

# A Feminist Carnavalesque Ecocriticism: The Grotesque Environments of Barbara Gowdy's Domestic Fictions

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Article abstract

This comparative examination of Canadian writer Barbara Gowdy's fiction, specifically the novels *Falling Angels* (1989), *Mister Sandman* (1996), *The Romantic* (2003), and *Helpless* (2007), and several short stories in *We So Seldom Look on Love* (1992), expands the study of the feminist grotesque from representations and performances of transgressive bodies to the politics involved in imagining and inhabiting grotesque environments. Gowdy's fiction makes freaks ordinary through domestic realism, and in so doing her narratives make strangely surreal the "normal" environments of late modernity. By imagining our bodies and environments as grotesque forms — uneven and ungainly, open and porous, incomplete and excessive — Gowdy's depictions of freaks and their ordinary domestic and suburban environments broadly entail a carnivalesque inversion of normative environments that has social and ecological relevance. The normative home is figured by way of miniaturizing containers that restrict — albeit only partially — gender, sexuality, and physical embodiment to normative practices and symbolically exclude ecological processes in an illusion of self-enclosure. Gowdy's carnivalesque inversions show ordinary residential environments to be dense with animal lives and deaths, energy flows, and fungal and vegetative growth and decay. The recurring theme of power outages and electricity transmission lines shows seemingly self-contained domestic space supported by an extensive industrial infrastructure, and socially marginal women absurdly imagining themselves responsible for industrial failures in primarily masculine domains. Gowdy's carnivalesque domestic realism historically situates suburban development, nuclear families, and nuclear weaponry as a particular set of gendered social relations while resisting any reduction of the physical world to an inert background.

# A Feminist Carnavalesque Ecocriticism: The Grotesque Environments of Barbara Gowdy's Domestic Fictions

CHERYL LOUSLEY

IN HER FEMINIST CLASSIC *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1995), Mary Russo argues that an appreciation of the aesthetics of the grotesque is useful for grasping and disrupting certain conventions of the feminine, particularly the female body rendered as spectacle, as marginal, and as viscerally abject womb. Barbara Gowdy's short stories and novels fit readily into this feminist grotesque mode, featuring out-sized and fleshy performers, storytellers, and jokesters whose stories and laughter disrupt containment of their freak bodies to voyeuristic spectacle and whose exuberant, transgressive sexual desires confound normative femininity and heterosexuality. My goal here, in a comparative examination of Gowdy's oeuvre, is to expand the discussion of the feminist grotesque from representations and performances of *transgressive bodies* to the politics involved in imagining and inhabiting *grotesque environments*. Gowdy's fiction makes freaks ordinary through domestic realism, and, in so doing, her narratives make strangely surreal the "normal" contained environments of late modernity, with their nuclear bombs, closet-like suburbs, and animal deaths. In her work, the ordinary freak, often comically contained within 1960s and 1970s suburban homes and straight relationships, functions to show the normal environment as a tenuous construct that suppresses and denies an ecological world of relational flows of energy and desire — a comic, vibrant, grotesque world of porous bodies and identities.

My argument begins with an overview of three strands of critique of the normalization of environmentalism and the construction of normative environments. I then organize my discussion of Gowdy's carnivalesque inversions of normative environments around three themes: grotesque disruptions of patriarchal illusions of domestic "security" as ecological self-containment; the material and cosmic electricity animating ordinary suburban lives and landscapes; and degraded figurations

of animals, nature, and sexuality in contrast to nature imagined as a “classical body.” I focus primarily on the novels *Falling Angels* (1989) and *Mister Sandman* (1996), with short discussions of the novels *The Romantic* (2003) and *Helpless* (2007) and several short stories in the collection *We So Seldom Look on Love* (1992). It might surprise some readers that I relegate discussion of *The White Bone* (1999) to the endnotes, for its depiction of an elephant world threatened by habitat loss and hunting makes it the Gowdy novel most commonly analyzed from an ecocritical perspective (see Gordon, “Sign”; Huggan; Soper-Jones). In fact, many of the themes that I discuss in this essay — including spectacle, freaks, safety, and security — are relevant to a reading of *The White Bone*, but I omit it here in order to foreground the significance of Gowdy’s domestic settings. Thinking of environmental politics in terms of her grotesque environments enables an attention to domesticity as a site where physical environments and environmental subjectivities are made and remade.

### Normal Environments

Russo’s feminist approach to the grotesque begins with a distinction between the normal and the ordinary and with a concern that feminism as a social movement loses its political potential when articulated in the name of *normal* rather than *ordinary* women. Russo describes the normalization of feminism as having two dimensions: “It is identified with the norm as a prescription of correct, conventional, or moralizing behavior or identity, and with the normal as it is commonly misapprehended as the familiar” (vii). Collapsing the distinctions among the ordinary, the familiar, and the normative has led, Russo argues, “to a cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed, and the alien” (vii). “An ordinary feminism (as opposed to the standard or normal variety),” she proposes, “would be heterogeneous, strange, polychromatic, ragged, conflictual, incomplete, in motion, and at risk” (vii). Russo’s association of ordinary feminism with *risk* and *risk taking* might suggest an uncomfortable fit with environmentalism because environmentalism is commonly associated with health, safety, and precaution. But the distinction between normal and ordinary is useful precisely because it can help to expose and open up for debate and contestation the normative dimensions of moralistic environmentalisms and scientific and technocratic discourses of the environment (see Darier; Daston and

Vidal). Much as Russo describes of feminism, moralistic prescriptions and a disavowal also of the strange and excessive have been tendencies in environmentalism as a social and political movement and in its commercial adaptations and co-optations. Noël Sturgeon, for example, has noted the irony of how North American popular culture versions of environmentalism, with their heroic eco-children and nuclear families, tend to imply that survival of the planet depends on survival of the “Western suburban heteronormative family form,” despite the ways in which climate change and ecologically destructive resource use hinge on the suburban consumer economy (107).

