to

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[118] LeAnne Howe argues that this too is *nukfokechi*, the narrative energising of connectivity. Howe notes that biologist Lynn Margulis's work on 'symbiogenesis' (often cited in NM) 'suggests that evolution is the result of cooperation, not simply competition' and, in Marugulis's words: 'Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking' (Howe 2002: 34). Thus, 'Lynn Margulis's scientific theory is also *nukfokechi*' (ibid.).

[119] Cf. Celia Deane-Drummond's discussions of mammalian play in particular (Deane-Drummond 2014a: 37-38) and debates about evolutionary cooperation in general (202 ff.).

nature; they are as implicit in nature as oak leaves are in an acorn' (Lafferty 1986: 58). Human arts grow out of the earth's processes as much as anything else on the planet. (Industry as well, hence the cars surging up from the roiling clay-sea alongside bison and horses in 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay'.) Lafferty's experimental ecomonstrous novel *Serpent's Egg* (1987) pictures more-than-human semiotic artistry from a different and very strange angle. In the novel, a dream ocean teeming with marine life begins to form in the midst of Oklahoma by means of the powerful mental activity of twelve gifted children.[120] Whales in this oneiric ocean telepathically deploy deep-sea lice to sculpt a megalithic undersea mosaic out of multi-coloured marble. The 'Art of the Whales', done by the sea-lice on 'beautiful pink, lilac, tan, orange, and mauve-tinted marble' with 'happy blotches and gouts of the greenest green ever', is 'portraiture art, cut in high-and-bas relief out of the giant stone pillars and walls and lintels':

> Mostly the faces and forms were those of famous whales of yore. But there were also distinguished-looking animal faces, human faces, god faces, even strange computer faces, all emerging from the big stones that the sea-lice were sculpting for the whales. And whenever they finished one of the great and distinguished faces, the sea-lice covered it over with a beautiful and thin plaiting of nacre or mother-of-pearl. (Lafferty 1987: 137-38)

The monstrous and the beautiful are mixed in this collaboration between oceanic graceful giants and marine parasites (more 'monstrous miniatures'). Here the human collective unconscious—porous to inhuman monstrations—wells up with a sense of deep more-than-human entanglement and plenitude.[121] Inter-inhuman projects both preceded and *make* 'us' (humans and other animals) and our cultures and technologies and religions. The semiotic is a more-than-human continuum from which human semiotics has emerged and in which it is permanently enmeshed in co-narration of the world.[122]

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[120] Each is around ten years old and only a few of them are human. The other 'children' are an elephant, a bear, a chimpanzee, an ape-human, a computer, a python, a seal, a parrot, a devil-wolverine, and an angel.

[121] Recall the ansels entering our oceanic unconscious to replace monsters we have lost in *Past Master*. In an obverse image, a human character in *Serpent's Egg* embodies porosity to the nonhuman through transformation into an 'Ocean Obscenity or Monster' (Lafferty 1987: 137). This is not derogatory. 'All Ocean Creatures are obscene, in the nicest sense of that word' and thus this character becomes 'enormous, he was grotesque, he was comic, even for a fish' (135). Yet he was 'himself in his beautiful oceanic-ugliness-monsterness as we saw him and loved him today' (144). We will return to this as a christomonstrous image in chapter five.

[122] This passage from *Serpent's Egg* echoes a scene in Lafferty's mythopoeic tall tale 'And Name My Name' (1974) in which several apes are discussing pre-human epochs with one another, referring to them as the Day of the Elephants, Day of the Hyenas, Day of the Dolphins and so on: 'the Day of the Whales was a big one. For showiness it topped even our own takeover. The account of it is carved in rocks in whale talk, in rocks that are over a mile deep under a distant ocean; it is an account that no more than seven whales can still read. But there are several giant squids who can read it also, and squids are notoriously loose-mouthed. Things like that are told around' (Lafferty 2018a: 288).

Thus, through material ecocriticism we can recover a more-than-human understanding of Cohen's sense of the monster as a 'glyph that seeks a hierophant' (Cohen 1996: 4). If nonhumans co-create imaginary monsters with us, and if imaginary monsters are inspired by the real monstrosity of the category-busting material-semiotic world already busy with its own 'literary' productions, then we may suggest that the glyph-monster's hierophant (priestly interpreter) need not even be human, and certainly need not be *only* human. As Cohen himself remarks in the foreword to *Material Ecocriticism*, the 'astonishing textualities' and 'strange stories' of the more-than-human world 'demand participations that move beyond the certainties of closure: not a study *of* so much as movement *with*' (Cohen 2014: x; italics in original). Lafferty's fiction exhibits just such a monstro-ludic realism, in which nonhumans are signifying through more-than-human monster making and in which we are implicated in more-than-human interpretive play.

Sympoiesis in the Chthulucene: Monsters in the Best Sense

The figure most prominent in bringing the rhetoric of monsters to bear in new materialism is Donna Haraway. It is not always appreciated, however, that Haraway's concept of the Chthulucene only barely references H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu (note the spelling differences) by way of a species of spider named after the Lovecraftian monster-god (Haraway 2016: 31). Haraway states plainly: 'the monstrous male elder god (Cthulhu)' of Lovecraft's fiction 'plays no role for me' (174; cf. 101).[123] Chthulucene, then, is monstrous but not Lovecraftian. As a proposed alternative to Anthropocene, it indicates an epoch not centred on Anthropos but instead naming a time and place of 'chthonic ones', earthly ones, Terrans (49, 55).[124] The neologism is 'a compound of two Greek roots (*khthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (2). The *kainos* of the Chthulucene is a now-time full of both remembrances and 'what might still be', a 'thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities' (2), a timeplace of 'mortal earthlings in thick copresence' (4).

[123] Just as we find it necessary to draw on non-Western sources to evince ecomonstrous poetics, Haraway lists, instead of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, a wide range of goddesses, gods, and other beings, such as serpentine Naga from Hinduism, the *kami* Haniyasu from Shinto (cf. Foster 2012: 136), Spider Woman from Navajo culture, and snaky-haired gorgons from Greek mythology (Haraway 2016: 101 and passim).

[124] Cf. Eileen Crist's scathing critique of the 'Promethean self-portrait' of humanity implied in the concept of the Anthropocene (Deane-Drummond 2018: 178).

As to the *khthôn* of the Chthulucene, Haraway waxes (eco)monstrous:

> Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are *monsters in the best sense*; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. They are who are. (Haraway 2016: 2, emphasis added)

A key move here for Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics is that Haraway has placed monsters into landscapes, atmospheres, biomes and not just in movies or books or other products of human culture. Or more simply, Haraway has *placed* monsters. In a fresh manifestation of categorial monstrosity, places and monsters and nonhuman appendages coalesce in Haraway's chthonic rhapsody—a 'monsterscape' unfolds.[125]

As we noted in previous chapters, Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction also exhibits something like Haraway's 'tentacularity'. For the chthonic ones are also the tentacular ones: 'The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others' (Haraway 2016: 31). Accordingly, we may understand the teetering open-ended interconnections and seething more-than-human manifold in Lafferty's fiction to 'perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters' in Mexican border towns, Texas rivers, Oklahoma skies and springs and valleys, and in the behaviours of birds and badgers and bison.

Another crucial move here is that nonhumans are named monsters, and *this is a good thing*. Without our forays into non-Western monsters and other considerations that help us conceive of monsters beyond the closed notion that they are nothing more than constructions of what we fear and reject, we cannot understand Haraway's insistence that there is a 'best sense' in which monsters may abide. Indeed, Haraway's Chthulucene

[125] Lafferty's monster-rife (and almost psychedelic) novel *Fourth Mansions* (1969) depicts a woman 'with her eyeballs painted with landscapes and dragon-scapes' (Lafferty 2018: 364). Like the Chthulucene, his ecomonstrous poetics suggests monsters aren't located under headings of 'here be dragons', but that (imaginary) monsters *are* the maps—because (real) monsters *are* the terrain (cf. Myhre 2012: 220; Van Duzer 2012).

overtly counters the Greek mythos of heroes destroying monsters to establish civilisation in imitation of the gods eradicating Gaia's monstrous children to secure their Olympian rule: 'The chthonic powers of Terra infuse its tissues everywhere, despite the civilizing efforts of the agents of the sky gods' (Haraway 2016: 31; cf. Felton 2012). In such battles, we are urged to side with the monsters of earth, such as Gorgons, Furies, and Harpies (Haraway 2016: 54). Yet, battle need not be joined if aggressors would join themselves instead to the monstrous chthonic earth. A human relating with respect to nonhumans might not need to be turned to stone as the 'snake-encrusted faces' of Gorgons turned men to stone.

> I wonder what might have happened if those men had known how to politely greet the dreadful chthonic ones. I wonder if such manners can still be learned, if there is time to learn now, or if the stratigraphy of the rocks will only register the ends and end of a stony Anthropos. (Haraway 2016: 54)

Just as crucial as that there is a 'best sense' in which monsters abide is that they are thereby no less 'dreadful'. They writhe and luxuriate and *monstrate*. Humans may greet chthonic monsters with the 'manners' of adduction or leave a stain of inhospitality on the stratigraphy of the *kainos*-time to come.

In the Chthulucene, then, monsters are nonhumans with whom we may be in alliance and even kinship (Haraway 2016: 4, 103, and passim) but who sinuate and rollick regardless, a bright manifold of monstrosity in the very landscape that is showing in excess of our relation to it. As it happens, Haraway herself effectively exemplifies ecomonstrous poetics when she describes the 'great good' that can irrepressibly manifest even from, or in spite of, the slaying of earth's monsters, as when 'from Medusa's body came the winged horse Pegasus' (54). More specifically related to topography and biome:

> And from the blood dripping from Medusa's severed head came the rocky corals of the western seas, remembered today in the taxonomic names of the Gorgonians, the coral-like sea fans and sea whips, composed in symbioses of tentacular animal cnidarians and photosynthetic algal-like beings called zooanthellae. (Haraway 2016: 54)

Such gruesome and (potentially) redemptive monsterscapes are the very stuff of the fiction of McCarthy and Lafferty. This mainly comes through in the sheer more-than-human exuberance (even McCarthy's dark exuberance) in their narratives, the exorbitant plenitude that shines out but which also eludes human closure. Yet, as we will see, even the

pervasive death and devourment in both Lafferty's and McCarthy's landscapes speaks to the 'ongoingness' and 'resurgence' of life and earth (cf. Haraway 2016: 1, 132, and passim).

Finally, Haraway's ecomonstrous rhetoric comports with ME's emphasis on storied matter, which together help elucidate Lafferty's fiction as evincing not only a poetics *of* (i.e. about) the more-than-human monstrous, but a poetics *with* the more-than-human monstrous. In the Chthulucene we are 'symchthonic' (Haraway 2016: 33), co-earthly, and thus we collaborate in sympoiesis, making-with (58). 'Nothing makes itself; nothing is really auto-poietic or self-organizing' (Haraway 2017: 25). The 'radical implication of sympoiesis' is that 'earthlings are Never Alone' in our 'worlding', or making of the world (ibid.). For Haraway, this co-making can range from crafting to sports to storytelling (including the storytelling of scientific research) and, as an ecomonstrous poetics stresses, entails that we are equally Never Alone in our monster-making. Furthermore, this sympoiesis is ludic as well as workmanlike, a more-than-human co-making in which we are 'working and playing for a resurgent world' (Haraway 2016: 3). 'To renew the biodiverse powers of terra is the sympoietic work and play of the Chthulucene' (55). Art too is directly entangled with the ludic-monstrous renewal of biodiversity in this vision (chiming with Bennett's emphasis on art). 'The core concept is material play' (echoing the natural play of biosemiotics), which 'enacts not think tanks or work tanks but *play tanks*, which I understand as *arts* for living on a damaged planet' (Haraway 2017: 38, emphasis added). I suggest that Lafferty's fiction exhibits an ecomonstrous sympoietics, if you will: it traces a porous resonance and interplay between the agentic, mindful creativity of humans and nonhumans. As mentioned above, the Great Plains and (south)west are making his storyworlds *with* him. His regional biomes continually bleed into the stories in the form of digressions, contexts, and central themes. Lafferty's body of work is a bioregional play tank of the Chthulucene.

The Monsters of Object-Oriented Ontology

At the other end of the spectrum from vibrant materialities are dark interiorities. Object-oriented ontology's 'most characteristic gesture', as noted above, is 'Graham Harman's notion of object withdrawal' (Sheldon 2015: 194). Yet, although OOO's objects have a permanently withdrawing 'dark side' (Morton 2011: 165) they are not completely lightless. From dark, withdrawn objects a sort of phosphorescence or noctilucence is emitting.

Though Harman insists objects exist 'as entities… quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world', nevertheless, an object is, in Morton's words, a 'weird entity withdrawn from access, yet somehow manifest' (both cited in Bennett 2015: 226). OOO is, of course, quick to qualify that however the object manifests (or monstrates) in the mesh of material interchanges, it is never thereby fully known: 'no entity is exhausted by its series of encounters with other entities, since there is always more to the entity than it shows' (Harman 2010: 54). This entity-excess connects to the fundamental *more-than* of monstrosity that we asserted in chapter two. Yet even with their monstrous inexhaustibility of interiority, OOO's objects are always populating the interconnective landscape with strange appearings like mysterious *yokai*.[126] Harman as much as says so in *The Quadruple Object*: 'objects as presented in this book are as strange as ghosts in a Japanese temple, or signals flashing inscrutably from the moon' (Harman 2011: 6).[127] These ghostly, signalling objects are never 'wholly present to each other', yet, 'despite this apartness, objects are *coy*, always leaving hints of a secret otherworld, "alluding" to an "inscrutable" reality "behind the accessible theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities." Objects are expert players at the game of hide-and-seek' (Bennett 2015: 226-227, emphasis in original). So there is a dark-and-light interplay about the object according to OOO, a furtive showing and a more fundamental hiding. Let us call the visible surface action of objects *coruscation*.

As regards literature, then, the coruscation of objects means they are capable of being artistically represented, but 'there will always be some residual depth to the entity behind anything we might be able to say about it' (Harman 2010: 60). As in 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay': 'it isn't just the surface, it's the immeasurable depth also' (Lafferty 1976b: 72). While it does not seem likely that OOO acknowledges anything like material ecocriticism's 'necessary unity' between mind and nature noted above (Wheeler 2014: 78), OOO does firmly advocate for contact between human minds and the rest of the world—but such connection is of the same nature as that which obtains between all objects whatsoever. Every object 'speculates' across the coruscating surfaces of other objects toward what is interminably withdrawn.[128] These surfaces shine sensually in myriad ways and this is how withdrawn things negotiate one another, 'the parallel universe of private

[126] There is even a subfamily of *yokai* called 'Tsukumogami: Object Monsters or Utensil Yokai' (Foster 2015: 239). Native American folklore includes object monsters also, as we saw.

[127] Directly citing M. R. James, Ian Bogost says OOO aims 'to release objects like ghosts from the prison of human experience' (Bogost 2012: 65).

[128] Hence, OOO's inclusion under the umbrella of Speculative Realism. Cf. Harman, Graham. 2018. *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

objects cradled silently in their cocoons, even while their surfaces seem to explode, devour, caress, or murder one another' (Bogost 2012: 79). As Bogost summarises:

> In Harman's OOO, things recede into inaccessible, private depths. When objects interact, they do so not from these depths but across their surfaces, in their sensual qualities. When fire burns cotton, it takes part only in the cotton's flammability, not in its other properties, or in its real essence, which withdraws interminably. (Bogost 2012: 77)

Thus, rather than emphasising co-making with nonhumans as NM does, OOO emphasises that our weird speculations about the dark interiorities of nonhumans is what all things whatsoever are doing with each other: the cotton speculating on fire and vice versa, alcohol speculating on cotton in a different way than fire, etc. And no thing thereby exhausts or is exhausted by any other thing. Rather than an ecocentric view per se, OOO advocates something more like an eco-*ec*centric view where every object is strangely withdrawn and in mutually speculative allusion and allure with the withdrawing objects all around it. We see something very like this in the ecomonstrous fiction of Lafferty (and McCarthy), in which bioregional objects cannot be exhaustively described but instead fauna, flora, landforms, weather, and so on are 'allowed to resonate and hum weirdly' (Bogost 2012: 127).

Humans, of course, participate in this speculative activity of the world and OOO offers a number of 'techniques' for consciously pursuing this. Let us briefly explore some examples pertinent to ecomonstrous poetics of what Morton calls OOO's 'affective-contemplative techniques for summoning the alien' (Morton 2011: 171), or ACTs.

Harman's ACTs: Lovecraftian Ontography

Having discovered the obscure word 'ontography' in (significantly) a ghost story by M. R. James (Bogost 2012: 36), Harman adopted it as the term for mapping out and exploring gaps and relays between the coruscating surfaces of objects and their tenebrous depths.[129] It is in light of this that Harman claims 'Lovecraft is the model writer of ontography'

[129] Harman's version of ontography is a complex and detailed philosophical mapping of criss-crossed 'tensions' between real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities, where this topography of ontic tensions comprises the stuff of space, time, 'eidos', and essence (Harman 2011: 95 ff.). Following Harman's own practice, we elide that rigorous account here as we are 'concerned more with literature than with metaphysics per se' (Harman 2012: 32). In so doing we edge nearer to Bogost's far more loose and lateral iteration of ontography as simply 'a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness' of things (Bogost 2012: 38).

(2012: 33).[130] Thus, Harman draws on the literature of the monstrous (both James and Lovecraft) to elucidate his philosophy—or as, in fact, exemplifying it.

As Harman sees it, Lovecraft's exemplary ontography is rooted in his fruitful inability to see objects as simple and seamless integers. In this regard, Harman reckons there are basically two types of philosophers: reductionists and productionists. The former are 'those who destroy gaps by imploding them into a single principle' and the latter are 'philosophers who find new gaps in the world where there were formerly none' (Harman 2012: 3). Harman locates Lovecraft squarely in the company of the latter. 'Lovecraft is clearly a productionist author. No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess' (Harman 2012: 3). Lovecraft expresses this productionist perplexity through evocations of the monstrous and the weird: 'No other writer gives us monsters and cities so difficult to describe that he can only hint at their anomalies' (10). Similar to the intuitive leaps of adduction, one cannot evoke a Lovecraftian monster (nor the more-than-human world behind the monster) through straightforward point-for-point description, but must approach its exorbitance more craftily—as with Lafferty's antiecomimetic descriptions of the monstrous fabric of his bioregions. Harman also notes, however, that this approach that can only hint at anomalies is not only achieved by an 'allusive' description, but also by what he calls a 'horizontal' or 'cubist' evocation of 'weirdness', which consists (in Lafferty as in Lovecraft) in a sort of embarrassingly excessive over-description that mirrors the excess of the thing described: 'language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing' (Harman (2012: 25 and passim).[131]

As Harman notes, theories of philosophical realism tend to be 'representational' and thus 'hold not only that there is a real world outside all human contact with it, but also that this reality can be mirrored adequately by the findings of the natural sciences or some other method of knowledge' (Harman 2012: 51). OOO problematises this sort of realist mimesis. 'No reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or

[130] Haraway's Chthulucene, as noted above, altogether avoids 'Lovecraft's misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference)' (Haraway 2016: 101). I can only suggest here that this thesis's folding together of insights from certain readings of Lovecraft's fiction with insights from non-Western monsters indicates possibilities for supplanting Lovecraft's toxic fear and loathing with the 'all-too-human' alternatives of 'vulnerability, humility, care, faith, hope, and love' summoned by monstration (Klyukanov: 140).

[131] The teeming billions of 'half-animated' bison and horses and cars in 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay' almost instantiates both allusion and over-description at once.

measure it' (ibid.). This is not an endorsement of antirealism, but a clarification of what the term realism ought to indicate. 'Realism does not mean that we are able to state correct propositions about the real world. Instead, it means that reality is too real to be translated without remainder into any sentence, perception, practical action, or anything else' (Harman 2012: 16). The *monstrum*, as we have said, forecloses closure (cf. Klyukanov: 137). 'No literal statement is congruent with reality itself,' insists Harman; nor is any handling of an object the same thing as that object 'in the plenitude of its reality' (Harman 2012: 16). This means that 'nothing can be paraphrased', 'nothing in this world, whether it be a poem, hammer, atom, lizard, or flower, can be converted into anything else without distortion' (Harman 2012: 251). We can't elide that distortion—it is always happening as objects encounter one another. We can only play along *with* it.[132] Thus, rather than straightforwardly representational realism, we require instead an 'oblique mode of access to reality' (Harman 2012: 52). What Harman calls the 'untranslatability' of objects obliges us to forge 'an art of allusion or indirect speech, a metaphorical bond with a reality that cannot possibly be made present' (Harman 2012: 16).

Objects themselves instigate the crafting of this allusive art. Since the object in our consciousness is a 'false paraphrase' of its full reality, 'a caricature that exists only in the context of my own experience of it', it 'can surprise us with sudden breakdowns' that imply it 'is not the effects it has on us, but something more' (Harman 2012: 252; cf. Bogost 2012: 66). Art in the mode of an oblique realism responds to such broken monstration. 'Normal sensual experience does not feel haunted by any sort of withdrawn real background; it is Heidegger who shows us that this occurs in relatively rare cases of broken equipment, profound boredom, or *Angst*' (Harman 2012: 255). That is, these are the places where Heidegger felt the withdrawn background break in, but for Harman that breakdown/break-in is ubiquitous. He argues that monstrous writing such as Lovecraft's (and I would add, Lafferty's) models the everyday unveiling of monsters even in the mundane objects and places that surround us. For we find in Lovecraft

> […] the explicit production of unparaphrasable real objects (Antarctic cities, Cthulhu idols) in the very midst of the sensual realm. Deprived of access to the real objects that lurk beneath perception and all other contexts, we produce our own real objects in the midst of them—as if countless black holes were suddenly and deliberately generated in banks, hospitals, and malls, or in Florence, Stratford, and Providence' (Harman 2012: 260).

[132] As Bogost notes, OOO '*welcomes* such distortion' as the only means of glimpsing the depths of withdrawing objects (Bogost 2012: 66; italics in original).

This productionist approach fashions imaginary monsters that darkly reflect the real monstrosity of objects that exceed all relationships. As Mark Fisher observed, even though 'ordinary naturalism' in Lovecraft's writing 'will be shredded by the end of each tale, it is replaced by a hypernaturalism—an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains' (Fisher 2016: 18). Thus, 'the weird entails a certain relationship to realism': in Lovecraft's case it was that his exorbitant Outside most often irrupted into (or better, from out of) his familiar and fondly detailed local New England (Fisher: 19-20). In Lafferty and McCarthy, the monstrous irrupts in/from the (south)western plains and deserts. A 'belonging together' of excess and the mundane: black holes in bioregions.

In art made in the mode of this weird realism we 'endure a breakdown of the usual situation in which perceptions and meanings simply lie before us as obvious facts' (Harman 2012: 258). Things become endarkened, strange, and we become fruitfully uneasy. That is, (in a move productively obverse from NM's emphasis on enmeshment) 'the strain and novelty of taking these objects seriously emphasizes our separateness from them' such that 'we ourselves invest energy in paying attention to this object' and experience a 'lack of ease' that takes us out of the ordinary (ibid.). Thus, 'when new and difficult experience is produced by breakdowns along the fault-lines of things, it becomes evident that our experience of the new object is unparaphrasable, and that it is thus a reality in its own right' (259).

A poetics of the unparaphrasable is a poetics of monstration and adduction (of worldly excess and humbled leap), an artistic realism that doesn't, for example, reduce ecological reality to human comprehension, but which does enable us to take nonhumans seriously along the fault-lines of their monstrating mystery. We might say that McCarthy and Lafferty perform a sort of 'breakdown fiction' by the production of gaps and black holes in their own bioregions, irruptions of more-than-human contact and surplus, coruscation and withdrawal. As we have seen, grotesqueries and uncanny marvels in Lafferty's landscapes and biomes 'surprise us with sudden breakdowns', the 'strain and novelty' of which provokes us to take them seriously and to uneasily invest ourselves in their unordinary reality rather than taking them for granted as colourful backdrop to human drama.

A particularly apt example of this is Lafferty's story 'All Pieces of a River Shore' (1970), which narrates its inhuman breakdown at the very opening of the tale:

> It had been a very long and ragged and incredibly interlocked and detailed river shore. Then a funny thing happened. It had been broken up, sliced up into pieces. Some of the pieces had been folded and compressed into bales. Some of them had been cut into still smaller pieces and used for ornaments and as Indian medicine. Rolled and baled pieces of the shore came to rest in barns and old warehouses, in attics, in caves. Some were buried in the ground.
>
> And yet the river itself still exists physically, as do its shores, and you may go and examine them. But the shore you will see along the river now is not quite the same as that old shore that was broken up and baled into bales and rolled onto rollers, not quite the same as the pieces you will find in attics and caves. (Lafferty 1972a: 161)

We are then told that the chopped and folded river shore panorama was an attraction of 19th century carnivals (alongside advertised 'Monsters' and 'Wonders') at which segments of the panorama were made to flow by on 'rollers' (163). The main character of the tale—a 'rich Indian' named Leo Nation—is trying to collect all the pieces and assemble the whole (161). Yet the slippery language of the opening paragraphs seems to suggest that it was an actual physical river shore that was broken up and baled, not a painting of the shore.[133] The gap produced from this slippage is never resolved in the story: the pieces of the panorama behave simultaneously as painting, photograph, and actual river shore. Yet the uneasiness of the ontological breakdown and fault lines of this river shore make the human characters (and readers) track it all over the region (the pieces are used as an attraction inside a cave, as rugs in a house, and so on) and thereby to slowly piece its plenitude back together. The unfolding story is rich with vivid bioregional evocation. Furthermore, the glimpses of flora and fauna ensconced in the trees and mud of the panorama reveal species that have been extinct for ten thousand years. Under magnification, a microscope reveals cellular detail in leaves, moss, and (yet again) the hairy legs of bees (166, 169). Furthermore, the very identity of the river shore never resolves—it shifts between being the shore of the Mississippi, the Arkansas, and the Atchafalaya rivers. Through its weird breakdown in this story, then, the river shore surprises us with its alterity and liminality, evocative of the real monstrosity of hybrid aquatic-terrestrial landforms: 'The Muddy Mississippi is the brown river, a place of interstices, mixing, hybridity, autonomy, cogency' (Cohen 2013a: 28). (South)western river biomes are *themselves* monstrous. In this tale, the human characters play along adductively with the river shore's monstrations but doing so does also nearly (in Lovecraftian echo) break their minds. *Monstrum tremendum*.[134]

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[133] Such painted panoramas existed and could be a quarter of a mile long. Cf. McDermott, Jennifer, November 23, 2017, 'A whale's tale: Longest painting in North America restored'. The Associated Press. Retrieved from https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/a-whales-tale-longest-painting-in-north-america-restored/

[134] We return to this story and its denouement after discussing Timothy Morton below.

Bogost's ACTs: The Experience of Planet-Fall is a Daily Thing

Akin to Harman's sudden multiplication of terrestrial black holes, Ian Bogost offers a vision of being surrounded by alien life in each and every object of the world, which requires a response of nescient, flexuous speculation and copious compilation.

> The true alien recedes interminably even as it surrounds us completely. It is not hidden in the darkness of the outer cosmos or in the deep-sea shelf but in plain sight, everywhere, in everything. Mountain summits and gypsum beds, chile roasters and buckshot, microprocessors and ROM chips can no more communicate with us and one another than can Rescher's extraterrestrial.[135] It is an instructive and humbling sign. Speculative realism really does *require* speculation: benighted meandering in an exotic world of utterly incomprehensible objects. As philosophers, our job [...] is to write the speculative fictions of their processes [...]. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder, and gypsum. Our job is to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger. I call this practice *alien phenomenology*. (Bogost 2012: 34, emphasis in original)

Hence, OOO's dark inexhaustibility of objects means we are always On Alien Ground.[136]

As it happens, Lafferty's essay 'The Moth-Eaten Magician' (1981) spells out a view that anticipates OOO's alien phenomenology and strange stranger coexistence. Noting his appreciation of the science-fictional trope of 'planet falls', Lafferty avers that 'the experience of planet-fall is a daily thing': indeed, it 'happens a dozen or a hundred times a day' as we continually experience 'the feeling of having just arrived' and the 'compulsion' to explore this 'intricate and massive world, prodigious in detail and almost beyond numbering in its dimensions; compendious, encyclopedic, physically astonishing, prodigal in line and color, alive on a dozen different levels' (Lafferty 1981: 58). The ceaseless profusion of strange encounters with nonhumans throughout Lafferty's fiction testify to his planetfall frame of mind and resonates with alien phenomenology. He was constantly getting his hands dirty, as Bogost puts it, writing the speculative fictions of inhuman processes and withdrawals.

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[135] Referring to Nicholas Rescher's challenge to the SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) project that genuine extraterrestrial intelligence might be incomprehensible to us (ibid.).

[136] This phrase is used as a chapter subheading in *Blood Meridian*, which we will look at in the next chapter.

Also obviously resonant with Lafferty, then, is that Bogost, perhaps more than any other proponent of OOO, urges a recovery of genuine wonder. 'The posture one takes before the alien is that of curiosity, of wonder' (Bogost 2012: 133; 121; cf. Bogost 2015: 85). Out of wonder, we speculatively pursue alien objects of all sorts. 'Anything will do, so long as it reminds us of the awesome plenitude of the alien everyday' (Bogost 2012: 134).[137] Yet, the alien never ceases to be alien (like Morton's strange stranger). So it is a *dark* plenitude we explore, 'the weird, murky mists of the really real' (Bogost 2012: 8).

This suggests a poetics of *excessive* plenitude as well. This can be found in Bogost's version of ontography, which doesn't so much track detailed philosophical tensions between the sensuous and the hidden as much as it simply (almost naively) inscribes the sheer unfungible presence of things taking up space in the ontological landscape. Here there is a convergence with the encyclopaedic bent of the Japanese monstrous and the sense of the 'compendious, encyclopedic' and 'prodigious' in Lafferty: 'Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interaction through collocation', though 'without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind' (Bogost 2012: 38). Such compendious compilations are another aspect of object-oriented *realism*:

> Ontography is a practice of increasing the number and density, one that sometimes opposes the minimalism of contemporary art. Instead of removing elements to achieve the elegance of simplicity, ontography adds (or simply leaves) elements to accomplish the realism of the multitude. (Bogost 2012: 58)

Ontographic bestiaries abound in McCarthy's and Lafferty's fiction as they list and list and list the endless alien objects of their respective regions of the U.S. (south)west, crowding human characters with the rowdy presences of nonhumans. 'Ontographical cataloging hones a virtue: the abandonment of anthropocentric narrative coherence in favor of worldly detail' (Bogost 2012: 41-42). Lafferty's 'realism of the multitude' does not fit neatly into plot, theme, and dramatic effect as we know them, but well exemplifies the more-than-human exorbitance of ecomonstrous poetics.

[137] Material ecocriticism's more semiotic approach is not without valences of the alien: since 'minds and knowledges are not confined to humans', we should 'get into conversation and relationship with all the life and mindedness we encounter around and about us, whatever form it takes' and 'no matter how potentially alien the knowing belonging to this way of life' (Wheeler 2014: 78).

Indeed, ‘All Pieces of a River Shore’ furnishes yet another glut of litanised bioregional specificity:

> He collected old pistols, old ball shot, grindstones, early windmills, walking-horse threshing machines, flax combs, Conestoga wagons, brass-bound barrels, buffalo robes, Mexican saddles, slick horn saddles, anvils, Argand lamps, rush holders, hay-burning stoves, hackamores, branding irons, chuck wagons, longhorn horns, beaded serapes, Mexican and Indian leatherwork, buckskins, heads, feathers, squirrel-tail anklets, arrowheads, deerskin shirts, locomotives, streetcars, millwheels, keelboats, buggies, ox yokes, old parlor organs, blood-and-thunder novels, old circus posters, harness bells, Mexican oxcarts, wooden cigar-store Indians, cable-twist tobacco a hundred years old and mighty strong, cuspidors (four hundred of them), Ferris wheels, carnival wagons, carnival props of various sorts, carnival proclamations painted big on canvas. Now he was going to collect something else. (Lafferty 1972: 161-162)

This collection’s tapestry of artefactual unclosure weaves fauna (horse, buffalo, longhorn cattle, deer, squirrel) and flora (hay, flax, tobacco) together with local culture (novels, circus, carnival, agriculture, transportation, clothing). The plenitude of such lists in Lafferty’s fiction strangely anticipates the listing proclivities of both NM and OOO.

Morton’s ACTs: Strange Strangers and Real Monsters

Like Harman and Bogost, Timothy Morton posits a strange world that must be engaged by our own answering strangeness. Objects that perpetually withdraw are interminably strange. Their inexhaustibility guarantees that their strangeness is without bottom. Morton thus calls the object a ‘strange stranger’.

> *Strange stranger* names an uncanny, radically unpredictable quality of life-forms. Life-forms recede into strangeness the more we think about them, and whenever they encounter one another—the strangeness is irreducible. Ecological philosophy that does not attend to this strangeness is not thinking coexistence deeply enough. (Morton 2011: 165, emphasis in original)

Morton clarifies that this is so not only life-forms, but also ‘non-living entities’ (165). Indeed, if all things withdraw: ‘Why should strangeness not apply to nonlife?’ (166). And again, the strangeness can’t be resolved by any means. ‘The more we know about a strange stranger, the more she (he, it) withdraws’ (166). Morton’s strange stranger comports with Klyukanov’s characterisation of monstration as ‘ever strange and elusive’ (Klyukanov:

137) and suggests, like Bogost's ubiquitous alien presences, an enveloping reality of *all* things understood as something like *yokai*, every earthly entity whatever a manifestation of 'strangeness, mystery, or suspicion' of 'things beyond the realm of explanation' (Foster 2012: 135). This nudges us again toward a picture of the world as monsterscape, where '*human* being is just one way of being in a mesh of strange strangeness—uncanny, open-ended, vast: existence is (ecological) coexistence' (Morton: 165-66, emphasis in original).

For Morton, our poetic response to strange strangeness must take the form of a sublime that doesn't just surround a human subject with exoticised nonhumans in a sort of anthropocentric panopticon zoo-gaze that keeps them distant. Instead, we require a sublime which allows the nonhuman to tap the human's shoulder in sudden deanthropocentrised proximity. This can even manifest as the elision of any gaze at all: 'this weird thing, the other, is somehow *structural*: it doesn't matter how you sidle up to it, you will never be able to grasp it directly. Its job seems to be to disappear whenever you look directly at it, but to feel like it's surrounding you when you don't—sometimes this feeling can be pretty creepy' (Morton 2018: 6, emphasis in original). Lafferty's characters (and readers) sometimes feel this inhuman creepiness (as we will see below). This is because an'object-oriented sublime transports the strange stranger into the reader's midst' (Morton 2011: 171). This is sublime adduction, we might say: impacted by the monstrations of strange strangers, we leap to (mixing in Haraway) sympoietically give them voice. 'We are getting used to how oil spills and strange weather really do "speak" to us—OOO is timely in giving us concepts with which to address the feedback we are receiving from Earth' (Morton 2011: 166). On this understanding we might say that Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics evinces a sort of 'feedback fiction' (as well as the 'breakdown fiction' noted above). In this respect it anticipates Bogost's assertion that 'our job is to amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways' (Bogost 2012: 34; cf. 66). That is, Lafferty's fiction *amplifies amplitude*.

