# Reimagining Carson McCullers:

# A Queer Crip Analysis of the Literary Grotesque in *Heart*

by

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*To freaks everywhere,*

*may our lived experiences always challenge*

*the social construction of "normal."*

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Abstract

Carson McCullers's 1940 semi-autobiographical novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, has been hailed by critics for its political commentary on mid-twentieth century Southern values of personhood. Critics' analyses of McCullers's work have historically positioned *Heart* within the context of freakery and the political genre of the literary grotesque. These analyses were initially groundbreaking for their time, but more recent works have been unable to move beyond the unidimensional, gloom and doom approaches that characterized the first analyses of the grotesque. In this thesis, I will re-examine McCullers's *Heart* using Mikhail Bakhtin's more productive understanding of the literary grotesque. Using Bakhtin's concept of the ever-unfinished grotesque body allows me to take an intersectional, queer crip approach to identifying the ways in which McCullers's characters both queer and crip the normatively social world as well as the ways in which they experience the social world through queer crip identities. Through this political work, I prove that *Heart* was written as a form of social protest against the stifling gender tropes of the Southern Belle and the Gentleman that plagued McCullers's childhood in mid-twentieth century Southern culture.

The introduction of this work positions the reader in the historical context of McCullers's early life, introducing the Southern values that shaped both her identity and her writing of *Heart*. I also state my justification for taking on this project, which stems from the failure of other critics, who have done similar political work with *Heart*, to recognize McCullers's characters for their intersecting "freak" identities.

Chapter one brings in critics such as Bakhtin and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to establish a foundation for readers' understandings of freakish embodiment and the grotesque performance, commenting on their roots in 19th century freak show culture as well as mapping their expansion into a literary theory, genre, linguistic style, and form of embodiment. I also establish the social positioning of the freak and the political potential of grotesque performances, offering examples from *Heart* of John Singer's, Mick Kelly's, and Biff Brannon's queer crip experiences of the social world.

Chapter two examines critics' historically separatist approaches to analyzing McCullers's characters as either queer or disabled but then transitions into an argument for more queer crip analyses of *Heart* in order to better, and more fully, understand McCullers's use of the grotesque as a form of social protest. Borrowing from contemporary queer and disability studies scholars, I trace the connection between the queer and disabled body, rooting their freakishness in compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality.

The final chapter offers a reimagining of McCullers's *Heart*, borrowing from the strictly queer or crip analyses of previous *Heart* critics and inviting readers to reexamine these analyses through a queer crip lens. This chapter culminates in a discussion of McCullers's commitment to exploring controversial topics as a Southern writer in the early to mid-twentieth century, arguing that the political nature of her fiction is a result of and response to her own experiences growing up as a queer crip writer in a conservative Southern community.

Keywords: the literary grotesque, queer crip analysis, Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Bakhtin, protest literature

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Short Titles

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# Introduction

It was in a moment of desperation – or rather a moment of illumination, as Carson McCullers often referred to her own inspirations for writing (*Illumination and Night Glare 32*) - that I stumbled upon McCullers's first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. The final assignment for my junior year English seminar was to either craft an essay about one of the dense feminist texts we had read in class that semester - few of which I thoroughly understood - or craft an essay that was relevant to my proposed senior thesis. I was weeks behind on the class readings. Needless to say, I opted for the second prompt.

As a Women's Studies student with a chronic illness, I had done some undergraduate academic work in the disabled community and was hoping that this work would inform my thesis. However, few, if any, of the countless novels I had read throughout my academic study explored the world of disability in the ways that I lived and thought about it. Or, at the very least, my classes had avoided justly discussing the topic when it arose – *"Right, right, Mandy, Ali's paralysis makes him a more sympathetic character"* (the response of my high school English teacher to the question: How does Ali's paralysis affect the ways in which he is able to function as a servant and a father in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*?). I had no literary foundation or inspiration on which to craft my thesis, so I looked to my professor, Dr. Adela Pinch, for literature recommendations that were inclusive of characters with disabilities. I was given a brief list of books to read, with Dr. Pinch's highest recommendations going to *Olive* by Dinah Craik. Dr. Pinch is a Victorianist, and as pleasurable as *Olive* was, I had had my fair share of Victorian-themed undergraduate classes and was quite tired of the era. But the deadline for my final paper was quickly approaching. In a moment of intense desperation, I gave it the old college try – conducting a Google search for "novels with characters who have disabilities." I scrolled past the

Harry Potter series, countless auto-biographies, some John Green novels, and Carson McCullers's *Heart.*

McCullers's novel had also been on Dr. Pinch's list, as it was published in 1940 and is not too far away from the Victorian era. I read a preview of the first few pages on Goodreads. My 10-page proposal was submitted shortly thereafter.

In my initial proposal, I looked at the ways in which John Singer, a distant, reserved deaf[1] individual who communicates via sign language[2]; Mick Kelly, a free-spirited tomboy; and Biff Brannon, a quiet, conflicted widower, all move outside the confines of the gender binary in the novel. In my exploration of queerness, I argued that the characters' positioning impacts the ways in which they are able to experience the social world, with queerness functioning as a means of "disabling" the characters' abilities to perform normative social interactions. I explored the ways in which their bodies are torn between the physical need to express themselves and the abstract tension of their corporeal relationship to the social world. Naturally, I fell into the pit of

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[1] In the Deaf community, there is oftentimes a distinction made between *Deaf* and *deaf*, with *Deaf* representing the cultural identity of deafness and *deaf* representing the ideologies of deafness. John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos are both Deaf and deaf because they are part of a culture of deafness but they are also ideologically deaf. For this paper, I will refer to these characters as "little d" deaf because this is the term that McCullers uses. Additionally, Deaf Studies scholar Brenda Brueggemann challenges the distinction between "Big D" and "little d" deaf, noting how "in the commonplace book of "deafness," things are not always clearly or singularly defined, designated, determined as "just" or "pure" or "only" deafness […] these labels – in all cases – are not always accurate, though they may be, as it were, with consequences" (12).

[2] In *Heart*, McCullers repeatedly uses the term "deaf-mute" to refer to John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos, who are both deaf individuals who communicate via sign language. "deaf-mute" was the term of work in the early 1900s, and in order to remain faithful to the ways in which McCullers crafted her characters, I will use the term throughout this essay when I am using McCullers's own words to describe her characters. However, the term "deaf-mute" is today considered offensive and inaccurately equates non-speaking with muteness. It is for this reason that I will use the descriptor of "deaf individuals who communicate via sign language" to more accurately portray and understand John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos.

equating queerness with disability and was forced to drastically rethink the ways in which McCullers's queer crip[3] characters function in the novel. I acquired McCullers's unfinished auto-biography, *Illumination and Night Glare,* with the hope of gaining insight into her writing of *Heart.*

*Illumination and Night Glare,* which at the time of its conception, was the working title for McCullers's auto-biography, is a reference to McCullers's life and writing. Her moments of intense illumination – rare, fleeting, and unpredictable moments that ignited her imagination and inspired her fits of writing – came "after hours of searching and keeping [her] soul ready" (*Illumination and Night Glare 32)* to discover the truths of the stories that she wanted to tell. McCullers referred to these illuminations as flashes and as religious phenomena that helped her escape from the darker, more frequent night glares that often left her in a senseless trance and unable to write (*Illumination and Night Glare* 31*).* These night glares followed the traumatic events of McCullers's life – a life consumed by injustice, sickness, and death.