There have been three main lines of critique of the normalization of environmentalism and the construction of normative environments, all of which are pertinent to an appreciation of Gowdy’s depiction of “freaks of nature” and grotesque environments (*Helpless* 283; see also Hernáez Lerena). One line of critique focuses on the way in which wilderness as visual spectacle has come to signify nature in general and thereby popularize a notion of nature as a pristine, binary-constructed, other place to human activity. As environmental critics William Cronon, Giovanna Di Chiro, Ramachandra Guha, and Carolyn Merchant have argued, the fetishization of wilderness as pristine nature and the equation of environmental protection with wilderness conservation creates a deeply exclusive, normative version of environmentalism that denigrates and undermines other land uses and the social groups whose livelihoods and cultural practices involve them. In such a reifying of nature as a domain outside culture, *visible resource use* by the poor is deemed destructive and in need of regulation and discipline, while resource use by the affluent — often *invisible as resource use* because subsumed into commodity forms and basic infrastructure, such as electrical lines and roadways — is rendered benign through the compensatory consumption and display of wilderness and nature-associated commodities (see Cronon; Price). When an appreciation of wilderness is used as a universalized marker of environmental sensitivity, its particular historical association with European settlement, indigenous dispossession, and white masculine virility is obscured (see Bordo; Cronon; Di Chiro; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 12-21).

The appealing moral simplicity of a wilderness-based environmentalism remains the normative framework against which successive ecocritics rail, as Anthony Lioi recounts in an essay that embraces swamp

lands and texts as *ordinary* alternatives: “despite its desire to affirm Earth, much of ecocritical culture has been dirt-rejecting. In our quest to promote wildness and nonanthropocentric cosmologies, ecocritics have shunned texts and places compromised by matter-out-of-place, the ritual uncleanliness of cities, suburbs, and other defiled ecosystems” (17). Wilderness as spectacle, in other words, functions much like the classical body as described by Bakhtin, against which he positioned the grotesque body as open, irregular, secreting, and changing — associated, like swamp lands, with degradation, filth, death, and rebirth. Indeed, given that the porousness of bodies in relation to their environment is the starting point of the postwar environmental movement — the core insight of Rachel Carson’s galvanizing *Silent Spring* (see also Alaimo) — the sublime aesthetics of wilderness spectacle are disturbingly anti-ecological, depicting discrete rather than morphing bodies and an individualized rather than social world. Feminist critics such as Chaia Heller and Val Plumwood have additionally noted the parallels between wilderness and women positioned both as homogenized and passive spectacles for a male gaze and as staging grounds for heroic male action.

A second line of critique focuses on the invocation of the natural as justification for the normative, particularly as used to discipline gendered, sexed, racialized, and disabled bodies, and the underlying, anti-ecological conceptions of nature on which they rely. Heteronormative discourses of family structure, gender displays and practices, and sexuality are deeply intertwined with discourses of nature; as Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson outline, they are linked “through a strongly evolutionary narrative that pits the perverse, the polluted and the degenerate against the fit, the healthy, and the natural” (3). The very phrase “freak of nature” — first a category of wonder, then a scientific category of pathology and error (Thomson 3) — shows the reliance of social and bodily normativity on a discourse of the natural. In response, theorists of freakery have tended to emphasize how freaks are made, not born, often literally through disfigurement or falsehood but more patently through their discursive construction as “freaks” (see Bogdan; Stewart; Thomson). Robert Bogdan, for example, argues that “Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation” (35). Rosemarie Garland Thomson emphasizes that the cultural construction of the freak is related to nor-

mativity but in a doubled, ambiguous way: on the one hand, “a freak show’s cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument”; on the other, “fascinated onlookers perhaps longed in some sense to be extraordinary marvels instead of mundane, even banal, democrats” (10). The *publicness* of the freak and freak show is pivotal to this hyper-visibility, implicitly contrasted to the privacy of middle-class domesticity, the pre-eminent site of gender normativity (see Armstrong).