As we mentioned in chapter one, Morton's particular strategy is to counter what he calls 'ecomimesis' with 'antiecomimesis'. Ecomimesis is 'a trope of immediacy and vivid aesthetic experience surrounding the act of writing, thinking or speaking' (Morton 2011: 168). It is related to the form of sublime Morton rejects: an 'ecophenomenological ecomimesis that confirms the localized position of a subject with privileged access to phenomena: here I am, writing this, sitting opposite this herd of wildebeest' (Morton 2011: 170). This is Kantian and Burkean sublimity, Morton argues, which is 'about reactions in the subject' (170) and is thus an 'egotistical sublime' (173). 'The core of ecomimesis is a

sentence such as "As I write this, I am immersed in Nature"' (Morton 2016: 57). Morton places against this the sublime as conceived by the 3rd century philosopher Longinus. 'Longinus, in contrast, is talking about intimacy with an alien presence: the sublime is what evokes this proximity of the alien' (171).

In line with a Longinian sublime, Morton suggests the counter-strategy of 'antiecomimesis' or 'weird ecomimesis' (Morton 2013: 6). Antiecomimesis 'amplifies imagination rather than trying to upstage it, and it revels in dislocation, not location' (2011: 169; cf. Iovino and Oppermann: 14). Morton pursues this amplification and dislocation through particular techniques, such as the 'ultra vivid description' of ekphrasis and various other eccentric or centrifugal rhetorical strategies:

> The ekphrastic object makes us see ourselves as objects traversed—translated by others. Longinian ekphrasis is not about the reaction of the (human) subject, but about rhetorical modes as affective-contemplative techniques for summoning the alien. "Transport" is the main motif, beaming down the object from its alien world; "elevation" (Greek: hypsos)—"getting high," lifting us out of anthropocentrism; and "phantasia" (ekphrasis). (Morton 2011: 171)

We have seen the weird, vivid descriptions of Lafferty's fiction frequently transport the inhuman into our midst or elevate us out of human exceptionalism into the more-than-human mesh of strange strangeness. Whether humans are lifted into a who's-eating-who game with goats-and-fetches-and-dogs-and-devils or gargantuan migration-and-devourment, or whether weird transports induce sudden sympathies and empathies with dragonflies or dog-faced saints or chopped up river shores, these antiecomimetic modes produce 'bizarre bazaars' of 'weird magnificence' (Morton 2011: 174) that foster 'intimacy with strange objects that can't be digested by the subject' (175). (With Lafferty it's more often the reverse: the subject digested by the object.) Thus, like the opaque monster for which we argued in the previous chapter, antiecomimesis evokes a more-than-human world that is not immediately available and accessible and 'readable' to us, but which instead makes uncanny contact, takes a reading of *us*, and then recedes—again and again. This is an 'alien phenomenology' in which the aliens are exploring us as much as the reverse. 'Longinian sublimity is an object-oriented sublime that touches, translates, withdraws from the strange stranger—that *is* a strange stranger' (171, emphasis in original; cf. Harman 2012: 17).

Not only does Morton implicitly engage the monstrous in the form of the strange stranger, he explicitly summons monsters all across his works, especially in *Dark Ecology* (2016), a book rife with monsters and the monstrous. One key way he engages the monstrous is through a multiplying and vertiginous sense of ecological scales. 'The Anthropocene binds together human history and geological time in a strange loop, weirdly weird' (Morton 2016: 8). We are experiencing the 'uncanny sense of existing on more than one scale at once' (9). Not only are we realising we 'live on more timescales than we can grasp', ours is an 'age of giant nonhuman places' (25) in which '*place* has emerged in its truly monstrous uncanny dimension, which is to say its nonhuman dimension' (10, emphasis in original). (Note the equivalence of monstrous and nonhuman.) 'One finds oneself on the insides of much bigger places than those constituted by humans' (11), deep inside the belly of the more-than-human world. It is weird and disorienting in here. 'We are faced with the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic' (25). This deep-time more-than-human Vertigo Monster is another way of describing the monsterscape of the Chthulucene that Lafferty inscribes across his bioregion(s)—and which these landscapes inscribe across the bodies and psyches and cultures of the humans who inhabit them.

As with NM and in accord Harman's OOO, all this is based, for Morton, in *monstrous realism*. That is, in Morton's construal monstrosity is ascribed to the more-than-human world quite apart from our cultural monster-making. 'Ecological awareness is disorienting precisely because of these multiple scales. We sense that there *are* monsters even if we can't see them directly' (Morton 2016: 41, emphasis in original). So, again, our engagement with NM and OOO enables us to widen *where* and *what* the monster is in Lafferty's (and McCarthy's) fiction: *it is nonhumans*—nonhuman places, timescales, and myriad nonhuman entities, from animals to rocks to storms. Though we do encounter some imaginary monsters in the fiction of Lafferty, an ecomonstrous poetics is primarily about this sense of ecology itself as the monster or as monstrous.

Let us return one last time to Lafferty's 'All Pieces of a River Shore' to glimpse something of the massive Anthropocene/Chthulucene monster that just *is* withdrawn inhuman plenitude and vibrant more-than-human entanglement. Toward the denouement of the tale, the pieces have all been collected and are being pieced together in order to

unroll the entire panorama of the river shore.[138] In tall tale fashion, the reconstituted river shore on bales and bales of rollers ends up being sixty miles long. As we saw above, it reveals first a lush and hyper-realistic rolling vista of ecological deep-time detail. Then, with mounting horror (that inhuman creepiness Morton speaks of), there is what at first 'looks like a shadow, like a thin cloud' at each end of the panorama (Lafferty 1972a: 173), 'like a big smudge in the air between us and the shore' the characters describe it (175), 'too exactly like something, and too big to be: the loops and whorls that were eighteen feet long' (176), which turn out to be the epic fingerprints of some gargantuan being that had visited the planet at the end of the Pleistocene. The human characters reckon the river shore panorama to be a discarded sample taken by the being. In keeping with an ecomonstrous poetics construed through OOO and NM, we may read this gigantically indirect and haunting encounter with a giant extraterrestrial emblematic of the primary sustained encounter of the tale, which is with the vast *terrestrial* alien that is the river shore itself. As with the anthropoid giants comprised of avian-insectile masses in 'Bird-Master', the gigantesque here is seen to be awe-fully inhuman rather than 'humanity writ large'.

Indeed, Lafferty's ecomonstrous evocation of this triplicity[139] of western and old southwestern rivers (Mississippi, Arkansas, and Atchafalaya) as a massive, many-miles-long work of inhuman *art* anticipates a move toward the monstrous inhuman from Jeffrey Cohen relating to one of these same rivers. Cohen gigantically anthropomorphises the Mississippi River as an 'earth artist' that works across time scales difficult for humans to discern: utilising its own unique set of artist's materials the river 'composes with ice, stone, potent flows of water, heterogeneous biosystems, and tumbling sediment' (Cohen 2013: 18). In this weird and powerful construal, the riverine Earth Artist's 'current installation curves sinuously across 2,320 miles, extensively terraforms, slowly alters the Gulf of Mexico through delta formation, and constantly extends land into what had been sea' (ibid.). Though comparatively recent human history has carved out various 'uses' for the river (dam, dike, water traffic, etc.), the Mississippi remains its own entity and agent. 'An incessant flow of objects, animals, elements, and forces not reducible to human use-value, the powerful river exerts a relentless agency easily readable in its engendered worlds' (ibid.). These worlds are engendered as its 'waters perpetually erode the earth, reshaping the kaleidoscope of biomes that cluster along its long path' (27). In Lafferty's

[138] Characteristic of Laffertian natureculture, this assemblage is achieved with the aid of technology: a character analyses the pieces of river shore and 'took the data into town and fed it to his computers' (Lafferty 1972a: 173). This again echoes Morton's computer-aided sense of a monstrous Anthropocene (Morton 2013).

[139] Recall the triplicity of Lundquist and his two fetches in 'Cabrito'. Do the Arkansas and Atchafalaya rivers, a tributary and distributary of the Mississippi respectively, act as inhuman riverine fetches here?

story, of course, it is not the river's powerful agential flow that is the main focus, but these kaleidoscopic, deeply aged biomes that cluster upon the landform (the shoreline) carved by the river's path. The tall ecomonstrous yarn 'All Pieces of a River Shore' breaks up those sinuate biomes and then pieces them back together as an exorbitant assemblage that swallows humans into the 'monstrously gigantic' strange strangeness of inhuman scale and an endless panorama of bioregional specificity (cf. Morton 2016: 25).[140]

Conclusion: The Laffertian Ecomonstrous: Chthulucene & Cthulhucene Amalgamated

We noted the suggestion of nonhumans withdrawing into the withdrawal of other nonhumans in 'Narrow Valley' at the opening of this chapter. Similarly, we saw in 'Love Affair With Ten Thousand Springs' (see chapter one) the suggestion of withdrawal in the obscurely sensed 'brittle and blue skin of the snake doctor dragonflies' as these in turn hid within the mysteries of the spring, which itself suggested watery depths of withdrawal by its very 'new-hatched' and 'born-blind' emergence from the 'underground darkness' of its rattling 'interior rocks' (Lafferty 1976a: 34). And the biota hide within the river shore's surplus of broken up withdrawal in the story just discussed. Again and again in Lafferty, the exorbitant behaviour or presence of nonhumans and the brief, bright coruscations of weird surface specificities together provoke the feeling of both withdrawing interiorities and strange inhuman entanglements—whether these seemingly opposing pulls and poles conveniently cohere in human perception or not.

As noted at the opening of this chapter, this category-busting combinatory approach has at least some precedent. Bennett remarks: 'It makes sense to try to do justice both to systems and things—to acknowledge the stubborn reality of individuation and the essentially distributive quality of their affectivity' (Bennett 2015: 229). There are energies and there are entities. So we suggest for our ecomonstrous reading of Lafferty, an unholy alliance/bivalence: Chthulucene and 'Cthulhucene' amalgamated. We propose that our

[140] Jeff Warrin and his artist collective Silt performed an installation for the 2003 Whitney Biennial called 'All Pieces of a River Shore', inspired directly by Lafferty's story: 'Traces of birds, reptiles, insects, and plants fossilized onto film are projected into a primordial mosaic, assembled live on kinetic, sculptural screens that float above the audience. Silt uses Lafferty's story—describing a panoramic picture, hundreds of miles in length—a scrolling riverscape image of tremendous antiquity and seemingly infinite resolution—as a method of focusing their own paranaturalist inquiry of a Northern California canyon creek.' Retrieved from https://www.jeffwarrin.com/all-pieces-of-a-river-shore/9kn5ld4710kcqz81mnpl48h81rha4w

qualified embrace of OOO will follow Lovecraft not only in the indescribability (due to inexhaustibility) of his monsters, but also in Lovecraft's realisation of our porosity toward hybridisation with them. As Mark Fisher remarked about Lovecraft's story 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', when the apparently human protagonist eventually realises he is himself a 'Deep One' (an amphibious race of para-humans enthralled to an aquatic monster god), he must acquiesce to more-than-human entanglement: 'I am It—or better, I am They' (Fisher 2016: 16). But instead of finding this entangling monstration something to loathe as Lovecraft did, I suggest that Lafferty responds as Klyukanov suggests with all-too-human (and, we might add, all-too-more-than-human) care, faith, hope, and love. Again and again his tales willingly surrender to this enmeshment (even if his characters only do so in varying degrees). Equally, we propose that our qualified embrace of NM will grant not only permeable distribution into teeming more-than-human matter-flows, but also the withdrawing dense ontology of things that persists in excess of entanglements. As Haraway forcefully encapsulates this obdurate opacity of entities: 'They are who are' (Haraway 2016: 2).

Attempting to fuse NM and OOO in an ecomonstrous poetics admittedly creates a Lovecraftian monster that can barely hold together[141] or indeed a Laffertian monstrosity of simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal movements.[142] Nevertheless, we will aim to strenuously insist that the ecomonstrous consists of both entanglement and withdrawal, and without secretly collapsing one into the other. On the one hand, this torqued vision of entanglement-withdrawal is like the shifting zoomorphisms of *taotie* Chinese monster masks: 'Any attempt to finally resolve these figures finds them maddeningly ambiguous, with parts of bodies detaching and re-emerging as some other figure or form' (Myhre 2012: 218). On the other hand, this tortuosity is akin to Ian Bogost's remark when he insists that OOO combines two seemingly competing meanings of 'wonder' (dizzying awe vs. puzzling logic): 'This is not one of those irreconcilable Derridean suspensions, either. It's a truly simultaneous condition without deferral' (Bogost 2012: 121; cf. Cohen 1996: 7). In the same way, we posit an ecomonstrous torsion of Chthulucene/Cthulhucene without deferral: 'Withdrawn *and* manifest' (Bennett 2015: 226, emphasis in original). Or as another new materialist remarks: 'The concepts of nature and culture need serious reworking, in a way that expresses the irreducible *alterity* of the nonhuman in and through

[141] E.g. the vast monster at the end of 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929) comprised entirely and indiscriminately of tentacles, eyes, and mouths; or the shifting, bubbling shoggoths in 'At the Mountains of Madness' (1936).

[142] The bird-and-bug giants that fly apart and reassemble, the half-animated churning clay multitudes, the river shore cut up and stitched back together, the competing stories of cabrito consumption, Pickens picked down to his bones and less than bones, 'until the next story'.

its active *connection* to the human and vice versa' (Smith 2011: 71, emphasis in original). Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics suggests a Chthulucene/Cthulhucene that perpetually amalgamates just such 'irreducible alterity and infinite connection' (ibid.). It is a poetics in which monsters illuminate/darken (noctiluminate) the outer limits of connectedness (NM) and separateness (OOO) and the monstrous exceeding of those limits in the liminal and the hybrid, the mixed and betwixt of weird realism and vibrant materiality.[143]

Furthermore, and to reiterate, ecomonstrous poetics affirms that *the monstrous is out there in the world*, before and beyond (human) culture, and that in this material nexus of uncanny entanglement-withdrawal, *nonhumans make monsters with us*. Nonhumans are right there with us, hand-in-tentacle, when we construct our exorbitant nightmares and fantasias, for 'matters and discourses are *co-constituting*' (Sheldon 2015: 201, emphasis added).[144] In this regard, note Haraway's characterisation of Bruno Latour (whose work is drawn upon extensively in both NM and OOO) as 'a compositionist intent on understanding how a common world, how collectives, are built-with each other, *where all the builders are not human beings*' (Haraway 2016: 41, emphasis added). As noted above, material ecocriticism holds that nonhumans are telling stories (including, let us note, scary stories) *with* us: 'There are so many good stories yet to tell, so many netbags yet to string, *and not just by human beings*' (Haraway: 49, emphasis added).[145] This is the more-than-human monstrous storytelling that Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics evinces. 'Diverse *human and nonhuman players* are necessary in every fiber of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story' (55, emphasis added). Human culture itself is, after all, only another expression of the vibrancy-tenebrity of things. Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics, then, expresses or 'carries' (is built-with and co-constituted by) the monstrations of nonhumans.

Finally, the NM-OOO torsion also helps develop our understanding of the Weird Bioregionalism exemplified in Lafferty's fiction. The *entanglements* Lafferty's fiction continuously stages are indicative of the potentials of more-than-human collaboration and coexistence and the dangers of ignoring our em-placement in a biome. The frequent

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[143] As Joni Adamson reports, article 2 of the 2010 Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth and Climate Change—a South American document rooted in 'indigenous cosmovisions based on ancient and ancestral indigenous knowledge'—declares 'that *each* "sentient being" (read: ecosystem, forest, river, and so on) is a *cosmos in itself*' which exists nevertheless in a 'pluriform and multi-vocal world' of 'indivisible and *interdependent relationship*' (Adamson 2014: 254, 264, emphases added). Withdrawal *and* entanglement.

[144] Cf. Iovino: 'the horizon of material ecocriticism is that of […] an ecology of mind and of *imagination* as embodied processes that are created and re-created in the essential *co-implication* with nonhuman subjects and forms' (cited in Wheeler 2014: 78, emphases added).

[145] Haraway's 'netbags' references Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'.

inhuman *withdrawals* his fiction depicts, on the other hand, keep the possibility of 'harmony' with one's region somewhat unstable and uncanny, a constant reminder of that we dwell with strange strangers whose weird plenitude we cannot exhaust, no matter how intimate and hospitable we mutually become. For even bioregionalism can become anthropocentric if it is not grounded in a sense of genuine mystery and wonder. To that end, let us hear Michael Foster on Japanese *yokai* and the 'monsterful' (monstrous + wonderful) as an envoi that encapsulates the themes of this chapter:

> If the monsterful is about wonder and the possibility of the inconceivable, it reminds us that there are otherworlds out there—sounds we have never heard, wavelengths of light human eyes cannot see, entire structures of thought yet to be imagined. As the human world contends with seemingly unsurmountable twenty-first-century challenges, the otherworld of yōkai may provide an escapist dream of fantasy and lighthearted play. But more significantly, with its variety and abundance and endless change, it can also offer a metaphor for imagining the unknown, and for the possibility of transforming amorphous hopes into solid futures. (Foster 2015: 244)

Chapter 4: 'Like Horses Called Forth Quivering Out of the Abyss': Voids Devoured by Plenitude and a Dark Zest for Being in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's gruesome and phantasmagorical odyssey through the Southwestern desert, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), is relevant for our purposes for two reasons. First, it amply exhibits a particular iteration of ecomonstrous poetics and thus furnishes a canonical text upon which to perform an ecomonstrous reading. Secondly, there is overlap between the works of McCarthy and Lafferty in regard to both era[146] and bioregion.[147] Indeed, McCarthy, like Lafferty, exhibits his own iteration of Weird Bioregionalism. Despite what might initially be perceived as a disparity of style and outlook between Lafferty's horror-comic mode and McCarthy's ornate bleakness, each author achieves a very similar effect: that of being enveloped and transected by a teeming host of monstrating nonhumans, accomplished through a recurring set of 'affective-contemplative techniques' involving weird proximity, withdrawal, and vivid blood-letting/devourment. I argue that McCarthy's strange iteration of bioregionalism consists mostly in absorbing Euro-settler ideas of empty or malevolent southwestern deserts and transmuting them into a dark, monstrous plenitude of nonhuman presence and agency. As such, *Blood Meridian* almost evinces an *inhuman bioregionalism*. It is perhaps unlikely that natives of the southwest would give the novel to non-southwesterners as an alluring portrait of their region. Yet the novel *does* possess a distinctly southwestern inhuman allure, which profoundly challenges historic Eurocentric attitudes to the western xeriscape. For this reason, this chapter focuses on *Blood Meridian* as a novel of ecomonstrous repleteness rather than negation.

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[146] Both McCarthy and Lafferty had their first short stories published in 1959 ('Wake for Susan' and 'The Wagons' respectively). McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, was published in 1965 and Lafferty's first three novels, *The Reefs of Earth*, *Space Chantey*, and *Past Master*, were all published in 1968 (the same year McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, was published).

[147] It is well known among critics that McCarthy moved (much like *Blood Meridian*'s protagonist, 'the kid') from his Tennessee background to Texas, where he took firsthand field notes of the terrain in preparation for writing his western novels. (He lived on in Texas for some two decades before relocating yet further west near Santa Fe, New Mexico.) Cf. Sepich 2008: xii-xiii.

The chapter takes shape as follows. A general programme of attention to nonhumans in *Blood Meridian* is announced as the means by which this chapter will resist nihilistic and gnostic (i.e. world-rejecting) readings of the novel. As the first move in such a reading, a series of faunal and atmospheric encounters with nonhumans is examined, in which humans are monstrously drawn into entanglement while nonhumans ontologically exceed the encounter. With ample evidence of nonhuman repleteness in place, the second half of the chapter argues that the novel's frequent evocations of the desert hyperobject as infernal and void do not unequivocally encode either evil or emptiness but contain powerful valences of arid nonhuman strangeness and repleteness, and more-than-human entanglement. After an aside on understanding devourment to signal not a hostile world but a monstrous creative process, the chapter concludes first with a brief coda suggesting a possible basic resonance between *Blood Meridian* and the theological roots of Lafferty's fiction—in a word: zest for existence, which amounts to love of the nonhuman—and secondly, with an envoi of profuse yet not exhaustive inhuman catalogue found in the novel.

Towards a Nonhuman and (Therefore) Non-Nihilistic and Non-Gnostic Reading

A number of critics have found in *Blood Meridian* an unremitting, dark-red paean to nihilism (e.g. Shaviro 2009 [1992]; Phillips 1996; Shaw 1997; Masters 1998).[148] No doubt a nihilistic strain is profoundly voiced in the novel (not least in the satanically eloquent rhetoric of Judge Holden, most often referred to simply as 'the judge'). 'And yet the relationship McCarthy explores is considerably more complex than the simple nihilism of "Nature does not care for man"' (Spurgeon 2009: 91). Indeed, *Blood Meridian*'s dialogical and polyvalent capacities work to weave an overall picture of something much weirder and less resolved than a straightforward affirmation of bleak meaninglessness or pessimistic determinism. Indeed, some have countered such nihilistic readings of *Blood Meridian*, and McCarthy's works more generally, by pointing (accurately, I think) to the moral choices and moral structures in his novels, which persist intact at a bare bones level in spite of a prevailing atmosphere of baroque nihilism (e.g. Benson 2011; DeCoste 2012). Others might point (again, accurately in my opinion) to the geopolitics of *Blood Meridian*, such as

[148] See the summary of critics that hold to nihilistic readings of McCarthy's works in general in DeCoste 2012: 87, footnote 1.

how it 'unveils the barbaric underside of America's self-mythologizing global expansion: that it and its attendant ideologies of progress are conceived in the slaughter of those located on the underdeveloped peripheries of the American nation-state' (Montague 2016: 97-98). Importantly, such a critical unveiling can be discerned in the artistry of the text itself only if the novel's overall picture allows for, at the very least, the bare possibility of a moral realism by which to measure and find wanting such genocidal politics.

These approaches to *Blood Meridian* (and McCarthy's oeuvre) undermine Steven Shaviro's oft-cited vaunt in regard to the novel: 'We are called to no responsibility, and we may lay claim to no transcendence. *Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace. It is useless to look for ulterior, redemptive meanings' (Shaviro 2009: 12; quoted approvingly in Shaw1997: 118 and Masters 1998: 35). Such a unilateral reading simply doesn't come to grips with the heteroglossia of the novel, not only in terms of human voices,[149] but also in terms of overall artistic texture and metaphysical resonances (cf. Sepich 1991; Peebles 2003; Montague 2016).[150]

Our ecomonstrous reading pursues something similar to the moral, political, and metaphysical approaches that undercut nihilistic readings, but by means of attention not to human characters or ideological discourses but to a basic and resplendent nonhuman plenitude in the novel. Such attention should put anyone interested in the Nonhuman Turn immediately on guard against pessimistic readings of *Blood Meridian* (that is, readings that interpret the novel as espousing pessimism as its controlling meaning). For it is only if one thinks humans are the only meaning-makers in the universe that one could think of McCarthy's depictions (in various places across his novels) of an Earth in which humans are profoundly marginalised (even vanishing) as meaningless or nihilistic.[151]

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[149] The narrative certainly pits the kid and the ex-priest Tobin against the judge's rhetoric, and despite the latter's overwhelming of the former with both force of eloquence and brute force, readers are not left with a sense that the murderous, paedophilic judge is therefore correct in his philosophising.

[150] We don't have space to thoroughly explore the narrative voice, but I suggest the narrator is something of an omni-witness who inscribes all the views and textures expressed, either by turns or simultaneously, privileging none, even if some appear to be given a greater amount of words. The narrator's vision is 'dark', but it is a darkness of fullness and mystery, even if contested, as when the judge remarks that 'The mystery is that there is no mystery' and the ex-priest Tobin retorts: 'As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker' (McCarthy 1985: 252; cf. DeCoste 2012: 87).

[151] *Blood Meridian* previews the world of vanishing humans in *The Road*, although the former novel's humans disappear not into the ash of a non-ecology, but into the monstrously evoked repleteness of a richly arid ecology. In an emblematic example: 'white noon saw them through the waste like a ghost army, so pale they were with dust, like shades of figures erased upon a board' (McCarthy 1985: 46).

Consider in this regard Eugene Thacker's construal of a 'world-without-us', which he conceives as occupying a shadowy position between the 'world-for-us' and the 'world-in-itself':

> To say that the world-without-us is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the world-for-us. To say that the world-without-us is neutral with respect to the human, is to attempt to put things in the terms of the world-in-itself. The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific. (Thacker 2011: 5-6)

This is not quite an ecomonstrous view due to words like 'neutral' and 'impersonal'. Material ecocriticism's emphasis on a material-semiotic world cannot countenance 'an impersonal and indifferent world-without-us' (Thacker: 9). To be fair, Thacker hasn't here said the world-without-us has no meaning whatsoever, but it is unclear whether and in what sense it is meaningful in his schema. He seems at any rate to tie the world-without-us to a 'Cosmic Pessimism, with its dark metaphysics of negation, nothingness, and the non-human' (20). As we saw in chapter three, object-oriented ontology proffers a very different 'dark metaphysics' of the nonhuman that, while withdrawing, is anything but negation or nothingness. I argue that *Blood Meridian*'s emphasis on nonhumans is similarly devoid of negation and, on the contrary, displays quite the opposite: affirmation, inscription, substantiation—even refulgence.

In any case, more-than-human entanglement disallows *indifference*—from any quarter, human or nonhuman.

> Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman […] Beings—human and not—become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding. (Haraway 2017: 45)

This is not the language of indifference, but of an inextricable *involvement* in more-than-human world-making, or of 'involution' powering evolution (Haraway 2017: 31). Furthermore, new materialism's emphasis on material agency and liveliness might make us suspicious of ideas of a world-without-us as 'impersonal'; that is, of nonhumans as not being 'persons' or possessing qualities relevant to 'personhood' or 'selfhood' in some wide

(or perhaps analogical) sense (cf. Bennett 2010: 10; Adamson 2014: 257; Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 3-4; Shaviro 2015: 22-23).[152]

On the other hand, Thacker has a very fruitful definition of horror, so I do not quibble with the word 'horrific' in his characterisation of the world-without-us. Horror, for Thacker, is 'about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This also means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the unknown' (Thacker 2011: 8). This comports with our sense of the monstrous as the numinous excess and exorbitance of the more-than-human. Thus, *Blood Meridian* is certainly a novel of horror in Thacker's sense (as well as exemplifying more familiar valences of horror, such as graphic portrayals of violence and violation).[153]

Thus, an ecomonstrous reading will see all the nonhumans eerily crowding the pages of *Blood Meridian* not as tied to notions of pessimism or negation but instead as expressive of a gushing glut of semiotic meaningfulness, whatever becomes of the human characters. As Wendy Wheeler explains, meaning-making is not exclusively the domain of humans:

> [T]he human use of metaphor […] is descended from metaphoric processes—Bateson called these "syllogisms in grass" […]—in nature. The assertion that nature is meaningless and random is, thus, incorrect. It is a work of meaning making and purposes from which our own human meaning making and purposes have evolved. […] Matter, we can say, is not merely a passive substratum, but a *meaning-bearing* field of agency. (Wheeler 2014: 70, emphasis in original)

Blood Meridian's evocations of, as we might say, 'syllogisms in chaparral' (cf. McCarthy 1985: 161, 215, 228) may express natural 'metaphoric processes' in an excessive poetics scarily beyond human comprehension, but this does not mean the novel's landscapes are anything less than monstrating, communicative entities-full-of-entities (much as we have seen in Lafferty's brimful and almost hyper-semiotic monsterscape). Perhaps the human sojourners in McCarthy's novel grasp neither premises nor conclusion of the nonhuman syllogisms in the midst of which they ride (indeed, upon whom they are mounted), but

[152] An impersonal view of nonhumans, or the universe in general, is certainly antithetical to Native American ontologies (e.g. Posthumus 2018: 42 and passim; cf. Adamson 2014).

[153] I take Shaviro's comments in this regard to make something of the same point: 'Reading *Blood Meridian* produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration [...] something beyond either fascination or horror' (Shaviro 2009: 10). That is, McCarthy's novel produces the *monstrous* in the vertiginous sense we have affirmed, which, while going beyond 'horror' in the sense of mere repugnance toward what is hideous, finds an echo in Thacker's carefully distinguished sense of horror as confrontation with human limits and the unknown.

readers, at least, recognise with horror the shapely elegance of a Logic-Beyond-Us (to augment Thacker's world-without-us).[154]

From the same new materialist perspective, we also reject gnostic readings of *Blood Meridian*—at least, again, in any univocal sense.[155] Petra Mundik, for example, makes a compelling evidential case for a 'world-rejecting' gnostic reading of the malevolent desert in the novel (Mundik 2016; cf. Deane-Drummond 2014b: 71). Yet what this unilateral reading again fails to take into account is the novel's heteroglossic convocation of voices. The narrator may often evoke landscapes in terms of the demonic, hellish, or otherwise malefic, but by continuously evoking nonhumans (and most often in a wealth of informed detail and apt phrasing) the narrator has allowed, willingly or unwillingly, their agency and surplus (exceeding even their poeticisation) to permeate the novel so completely that nonhumans become arguably the most eloquent interlocutors of the text.[156] Indeed, material ecocriticism affirms that nonhumans of all kinds are 'self-representational' and self-articulate, such that: 'There are many ways nature can be *loquens*, eloquent, speaking, telling' (Serenella Iovino, cited in Oppermann 2014: 28-29). Put another way, this is to recognise that 'nonhumans are not just represented but represent, and that they can do so without having to "speak"' (Adamson 2014: 255). Hence, we aim to heed (to feel) the traces of these articulate nonhuman 'voices' and self-representations residing within the more-than-humanly collaborative ecomonstrous poetics of *Blood Meridian*—and, in fact, we discover therein a powerfully *world-affirming* voice in the novel, even if in a manner more bewildering than reassuring.

Faunal Aliens

To begin with, we look at two faunal encounters that are ghoulish, but whose monstrous qualities are not limited to this. These garish[157] episodes also convey *monstrum tremendum et fascinans*. For readers at least, the nonhuman animals horrify (overwhelm) us and fascinate us simultaneously. Biotic harbingers of the agency of the larger landscape

[154] Our approach here is somewhat akin to Found 2016, but without necessarily building outward from ecosystem to politics and without as much of a stark distinction between ecology and ontology.
[155] See the summary of critics who hold to gnostic and other esoteric readings of McCarthy's works in DeCoste 2012: 87, footnote 2.
[156] I say this advisedly, as one who has felt the full force of the judge's incredibly mesmerising oratory.
[157] To use the term favoured by the feature-writer John T. Woolybear in Lafferty's story 'Magazine Section'.

through which the humans travel, these nonhumans enact entanglement and excess. They manifest. They mangle. They withdraw. Bloody strange strangers.

Attacked by a Vampire

A chapter subheading glosses the following scene as 'Attacked by a vampire' (McCarthy 1985: 55). It is a nocturne subsequent to a typically described daytime trek: traversing a 'purgatorial waste' (63), two filibusters (the kid and a character called Sproule, the only survivors of a Comanche assault upon their company) 'struggled all day across a terra damnata of smoking slag, passing from time to time the bloated shapes of dead mules or horses' (61).[158] Hellscape by day, the Mexican desert night furnishes an antiphonal horror:

> They walked on into the dark and they slept like dogs in the sand and had been sleeping so when something black flapped up out of the night ground and perched on Sproule's chest. Fine fingerbones stayed the leather wings with which it steadied as it walked upon him. A wrinkled pug face, small and vicious, bare lips crimped in a horrible smile and teeth pale blue in the starlight. It leaned to him. It crafted in his neck two narrow grooves and folding its wings over him it began to drink his blood.
>
> Not soft enough. He woke, put up a hand. He shrieked and the bloodbat flailed and sat back upon his chest and righted itself again and hissed and clicked its teeth. (McCarthy 1985: 65-66)

A metaphoric-material assemblage of men, dogs, sand, bat, starlight, and blood, the description interweaves naturalistic detail such as 'fingerbones' with the fanciful 'horrible smile' and macabre bloodsucking, the latter with wings folded over the man like the cape of a count in classic modern vampire imagery. An ecomonstrous reading may take the hissing recalcitrance of the bloodbat as emblematic of its ontological refusal to be reduced to either mere (human) metaphor or meaningless materiality. It is, in fact, a metaphoric materiality, as biosemiotics insists (Wheeler 2014: 70). It is an actual bat. And a bat is no insignificant thing, as materially storied and metaphysically chilling as a folkloric vampire.

Perhaps similarly emblematic, the kid grabbed a rock to throw at the bat, 'but the bat sprang away and vanished in the dark' (66). The men can avoid neither fanged entanglement nor dark-winged withdrawal in regard to the bloodbat. Indeed, the bitten and

[158] Another chapter subheading identifies this region as 'The Bolsón de Mapimí' (McCarthy 1985: 55), an endorheic basin in the Mexican Plateau. This sly bivalence between its geographical name and the perception of it as 'terra damnata' further complicates univocal readings.

blood-sucked Sproule's reaction is described in more overtly philosophical terms, which appear to rebuke anthropocentric exceptionalism:

> Sproule was clawing at his neck and he was gibbering hysterically and when he saw the kid standing there looking down at him he held out to him his bloodied hands as if in accusation and then clapped them to his ears and cried out what it seemed he himself would not hear, a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world (66).

As in certain readings of Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical sense of 'caesura', Sproule's actions appear to strangely reify an outrage toward the violation of an 'inner distinction' between the 'political life' (*bios*) of humans and the 'bare life' ($z\overline{oe}$) of other animals (including dehumanised humans), a division or caesura that 'suppresses and excludes $z\overline{oe}$ as a wildness or disorder that threatens to consume the fragile arrangements of humanity' (Meyer 2014: 152, 155; cf. Adamson 2014: 255). It's as if Sproule considered it somehow a basic right to never have to sleep in an open wilderness where a human could be perforated and drained of blood by a nonhuman. Yet his humanity subsists only within the heartbeat of the more-than-human world. His bloody-handed howl of outrage fails to surgically sever him from the pulsing tapestry into which he's woven.

The kid is not impressed with Sproule's display. 'I know your kind, he said. What's wrong with you is wrong all the way through you' (66). These words end this scene, a final pronouncement upon it. Ecomonstrous entanglement is not to be denied.

It's worth noting that ecomonstrous bats appear several more times in the novel. Curiously, we are invited more than once to associate the creatures with the judge for he frequently displays a keenness for observing them. There is even a chapter subheading, 'The judge and the bats' (122). However, it is also possible to see a disjunction between the strange *batness* of the bats, if you will, and the judge's characteristic mastering attitude toward them. For example, at one point the bats are described busy about their own projects in uncanny nonhuman-to-nonhuman encounters, quite apart from human involvement: 'and along the nearby ridge the white blooms of flowering yuccas moved in the wind and in the night bats came from some nether part of the world to stand on leather wings like dark satanic hummingbirds and feed at the mouths of those flowers' (148). The monstrous 'satanic' imagery may invite association with the Luciferian judge, but note that there is also the more general chthonic designation of 'from some nether part of the

world'[159] as well as nonhuman/nonhuman hybridity in the metaphor of the bats as (satanic versions of) hummingbirds; and, of course, there is their entanglement with desert flora. The 'dark satanic' modifiers effectively invest the scene with a sinister uncanny aura, but together with the rest of the description we may see it as evocative of inhuman repleteness, much like the demonic and hellish imagery of the desert nights and days we will encounter below.