McCullers was raised in a small town in Georgia, where she notes that she inhabited a "backward Southern community" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 16*)* with certain hideous aspects, such as blatant racism, that she would later spend two years contemplating before writing *Heart* (*Illumination and Night Glare* 62). There is one particularly racist incident that occurred during the Depression-era of McCullers's childhood that had a lasting effect on her, and its impact can be felt in the way that she writes of Dr. Copeland and race relations in *Heart*. At the time, McCullers's 14-year-old African American nurse and cook, Lucille, was denied a ride

[3] I borrow this term from Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* where she uses "queer crip" to describe individuals who are both genderqueer and disabled. The use of the identifier "crip" is an intentional act of reclamation, chosen for its shock factor and consequent ability to start important political conversations.

in a public taxi late one night after work and was consequently forced to walk many miles home in the dark (*Illumination and Night Glare* 54).

This is not the only event of McCullers's life that shaped her fiction, however. McCullers, herself, has admitted, "Everything that happens in my fiction has happened to me, or it will happen eventually" (Carr 105).

Echoes of McCullers's experiences of the social world and non-normative social performances can be seen in her portrayal of Mick as a socially awkward teenage girl in *Heart.* McCullers self-identified as a socially awkward child who cared much more for her piano music than for the musings of other children (*Illumination and Night Glare* 13). McCullers is quoted: "I'm sure I missed certain social advantages by being such a loner, but it never bothered me" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 12). This preference for loneliness followed McCullers into adulthood and was often the prerequisite for her moments of illumination. She required absolute solitude to write, and, even throughout adulthood, she often abandoned her husband and her lavish life of fame in New York to return home to her parents' house in Georgia. She would later cite her reasons as overstimulation caused by chaotic city life and severe bouts of homesickness coupled with an intense longing for solitude (*Illumination and Night Glare* 30).

Also like Mick, McCullers was unable to escape all of the normative socialization that accompanies one's coming-of-age. She recalls that, despite her lack of beauty, her mother did her damndest to fuss over McCullers, keeping her as dainty and beautiful as was possible (*Illumination and Night Glare* 58). Despite these attempts, however, McCullers, like Mick, actively defied the normative performance of womanhood and instead appeared androgynous for most of her life. She kept her hair short and often un-styled, and she was frequently

photographed in trousers rather than a skirt, especially in the presence of her male-dominated social and professional circles (*Illumination and Night Glare* 29).

But where McCullers's life appears most prominently in her fiction is in the moments shaped by her own periods of night glare. The ever-present undertone of illness and impairment that functions as the backbone of *Heart* is a somewhat tamed version of McCullers's reality. An undiagnosed and later mistreated case of rheumatic fever in McCullers's early childhood resulted in a life of debilitating strokes and convulsions, numerous infections, partial paralysis, impaired vision, depression, anxiety, a miscarriage, chronic fatigue, the need to amputate a limb, an inability to walk, a 47-day period of comatosis, and her eventual death. These illnesses and impairments were infrequent in McCullers's early life and caused only brief moments of night glare that temporarily numbed her artistic creativity. However, McCullers's final years were one unending night glare, as severely debilitating strokes resulted in the loss of her ability to write, and the tragedies of her social life – the suicides of Reeves (husband), Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenback (close friend), and her long-time psychiatrist along with the early and unexpected deaths of her mother and her close friends Richard Wright and John La Touche – became too much for her to bear (*Illumination and Night Glare*).

Her characters' ongoing battles with mental illnesses were also reflections of McCullers's personal life. Not only was McCullers, herself, depressed, but her husband, Reeves McCullers, was a depressed alcoholic with PTSD from World War II, and he eventually took his own life. Before his death, however, Reeves attempted suicide multiple times and even encouraged his wife to commit suicide alongside him. The couple's relationship had always been turbulent. Their marriage failed twice, and in her autobiography, McCullers noted that she wished she and

Reeves had just remained friends, as her abusive relationship with him left her in a constant state of depression (*Illumination and Night Glare* 39).

Carlos Dews, the editor of McCullers's autobiography, notes that, like their marriage – or perhaps because of their marriage – McCullers and Reeves's sex life was also a failure, and McCullers was admittedly "disappoint[ed] in the sexual dimension of her relationship with Reeves," (xxi). "The sexual experience was not like D. H. Lawrence[4]" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 6), McCullers noted in response to her dissatisfactory sex life with Reeves. The reason why the couple's sex life and marriage repeatedly failed, however, is highly contested. One argument is that the pair's personal illnesses caused great strain on their relationship, and McCullers's literary success only intensified this strain as it was a source of jealousy for Reeves (*Illumination and Night Glare* 39). Others argue, however, that McCullers, owing to the "backward Southern community" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 16*)* in which she lived, spent her life suppressing her bisexuality or lesbianism and was therefore uninterested in a romantic relationship with Reeves. The evidence throughout *Illumination and Night Glare* as well as McCullers's fiction strongly supports the latter argument.

Inspired by Isadora Duncan's *My Life*, McCullers recalled in her autobiography spending much of her childhood preaching "free love" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 54). While writing *Illumination and Night Glare*, she often reflected on the beauty of her female doctors (*Illumination and Night Glare* 74) and recalled fondly the first and last times she kissed her female friends – most notably Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenback (*Illumination and Night Glare* 35). Dews, the editor of *Illumination and Night Glare*, notes that McCullers's relationships with

[4] This is a reference to the sexually explicit nature of D. H. Lawrence's formerly controversial novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was banned for being too pornographic and obscene for its time.

her female friends often appeared more intimate than her relationship with Reeves, and when confronted by Reeves at a low point in their marriage, McCullers noted feeling confused about whether she was in love with her friend Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenback (*Illumination and Night Glare* 22). Much like her characters Singer and Biff, McCullers was forced to perform normative sexuality in a world that demonized her queerness.

But this recounting of McCullers's androgyny, disability, and queerness is not her complete life story. There is a consensus among scholars of McCullers's work[5] that her true and complete autobiography is "submerged below the surface of her fiction" (Dews xiv). What readers are left with, then, is an interesting social experiment in which McCullers used her life experiences to shape the lives of her characters. The consequences for her characters are ultimately comparable to the consequences that she faced, but the lasting social impact of McCullers's life is hardly comparable to that of *Heart*.