Placing the transgressive body of the freak within social frameworks of the public and private and spectators and spectatorship helps to disrupt and complicate simple equations of the natural and normal but does not quite involve reconsidering why the natural is still conceived as fixed and normative at all, given that the mutability of lives and bodies underlies evolutionary biology (see Grosz). Bakhtin’s agrarian and folk approach to the grotesque notably emphasizes how “its imagery [presents] the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being” (52). Nature itself as grotesque is perhaps best developed in the nature writing of Annie Dillard, to whom Gowdy dedicates “Body and Soul,” the opening story of her collection *We So Seldom Look on Love*. Tentative connections between freakery and environmental theory can be said to have begun with Donna Haraway’s provocative cyborg figure, which offered the post-natural, transgressive bodies of technoscience and science fiction as an alternative locus for feminist and environmental politics. However, the cyborg was often translated into technophilic inspiration, with its messy biologies and ecologies neglected. More recently, Jill Casid and Paul Outka have brought the porous and mutable biologies of freaks and other grotesque bodies into ecocritical discussion, emphasizing how the grotesque provides a more robust engagement with ecological materiality and evolution than does the category of the natural, arguing, like Timothy Morton, for an “ecology without nature.” Outka suggests that the patchwork or decomposing body is a reminder of the materiality of the human, which, as feminist philosopher Val Plumwood argues, is conventionally repressed and abjected as a reminder of not just mortality but also ecological dependence. Casid focuses on the dynamic agency and plasticity of matter signified by hybrid, excessive, and aberrant bodies, reading the mythological chimera alongside contemporary

practices in biotechnology (and a variety of other historical practices of transplantation). Aesthetically grotesque and socially transgressive as *spectacles*, the chimera and hybrid are nevertheless, Casid argues, *ordinary* dimensions of the dynamic potential of living materials, sites that might be claimed for imagining radically alternative futures.

The third line of critique focuses on how normative environments and environmental practices function as a gendered alibi for capitalism. An example — pertinent to Gowdy’s domestic fictions — is the way in which waste management became articulated in a rhetoric of purity, order, and domestic labour in the postwar period, repeated again in the recycling boom of the 1980s and 1990s, and in many ways a twentieth-century version of the social opposition between grotesque slum/sewer and pristine suburb that Peter Stallybrass and Allon White find central to the nineteenth-century city (125–48). Feminist environmental scholars Sherilyn MacGregor, Catriona Sandilands, and Val Plumwood discuss contemporary waste management rhetoric as a form of privatization of environmental responsibility into the consumer realm and unpaid women’s work, what Timothy Luke terms the “ruse of recycling” because of its ability to deflect producer regulation under the guise of “greening” the economy (115). Donna King, describing how environmental concern became a mode of moral education for children in the 1990s, notes its manifestation in the children’s literature of the time in the form of neat recycling boxes lined up at the edges of tidy suburban lawns, exemplifying the containment of a political movement through normalization. Although such critiques of suburban domesticity might collude with wilderness-fetishized environmentalism by demonizing both suburbia and domesticity, I propose instead, returning to Russo and the politics of second-wave feminism, that the suburban domestic be approached as a contested site where the *normative* meets the *ordinary*. Environmental criticism should not discount or neglect the domestic but expand feminist understandings of the construction and contestation of domesticity and its public/private dichotomies beyond human actors to include physical environments, resource flows, and living beings as also “agent[s] of historical forces and human culture” (A. Wilson 91).

Landscape theorist Alexander Wilson, in his seminal book *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (1991), insists on the importance of reading suburbs as more

than places of consumption, recognizing them as sites of work, production, and landscape aesthetics through which modern North American culture has developed:

Those working landscapes — the *ordinary* places of human production and settlement — are enormously complex places. Their history is part of the history of engineering — of how we build bridges, contain water, prune trees, and lay sidewalks. But it is also an aesthetic history. It is about shaping, defining, and making the world beautiful in a way that makes sense to us in the time and place that we live. (89; emphasis added)

Gowdy explores the complexity of these ordinary places by embracing bodily, evolutionary life in all its fecund aberrations and non-teleological incompleteness. Her combination of freak bodies and ordinary domestic spaces has confused some critics who insist on reading her fiction solely within the frame of realism and then find her comic grotesque moments simply aberrant and excessive (see Beddoes; Craig and van Herk; Phillips). But as María Jesús Hernández Lerena, Hilde Staels, and Neta Gordon (in “Sacrificial Pets”) discuss, the transgressive bodies and desires of Gowdy’s grotesque imaginary depend on their insertion into ordinary, domestic settings. Rather than simply embrace the transgressive possibilities of freakish bodies, Gowdy makes freaks ordinary and normative environments disturbing through the comic combination of domestic and “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 52).

### Normative Homes, Suburban Grotesque

The normative home is the theme of three of Gowdy’s domestic novels, figured by way of miniaturizing containers that restrict — albeit only partially — gender, sexuality, and embodiment to normative practices and symbolically exclude ecological processes in an illusion of self-enclosure. In *Falling Angels*, the imprisoning home of patriarchal abuse is claustrophobically condensed into the nuclear fallout shelter where the family spends two weeks in place of the father’s promised trip to Disneyland. In *Mister Sandman*, the married queers Doris and Gordon contain their same-sex desires and affairs in a metaphorical social closet while their light- and sound-averse granddaughter Joan retires to a physical closet. In *Helpless*, potential pedophile Ron prepares a doll-house- and movie-filled bedroom for a little girl in his lock-secured