The problematising of a straightforward association between bats and judge is borne out by how the judge interacts with the bat-and-yucca assemblage in the very next lines of this paragraph:

> Farther along the ridge and slightly elevated on a ledge of sandstone squatted the judge, pale and naked. He raised his hand and the bats flared in confusion and then he lowered it and sat as before and soon they were feeding again. (McCarthy 1985: 148)

This scene ends this section of the chapter and surely it is emblematic of the judge's anthropocentric apartness and interference. It is an offhanded analogue of his sketching of specimens into the book he carries everywhere to 'expunge them from the memory of man' (140). The world is a text for him to redact as he wills. But as we have seen, the bats withdraw from and exceed all entanglements, human and nonhuman and ideological.[160] Indeed, as Ian Bogost has noted, 'chiropteracentrism' is as unavoidable for bats as a certain amount of anthropocentrism is for humans (Bogost 2012: 64). Thus, as an exemplification of the 'eco-eccentric' view we have suggested, we might say that the vampiric and satanic evocations of bats in *Blood Meridian* furnish ecomonstrous contact points between species-centric humans and nonhumans.[161] For it is not only humans who attempt to draw the world towards themselves.

Bear Attack

The present chapter is largely focused on the desert narratives that make up the bulk of *Blood Meridian,* but examining one of a number of brief forest scenes reminds us that

[159] Great masses of bats rise out of the earth (McCarthy 1985: 105) and descend into it (127) in other scenes in the novel.

[160] One is reminded yet again of the imagery of the birds and bugs scattering out of anthropo-giant shapes into swarming clouds of inhuman multiplicity in Lafferty's 'Bird-Master'.

[161] Bogost also notes that the philosopher Thomas 'Nagel rightly calls [bats] "fundamentally alien." Bats are both ordinary and weird, but so is everything else: toilet seats, absinthe louches, seagulls, trampolines' (Bogost 2012: 65).

there are other types of biome explored in the novel (and not for insignificant amounts of space). These areas are, in fact, *contiguous* with the deserts through which the characters sojourn, essentially comprising sections of the variegated Southwestern mosaic (cf. McCarthy 1985: 304). Recall from chapter one that we identified the American West as a 'mosaic' of 'profound variability and extremity', 'radically varied topography', and all round 'environmental eccentricity', of which aridity is only one (albeit prominent and remarkable) aspect (Neel 1996: 113-114). *Blood Meridian* can feel as if it is exclusively focused on aridity, just as it can feel it is exclusively focused on violence, but the novel actually holds a manifold of both themes and landscapes.

In an episode that a chapter subheading glosses simply as 'A Delaware carried off', Glanton's gang of scalphunters rode through a 'dark fir forest': 'and just at dusk [...] a lean blond bear rose up out of the swale on the far side where it had been feeding and looked down at them with dim pig's eyes' (136-137). There is categorial slippage in this inter-nonhuman zoomorphism (as with the bat-hummingbirds above), hybridising the porcine into the ursine gaze of this rearing terrestrial alien. The gang, of course, is itself a more-than-human concatenation of equipment, animals, and men and it is this whole assemblage that is ensnarled into the encounter. Hence, a horse ridden by one of the Delaware Indians fell backward at this sight 'and the bear's long muzzle swung toward them in a stunned articulation, amazed beyond reckoning, some foul gobbet dangling from its jaws and its chops dyed red with blood' (137). A circle of mutual stunned amazement is described between ursine, equine, and human biota, limned with the novel's characteristic bloody gore, here the product of predation.

Happenstance intersection with this strange stranger segues to human-nonhuman violence, which only further engulfs the gang into more-than-human entanglement. (The bear, in fact, does not actually 'attack' until it is attacked first by Glanton.) The short ensuing scene describes an ekphrastic geography of commotion, like a compact echo of the lengthy 'wild frieze' depiction of the terrifying Comanche attack at the end of chapter IV (53). This antiecomimetic technique here amasses a riot of sensory notes, frenzied exchanges, arcing trajectories, and comic-grotesque similes to evoke a material-semiotic carnival of seemingly decelerated mayhem.

> Glanton fired. The ball struck the bear in the chest and the bear leaned with a strange moan and seized the Delaware and lifted him from the horse. Glanton fired again into the thick ruff of fur forward of the bear's shoulder as it turned and the man dangling from the bear's jaws looked down at them cheek and jowl with the brute and one arm

> about its neck like some crazed defector in a gesture of defiant camaraderie. All through the woods a bedlam of shouts and the whack of men beating the screaming horses into submission. Glanton cocked the pistol a third time as the bear swung with the indian dangling from its mouth like a doll and passed over him in a sea of honeycolored hair smeared with blood and a reek of carrion and the rooty smell of the creature itself. The shot rose and rose, a small core of metal scurrying toward the distant beltways of matter grinding mutely to the west above them all. Several rifleshots rang out and the beast loped horribly into the forest with his hostage and was lost among the darkening trees. (137)

The almost whimsical notion of the bear and the Indian in anthropomorphic camaraderie recalls a folktale or perhaps a picture book. In a similar vein, toys and grotesquery are combined in the likening of the Delaware man to a doll hanging from the bear's mouth.[162] These 'comic' tones (as is also the case in Lafferty's fiction) only heighten the horror of the episode rather than relieving it (and perhaps irreverently broach the possibility a ludic response in readers).[163]

On an ecomonstrous reading, then, even if this sudden encounter with a nonhuman is foul and dangerous to humans, it nevertheless monstrates an exorbitance of material meaning in the sensuous and pungent surface-coruscations of its withdrawal: 'a sea of honeycolored hair smeared with blood and a reek of carrion and the rooty smell of the creature itself'. Blond fur, blood, and the smells of decaying flesh and roots rise and rise toward 'distant beltways of matter' as much as Glanton's pistol shot. Manifest and withdrawn.

When several more of the Delawares in Glanton's gang set off to track the bear, the narrator makes explicit the folkloric connotation and also conflates devourment by fauna and devourment by land: 'The bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond all ransom or reprieve' (137-138). Like the bloodbat, the startled bear acts as biotic harbinger of the landscape, snapping the human up into its jaws. This suddenly constituted human-bear assemblage is swallowed into the landscape's jaws in turn. As with Sproule howling his impotent outrage

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[162] These types of associations are reprised with the dancing bear and little girl at the denouement of the novel (McCarthy 1985: 324 ff.).

[163] It is a frightening and tragic scenario, but what if, by a carnivalesque inversion, we were made wise from the novel's ecomonstrous resplendence and became *intentional* 'defectors' from anthropocentrism in 'defiant camaraderie' with nonhumans? To be sure, it would be a pitch black, gallows humour that could glean such a lesson from the novel, but perhaps it is a genuine way to play along with monstrous cues and weld comedy to tragedy.

at the bloodbat, so here no anthropocentric ransom can release this 'hostage' from his terrifying entanglement with strange-stranger coexistence.[164]

However, where Sproule howls his objection to his ecomonstrous encounter, the Delaware Indians are more adapted to the region's vagaries and wonders. 'They were men of another time for all that they bore christian names and they had lived all their lives in a wilderness as had their fathers before them' (138). They contained monstrous interiority that could cope with monstrous exteriority:

> If much of the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet and men of other colors and beings which no man has looked upon and yet not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts. (138) [165]

Counter to the caesura-construal of human being, the Delawares accept that they are strange strangers even to themselves and thus accept the boundless strangeness of the world, aliens in an alien world.[166]

Rachel Muers describes attending an exhibition of sacred texts from the Abrahamic religions in which she encountered an abundance of illustrated animals in the marginalia of the manuscripts. There is the possibility of a striking parallel between how she reads the presence of these illuminated beasts and the presence of the beasts in *Blood Meridian*:

> The marginal animals in the illustrated manuscripts are not, it seems to me, being instrumentalized in the service of a larger project of meaning-making. If the *text* stands at this point for the larger project of meaning-making, the marginal animals if anything detract from it. Quite often, they make the text considerably harder to read. […] In their very gratuity, their oddness, their apparent irrelevance, they seem to invite a pause before reading. They make the text more opaque […] One is invited to wonder. The marginal animals reinforce a sense of the text's resistance to, and capacity to exceed, any particular use to which it is put by its interpreters. (Muers 2009: 139-140, italics in original)

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[164] The bear is 'a powerful symbol of the natural world for McCarthy', here acting as 'avatar of the natural world, perhaps as nature's own sacred hunter' (Spurgeon 2009: 97).

[165] A more negative monstrous interiority resurfaces in regard to the gang as a whole: 'in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live' (152).

[166] Recall that 'monsters are a central part of Cherokee mythology' because, in the cosmic scheme of things, they are 'created by the mixing of the Middle World' and therefore must be creatively negotiated rather than denied (Teuton 2012: 21, 79, 236). Recall also how Clarence the Pawnee could interact with the strange valley or Leo Nation with the weird river shore or how Momaday's Kiowas negotiate monstrosities of land and sky—but, like the Delawares here in *Blood Meridian*, this does not exempt them from danger or even devourment into the more-than-human.

These dark faunal byways in *Blood Meridian* have a similar effect. Their own ecomonstrous eccentricity and opacity to human hermeneutic 'use' complicate straightforward ideological readings of every kind, including ecocritical ones. The gratuity here is often that of violence—as well as what could be perceived as a dark 'playful exuberance' (Muers: 140)—which intersects human concerns with a ferocity that may yet tear us away from anthropocentric preoccupations. Indeed, in the attack scenes, the animals otherwise noted in the distance, suddenly loom near—the margins close in on the humans, the land eats them.[167] The continual inscription of regional animals (a practice strongly resonant with Lafferty's fiction) is one means by which *Blood Meridian* exceeds unilateral readings; and, still more crucial, the animals en-tokened within, and yet existing beyond, the text exceed both writing and reading, enticing us toward their dark withdrawals.

Atmospheric Aliens

From intimate monstrous intersections with fellow animals in *Blood Meridian*, we turn to the monstrous spatial atmospherics of desert nights and days. Here the sense of devourment is of being completely encompassed by the alien wills and powers of more-than-human spatio-temporalities rather than focused in on visceral bloody encounters.

A Land of Some Other Order

Just one of the novel's many eerie nocturnes, the following spectacle spreads out from the electrical luminosities of a rolling wagon train of filibusters to disclose a vast night land of more-than-human exorbitance.

> That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from

[167] Just as the scenes across the novel of bats about their business are punctuated by the bloodbat's intersection with humans, so the novel's various scenes of bears spotted in the distance (e.g. McCarthy 1985: 129, 302), as well the giantised Great Bear roaming the starry night sky (61, 212), are punctuated by the scene of the blond bear's intersection with humans (and later, the dancing bear's bloody demise at the gunshot of humans).

> the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (McCarthy 1985: 47)

Whereas in the scenes of bloodsucking bat and mauling bear, members of the regional fauna directly and ghoulishly intersect with human characters, here desert meteorology and geology conspire first to literally put the human-horse-wagon assemblage in a strange light and then to dwarf and marginalise the company almost to invisibility in the midst of the continuous lightning's revelations of the fearful and 'demonic' land through which they ride. All the things inscribed with Bogostian ontography—blue fire, horses, men, metal trappings, wagon wheels, ears, beards, thunderheads, mountains—are then suddenly and irrevocably withdrawn again in darkness. Yet it is only *like* a changeling land that leaves no trace. We do in fact have the trace of the nonhumans here in this text, but the simile reminds us they exceed this inscription.

These monstrous evocations exhibit Harmanian ontography as well. The strange and sinister similes provoke breakdowns in the way we might usually see these elements, landforms, and weather, which cause us to take them seriously with the energy we must invest in riddling out these strange connotations (cf. Harman 2012: 252, 258-259). What, after all, is a geology of *fear*? As we noted in chapter two, the monster's central source of scariness—of fear—is its anomaly, hybridity, and exorbitant excess (Klyukanov: 136). This construal suggests that the simile of sudden mountains 'whose true geology was not stone but fear' confronts us with a physical, earthly landform that is exorbitant, monstrous, and scary because its lithic reality monstrates in excess of anything we can know about it (pace Mundik 2016: 41).

It is also important to acknowledge that the distinctly supernatural resonances of 'a land of some other order' and 'demonic kingdom' constitute a key aspect of the antiecomimetic description here. These phrases conjure, with appropriate ambiguity, the 'belonging together of a divine excess and the mundane thing through which such an excess shows itself', which we have affirmed as a crucial feature of monsters and the monstrous (Ewegen 2014: 106; Klyukanov 2018: 136). Critics of the novel who reduce these occult or mystical resonances to mere decorative metaphor or rhetoric (in subordination to gnostic, nihilistic, naturalistic, or other priorities) are perhaps not heeding closely enough the metaphysical frisson such descriptions incite in the reader (especially as a cumulative chill the further one reads in the novel). For example, Dana Phillips's

insistence that '*Blood Meridian*'s universe is a natural one, even when its landscapes are simultaneously earthly and unearthly' and that 'it is cosmic without being metaphysical' (Phillips 1996: 447) pulls the ecomonstrous fangs of the very simultaneity he cites, making the novel's superimpositions of otherworldly and worldly a mere seeming, which is a hermeneutical closure not warranted by the text itself. *Blood Meridian* leaves these metaphysical tensions quite unresolved at a number of levels (including the identity and ontology of the apparently immortal judge). As such, we must let this exorbitant 'belonging together' do its work on us. We cannot resolve it either. It remains monstrous. It signals, as with other malefic and otherwise supernatural tones in the novel, the possibility of a *dark* 're-enchantment of nature' (cf. Oppermann 2014: 23).[168] On an ecomonstrous reading, the undecidability of these monstrations are what overwhelm us with the necessity to invest energy in these nonhumans as more than mere atmosphere.

Beings for Whom the Sun Hungered

Neither night nor day provides relief from inhuman exorbitance in *Blood Meridian*. Indeed, the sun itself is not typically cast as benevolent giver of life in the novel's ecology but as sinister gigantic monster (cf. Mundik: 31-33). To cite one solar scene out of many:

> They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come. (McCarthy 1985: 44-45)

The sun is here cast as aggressively male and in collusion with the night's tentacles creeping through the men's sharp shadows, by which they're bound to darkness despite—or rather, by means of—the glaring daylight.[169] The scene is mostly a spectacle of space, trajectory, and colour, but the 'smallest stones' are still significant, as are the 'men and

[168] See John Sepich's excellent and (to my mind) decisive case for understanding *Blood Meridian* as a 'romance' that takes place in an 'arcane philosophical universe' (Sepich 1991: 17, 24, 30). Decisive, I say, but not controlling. The heteroglossic novel exceeds this interpretation too.

[169] Cf. another sun-washed scene that sees 'their shadows contorted on the broken terrain like creatures seeking their own forms' (65). Again contra Phillips, I do not think darkness in the novel can be read as 'just darkness' or *only* 'literal darkness' (Phillips 1996: 438). Its monstrous depiction is metaphysical as well, evoking the 'horror' (or dark wonder) of 'the enigmatic thought of the unknown' (Thacker 2011: 8).

their mounts' riding under this pulsing malignance and tentacled to forthcoming night (the latter possibly read not only as ominous but as a coming relief from the torrid day). Nevertheless, let us suggest that the valences here of overtly evil monstrosity are situated into the general amoral exorbitance of inhuman monstrosity throughout the novel. The sun's gargantuan malevolence recurs throughout *Blood Meridian* and the riders are said to be 'like beings for whom the sun hungered' (248).[170] However we read the baleful solar imagery in the novel, it certainly suggests the ever imminent devourment of humans into more-than-human light—and, in the stark shadow-play the sun creates, the obverse: humans are tentacled to more-than-human darkness.

Of course, it is also not a stretch to see solar malevolence in the novel as an expression of Euro-settler xerophobia (cf. Lynch 2008: 32-33 and passim). Momaday describes the Kiowas' alternative and no less exorbitant perception of the sun as they migrated from northern mountains into the great flat regions toward what would become known as Oklahoma: 'The sun is at home on the plains. Precisely there does it have the certain character of a god', in a landscape where the Kiowas witnessed 'the profusion of light on the grain shelves, the oldest deity ranging after the solstices' (Momaday 1976: 7-8). As such, Momaday's 'grandmother had a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of mankind' and thus, as a witness of the U.S. government's forced dispersal of Sun Dance culture, 'she bore a vision of deicide' (9-10). Surprising in such a multivalent novel (inclusive of hinted indigenous views as we noted above), this competing solar construal does not seem to be glimpsed in *Blood Meridian*. But we may suggest that the novel's construction of the sun's Evil Twin (the settler view) is a 'dark' reminder in the novel of what is lost in the subjugation of Native culture—and what replaces it.[171]

The Unguessed Kinships of Solar-Devoured Ontography

It is worth noting, however, that the monstrous saturation of sunlight in *Blood Meridian* is also a key factor in the novel's indefinite enumeration of Southwestern nonhuman

[170] This is one of the most compelling strands of Mundik's argument: that the unremitting malevolence of the sun proves a gnostic orientation in the novel. The argument is persuasive enough that I must concede that a gnostic voice certainly appears to be at play among the competing voices of the novel (Mundik 2016: 31-33).

[171] We will see Lafferty furnish a brief burst of comic gigantesque solar imagery in the next chapter.

abundance and discreteness. For example, the much-cited ‘optical democracy’ passage inscribes *ontographical* democracy:

> In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth any claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing was more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (McCarthy 1985: 247)

This exorbitant solar gaze evinces OOO’s almost deliriously inclusive ontography: ‘Nothing is overlooked, nothing reduced to anything else, nothing given priority. Instead, everything sits suspended. [...] It simply catalogs, like the monk’s bestiary, exemplifying the ways that human intervention can never entirely contain the mysterious alien worlds of objects’ (Bogost 2012: 50).

This ‘neuter austerity’ is, in fact, a defining visual phenomenon of the American West where ‘transparent light allows the eyes to outrun all the other senses’ (Flores 1996: 131). Yet the novel inscribes the democracy among this transparency of objects as a ‘*strange* equality’. The stringent clarity of the desert serves only to defamiliarise its alternately luminous and enshadowed (coruscating and withdrawing) ‘articles’. The passage is antiecomimetic in that the apparently crystal-clear access to the objects of the ‘terrain’ actually ‘belied their familiarity’ and disclosed instead an abyss of both otherness and unsettling kinship. Any view other than such strange entanglement is pronounced ‘whimsical’. Both exhaustibility of nonhumans and apartness of humans dissolve in an overabundance of light.

This solar-induced democracy, however, is not monistic oneness. The concatenation of negations ‘nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass’ performs a sort of apophatic version of ontographic bestiary or compendium, insisting that no being takes precedence and thereby no being is reduced to another: all are inscribed equally, fully. This passage is only one of hundreds that demarcate the stark yet lambent outlines of discrete objects in the novel. If *Blood Meridian* portrays humans as cosmically consumed by the sun, we pitch nevertheless into a maw and belly already crawling with other swallowed occupants.

‘Empty Space’ vs. Hyperobject

These glimpses of the novel’s host of nonhumans (presences and places) have set us up to engage the claim that *Blood Meridian*’s desert inscribes an emptiness. Steven Shaviro, in analysing the judge’s espousal of a valueless universe in which, therefore, not even transgression is possible, points to the nonhuman reaches so epically and alienly evoked in the novel as substantiating the judge’s convictions.

> We cannot deplete the world, we cannot reach the sunset. Beyond the desert, there is only more empty space, the equally daunting infinitude of the ocean, “out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (304). (Shaviro 2009: 13)

It is something of a throwaway line at this point in Shaviro’s essay, but it affords an opportunity to examine the general notion that deserts are empty and the particular notion that *Blood Meridian*’s desert is somehow some kind of metaphysical void.

Vast ‘natural’ area is, of course, often considered the ‘most distinguishing environmental characteristic’ of the western U.S.: ‘The West has space, vast landscapes with minimal human impact’ (Righter 1996: 127). But that minimal human impact in no way implies some formless void, as if only human touch animates the land into life. Certainly, the words ‘*empty* space’, as we have already seen, do not at all apply to the *Blood Meridian*’s desert. Nor do they even apply to the line Shaviro cites here. Stars, saltwater, whales, and the vast souls within the whales (however one defines ‘soul’) are creaturely opacities not to be elided in favour of sweeping ideological commentary. Furthermore, the scene of which this is the final line furnishes many more things populating this clearly not-empty California coastline: horse, foal, beach, man, ship, tidepools, (dead) seal, rocks, reef, kelp, clouds, grass, birds, phosphorous crabs, and so on (McCarthy 1985: 303-304). (And it is actually a horse’s gaze that is attributed with taking in the seascape ‘past men’s knowing’.) This setting is already beyond the desert and it is anything but ‘empty space’ giving way to yet ‘more’ empty space.

In fact, neither land nor ocean is an ‘infinitude’ at all, but a hyperobject and ‘hyperobjects are not forever’; they are embodiments of ‘very large finitude’ (Morton

2013: 60).[172] However 'daunting', hyperobjects like desert and sea do not invite reductionist universalisations (even those that indicate human finitude). As Morton explains:

> Hyperobjects provoke *irreductionist* thinking, that is, they present us with scalar dilemmas in which ontotheological statements about which thing is the most real (ecosystem, world, environment, or conversely, individual) become impossible. Likewise, irony qua absolute distance also becomes inoperative. Rather than a vertiginous antirealist abyss, irony presents us with intimacy with existing nonhumans. (Morton 2013: 19, emphasis in original)

Such inhuman intimacy over against unilaterally abyssal 'absolute distance' is precisely what the above coastline passage furnishes. It does not descry or describe blank infinitudes (physical or metaphysical), but, on the contrary, a spare yet opulent sketch of the coruscating contiguity of terrestrial and aquatic biomes quietly brimming at the point of overlap with biotic and abiotic beings busy about their inhuman projects, networks, interiorities—and a few tinctures of human-nonhuman entanglement. It is *this* fulsome yet furtive world that we may rightly understand the novel to insist we 'cannot deplete'. The capping image (with which this chapter of the novel closes) of the whales ferrying their capacious souls through oceanic blackness casts an uncanny noctilucence back across the whole description, vividly emblematising the enormity and alien secrecy of object withdrawal.[173] (Who or what can even observe these beings?) A somewhat hushed iteration of the ecomonstrous, it posits in these cetacean strange strangers 'a hybrid of weird corporeality with something numinous or mysterious, a linking of the tangible and intangible' (Foster 2012: 135).[174]

If the scene has significance for humans, it is not the crypto-anthropocentric moral that they or their world are meaningless (cf. Shaviro 2009: 14-15), but that humans jostle with other objects inside the maw of a more-than-human existence that is more extravagantly meaningful than they can comprehend. The 'description is a key moment in the text' not because of some promulgation of endless emptiness (physical or metaphysical) but quite the reverse: unlike the kid's more lacklustre and distanced encounter with the sea early in the novel, 'he is now engulfed by the scene', swallowed

[172] Morton defines hyperobjects as 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans', which 'involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to' and which exist and have agency whether or not humans perceive them (Morton 2013: 1).

[173] Thus, McCarthy's scene exhibits a *realist* vertiginous abyss, evocative of the 'erupting infernal universe within' the vast biomes and each a/biota (Harman, cited in Bogost 2012: 22).

[174] The image is also a strange but echoing obverse of Lafferty's obliquely communicative whales in *Serpent's Egg*.

into inhuman amplitude (Found 2016: 76). The ecomonstrous coastal tableaux thus shades from its eerie textures toward more vertiginous exorbitance the more it is contemplated. As such, this terrestrial-aqueous ecotone hyperobject of the shoreline, like all hyperobjects, *unmasks* the void rather than reifying it:

> These "hyperobjects" remind us that *the local is in fact the uncanny*. Space evaporates. The nice clean box has melted. We are living on a Gaussian sphere where parallel lines do indeed meet. The empty void of space and the rush of infinity have been unmasked as parochial paradigms. (Morton 2016: 11, emphasis in original)

Infernal Plenitude

Equally, the desert of the novel is nothing if not *full*. We see this in passage after passage. The judge, to be sure, considers the land empty and links this spatial and ontological barrenness with his claim that human interiority is a chimera, as Shaviro notes (14). In speaking of human will versus destiny, the judge orates:

> This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone. (McCarthy 1985: 330)

Yet even stone, as Jeffrey Cohen has so repletely shown, is far from a mere elemental blank.[175] The lithic is full (not empty!) of 'strange stories' and 'astonishing textualities' (Cohen 2014: x; cf. Cohen 2015). *Blood Meridian* evinces this lithic repleteness frequently, as noted above, for example, in its strange invocation of a 'geology of fear'. This finds more explicit and detailed expression in the novel's ekphrastic more-than-human semiotic 'auguries' of stone's ancient and ongoing ructions.

> They rode through regions of particolored stone upthrust in ragged kerfs and shelves of traprock reared in faults and anticlines curved back upon themselves and broken off like stumps of great stone treeboles and stones the lightning had clove open, seeps exploding in steam in some old storm. They rode past trapdykes of brown rock running down the narrow chines of the ridges and onto the plain like the ruins of old walls, such auguries everywhere of the hand of man before man was or any living thing. (McCarthy 1985: 50)

[175] Related to the judge's mastering attitude, Anne Hyde reminds us that many 19th century artworks 'depict the West as a blank place where white Americans make exciting things happen, not as a geographic region where the people and the climate have the power to limit what happens' (Hyde 1996: 189).

Unguessed kinships here too in the uncanny monstration of an anthropomorphism before anthropomorphism was possible. The *geomorphic* 'hands' that made these 'ruins' were in fact storms, hydrosphere, tectonic plates. A material-semiotic and object-oriented reading of *Blood Meridian* thus sees webs of repleteness in these vast stony deserts, not desolations of empty space. The novel, in fact, bars the latter view at every turn. The desert's very nature is indeed stone. Storied, meaningful, rambunctious, and inexhaustible stone.

Southwestern writer Mary Austin observed that the English language's words for landscape arose from use in 'a low green island by the North Sea' (Lynch 2008: 32). As Southwestern critic Tom Lynch puts it: 'ideas of landscape aesthetics' among many Americans 'and even the very language with which they think and discuss such things, evolved on a wet, small, foggy, and very green island' (31). Indeed, the very word *desert* 'defines a place by what it lacks rather than by what it possesses. Deserts are deserted. Something that seemingly ought to be there is missing. The word itself encodes an absence, not a presence, and implies that deserts are inherently and by definition deficient' (32-33), 'a flawed version of England' (31) in need of cultivation and transformation into the verdant aesthetics of the mother country.[176]

Blood Meridian can certainly give voice to a Eurocentric view of the desert, such as when a character, as his company starts 'across a plain of pure pumice where there grew no shrub, no weed, far as the eye could see', remarks: 'This looks like the high road to hell to me' (45). To *me*. That is, it looks like 'terra damnata' (61) to European settlers. Yet I suggest McCarthy ecomonstrously evokes this landscape not simply to acknowledge ecophobia toward arid lands, but to push past it (showing what a paltry and *short*-sighted attitude it is in such a far-sighted place) and press into the land's weird arid plenitude. In fact, viewing the desert as emptiness is more a feeling attached to the Gothic than the monstrous (as we have construed the latter). Gothic strains in American literature tend to perceive a 'demonic hollowness behind nature' resulting in 'a terror of the land itself, its emptiness, its implacability; simply a sense of its vast, lonely, possibly hostile space that informs the American Gothic and, ultimately, resists any rational explanation' (Hillard 2013: 111). To be sure, *Blood Meridian* evinces these Gothic qualities in spades. Yet, as I have argued, the 'hollowness' and 'emptiness' of the novel's desert are shown again and

[176] In this connection, it is worth remembering that Lafferty's native Great Plains were called the Great American Desert in the 19th century (Welsch 1972: 4-5): 'Some viewed the desolation and treelessness of the Plains as a horror' (44) or 'a shock' and 'strange and unsettling' (Hyde 1996: 184; cf. Kaye 2011: 5, 212). In a manner similar to *Blood Meridian*, Lafferty's plains region is ecomonstrously inscribed as anything but a desolation.

again to be paradoxical tropes for a plangency and plenitude educed in a dark, 'demonic' key.[177]

Quite to the contrary of Gothic notions, the descriptive strategies in *Blood Meridian* (including but not limited to the 'terra damnata' strain) display a sheer *love* of the land. In this regard, Shaviro's offhand affirmation of the desert as empty space seems contrary to his own analysis of the novel later in his essay. *Blood Meridian*'s language, he observes, is 'continually outside itself, in intimate contact with the world in a powerfully nonrepresentational way. McCarthy's writing is so closely intertwined with the surface of the earth and the depths of the cosmos that it cannot be disentangled from them' (Shaviro 2009: 17). Shaviro even comes close to a material-semiotic view of the novel's inhuman eloquence. 'The writing of *Blood Meridian* composes such an immanent, material language, a speaking inscribed in the rocks and in the sky, in the very physical body of the world' (17). This comports with Cohen's lithic liveliness. Shaviro even affirms the novel's lovingly detailed desert specificities over against arid abstractions. 'The prose enacts not a symbolization or a hermeneutics but *an erotics of landscape*, moving easily between the degree zero of "desert absolute" (295) and the specific articulations of water, mud, sand, sky and mountains' (17, emphasis in original). That such astute critical observations can give way to sweeping metaphysical bulldozing is all the more reason for vigilance in regard to consciously making ourselves available to the monstrations of nonhumans in literary texts. This is especially so in a novel so rife with nihilistic or gnostic rhetoric, the former encapsulated most famously the judge's oft-quoted maxim: 'the mystery is that there is no mystery' (McCarthy 1985: 252). The nonhumans in the novel are showing and telling us something better.

I would suggest, then, that the many ascriptions of the infernal in *Blood Meridian* evoke not (or at least not *only*) a hellish gnostic or nihilistic or indifferent wilderness, but rather (or at least *also*) the fiery strange strangeness of the desert's arid repleteness according to its own character as a plucky xerarch biome evincing the creative extremities of adaptive life (cf. Lynch 2008: 12 and passim). Indeed, in the midst of all the refulgent and overwhelming description of abiotic landforms and places, a wide variety of species of flora and fauna are named throughout the novel (see the closing section of this chapter for

[177] On the other hand: 'Frontier Gothic texts are those that invoke uncanny fear or terror through the *active participation* of their wilderness, or liminal, or borderland settings' (Hinds 2017: 128, emphasis added). The Gothic frontier story is 'set beyond "civilized" space, where the mind affects and is *affected by* the landscape' (129, emphasis added). This uncannily entangled construal of American Gothic hews closer to the ecomonstrous.

an ontographical list). Nevertheless, the novel's ecomonstrous poetics also evokes a landscape inscribed with volcanic, meteoric, tectonic, and other violent pages of deep history worn close to the planet's surface. This is another kind of geo-storytelling that contextualises the biosphere.

Consider such a reading of, for example, the riders traversing a 'malpais' ('a lakebed of dry lava') evoked as a 'badlands of dark amber glass' (251) and onward:

> They crossed a cinderland of caked slurry and volcanic ash imponderable as the burnedout floor of hell and they climbed up through a low range of barren granite hills to a stark promontory where the judge, triangulating from known points of landscape, reckoned anew their course. A gravel flat stretched away to the horizon. Far to the south beyond the black volcanic hills lay a lone albino ridge, sand or gypsum, like the back of some pale seabeast surfaced among the dark archipelagos. They went on. In a day's ride they reached the stone tanks and the water they sought and they drank and bailed water down from the higher tanks to the dry ones below for the horses. (McCarthy 1985: 251)

An ecomonstrous reading takes the overtly hellish associations as, at least on one level, a baroque evocation of the desert's alien, inhuman majesty, its geologically vast vulcanism and bioregionally unique aridity. This landscape may be as imponderable as the floor of hell, but it is in fact the floor of earth. Nor is the hellish the only valence here. Eerily redolent of the whales ferrying their souls, a pale seabeast-gypsum-ridge recedes, withdraws, even from the terra damnata rhetoric, and casts its weirdly discordant oceanic resonance back across the whole description, making it explicitly a monsterscape. The monster-ridge's withdrawal epitomises, in fact, how this entire volcanic landscape tenebrously withdraws from the coruscations of its scorching surfaces antiecomimetically evoked as infernal. Yet, even in the thick of all this massive monstration and withdrawal, the riders reach, by reckoning 'from known points of landscape', a much-needed source of water. A subheading at the beginning of the chapter identifies this watering hole as 'The Tinajas Altas' (241) or High Tanks, a natural formation located in the Sonoran desert. Nor is this by any means the only account of the men attaining much-needed hydration from natural sources. Even in McCarthy's austere hands, the desert is not a place of unremitting inhospitality to humans (much less to nonhumans—hence, the teeming presence of ecologically adapted flora and fauna in so many of the desert scenes). Surely the hell-tones (interwoven as they are with other accents) make us witness to 'an erupting infernal universe within' the desert and its occupants (Bogost 2012: 22).

Void-Plenum

Tom Lynch observes that while the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are cherished as nurturing, beloved home to long-time dwellers, others perceive the region as a 'hostile landscape' that 'reflects the existential void pulsing at the heart of human existence' (Lynch 2008: 91). For the latter, the 'desert is the ultimate abject underlying all other metaphysics' (93). *Blood Meridian*'s desert is most often read as just such a metaphysical abject. In fairness, the novel's not infrequent use of ascriptions such as 'barren', 'waste', 'void', and the like would seem to confirm this reading (cf. Mundik: 35). Yet, as with infernal imagery, these tokens of 'voidal space' (Montague 2014: 99) are always immediately belied by opulent inscription of specific animals and plants—or simply stretches of, say, sand or scrub or pumice (which are *not nothing*).

For example, there is a section of the novel that posits desert void, then desert repleteness, then void again, and then repleteness again, as if the desert sings an antiphonal song of emptiness-fullness—or perhaps evinces what Morton calls the flickering, shimmering, and shuddering of things (and us) as they beam in and out of presence and withdrawal in 'uneasy nonholistic coexistence' (Morton 2016: 81-82 and passim).[178] The riders pass 'ruins of primitive boats' and 'desiccated shapes of horses and mules' in a region described as a 'shoreless void' (McCarthy 1985: 246-247). It is, of course, not a void since it is occupied by these material relics of decay and death (albeit they are also tokens of the desert's defeat of settler culture), as well as signs of native faunal life in the 'chamfering of miceteeth' on abandoned weather-worn saddles (246). Still more to the point, a fullness of arid-lithic diversity and liveliness immediately follows:

> They crossed a vast dry lake with rows of dead volcanoes ranged beyond it like the works of enormous insects. To the south lay broken shapes of scoria in a lava bed as far as the eye could see. Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. (247)

Such a scene may be austere and alien to some (or all) human eyes, but it is not a void. Indeed, to the contrary, this plangent terrain calls for precise nomenclature to distinguish

[178] 'Nonholistic' in the sense that no one thing is 'most real', as mentioned above in regard to hyperobjects (Morton 2013: 19 and passim). It is another way of eluding monism in favour of irreducible plurality (cf. Bogost 2012: 58).

its diversity of forms (volcano, scoria, alabaster, playa); its enormity awakens ecomonstrous gigantesque ('like the works of enormous insects'); and its agency (flaring, swirling, resonating) suggests 'some residue of sentience'. As they cross this landscape, its strange fullness retreats: the earth is said to mill beneath them 'the greater void wherein they were contained' (247).Yet directly after this second summoning of the void there follows the 'optimal democracy' passage (discussed above), full of its luminous kinships between biota and abiota. Perhaps we could suggest that this void-plenum/void-plenum arrangement typifies the thematic rhythm of the entire novel. It certainly undercuts any univocal avowal of the desert as void (existential or otherwise).