Although McCullers mirrored her childhood hometown when recreating the small Georgia mill town of *Heart*, and her queer crip characters embody many of McCullers's own qualities, the impact of her characters' existence is different. McCullers was a real person confined by the sociopolitical and geographic limitations placed on bodies in the material world. McCullers's characters, albeit informed by the social laws that bound McCullers in the material world, exist in the world of literature, and their limitations when performing non-normative

[5] In addition to Dews, Virginia Carr and Nancy B. Rich comment on the duplicity between McCullers's novels and her personal life in their respective works, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers* and *The Flowering Dream: The Historical Saga of Carson McCullers.* Carr quotes McCullers: "Everything that happens in my fiction has happened to me, or it will happen eventually" (105). Rich comments that McCullers's novels "were a statement on the motives, emotions, and actions found in the daily lives of regular people" in McCullers's Southern community (7).

social scripts were, and continue to be, not as consequential as McCullers's were. In the literary world, McCullers controlled her characters' outcomes. They could perform non-normative social scripts on paper in ways that McCullers would never be able to perform in the material world. Her writing was therefore a means of living her life the way that she wanted and needed to but never could. She had more freedom to experiment with her fiction than she had with herself, and her experimental fiction was able to reach a larger audience. *Heart* had a life of its own – that was a close mirroring of McCullers's life but notably different – and that life had a lasting and global social impact. It is for this reason that many scholars would agree[6] that McCullers's commitment to exploring and experimenting with controversial and taboo topics as a Southern writer in the early to mid-twentieth century – the injustice of racism and poverty, as well as the fluidity of sexuality, gender expression, and disability, to name a few - was a result of and response to her own experiences growing up in a conservative Southern community. Her writing of *Heart* was a means of protesting her corporeal restrictions in the material world, where McCullers's own social performances were limited by her Southern community's view of non-normativity as freakish and grotesque.

But McCullers capitalized on the social interpretation of non-normative performance – queerness, gender fluidity, and disability – as grotesque and freakish. In fact, following the height of freak shows in 19th century England and the United States, the literary grotesque became a popular genre of writing and lens of academic analysis. Characterized by those who have been culturally deemed "anomalous beings" – which would have included McCullers and her non-normative characters – the literary grotesque has been an avenue through which literary

[6] From *The Flowering Dream: The Historical Saga of Carson McCullers*, "It's exploration of the problems of racism, poverty, and labor suggest that it is a social protest novel" (Rich 10).

critics analyze the functionality of "social bod[ies] gone awry" (Russell 60). The literary grotesque, however, has also been a limited means through which critics analyze *Heart*. The lens has historically resulted in negative, unidimensional approaches to analyzing characters whose identities are far more complex than what they are perceived to be.

Analyses of McCullers's characters, under the lens of the literary grotesque, were initially groundbreaking for the mid-twentieth century, but modern critics of McCullers, such as Emily Russell, Nancy B. Rich, and Sarah Gleeson-White, with whom I will be conversing in this thesis, have been unable to move beyond the gloom and doom that frequently categorizes the literary grotesque. The gloom and doom approach often taken to analyze *Heart* echoes Aristotle's age-old view of women: female characters are grotesque because they are viewed as lesser men, disabled bodies as incomplete bodies, and so on, comparing each "anomalous" being to its socially accepted counterpart. This negative approach leads to obvious conclusions: John Singer is grotesque because he is deaf, and Mick Kelly is grotesque because she is a tomboy, and so on.

The second pitfall of these critics' analyses of *Heart* is that, even those who move beyond the gloom and doom approach often do McCullers's characters an injustice by taking a unidimensional approach to the consideration of the characters' identities. Like McCullers herself, McCullers's characters are queer, crip, gender fluid beings, but they have been rarely, if ever, analyzed in the context of holding these multiple intersecting identities. Rather, critics have interpreted these characters as grotesque through either a queer studies lens – using psychoanalytic theory to assess their gender fluidity or queer love – or through a disability studies lens to assess their impairments. Rather than taking a productive, intersectional approach to analyzing *how* McCullers's characters embody the literary grotesque, critics often overlook McCullers's central focus in creating radical, complex characters that defy social norms. Readers

are then left with flat, simplistic conclusions to what should be complex characters that reflect McCullers's profound experience of and resistance to her own strict social world.

Critics' strictly queer analyses or strictly crip analyses of the literary grotesque in *Heart* are incredibly limiting. When critics take such a limited critical approach to analyzing McCullers's work, they deny readers the opportunity to understand McCullers's indispensable mid-twentieth century insight into what it means to queer *and* crip the social as well as how characters experience the social world through queerness *and* disability. In other words, when readers understand *Heart* through this limited lens, they don't fully understand what it means to be freakish, and they can't fully comprehend McCullers's use of the grotesque as a form of social protest. Regardless of how scholars have interpreted McCullers's work, however, there is value in seeing and recognizing both the queerness and disability of McCullers's characters under the scope of the literary grotesque. To do so allows us to also see and understand McCullers's intersecting social positionings and the ways in which she crafted *Heart* as a political response to her own experiences growing up in a conservative Southern community.

To name only one – queerness *or* disability – is to deny the presence and importance of the other. McCullers and her characters' freakish existence and grotesque performances, when viewed through the combined lenses of queer *and* disability studies, challenge the hegemonic view of the relationship between one's body, one's self, and one's social environment as being inherently congruent (my body performs what myself and society want it to perform). In only acknowledging the queerness of the characters or the cripness of the characters as that which makes them freakish, critics cannot fully understand the ways in which McCullers crafted socially defiant, radical, and complex crip queer characters. At the completion of this work, throughout which I will take a multidimensional approach to analyzing the grotesque nature of

McCullers's characters, readers will have a broader, more productive lens through which to understand McCullers's use of the grotesque as a mechanism for bringing about social change.

## Chapter 1: The Grotesque

Mikhail Bakhtin, whose productive work on grotesque realism counters the all-too-common gloom and doom narrative of McCullers's critics, credits German writer Heinrich Schneegans with documenting the history of the grotesque and crafting the first literary theory of the grotesque, after which our modern understanding is modelled (304).

Since Schneegans' work in 1894, authors' and critics' use and understanding of the grotesque has expanded from its original designation as a literary theory to a more modern umbrella term that encompasses the grotesque as a literary genre, linguistic style, theory, and form of embodiment. Its expansion, and oftentimes consequent obscurity, is due, in part, to the constant conflagration of freakishness with the grotesque.