basement, a miniature enclosure where he can relive the fantasy family life conjured up in adolescence with his stepsister Jenny. “The miniature,” Susan Stewart writes, “represents closure, interiority, the domestic” (70). The miniature “as contained” is contrasted to “the gigantic as container,” often a representation of landscape or the physical world itself (71). Located in banal stretches of gigantic, mimetic subdivisions, Gowdy’s houses are containers, with duplicated containers both within and without. The homes and their interior closets and enclosures are metonyms of a suburban and national normativity in which nature and women appear as controlled miniatures — fantasies and spectacles, not desiring, pullulating, ecological agents. When the sisters in *Falling Angels* attempt to run away from home, they find themselves trapped in the circular roads of their subdivision, overcome by heat exhaustion in the grey streets without mature tree cover for shade: “The streets had names like Deep Pine Woods and Shady Oak Hill, although there were no hills and just a few spindly maple trees” (35). Their father’s military obsession with regimented space — his enraged surveillance of “the neighbours’ dandelions, their dirty cars, their unshovelled driveways, their noisy kids” (18) — comically shows a patriarchal desire to construct a totally enclosed world, echoing the era’s crazed nuclear strategy of achieving national security by risking total ecological death. In *Helpless*, vintage vacuum cleaner collector and appliance repairman Ron justifies to himself his kidnapping and confinement of beautiful nine-year-old Rachel by imagining that the locked basement room is a “safe place, a sanctuary,” for her (41).<sup>1</sup> These redoubled containers reveal *normal* nature, home, suburb, and nation as sites of excessive surveillance, discipline, and paranoia — and against which Gowdy comically juxtaposes *ordinary* suburban homes and landscapes in all their lived messiness.

Gender and ecological politics are at the core of these depictions of suburban and domestic spaces organized as containers that restrain and display women’s bodies. In *Falling Angels*, the physically abused girls and their mother imagine freedom along the lines of a “tightrope walker” (179) or female aerialist, the figure described by Russo as a common, though ambivalent, feminist trope on spectatorship and mobility: “For the artist who both identifies with and desires the female acrobat, several fantasies converge: the fantasy of a controlling spectatorship, the fantasy of artistic transcendence and freedom signified by the flight

upwards and the defiance of gravity, and the fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body" (44). This figure is ambivalent because it repeats the abjection of the female body *and the earthly ground*, wishing them into nothingness, while accomplishing this feat of apparent lightness through extraordinary strength and control. Like Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Gowdy's grotesque humour in *Falling Angels* both pursues and undercuts aerialist fantasies by presenting ungainly bodies and clamorous grounds. When Norma, nicknamed "Enorma" and moored at in the school hallways (79), walks to the house of Stella, her first crush, "she feels herself to be things she knows she is not — light as a feather, fascinating, unpredictable — and crossing the schoolyard, she just has to open her arms and run" (169). When out of whiskey, the girls' alcoholic and traumatized mother, once "a dancer with The Light Fantastic" (104), insists on climbing to the roof, where she can be "up high. High, high up" (28). Although the roof is clearly not an actual space of freedom, since their mother does fall to her death, Lou is "exhilarated" when she joins her mother on the roof, where she can see beyond the claustrophobic house, escape the surveillance of her father, and imagine herself lighter than air (181). Looking down on her father, "She has an urge to spit on him. 'It's great up here,' she says" (181). The imagery of their mother's fall similarly emphasizes this ambivalent fantasy of freedom from the earth: "In a balletic, yielding motion their mother's arms lift. Then they make slow, backwards circles, signifying, Norma realizes a half-second too late, that she has lost her balance" (184). The sentimental "angel image" offered by their drunk father — that she "floated" up to the roof — is undercut by the dark humour: "Pigeons running around on the roof sound like gangs of women in stilettos. How did their mother move so quietly up there?" (179).

In juxtaposing classical and grotesque images of the female body — the ballerina-angel counterposed to bawdy, stiletto-heeled female gangs — Gowdy shows how these aerial fantasies are about escaping the male gaze on and control over the female body, how it can move and where it can go, but also about girls and women desiring to control and escape their own bodies and embodiment. Indeed, the girls in *Falling Angels* must grapple with the ways in which they have been complicit with normative violence: they tie their mother up with a skipping rope to prevent her from climbing to the roof (28); Lou, the apparent rebel, subjects

herself to an excessive regime of bodily cleaning to compensate for her shame about her virginal body and sexual inexperience (152). Her rebellious identity is cultivated to match the image that she thinks her boyfriend desires — “which is deadly serious and angry about world events” (156) such as the Vietnam War — and against the conventional femininity represented by the domesticity of his mother, “a drab, frowning, old-fashioned-looking woman in a housedress and apron, who seems to have been warned by someone in another room to act normal” (164). Her male-defined oppositional identity means that Lou misses the gendered household labour that she shares with Tom’s mother: the grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, cleaning, and mending that the girls do to maintain the household economy is a steady presence throughout the novel. The aerial view, with its approach to domesticity, female bodies, and earth as constraint and limitation, repeats the commanding perspective of the bombers over Vietnam and the ever-hovering nuclear threat, from which the suburban families and school classes practise taking shelter, while disavowing the earthly materials and bodily work that keep daily life going and ordinary bodies alive (see Plumwood).