At a different point, the riders come upon a 'mesa that overlooked all the country to the north' (105) and witness a void tucked almost obscurely within a plenitude:

> The sun to the west lay in a holocaust where there rose a steady column of small desert bats and to the north along the trembling perimeter of the world dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies. The crumpled butcherpaper mountains lay in sharp shadowfold under the long blue dusk and in the middle distance the glazed bed of a dry lake lay shimmering like the mare imbrium and herds of deer were moving north in the last of the twilight, harried over the plain by wolves who were themselves the color of the desert floor. (105)

In addition to the vibrant motion of elements and a variety of fauna (bats, deer, wolves), we again have monstrous metaphoric scale inversion (this time the mountains are 'crumpled butcherpaper') as well as a lunar allusion ('mare imbrium') in the dry lake (this tentacle flung out toward galactic entanglements is a not infrequent rhetorical move in the novel). The void is mentioned but where exactly is it in this manifold of nonhuman specificity and profusion? In fact, the 'void' so named is itself the location or receptacle of a massive dust cloud!

Close examination of these and other passages thus suggests that while the novel's use of 'void' (and related terms) can certainly have metaphysical connotations,[179] it seems to describe, at the physical level, general desert spaciousness and aridity (e.g. 46, 304), the sky at day (108, 147) or night (227), and cosmic reaches (130, 245, 300)—none of which, of course, is either nothing or empty. In fact, the void or 'abyss' in the novel is even occasionally that out of which nonhumans appear to be suddenly birthed, such as horses (163) and mountains (175, 187). So the metaphysical resonances of 'void' in the novel

[179] The most overt instance being in connection to the origins of the judge (McCarthy 1985: 310).

need not exclusively indicate negation, but may in fact also suggest a darkly pregnant sort of 'nothing' out of which *something* is propagated, produced, brought forth.[180] All of these valences must be held together in the categorial crisis that *Blood Meridian* constantly induces (or simply *is*)—the conflation of nullness and fullness being perhaps the supreme monstrosity of the novel.[181]

Devoured by Distance

Of course, another reason why a metaphysically freighted sense of 'empty space' and 'void' arises is because the American West is breathtakingly vast. To 'see for miles' (McCarthy 1985: 62) is certainly a dwarfing feeling for humans, but in *Blood Meridian* it also fosters an *expansive* feeling as regards nonhumans—awe toward a strange diversity of gargantuan landforms or atmospherics and weather in undiluted spectacle or wonderfully adaptive flora and fauna, larger forms of the latter seen roving en masse in the distance, and so on. As noted above, epic inhuman landscape has been considered the American West's 'most distinguishing environmental characteristic' (Righter 1996: 127). As one travels from the Eastern United States into the West, one reaches a point where 'the sense of space becomes an undeniable reality', which can be 'a freeing or a fearful experience, depending on the individual' (ibid.). While native 'westerners find such fear inexplicable'—for they experience 'a sense of freedom' from 'the solace of open space' and consequent 'topophilia' and 'abundant feelings of connection'—non-natives can feel existential dread in the same wide-open spaces (ibid.).[182]

Weirdly, in *Blood Meridian* this awful distance doesn't remain distant. Whereas we are often only 'fleetingly aware' of the 'landscape that looms in the background of the opening frames of many movie Westerns and through which many a literary cowboy has

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[180] Lafferty broaches this very notion in the cosmic visionary denouement of his novel *Arrive At Easterwine: The Autobiography of a Ktistec Machine* (1971). On the possibility of another sort of productive 'nothingness', which 'causes things to ripple and float and have futurality and dissolve and move' and 'sparkle', see Morton 2016: 108.

[181] It's worth noting in this regard that Lafferty's novel *Past Master* places the oceanic interiority of Rimrock and his numinous eco-psychological race of ansels, as well as the exuberant ecomonstrous exteriority of the feral regions, over against another central monster of the novel: 'Ouden the nothingness monster' who is a formless presence that speaks with an eloquence not unlike the judge in *Blood Meridian* and claims that his nothingness is a 'vortex' that will 'annihilate', 'eat up', 'devour', and 'envelop' people, planet, and universe alike until 'topologically', he avers, 'everything is on the inside of my nothingness' (Lafferty 2019: 47). This void *versus* plenitude construal is distinct from but not in competition with the universes *birthed from* voids in *Arrive At Easterwine* (see previous footnote). There are voids and there are voids.

[182] We might say that McCarthy's (and, in a slightly different key, Lafferty's) ecomonstrous poetics *combines* these disparate emotional responses into a *dreadful topophilia*.

ridden', 'McCarthy shows' that 'this landscape is capable of more than looming' (Phillips 1996: 444-445). *Blood Meridian*'s landscapes enfold humans. The *viscosity* Morton attributes to hyperobjects means that not only is the desert not empty but full, it is also not over there, but right here, sticking to us, and we to it (Morton 2013: 27 ff.). We are inside it, even digested by it. As such, the novel's descriptions transgress some notions of artistically rendered landscape. As Morton remarks:

> The classic image of Nature is the Romantic or picturesque painting of a landscape. There it is, over yonder—on the wall in the gallery. And it has over-yonder-ness encoded throughout it: look at those distant hills, that branch suggesting that we follow the perspective lines toward the vanishing point, and so on. (Morton 2013: 72; cf. Hyde 1996: 189)

Certainly, many of *Blood Meridian*'s vistas are painted such that we follow their lines to the vanishing point. But these evocations of the desert's vast distances induce experiences of weird dislocation, not of a reassuring anthropocentric picturesque quality. The vistas unfurl again and again before the ragtag militants, recontextualising them into their smallness and the smallness of their bloody enterprise in the teeth of a gargantuan space-time of mangled and muddled 'geostories' (cf. Haraway 2016: 40-41).

Yet the narrative never encodes these vanishing vistas with unequivocal 'over-yonder-ness' for they are not always keyed to the perspective of human characters at all (as we saw with the horse gazing upon the coastal scene above), and, in any case, the men inevitably ride *into* that vastness. Human characters are again and again implicated into the land's massively distributed spatiotemporality, from which they cannot stand apart as gallery consumers.

> They set forth in a crimson dawn where sky and earth closed in a razorous plane. Out there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and scrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain, gravely canted and veering out through tinctures of rose and the dark beyond the dawn to the uttermost rebate of space. (McCarthy 1985: 50)

Even the 'They' is more than human, considering these men are mounted.[183] But crucially, the anthropo-equine assemblage *set forth*. Hybrid monsters entering a monstrous dimensionality. A sort of pitched syntax and grammar make the second, lengthy sentence disorienting—as 'uncertain', 'canted', and 'veering'—as the imagery. The undecidability

[183] In the sentence that precedes the above description of desert distance, 'the farrier saw to the mules and ponies that had thrown shoes and they worked on the wagons by firelight' (49-50).

or simultaneity or choppy syncopation of tenses, present (shearing, veering) and past (trembled, grew, canted), induces vertigo: ‘Out there’, the nonhumans (clouds, sand, scrub)—moving with movements difficult to fathom, in relations and directions not oriented to humans—up, out. The clouds hang there without predication or object. The ground and sky seem to act in different temporalities. The reader stumbles for balance by the final word, teetering at that ‘space’. It is a truly vertiginous sentence. It encodes not our inspirational intake of this panorama, but an inhuman point of view, perhaps the way the desert perceives itself, at least at one scale.

Yet, despite having no perspectival foothold, the humans ‘set forth’ into this inhuman topology. In a giganticised echo of the bear attack, the closing of that ‘razorous plane’ of objects ‘shearing upward’ creates a sense of gigantic jaws opening wide all round them and snapping shut again to swallow them alive into the immense belly of the hyperobject. And hyperobject it is, for there is a *rebate* of space, a returning portion, not a gone-forever distance. It is a closing maw.

Laffertian Excursus: Eaten Alive by Narrow Valley

A comparison to Lafferty is helpful here. To return once more to his story ‘Narrow Valley’, the neighbours—who know and accept the dimensional deviance of the valley that looks like a ditch until you try to cross it—describe the phenomenon in a way that touches on McCarthy’s weird sense of distance: ‘It's like one of those trick topological drawings. It really is half a mile from here to there, but the eye gets lost somewhere’ (Lafferty 2019: 22). The sentence from McCarthy that we just read above effectively *describes* the eye getting lost somewhere in that desert rebate of space. Like the riders that enter that tricksy topology, the neighbours insist that’s the only option for the Ramparts (the homesteading family): ‘It's your land. Crawl through the fence and figure it out’ (ibid.). When the children happily venture this, it looks ‘almost as if they ran down the vertical face of a cliff’, which, of course, they ‘couldn't do’ if the ‘gully was no wider than the stride of the biggest kids’ (23-24). Like the rocks and bull-bat that were implicated into the devious topography, the children become monstro-ludically enmeshed in the valley’s weird dimensionality. There is some vertigo in vertical cliff image, but the subsequent description of their movement performs a sort of obverse to McCarthy’s inhuman canting

distance. Here it is the effect on *human* topology that is described as the children are swallowed into the inhuman:

> But the gully diminished those children, it ate them alive. They were doll-sized. They were acorn-sized. They were running for minute after minute across a ditch that was only five feet across. They were going, deeper in it, and getting smaller. Robert Rampart was roaring his alarm, and his wife Nina was screaming. (24)

The only syntactical snarl Lafferty indulges here is to trip up the children's movement with commas as they are 'going, deeper in it, and getting smaller'[184] instead of the more straightforward 'going deeper in it and getting smaller'. There is almost a trowel-like sense of penetration in the pauses, as if the children have become little ontic burrowers into the occulted landscape. This sense of continuous digging is reinforced by the past progressive tense of the passage. For our purposes, it is also crucial to note that this playful more-than-human collaboration is explicitly figured as devourment. The ditch/valley 'ate them alive', just as we have seen *Blood Meridian*'s topography and biomes do again and again. 'Narrow Valley' is thus ecomonstrous both in its inscription of the exorbitant weirdness of a nonhuman (the valley) and its violently metaphored entanglement of others (human and nonhuman) into this singular weirdness.

Nina Rampart, though screaming in terror alongside her roaring husband, soon stops and wonders what she is 'carrying on so loud about'—and then she too acquiesces to the monstro-ludic: 'It looks like fun. I'll do it too' (24). Hence, a leap of adduction is her response to the valley's monstration: 'She plunged into the gully, diminished in size as the children had done' and was soon 'a hundred yards away across a gully only five feet wide' (ibid.).[185] Robert Rampart, on the other hand, declines enmeshment and instead complains to the authorities that a 'ditch had stolen his wife and five children' and 'maybe had killed them' (190). He sees only one aspect of the valley's monstrosity, but note how even in this he is forced to ascribe agency to the inhuman. He feels the impact of the monster even if he won't consciously participate in its numinous entanglement. Many comic theoretical explanations ensue, but eventually Nina forcefully carries Robert into the valley and its strange topology ceases to obtain. All is right with the world and they enjoy their property.

[184] This is the consistent grammar across many publications of the story.

[185] It is down in the valley, enjoying its spaciousness, that Nina and her children encounter the Pawnee man Clarence Little-Saddle and have the wry stereotype-busting exchanges with him that we noted in chapter one. Thus, participation in the valley's monstrosity facilitates ethnic as well as ecological wisdom in Euro-settlers.

Until Willy McGilly (another recurring character) teams up with Clarence to give ‘a booster shot’ to the magic that had made the valley appear narrow to ‘enemies’ (32). It works. Soon ‘the valley seemed a hundred yards closer’ and then ‘wasn't over a hundred feet wide now’ with consequent ‘screaming of the people in the bottom of the valley’ and the cough of their camper engine—and in short order the ‘valley was again a ditch only five feet wide’ (32-33). The ensuing scene describes the topological reversal of the humans, but instead of being restored to their former dimensions, they have a few of them clipped away in the ordeal.

> The camper car struggled out of Narrow Valley through the little gate. It was smashed flat as a sheet of paper, and the screaming kids and people in it had only one dimension.
> “It's closing in! It's closing in!” Robert Rampart roared, and he was no thicker than if he had been made out of card-board.
> “We're smashed like bugs,” the Rampart boys intoned. “We're thin like paper.” (33)

Now, instead of eating up the humans into more-than-human plenitude as the valley had done earlier in the story, the shearing and razorous western landscape (to borrow McCarthy’s terms) closes in to cartoonishly masticate the homesteaders and spit them out one-dimensional.

Even so, Nina Rampart maintains her ludic composure and quips with a wink at Willy and Clarence: ‘This homesteading jag always did leave me a little flat’ (34). The two n/Native Oklahomans, Irish Willy and Pawnee Clarence, add a final punning joke of their own when Willy asks:

> “What did one flatlander say to the other?”
> “Dimension of us never got around,” Clarence said. (34)

Settler culture lacks the dimensions (monstrous inner depth and monstrous outer enmeshment) that McCarthy’s Delawares displayed above in the face of ursine and topographical devourment. Without such full dimensionality, it is impossible to sustainably dwell in the land’s shining yet withdrawing fullness. Lafferty’s characters are not always given reprieve from gruesome demise, but ‘Narrow Valley’ ends by noting that the ‘car was widening out as it bumped along’ and Clarence observes: ‘That car must be eighteen inches wide already, and they all ought to be normal by the time they reach the main road’ (34). This time the humans live to become more-than-human another day—if they’ve learned from this ecomonstrous encounter.

An Aside on Devourment

As we arrive at these culminating images of humans being eaten alive not only by individual nonhumans, but by the hyperobject of a biome itself, a brief aside on devourment is warranted. I have saved this brief explication until now so that we come to it after having witnessed many a devourment (at various levels) in the fiction of both Lafferty and McCarthy. We have felt the impact of these monstrations at some length, so now let us pause to try to adductively reason about the fact that we inhabit a world of everything eating everything.

Some consider the phenomenon of all-pervasive predation and carnivorous feeding to somehow indicate something sinister about the world. Mundik, for example, considers the carnivorous habits of nonhumans in *Blood Meridian* to be on par with the 'atrocities' committed by human characters and thus indicative of a gnostic view of the world as fundamentally evil (Mundik 2016: 36-37). The man-eating scavenger activities of buzzards (McCarthy 1985: 26), coyotes (42), pigs (181), and perhaps especially a lurid convocation in a field of buffalo carcasses—'the air whining with flies and the buzzards and ravens and the night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carrion' (McCarthy: 317)—all certainly 'presents the reader with a natural world in which everything devours everything else' (Mundik: 36). But why and how this 'endless cycle of devouring' indicates that the world is 'hostile' (Mundik: 37) is not clear. 'All organisms, including humans, return to the earth through the mouths and stomachs of insects, bacteria, and sometimes larger predators who find us a rather easy meal' (Murphy 2014: 51). *Blood Meridian*'s devouring mouths and stomachs (at whatever scale) are, at one level, simply reminders of the already ongoing and mutually consuming entanglement into which we have emerged as a species, and only an anti-ecological view could find this basic fact of biological existence somehow ontologically or spiritually alarming. It is a basic and inalterable condition of existence on this planet that we are 'enmeshed in webs of predation' (Adamson 2014: 265). Pervasive devourment is exorbitant, to be sure, another signal of the world's real monstrosity, but, as we have been at such pains to argue, this need not mean the world's malevolence. Indeed, some would suggest that, on the contrary, visions of devourment offer us 'the experience of a vulnerable corporeality that both reveals our limits and expands our capacity for connection to the transcendent' (Murphy: 51-52); certainly for connection to the more-than-human in any sense.

As Haraway insists: getting hungry, hunting, eating, digesting, and thereby transforming is what 'companion species' do, 'living-with' and 'dying-with' each other in 'the turbulent folds and eddies of a situated earth' (Haraway 2016: 65, 165); all earthly beings 'compose and decompose each other' in 'sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding' (Haraway 2017: 45). Far from an unequivocally destructive exemplification of a hostile existence, mutual devourment is a central aspect of what *creates* the world:

> Irresistible attraction toward enfolding each other is the vital motor of living and dying on earth. Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each another [sic], get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages. (Haraway 2017: 25)

So while there might be voices in *Blood Meridian* that imply the perpetual cycle of devouring is indicative of either malevolence or meaninglessness or both, it is not clear that the very acts of devourment as narrated contain these negative valences. Rather, devourment can become a site of ethics. Eating each other is how the world works, but: 'It matters who eats whom and how' (Haraway 2016: 165). Haraway outlines how climate change in the Arctic, for example, is making it hard for plants, landforms, elements, people, microbes, and other animals to sync up and maintain the mutually consuming food web (73). 'Eating each other properly requires meeting each other properly, and that requires good-enough synchronicity' (ibid.). So there are 'proper' ways of eating each other on Earth.

Whatever the vagaries of devourment in *Blood Meridian* (and Lafferty's fiction), then, an ecomonstrous reading takes the novel's cycle of devouring first and foremost as another gruesome, yet perfectly natural, inscription of more-than-human entanglement. Many of the scenes Mundik cites as 'atrocities' are of animals feasting on the blood and dead flesh of humans slaughtered by humans. We may tragically and criminally waste human life this way. The animals and greater biome will do no such thing. Into their mouths we go.[186]

[186] As we have seen and will continue to see, devourment serves similar purposes in Lafferty's fiction, though often in a more gleeful, comic-grotesque key.

Conclusion: Its Perfection Was Not Lost on Him: A Fullness of Withdrawal

To conclude our ecomonstrous reading of *Blood Meridian*, then, we note that the passages adduced above indicate that it simply is *not* the case that *Blood Meridian*'s 'world is devoid of final mystery or essential otherness, since all is composed of the one unique Spinozistic substance' (Shaviro 2009:12). On the contrary, our ecomonstrous reading suggests that mystery is ascribed to each discrete object as it entangles others and is then 'sucked away again' (McCarthy 1985: 46), not into gooey and ultimately undifferentiated oneness but into its own dark repleteness, objects and hyperobjects alike. As the sudden lightning-lit landscapes of the novel frequently emblematise, nonhumans are manifest, then withdrawn:

> They watched storms out there so distant they could not be heard, the silent lightning flaring sheetwise and the thin black spine of the mountain chain fluttering and sucked away again in the dark. They saw wild horses racing on the plain, pounding their shadows down the night and leaving in the moonlight a vaporous dust like the palest stain of their passing. (46-47)
>
> The sourceless summer lightning marked out of the night dark mountain ranges at the rim of the world and the halfwild horses on the plain before them trotted in those bluish strobes like horses called forth quivering out of the abyss. (163)
>
> Lightning stood in ragged chains far to the south, silent, the staccato mountains bespoken blue and barren out of the void. (175)

Out of the void, plenitude. And specificity: 'The leaves shifted in a million spangles down the pale corridors and Glanton took one and turned it like a tiny fan by its stem and held it and let it fall and its perfection was not lost on him' (McCarthy 1985: 136). Yes. And the perfection of a multitude of such objects in the novel should not be lost on us either.

Proto-Theological Coda: A Dark Zest for Being

As a postlude, and in anticipation of our discussion of Lafferty's ecotheology in chapter six, let us take one sketched step toward a rapprochement between McCarthy's fiction and the theological roots of Lafferty's fiction. It is premised on this postulate: it is good for a thing to exist. On at least the possibility that the monstrously replete and insistent ontography of *Blood Meridian* inscribes a basic ontic goodness, consider the

palaeontologist-priest Père Teilhard de Chardin's 'fundamental option' to affirm being over non-being, which amounts to an axiomatic assent to 'the goodness of existence, the value of existence' (De Lubac 1968 [1966]: 43). Teilhard argued that to admit 'that being is better than its opposite' is to weigh in on 'a fundamental option of all thought, a postulate which cannot be proved but from which everything is deduced' (43). Indeed, Teilhard lays down the gauntlet: 'No reflective construction would be possible without the initial choice which makes us incline heart and mind for existence rather than non-existence' (ibid.). Rather than a rarefied abstraction, Teilhard insists this basic premise is utterly down-to-earth: 'Despite its abstract, metaphysical form, this is essentially a practical question representing the fundamental dilemma upon which every man is compelled to pronounce, implicitly or explicitly, by the very fact of having been born' (ibid.). Henri de Lubac suggests that Teilhard thus shares with Thomas Aquinas a characteristic and definitive 'zest for existence', 'which before influencing their doctrine characterizes their basic personality', so much so that 'Teilhard de Chardin deserves to be classified in the line of Thomistic thought' (67).[187] We tentatively suggest that Lafferty's fiction (operating self-consciously in the line of Thomistic thought) and McCarthy's fiction (itself not without significant impact from McCarthy's own Catholic upbringing)[188] both manifest a similar fundamental 'zest for existence' based in the axiomatic affirmation of being over non-being.

A decidedly *dark* zest for being it may well be in its incessant emphasis on devourment, death, bloodshed, and mystery. This was, in fact, no less the case for Teilhard, who 'himself keenly felt human anguish' (De Lubac 1968: 67). Having witnessed first-hand the horrors of modern warfare as a stretcher-bearer in World War I and spent his life studying the immense geological graveyard of evolution's long processes, his ontological zest was tempered by an embrace of the suffering and 'sacrifice' involved in a dynamic evolutionary view of existence, in which there is, he concluded, 'no progress in being without some mysterious tribute of tears, blood, and sin' (66). Yet *Blood Meridian* (as also with Lafferty's fiction) consistently folds this 'mysterious tribute' together with the sheer goodness of an abundance of existing things. Thus, it is not unequivocally so that 'the desolate landscapes through which McCarthy's characters wander serve as symbolic

[187] While Teilhard plausibly shared this basic Thomistic impulse and a profoundly ecological bent, Lafferty nevertheless objected to what he took to be Teilhard's opposite impulse toward an erasure of specificity in favour of a theologised monism or what Celia Deane-Drummond calls Teilhard's 'almost excessive Christomonism' (Deane-Drummond 2009: xiv). This critique of Teilhard is overtly and succinctly put forward in Lafferty's short story 'Old Foot Forgot' (1970) and overtly yet arcanely expressed in Lafferty's novel *Fourth Mansions* (1969).

[188] Cf. DeCoste 2012: 88, footnote 5.

projections of spiritual desolation' (Mundik 2016: 30). On a Thomistic understanding, the individually named trees, rocks, soils, and animals are good simply as instances of their kinds (Feser 2009: 34) and as such are 'unleashed' (Morton 2011: 169) in the novel's pages rather than 'expunged' as in the judge's book of specimens. There may be a spiritual desolation in the judge's depravity and in the gang's communal soul (McCarthy 1985: 152), but we need not project it onto the landscape through which they wander.

Rather, it is *zest* that the narrator directs onto the landscape in a monstrous 'erotics of landscape' (Shaviro 2009: 17). As D. Marcel DeCoste argues (rightly, I think) of the character-forming virtue between father and son in *The Road*, their mutual love is ultimately an ontological matter, striking at the heart of void-plenitude in *Blood Meridian* as well: 'This love constitutes the most radical of affirmations in the face of a world of nullity and temptations to nihilism. For [Catholic theology], love as virtue is nothing other than the declaration to and of the beloved, "it's good that you exist" (164): (DeCoste 2012: 73).

It may be that Lafferty and McCarthy meet in this affirmation, especially of the nonhuman.

Ontographical Envoi

The judge avers that humans must 'take charge' of any and all autonomous life by routing it out and making it stand naked before our knowledgeable gaze, for otherwise the 'smallest crumb' of it 'can devour us' (McCarthy 1985: 198-199). As an open-ended closing, let us instead surrender to this devourment by placing an ample but very partial catalogue of the novel's very specific southwestern nonhumans over against the judge's mastering book of sketches and specimens. The last word belongs to them. 'They are who are.'[189]

Inside this desert hyperobject, we are enfolded into talus slides, lava dust, rimrock, scalloped canyon walls (56); scoria, monkeyflower, deathcamas (57); shale, whinstone, vipers, ocotillo, pricklypear, lizards (62); cholla, nopal, atemisia, aloe, palmilla, swine

[189] I first performed a reading of this list as the conclusion to my paper on *Blood Meridian* delivered at the Gothic Nature conference in Dublin 17-18 November 2017.

(88); benchland, plateau, piñon, juniper (90); lavender, soapweed, eagle, scruboak, pine, deer, wolves, mesa (105); playa (108); creosote, cirrus (109); gastine, saltbrush, panicgrass, gypsum, boneblack, dustspouts, whirlwind (111); lanneret, marl, terracotta, copper shale, promontory, caldera (113); coyotes, owls (117); evergreens (119); dry lightning (120); driftwood, draws (122); bear, swale (136); raven, maguey plants (147); yuccas, sandstone (148); caves (151); dustdevils, hail (152); cloudbanks, galaxies (154); chaparral (161); white leeches, dunes, catclaw, crucifixion thorn, eagles, mules (175); buzzards, pigs (181); hawks (186); grassland, meadow, groundsel, zinnia, gentian, morningglory, rimlands, foothills, spruce, aloes, gorge, moss, grottoes, buttes (187); holly, oak, escarpment, mist (188); mercury (195); vines, macaws, cascades, vapors, valley, orchids, bamboo (197); boulders, waterfall (198); sunflowers (199); doves, greasewood (207); dwarf oak, parkland, snow (211); arroyo, gametrails, firs, cloud cover, icicles (212); barren pan, bluffs, prairie (214); tarantulas, solpugas, vinergarroons, beaded lizards, basilisks, scrog, sulphur, fulgurite, ball lightning, javelinas (215); whitethorn, bajada, grama (219); cottonwoods (226); saguaro, elf owls (242), and very, very, very many more beings.

Chapter 5: ‘You Are the Old Entrapped Dreams of the Coyote's Brains Oozing Liquid Through the Broken Eye Socket’: Ecomonstrous Erotics and Chthonic Renewal in Lafferty’s Oklahoma Biomes

Introduction

In this chapter, Lafferty’s bioregional vision has full sway as we examine two of his short stories in some detail. In two Oklahoma bioregions—the organically rich lithosphere of ‘Continued On Next Rock’ and the muddy and monsterful riverside of ‘Boomer Flats’—we find something similar to McCarthy’s ecomonstrous ‘erotics of landscape’ in which humans are continuously swallowed up and integrated with nonhumans in the darkly comic mystery of both death and life (or better, death-in-life/life-in-death). We see also that human characters (and through them, readers) are called upon with urgency to participate in the already ongoing monstrations of the more-than-human world, such that aesthetics in the tales becomes ethics—with a strong sense of danger (even death) in both beauty and goodness. ‘Boomer Flats’ in particular moves in both implicit and explicit theological directions. Discussion of this allows us to begin to trace some of Lafferty’s ecotheological motifs and sources as a prelude to the final chapter’s focus on the ‘sacramental ontology’ with which Lafferty’s fiction is so chthonically charged.

‘Continued On Next Rock’

‘Continued On Next Rock’ gathers together a number of the threads pursued in the previous chapter’s reading of *Blood Meridian*: a poetics of lithosphere, emphasis on the cycle of devourment, and an ‘erotics of landscape’. However, in Lafferty’s story it is ultimately the landscape (and its biome) that expresses erotic desire *for the human.* As it happens, the events of this particular story portray a tragic hardening of heart and indecision in the face of these inhuman overtures.[190] The story is not without its comic

[190] It appears that the very same events simultaneously (and somewhat perplexingly) narrate an admirable woman’s cyclical refusal of unwanted male advances. I do not think these dual themes negate each other, but

tones, however, and I suggest its violent denouement is consonant with Lafferty's 'comic apocalypticism', which, as we have noted, is 'open-ended and episodic' rather than indicative of foreclosed doom (Garrard 2012: 95, 96). The tale is monstrating (not without poignance) the consequences of a refusal to play along with the more-than-human world in monstro-ludic sympoiesis—while simultaneously '[s]peaking resurgence to despair' (Haraway 2016: 71).

Weird Geopoetics: Striated Time and Travertine Agonies (Rocks in Our Heads)

The story opens with a geological description of the region:

> Up in the Big Lime country there is an upthrust, a chimney rock that is half fallen against a newer hill. It is formed of what is sometimes called Dawson sandstone and is interlaced with tough shale. It was formed during the glacial and recent ages in the bottom lands[191] of Crow Creek and Green River when these streams (at least five times) were mighty rivers.
>
> The chimney rock is only a little older than mankind, only a little younger than grass. Its formation had been upthrust and then eroded away again, all but such harder parts as itself and other chimneys and blocks. (Lafferty 2019: 232)

This 'Big Lime country' is not far from Lafferty's hometown of Tulsa, up 'in the Ozark Plateau region of the northeast' of Oklahoma where 'most limestone is produced' in the state.[192] Lafferty's description of the place situates 'mankind' as its youngest member, coming after the central 'chimney' upthrust of the story and the even older entity, grass.[193] Cohen argues that stone 'demands acknowledgement of more-than-human temporal and spatial entanglement, so that ecology becomes Long Ecology [...] demanding an ethics of relation and scale' (Cohen 2015: 41). Lafferty here indicates that even grass demands this

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rather suggest the need to integrate ecological politics with gender and sexual politics. I here focus on the ecocritical theme, but at the end will briefly suggest an interpretation of the gender theme in relation to ecocriticism.

[191] As Stephen Graham Jones (a Blackfeet writer from East Texas) explains: 'when referring to landscape, there's bottomland, a term that suggests, if not an alluvial floodplain, then at least some swampy or marshy area— a wetland, drained or not' (Lopez and Gwartney 2013: 59). While the bottomland here is largely dry (though note its alluvial past in the description below), we will visit a muddy version of Oklahoma bottomland in 'Boomer Flats'.

[192] Krukowski, Stanley T. 'Limestone'. *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Retrieved from https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=LI004

[193] Mountaineer and writer John Krakauer notes: 'As used to denote landforms, the term chimney most commonly refers to slender rock towers that resemble their man-made brick-and-mortar counterparts when considered from afar' and that the term 'is also applied to aspects of the landscape that resemble masonry flues when viewed from within' (Lopez and Gwartney: 93). 'Continued On Next Rock' seems to have both of these connotations in mind.

long-scale entanglement. As Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote of the sawgrass of the Everglades, its four-thousand year cycle of growth is 'not so long as any geologic age but long in botanic time' (Douglas 2008 [1947]: 262). Here, as elsewhere,[194] Lafferty places humans within an ethics of inhuman relation and scale (lithic and botanic), resonant with Morton's remark that 'humans now find themselves outscaled, caught in and concerned for all kinds of nonhuman *place*. Place is no longer simply human' (Morton 2016: 27, emphasis in original). This long view of place also evokes a sense of continuous long-play movement: the rivers of the region have waxed and waned many times over the glacial epochs and landforms have thrust up and eroded again. Like McCarthy's desert, this Big Lime hyperobject is alive with activity and agency, busy with its own protracted projects into which humans find themselves lately imbricated.

In counterpoint to the narrator's sense of more-than-human place: 'The people of the party did not care about the deep limestone below: they were not geologists. They *did* care about the newer hill (it was man-made) and they did care a little about the rock chimney; they were archaeologists' (Lafferty 2019: 232, emphasis in original). As if to immediately countermand this indifference, a short separate paragraph reprises the opening description of more-than-human scale, but now in onto-poetic cadence:

> Here was time heaped up, bulging out in casing and accumulation, and not in line sequence. And here also was striated and banded time, grown tall, and then shattered and broken. (232)

Shifting from the introduction's informative tone and straightforward sequential age identification of youngest→older→oldest, the antiecomimetic problematising of conventional sequential time in this poetic paragraph resonates with Donna Haraway's 'polytemporal' *kainos* time (Haraway 2016: 2, 11). This is rock as temporal strange stranger. Time emerges (bulges) *through* the solidity of place and matter (cf. Morton 2013: 73), through the rambunctious ructions of the lively lithosphere (not unlike the stonescapes of *Blood Meridian*). The archaeologists are interested only in the past *cultural* elements of this heaped casing of time, but they will soon discover that the cultural artefacts point beyond themselves to the wider inhuman context.

Into this more-than-human polytemporality the archaeologists descend: 'The five party members came to the site early in the afternoon, bringing the working trailer down a

[194] E.g. 'All Pieces of a River Shore', discussed in chapter three.

dry creek bed' (Lafferty 2019: 232). A motel is nearby via 'a road along the ridge above', but they make camp at the dig site because the project's leader, Terence Burdock,[195] 'believed that one could not get the feel of a digging unless he lived on the ground with it day and night' (233). Ensconced below the ridge by the creek bed at the chimney and mound, they will get that feel in spades—beginning with the senses. After an initial dig, they reflect on the 'timbre' of the 'late evening smell of newly exposed excavation', that there is 'something time-evocative about the smell of the diggings; cool, at the same time musty and musky, ripe with old stratified water and compressed death. Stratified time' (243-244). The upturned smell reminds us that the stony temporality already described is also layered with death and decay (fossils and organic matter in limestone and other underground compositions), a connotation that will become explicit as the 'old flesh' of 'old and worn-out and bloody Time' toward the end of the story (256). All these evocations of strangely striated, banded, stratified time—present and active to the diggers' noses—again resonate with Morton: 'Place has a strange loop form because place deeply involves time. Place doesn't stay still, but bends and twists: place is a twist you can't iron out of the fabric of things' (Morton 2016: 11). Much as in *Blood Meridian*'s arid borderlands, the Lafferty's prose here follows the bloody, twisting, looping layers of this Oklahoman place rather than ironing them out.

In addition to the senses, human psychology is folded into the minerally rich region. Terence Burdock mirrors the opening lithic poetics when he orates round the campfire on the 'analogy' between 'historical geology and depth psychology':

> "The mind has its erosions and weatherings going on along with its deposits and accumulations. It also has its up-thrusts and its stresses. It floats on a similar magma. In extreme cases it has its volcanic eruptions and its mountain building. [...] The mind has its hard sandstone, sometimes transmuted to quartz, or half-transmuted into flint, from the drifting and floating sand of daily events. It has its shale from the old mud of daily ineptitudes and inertias. It has limestone out of its more vivid experiences, for lime is the remnant of what was once animate: and this limestone may be true marble if it is the deposit of rich enough emotion, or even travertine if it has bubbled sufficiently through agonized and evocative rivers of the under-mind. The mind has its sulphur and its gemstones—" Terrence bubbled on sufficiently, and Magdalen cut him off.
>
> "Say simply that we have rocks in our heads," she said. (Lafferty 2019: 235-236)

[195] Burdock is an Anglo-Norman surname, but also an invasive species of weed in North America introduced by European settlers. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 15 June, 2016. 'Burdock'. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/plant/burdock

Though it is a *mental* stratigraphy educed here, it flows from actual earth processes, from stories in stone, resonant with new materialism's avowal of an emergent rapprochement between human minds and nonhuman 'natural metaphors' in a shared material-semiotic world (Wheeler 2014: 69-70, 78). Notwithstanding Magdalen's witty derision, this geo-psychology suggests even our richest human emotions find ontological analogy with nonhumans. Metaphor in the world, geomorphology in the mind.

These lithic and anthropolithic notes toward the beginning of 'Continued On Next Rock' seem to form something of an outer ring to the narrative. A strange, looping, layered depth of inhuman time and place is established as contextualising and deeply interpenetrating the central yarn about a group of archaeologists making strange discoveries. These weird geopoetics also establish a slippage and swappage between humans and nonhumans that will be overtly (though biomically) cashed out in the remainder of the tale.

Devourment Inversions: It is an Odd Thing to Munch One's Own Flesh (His Damn Cheap Poetry!)