In literary analysis, the freak exists in close relation to the grotesque, as one must first be a freak in order to be grotesque, and in the presence of freakishness, there is always the potential for a performance of the grotesque. But unlike the grotesque, freakishness is merely visual difference (Garland Thomson *Freakery* 1) - a corporeal performance of the seemingly abnormal. Freaks, or rather, marvelous and deviant corporeal curiosities, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson deems them, possess an excess or a lack that threatens the organizational principles of personhood (5). This imagined excess or lack is bodily, and is often used to mark non-normative bodies as freakish for being too abnormal (excess) and not human enough (lack). Therefore, freakishness is a broad category, with freaks ranging from "fat ladies, albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, and armless and legless wonders" to "giants, cannibals, midgets, hermaphrodites" (5), and in *Heart*, specifically, queer and disabled bodies. What makes these bodies freakish is

that their existence "gesture[s] toward other modes of being [by] confusing comforting distinctions between what is human and what is not" (Garland Thomson *Freakery* 1). These seemingly monstrous and deviant bodies "violate culture bound expectations" (3), challenging moral conceptions of "normal" human existence. Because freakish bodies "are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment" (2), consequently generating fascination, interpretation, explanation, and regulation from the non-freakish audience.

This marking of bodily excess and lack as freakishness has its roots in 19th century freak shows, in which the public commodification of freakish bodies – excessively tall individuals as well as those of short stature, people with too many or too few bodily extremities, men and women with too many, too few, and/or too ambiguous sexual characteristics, and so on – offered freak show attendees a means of scrutinizing bodily difference while freakish performers stood on a pedestal under a bright spotlight.

Despite the scrutinization and consequent dehumanization of bodily difference that perpetuated the popularity of freak shows and freak culture, freak performances were replete with political[7] potential. As human spectacles whose "every somatic feature was laden with significance," freaks existed outside the normative boundaries of personhood and, as a result, were able to "transgress rigid social categories such as race, gender, and personhood" while occupying a "cultural space of seemingly infinite license" (Garland Thomson 5). In this cultural space, freaks were not only able to embrace their corporeal performances of the abnormal, but

[7] To define "political," I will borrow from Alison Kafer's definition in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*: "To say that something is "political" in this sense means that it is implicated in relations of power and that those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (10).

their very existence under the spotlight (and their very deliberate existence, at that) challenged the ways in which the "non-freakish" audience made sense of the world by thrusting discussions of formerly rigid social categories into the dominant discourse.

Questions such as, "What makes us human?" and "What constitutes a body as being corporeally 'normal'?" entered everyday conversations. But the political nature of freak culture was not a result of the mere visual differences that spectators observed upon those pedestals; the political realm of freak culture was sustained by bodily performances of what Bakhtin dubs the "grotesque." Per Bakhtin, the grotesque body is political because it

> […] is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. […] The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits […]. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body […]. (26)

Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body incorporates the freakish criteria of lack and excess by identifying the grotesque body as one that exceeds its own limits while simultaneously being unfinished. But the freakish body is not to be conflated with the grotesque body. To be freakish is not inherently political. A freak has the potential to be political by performing the grotesque, but mere freakish existence is not innately political. Freakishness is merely a collective description resulting from the recognition of the anomalous body's visual difference from the normative body, and this recognition can come from either the freakish individual or the normative individual. To be grotesque, on the other hand, is a physical action and a political performance. The grotesque body is the freakish body that has transcended the threshold of the imagined real by becoming something more than the normative body. To be grotesque is to

actively transgress the social limitations of personhood, and albeit rooted in the freakish body's visual difference, the grotesque performance is not a collective description.

Take, for example, John Singer, the distant, reserved deaf individual who communicates via signing. In *Heart*, Singer is also queer[8], and, in addition to his deafness, his queerness marks him as a freak – as one who is visually different from the normative male because he lacks the normative heterosexual desires as well as the ability to speak and hear, and performs an excess of crip (signing) and homoerotic behavior. What makes Singer grotesque, however, is that he is able to exist in flux between passing as straight and able-bodied ("normal") and living as queer crip when socially interacting with his peers. When Singer is with his deaf friend and lover, Antonapoulos, he is able to sign and be openly queer. Yet, when Singer is interacting with Mick, Biff, Dr. Copeland, or Jake Blount, he is able to suppress his queerness and pass as straight as well as pass as able-bodied by reading lips and responding in writing (with some characters thinking that he is simply a quiet man). That Singer's body is queer and therefore freakish is not enough to make him grotesque. Rather, Singer's queer crip body is grotesque because it is able to perform in the social world in a way that the "normal" individual is unable to do – passing as straight and able-bodied while living as a queer crip. This transcendence of previously imagined social limitations makes Singer grotesque, as his freakish body is able to exist as a dually normative and queer crip body that can alter its performance based on its surroundings.

While Singer's visual difference may alone elicit fascination, interpretation, and explanation from the non-freakish audience, it is precisely Singer's grotesque dual existence - his existence outside the normative boundaries of personhood and his occupancy of a cultural space

[8] For both McCullers and her critics, "queer" serves as an umbrella term that describes the characters in *Heart* that are homosexual, transgender, and/or androgynous.

of seemingly infinite license – that thrusts discussions of rigid social categories into the spotlight. What is a normative social and sexual interaction? Can queer crip bodies be freakish when they successfully pass as straight and able-bodied? How does Singer's deafness complicate readers' understanding of his queerness and vice versa?

This political potential of freak culture to reconfigure the sociocultural boundaries of personhood dates back to 19th century freak show performances of the grotesque, which paved the way for the later emergence of characters like Singer and the use of the literary grotesque. Inspired by the potential of anomalous bodies to occupy cultural spaces of seemingly infinite license, authors and critics alike began to explore the political implications of including freakish bodies in literature. This expansion of freakishness into the literary realm ushered in with it an extension of the "non-freakish" audience to include both readers of the grotesque and other characters in the literature.

## Genre

Preceding the existence of academic fields devoted to queer theory and disability studies, the genre of the literary grotesque was the vehicle through which academics studied freakish bodies. In *Heart*, these freakish bodies are, most notably, characters who perform non-normative social scripts as a result of being queer and/or disabled – the vehicles through which they challenge normalcy.

Marked by its devotion to capturing the social transgressions of freakish bodies, the genre of the literary grotesque is, consequently, characterized by literature that has "an unsettling effect [that] expresses a social, political, or spiritual comment" (Russell 60). It is a collection of literature that utilizes the trope of the freakish body with the purpose of commenting on the world outside of the novel (Russell). Emily Russell is a scholar of the grotesque, and her research

on the genre echoes Garland Thomson's work with freak shows and Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque body. With these critics as my precedent, I will show how McCullers's political portrayal of socially defiant, radical, and complex queer crip characters – in other words, her use of the grotesque genre to express a political comment – functions as a mechanism for bringing about social change. Her particular attention to the ways in which her queer crip characters defy normatively social interactions in the novel, through queering and disabling their experiences of the social world, is a medium through which McCullers, herself, defies the mid-twentieth century social limitations of her time – most notably, the tropes of the Southern Belle and the Gentleman.