Despite the fantasies of flight, the enclosures of the suburban family are disrupted from within in *Falling Angels* by grotesque bodily growths and excretions and by sexual practices and desires marked “excessive” because they involve “freaks”: twins, giants, and other expansive corporalities. Youngest sister Sandy finds sexual comfort in being the desired object of a string of strange men, especially when multiplied as a pair of identical twins. To appear normal — not a lesbian — she dates “a giant he-man” (143). Norma falls for a “dazzling” six-foot blond angel named Stella, whose name Norma takes as an allusion to Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (146). These giants, comically squeezed into realist domestic spaces and relationships, offer a carnivalesque displacement of the media’s fixation on their mother as a freak: “Is it the same Mary Field who dropped her baby over Niagara Falls?” (185), they ask in breathless anticipation. Although in some ways she is that “same Mary Field,” the novel and her daughters refuse to reduce Mary to a spectacle of mental illness. Rather, the torrents of female desire and strength that the novel comically traces suggest that it be read as a feminist-carnivalesque rewriting of the 1953 film *Niagara*, a film noir that featured Marilyn Monroe as a femme fatale, the promotional poster featuring her body subsumed within the falls to show both woman and nature

as erotic spectacles that are dangerously uncontrollable (see Dubinsky 43-46, 199). Gowdy shows that, despite the opposition generally drawn between wilderness and domesticity, nature reified as dangerous spectacle replicates gender ideologies that oppose feminized domestic virtue to promiscuous public women (see also Heller).

In place of the spectacle of woman-nature-freak, Gowdy offers resilient girls, messy bodies, and porous landscapes. When Norma's menarche coincides with the family's descent into the fallout shelter, the grotesque eruptions of a maturing female body — fluid, open, stinking, growing, overflowing, leaking — comically expose the pathetic limits of the patriarch's control and his fantasies of autonomy and pristine enclosure. The "awful rotting smell" that permeates the shelter might be Norma's bloody rags (64) or, more likely, decomposing matter that the shelter, buried in the earth, cannot seal out. In Gowdy's celebrated short story "Disneyland," an earlier version of the scene, the girls attribute the smell to the corpse of their pet, buried in the yard, as does Sandy in the novel, who "figure[s] the air vent must be right next to where Rapunzel was" (60). Clearly, the shelter cannot be ecologically self-contained, despite their father's fantasies: "Every Monday and Friday the girls had to empty the water jugs and refill them with a fresh supply. They didn't mind this chore. It was small payment for the notoriety and security of being the safest children in the subdivision" (55). This ironic inversion, flatly maintaining the association of the domestic with safety and security, exposes not only the hollowness of normative domesticity and nuclear nationalism but also the absurdity of the nuclear family as well as suburban landscape design, both based, like Disneyland, on an illusory appearance of self-containment. The suburb and the home, like the fallout shelter, function as livable spaces only by bringing in air, water, energy, and food from elsewhere. Rapunzel, the pet kitten, mangled in the car engine while wearing a doll's pink ball gown, similarly epitomizes through grotesque disruption the doublespeak of calling women and animals trapped in domestic spaces and passive femininity "safe" and "protected."<sup>2</sup> Gowdy's suburban grotesque disrupts these normative constructions of "inside" and "outside" by exposing the disavowed material flows that travel across the socially constructed boundaries and by politicizing the gendered distribution of responsibility and risk.

## Ordinary Lives, Electric Worlds

The theme of illusory ecological self-containment also runs through the novels *The Romantic* and *Mister Sandman*, in which characters find their ordinary suburban environments to be entire worlds of vibrant, animated meaning. Private lawns are appropriated for public access to the cosmic in *The Romantic*, with “bushes ranged across [them] . . . like planets” (17), glow worms lined up “like little Christmas lights” (19), and galaxies on display: “we walk across the creek and climb the bank onto a neighbouring lawn where we lie down and watch the sky, our old occupation. There it all is: the Milky Way, the North Star, the Little Dipper. He says Polaris, Cassiopeia, Ursa Major and Minor, Hercules” (22). The erotic allure of Abel for protagonist Louise lies in his “romantic” heightened perception of nature. As she describes it, “It’s as if the ravine were an old mansion I’d thought was empty, making do with bare floors and no furniture while he was sliding back panels onto rooms crammed with treasures, onto attics inhabited by ghosts . . . or bats” (184; ellipsis in original). Ordinary suburbs are not empty, regimented spaces in Gowdy’s fictional landscapes but fully inhabited worlds of cosmic wonder;<sup>3</sup> it is just that many of the inhabitants are not human, not normal, or not natural. Gowdy’s carnivalesque rather than romantic or sentimental mode shows ordinary environments, especially residential neighbourhoods often taken as if exclusively human and cultural environments, to be dense with animal lives and deaths, energy flows, and fungal and vegetative growth and decay.

In *Mister Sandman*, Doris’s mother, Grandma Gayler, in the dementia of her widowhood, happily and stubbornly moves from her “lake-side” home’s main floor to the lively wetland of its basement:

The walls were mildewed, the wooden arms and legs of the furniture furry with mould. Mould was the antimacassars. Frogs were her “flat mates.” After rainstorms, which flooded the apartment and turned her shoes and wastepaper baskets into boats, bullfrogs showed up and preyed on the centipedes. . . . Every time Doris visited, the first thing she did was dash around squashing the centipedes and harvesting the mushrooms. (93)

The boundaries between land and lake, inside and outside, domesticity and ecology, rot and food are here undone in an exuberant and fecund proliferation of species and relationships. Domesticity as inside or con-

tainer is further undermined by great-granddaughter Joan's heightened perception of the energy infrastructure that sustains the suburban home, all from her comfortable hideout in a bedroom closet. The *soundscape* of the suburbs is revealed in her vocalized repetition of the energy hums, mechanical operations, and traffic noises that surround Joan, well past the boundaries of the house. She lies awake at night "parroting some soothing noise, like a drip or the refrigerator motor" (72). Attached to an electroencephalogram for yet more medical testing of her anomalous, damaged brain, Joan "sat limply with her eyes shut, apparently asleep except that she imitated the electric shaver cropping patches of her hair" (73). The novel incorporates into its narrative the November 9, 1965, eastern seaboard electricity blackout (caused by an operator error at the Niagara generating plant, which led to successive transmission shutdowns at the connected power stations); in the fictional narrative, Joan is the first in the family to notice, "because only she is aware of the sudden silence from the electrical transformers" (225).