The story proceeds from stone to bone and blood and flesh, a progression already hinted at in the redolence of 'compressed death' arising from the dig. Imbricated with the tale's geopoetics are scenes of hunting and devourment, which form the next thematic ring round the central narrative of the archaeological dig. On the first evening of encampment, Magdalen abruptly gives one of the men specific instructions on hunting their dinner. Even though the quarry is 'down in the draw',[196] which Magdalen can't physically see from their camp site, she orders: 'Robert, go kill that deer in the brush about forty yards north-east of the chimney [...] a two-year-old buck and a very big one' (Lafferty 2019: 234). Robert balks but obeys.

[196] A 'draw' is a creek bed, often dry, that conceals or shelters whatever is down in it. The U.S. Western writer Conger Beasley Jr. cites the term's use in a passage from Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (Lopez and Gwartney 2013: 143), but it is a landform recurrently cited in *Blood Meridian* also (e.g. McCarthy 1985: 15; 57; 125; 136; 292; 314). It is a landscape feature that hides humans and other animals in a number of Lafferty's stories, including 'Rain Mountain', 'Snake Cabin', 'Land of the Great Horses', 'Love Affair with Ten Thousand Springs', and 'Three Shadows of the Wolf', as well as his Oklahoma novels, *Okla Hannali* and *The Reefs of Earth.* A woody draw within the city is the central landscape feature of 'Animal Fair', a story discussed in the next chapter.

> Robert Derby took a carbine and went northeastward of the chimney, descending into the draw forty yards away. There was the high ping of the carbine shot. And, after some moments, Robert returned with a curious grin.
>
> "You didn't miss him, Robert, you killed him," Magdalen called loudly. "You got him with a good shot through the throat and up into the brain when he tossed his head high like they do. Why didn't you bring him? Go back and get him!" (234)

Though the draw concealed the violent action of the hunt, Magdalen vividly describes what she clairvoyantly saw there. Robert protests that he'll need the help of the other men as the carcass is too heavy for him alone. But Magdalen, with preternatural strength equal to her preternatural knowledge, goes and hauls the huge buck back all on her own, 'carrying it listlessly across her shoulders and getting herself bloodied, stopping sometimes to examine rocks and kick them with her foot, coming on easily with her load' (234).

The work of making the kill into a meal is succinctly elaborated: 'They strung the buck up, skinned it off, ripped up its belly, drew it, and worked it over in an almost professional manner' and then cooked and ate it (Lafferty 2019: 235). The scene is almost sanitary in its gore compared to the filibusters in *Blood Meridian* 'cutting up the gutted antelope in the floor of the wagon with bowieknives and handaxes, laughing and hacking in a welter of gore, a reeking scene in the light of the handheld lanterns' (McCarthy 1985: 43-44). Yet Lafferty's depiction is grisly nonetheless. Its almost clinical butchery shifts toward grotesque fun when Ethyl Burdock (Terence's wife) tries to prank Magdalen by serving her the buck's brains, but 'Magdalen ate them avidly. They were her due. She had discovered the buck (235)'. (This due devourment is followed by Terence Burdock's outline of geopsychology noted above.)

Yet this butchered animal returns from the margins of consumption by the strangest means. During Terence's oratory, a liminal person materialises among the company around the campfire. When asked who he is, he cryptically replies that he's a 'rich old poor man' who keeps 'hoping and asking':

> "And sometimes I am other things. Two hours ago I was the deer in the draw. It is an odd thing to munch one's own flesh." And the man was munching a joint of deer, unasked.
>
> "Him and his damn cheap poetry!" Magdalen cried angrily. (Lafferty 2019: 237)

Slippage between ontology and poetry occurs right at the point (or joint) of devourment. The man says the deer is what he is. Magdalen protests that this is just a (to her, poorly chosen) poetic metaphor. The rest of the tale suggests that both may be true. In any case,

the very faunal marginalia the humans are eating comes and sits among them and partakes of its own killed, gutted, prepared, and cooked flesh (cf. Howe 2002: 35-36).

The man calls himself Anteros Manypenny. Asked 'what' he is, he responds: 'Oh, just Indian. Shawnee, Choc, Creek, Anadarko, Caddo and pre-Caddo. Lots of things', though he admits his first name is of Greek origin (Lafferty 2019: 237).[197] Here Lafferty, rather unusually, lists out a number of distinct Native nations rather than assigning a single one to this character. Hence, instead of some wily Pawnee or Choctaw or Cherokee, we have a ludically symbolic 'pan-Indian' man who in his subsequent role represents, we may suggest, the ecological/ontological view common to many Native American cultures (cf. Momaday 2008 [1976]; Deloria 2006; Posthumus 2018: 23). Of course, he also, by way of his Greek name and its mythological connotations, ties into aspects of pre-modern Western views of the more-than-human world.

In a subsequent instance of hunting and devourment, Magdalen commands the mysteriously arrived Anteros to procure dinner from their ecological ambient. The preternatural sight and knowledge of both of these liminal characters becomes entwined at this point:

> "Anteros!" she called sharply just at sundown.
> "The turtle?" he asked. "The turtle that is under the ledge out of the current where the backwater curls in reverse? But he is fit and happy and he has never harmed anything except for food or fun. I know you do not want me to get that turtle."
> "I do! There's eighteen pounds of him. He's fat. He'll be good. Only eighty yards, where the bank crumbles down to Green River, under the lower ledge that's shale that looks like slate, two feet deep—"
> "I know where he is. I will go get the fat turtle." Anteros said. "I myself am the fat turtle. I am the Green River." He went to get it.
> "Oh that damned poetry of his!" Magdalen spat when he was gone. (Lafferty 2019: 242-243)

The fine touches here of close ecological observation and description ('under the ledge out of the current', 'the backwater curls in reverse', 'where the bank crumbles down', 'the lower ledge that's shale that looks like slate, two feet deep') actually exhibit the epitome of antiecomimesis, for all these nonhuman details are not witnessed as something right in front of and visually accessible to the describers, but are intuited and known by some occult capacity. It's as if Anteros and Magdalen succumb to some nonhuman mode of

[197] In Greek mythology, Anteros is simultaneously a complement and 'counterforce' to his twin brother, Eros. Stephenson, Craig E. 2012. *Anteros: A Forgotten Myth*. London: Routledge, 11-12, 108.

perception—or simply find the human conflated with the nonhuman in the case of Anteros, who again claims he is the inhuman quarry, the turtle, and indeed, that he is also the turtle's element and habitat, the river. These two human characters, we may say, are adductive when impacted by the regional inhuman. They 'feel the effect of anomaly' and surrender to amplificative monstration rather than reductive demonstration (Klyukanov: 138).

This strange ecopoetics again mingles (mangles) the identity of human and nonhuman not only by conflation but also by inversions of devourment (which Magdalen continues to call mere 'poetry' on the part of Anteros). The humans cook and eat the turtle and again commence to campfire ruminations (this time with the help of brandy that Anteros bought from a local shop along with a few other amenities, troubling any notions that he is some pure 'nature figure'). The group finishes their evening 'full of turtle and V.O. and feeling rakishly wise' (Lafferty 2019: 243). Note that the turtle, which is Anteros, is also indexed as a bio-ludic eater in its turn, a predacious creature that 'harms' for food and also for 'fun', a hunter for both sustenance and sport. Lafferty, like McCarthy, sees 'a natural world in which everything devours everything else' as adding up to something more complex than a merely 'hostile' environment (pace Mundik: 36, 37), one, indeed, in which 'natural play' has as much sway as natural selection (Wheeler 2014: 75), no matter how rough the play.

Whereas the weird geopoetics forms an outer ring of long-time/deep-time context, as suggested above, this next concentric ring of devourment-poetics initiates a theme of anthropo-zoo-morphic comic-grotesque that threads through the narrative. This human-nonhuman conflation is broached in between the archaeological activity at first, but gradually becomes the very subject matter of the archaeological finds.

Rotten Erotics: The Roots of Love Grow Out of Its Gore (Oh I Don't Know What I Want!)

As the human characters dig up remnants of past cultures, they begin to decipher a variety of glyphs, which together comprise a cycle of love poetry. Etched in a variety of Native American graphics ('Nahuat-Tanoan', 'Anadarko-Caddo', and Kiowa—hence, to the scholars' perplexity, occurring across cultural boundaries and epochs), it emerges that the

poems are composed in the perspective of the land itself as it calls upon a would-be beloved for requital of its earthy, chthonic desire.

To feel the full effect of the monstrating excess of more-than-human imagery these unearthed poems convey, we set out the cycle pieces here without the group's commentary and the day's events that are narrated in between. (The archaeologists' proffered interpretations of the glyphs are also a comedy of translation liberties and extravagances; their asides on this are placed in the footnotes.[198]) The cycle alternates between addressing rank and rampant praise to the beloved and vaunting the equally lavish plaudits of the would-be lover. Its central dramatic tension is the refusal or indecision of the beloved and consequently the anguish of unrequited love in the poet. An uncanny note is struck in that the cycle appears to be endless. Each poem concludes with a glyph signalling 'continued on next rock' (hence the story's title). Notice how the Great Plains/southwestern ontography intensifies in regard to the qualities of putrescence, grotesquery, and excess as the cycle progresses.

Of the beloved it begins:

> You are the freedom of wild pigs in the sour-grass, and the nobility of badgers. You are the brightness of serpents and the soaring of vultures. You are passion of mesquite bushes on fire with lightning. You are serenity of toads. [...] You are the water in rock cisterns and the secret spiders in that water. You are the dead coyote lying half in the stream, and you are the old entrapped dreams[199] of the coyote's brains oozing liquid through the broken eye socket. You are the happy ravening flies about that broken socket. [...] You are the cornworm in the dark heart of the corn, the naked small bird in the nest. You are the pustules on the sick rabbit, devouring life and flesh and turning it into your own serum. You are stars compressed into charcoal. But you cannot give, you cannot take. Once again you will be broken at the foot of the cliff, and the word will remain unsaid in your swollen and purple tongue. (Lafferty 2019: 244-45)

'"A love poem, perhaps, but with a difference," said Robert Derby' (245). The character's comment appears to be sincere, but the narrator is clearly using deadpan wit and understatement. The 'difference' between this poem and popular love poems (say the likes of 'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?' or [My Love is] 'A Red, Red Rose') is striking to say the least. We may see it as parallel to the difference between

[198] As a translator says: 'perhaps I cheat a little' but there 'is some basis for every phrase I've used' (Lafferty 2019: 256-257).

[199] When challenged to identify the glyph for 'entrapped dreams', the translator comments: 'The solid-person sign next to the hollow-person sign, both enclosed in the night sign—that has always been interpreted as the dream glyph. And here the dream glyph is enclosed in the glyph of the dead-fall trap. Yes, I believe it means entrapped dreams' (45).

antiecomimesis and ecomimesis. In the poem, both love and ecology are encountered not through direct contact and idyllic observation but through strange and weird transports and transpositions of the noble and the noxious. Indeed, it echoes what Morton calls the 'apocalyptic grotesque' of Graham Harman's rhetoric in which 'reality is churning' beneath the 'ceaseless argument' of philosophers, 'as if a million animals had broken free from a zoo in some Tibetan cosmology' (Morton 2011: 169-170). Yet, whereas Harman's rhapsody indiscriminately juxtaposes inhuman views of the interactive 'blessings and punishments' between snowflakes, limestone, earthquakes, ocean floors, sharks, and mushrooms (Harman 2010: 94-95), Lafferty's earth poem unleashes a *bioregional* apocalyptic grotesque of inhuman inter-onticity.

The refrain of 'You are...', 'You are…' (eleven times in this section) exhibits the 'zest for existence', the basic affirmation of being, that we noted McCarthy and Lafferty share in their endless ontography of nonhumans and which is an expression of love: 'love as virtue is nothing other than the declaration to and of the beloved, "it's good that you exist"' (DeCoste 2012: 73). Yet this ontological eros is filled in with rich regional specificity. Fauna and elements, decomposition and insects, celestial bodies and rock strata, flora, nonhuman mental states, the secret devouring ways of microbes—the beloved is all of these. It is a completely ecologically-inclusive love poem. Nothing is off limits.[200] Inhuman marginalia are crowding into the centre of the page and infecting any notion of pristine human text with shifting hybridities: a roiling procession of pigs, grass, badgers, snakes, vultures, bushes, lightning, toads, water, rock, spiders, coyotes, oozing nonhuman brains, nonhuman dreams, decay, flies, worms, corn, birds, nests, rabbits, disease, stars, and charcoal (revealing an array of inhuman feeling: freedom, nobility, passion, serenity, secrecy, happiness). This seething panoply is offered as a parade of fit expressions for the beloved's worth.[201] Furthermore, as discussed in regard to devourment in the previous chapter, the poem's interweaving of putridity and vitality resonates with Donna Haraway's characterisation of 'living-with' and 'dying-with' in the 'folds and eddies' of terrestrial co-existence (Haraway 2016: 65, 165). All creatures of every variety, and in every phase of the life-and-death cycle, 'loop around and through one another' and 'partially assimilate one another' (Haraway 2017: 25) and the glyph-poet here sees the beloved in every aspect of this all-pervasive sympoietic and symchthonic entanglement, almost as if to induce the

[200] Recall Lafferty's remark: 'It is a condition of nature to be mixed and impure' (Lafferty 1981: 58).
[201] The poet's variegated vision exhibits a certain resonance with the 'eerie zoomorphic motifs' on the *taotie* masks of the Chinese monstrous imaginary, in which 'different faces and bodies' of various animals 'recede and re-emerge, producing [...] a mass of movement' (Myhre 2013: 218).

beloved to the Lovecraftian confession: 'I am It—or better, I am They' (Fisher 2016: 16).[202] Furthermore, the poet's dolorous premonition of the recalcitrant beloved's violent end only increases the outpouring's sense of passion. It is not only a paean, but also a lament—one that is profoundly infected and infused with more-than-human monstration.

Having expressed affection and then frustration, the poem shifts to assuring the beloved of the lover's plenteous, exorbitant resources:

> I own ten-thousand back-loads of corn. I own gold and beans and nine buffalo horns full of watermelon seeds. I own the loin cloth that the sun wore on his fourth journey across the sky. Only three loin cloths in the world are older and more valued than this. I cry out to you in a big voice like the hammering of herons[203] [...] and the belching of buffaloes. My love is sinewy as entwined snakes, it is steadfast as the sloth, it is like a feathered arrow shot into your abdomen—such is my love. Why is my love unrequited?[204] [...] I roar to you. Do not throw yourself down. You believe you are on the hanging sky bridge, but you are on the terminal cliff. I grovel before you. I am no more than dog-droppings.[205] (Lafferty 2019: 245-46)

The sun's loincloth adds a note of comic gigantesque[206] and again tethers the ecological to the astronomical, like the mention of stars in the previous section of the poem (resonant with patterns in *Blood Meridian*). Likening the lover's plangent pleas to buffalo further specifies the imagery's western provenance. The 'sinewy' and 'entwined' entanglement of the poet's snaky love includes, as ever, death and even bloodshed, emblematised in the erotic pang of the arrow-shot gut. This touches on Haraway's serpentine construal of the Chthulucene: 'Undulating with slippery eros and gravid chaos, tangled snakes and ongoing tentacular forces coil through' the Chthulucene, which signals a better monstrosity than 'Lovecraft's dreadful underworld chthonic serpents' that 'were terrible only in the

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[202] However, keep in mind that, here as elsewhere, Lafferty's endless detailing of specific ecological beings is an expression of individuated-yet-interconnected poly-realism rather than all-is-one holism or monism. Such a vision appears to comport with Harman's (cf. Harman 2011: 36) and Morton's (cf. Morton 2011: 173, 179).

[203] The translator notes parenthetically: 'that sound-verb-particle is badly translated, the hammer being not a modern pounding hammer but a rock angling, chipping hammer' (245-246). Even this erudite tidbit angles toward more-than-human abundance, the subtleties of hammers and rocks and how they are strangely analogous to bird flight. (It is perhaps stranger yet that though the beating of the heron's large wingspan might aptly have been compared to a 'pounding hammer', the poet sees something finer and more precise in it.)

[204] "'What is the glyph for 'unrequited'?"
"The glyph of the extended hand—with all the fingers bent backwards"' (46).

[205] An interjection follows this line about dog droppings: '"You'll notice he said that and not me," Magdalen burst out' (46). Magdalen's irascible wit throughout the story is actually winsome in its way, complicating a reading that would take this as simply a tale of a person self-blinded to a would-be lover's overtures. Indeed, it is a tale of *consent not given*, which has its own power and application. But the ecomonstrous imagery and import is evident regardless. I will say another word about this tension below.

[206] This image resonates with humorous tall tale exaggeration as well as Native American cosmography. Recall again the Kiowa's exorbitant perception of the sun as 'a god' on the plains, 'the oldest deity ranging after the solstices' (Momaday 1976: 7-8; cf. Ward 2014: 627).

patriarchal mode' (Haraway 2016: 174). (Albeit, Lafferty's serpentine imagery here is not overtly female, as it usually is for Haraway.)

The poem's conclusion suggests that the beloved's destruction will be due to a disordered emphasis on the heavenly in neglect of the earthly, a deluded denial of entanglement.[207] The poet roars passion and warning in these avine wingbeats and bovine bellows, but is also not above begging, even from a place of inhuman shit, for that is ecological too and not outside the scope of love (cf. Phillips 2014).

As the dig proceeds, it becomes clear that Anteros embodies the lover of the poem cycle and Magdalen the beloved. Tellingly, members of the group at one point find Anteros 'hunched' and 'sobbing' on a 'sundown knoll' and 'his face seemed to be made out of dull pumice stone' (Lafferty 2019: 251). The poetry leaks from the glyphs into flesh. Out of Anteros's igneous face (the result of volcanic passion now spent) comes the sobbing of the unrequited earth. The erotics of more-than-human ages is thus poignantly present among this little company of antiquarians.

Further emphasising the presentness of this passion, the disinterred imagery haunts the group in the evening and entwines with their more-than-human context:

> But it had fastened on them. It was all about them and through them: the brightness of serpents and the serenity of toads, the secret spiders in the water, the entrapped dreams oozing through the broken eye socket, the pustules of the sick rabbit, the belching of the buffalo, and the arrow shot into the abdomen. And around it all was the night smell of flint and turned earth and chuckling streams, the mustiness, and the special muskiness which bears the name Nobility of Badgers.
>
> They talked archeology and myth talk. Then it was steep night, and the morning of the third day. (Lafferty 2019: 247)

As noted above, the geology (and here, general biome) of the place forms the outer ring to this story ('around it all') as the encompassing atmosphere of the cycle's biospheric excesses and erotics. And the cycle's poetics is not only 'all about them' but also runs 'through them' in a commingling of outer and inner, of inhuman environment and human interiority. Note too that the earth calls from its own interiority. While the poetry appears to be almost entirely evocative of the coruscations of things (of vibrant surfaces interacting with vibrant surfaces), the mellow, nocturnal echo of the imagery on this evening reminds

[207] Cf. Haraway's critique of reliance on 'sky gods' (Haraway 2016: 53, 56). Yet note also her important concession, relevant to the astro-terran entanglements of Lafferty and McCarthy: 'My SF critters are beings of the mud more than the sky, but the stars too shine in Terrapolis' (11-12).

us that there is also darker inhuman withdrawal in its ecomonstrous entanglement: 'the parallel universe of private objects cradled silently in their cocoons, even while their surfaces seem to explode, devour, caress, or murder one another' (Bogost 2012: 79). The 'brightness of serpents' is balanced by 'secret spiders' (coruscation and withdrawal respectively). Indeed, the dreams of coyotes are surely known only to their species, 'entrapped' (withdrawn) even though 'oozing' (coruscating).[208]

The next love poem the group unearths contains more declarations of wealth and further linkages of passions with ecological specificities. It also now identifies the suitor, in addition to the beloved, with members and aspects of the biome:

> I own three hundred ponies [...] I own two day's ride north and east and south, and one day's ride west. I give you all. I blast out with a big voice like fire in tall trees, like the explosion of crowning pine trees. I cry like closing-in wolves, like the high voice of the lion,[209] like the hoarse scream of torn calves. Do you not destroy yourself again! You are the dew on crazy-weed in the morning.[210] You are the swift crooked wings of the nighthawk, the dainty feet of the skunk, you are the juice of the sour squash. Why can you not take or give? I am the hump-backed bull of the high plains, I am the river itself and the stagnant pools left by the river, I am the raw earth and the rocks. Come to me, but do not come so violently as to destroy yourself. (Lafferty 2019: 252-253)

The erotics continue to be inclusive of the pyroclimatic, predatory, painful, poisonous, and putrescent. (Note too that the poem further specifies the provenance as inclusive of the 'high plains', a westerly subregion of the Great Plains that includes portions of Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas.) The poet's admonitions through nonhuman *loquens* (the 'big voice' of burning trees, the cry of wolves, lions, calves) continue to affirm a material-semiotic picture of a communicative more-than-human world; as well as one swirling with the agentic motion of biospecificities: combustible explosion, 'closing-in wolves', 'crooked wings', and 'dainty feet'. The series of 'I am' statements set in antiphony to the continuing 'You are' declarations comports with Anteros's earlier remarks about being the deer and the turtle that had been hunted and eaten, and even being the river in which he found the turtle. The poem not only conflates humans with varieties of nonhumans but in so doing ascribes a kind of lively personhood to nonhumans

[208] On 'dreaming animals' cf. Adamson 2014: 255.

[209] The 'high voice' is that of the mountain lion or puma (mentioned a number of times in Lafferty's output, but see especially his short story 'Rain Mountain', which centres on the feline and its uncanny cry).

[210] A poisonous, purple-flowered plant of the western U.S. Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 15 June, 2016. 'Locoweed'. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/plant/locoweed. Access Date: 3 September, 2019.

(inclusive of elements as well as flora and fauna). The overture toward communion rather than destruction continues.

The final poem unearthed is the most chthonic and grotesque of all, pressing into earthbound putridity as an inextricable element of more-than-human love.[211]

> You fear the earth, you fear rough ground and rocks, you fear moister earth and rotting flesh, you fear the flesh itself, all flesh is rotting flesh. If you love not rotting flesh, you love not at all. You believe the bridge hanging in the sky, the bridge hung by tendrils and woody vines that diminish as they go up and up till they are no thicker than hairs. There is no sky-bridge, you cannot go up on it. Did you believe that the roots of love grow upside down? They come out of deep earth that is old flesh and brains and hearts and entrails, that is old buffalo bowels and snakes' pizzles, that is black blood and rot and moaning underground. This is old and worn-out and bloody Time, and the roots of love grow out of its gore. (Lafferty 2019: 256)

Love that can't accept that decay and decomposition are part of the process of life (and even of love—for loved ones, human and nonhuman, must die) is not really love, says the earth-poet. If you can't love that which dies even in its death and decay, 'you love not at all'. It's a challenging proclamation and even if one is not entirely sure what to make of it, that itself is an aspect of its monstration of excess. It is so against 'sky bridge' thinking, against gnostic or dualistic earth-denial we might say, that it states its case in the earthiest, fleshiest terms, which means 'old flesh', from decomposed brains and hearts to bowels and 'pizzles'—not to mention entrails and blood and the Sheol-like 'moaning underground'. (Note too the continuing shades of secret withdrawal in these tokens of 'compressed death' out of which love grows.) Only the 'gore' of 'old and worn-out and bloody Time' can be the authentic source of authentic love in this ecopoetics. One could almost say that the earth-poet's visceral, fetid geo-erotica looks straight into the dark heart of the bloodscapes and deathscapes of a work like *Blood Meridian* and affirms that love can only be (and indeed *is)* right here in all this vibrant horror and seething life-in-death, strange and bewildering and monstrous though it may be.

Crucially, however, continues the poet, one must reciprocate to enter into earthy, chthonic love. He yet again assures the beloved of ample provision with faunal, terran cries of compassion and admonition. And he here makes his identity certain:

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[211] On 'the Earthbound' (appropriated from Bruno Latour's 'Terriens') as those 'who tell Gaia stories or geostories', see Haraway 2016: 41 and passim. Lafferty's fiction may come to be recognised as geostories of the Earthbound.

> I own twenty-two trade rifles. I own ponies. I own Mexico silver, eight-bit pieces. I am rich in all ways. I give all to you. I cry out with big voice like a bear full of mad-weed, like a bullfrog in love, like a stallion rearing against a puma. It is the earth that calls you. I am the earth, woolier than wolves and rougher than rocks. I am the bog earth that sucks you in. You cannot give, you cannot take, you cannot love, you think there is something else, you think there is a sky-bridge you may loiter on without crashing down. I am bristled-boar earth, there is no other. You will come to me in the morning. You will come to me easy and with grace. Or you will come to me reluctant and you be shattered in every bone and member of you. You be broken by our encounter. You be shattered as by a lightning bolt striking up from the earth. I am the red calf which is in the writings. I am the rotting red earth. Live in the morning or die in the morning, but remember that love in death is better than no love at all. (Lafferty 2019: 257)

This further set of 'I am' statements concludes this poem of the cycle. Bear, weed, bullfrog, stallion, puma, wolves, rocks, bog are each and all the voice of the bristling and blood-coloured earth with whom ecomonstrous encounter of one kind or another is utterly inevitable.[212] Indeed, the story expresses a bioregional monstration of the chthonic ones that 'writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth', which 'demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters' and also 'demonstrate and perform *consequences*' (Haraway 2017: 2, emphasis added). As with all the previous poems, there is a glyph that signals 'continued on next rock' (257). But to this promise of continuance, Magdalen (the one to whom the cycle is representatively addressed) cries with poignant ambivalence: 'I want it to be over with. Oh, I don't know what I want!' (257).

To summarise then: in its exorbitant, category-busting conflation of earth processes and amorous encomium, the poem cycle performs an *ecomonstrous eroticism*. The always ongoing cycle exhibits something even beyond an 'erotics of landscape', for it loops and twists into a strange inversion of 'nature poetry'. A 'nature poet', we may say, is a human who writes about the landscape (cf. Garrard 2012: 46 ff.), but here it's as if 'nature' *is* the poet, as if we are meant to entertain the notion that the landscape itself composed a poem out of the rich dead-and-alive materials of its own body (inclusive of the remains of human culture) to express love for humans and the rest of the members of its biome with all its material processes, even the gory and putrescent. Derrida wondered 'what if the animal

[212] The name Oklahoma is from Choctaw words for 'red people' and Oklahoma writers frequently refer to the state's 'red earth', red dirt, red clay (Harjo 1980: 43; cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 1998: 1, 21, and passim). Reddish buffalo calves are a commonplace of western writing: 'bison calves looked red in the sun' (Kaye 2011: 3); 'a calf lay in the tall grass; it was red-orange in color, delicately beautiful with new life' (Momaday 1976: 55). As to the 'red calf' in 'the writings', there may be a tenuous connection to the Sioux White Buffalo Woman who, after imparting her teachings, transformed successively into a black, brown, red, and white buffalo calf (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 52).

responded?' (cf. Cohen 2012: 454), but here it is the human who is called to respond to the already speaking nonhuman, namely the land or earth itself.[213] Weird weirdness.

The next day of the dig, everything comes apart. The chimney rock explodes and collapses and a partially unearthed statue of Anteros falls from the natural column's crown and crushes Magdalen. 'It was the bristled-boar earth reaching up with a rumble. It was a lightning bolt struck upward out of the earth, and it got its prey' (Lafferty 2019: 259-260). Magdalen never decided and it was decided for her. 'She was broken by the encounter. She was shattered in every bone and member of her. And she was dead' (260). The archaeologists, in a mental and metaphysical fog this morning, strangely fail to recall who this dead young woman at their site is and they are scarcely interested. Says one of the group casually: 'She believed there was a sky-bridge. It's in a lot of the mythologies. But there isn't one, you know. Oh well' (260). Says another: 'Next time someone goes to town they might mention to the sheriff that there's a dead girl here' (261).

They are distracted by a topological-temporal wonder: the topmost strata of the exploded mound appears to be from the future. They are also more interested in the statue of Anteros that crushed the young woman than the woman herself—or even the living Anteros who had been among their company. Asked if they recall Anteros, one of them replies abstractedly: 'Certainly, the twin of Eros, but nobody ever made much of the symbol of unsuccessful love' (261). They have forgotten Anteros-in-the-flesh as much as Magdalen. But they are fascinated by his carven image:

> Well, it *was* Anteros, life-like in basalt stone. His face was contorted. He was sobbing soundlessly and frozenly and his shoulders were hunched with emotion. The carving was fascinating in its miserable passion, his stony love unrequited. Perhaps he was more impressive now than he would be when he was cleaned. He was earth, he was earth itself. Whatever period the carving belonged to, it was outstanding in its power. (Lafferty 2019: 261)

Anteros's identity is again confirmed in no uncertain terms: he is 'earth itself' weeping in 'stony love unrequited'. The story ends with the archaeologists trying to read the future in 'the dark broken rocks before they would disappear' (262), but without revealing whether they were successful, much less what they read there. Past and present material processes have been vividly reified in rock and soil and the earth-poems interred there. These are the

[213] Recall the *loquens* or eloquence of nonhumans affirmed by material ecocriticism (Oppermann 2014: 28-29; cf. Adamson 2014: 255).

chthonic ones that 'writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth', which 'demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters' and also 'demonstrate and perform *consequences*' (Haraway 2017: 2, emphasis added). The future, it seems, we cannot know, even if we are a part of it in the long temporal reach of hyperobjects like the human species and climate and biome (cf. Morton 2016: 8 and passim).

Though I have mainly read Anteros's love poetry as inhuman chthonic desire for humans, I would not be doing justice to the story, or Lafferty's output more generally, if I did not admit that it's not nearly as straightforward as that. Lafferty infused this particular story with an almost maddening ambivalence. He confirms this in a piece entitled 'How I Wrote "Continued On Next Rock"', in which he writes that the story employs a 'sense of grotesque juxtaposition', for 'You can't be sure you are looking at something from the right angle till you have looked at it from every angle' (Lafferty 2019: 262). Thus, Lafferty avers that in writing the story he was 'trying to set anti-love up as comparable to love (the flattest thing you can imagine has to have at least two sides; it can have many more)' (263). Of course, the story shows that the 'anti-love' Lafferty had in mind was not hate or indifference or some other form of antagonism to love, but 'Anteros', eros that is unrequited and thus unsuccessful (cf. Montejo 2017: 48). Lafferty even concludes the piece on how he wrote the story with the utterly oscillating claim: 'I am both facetious and serious in every written word here' (264). It is not even clear that he limits this claim to 'every written word' of the essay or whether it is inclusive of the story too. In any case, Magdalen is a very sympathetic character (note her name and what it would have meant to Lafferty's devout imagination). Her refusal of Anteros has a certain ring of integrity to it, even if it simultaneously conveys uncertainty, indecision, and even recalcitrance. While Lafferty was often critical of what he took to be false construals of transcendence[214] (resonant, as noted above, with Haraway's critique of sky gods), this was because he believed in a transcendence or spirituality that did not 'leave behind' or negate the earthly.[215] I suggest that Lafferty is playing both sides in 'Continued On Next Rock'.[216] He is promoting earth-bound love that avoids false transcendence, but with a nod toward its converse: that we are right to resist any earth-bound love that fundamentally bars any sense

[214] See, for example, his stories 'Sky' (1971) and 'Bequest of Wings' (1978).
[215] In this, Lafferty follows Thomas 'Aquinas's foundational presupposition that grace builds on, and does not destroy, nature' (Cavanaugh 2000: 278).
[216] Recalling one of Lafferty's storytelling roots, it's worth noting that 'the tall tale is a narrative form that accommodates contradictory authorial impulses within a single utterance' (Wonham 1993: 31).

of meaningful and materially inclusive transcendence (or 'sacramental ontology', to be precise, which we will examine in the next chapter).

Regardless of the inherent ambiguities of the tale, in 'Continued On Next Rock' we have seen not only the agency and semiosis, but the *affection* of matter, the *passion* of nonhumans. 'Eros, desire, life forces run through everything, not only specific body parts or specific kinds of engagements among body parts [...] feeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics of or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers' (Karen Barad, cited in Oppermann 2014: 31). Moreover, Lafferty dramatises the call to *respond* to affective matter. We have here witnessed an ecomonstrous iteration of the refusal of earth's chthonic, visceral, putrescent, fecund passion and the consequent shattering encounter. What would it look like if we were to ecomonstrously reciprocate?

'Boomer Flats'

We turn from the biome of Oklahoma's Big Lime country to its red clay flats along a particular river. The denouement of the tale about to be examined also moves things in a cryptic-cum-overt spiritual-material direction, which sets us up to discuss Lafferty's ecotheology in the next chapter.

'Boomer Flats' (1971) is about characters tracking cryptids only to find the monsters were *with/in* them and (equally important) *all around* them all along. Nonhumans deeply porositise humans throughout this tale: geese, snakes, catfish, bears, ice ages, spring seasons, rocks, thunderstorms, rivers, mud, comets, fish, foliage, and much else are inscribed into and across human flesh and psyche as the story unfolds. The particular type of biome strangely evoked in the story is the eponymous clay (alternately sandy or muddy) 'flats', which form at the banks of the Cimarron River, whose clay-red waters are prone to threatening flash floods.[217] Three 'eminent scientists' (the lampoonishly named Willy

[217] The Cimarron begins in New Mexico and winds briefly in and out of Kansas and southeastern Colorado. The majority of it runs through Oklahoma before joining the Arkansas River to which it is a tributary. In relation to the events of 'Boomer Flats', it is worth googling images of the Cimarron to see just how red it is and the muddy, sandy flats along its (often surging) banks. Cf. O'Dell, Larry. "Cimarron River", in *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Retrieved from https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CI004

McGilly, Arpad Arkabaranan, and Velikov Vonk)[218] are on the track of a legendary Bigfoot or Sasquatch race of beings said to dwell on the outskirts of the town of Boomer in an obscure 'shadow town' known locally as Boomer Flats. 'Every town in the south part of that county has a shadow or secondary' (Lafferty 2019: 316). Given the historical land-grabbing associations of the name of the town ('boomers' were 19th century white settlers seeking to obtain as yet 'unassigned land' in Oklahoma by rushing in to homestead various available 'allotments' in then 'Indian Territory'), this shadow town can be seen as the ontologically dark obverse of boomers (land-grabbing humans). It is a place in which we will see humans *merge* with land—thus evincing both withdrawal (from human use-value) and entanglement.[219] Indeed, in this regard it seems to reflect (like 'Narrow Valley') Lafferty's ambivalence about the activity of his homesteading forebears.[220]

Given that 'cryptids "weird" our world, suggesting that it is stranger than we think: more dangerous, but more interesting' (Weinstock 2020: 21), it is only (un)fitting that in this liminal (dis)location, these modern monsters will usher the monster-trackers into ecomonstrous sympoiesis with this Oklahoma biome. Speculative fiction author Cat Rambo perceptively notes in her introduction to the story that it's 'almost as though Boomer Flats is the secret heart of Lafferty's cosmos' (Rambo 2019: 314). As will be seen, especially in the story's themes of Xenodocheion (an inn for strangers) and ecomonstrous eucharist and baptism, Boomer Flats is certainly at least one interchange to the hidden heart of Lafferty's cosmos.