According to Sarah Gleeson-White, a queer studies scholar of McCullers's work, women in the South during McCullers's youth were expected to embody the Southern Belle – a hyper feminine, polite, chaste, beautiful woman whose duties, above all else, were to serve her family and maintain her social status. Alternatively, Southern men in the early-to-mid twentieth century were expected to be Gentlemen: tall (but not giant-like), confident, muscular, and exuding aggressive social dominance through displays of hyper-masculinity. The ways in which bodies performed, or failed to perform, these gender tropes determined their ability to engage in normative social interactions. It was the norm for women to desire and work toward achieving the ideal of the Southern Belle. These women were therefore distinguished in social interactions by their politeness, passivity, gentleness, sensitivity, compassion, and soft-spokenness. Normative men were also expected to desire and work toward achieving the ideal of the Gentleman, consequently distinguished in their social interactions by displays of aggression that were fueled by their competitive nature. There was no room in these categories for the queer, the disabled, and those who were not a Southern Belle or a Gentleman (Gleeson-White). The aftermath of the Depression, coupled with WWII, left early-to-mid twentieth century citizens in a

state of social and political upheaval, with few feeling comfortable about the uncertainty of the future. Therefore, adherence to stringent social categories of personhood provided citizens with "refuge in a world where there were others similarly situated" to themselves (Bogdan 35). However, as a self-identified "invert" who felt that she was "born a man" (Carr 39, 159, 167) McCullers performed androgyny, and her androgynous body was impaired by years of debilitating illnesses. Her violation of social norms as a result of her bodily lack and excess – her freakish queer crip existence – made her both unwilling and unable to achieve the ideal of the Southern Belle. Nevertheless, McCullers's formative years were marked by the prevalence of these social tropes as standards for personhood, and her use, in *Heart*, of the grotesque genre to protest these stringent tropes reflects the impact of these social ideals on McCullers's own corporeal performance and understanding of the social world.

## Linguistic Style

In addition to the sheer existence of freakish bodies in the genre of the grotesque, authors' linguistic styles contribute to the depiction of freakish bodies and can therefore also be grotesque. Russell argues that "the alienating values of the modern social world have a deforming effect on the body and, in the proliferation of words as commodities or commercials, can make language unreliable as well. From misleading newspaper accounts to strobing neon signs, language and the body perform mutually grotesque acts" (67).

As a linguistic style, the literary grotesque is replete with repetition and metaphors – the unreliable language to which Russell is referring. Although seemingly incapable of being grotesque, as that which is grotesque must first be rooted in the freakish and the freakish in visual bodily difference, one must consider how language is communicated through bodily performance - sounds and gestures, otherwise known as "parts of the body that are open to the

outside world [and] through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (Bakhtin 26). Language, in granting the world access to the inner workings of the mind via bodily performance (i.e. speaking through the mouth or signing with the hands), can be freakish in its performative excess of repetition and metaphors. This freakish performance of language can become grotesque when the excess of repetition and metaphors warrants careful consideration and further explanation, invoking a political conversation (and consequently performing the grotesque).

In *Heart*, this grotesque linguistic style can be observed when John Singer first goes to visit his former housemate and fellow deaf friend, Spiros Antonapoulos, at the insane asylum. Antonapoulos, a man hospitalized not for his few words and actions but for his many drinks and lavish meals, only speaks to Singer when the conversation revolves around his indulgences. All other conversations between the pair are read as seeming monologues with Singer as the sole signer. This excess of language on Singer's part – his repetitive signing and domination of the conversation despite Antonapoulos's disinterest - makes the pair's first interaction post-institutionalization quite freakish.

> Singer raised his hands timidly and began to speak. His strong, skilled fingers shaped the signs with loving precision. He spoke of the cold and of the long months alone. He mentioned old memories, the cat that had died, the store, the place where he lived. At each pause Antonapoulos nodded graciously. He spoke of the four people and the long visits to his room. The eyes of his friend were moist and dark, and in them he saw the little rectangle pictures of himself that he had watched a thousand times. The warm blood flowed back to his face and his hands quickened. He spoke at length of the black man and the one with the jerking mustache and the girl. The designs of his hands shaped faster and faster. Antonapoulos nodded with slow gravity. Eagerly Singer leaned closer and he breathed with long, deep breaths and in his eyes there were bright tears. Then

> suddenly Antonapoulos made a slow circle in the air with his pump forefinger. His finger circled toward Singer and at last he poked his friend in the stomach. The big Greek's smile grew very broad and he stuck out his fat, pink tongue. (McCullers 220)

In this scene, freakish bodily performance is manifested as a written form of repetition and excess – Singer's rapid, passionate, and continuous signing despite Antonapoulos's half-hearted nods and complete lack of comprehension – signified by the vacant expression in his eyes and his childlike response to the conversation. But how does this freakish linguistic style come to be grotesque?

On the one hand, Singer's signing is his way of conversing with his friend about the events of the world that have transpired since his hospitalization. On the other, Singer's eruption of language via a freakish bodily performance – his excessively dominant and repetitive signing– is a political means of expressing his frustration with the chaotic and stifling social world that surrounds him. He is releasing the thoughts that he has bottled up for the better part of a year, surrounded only by hearing individuals who talk at him rather than with him. His outpouring of language, then, in comparison to what his counterpart contributes to the conversation, can be analyzed as crossing the threshold of normative social interaction; his signing can therefore be read as grotesque. This scene is complicated by physical difference, as Singer's signing, as opposed to verbal speaking, is a signifier of disability and freakishness and therefore contains the potential for the grotesque. But the linguistic importance of the scene, despite the hands acting as the bodily component of freakishness, lies not in *how* Singer speaks but rather in *how much* Singer speaks and *why*. The linguistically grotesque nature of the scene hinges on his overindulgence in language as a form of political expression – a comment on his frustration with

the limiting social boundaries of personhood and his exclusion from them as a result of being freakish.

In addition to excess in the form of linguistic repetition, metaphors exist as a key element of the grotesque style. Russell claims that, "where a character's subjectivity is considered, critics see disability as a sign of psychic or spiritual troubles" (64). The lived experience of bodily difference - disability, among other things – has historically been a signifier of the freakish and grotesque. There is also a long, overwhelming religious history of interpreting disability as a sign of psychic or spiritual trouble – a wrongdoing and consequent punishment from a higher power as a moral reminder of right and wrong (Garland Thomson *Freakery* 3-4). These troubles are difficult to capture linguistically, however. Linguistic representations of psychic and spiritual troubles are often manifested in a series of metaphors that abstract the corporeal experience. Consequently, the lived experience of bodily difference is often linguistically misrepresented and improperly analyzed in literature. If we return to the scene of Singer's conversation with Antonapoulos, it is easy to see how one could solely interpret Singer's grotesque performance as a protest against the ways in which Singer's body is excluded from society. This, however, would abstract and misrepresent his lived experience by ignoring the ways in which he is able to make social connections and participate in the social world, albeit differently from the normative social experience. Bakhtin's grotesque realism, a commonly used method of linguistically analyzing these lived experiences, situates bodily difference in relation to the body and the world through which it moves rather than solely situating bodily difference in opposition to the world. Most notably, Bakhtin focuses on parts of the body that allow the outside world access to the inside of the body. For Singer, again, this access is granted through his hands. As his means of communication, Singer's hands grant the outside world access to the