Her reclusive home in the closet is not a rejection of a world that sees her only as a "freak" — as Gordon, her grandfather and surrogate father, belatedly realizes — but a means to survive her hypersensitivity to her environment: "For Joan, the whole world vibrates — objects, people, weathers, shades of light and seasons themselves emanating their signature amplitudes and oscillations" (219). On her first night outside — when Gordon finally clues in that she can enjoy the outdoors when not subjected to the harsh light of day — Joan takes in the fluttering moths: "her head began to move in rapid jerks and he realized, astonished, that she was following individual flight paths" (88). And then the crickets: "The air quivered with . . . what sounded like a thousand crickets. . . . The crickets were like a live wire, and after a minute she joined them" (88-89). The aviation metaphor and electrical simile display Gowdy's confounding of naturalized categories while nevertheless conjuring up an animate physical world. Joan's sonic mimicry of her environment registers both the world and her perceptiveness as active presences, one way in which Gowdy's fiction involves what Natalie Wilson describes as "redefining the body as an active agent rather than a passive receptacle for regulatory norms" (115). Joan, the crickets, and the power lines crackle and buzz with agency and voice.

The electrical metaphors and themes are no minor element. Not only do "intense current[s] of energy" and "sparks" of desire run through

Gowdy's fiction ("We So Seldom" 145), but allusions to Niagara Falls also recur. It thus seems significant to follow the transmission lines themselves back to the Niagara Falls generating plant and, hence, back to that spectacle of nature so commercialized and conventionalized that it is itself "a site of the carnivalesque, a landscape of *kitsch*," where the romantic sublime has long been supplanted by a heteroglossic carnival of attractions, a sanctioned site for pleasurable inversion of the middle class proper (Shields 156).<sup>4</sup> Karen Dubinsky describes Niagara Falls as "the greatest theme park of heterosexuality" (4), the place, as a honeymoon destination, where newly married couples "practi[se] heterosexuality" in its official, culturally sanctioned forms, ironically revealing just how socially constructed heterosexuality is (1). Yet it is also a place of unabashed commercialization — of both nature and culture — with a long-standing, working-class embrace of freak shows and other sensational displays. Niagara Falls thus represents the *public space* where the normal and abnormal are oppositionally and ambivalently delineated and displayed. Its recurrence in Gowdy's domestic fictions is juxtaposed with her depiction of *private domestic spaces* where freaks — beauty queens, fat ladies, orphans, foreigners, gay men, lesbians, giants, savants, promiscuous women, exhibitionists, and others — live *ordinary* lives that are less sensational than presumed by the voyeuristic gaze from outside.

Niagara Falls is not only a tourist locale but also an industrial landscape, the site of the first publicly owned power generation plant in Canada. Power outage is a theme that runs through Gowdy's fiction, consistently showing how seemingly self-contained domestic space is supported by an extensive industrial infrastructure but also subsuming into personal narrative national industrial history. In *The Romantic*, Louise's conception is attributed to a "province-wide power failure and [a] bottle of French wine" (3). The child abduction of *Helpless* takes place during a power failure in the middle of a Toronto heat wave, likely an allusion to the major August 2003 outage, marked for several years afterward as a voluntary Blackout Day to encourage conservation of electricity. Assuming personal blame for a collective, systemic crisis, the waitress Nancy "thinks it's her fault. Just as she turned on her air conditioner the electricity went off . . . in the entire neighbourhood, from what she can see" (76; ellipsis in original). In *Mister Sandman*, eight-year-old Joan similarly attributes the 1965 power outage to her

own actions, in her case a radio broadcast of her taped performance of her prodigal piano prowess: “she wonders if her being on the radio — that terrible frequency — is what caused the blackout” (226). These crossed lines of causality, whereby socially marginal women imagine themselves responsible for industrial failures in primarily masculine domains, undo the gendered public-private dualism while making visible agential domains conventionally “backgrounded” as mere “environment” to history and action: women’s lives, domestic spaces, and ecological resources and infrastructure (Plumwood 4).

Gowdy’s embrace of ordinary — or despectacularized — freaks and their ordinary, exuberant environments broadly entails a carnivalesque inversion of foreground and background with social and ecological relevance. Despite the voyeuristic neighbours’ suspicions about abuse, Joan, in *Mister Sandman*, is fiercely defended by her loving family, who adamantly resist external pressures to normalize her — or their own — freakness through violent parenting, institutionalization, or medical categorization. Doris and Gordon, her surrogate parents, comically try hard to practise heterosexuality — as the title’s allusion to the popular song “Mister Sandman” might suggest — but are also gentle enough with themselves not to repress their same-sex passions; indeed, Gordon joyfully sings along to the song when having his affair with Al, the comic yet ultimately sinister “orange-haired giant” (2, 32) or sandman (see Staels), who fathers Joan by raping Doris and Gordon’s daughter Sonja. Joan herself insists on not being a spectacle for others, as she was in the radio broadcast. She takes control over her communicative media by splicing tape recordings to produce her own version of the “Mister Sandman” song, expressing love for her family. The tapes play their own words back to them, serving, at the climax of the novel, to reveal and absolve their sexual indiscretions at the moment when Richard Nixon, *presidential spectacle*, resigns his authoritative position when his secretly taped *political indiscretions* are publicly disclosed. *Sexuality* is comically *deflated* as a mode of moral corruption; the normative nation turns into a freak show; the queer becomes the *ordinary*.