Legends and Jokes and Shadow Towns

Rambo also notes that 'Boomer Flats' moves by slow gradations into a mythic mode. Thus, the story opens with a pseudo-scientific discourse of paranormal research as the monster-trackers discuss their quarry. They are after 'ABSMs', a catch-all term for a host of legendary cryptids, which they speculate are rooted in one source, *if* source there is:

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[218] These three showed up in 'Narrow Valley', though we only mentioned Willy's contribution. The three 'eminents' recur in quite a few stories as side characters introduced for theoretical lampoonery (except for Willy, who is always an insider to whatever weirdness they are investigating).

[219] Kate Rigby speaks of '"shadow places" and their inhabitants, human and otherwise' in regard to 'far-flung' producers of resources within global capitalism. Lafferty's shadow place produces onto-poetic rather than commercial resources, but there may be tentacular connections here in terms of more-than-human interrelationships and depths.

[220] Cf. Kaye 2011: 144 ff.; Hoig, Stan. 'Boomer Movement'. *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Retrieved from https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=BO011

> ABSM is the code name for the Abominable Snowman, for the Hairy Woodman, for the Wild Man of Borneo, for the Sasquatch, for the Booger-Man, for the Ape-Man, for the Bear-Man, for the Missing Link, for the nine-foot-tall Giant things, for the living Neanderthals. It is believed by some that all of these beings are the same. It is believed by most that these things are no thing at all, no where, not in any form. (325-326)[221]

But among the scientists' arcane discussion of 'missing links' and popular belief in ABSMs, two curious notions are mentioned: that seeing a Bigfoot or Sasquatch might be like looking in a mirror to one of the scientists (Velikov Vonk) or like meeting people he used to know at the edge of his town growing up to another (Willy McGilly). Human distance from these monsters is already problematised through these cryptic associations.

The third scientist, Arpad Arkabaranan, has a different take. He remarks that they have 'trailed a clutch' of these cryptids 'to their lair', which, as it turns out, is not 'a mountain thicket or rain forest or swamp, but these scrimpy red clay flats'; he then confesses with some disappointment, 'it seems that it should have a more magnificent setting' (Lafferty 2019: 315). Arpad opines: given that these cryptids 'have been reported in every sort of climate and countryside' around the world, it 'would be ironic if we did find them in such a place as this: not a wild place, only a shady and overlooked place' (316). Lafferty is pleased to supply that irony, locating the monsters here within his home state's own kind of 'magnificence', according to its own weird specificities. His native Oklahoma plains are as good a location for the monsterful (the monstrous as wonderful) as anywhere else in the world—and not as a mere container for monsters, but *monstrous in itself*.[222]

'The local legend' about Boomer Flats was that strange people dwelled 'between the sand-bush thickets and the river' and 'that they lived on the very red mud banks of the river, and that they lived a little in the river itself' (Lafferty 2019: 316-317). In fact, it was claims of a strange merging of people and biome that prompted Dr. Velikov Vonk to contact his colleagues to recommend a field trip to Boomer Flats. From a cassette tape of

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[221] The Scottish emigrant to the U.S., Ivan T. Sanderson, is named in the first sentence of the story and 'ABSM' is his term. Cf. Anderson, Ivan T. 1961. *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life*. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company. The book features chapter sub-headings such as 'A Brief History of ABSMery', 'ABSMs in the Himalaya and the Great Gutter', 'The Physical Evidence for ABSMs', 'ABSMal Connotations', and 'An Ichnological Analysis of ABSMery'.

[222] As previously noted, the Great Plains were called the Great American Desert by the first European settlers, a spooky place in need of transformation to be of any value. Arpad echoes this sentiment in his evaluation of the place as merely 'shady and overlooked' rather than romantically or sublimely 'wild' (cf. Kaye 2011: 5 and passim).

an interview with a local man ‘recorded by an anthropology student at State University’ (319), Velikov heard the following exchange about the people from Boomer Flats:

> “What do they do when the river floods?”
> “Ah, they close their noses and mouths and ears with mud, and they lie down with big rocks on their breasts and stay there till the flood has passed.” (317)

This monstrous sympoiesis with the area’s ecology figures into their eating habits also, the interviewee avers, for when they boil a pottage of local greenery with river water: ‘It gets lumps of meat or clay in it, and they eat that too. They eat frogs and fish and owls and thicket filaments’ (317).

When asked about the legend that these people are ‘born without much shape’, the local man seems to lapse into unvarnished tall tale:

> “Most of them never do get much shape. When they have any, well actually their mothers lick them into shape, give them their appearance.”
> “It's an old folk tale that bears do that.”[223]
> “Maybe they learned it from the bears then, young fellow. There's quite a bit of bear mixture in them, but the bears themselves have nearly gone from the flats and thickets now. More than likely the bears learned it from them. Sometimes the mothers lick the cubs into the shape of regular people for a joke.”
> “That is the legend?”
> “You keep saying legend. I don't know anything about legend. I just tell you what you ask me.” (317-318)

This is weird bioregionalism. Anthropology, folklore, tall comedy, and local ecology intertwine and refuse to be disentangled. There is a monstration of human-nonhuman continuum and the boundary between species is made the slipstream of a onto-liminal ‘joke’. In fact, the local man expands on this joke by telling the anthropology student ‘a funny one’ about a Boomer Flats woman who licked her daughter into a shape based on ‘an old movie magazine that some fishers from Boomer had left on the river edge’, which contained ‘a picture of the prettiest girl that anyone ever saw, and it was a picture of all of that girl’ and the ‘mother was tickled by that picture’ (318). The child, now grown, is named Crayola Catfish, the man informs the student, and then adds: ‘I don’t believe the girl appreciates the joke’ (ibid.). (Crayola will crop up again presently.)

[223] Pliny the Elder is one source of this folk belief (Brunner 2007: 50).

When Velikov Vonk invites the others on the monster hunt, each man's relation to these Bigfoot people is reprised. Arpad is sceptical but dogged: 'This won't be it, this can't be it, but I'll never give up' (319). Willy is already familiar with the place and its people: 'I've been there before, I kind of like those folks on the flats. I don't know about the biggest catfish in the world, but the biggest catfish stories in the world have been pulled out of the Cimarron River right about at Boomer Flats' (ibid.). And Velikov is closer to the Bigfoot people than he realises, wondering: 'How can we miss it? I can almost reach out and scratch it on the nose from here'; to which Willy responds: 'You'll find yourself scratching your own nose, that's how you'll miss it. But it's there and it's real' (ibid.). Note that Willy sees a distinction between tall tales ('biggest catfish *stories* in the world') and the actual ecology, yet he sees the former serving to accentuate the latter, much like Morton's antiecomimesis, and in no way to the exclusion of monsters and the monstrous. Further to that point, Velikov wonders if some sort of 'amnesia' keeps the human community from remembering such outré monster people. But Willy demurs: "It's just that they're always too close to see" (ibid.). Read ecocritically, this suggests that the allegedly straightforward accessibility of ecomimesis doesn't provide the odd perspective or strange encounter required to really see the inhuman already with/in us. Hence, Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics is required to bring the monsters (and the more-than-human entities monstrating through them) into visibility again. And they're closer than we think.

'Boomer Flats wasn't on any map' and as they navigate their way to this 'sort of a place' by 'sort of a road going to it', the assemblage of weather-soil-river is also factored in: 'The flats hadn't flooded lately. The road was sand, but it could be negotiated. They came to the town, to the sort of town, in the ragged river flats. There was such a place' (Lafferty 2019: 320).[224] At this point, the men have officially crossed into an ecomonstrous zone and the story will act accordingly from here on out, with increasing more-than-human strangeness. As Rambo notes: both the events and the language in which they're conveyed 'move the trio into a strange mythopoetic world in washes, like a television show's set where each cut-away and back reveals odder and odder details changed and added' (Rambo: 314). Yet note how the ecological details increase in proportion to the mythopoeia. Flats, floods, sand, clay, river, local fauna, and so on take centre stage even as the onto-mythos gets stranger and stranger.

[224] 'The riverbed in this area is dry except during spring and early summer or during occasional floods' ('Cimarron River', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The men go to dine in the common room of the shadow town's Cimarron Hotel, with its 'dingy bar' and 'intimations of old elegance in the blued pier mirrors' (Lafferty 2019: 320). The scene is weird and slippery:

> There was a pool table there, and a hairy man was playing rotation with the Comet on it. The Comet was a long gray-bearded man (in fact, comet means a star with a beard) and small pieces were always falling off him. Clay-colored men with their hats on were playing dominos at several of the tables, and there were half a dozen dogs in the room. Something a little queer and primordial about those dogs! Something a little queer and primordial about the whole place! (320)

There is almost an implication that there is no pure 'human' in the whole tableau. The men are all hairy or clay-coloured or stellar (onto-poetic imagery really starts to seep in with the crumbling Comet and the aside on 'a star with a beard') and even the dogs are 'queer and primordial'.[225] Yet the atmosphere is also ludic with game-playing and will only become more so.

In the midst of the strange men in the common room, 'there was a remarkably pretty girl there' (Lafferty 2019: 320-321), which the trio take to be the hostess. As the setting becomes uncanny, the 'prose becomes stranger and stranger at the same time, moving into deeper and deeper waters of wordplay' (Rambo 2019: 314). For example, geo-anthropomorphisms are suddenly woven into the dialogue between the hostess and one of the scientists: 'Dr. Velikof Vonk twinkled his deep eyes in their orbital caves: perhaps he cogitated his massive brain behind his massive orbital ridges', merely to ask her if there was a menu. She replies with a simple 'No', 'but it wasn't simple at all' for 'even in that one syllable' there was something 'powerful, not really harsh, deep and resonant as caverns, full and timeless' (Lafferty 2019: 321). The speleological depictions of Velikov's head and the woman's voice are both comic and unsettling as they slow the pace of the dialogue to an inhuman tempo and describe human features in terms of inhuman spatio-temporality. As with the geopoetics of the human mind and of Anteros's face in 'Continued On Next Rock', so here the lithic is sympoietically inscribed into human

[225] Lafferty often used 'queer' to describe exuberantly refractory more-than-human communities and places he sympathised with. See especially his 'constructive' rebels in a 'destructed society' in 'And Walk Now Gently Through the Fire' (1972) who are labelled 'Ants of God' and 'Queer Fish' by their social enemies. (Whence the name of the blog I've kept on Lafferty since 2009: http://antsofgodarequeerfish.blogspot.com/.) Lafferty in relation to queer theory is a project for future research, but I would suggest, as a starter, comparing Lafferty's work to Morton's 'queer ecology' reading of gay author Clive Barker's ecomonstrous fiction (Morton 2010: 280).

exteriors and interiors. The young woman's geo-resonant monosyllable suggests this is not a place in which to 'order' but in which to receive what is already prepared, as she then explicitly confirms: '"They're fixing it for you now," the girl said. "I'll bring it to you after a while"' (ibid.).

The geo-poeticised head and voice are ensconced in the hotel common room's olfactory and visual ambient and an elaboration upon the ecopoetics of the woman's voice follows:

> There was a rich river smell about the whole place, and the room was badly lit.[226]
> "Her voice is an odd one," Arpad whispered in curious admiration. "Like rocks rolled around by water, but it also has a touch of springtime in it, springtime of a very peculiar duality."
> "Not just a springtime; it's an interstadial time," Willy McGilly stated accurately. "I've noticed that about them in other places. It's old green season in their voices, green season between the ice." (Lafferty 2019: 321)

A liminal geological epoch (an interstadial thaw between ice ages) clacks and rumbles within a liminally human voice. This a poetics that oddly inverts the picture of the Anthropocene, placing a geological footprint within the human rather than a human footprint in geology. Such a picture resonates with Haraway's critique of the Anthropocene as giving 'Species Man' and his tools too central a role in producing the 'Third Carbon Age' and thus her preference instead for the 'webbed, braided, and tentacular' geo-stories of the more-than-human Chthulucene (Haraway 2016: 47 ff.). At the same time, Lafferty's geo-anthropic picture here resonates with Morton's weird hyperobject iteration of the Anthropocene that also sees (in a slightly different way from Haraway) humans transected by and swallowed into the more-than-human: 'The Anthropocene names two levels we usually think are distinct: geology and humanity [...] The Anthropocene binds together human history and geological time in a strange loop, weirdly weird' (Morton 2016: 7-8). Here these distinct visions of a counter-Anthropocene (Haraway) and a looped Anthropocene (Morton) are weirdly fused right inside a strangely human voice.

When the men announce to the young woman that they are looking for 'strange creatures', she responds that the scientists are 'the only strange people who have come here lately' (Lafferty 2019: 322). Having entered an ecomonstrous zone, the men are revealed as monstrous. Accordingly, the geo-heads of Velikov and Crayola continue their strange

[226] The dim lighting is from the 'clay-colored flame' in 'hanging lamps' burning 'catfish oil' (322), a detail that will become symbolically significant later in the tale.

gigantesqueries in sympoiesis with the elements present metaphorically and literally. As she serves the men 'great sloshing clay cups' of some alcoholic drink that 'smelled strongly of river, perhaps of interstadial river', she has 'a twinkle in her eyes' that is more like 'laughing lightning flashing from under the ridges of that pretty head' (322). 'Velikov cocked a big deep eye at his drink' and 'grinned out of deep folk memory as he began to drink' (ibid.). Arpad, on the other hand, is shocked out of his chair by the fact there are green snakes in their cups (which are clarified to be a species of green worms). The green snakes/worms are trying to drink up the alcoholic river drinks before the men do. Willy recognises the drink as a specialty called a 'Green Snake Snorter' and he and Velikov join in the fun and quickly outdrink their respective snakes. Arpad, however, is afraid. Warned that the snakes will 'fang the face off a man who's afraid of them', he simply allows the snake to drink his drink, after which the snake evaporates into thin air (323). 'Where did it go?' asks Arpad; 'Back to the catfish,' the woman says, and then elaborates: 'All the snakes are spirits of catfish just out for a little ramble' (324). This monsterful interspecies aside performs a succinct little category-buster of faunal marginalia, intermixing not only the reptilian and piscine, but attributing ambulatory spirits to regional nonhumans.[227] When first served his sloshing drink, Arpad had cried out in dismay: 'It's alive, it's alive' (323). Indeed.

This is more than a funny monstrous episode, however. It dramatises a ritual in which humans ingest the river and its biome before they are ritually devoured (by deluge) in turn. As Cat Rambo observes, and as we've seen in the geo-poetics of brow and voice, there is a 'sort of linguistic play' of 'the metaphorical made real', which 'ripples through the story, and even sometimes slides it over into poetry's realm, such as the repeated reassurance Crayola Catfish gives the eminent scientists about their drinks, "They're fixing them for you now. I'll bring them after a while"' (Rambo: 313). Crayola assures them about their food with the same phrasing, thus suggesting not only poetry, but ritual.

It is no surprise, then, that when the meal arrives, it is equally if not more chthonic than their drinks, and garners the same sorts of responses from the respective men:

> The girl brought them three big clay bowls heaped with fish eggs, and these they were to eat with three clay spoons. Willy McGilly and Dr. Velikof Vonk addressed themselves to the rich meal with pleasure, but Arpad Arkabaranan refused.
> "Why, it's all mixed with mud and sand and trash," he objected.

[227] I go into a slightly more detailed reading of this spirit-of-catfish episode in Petersen 2015.

> "Certainly, certainly, wonderful, wonderful," Willy McGilly slushed out the happy words with a mouth full of delicious goop. "I always thought that something went out of the world when they cleaned up the old shanty town dish of shad roe. In some places they cleaned it up; not everywhere. I maintain that roe at its best must always have at least a slight tang of river sewage. (Lafferty 2019: 324)

Willy and Velikov display adductive and ludic dispositions toward this exorbitant delicacy and scoff it down.[228] But Arpad merely scoffs. He 'broke his clay spoon in disgust' and 'would not eat', for though he 'had traveled a million miles in search of it', he 'didn't know it when he found it; he hadn't any of it inside him so he missed it' (324-325). What is 'it' that Arpad lacks within himself in order to recognise 'it' before him? The story never explicitly says, but one answer is that he lacked the monsters within to recognise the monsters without that they sought.[229]

Having completed (or declined in the case of Arpad) their ritual drinking and eating, they return their attention to the hotel's common room. Recall again Cat Rambo's likening of this to a 'a television show's set where each cut-away and back reveals odder and odder details changed and added' (Rambo: 314).

> One of the domino players at a near table (the three eminents had noticed this some time before but had not fully realized it) was a bear. The bear was dressed as a shabby man, he wore a big black hat on his head; he played dominos well; he was winning. (Lafferty 2019: 325)

This ursine identification, however, is immediately retracted:

> "He isn't really a bear," the girl said. "He is my cousin. Our mothers, who were sisters, were clownish. His mother licked him into the shape of a bear for fun. But that is nothing to what my mother did to me. She licked me into pretty face and pretty figure for a joke, and now I am stuck with it. I think it is too much of a joke. I'm not really like this, but I guess I may as well laugh at me just as everybody else does."
>
> "What is your name?" Arpad asked her without real interest.
>
> "Crayola Catfish." (325)

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[228] As with the eponymous dish of 'Cabrito', it is worth googling 'shad roe' to see how potentially grotesque this delicacy looks, even without 'mud and sand and trash'. 'Shad roe is the egg sac of the female American shad fish, a member of the herring family. Each female shad produces a pair of lobe-shaped egg sacs. Although the fish itself is quite bony, shad roe is full of rich flavor similar to sweetbreads.' Ruggirello, Julie. 11 April, 2018. 'What Is Shad Roe and How Do You Cook It?'. *The Daily Meal*. Retrieved from https://www.thedailymeal.com/cook/what-shad-roe-and-how-cook-it

[229] Recall yet again the monstrous interiority emblematised in Lafferty's ansels and McCarthy's Delawares.

So here we have the ‘legend’ from the anthropological interview tape come to life. Boomer Flats ‘is where the legends dwell’ (Rambo: 314)—in ontological slippage. Arpad, once again, is ‘without real interest’ in her answer, not out of boredom or distraction, but denial. He ‘didn't hear or recognize the name’ Crayola Catfish. ‘Arpad had now closed his eyes and ears and heart to all of it’ (Lafferty 2019: 325). This is a harder response even than Magdalen’s grumbling ambivalence in ‘Continued On Next Rock’. Whereas she heard the earth’s overtures and remained indecisive, Arpad will not even hear it.

Oh, I Believe We Are Right in the Middle of It

Leaving the hotel to explore the environs, the men ‘could not find hide nor hair (rough hide and copious hair were supposed to be marks by which the ABSMs might be known)[230] of the queer folks anywhere along the red bank of the Cimarron River’ (Lafferty 2019: 326). Or so they thought. They did find more folks like those they had already encountered in the hotel. ‘They weren't an ugly people: they were pleasantly mud-homely’ (ibid.). They are ‘mud-homely’ rather literally in their surefootedness in the unsure soil of the place, described via Lafferty’s characteristic biomic ontography:

> It may be that the red-mud river was full of fish. Something was splashing and jumping there. Big turtles waddled up out of the water, caked with mud even around their eyes. The shores and flats were treacherous, and sometimes an eminent would sink into the sand-mud up to the hips. But the broad-footed people of the area didn't seem to sink in.
>
> There was plenty of greenery (or brownery, for it had been the dusty weeks) along the shores. There were muskrats, there were even beavers, there were skunks and possums and badgers. There were wolf dens and coyote dens digged into the banks, and they had their particular smells about them. There were dog dens. There were coon trees. (Lafferty 2019: 326-327)

Into this muddy, dusty, chthonic catalogue is introduced a hint of monstrosity:

> There were even bear dens or caves. But no, that was not a bear smell either. What smell was it?
>
> “What lives in these clay caves?” Velikof asked a woman who was digging river clams there.
>
> “The Giants live in them,” she said. Well, they were tall enough to be giants' caves. A nine-footer need hardly stoop to enter one. (327)

[230] Recall that Haraway’s monstrous chthonic ones have ‘very unruly hair’ (Haraway 2016: 2).

To this monstration the men again respond respectively as they have done, adding to the poetry and ritual of the story's repetitions:

> "We have missed it," Arpad said. "There is nothing at all to be found here. I will travel farther, and I may find it in other places."
> "Oh, I believe we are right in the middle of it," Velikof gave the opinion.
> "It is all around us, Arpad, everything you wanted," Willy McGilly insisted.
> But Arpad Arkabaranan would have none of the muddy water, none of the red sand or the red sand caves, nothing of anything here. The interest had all gone out of him. The three of them went back to the Cimarron Hotel without, apparently, finding primitive creature or missing link at all. (327)

The interest, the ontological sense of wonder, goes out of Arpad and thus he can 'have none' of this more-than-human plenitude of muddy water, red sand, red caves, 'nothing of anything here'. (Recall Anteros's lament: 'Why can you not take or give?') Anthropocentric disinterest leaves no room for the inhuman (especially that which dominant culture has not romantically staked out as 'sublime' or 'idyllic'). Arpad exemplifies Lafferty's apparent conviction that a deficiency of more-than-human *interiority* (geomorphology of the mind and heart; potent river water and dirty fish eggs digested into the belly, even in the face of snakes; monsters within) guarantees a failure to consciously connect to more-than-human *exteriority*, even though it is 'all around us'.[231]

Back at the hotel, Crayola tells them the man named the Comet, with pieces continually falling off him (the reiteration of this strange crumbling quality has been another poetic refrain of the story throughout), only visits this place every eighty-seven years, in between his circuits riding 'out past the planets and among the stars' by means of 'horse and buggy', which the Comet confirms when asked. Humans are monstrously mixed not only with mud and animals, but also stars, as with the poem cycle in 'Continued On Next Rock'.[232] Amplification of this monstration is then achieved by adding to this stellar presence a meteorological phenomenon, which in turn serves as elemental harbinger to the entry of monsters.

> "Touch clay," said Crayola Catfish, "for the lightning."
> They touched clay. Everything was of baked clay anyhow, even the dominos. And there had been lightning, fantastic lightning dashing itself through every crack and cranny of the flimsy hotel. It was a lightning brighter than all the catfish-oil lamps in

[231] Cohen notes that the monster is the site of Jacques Lacan's 'extimacy': 'Only in the constant movement between these two hermeneutics [of exterior and interior] can the monster's nature be glimpsed' (Cohen 1999: xiii).
[232] Recall again Haraway's inclusion of stars with mud in the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016: 11-12).

> the world put together. And it continued. There was clattering sequence thunder, and there was a roaring booming sound that came from a few miles west of the thunder.
>
> The Giants came in and stood around the edges of the room. They were all very much alike, like brothers. They were tall and somber, shabby, black-bearded to the eyes, and with black hats on their heads. Unkempt. All were about nine feet tall. (Lafferty 2019: 328)

An anthropomorphised interstellar planetesimal (the man called the Comet) is here collocated with clay, lightning, catfish, thunder (and a booming beyond the thunder), and hairy giants. The three scientists really are 'right in the middle of it' as Velikov remarked, right in the middle of ecomonstrous encounter with inhuman amplitude.

Crayola Catfish explains about the shaggy, shabby giants:

> They stay here in the out-of-the-way places even more than the rest of us. Sometimes regular people see them and do not understand that they are regular people too. [...] But they are not apes or bears or monsters. They are people too. [...] They are the uncles, the old bachelors. That's why they grow tall and silent. That's why they stand around the edges of the room. And that is why they dig themselves caves into the banks and bluffs instead of living in huts. [...] This happens also to the steers of cattle and bears and apes, that they grow tall and gangling. They become bashful, you see, so sometimes it is mistakenly believed that they are fierce. (Lafferty 2019: 328-329)

That is, the giant uncles are not monsters *in the sense of being of some other race than humans*. They are, rather, monstrations of humanity's deep entanglement with nonhumanity; and also of the surplus of human-nonhuman ontology that withdraws from relations. The giants literally ensconce themselves into the inhuman ground, bashfully withdrawing to the edges and 'out-of-the-way places', exhibiting traits similar to the steers of other animals. Note, however, that their humanity does not preclude them being 'giants', which are traditional monsters—beings that are universally catalogued among types of monsters, often thought of as 'beyond the realm of the human', even if also containing a 'duality' in their vast bodies (Cohen 1999: xi-xii).[233] The humanity of these Oklahoma giants reveals not that there are no monsters but that *humans are monstrous,* not least because they are profoundly enmeshed with the more-than-human monstrous, as the story will make clear.

Heralding the tale's denouement, the booming beyond the thunder is now identified:

[233] It is worth noting too that Cohen lists Bigfoot, Sasquatch, and Yeti as 'lineal descendants' of the ancient and medieval giant (xiv).

> The roaring and booming from west of the thunder was becoming louder and nearer. The river was coming dangerously alive. All of the people in the room knew that it was now dark outside, and it was not yet time to be night. (Lafferty 2019: 329)

The untimely darkness is harbinger to Oklahoman storm and flood, alive with dangerous agency.

Mythos Maintains the World in Being

However, even as the river flood is imminent, the story furnishes one final arcane discursion on the mythopoetic maintenance of the world through the secret presence of strange strangers. The men are now fully immersed in a bio-mythical realm in which this particular mythos is elaborated to them (and thereby the reader). The elaboration begins with a note on the realist power of myth.

The Comet asks the trio if they are 'Magi' and the men confirm this (though 'Arpad has lost it all this day'), Willy explaining: 'We are called eminent scientists now-a-days' (Lafferty 2019: 329). The Comet then waxes tall and temporally weird on having met another trio of Magi, allegedly the authentic alternates of those we know from the traditional Christmas story:

> "Those three passed me several of my cycles back. They had had word of an Event, and they had come from a great distance as soon as they heard it. But it took them near two thousand years to make the trip and they were worried that myth had them as already arriving long ago. They were worried that false Magi had anticipated them and set up a preventing myth. And I believe that is what did happen."
>
> "And your own myths, old fellow, have they preceded you, or have you really been here before?" Willy McGilly asked. "I see that you have a twisty tongue that turns out some really winding myths."
>
> "Thank you, for that is ever my intent. Myths are not merely things that were made in times past: myths are among the things that maintain the present in being. I wish most strongly that the present should be maintained: I often live in it." (Lafferty 2019: 330)

Lafferty here essentially (and slyly) defends his own 'twisty tongue' and 'winding myths' as keys to, as Haraway would say, 'worlding' or 'world-making' (Haraway 2016: 10 and passim; cf. Ferguson 2014b). And as we have seen consistently, Lafferty's myth-maintenance of the world is decidedly ecological. Suffice it to say, on our ecocritical

reading, this aside explains what we're reading in 'Boomer Flats' and in Lafferty's work generally: antiecomimetic 'net bags' of narrative that help make/preserve the world (cf. Haraway 2016: 39 and passim; cf. Adamson 2014: 262-263). (We will return to the implications of this mention of the 'Event' of the Advent.)

The world-making/maintaining mythos of 'Boomer Flats' is then enumerated by the Comet as consisting of three major elements: a river named Ocean that manifests bioregionally yet surrounds the world; an 'under-people' who mix with regular humanity to invigorate them and withdraw again to deepen; and an inn that serves as a world centre that welcomes these xenoi, these monster-people strange strangers.

A River Named Ocean

Willy asks the Comet why his kind come back to visit Boomer Flats of all places:

> "Oh, it's just one of the post stations where we change horses when we make our orbits. A lot of the comets come to the Flats: Booger, Donati, Eneke, 1914c, and Halley."
> "But why to Boomer Flats on the little Cimarron River?" Willy inquired.
> "Things are often more than they seem. The Cimarron isn't really so little a river as you would imagine. Actually it is the river named Ocean that runs around all the worlds." (Lafferty 2019: 330)

There is both withdrawal and entanglement in this things-are-more-than-they-seem claim. The river Cimarron is 'more-than' (monstrously exorbitant) in that it is entangled with both astronomical and hydrological mythography in a spiritual-material continuum. This may allude to the ancient belief in a 'circumfluent ocean' or 'the distant ocean generally held to encircle the earth' (Van Duzer 2013: 417). The Cimarron is also exorbitant in that this very oceanic surplus means it withdraws from all its worldly relations into a profound depth of being. The ancient explication of the circumfluent ocean makes its monstration explicit by the presence of monsters: 'The ocean surrounding the earth abounds with sea monsters', with the implication that 'the monstrous holds the whole earth in its serpentine grasp' (Van Duzer: 419).[234] The Cimarron River here manifests its monstrous, oceanic depths by hosting Comets and Sasquatch on its flat muddy banks and in its red muddy waters.[235]

[234] This is also consistent, of course, with the oceanic-monstrous motif of Lafferty's novels *Past Master* and *Serpent's Egg*.

[235] The circumfluent ocean also mythically evokes cosmic understandings of water: 'When hydrogen and oxygen met finally in the folds of stellar remnants, water came into the Universe and with it new possibilities of creativity […] Enveloped by water, Earth's creativity flourishes' (Rushton 2018: 92).

An Under-People Who Mix and Withdraw

Velikov now refers to the Sasquatch as 'the under-people' they have been tracking and the Comet explains that these are 'the scrubs who bottom the breed', they 'are the foundation' of humanity (Lafferty 2019: 331).

> When the bones and blood of the more manifest races grow too thin, then they sustain you with the mixture of their strong kinship: the mixing always goes on, but in special eras it is more widespread. They are the link that is never really missing, the link between the clay and the blood. (331)

Weird kinship with these chthonic ones ensures weird kinship with dirt. Monstrous mixing. Anthony Lioi has noted the distinction between 'dirt-affirming' and 'dirt-rejecting' cultures, which either unite or separate dirt with the sacred and the cosmic order (Lioi 2007: 17). Lafferty's is clearly (muddily) a dirt-affirming vision of the world.[236]

Recall the muddy underworld of the Cherokee cosmos, a chaotic and mysterious realm 'where things mix, but also a source of creative power and change' upon which the Cherokee draw to 'create dynamic balance' on earth (Teuton 2012: 21).[237] Lafferty too sees monstrous mixture as a source of both 'strong kinship' and creativity. His monsters' achievement of this creativity, however, involves withdrawal as well as mixture. When Velikov asks the Comet why the Bigfoot people are 'sometimes taken to be animals' and 'always live in such outlandish places', he is informed they also sometimes 'live in very inlandish places' such as city centres (Lafferty 2019: 331). Inlandish or outlandish, they periodically withdraw from the general culture to strengthen and deepen.

> But it is their function to stand apart and grow in strength. Look at the strong bone structure of that girl there! It is their function to invent forms—look at the form her mother invented for her. They have a depth of mind, and they have it particularly in those ghostly areas where the other races lack it. And they share and mingle it in those sudden motley ages of great achievement and vigor. [...] And afterwards, this people will withdraw again to gather new strength and bottom. (331-332)

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[236] Lioi urges a mud-monstrous ecocriticism of 'swampy hermeneutics' in which the 'swamp dragon' is a 'dragon of wisdom' that guides us in 'how to love the land' (Lioi: 22-23). I consider Lioi's approach a thoroughly ecomonstrous ecocriticism.

[237] Lioi notes that though Europeans traditionally saw the swamp as a hellish place, in the mid 19th century it began to become symbolic of a 'site of political resistance and repressed psychic materials' and a 'matrix of transformation' (Lioi: 20).

The strong kinship of this ghost-minded people keeps our human blood creatively connected to the clay, to the more-than-human world in material-semiotic symchthonic sympoiesis. These monsters manifest and 'withdraw again' to gather strength and depth. In this mythos, they are the monstrous source of human participation in more-than-human sympoiesis.[238]

Xenodocheion: An Inn for (More-Than-Human) Monsters

The final piece of this world-maintaining mythos is the hotel itself in Boomer Flats, upon which the Comet once again elaborates:

> "And why are they centered here in a tumble-down hotel that is like a series of old daguerreotypes?" Willy McGilly asked. "Will you tell us that there is something cosmic about this little old hotel, as there is about this little old river?"
>
> "Aye, of course there is, Willy. This is the hotel named Xenodocheion. This is the special center of these Xenoi, these strangers, and of all strangers everywhere. It isn't small; it is merely that you can see but a portion of it at one time. And then they center here to keep out of the way. Sometimes they live in areas and neighborhoods that regularized humanity has abandoned (whether in inner-city or boondock). Sometimes they live in eras and decades that regularized humanity has abandoned: for their profundity of mind in the more ghostly areas, they have come to have a cavalier way with time. What is wrong with that? If regular people are finished with those days and times, why may not others use them?" (Lafferty 2019: 332)

The shadow town hotel is a centre for strange strangers. An inn for monsters. And Lafferty's name for it is historically significant:

> *Xenodocheion* was a Greek term for new Christian philanthropic institutions that appeared during the fourth century CE in the Eastern Roman Empire. Although *xenodocheion* occasionally served as a synonym for *pandocheion* (commercial inn), after 300 CE it referred exclusively to hospices offering free lodging to travelers and homeless poor.[239]

Like the Cimarron River, the Cimarron Hotel is more than it seems, monstrous in itself and host to monsters.[240] Again considering 'Boomer Flats' as intimating 'the secret heart of Lafferty's cosmos' (Rambo 2019: 314), we might say that in a certain sense, the entire

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[238] Lafferty's ghostly and inventive Bigfoot people resonate with Morton's explication of the capacious and ontologically supple 'arche-lithic' mind, which Morton distinguishes from the Neolithic or Paleolithic and which he finds exemplified in many indigenous worldviews (Morton 2016: 63, 80, 84, and passim).

[239] Miller, Timothy S. 2013. 'Xenodocheion', in Bagnall, Roger S. et al., eds. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Retrieved from 10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah03254

[240] Xenodochy = hospitality for strangers. Xenodocheionology = the lore of hotels and inns.

body of Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction serves as a bioregional Xenodocheion—a narratological inn not only for legendary beings, but for a host of nonhumans monstrating from within their diverse (south)western biomes. Building on that suggestion, we might further say that the ecomonstrous imagination more generally can serve as a more-than-human Xenodocheion poetics (*Blood Meridian* furnishing another room in this strange and spacious inn, as we have seen).

Into the River, Enriched in Cousinship

With the scientists' graded immersion accomplished, and the mythos outlined, it is at last time for the fluvial climax and denouement of the tale.

> The roaring and booming to the west of the thunder had become very loud and very near now, and in the immediate outdoors there was heavy rain.
>
> "It is the time," the girl Crayola Catfish cried out in her powerful and intricate voice. "The flash flood is upon us and it will smash everything. We will all go and lie down in the river."
>
> They all began to follow her out, the Boomer Flats people, and the Giants among them; the eminents, everybody. (Lafferty 2019: 332)

Antonya Nelson cites Southwestern author Craig Childs's evocation of this hydroclimatic phenomenon: 'The sound becomes familiar. Next I smell it, and that too is familiar. It is the musty scent of death, the umistakable smell of a flash flood' (Lopez and Gwartney 2013: 178).[241] Lafferty's story expresses this sense of mortal danger felt in the proximity of this monstrating earth process.

The Comet is the exception here, who does not enter the river with the others but says his 'way' is, rather, to 'ascend' (Lafferty 2019: 333). Before ascending, the Comet imparts a final addendum to the mythos. Velikov asks what species the Comet belongs to and he responds 'the human species, of course':

> I belong to still another race of it; another race that mixes sometimes, and then withdraws again to gather more strength and depth. Some individuals of us withdraw for quite long times. There are a number of races of us in the wide cousinship, you see, and it is a necessity that we be strangers to each other for a good part of the time. [...] We are the comets. And our own mingling with the commonalty of people has also had quite a bit to do with those sudden incandescent eras. (333)

[241] Nelson explains: 'What happens during a flash flood is that too much water falls in too short a time for the terrain to absorb or safely channel it' and 'the abrupt and excessive combination becomes deadly' (178).