inner workings of his mind. Therefore, instead of reading Singer's signing solely as a protest against his exclusion from society, Bakhtin would also read Singer's signing as a means of combining the social and the corporeal – positioning the bodily difference within society by examining Singer's participation in the social world – rather than exclusively situating them in opposition to one another. Many scholars of the grotesque have echoed Bakhtin's situational analysis: "To imagine a monstrosity is to imagine a world capable of producing that monstrosity" (McElroy 11), and grotesque bodies exist as "both the effect of and antidote to a modern world characterized as alienating and stifling in its embrace of homogeneity" (Russell 59). In other words, Singer and his grotesque performance are a product of the stifling social world in which he lives. Although "monstrous," he is still an active participant in the social world, however freakish and grotesque he may be. The very fact that he is able to be analyzed as freakish and grotesque acknowledges the impact of his existence on the world that created him.

This use of Bakhtin's grotesque realism as a lens of literary analysis has been hailed by scholars[9] for its more positive and productive approach to interpreting the grotesque as a linguistic style, as it more accurately represents lived experience by situating the body in relation to society as well as in opposition to it. Grotesque realism captures the tension between physical existence and existing in literature through repetition and metaphorical representation. Physical and literary existence are not entirely mutually exclusive. Rather, readers see the literary grotesque manifested in what is created by this linguistic-corporeal tension.

[9] Gleeson-White writes, "Readings McCullers through the lens of Bakhtin's subversive and metamorphic form of grotesque representation allows us not only to pinpoint but also to underscore and celebrate those radical – and overlooked – features of her novels" (2).

## Form of Embodiment

The literary grotesque as a form of embodiment is the foundation upon which Shneegans's original theoretical conception of the grotesque is founded. Granted, modern understandings of the grotesque as a form of embodiment largely overlap with understandings of the grotesque as a genre and linguistic style. The grotesque genre is marked by literature that uses grotesque bodies for social, spiritual, and political commentary, and the grotesque linguistic style seeks to capture and portray the lived experiences of grotesque bodies through the manipulation of language. The three are inherently connected and dependent upon one another, with the grotesque form of embodiment functioning as the foundation for the theory that expanded to include each of these additional modes of analysis.

As previously established, the freakish body must be analyzed separate from a character's performance of the grotesque, as the two are often conflated yet are notably different in form and function. To be freakish marks one's body as "an inescapable ideological property" (Russell 60). To be grotesque is to escape from the "ideological property" through defiance of the ideologies, otherwise read as a political performance of bodily difference. In its social interactions, the freakish body's relation to the social world is "a relation bound up in a series of imaginative constructions" about normative personhood and non-normative social performances (Russell 63). To be freakish, then, is to both feel and be read as odd in the way of bodily difference that deviates from the social standard (Gleeson-White). The recurring idea of the freakish body as *freakish* in relation to the *social* solidifies the idea that freakishness is an "enabling and transformative figure in social relations," paving the way for a political performance of the grotesque (Russell 61). Similar to how the grotesque is dependent upon the existence of the freakish body as much as it is dependent upon normative social interactions, freakishness is

dependent upon the existence of bodily difference as much as it is dependent upon the normative body.

Since freakishness is fueled by a feeling – a feeling that is created by the observed and felt difference between the freakish and the normative body – a normative body can assign freakishness to another as a result of feeling this difference; and at the same time, a freak can self-identify as freakish as a result of feeling different from the normative body. For Biff Brannon, *Heart's* New York Café owner and widower, who is referred to with masculine pronouns yet wears feminine rings on his fingers (McCullers 234), sews (123), wears female perfume (224), washes his hair with a feminine lemon rinse (226), carries a purse (233), and wishes he was a mother (133), his non-binary gender performance exists in contrast to hegemonic displays of masculinity. As a result of these hyper feminine displays, a frequent café-goer notes that Brannon "is different – he is just not like the others" (215). In other words, Brannon's non-masculine gender performance creates both a physical and emotional feeling of difference – noticed by both Brannon and the café-goer – that marks Brannon as freakish in relation to the normative male body's gendered and social performances.

To be grotesque, on the other hand, is to be an "extension of the freak" (Gleeson-White 12). It is not merely that the freak exists that makes them[10] grotesque. Rather, society's response to the freak's existence in the social world – in *Heart,* it is society's response to the ways in which the characters queer and crip the social world – that makes them grotesque. To be grotesque is to exist at the margins of normalcy, and to, per Bakhtin, live at the threshold of the material real and the abstract other-worldly (40). To be grotesque is to become more than the

[10] Freaks were read as existing outside of the gender binary, as their existence often challenged the social constructions and normative performances of gender (Gleeson-White).

normative body, and, in doing so, to redefine the bodily experience by challenging the discreteness of identity (Gleeson-White 12). If freakishness is fueled by visual difference and its resulting feeling, then a performance of the grotesque is fueled by the political "moments of promise and potential found in" the bodily act of being freakish (Gleeson-White 11). According to Emily Russell,

> Bodies at the margins of national norms seem to provide a conduit to the material real and, in this proximity to reality, access to exceptional insights. This quality of seeming both more real and more otherworldly than the quotidian social world suggests just one of the complexities of representing physical difference and its figural burden in novels of the mid-twentieth century. In its emphasis on materiality, contradiction, spectacle, and populism, the grotesque form provides a representational scaffold for these freakish bodies, offering the tropes by which they become legible in the national imagination. (59-60)

Russel's analysis of the grotesque body acknowledges the complexity of linguistically representing freakish embodiment while simultaneously offering up the grotesque as a vehicle through which freaks can enter public discourse. Authors' portrayals of freaks as "bodies at the margins of national norms" that challenge the "quotidian social world" (59) grant them immense, and in the 1940s unprecedented, political potential. By depicting freakish bodies that grotesquely navigate the social world, McCullers was given a global spotlight to comment on the unjust sociopolitical limitations of personhood.

One such depiction that had personal implications for McCullers is her freakish depiction of Mick Kelly, a socially disabled tomboy and the female protagonist in *Heart.* Mick's freakish existence stems from her physical difference. She is introduced early on as "a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve," who "dresse[s] in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so that at first glance she [is] like a very young boy" (McCullers 18). As a

thirteen-year-old girl, Mick notes that she is “five feet six inches tall and a hundred and three pounds,” which, she claims, means that she towers over everyone in her grade. Consequently, she obsesses over her androgynous and “unfeminine” figure, appearing as a female giant in a world where the Southern Belle is supposed to be dainty. “The gigantic proportions of Mick conflict with the more appropriate, delicate height of “ladies,”” making Mick a spectacle, to be perceived of as a subhuman specimen, a freak (Gleeson-White 22-23).