Moreover, making sexuality secret and secretive — keeping queer identities and disabled bodies in the closet — is exposed as *political*, a theme also evident in *Falling Angels* and *Helpless*, in which girls and young women are shown to internalize as shame their sexual exploitation by others. Discussing the theme of secrecy and abuse in *Falling*



*Angels* and other nuclear-era novels, Caputi suggests that it shows how “making genocidal bombs isn’t taboo, but speaking out against them is. So too, as many observers note, incest is not really taboo in our culture, but speaking out against it is” (113). Comparing the *practices* of child sexual abuse and nuclear military production as widespread yet censored suggests that these are forms of perversion at the heart of the “normal” family and nation. In *Mister Sandman*, the novel’s off-hand references to chemically saturated carpets and asbestos insulation point to how the *physical house* — not the freaks within — is what the neighbours should have been watching.

### Degrading Animals, Obscene Laughter

It is easy to see the initial relevance of the carnivalesque to the ecocritical given the emphasis that Bakhtin places on its connection to earth and the material basis of life and its orientation to renewal and rebirth. But it can be too easy to naturalize these categories into an image of organic wholeness that subordinates rather than embraces the organic as rot, filth, shit, fucking, and bleeding. “The essential principle of grotesque realism,” Bakhtin writes, “is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). Gowdy’s domestic fictions resist the tendency to naturalize the earthly by finding pleasure and laughter in death: sex with the dead, jokes about animal death, and sex with dead animals. Her degradations — her obscene comedies — prompt a move away from imagining nature as a “classical body”: a fixed, pure, complete form that must be protected in some “safe place” where only those holding the house keys — or appropriate aesthetic — can access it.

A contrast between “nature” seen as a classical body and seen as a grotesque body is staged in *The Romantic*. Animal- and nature-loving Abel, epitome of the romantic artist, drinks himself to a youthful death in his effort to avoid causing harm; his lover, Louise, in contrast, is matter-of-fact about the materiality of bodies. When, as children, Abel is distraught by his possible role in killing a baby bat, Louise becomes a voyeur of death: “As soon as he’s gone I switch on the flashlight and study the corpses. Fan out one of the mother’s wings. It’s like cooked chicken skin” (214). Abel wants to maintain the bodies of the bats intact and bury them with respect; Louise moves and touches their grotesque

bodies. The description of the scene is grotesque because it blurs the raw and the cooked, and eating and decaying, but mostly because it refuses to maintain a distinction between animals normally designated for human consumption and animals normally designated untouchable. It thus points to a normalized distinction between animal deaths that might be grieved and those deaths — for human consumption — that do not count as “grievable,” to extend Judith Butler’s account of how mourning contributes to “certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xiv-xv). Louise’s fascinated, hands-on play with the bat corpse extends the comfort that most meat eaters have with handling chicken parts to a dead wild animal, seemingly degrading it while pointing to the way in which the death of an animal killed for meat is rarely considered or respected as grievable.

Critic Neta Gordon discusses the animal deaths that figure in *Falling Angels* but suggests in an off-hand comment that “the most pressing concern for [Gowdy] is not the pet itself” (“Sacrificial Pets” 115); the animal is simply standing in for the self-sacrifice socially expected of feminine women and mothers. I argue, instead, that animals and their deaths matter very much in her fiction. Indeed, seemingly “normal” animal death becomes strange and disturbing in Gowdy’s hands. When Lou in *Falling Angels* comes across a “rotting smell” in the house of a boyfriend, she finds an odour “which she used to think was the odour of a *normal* household but which she now recognizes as the odour of cooked meat” (153; emphasis added). Joan in *Mister Sandman* finds painful the very sound of slicing meat. Her sister Sonja goes on a date with twin brother Hen, who, in a string of politically incorrect jokes about morons, fat people, and Chinese people, tells an animal joke that makes explicit the normally implicit violence of meat consumption. When the waitress asks “if they wanted their chicken smothered in gravy . . . he said, ‘What the heck, Vicky, kill it however you usually do’” (164).

In contrast to this normalized animal killing is the erotic ritual engaged in by the necrophilic protagonist of Gowdy’s short story “We So Seldom Look on Love.” As a child, she buries the many animal corpses that she finds abandoned by hunting cats; at night, she ritually dances and digs them up and then buries them again. In a grotesque scene combining fertility and bodily decay, she experiences her first menstruation while dancing with the corpse of a pregnant chipmunk. While her companion is disgusted by her erotic, bodily handling of the

corpse, the narrator is “horrified” by the blood because she is afraid she had “squeezed the chipmunk too hard” (148). In the short stories “Lizards” and “Flesh of My Flesh,” pet shop owner Marion shares macabre tales of pet death and child death with cat groomer Emma, anonymously grieving the death of her toddler. Their fixation on the “gory details” is equated not with superficiality or humour — they “don’t laugh” — but with replaying the horrors as a means of grieving their losses (“Lizards” 127). Their fascination with the grotesque thus comes to serve as a confirmation of their love for the otherness of other creatures, unlike the callous objectivity of the doctors in the story “Sylvie” who justify their voyeurism with moralisms about help and protection. It is precisely the attentiveness of Marion and her customers to animal deaths that shows their love, their investment in the lives of others, and their belief in an animated, meaning-laden world (see also Downing).