From above as well as below, there is incandescent mixture (coruscating entanglement) as well as dark withdrawal into strengths and depths—strange strangers in a 'wide cousinship'.[242]

Discourse finally gives way to enacted, bodily ritual in weird sympoiesis with the regional particulars of landscape. The local inhumans make the first move:

> The red and black river was in surging flood with a blood-colored crest bearing down. And the flats—they were just too flat. The flood would be a mile wide here in one minute and everywhere in that width it would be deep enough and swift enough to drown a man. (Lafferty 2019: 333)

A place this flat, in this particular climate, creates this flood so instantaneously. And it is deadly.[243] The humans, for their part, are invited to adductively participate with the intimacy and touch of these specific nonhumans: 'there was a pile of large rocks there in the deepening shallows: plenty of rocks: at least one big heavy rock for every person' (334). The trio of scientists/eminents/magi dispose themselves to this sympoesis as they have throughout the story:

> The Boomer Flats people understood what the rocks were for, and the Giants among them understood. Two of the eminents understood; and one of them, Arpad, apparently did not. Arpad was carrying on in great fear about the dangers of death by drowning. (334)

As the flood and this human-nonhuman assemblage approach collision, they begin to coalesce and merge in symchthonic ritual. Even the spirituality of nonhumans is reprised and woven into the tangle through the narrator's involved and non-objective invocation:

> Quickly then, to cram mud into the eyes and ears and noses and mouths. There is plenty of mud and all of it is good. Spirits of Catfish protect us now! — it will be only for a few hours, for two or three days at the most. (334)

Arpad, however, making his final gesture of denial toward more-than-human entanglement, fled in a panic 'when Crayola Catfish tried to put mud in his mouth and nose

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[242] Again recall that the Cherokee cosmography consists of its Sky World (Galunlati) as well as its monstro-aqueous underworld, such that 'creatures of the Middle World must negotiate both sky and water energies' to 'create dynamic balance' here between, lest the Middle World 'sink into the waters' (Teuton 2012: 21).

[243] Antonya Nelson notes: 'the number of deaths from flash flooding has exceeded deaths from tornados since 1985' (Lopez and Gwartney 2013: 178).

to save him' and thereby 'stumbled in the rising waters to his death. But all the others understood' (ibid.). In the strange mytho-ontic realm of the shadow town, there is salvation only in the merging of mud with breath and sight. (And doom without it.)

The giant 'uncles' of the Boomer/Bigfoot/Sasquatch people preside over the ensuing scene almost like ceremonial custodians: the people of the procession 'lay down in the red roaring river, and one of the giants set a heavy rock on the breast of every person of them to hold them down. The last of the giants then rolled the biggest of the rocks onto his own breast' (Lafferty 2019: 334). This mud-rock-river-human-giant-flash-flood assemblage then coalesces into more-than-human spiritual renewal:

> So all were safe on the bottom of the surging torrent, safe in the old mud-clay cradle. Nobody can stand against a surging flood like that: the only way is to lie down on the bottom and wait it out. And it was a refreshing, a deepening, a renewing experience. There are persons, both inside and outside the orders, who make religious retreats of three days every year for their renewal. This was very like such a retreat. (334)

This is a very challenging idea of what it means to be 'safe', much less refreshed or renewed. The story mythopoetically suggests that one must 'lie down' in the face of inhuman monstration. Indeed, one must go right to the 'bottom' of it and let it have its way, rather than futilely attempt to stand against it or escape it.[244] It is a profoundly disanthropocentrising image, but this surrender to the surge of more-than-human entanglement is symbolic of a deepening and refreshing experience for humans in collaboration with nonhumans. Indeed, it echoes when two characters in 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay' adductively enter into the roiling clay-sea: 'It's fun to merge in with the background, with the ground itself,' says one; 'The renewal experience alone is worth it,' says the other (Lafferty 1976b: 73). 'Boomer Flats' likens this muddy renewal experience to a religious retreat taken by lay people as well as monks and nuns. It is a strange mingling of the religious, ecological, and monstrous.

Preserved and Enlarged by Sacramental Mud and Chthonic Eucharist

Nor, in that regard, was this inundation and burial the end of the matter:

[244] 'Humans do not rise above the world but only burrow ever more deeply into it, digging down toward the heart of things by fusing with them' (Harman 2010: 134).

> When the flood had subsided (this was three days later), they all rose again, rolling the big rocks off their breasts; they cleared their eyes and ears and mouths of the preserving mud, and they resumed their ways and days. (334)

The rolling away of the stones and rising again three days later is, though rather understated, fairly unmistakably a christic resonance. The flood is even described as 'blood-colored'. This retrospectively suggests that the drinking and eating of this same river-clay stuff was a sort of carnivalised chthonic Eucharist in preparation for the exorbitant flood retreat/renewal.

Recall that the drinks and food were already being prepared for the men when they arrived at the hotel. When received, their clay cups were full of the blood-red river water, which had somehow been made alcoholic, a 'lively drink', 'sparkling with live action' (Lafferty 2019: 323), suggestive of the consecrated wine of the Catholic church's sacrament of the Eucharist.[245] Even the snakes and catfish associated with the riverine drink seem obliquely charged with christic symbolism. For example, in regard to the little green snakes or worms in the cups of the drink Willy McGilly called a 'Green Snake Snorter', note that in the Gospel of John, Jesus likens being 'lifted up' on the cross with the story of Moses lifting up a serpent symbol to save the Israelites from poisonous snake bites.[246] Classical and medieval theologians likened Christ on the cross to a worm on a hook deployed as bait to snare the sea monster Leviathan (Satan).[247] That the green snakes compete with the men to drink up their beverages fits with the tall and ludic tone of the scene, but even this strange detail nods to symbolic traditions. The image of a small green serpent or dragon being drawn out of a poisoned chalice in the hand of St John is common in iconography.[248] Some Christian symbology even mixes the snake/worm as Christ and the snake/dragon as poison or death in the recurring image of a snake *drinking* from the cup (an image drawn from classical Greek imagery, but note that the drinking vessel

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[245] Cf. Catholic Church. 1999. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition. Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 341-342.

[246] 'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him' (John 3:14-15, New International Version; cf. Numbers 21:9). Hence, there is a long tradition of sacred serpentine symbology in Christian tradition (cf. Charbonneau-Lassay 1992: 159-160).

[247] Cf. Seow, C. L. 2013. *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 211. For a more-than-satanic reading of Job's mytho-natural monster, see my conference paper, 'Leviathan Regained: Towards a Theology of the Ecomonstrous' (Petersen 2015, June 20).

[248] Seen, for example in stained glass at St Gregory's Church in Warwickshire and in many other locations in Europe and the U.S. Many paintings contain the image as well. E.g. Cano, Alonso. 1635-37. *Saint John the Evangelist.* Musée du Louvre, Paris, France; El Greco. 1609. *Saint John the Evangelist*. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. The iconographic tradition is based on a legend of St John drawing forth poison from a chalice in the form of a serpent. Cf. Fonck, Leopold. 1910. 'St. John the Evangelist', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved from: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08492a.htm

became a time-honoured image of Christ). The 'drinking serpent was often placed on cemetery crosses and funeral monuments' such that 'before our eyes rises the striking image of Death drinking from the divine vessel of life, from Christ, the kernel of survival, of the eternal life which he promised' (Charbonneau-Lassay 1992: 162-163). These various christo-serpentine insinuations converge in the Green Snake Snorter, a cluster of allusions 'sinewy as entwined snakes' like the poet described his love in 'Continued On Next Rock' (Lafferty 2019: 246). The green worm in the 'Green Snake Snorter' drink doesn't seem to be drawing on any local Oklahoma fauna, but this classical European image is transplanted into a thoroughly (south)western setting via a monstro-comic tall tale mode.[249]

Furthermore, the green worms/snakes are said to be the 'spirits of catfish just out for a little ramble' (Lafferty 2019: 324). The catfish here can act as a bioregional allusion to the *ichthys* (Greek, fish) of early Christian symbolism, which signified the divinity of Christ and also the identity of his followers.[250] Hence, the catfish oil burning in the lamps can be taken to allude to the biblical oil and fire symbolism of the Holy Spirit, the oil making the allusion not only christic but chrismal.[251] The 'clay-colored flame' (322) in lamps would then allude to the Incarnation, the doctrine of the divine Word taking on the 'clay' of human flesh (John 1:14).[252] Finally, the catfish-oil lamps anticipate the later invocation 'Spirits of Catfish protect us now' as the flood overtakes the group (334). Given that the fish symbolises both Christ and christians, the plural 'spirits' may be invoking the protection of both the 'Spirit of Christ' and the living communion of his saints.[253] Importantly, the allusion to 'the Christ-Fish' surrounded by his 'smaller fish' (Charbonneau-Lassay: 301) in no way cancels out the ecomonstrous ascription of weird and lively spirituality and agency in the actual catfish of the Cimarron River. All is sacramentally participatory here (as we will elucidate in the next chapter).

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[249] Recall also the ambivalence of the snake in Native American culture, occasionally evil or neutral, but often sacred and protective, as we saw in chapter two. (Cf. Teuton 2012: 41, 62, 238; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1964: 43, 46.)

[250] Cf. Charbonneau-Lassay 1992: 300. The second-century African theologian Tertullian wrote that christians were 'little fishes' who 'are born in the water' in 'the image of our *Ichthys*, Jesus Christ'. Hassett, M. 1909. 'Symbolism of the Fish', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved from http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06083a.htm

[251] The 'chrism' is a 'perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop' with which the newly baptised are anointed and which 'signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit' in the sacrament of 'Chrismation'. *Catechism*: 317, 327. On the Holy Spirit's association with the symbol of fire, see Matthew 3:11 and Acts 2:3-4; cf. *Catechism*: 184.

[252] The intermingling of christological and pneumatological symbols gives these clustering allusions a Trinitarian flavour. Space does not permit an investigation of trinitarian themes in Lafferty's fiction, but Deane-Drummond's explication of Aquinas on creation applies: 'Given that the creative act of God involves all three person of the Trinity, it is logical that a trace of the Trinity is also found in creaturely beings' (Deane-Drummond 2014b: 77).

[253] Cf. Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19. See also the doctrine of the 'intercession of the saints' in *Catechism*: 249.

Another detail from that earlier scene that we have not yet attended to may also make more sense in light of a Eucharistic interpretation: Willy McGilly 'drank deeply from his own stirring vessel' and 'cried in amazement and delight': 'Oh drink of drinks, thou're a pleasure beyond expectation! [...] What great thing have we done to deserve this?' (Lafferty 2019: 323). Even Arpad's refusal of the drink exhibited its spiritual potency:

> Arpad Arkabaranan specialized in primitives, and primitives by definition are prime stuff. But there wasn't, now in his moment of weakness, enough prime stuff in Arpad himself to face so pleasant and primitive a drink as this. (323)

That is, Arpad lacked the prime/primitive *eucharistia* (gratefulness, thanksgiving) within him that Willy displayed so joyously in receiving the drink. Ecotheologically read, Willy was grateful to be called into sympoietic participation with more-than-human monstration and Arpad was not.

The food the men ate out of 'clay bowls' with 'clay spoons' is suggestive as well (Lafferty 2019: 324). The shad roe resonates with ancient adherence to the fish as 'the sign of human and animal fecundity' in part 'because of the incredible number of eggs that it carries' (Charbonneau-Lassay: 295). The symbol of the fish was closely associated with the eucharistic meal in early christian iconography: some works of art depict the 'fish carrying the eucharistic bread-basket' and in others the fish 'waits on a platter, between the chalice and the wafer, to be distributed like them as food' (Charbonneau-Lassay: 302).[254] Lafferty's chthonic and almost abject imagery of the shad roe ('all mixed with mud and sand and trash') almost suggests the eggs *are* the bread, the shad fish's egg sac being the fleshy basket that carries the consecrated host (Lafferty: 324).[255]

All these eucharistic resonances are loose and ludic, suggestive rather than strictly allegorical. Yet, in light of these oblique theological motifs, consider Cat Rambo's assessment of the story's christic resonances:

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[254] John 21:9-13 depicts the recently resurrected Jesus preparing and serving his disciples a breakfast of grilled fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, just after he has directed them to a miraculous and exorbitant catch of fish from their boat. It is suggested that 'this gospel text contributed greatly to the eucharistic significance given the fish, for this episode of the seven favored disciples was the most popular of all the mystic banquets in early Christian art' (Charbonneau-Lassay: 302-303).

[255] Recall the felicitous detail that the shad's eggs are said to taste 'similar to sweetbreads', 'sweetbreads' being a name for throat and heart meats (Ruggirello, see footnote 41).

> The three eminent scientists are specifically identified as three Magi, but what they find is not an answer in the form of the Christ Child, but more and more questions about the world itself. Instead the ending turns back to story's heart in a way that pulls the reader further in and farther out, so to speak. This is Lafferty at his luminiferous best, slipstream before the term was ever invented. (Rambo 2019: 314)

Slipstream indeed, but in regard to theology as well as genre. In point of fact, Lafferty's story doesn't draw a disjunction between 'more and more questions about the world itself' and 'an answer in the form of the Christ Child'.[256] Indeed, it is the 'answer'—a chthonic and even abject Eucharist in and through the river's mud and water and fauna and rubbish—that poses questions so pointedly.

For example, consider the questions regarding beauty and ecology that Lafferty's crypto-chthonic 'form of the Christ Child' elicits. Ecotheologian Celia Deane-Drummond notes that 'it seems obvious that the beauty of the cross is no ordinary beauty but rather an expression of profound ugliness, so that all worldly aesthetics are shaken at their foundations' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 140). Lafferty's imagery here, as elsewhere, presses into the 'ugliness' of cruciform beauty to challenge 'intramundane aesthetics'. Deane-Drummond cites Stephen Fields's work on the theo-aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar: 'Shining forth in the scandal of the cross, this love ['God's passionate love' revealed in the crucifixion], grasped in faith, transforms an image assessed as ugly by intramundane norms into an icon of beauty' (Deane-Drummond: 141). Deane-Drummond expands this insight ecotheologically, suggesting that 'Balthasar's interpretation of Christ as the form of beauty can be extended to include appreciation of not just creaturely suffering more generally, but also our standards of aesthetics as applied to the nonhuman world', including both extinct and extant species 'which are not beautiful according to what may be judged as worldly aesthetic standards' (142). Mud and monsters are not usually thought of as the stuff of beauty. Yet:

> Christ the form of beauty challenges humanity to appreciate not just those forms of creation that seem most appealing to us, but also those creatures that seem to us in aesthetic terms to be repellent or even repugnant. (Deane-Drummond 2009: 143)

To riff on Rambo, let us suggest that the 'luminiferous' light of 'Boomer Flats' is clay-coloured with chrismal catfish oil.[257] Through Lafferty's implicit eco-incarnational

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[256] Though the magi put us in mind of the Christmas story, Lafferty here mainly has in mind the Incarnation's climax in the Easter story.

[257] Real clay and real fish, yet through a poetics that evokes these nonhumans as really sacramentally participatory in the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist. Cf. *Catechism*: 896.

imagery the reader is pulled 'farther out' of anthropocentrism and 'further in' to the slipstream of the world in all its monstrous beauty.

Indeed, this mud-filled chthonic retreat in the flooded river 'had been an enriching experience' for Velikov and Willy (Lafferty 2019: 335). 'They had found the link that was not really lost' and 'had grown in cousinship and wisdom' through ecomonstrous entanglement along a spiritual-material continuum (ibid.). While we have again a character (Arpad) dying in refusal, as with Magdalen in 'Continued On Next Rock', we also glimpse what it might be like to ludically and sympoietically participate with more-than-human monstration rather than coming to ruin by closing our eyes, ears, and hearts to it (instead, closing them up with mud in order to be open to it).[258] Announcing their intention to 'return to the flats every year at mud-duck season and turtle-egg season', the two surviving men 'went back to T-Town [Tulsa] enlarged and happy' (335). There is a willingness to ritually repeat the connection and convergence with the more-than-human and there is the fruit of larger and happier more-than-human existence.

The Beautiful Monstrosity of the Christ-Catfish: Towards a Theopoietic Christomonstrous

Intriguingly in regard to this interpretation of 'Boomer Flats', Donna Haraway (who, like Bruno Latour, was raised and educated in Roman Catholicism) discusses in a lengthy footnote the tensions and possibilities of their (apparently ongoing) partaking of the Eucharist:

> Latour and I both ate the "host" in the sacrificial Eucharistic feast, and so we know what it means to be in the material-semiotic world where sign and signifier have imploded in meaningful flesh. Neither of us fits very well in secular Protestant semiotics, dominant in the university and in science, and that shapes our approaches to science studies and much else. But note that the "host" that we ate—our communion—is firmly ensconced in the story of the acceptable sacrifice to the Father. Latour and I ate too much and too little when we consumed this host and refused (and still refuse) to disavow it. I have a case of permanent raging indigestion, even as I hold fast to the joy and the implosion of metaphor and world. (Haraway 2016: 179).

[258] Compare Christopher Teuton's beautiful image of the critic descending below the surface of ordered theory in imitation of Dayunisi the water beetle, to dive down into the underworld for a handful of mud with which to re-emerge and communally build the world (Teuton 2010: xiv).

Lafferty's relation to patriarchal interpretations of theology will have to await further research, but his eucharistically participatory characters in this story seem very much to 'know what it means to be in the material-semiotic world where sign and signifier have imploded in meaningful flesh' and to 'hold fast to the joy and the implosion of metaphor and world' as figured forth in the ecomonstrous events occurring in this mythopoeic bioregion.

Haraway's is not the only voice from New Materialism and Material Ecocriticism to engage with the strangely material-spiritual concept and ceremony of the Eucharist. Kate Rigby's explication of the deep-incarnational implications of the ritual suggest it can, in fact, embody the Chthulucene:

> In Christian worship, the conjunction of connectivity and singularity[259] is affirmed in the "kenotic [self- emptying] hospitality" […] of the Eucharist, in which the congregation affirms, "We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread." Although the actual bread that is shared in the communion of fellow Christians is conventionally understood as the symbol or embodiment of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, within the ecotheology of "deep incarnation" (Gregersen), it is understood more inclusively as a synecdoche for the wider creation, the inspirited "flesh of the world," in which we are called into fellowship, not only with other Christians, or even other humans, but, ultimately, with all creatures, for all our differences and sometimes conflictual entanglements. (Rigby 2014: 288)

In fact, the eco-eucharistic encryptions in 'Boomer Flats' implicate not only humans but the *divine* more chthonically into the monstrous slipstream. Classical theologians argued that in *theopoiesis* (the term Athanasius coined for it) the divine Word 'became flesh' (John 1:14) so that creation would in turn share in the Word's 'deified flesh' (Edwards 2009: 88-89).[260] Read ecotheologically, 'the solidarity of the flesh in the doctrine of the incarnation is not limited to the human community':

> Flesh is understood as involving the whole 3.8 billion-year evolutionary history of life on our planet, with all its predation, death and extinctions, as well as its diversity, co-operation, interdependence and abundance. Flesh involves all the interconnected ecological relationships that make up life on our planet. (Edwards: 92)

If the world is fundamentally ecomonstrous as this thesis has argued, then the incarnation must also be ecomonstrous. Recall our mention of a human character who became an 'Ocean Obscenity or Monster' in *Serpent's Egg* (Lafferty 1987: 137), that his 'beautiful

[259] I.e. entanglement and withdrawal.
[260] Known doctrinally as deification or divinisation or *theosis* (cf. Petersen 2017).

oceanic-ugliness-monsterness' was 'enormous', 'grotesque', and 'comic, even for a fish' (135, 144), a corporeal literalisation of the evolutionary ocean every human carries within (cf. Alaimo 2014: 188-189). If the Word becomes flesh, the Word becomes this oceanic monster flesh (with numinous ansels swimming through his dreams). Hence, the beautiful oceanic-ugliness-monsterness of the serpentine Christ-Catfish encrypted in 'Boomer Flats' flashes up from the 'flesh of the world' in a (south)western bioregion. And in an implosion of metaphor and world the human characters are invited to eat/drink (with) this sacred monster through a strange local ritual. Here Lafferty's sympoietic ecomonstrous subscends into a theopoietic christomonstrous.[261]

A Participatory Postlude

A postscript appended to this tale addresses the reader:[262] 'There is, however, a gap in the Magi set, due to the foolish dying of Arpad Arkabaranan' and it is 'of scripture' that 'a set should not consist of less than three' (Lafferty 2019: 335). Indeed, 'it seems to be said that a set must contain at the least a Comet, a Commoner, and a Catfish. The meaning of this is pretty muddy, and it may be a mistranslation' (ibid.). But into this muddiness we are invited to go. It is confirmed that Velikov Vonk is the Catfish of the trio, one of the Bigfoot people, 'a neo-Neanderthal, an unmissing link, one of that branch of the human race that lives closest to the clay and the catfish' (ibid.). Willy McGilly 'belongs (and he himself has come to the realization of this quite lately) to that race of mankind called the Comets. [...] Pieces fall off of him; he leaves a wake; but he'll last a while yet' (ibid.). With Arpad's death, then, there is a vacancy in the Commoner position of the sophianic or sapiential trio: 'One more is needed so that this set of Magi may be formed again' (ibid.). And 'the third member could well be a regularized person', perhaps 'an older person of ability, an eminent' or 'a younger person of ability, a pre-eminent' (335-336).

> This person may be you. Put your hand to it if you have the surety about you, if you are not afraid of green snakes in the cup (they'll fang the face off you if you're afraid of them), or of clay-mud, or of comet dust, or of the rollicking world between. (336)

[261] See Morton's adaptation of '*subscendence*, a once-theological term that describes the incarnation of Christ' to explicate hyperobjects and biodiversity (Morton 2016: 114).

[262] This is the ending to which Rambo referred as turning 'back to story's heart in a way that pulls the reader further in and farther out'.

Any ‘commoner’ may be a muddy mage of the ecomonstrous. Anyone who succumbs to the risky but enriching surge of snakes, river, dirt, stars, and ‘the rollicking world between’ may be ‘enlarged and happy’ as they grow in ‘cousinship and wisdom’.

Conclusion: Towards Spiritual Materialism

Deane-Drummond reminds us that Aquinas construed beauty in terms of *claritas*, a concept which builds upon ‘Aristotelian realism that supposes form *radiates* being’ (Deane-Drummond 2009: 130, emphasis added; cf. Montejo 2015: 59 ff.). She notes that the 20th century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar expanded on Aquinas’s construal of the beautiful, arguing that ‘the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather, it breaks forth from the form’s interior’ (Deane-Drummond 2009: 131). From just such a metaphysics arises the weather and mud and blood and flood and stone and bone and biome—in a word, the darkly vibrant *materiality*—of Lafferty’s ecomonstrous spiritual vision of the world. Spirit, in Lafferty’s fiction, is not merely superimposed on the world as an extra ‘bonus’ layer from above; it ‘breaks forth’ *from the interior of things*, from their becoming as actual things in their own right. Obversely, form hides and occludes the fullness of the object and preserves its inexhaustibility because, for Balthasar, ‘form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time, protecting and veiling it’ (Deane-Drummond 2009: 131-132). As such, Lafferty’s fiction (as we will see more fully in the next chapter) springs from a metaphysics in which there is no spirituality that is not ecological and no ecology that is not spiritual. We might call this a spiritual materialism or ‘materialist spirituality’ (cf. Rigby 2014: 284).

It is not hard to see the possible resonances between Lafferty’s theological sources and the discourses of both NM and OOO for whom things are manifest *and* withdrawn (cf. Bennett 2015: 226). This is the very language of incarnational ecotheology: ‘The incarnation of the Word combines, in a paradoxical way, “the most extreme manifestness within the deepest concealment”’ (Deane-Drummond 2009: 138; citing Balthasar). Hence, the muddy, fishy, snaky Logos we cryptically encounter in ‘Boomer Flats’. But this incarnational manifestness-concealment is shared with all beings. In terms of Lafferty’s theological roots, then, we might describe this as the object’s *radiance* and *secrecy* (or *claritas* and occlusion): things are radiant *and* secretive. Thus, Lafferty’s world is lambent

with chrismal-christic and clay-coloured flame.[263] In ‘Continued On Next Rock’ and ‘Boomer Flats’, this monstrating radiance-secrecy constantly shows humans as already entangled with the coruscating-withdrawing nonhumans of their biomes but also urges conscious participation in weird bioregionalism. Lafferty’s ecomonstrous poetics is both aesthetic and ethical as it calls upon humans for collaboration in worldmaking, ‘a mutual creation of humans and nonhumans by way of ethical-aesthetical encounters’ (Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 15). We now proceed to a final chapter on these spiritual and theological aspects as they are more overtly elucidated in Lafferty’s fiction.

[263] Or as Balthasar expressed it: ‘creation as a whole has become a monstrance of God's real presence’ (cited in Eggemeier 2013: 358). Yet another term rooted *monstrare* (to show or reveal), a monstrance is the vessel that elevates the consecrated Host of the Eucharist in Catholic liturgy.

Chapter 6: 'That Anarchist of Yours is Ruining My Grass': Girls and Boys with Really Eyes and Sacramental Sympoiesis

Introduction

The relevance of theology and religion to ecological issues is a live issue to some material ecocritics (e.g. Wheeler 2014; Rigby 2014; Gaard 2014; Abram 2014). As such, attention to Lafferty's theological roots and resonances is one way to heed Kate Rigby's call for 'greater ecocritical engagement with emerging manifestations of new materialist spirituality, in which contemporary forms of knowledge are being brought into conversation with nonmodern (and frequently non-Western) religions and philosophies' (Rigby 2014: 290).[264] Some may find the inclusion of religion and spirituality uncomfortable, but as Rigby notes:

> Contrary to the (possibly "old" materialist) assumptions of those who are "unsettled" by talk of "ecospirituality," as Franca Bellarsi puts it in her introduction to *Ecozon@*'s 2011 special issue on religion and the environment (1), this modality of postsecularism is in dialogue with the sciences and supportive of political engagement in the pursuit of greater social, or, more inclusively, transpecies, justice. In the long run, moreover, it might also provide a better bulwark against fundamentalist versions of postsecularism than the radical atheist rejection of religion per se. (Rigby 2014: 290)

On the other hand, ethicist and theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda notes that even while 'religious fundamentalism is on the rise, another marker of our day is deep interreligious respect and engagement among many people':

> If humankind is to meet the unprecedented moral challenge of survival with equity and dignity in the face of climate change, then all of Earth's great wisdom traditions—both religious and scientific—must plumb their depths for resources to share and bring these resources into conversation with each other. (Moe-Lobeda 2017: 272)

Let us explore, then, the wisdom traditions undergirding Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction and put them into conversation with the other wisdom traditions we have engaged.

[264] We, of course, have also been pursuing this by reading Lafferty through Native American Studies.

To do this, we look at Lafferty's story 'Animal Fair' (1974), which tells of weird teenagers with 'Really Eyes' in sympathetic sympoiesis with weirdly discursive and communicative nonhumans, co-making the world. The story roots this sympoiesis in sacramental ontology or ontological sacramentality—that is, the participation of all things in the divine. It also ends on the twin notes of improvisational contingency and productive endarkenment. The narration consists of a series of human conversations so insistently imbricated with nonhuman presence, pungency, and eloquence that the nonhuman voices take over and deliver the central theological kernel of the story. For reasons of space, and to drive home the story's rhetorical point, we will elide the human conversations here (themselves of interest, consisting of discussions of arche vs. anarchy and logos vs. alogos) to focus on the inhuman discourse/activity that the story weaves into and around the human discourse: namely, a gathering of animals (by which we mean, of course, *nonhuman* animals) from the surrounding bioregion are met to 'discuss' (in their way) and assess whether the humans of the region are adequately co-making the world with them or not.

A Girl with Really Eyes and the Wonders of Manure

This tale is part of a cycle of stories about 'the four men who know everything' and one who doesn't. This latter is the narrator, referred to as 'Laff' by other characters (an obvious authorial stand-in). The men gather regularly at the house of Barnaby Sheen and Laff shows his cronies to be, of course, anything but all-knowing, not least through recording the ancillary antics of the very weird, liminal teens who are related in various ways to the men. The three main recurring characters of this teenage cohort are Loretta Sheen, Barnaby's dead daughter who lives on as a life-sized doll filled with sawdust;[265] Mary Mondo the ghost girl; and Austro the Australopithecus boy. This story also features Chiara Benedetti, the living daughter of one of the men.

'That anarchist of yours is ruining my grass,' says Barnaby's neighbour, Mrs. Bagby, at the opening of the tale, accusing Austro of making her property shaggier and wilder just by looking at it (Lafferty 1983: 81). Just before this first line of the story, an epigrammatic couplet mentions 'a girl with really eyes' (ibid.).[266] Chiara Benedetti identifies herself as

[265] In this story, Loretta merely makes the odd and suddenly animated gesture as sly commentary on the proceedings, injecting, as she usually does in the cycle, a sidewinding note of semi-human weirdness.
[266] This couplet and those that head subsequent sections are attributed to, simply (and significantly), 'Eco-Log'.

this person when she remarks that Mrs. Bagby complains that Chiara, like Austro, has 'spooked' her lawn and landscaping and 'made them look like the grass and trees in paintings by Rossetti, not like real grass and trees. And I do. I have Really Eyes, you know' (83). Barnaby admits that even the 'wooded draw' behind his own property is expanding and enlivening with flora and fauna as these things 'respond to sympathy and seeing' from Austro and Chiara (84).

It is soon seen that this 'onto-sympathy' (cf. Bennett 2017) involves not only seeing but materially hosting the nonhuman. When Chiara announces that 'Austro wants to host a bash for some of his friends and associates' (adding 'and they aren't all of them human'), Barnaby seeks the advice of another of the liminal teens: 'Ah, Mary Mondo, just what sort of hotel or guest accommodations would you offer a badger or a beaver or a prairie dog or vulture or sexton beetle?' The ghost girl answers: 'Manure. I think we need lots of manure' (Lafferty 1983: 86). This prompts Mary to rhapsodise on the fecundity of faeces:

> "Oh, there are so many things that can be done with manure! The tumble bugs love it, and the beetles. Whole life cycles can be built on it, and it will make all sorts of creatures feel at home. It's the old and unanswerable question, you know: which came first, the horse or the horse manure? But manure is very necessary."
>
> "I agree that it is," Barnaby said. "It's a fact too often forgotten, and the world forgets it to its peril." (86)

In her biomic transport, Mary figures more-than-human hospitality (in good Xenodocheion fashion) as dynamically, exuberantly shit-inclusive (consonant with the love poetry of 'Continued On Next Rock'). Barnaby concurs and even goes so far as to condemn a shit-forgetful view as perilous.[267]

Duelling Ontography

One of the ways the nonhumans infect the human discussions in Barnaby's house is that the men can't stop intruding the fact of the strange abundance of the animals into their own

[267] Dana Phillips declines to 'strain the reader's credulity by calling shit vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, and evanescent, as Bennett would have it' (Phillips 2014: 173), but Lafferty has no such qualms and joyfully ascribes vibrancy to shit repeatedly. Furthermore, shit (especially nonhuman shit) is for Lafferty a sign of the real—rather than being 'merely' a 'trope' for, say, literary satire (cf. Phillips 2014: 175). In 'Smoe and the Implicit Clay', when Colonel Crazelton wonders if the bison he seems to see are real or not, his nose is directed to the pervasive pungency of 'buffalo hokey' (Lafferty 1976b: 66). (Exclamations like 'elephant hokey!', 'hog hokey!', and 'horse hokey!' are scattered throughout Lafferty's stories.)

more theoretical conversations. For example, at one point a duelling litany of the nonhuman ensues between Barnaby and one of the other men:

> "Myself, I don't understand it at all. There are animals in that back draw tonight that aren't often found in the city: porcupines, beavers, chipmunks, prairie dogs, badgers, skunks, rabbits, foxes and kit-foxes, wildcats, weasels, fishers, martens."
> "And martins," said Harry O'Donovan, who was a bird-fancier. "They aren't a night bird, but they are out back tonight. And catbirds, scissortails, roadrunners, jaybirds. I have seen as many birds in a small area before, but not as many species of birds. Plovers, herons, ducks, mergansers, geese." (Lafferty 1983: 87)

Into this antiphonal ontography another monstration is spliced: a liminal 'seedy man' mysteriously among their company 'rolled in his hands some of those seed-filled sacks that were made of brown-green leaf that always remained as flexible as leather. Seedy he was called, for he always carried and scattered seeds' (87). After this aside, Harry O'Donovan shifts from his avian rhapsody to the creeping and swimming things of the earth:

> "Insects, worms, snakes, snails, frogs, I don't know where they're all coming from," O'Donovan said. "And fish! There couldn't be such big fish in that little creek or sewer ordinarily: it just wasn't deep enough before. Now it is, or it looks as though it is." (87)

The nonhuman animals come crowding in out of the non-urban margins and their exorbitant profusion demands to be spoken, litanised, catalogued—to the point of exuberant excess.[268] As Barnaby makes clear, we need not understand the strange and teeming presence of nonhumans in order to affirm their existence through effusive compendium. After all: 'Monstration is the fact of showing that has already begun, but has not yet made sense' (Klyukanov 2018: 135); and adduction is the leap that enables us to feel that impact and amplify it, to 'add something new' to the world in collaboration with monsters/nonhumans (Klyukanov: 138, 140) as Chiara and Austro have already initiated in their shaggy seeing.

Darkish, Vibrant, Fox-Fire Girl and a Synthesis of Devourment

However, most people still don't see the animals or see them only fleetingly. Yet the animals are sensed in other ways. Due to their 'cacophony', for example, 'the papers had published humorous little pieces about the din of the ghost animals'; their 'stenches also'

[268] The amassing creatures here bring to mind a catalogued crowd of nocturnal fauna and creeping things 'all bound in a precarious truce' as they gather round a burning tree in *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy 1985: 215).

do not go unnoticed, ‘a pretty bleak orchestration of smells’ (Lafferty 1983: 89). Predation makes its impact too. When Barnaby attempts to feed the newly arrived animals with pet food, the gesture receives only ‘slashing, fanged laughter’ from the inhuman gathering. Laff the narrator comments:

> But we all knew that the dog and cat food was not acceptable, that it was a mistake. Nothing was likely to eat it except domestic dogs and cats, and the domestic dogs and cats of the neighborhood had been disappearing down the maws of larger and fiercer animals. (90)

Thus, comic devourment too is crowding in as the animals crowd in.[269]

The implications of this proximity to predation become clearer as things get metaphysically woozier with multiplicity and depth. Though human perception of it is sketchy, we now learn that there are others than humans perceiving (and thus co-creating) this phenomenon. The wooded draw was ‘only an eighth of a mile long, only half that wide’, but ‘now it seemed much larger’ as though ‘a greater area’ or ‘large region’ were ‘shining through’:

> The draw was occupying space that belonged to something else. There were unaccountably grand vistas of—
>
> “—vistas, and vastas, and verdigris lands,
> made by my Really Eyes, shaped by my hands.”
>
> Where did those unspoken, dog-eared words come from? Oh, partly they came from a tawny puma that had just finished off a dog, eating the ears last; partly from a wolverine, that fierce devil-animal; partly from a horned bull of uncommon size; partly from a snake in the grass. (90)

Austro and the seed-man are ‘into the business’ too, but ‘mostly it was given its verbal form by Chiara’:

> She was alive and vibrant in the darkish glade there, singing silently within, with fox-fire coming from her in waves, and sparks from the tips of her toes and the tips of her ears. Oh, she was alive, and she was spirit-animal! And the cycle of creatures maintained each other in being by their attention and their sensing.
>
> The most valid of scenes may be created, or maintained in being, by the forming eyes of no more than seven persons, so one of the old Greek philosophs told it. (90)

Of course, the ‘persons’ with ‘forming eyes’ that create this tableau ‘aren’t all of them human’ (86). Polyontic, multispecies sympoiesis (a ‘cycle of creatures’ maintaining one

[269] As comic commentary on this, ‘Loretta Sheen sat up, winked (and a little sawdust trickled out of her eye when she did this), and lay back down again’ (96).

another in being by mutual sensual attention, inclusive of creative material-semiotic devourment) insinuates itself into this urban neighbourhood. The greater more-than-human world is 'shining through' in the vertiginous category crisis of the little urban draw being haunted and permeated by the larger biome that contains (and maintains) it.[270] Indeed, the liminal teens themselves become more-than-human in their sympathetic participation, Chiara physically embodying the 'darkish' withdrawal and 'vibrant' coruscation we have traced throughout the thesis: she maintains a silent 'within' while sending off waves of luciferatic fungal luminescence.[271] She is impure spirit-animal-fungi as she ludically leads this scene of sympoiesis in a vivid monstration of Weird Bioregionalism.