This description of her freakish appearance epitomizes Mick’s struggle throughout the novel. As a teen enduring the social pressures of puberty, Mick longs to fit in with the other hyper feminine girls at school, yet she acknowledges that her preferred social and gender performances, as well as her excessive height, are different from the norm. Physically, Mick’s height and androgyny isolate her from the social world. Socially, Mick doesn’t function like the normative students her age, as she, like McCullers, prefers the company of music and the calming nature of solitude to the chaotic presence of other students her age. These non-normative physical and social performances create a tension between Mick’s mind (what she knows she is expected to perform), her body (how she performs), and how she fears her body interacts with the social world (the perceived difference and consequent feeling of freakishness). But Mick’s freakish existence transitions into a grotesque performance when she attempts to reconcile her incongruent mind-body-social relation by dressing up as a Southern Belle for her prom.

> The dress she would wear was laying out on the bed. There was Etta’s long blue crêpe de chine evening dress and some white pumps and a rhinestone tiara for her hair. These clothes were really gorgeous. It was hard to imagine how she would look in them. Silk teddies she put on, and silk stockings. She even wore one of Etta’s brassieres for the heck of it. Then very carefully she put on the dress and stepped into the pumps. This was the first time she had ever worn an evening dress. She was so tall that the dress came up two or three inches above her ankles

> – and the shoes were so short they hurt her. She stood in front of the mirror a long time, and finally decided she either looked like a sap or else she looked very beautiful. One or the other. She didn't feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely. (McCullers 106-107)

Her transformation from the socially awkward and gangling, tow-head tomboy to "somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (107), is observed as Mick trades her khaki shorts for an evening gown. At first, Mick appears to be excited at the idea of wearing beautiful, hyper feminine clothing. She feels empowered to put on her sister's bra "for the heck of it" (106), and after admiring both the gorgeous clothes and herself *in* them, she draws the conclusion that maybe she, too, *could* look beautiful, a feeling that readers rarely have the opportunity to associate with Mick. But Mick's transition into the Southern Belle is neither graceful nor comfortable. Mick notes that "she didn't feel like herself at all" (107) but rather feels physical pain by "molding" her body into these too-small and not-quite-right clothes. Her natural, comfortable state is not as a young woman in pumps, a tiara, and an evening gown but rather is the gangly, tall, short-wearing teenager who is often mistaken for a boy. Mick's initial excitement in this scene stems from her realization that she may finally be able to subdue the feelings of freakishness and consequent pressure to conform to social norms by dressing in a way that embodies the Southern Belle. But her concluding realization that what she sees in the mirror is not her true self at all has quite the opposite effect. It is a performance of the grotesque - a transcending of the threshold of normative existence by passing as feminine and able-bodied while living as a socially disabled, androgynous freak. Mick's dressing up is ultimately a grotesque breaking down of her two selves. As she stands in front of the mirror and observes her seemingly "normative" and transformed self (the self that her mind tells her she is expected to perform), she feels physical pain over the suppression of her authentic self (the self that her body

wants to perform). This pain is a physical manifestation of her internal struggle to reconcile the unnatural change required for her to embody the Southern Belle.

Consequently, this change affects how Mick occupies social spaces and navigates the normative world. Unlike the normatively feminine body, Mick's body is able to perform in the gendered and social world in both a "normal" and freakish way. This fluid transcendence of previously imagined social limitations makes Mick grotesque, albeit uncomfortably, her freakish body is able to alter its performance based on its surroundings.

While Mick's visual difference alone elicits fascination, interpretation, and explanation from the non-freakish audience, it is precisely her grotesque dual existence outside the normative boundaries of personhood that raises questions about the political nature of personhood. Should individuals with "abnormal" bodies be expected to conform to the norm? What impact does this have on their bodies as well as on the greater culture? Is freakishness fluid?

This political potential of grotesque performances to reconfigure the sociocultural boundaries of personhood is a defining characteristic of the grotesque genre, linguistic style, theory, and form of embodiment. It is for precisely this reason that McCullers's political portrayal of socially defiant, radical, and complex queer crip characters – in other words, her use of the grotesque to express a political comment – functions as a mechanism for bringing about social change.

# Chapter 2: The Queer Crip Identity

My dedication of an entire chapter to the exploration of the queer crip identity is motivated, in part, by the failure of other critics who have done similar work with *Heart* to recognize McCullers's characters for what they truly are: radically complex queer *and* crip characters. Rather than acknowledging the ways in which Singer, Mick, and Biff both defy and experience the normatively social world through their queer crip identities, critics have taken separatist approaches to their character analyses. Scholars such as Nancy B. Rich and Sarah Gleeson-White have done extensive political work with their queer readings of *Heart,* and scholar Emily Russell has devoted her analysis to examining how Singer, Mick, and Biff experience the social world through the lens of disability. But these analyses fall short in their understanding of McCullers's semi-autobiographical creation. By not taking an intersectional queer crip approach to analyzing how McCullers's characters embody freakishness and perform the grotesque, critics overlook McCullers's central focus in creating radical, complex characters that defy social norms. What readers are then left with are flat, simplistic descriptions of what should be complex characters. By writing this chapter, I am inviting readers to reexamine these critics' unidimensional analyses through a queer crip lens, providing them with the tools necessary to understand the full political nature of McCullers's fiction as a response to her own experiences growing up as a queer crip writer in a conservative Southern community. Through my analysis of both *Heart* and other critics' responses to it, I will address and further the political nature of McCullers's queer crip work, as "all analysis and evaluation have political implications" (Garland Thomson "Integrating" 77).

Before we examine McCullers's work through a queer crip lens, we must understand the separatist approach and how it falls short of accurate analysis. This 'queer *or* crip' approach is a

response to the long histories of disability and queer activism, in which queer and disabled bodies have fought against the excavation of deviance by challenging the social lexicon (McRuer 1-2) to reimagine disabled and queer as "normal" identities and reposition queer and disabled bodies in the sociopolitical sphere (Kafer 4). As signifiers of corporeal difference, queer and disabled bodies have historically been marked as freakish, paradoxically existing as hyper visible spectacles but nearly invisible sociopolitical entities (McRuer 1). Critics who now choose to use these two identities in a combined form of literary analysis run the risk of making the same mistake that I made in my initial thesis proposal - equating queerness with disability and, if not careful, potentially invalidating each group's activist work by flattening and clumping together all non-normative identities. In a combined analysis of these identities, a critic of McCullers could, albeit wrongfully, read Singer, Mick, and Biff as queer because they are disabled and/or as disabled because they are queer. They could also inaccurately reason that queerness is a disability and that persons with disabilities are inherently queer. When considering each group's history of activism – the negotiation of space in heteronormative and ableist environments and the positioning of queer and disabled bodies in a limited and oftentimes disparaging cultural lexicon – it is easy to see how these lines of reasoning are undoubtedly problematic and rightfully speak to the dangers of conflating queerness and disability.