### In Conclusion

The discourse of environmental politics is largely serious and reverential. To laugh at the nuclear bomb, to revel in the bloody, the sexual, and the vulgar, to indulge in exaggeration of story and body: Gowdy’s carnivalesque fictions are environmentally obscene. But Gowdy inserts the mundane materialities of insulation, carpets, power transmission lines, car engines, water jugs, and dead bats, chipmunks, and cats in the place of imagery of either suburban refuge or sublime and reified nature — the Niagara Falls of sensationalist kitsch rather than powerful nature. She simultaneously figures *ordinary* suburban domesticity as an animated world “vibrating” — to adapt Joan’s experience in *Mister Sandman* — with cosmic meaning, revelation, and desire. Her fiction thus makes a contribution to the “material turn” in ecocriticism and feminism, which Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman define as “a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force” not reducible to its discursive production (6, 4). This “material turn” draws extensively on science studies and environmental theory to combine historical materialist political analysis with an agential conception of physical relations (which I discuss in depth elsewhere<sup>5</sup>). Gowdy’s domestic realism exemplifies a materialist orientation in historically situating suburban development, nuclear families, and nuclear weaponry as a particular set of gendered social relations while resisting any reduc-

tion of the physical world to a mere objective, background condition. It is a materialist rather than naturalist vision of the world.

In a carnivalesque mode, degradation, materialization, and embodiment are achieved through laughter, which brings all things down to the same level, playing in the muck. “Laughter,” Bakhtin writes, “degrades and materializes” (20). An overly chaste attention to the ecologically materialist side of Gowdy’s fiction and not its sexual obscenities would “sanitize” her depictions of suburbia and reconfirm what Greta Gaard terms the “erotophobic” dimensions of the Western devaluation of nature (cited in Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 29; see also Heller). If, as Stallybrass and White propose, carnivalesque laughter is a way for women to recognize themselves and their own bodies without disgust (187), then Gowdy’s carnivalesque fictions allow contemporary Canadians to recognize *their ordinary, grotesque natures* — inside and outside — *without disgust*. Her suburban grotesque is simply *ordinary ecology, ordinary women, ordinary bodies*. And by imagining our bodies and environments as grotesque forms — uneven and ungainly, open and porous, incomplete and excessive — they come to appear pliable and changeable (Stallybrass and White 21). It becomes possible to imagine them in all kinds of shapes and social arrangements — arrangements of the full, animate world, where there might be permission to grieve publicly the deaths of animals and to love and desire in freak ways. The grotesque form, just like the classical form, is always a representation of a social formation. Our environments — whether individual houses or industrial infrastructures — are physical manifestations of social arrangements; they need not be “normal.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The same phrase — “a safe place” — that Ron uses to justify Rachel’s kidnapping also appears in *The White Bone*. The elephant She-S’s embark on a quest for “The Safe Place,” a mythical realm of sanctuary and security, after losing the home that is their very world because of habitat destruction, climate change, and bounty hunting. This intertextual echo suggests that readers should attend to the precariousness and power relations of the apparent security of this “safe place” in *The White Bone* as well as in the other domestic fictions. At the close of the novel, this mythical realm is associated with a wildlife refuge, where, in resonances with the freaks in *Falling Angels* and *Helpless*, survival for the remaining members of the family depends on their becoming a tourist spectacle.

<sup>2</sup> The parallel drawn between women and animals, whereby the kitten’s violent death is marked as a form of feminized and sexualized violence, and femininity is depicted as

a form of ill-fitting domestic entrapment, again seems pertinent to *The White Bone*, in which the elephants might be read as feminized creatures in relation to the violence that they experience and the ways in which they become dependent on benevolent people and a fenced refuge to find “safety.”

<sup>3</sup> I build here upon Graham Huggan’s argument that the cosmic is a pivotal theme in *The White Bone*. Huggan suggests that the novel posits “faith in a universe saturated with cosmic meaning (‘everything exists for the purpose of pointing to something else’ [135])” and a tragic narrative in which “the land, previously ‘trembling with mystic revelation,’ has fallen silent” (717; see also Gordon, “Sign”).

<sup>4</sup> Although, as Shields notes, Niagara Falls as a commercial attraction is not an example of “‘pure’ carnivalesque” in Bakhtin’s folk-based approach (152), it nevertheless inverts social hierarchies in celebrating the vulgar, profane, and low, particularly working-class cultures; presents a topsy-turvy world of hybrids and mixtures that confounds cultural categories through excess and display; and makes public space for the pleasure of the crowd. Moreover, the very distinction between commercialized carnivals such as circuses and freak shows and folk carnivals is, as Stallybrass and White point out, precisely the utopian, nostalgic, and anachronistic use of modern categories for which Bakhtin has been criticized (18-19, 27-30).

<sup>5</sup> See Lousley, “Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation” and “Ecocriticism in the Unregulated Zone.”

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