Despite this numinous, luminous display, the conflict between perceptions of 'various realities' persists (93). Yet even 'the dullest eyes' could discern 'a few stray and strange animals lying around and standing around in the draw', a 'glare-eyed ox chewing his cud', a 'couple of skittish horses', a 'belching buffalo—it must have escaped from the Blue Hills Ranch: they have the only buffaloes around here; they try to cross them with cattle to fix certain traits, but mostly they only get sterile hybrids from the crosses' (93). Thus, a touch of elegiac tone concerning the deprivations of contemporary natureculture is juxtaposed with exuberant exaggeration of the possibility of a resurgence of biodiversity if we could become infected by a vision deeper than instrumental views of 'nature'.

Regardless, 'monstrosity will monstrate (or show)' (Klyukanov: 137). And some adductively respond: 'Austro was shambling about, grinning, and drawing cartoons in a large drawing tablet' (Lafferty 1983: 93). Asked about a speech bubble drawn over a buffalo, the seed-man comments: 'The buffalo is one of the most respected spokesmen here and one of the finest orators' (94). Perhaps the most emblematic animal of Native dwelling and settler rapaciousness, this creature still has eloquence to impart if we could but hear it.[272] The *loquens* of the more-than-human convocation is then expressed in biosemiotic drollery:

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[270] Tom Lynch notes that 'urban capitals are a part of their own bioregions and intimately, although often ignorantly, implicated in the life of those encompassing biotic communities. In bioregionalism, the center-province dichotomy dissolves, as every place, no matter how central it considers itself to be, becomes subsumed within a bioregion' (Lynch 2008: 22-23).

[271] The enzyme 'luciferase' is a key component of this kind of bioluminescence. Cf. Fesmire, Sarah. 2015, March 21. 'Foxfire and fungi: Solving a 2,300 year-old mystery'. The University of Chicago Library News. Retrieved from https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/about/news/foxfire-and-fungi-solving-a-2300-year-old-mystery/

[272] I suggest Lafferty's degradation/respect approach to bison here is similar to that of Momaday who juxtaposes a Kiowa legend of a powerful buffalo with 'black metal horns' with an early 20th century anecdote about the trotting out for sport of 'a buffalo, a poor broken beast in which there was no trace left of the wild strain', and finally a personal reminiscence of a dangerous encounter with a mother buffalo when he and his father got

> Barnaby gave the big drawing tablet back to Austro: and that person began to draw furiously and well the minutes of the session, the snortings, gruntings, roarings. All was not amity with the people of the Broader House, but the rabbit did lie down with the wildcat for a while, and there was certainly an attempt at meaningful discussion. The wildcat made a statement, and Austro could be seen recording it. Then the rabbit made a statement; it was the antithesis to the statement made by the wildcat. Then the wildcat ate the rabbit: that was the synthesis. (94)

Recall Haraway's insistence that creatures eating each other is one of the 'sympoietic arrangements' that powers the world's ecological webs (Haraway 2016: 73; 2017: 25).[273] That devourment sympoiesis is figured here as a 'meaningful discussion' that yields a comic-grotesque but necessary synthesis. As we will see, these animals have met to assess the humans, so this predacious discussion among the greater bioregion signals a wider enveloping devourment of the human into the more-than-human.

What We Need Are More Nymphs: The 'spirit in things'

As the story proceeds to intersect with the anthropogenic ills of the planet, it is the nonhumans who broach a spiritual solution. Asked what he will do about the 'foul and rotten' water and 'trashy' banks of the ravine on his property, Barnaby muses:

> "I believe that thinking about it is the first step in making it less of a sewer, yes. It's possibly something else to other eyes. And a beaver I talked to today said that he had some good ideas about righting it. He showed me, or someone showed me, what it could be made into: quite a pleasant little brook flowing into a clear-water grassy pond, and going out again in a small waterfall over a dam that had a beaver warren inside it. The banks were lush, and the trees and bushes were clean and rich. The beaver also told me (which I had somehow forgotten) that every brook, pond, dam, waterfall, tree, and bush has its own spirit and that these in the personification age were called nymphs.
>
> "What am I talking about?" Barnaby raised his head suddenly in alarm. "Am I mad? I never talked to a beaver in my life. My mind must have blown." (Lafferty 1983: 97)

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too near her calf. The latter adventure made the spring morning 'deep and beautiful' as their hearts beat fast and they felt 'what it was to be alive' (Momaday 1976: 54-55). Modern deprivations are relativised between monstrous mythopoeic resources and contemporary inhuman monstrations—the result is more-than-human resurgence. Competing views of reality make a material difference.

[273] An epigram that opens this third section of the story runs:

> An Animal Fair that grunted and yelped
> Confronted its Upper Brother.
> It's part of the doings that can't be helped
> That the delegates ate each other.
>
> —Eco-Log

Here the ecomonstrous and pastoral are interwoven. That is, the 'pleasant' and 'lush' description of an aqueous biome is achieved via inhuman anomaly (conversation with a beaver), similar to the way Anteros and Magdalen succumb to the subjectivity of the turtle and the fine details of its habitat in 'Continued On Next Rock'. Picturesque, it is nevertheless antiecomimetic and ecomonstrous in its mechanism of perception and hence Barnaby's exclamations about being insane. It is also monstrous in that the nonhuman not only communicates an insider view of niche construction (cf. Deane-Drummond 2018), but is also first to broach a new wrinkle in the story's emergent ecotheology.

The seed-man picks up the beaver's thread and in an 'inaudible and invisible' mode sows the seeds of it in the men's minds subliminally:

> "One of the things that has gone wrong is that you no longer recognize the spirit in things," the seed-man said. "The spirit of the Shaper, of course, is in everything, whether living or unliving, in every person, animal, plant, tree, pond, rock, house, factory. But your minds are not able to comprehend this. Once you saw a nymph in everything, every tree, every stream, every stone. At another time you saw an angel in each thing. Now you […] do not see the spirit in anything at all. You are not holy enough to see the Shaper, not holy enough to see the angel, not even holy enough to see the nymph. Ah, most of you are not holy enough to see the stone." (Lafferty 1982: 99-100)

As with the implicit ecochristology of 'Boomer Flats', so the explicit ecopneumatology in 'Animal Fair' surges from within materiality and is inclusive of all natural-cultural things. The seed-man's 'inaudible' ecotheological discourse is echoed and developed (if subliminally) along these lines:

> "I've just had an idea," Cris Benedetti said […] "My daughter says that seeing a thing in a certain way will sometimes make it so. These are the metaphysics, the things beyond and behind the physics. I believe that we should see a nymph in every tree and stream once more, in every field, ah, in every factory. If only we could realize that every object contains the whole of the spirit! But, since we cannot, then why can we not see a personification of the spirit in every object? What we need is more nymphs. Even the sewers should have nymphs: then they would realize that there is no shame in being a sewer, not in being a good and transforming sewer." (100)

Chiara's father reiterates the beaver's affirmation of the onto-poetic insight of the 'personification age', expanding it natural-culturally as the seed-man did: this is a metaphysics in which sewers and factories are as spiritual as fields and streams.

The Way Stones Love God: The Spirit of the Shaper and Sacramental Ontology

The 'Shaper', of course, is the creator deity of Lafferty's Catholic faith. It is an interesting word choice, not frequent (though not unknown) among theological writings, even though its artistic and creative tones are certainly implied by Judaeo-Christian doctrines of creation.[274] It may suggest a sense of 'sovereignty' or 'omnipotence' characteristic of classical theology, yet the word also suggests the patient and influencing work of a potter or sculptor working closely *with* her material in mutual responsiveness.[275] Hence, the emphasis on the *spirit* of the Shaper in all things. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda cites theologians across the ages and different traditions of Christianity who regard the created world as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Given this, Moe-Lobeda argues that the reason many humans have become deeply impaired in the capacity to hear and heed the Spirit is in part because we are destroying 'Earth's life systems', which amounts to 'killing the Spirit's abode' (Moe-Lobeda 2017: 258). (Note how Lafferty also ties abuse of earth with inability to see the spirit(s) in things.) Furthermore, Moe-Lobeda cites Catholic theologian Yves Congar's reminder that the Greek term *pneuma* was modified in early Christian thought by being rooted theologically in the Hebrew term *ruach* (breath, wind, spirit): 'The Greeks thought in categories of substance, but the Jews were concerned with force, energy and the principle of action. The spirit-breath was for them what acts and causes to act and, in the case of the Breath of God, what animates and causes to act in order to realize God's plan' (Moe-Lobeda 2017: 259). Hence, the seed-man's call to 'recognize the spirit *in* things' and that 'the spirit of the Shaper' is '*in* everything' (with his important nuance that this genuinely means all things 'living or unliving', i.e. biotic or abiotic). So the Shaper is first a *sharer* of being. This is an expression of 'sacramental ontology' (cf. Boersma 2012) or 'ontological sacramentality' (Shepherd 2018: 51); that is, a metaphysics of *participation* in both being and becoming. Elizabeth Johnson encapsulates Thomas Aquinas's sacramental metaphysics thus: it regards 'God as the plenitude of being, sheer being itself, while all

[274] 'Creator of the heavens—he who is God, | Shaper of the earth, its maker—he who is its establisher | (He did not create it an emptiness; he shaped it for living in)' (Isaiah 45:18). Translation from Hebrew by Goldingay, John. 2003. *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 85. Cf. Carasik 2014: 85.

[275] Cf. Isaiah 40:12: God 'gauged the heavens with his fingers', 'scooped out dust for the earth by the cupful'—translation from the Hebrew by Michael Carasik who suggests that here God is '(so to speak) getting his hands dirty, mixing and measuring on a cosmic scale to match his forming man out of clay' (Carasik 2014: 312-313). (Cf. Jeremiah 18:1-8; Isaiah 64:8.)

else participates in being which is given as a gift' (Johnson 2014: 144).[276] In technical language, creatures *have* being (*ens*) from God who *is* being (*esse*) (Johnson: 144).

Before outlining some of the ecological implications of this metaphysics, let us note that biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler roots her brief history of biosemiotics in the rarefied metaphysical disputes of Aquinas and other scholastics. Wheeler notes that although the Christian tradition 'had produced a developing semiotic philosophy of creation in which divine truth was legible in God's two great books of nature and of scripture' (which eventually found expression in the modified Aristotelian realism of Aquinas), later scholastics such as Scotus and Ockham supplanted this understanding with nominalism and its implications that the world cannot be read or trusted—which ultimately gave rise not only to Lutheran theology but to 'the strange case of a materialist modernity […] unable to account for the richly communicative world all human and nonhuman organisms manifestly live in' (Wheeler 2014: 72-73). It is the Thomist-realist '*semiotic* theology' (Wheeler: 74, emphasis in original) that Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction exemplifies.[277]

Importantly, however, sacramental ontology also secures the integral opacity of creatures as not merely signs or symbols of something else:

> In this framework creatures are truly other than God. They exist with their own integrity and are themselves properly agents and causes, in participated finite ways, with a difference from God that is ultimately and essentially good. We encounter that goodness not merely in looking past creatures to their Source, but also in looking at them, in celebrating their intrinsic density and their irreplaceable uniqueness. At the same time, they exist because the loving Giver of life shares the plenitude of being as the grounding source of their existence at every moment. Participation signifies this intimate and profound relationship. (Johnson: 148; cf. Carpenter 2015: 173-174)

Thus, this 'thickly metaphysical account' is not merely an exercise in scholastic gymnastics, but crucial to a carefully structured divine-creature relationship that doesn't collapse the two:

> Furthermore, creaturely differences are not extrinsically representative, pointing like road signs to the divine superabundance, but participative representations. The creature is an ontological participation in the divine goodness. Each plant and animal in some sense *is* the divine goodness communicated, simultaneously with being the

[276] 'The accent of Thomas's account is on the *gratuity* of created plenitude' (Grey 2018: 234, emphasis in original).

[277] Donna Haraway is alive to this history as well: remarking of herself and Bruno Latour, each steeped from childhood in Catholic tradition on two different continents: 'Neither of us fits very well in secular Protestant semiotics, dominant in the university and in science, and that shapes our approaches to science studies and much else' (Haraway 2016: 179).

> recipient of the divine goodness communicated. (Grey 2018: 235, emphasis in original)

Recall the exclamation: 'If only we could realize that every object contains the whole of the spirit!' Participation in plenitude. Yet the specificity of the seed-man's espousal of *spirits* (or nymphs or angels) in things means multiplicity, diversity, and the unfungibility of each thing: participation in the spirit (or *ruach*-energy) of the Shaper engenders *that* rock-spirit, *that* tree-spirit, pond-spirit, house-spirit, factory-spirit, etc.

Accordingly, since each of these just is divine goodness communicated and received, sacramental ontology thereby provides a theological rationale for the 'teeming diversity of creatures in the world' (Johnson: 149). As Dennis Edwards notes: 'Only the diversity of life—huge soaring trees, the community of ants, the flashing colors of the parrot, the beauty of a wildflower along with the human—can give expression to the radical diversity and otherness of the trinitarian God' (cited in Johnson: 149; cf. Grey 2018: 234; Berkman 2009: 24).[278] However, some ecotheologies can tend toward a 'romanticizing of nature' (Shepherd 2018: 50). Thus, another listing comment from Edwards strikes home more acutely: 'God is with every sparrow, every beetle, every Great White shark, every creature hunting another for food and every creature that is the prey of another' (Edwards 2009: 95). As we have seen, Lafferty cashes this out in bioregional particulars, inclusive of parasites, predation, and shit, as well as abiotic entities and elements such as landforms, mud, and manufactured artefacts—thus, the *radical* otherness of the divine is genuinely evoked in Lafferty's fiction not by merely the idyllic or pastoral, or even the grandly sublime, but by *all* things in the cycles of biomes, and in keeping with 'the ambiguity of natural beauty as it appears through an acknowledgement […] of evolutionary biology' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 134). Lafferty's work certainly does not reflect the 'more saccharine accounts of evolution' to which some ecotheologians have been prone (Deane-Drummond 2009: 206). Lafferty's ecopoetics suggest that a 'sacramental approach to creation' is about 'showing the divine through creation *being itself* in a way that includes creation in its unfinished state, in its pain, suffering, and death' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 150-151, emphasis in original) and in its comic-grotesque vivacity we might add.[279]

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[278] As noted in the previous chapter, space does not permit specific engagement with trinitarian ecotheology, but it is implied in the ecochristology of 'Boomer Flats' and ecopneumatology of 'Animal Fair' and will be pursued in future research.

[279] Indeed, Anthony Lioi's discussion of the 'swamp dragon' as an emblem of 'ecological wisdom' urges that we must embrace swamps and mud and toxicity and all else with 'a kind of sacramental consciousness: the

Of course, an ecotheology inclusive of finite weirdness need not look *only* to the exorbitance of devourment or to aesthetically challenging forms in the biosphere, but also at the sheer spooky breadth of agency and 'life' in all kinds of things, attention to which elicits strange and surprising specificities. For example, 'Willis Jenkins foregrounds God's pleasure in a creature being what it is, with all its limits: "God desires ravens to call upon God by acting as ravens, not by learning to sing as angels… God delights in the simple way stones love him"' (Grey 2018: 234). Thus, in Thomistic metaphysics:

> Thomas is not offering a static conception of diversity but a dynamic one that attends to the quotidian doings of plants and animals. A sapling pushing its roots through the soil, a mushroom lifting its head through leaf mold, a hen taking a dust bath; all are expressing a desire for the divine goodness. The same can apply to the action of a river or the falling of snow. This is not biodiversity as a numerical count of different types of things. The richness of what creatures do, as well as their existence as diverse entities, communicates the divine good. (Grey 2018: 236)

Note how even the abiotic is included in this list. 'It is not just difference that is good, but different sorts of difference' (Grey: 234). Hence, Lafferty's plethora of sidewinding lists and ontographies of nonhumans and his roiling arabesques of their interactive motions. Indeed, the final section of 'Animal Fair' to which we are about to turn furnishes yet another catalogue of inhuman quotidian richness:

> There was the hair-smell and the fur-smell climbing up from the lower floors; there was the green breath of the foliage-eaters and the red breath of the meat-eaters; there was the feather and foot-smell of the birds. It was a complex of creeping, crawling, scuttering, hopping, fluttering, flying things down there. There was the rattling of antlers and the squeaking of non-retractable claws on wooden floors. There was turkey gobble and badger hiss. (Lafferty 1983: 101)

All these faunal particularities of sound and smell arising from different anatomies, diets, pelts, and motilities are, on a Thomistic account, expressions of the communication of and desire for divine goodness, the spirits of these creatures manifesting the spirit of the Shaper in their unique and collaborative co-shaping of the world (cf. Berkman 2009: 29). Lafferty's ecotheological underpinnings make this story, and his fiction generally, completely porous to all this inhuman monstration and therefore incapable of anything less than adductively amplifying it. This is a central aspect of his ecomonstrous poetics.

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world is flawed but good and must be loved as a broken embodiment of the grandeur of God' (Lioi 2007: 31).

Put On Notice to See Better

Lafferty's sacramental ontology also folds the wild diversity of worldly beings together in relationship and responsibility. Thus, 'Animal Fair' concludes with a series of admonitory drawings by Austro. The first conveys the outcome of the nonhuman convocation:

> "Ah, those of the Upper House are put on notice," the seed-man interpreted. "The Animal Fairs here and all over the world have put you on very short-term notice. Your unwritten contract will not even be on a yearly basis now. It will be on a weekly, even a daily basis. The creatures have been doing all the work, they say: they have furnished the forming eyes, and you the deforming. You must see with more valid eyes, with more interlocking eyes. You can be replaced, you know." (Lafferty 1983: 102)

The nonhumans weirdly call upon us to stop our deforming of the world and join them in co-shaping it with the spirit of the Shaper. They've been carrying the forming load long enough! As a character remarked earlier: 'we must see the whole thing with more valid eyes, and enough of us must see it as it is to reestablish its validity. Seeing it and feeling it as it should be are creative acts; they will restore it as it should be' (85-86). Such is the awful potential we've been given (cf. Zapf 2014: 66).

With the genuine monstrations in the world around us today, quite outside of fiction, this warning of being put on short notice by the nonhumans is nothing short of chilling. Laff the narrator pursues the matter:

> "How serious, Austro?" I asked.
>
> He made big graphs on the wall with a luminescent red pencil. […] There were a couple of discs or scales in almost-balance. There were some lumps on one scale (and I knew that I was part of one of the lumps): there were what appeared to be tongues of fire on the other scale. And there was a line of writing.
>
> Even as I looked, I saw the balance beam in the drawing was moving slightly on the wall.
>
> "Ye are weighed in the scales?" I asked fearfully, and he nodded that I had read it correctly. […]
>
> "Sure is going to be close," the words said. I thought I saw the balance rod in the drawing on the wall move just a bit more. (102-103)

Thus, in keeping with Lafferty's 'comic apocalypticism', we are warned of an impending but not foreclosed doom. There is no guarantee of safety in this, but there is a sense of the genuine possibility of 'ongoingness' (cf. Haraway 2016: 3 and passim).

In this regard, Deane-Drummond critiques what she calls ‘epic narratives’ of evolution, either theological or scientific, that imply an inevitability that doesn’t do justice to ‘the contingency and turmoil of life processes’ (29, 53, and passim). Deane-Drummond acknowledges that a Christian theological view implies hope:

> Yet, lest the reader suspect that I have introduced yet another grand narrative into the scheme, I suggest that my notion of divine providence should be rendered more akin to improvisation than attachment to a fixed score: there is directionality, yes, but plenty of surprises and counter-turns in the drama of entangled human history. (Deane-Drummond 2018: 186)

Thus, we have ‘not so much a smooth evolutionary narrative as one that gives expression to surprising twists and turns of events’ (Deane-Drummond 2009: 137). This precarity (cf. Haraway 2016: 37) is an ‘indeterminacy’ in which we have the ‘possibility of sharing in a *performance*’ with ‘other finite creatures’ according to the ‘choreographic syntax of the ecological moment’ (Deane-Drummond 2018: 199-200, emphasis in original). This sense of entangled improvisation is expressed in ‘Animal Fair’ and seems rife in Lafferty’s fiction generally.

Indeed, Lafferty’s fiction seems to agree with Deane-Drummond that conceiving of ‘evolution in theodramatic terms’ disallows ‘resignation’ and instead ‘encourages further interpretation and engagement’ with the evolving world and the possibility of navigating our way through the Anthropocene (Deane-Drummond 2009: 201). Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s forceful summary of the Spirit’s activity in the world is instructive here:

> The Spirit of Yahweh, revealed in biblical texts, is an undeniably active moral force in the material world. God’s *ruach* acts within human beings, shaping their attitudes, behaviors, and corporate life. […] The bidding of the Spirit has life and death consequences. She confronts powers of deception and domination. Almost never is the Spirit of the Holy One interiorized, privatized, eclipsed by human authority structures, or withdrawn from confronting powers that counter God’s will. (Moe-Lobeda 2017: 264).

According to the sacramental view we outlined above, the divine will that confronts powers is the *ruach* energising the mutual flourishing of all creatures in replete diversity and unique erotic liveliness. Thus, in ‘Animal Fair’ the ‘hand of the Shaper’ shapes in *this* direction, draws us into co-shaping, and weighs us in the balance of the more-than-human scales.

The Son of Tellus' Seeds Must Sink in to Grow: The Virtue of Forgetful Ecopoetics

In a wonderfully counterintuitive move, Lafferty suggests the virtue of a forgetful ecopoetics. Mary Mondo has been spiking the drinks of the men all evening with forgetful 'Lethe' and all but Laff and Austro have fallen into deep sleep.[280] When Laff protests, Mary responds: 'I like to slip them to the fellows, and it's my job for a while […] Besides, *you have to forget*. This has to be buried down inside you, like one of the seed-man's seeds, before it will grow' (Lafferty 1983: 101, emphasis in original). And here the identity of the seed-man is finally, if enigmatically, disclosed:

> "What is your name?" I asked the seed-man.
> "I am Seminator the sower, one of the sons of Tellus," he said. (101)

The seed-man is thus himself a child of the earth-mother goddess, Terra/Tellus.[281] So his has been the voice of the earth all along (like Anteros and his poetry) and he continues to sow subliminal seeds: 'The seed-man talked to them [...] at great length, and they sound asleep all the while. But, asleep as they were, they were plainly understanding him on a profound level' (101). Austro, in his 'seldom-used English' remarks: 'They'll have to work it out without remembering' (102).

> "The animals in the draw, will they also forget it?" I asked.
> "Yeah. They forget it right now. It has to be worked out without remembering. The additive has been put into that little brook also." (103)

Laff and Austro then 'drank together', the 'youngish man' of the species *Australopithecus* and 'the oldish man of the species humorously called *Homo sapiens*' (103).

Thus, a crucial aspect of seeing with Really Eyes is succumbing to ontic tenebrity. Lafferty's Lethe strategy is in line with apophatic or negative theology. Thomists, for example, affirm the need for 'analogical negation' (Kirkland 2018: 169) and an 'appropriate negative' (Grey 2018: 238) in doing theology (cf. Moe-Lobeda 2017: 268). Indeed, a 'thoroughly comprehensive negative apophatic theology' honours 'the cipher-code of the world's Being' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 134). It honours the inhuman

[280] Responding to Mary's sneaky activity: 'Loretta Sheen sat up. She put a finger to her lips and made a hushing sound. A bit of sawdust dribbled from the corner of her mouth. Then she lay back down again' (98).
[281] Lafferty, like Haraway, consistently frays these classical references into 'post-Eurocentric' tentacularity (Haraway 2016: 52 and passim).

withdrawals with which we are entangled and keeps us from 'losing that porosity or open-endedness that melts our horizons metaphysically as well as empirically' (Grey 2018: 237). Admittedly, there is 'a sense of vulnerability in unknowing, but that need not diminish our hope' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 224). As Lafferty would have it, this tenebrous path is our only hope.[282] 'Animal Fair' is thus one of the many seeds (stories) that Lafferty scattered and it has to be buried deep inside us to grow.

Conclusion: Here Too the Gods are Present

The conceptual compromise advocated in 'Animal Fair'—that we should at least mythopoeically personify things to recover something of their spiritual liveliness and depth—has overlap with some rhetoric from NM and OOO. After all, Wheeler argues, we have not successfully severed ourselves from 'our understandings of the sacred and animistic patterns of meaning making that still live on within us just as our biological evolutionary history does'—hence, we are uncannily haunted by our 'biosemiotic unconscious' (Wheeler 2014: 73). For example, this sacred meaning making is touched on when Latour urges that '"here too the gods are present": in a hydroelectric plant on the Rhine, in subatomic particles, in Adidas shoes as well as in the old wooden clogs hollowed out by hand, in agribusiness as well as in timeworn landscapes, in shopkeepers' calculations as well as in Hölderlin's heartrending verse' (cited in Harman 2010: 90). Harman concurs in an object-oriented key: he hopes for 'a world where it is once again possible to give philosophical lectures not just on "wood" as a literary figure […] but heartfelt lectures on wood itself: a systematic ontology of maple, oak, and cedar. Let's dream of a conference [...] that would openly wrestle with the reality of objects such as sailboats, grapefruit, wax, and platinum. For here too, the gods are present' (92).

Furthermore, regarding the ecomonstrous insistence on simultaneous withdrawal and entanglement, Lafferty's ecotheology 'offers a way of affirming both *entity* and *process,* species and ecosystem richness, biotic and abiotic, "human" and "natural," which is yet sensitive enough to discern the values of distinctive kinds of difference' (Grey 2018: 236, emphasis added). Sacramental ontology implies that things tangle in a shared participation in the divine yet withdraw each into its *own* participation in the divine.

[282] Lafferty's fiction thus resonates with Balthasar's avowal that 'the forms of nature are really understood only when the spirit is ready to "give up its own light" and "trust itself to the loving intimations" that are found only when the intellect "renounces is argumentativeness"' (Deane-Drummond 2009: 132-133).

Hence: ‘What is being proposed is a view of biological diversity’ (and, for Lafferty, more-than-human diversity generally) ‘as a participation in an immeasurable plenitude, which always exceeds what is presently knowable and visible’; thus, ‘biodiversity’ (and abiodiversity) ‘expresses and manifests an uncontainable plurality and richness in reality itself’ (237). In essence, such an ecotheology, especially in Lafferty’s hands, keeps things weird. In this regard, Wheeler notes that Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart (explicating Heidegger) writes that ‘the particular pathology of modernity lies [...] in the loss of a certain kind of wonder or perplexity, a sense of the abiding strangeness of being within the very ordinariness of beings’ (Wheeler 2014: 79). Thus, sacramental ontology can still be monstrous, can still signal the anomaly and monstration of a *teras*, ‘the belonging together of a divine excess and the mundane thing through which such an excess shows itself’ (Klyukanov: 136; cf. Shepherd 2018: 51). Through the darkness of Lethe and implanted seeds, then, this Really Eyes way of seeing the world is antiecomimetic, weirdly realistic, *monstrous*.

Conclusion: The Bird-Master's Grin and Bones: 'Seeing Instruments' and New Modes of Literature for Ontopoetic Material Spirituality

To return to the suggestion in the preface to this thesis that Lafferty's works provide scraps of the mutilated maps of more-than-human past-futurity, let us suggest here a development of that notion. It stems from a recognition that Lafferty's sacramentally ecomonstrous tales appear to resonate with what has been termed 'perspectival multinaturalism':[283]

> This notion suggests that "the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, that apprehend reality from distinct points of view" [...] Humans, animals, and spirits participate in the same world, although with different sensory apparatuses constituting not just multicultural (human) worlds, implying a unity of nature and a multiplicity of cultures, but multinatural worlds, implying corporeal diversity and its attendant diversity of perspectives [...] In the Americas, story cycles embodying these philosophies, whether oral or written, are seen as "living books" or "seeing instruments" that offer "a complex navigational system" for understanding human relation to the stars, animals, soils, and planting cycles, as well as information about how to "see" spans of time and history unavailable to a human in a single lifetime. (Adamson 2014: 261)

Lafferty's sympoietic discourse of seeing with Really Eyes (valid eyes, interlocking eyes) suggests that his stories act as something very like such 'seeing instruments' for the complex navigation of deep-time multinatural worlds. Indeed, Lafferty's monstro-sacramental fiction resonates with the proposal that new materialist perspectives 'might also give rise to new modes of literature, as well as new ways of reading earlier texts, which respond to the ontopoetic experience of the material sacred in the written word' (Rigby 2014: 287). Lafferty's body of work seems to in fact *be* one of these new modes of literature, even as it also points beyond itself to its narrative root system of various non-reductionist worldviews (indigenous, classical, etc.) and their supporting story cycles.

Of course, Lafferty's ecomonstrous fiction sits firmly and fecundly in its Great Plains and Southwestern context, evoking these bioregions as monstrously alive with inhuman agency and depth. Yet the inherent tentacularity of his imagination suggests a

[283] Cf. the 'heteroholism' of the local/universal pluralism of tribal/inter-tribal cosmologies, ecologies, and metaphysics (Stratton 2015: 64).

multiplicity of connections with other bioregions, which is one of a number of reasons Lafferty's fiction may also be considered a member of global literature. With this in mind, then, let us summarise the thesis and indicate possibilities for future research.

The Ecomonstrous Thought

This thesis has descried and described two sets of poles: entanglement-withdrawal and monstration-adduction. The former is an inherent tension, automatic, always happening. The latter is a reciprocation where only the first term is always happening and the second term is voluntary. In fact, one of the central monstrations of the world just is the entanglement-withdrawal of all things. This always ongoing monstrance of vibrancy-tenebrity (as we have called it) provides a central opportunity for human adduction. Will we amplify this back to things in sympoiesis and co-make the world with nonhumans or will we be judged and found wanting by our kin in the more-than-human assembly? In opening us up to such questions, I propose that Lafferty's (and McCarthy's) weird bioregionalism helps us think not only The Ecological Thought (as Morton puts it) but The Ecomonstrous Thought.

Future Research

What might the ecomonstrous thought think next? If there is a future, I propose the following as possible further research. First of all, there are very many more ecomonstrous stories by Lafferty (not to mention novels). Many of them are equally bioregional and more so, many of them are equally monstrous and more so, many of them are equally ecotheological and more so. This alone provides a fairly vast amount of material still to interpret under the rubric of ecomonstrous poetics. But the *theoretical* contours of Lafferty's ecomonstrous poetics can also be developed by further engagement with the disciplines brought together in this thesis. There is a vast literature of Native American Studies that may deepen the theoretical contours, not least along ontological lines in addition to the storytelling emphasis of this thesis (e.g. Posthumus 2018; Deloria 2006). On a slightly different note, we can also research to what degree Lafferty's Catholic perspective perpetuates paternalistic, missionary tendencies and, alternately, to what degree his faith is transformed through engagement with Native culture. For that matter,

the responses of a Native American readership of Lafferty would be welcome. (One especially wonders what contemporary Native authors such as Stephen Graham Jones or LeAnne Howe might make of Lafferty's fiction.)

Of course, we have only scratched the surface of an ecomonstrous engagement with new materialism and object-oriented ontology and other areas of the Nonhuman Turn. To take just one relevant possibility among many that come to mind: we may put Lafferty's ludic-comic ecomonstrous in conversation with Morton's three subscending layers of ecological darkness: the dark-depressing, the dark-uncanny, and the lowest and most fundamental, the 'dark-sweet', in which we encounter: 'Laughter inside tragedy […] Comedy, the genre of coexistence' (Morton 2016: 5, 119). There is also much more work for the ecomonstrous to do vis-à-vis monster theory. Part of this will depend on its reception in that discipline, if it gets one. To this end, one would eventually like to see an Ecomonstrous Reader put together in which likeminded but diverse essays could amass toward a truly more-than-human turn in monster studies. It is, of course, not only *Blood Meridian* (and McCarthy's other novels) that may be read through an ecomonstrous lens in addition to Lafferty's fiction, but many more works of literature, from classics like *Frankenstein* or *Moby Dick* to recent works such as Jeff VanderMeer's Area X trilogy (perhaps the premier and most clearly ecomonstrous work amongst contemporary fiction), not to mention medieval, classical, and ancient works, and literature from all over the world—and, of course, other artforms such as cinema and music.[284]

As to Laffertian ecotheology, it may be further developed in part by not only continuing to engage Thomistic and other traditional sources (for example, Teresa of Avila is another key historical figure for Lafferty that I have not been able to engage in this thesis), but by also developing a nuanced understanding of Lafferty's fraught relation to the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and, furthermore, putting Lafferty's work into conversation with recent ecotheology of a more process minded bent (e.g. Keller and Rubenstein 2017). Of course, other-than-christian religious ecological perspectives may be fruitfully brought to bear as well (cf. Gaard 2014; Abram 2014).

As to bioregionalism, in addition to more comparisons with Cormac McCarthy, I would very much like to see Lafferty read in relation to other Great Plains and

[284] I have done a little work in each of these areas—for example, on Gareth Edwards's 2014 film *Godzilla* and on the ecomonstrous lyrics and sounds of Norwegian black metal bands.

(south)western writers such as Willa Cather, Mark Twain, Leslie Marmon Silko, M. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Stephen Graham Jones, and Joe Lansdale (to name only a few). Lafferty may be a weird one among this bunch, but I suspect there are many mutually enriching connections that would enhance understandings of U.S. western literature and the region.

Envoi: ‘New Bones for Old, Hahr, Hahr’

For now, however, put this thesis away and try to forget about it. Drink some Lethe and let the seeds go down deep and die that they might rise and grow.

Perhaps these passages from the conclusion of Lafferty’s story ‘Bird-Master’ may sing you out as you nod off (and may you wake to a happy anamnesis):

> I raked through the ashes [...]. There seemed to be nothing solid in the ashes. Yes there was. There were two blue eyes, the Bird-Master's eyes. And there was a grin; but what the material element of that grin might be was a mystery. The Bird-Master winked at me. Yes, with a lidless eye he winked at me. Then there was a ‘whoosh!’, and he was gone out of the ashes. He was away!
>
> I will never cease to be amazed at the variety of creatures in our world, especially such one-of-a-kind creatures as the Bird-Master.
>
> […]
>
> The bones were smoking and broken when I got to them, and then they suddenly healed. A Mynah bird walked into the cave and said ‘New bones for old, hahr, hahr, new bones for old.’ Then the Mynah bird walked out again. (Lafferty 1983: 39)

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