Yet, despite these potential pitfalls, contemporary queer and disability studies scholars continue to write about the queer crip identity, noting how, historically, "little notice has been taken of the connection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity" (McRuer 1), a connection linked by similar social and political histories rooted in freakish embodiment. Contemporary queer and disability studies scholars Robert McRuer, Alison Kafer, and Carrie Sandahl have all written extensive work about the relatedness of queerness and disability, linking

homosexuality and disability by their "shared history of injustice" (Sandahl 26), their resistance to the "contemporary spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity" (McRuer 3), and their fluid, ever-changing, and contested identity categories (Kafer 15-16). Kafer also advocates for more critical queer crip analyses that attempt

> To examine how terms such as "defective," "deviant," and "sick" have been used to justify discrimination against people whose bodies, minds, desires, and practices differ from the unmarked norm; to speculate how norms of gendered behavior—proper masculinity and femininity— are based on nondisabled bodies; and to map potential points of connection among, and departure between, queer (and) disability activists. (17)

In her tracing of the interrelated nature of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality in the demarcation of normativity (17), Kafer acknowledges the political potential of queer crip embodiment and analysis, supporting my assertion that there is something to be gained from looking at Singer, Mick, and Biff as having intersecting 'freak' identities. She also roots cultural justification for discrimination in gendered norms – proper masculinity and femininity – in much the same way that the social perception of McCullers's and her characters' freakish bodies is rooted in the mid-twentieth century gender tropes of the Southern Belle and the Gentleman.

It is for these reasons that I continue to write about the political potential of examining disability and queerness together under the lens of the literary grotesque, as there is something to be gained from looking at McCullers's characters as having fluid and complex queer crip identities. Feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality asks us to recognize how a person's (or character's) social identities are not only related to systems of privilege, power, and oppression, but also how a person's multiple identities intersect to create a

life that cannot justly be understood from looking at a singular component – in this case, just queerness *or* disability (140). Therefore, questions such as, "What makes Singer queer?" and "What makes Mick disabled?" are important, but their importance is limited when answering the larger questions such as "How do these characters defy normatively social interactions throughout the novel?" "How do they experience the social world through their freakish embodiment and performances of the grotesque? "Why are their defiance and freakish/grotesque existence politically important?" I will ask myself the smaller, less revealing questions throughout ensuing character analyses, but one must keep in mind that each queer analysis and each crip analysis requires a more intersectional approach in order to contribute to the greater understanding of McCullers's work.

## Queerness

In both McCullers's work and my own, *queer* functions as a verb/action and an identity. In *Heart*, characters queer the social world by first being conscious of their "strange" and "odd" positioning in the sociopolitical sphere. Queering the social is then a means of releasing oneself from the binds of the dominant discourse by resisting the cultural coercion toward normative conformity (male and female identification as well as heterosexual interaction) via the queer body's social participation. Ultimately, queering the social is an act of defiance – a move toward reclaiming one's identity through the true and conscious expression of the body's "strange" and "odd" gender and sexual tendencies. *Queer* also functions as an identity, describing those of McCullers's characters who are socially interpreted to be homosexual, transgender, and/or androgynous. This "umbrella-like" nature of McCullers's use of *queer* is rooted in the historical flattening and clumping together of freakish embodiment, but that does not make it inherently negative. Contemporary queer crip scholars are re-examining and reimagining the fluid, multi-

use nature of queerness within a productive political light. McRuer argues that "queer is a fluid designation for identities that are shaped and reshaped across differences and that interrogate and disrupt dominant hierarchical understandings of not only sex, gender, and sexuality but also race and class" (26). The multiplicity of queerness, then, is not a derogatory flattening of freak embodiment but is rather an embracing of multiple identities that are working together to disrupt heteronormative understandings of the social world. Queer studies scholar Judith Butler also situates the indefinable nature of queerness within a political context:

> The term queer, rather than describing a specific identity, can be considered a site of collective contestation [. . .] the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings. Thus, it must remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (27)

According to Butler, the very nature of queerness is rooted in its constant flexibility. Like McRuer, Butler identifies that which is queer not by its singular demarcation but by its political ability to reposition the freakish body in future discourses through a reimagining and reworking of derogatory historical understandings that flatten modern readings of queerness.

In fact, much of the work done in the contemporary field of queer theory and gender studies has been organized around challenging the linguistic conventions of queerness, both in the historical specificity as that which, through excess or lack, is freakish and in the contemporary political understandings as that which is not a singular identity. Through this work, queer theorists and gender studies scholars are repositioning queerness as a "normal" identity (while also acknowledging the inherent problems with the word *normal*) as well as placing queer bodies within the sociopolitical sphere. This activist work involves not only an expanded understanding of the term *queer;* it calls for a broadening of the social categorizations

of gender and sexuality. To acknowledge queerness as normal is to dismantle the dichotomous gender complex and the institution of heteronormativity. In this imagined future, my work on McCullers's homosexual, transgender, and/or androgynous characters would not be necessary, as queerness would no longer signify freakish embodiment. I find it important, here, to articulate that the purpose of this thesis is not to serve, explicitly, as a form of queer crip activism. Rather, discussing the historical and contemporary political groundwork in queer and gender studies provides the foundation for my ensuing analyses of McCullers's queer crip characters. I cannot identify what makes McCullers's creation of Singer, Mick, and Biff an act of social protest without first asking how they are queer, how they experience queerness, and how they queer the world around them.

But readers cannot adequately analyze this queerness in the literary realm without first broadening their understanding of social interactions (in all their many normative and non-normative forms) with attention to the ways in which queer genders and sexual orientations are performed. Gleeson-White does this political work with *Heart* in her analysis of Singer's suicide. Taking a psychoanalytic approach to this closing scene, Gleeson-White argues that Singer's death is a blatantly queer attempt to reunite with his same-sex deaf lover, Antonapoulos, in the afterlife (59). Following Antonapoulos's institutionalization, Singer suffers emotionally as a result of the lovers' physical separation. Despite his attempts to reunite and rekindle their queer friendship, the two are always separated by the material world – physical distance, visiting hours at the institution, walls that shut Singer out of Antonapoulos's life, and ultimately, Antonapoulos's death. Gleeson-White argues that the friends' flesh could only become one again – be reunited – in death (60). Singer's suicide, consequently, is a grotesque display of queer love.

The value in Gleeson-White's work is that it acknowledges queerness under the lens of the literary grotesque, positioning Singer's performance within a Bakhtinian understanding of the "ever unfinished, ever creating body" (26) that outgrows itself by transgressing the limits of life and unifying two separate entities in an expression of queer love. In prompting readers to consider the political implications of this act, she encourages her audience to read Singer's suicide as a performance that speaks to his queerness and to society's interpretation of him as a result of this social identity. Where Gleeson-White is lacking, however, is that she only acknowledges Singer's suicide as an act of queerness, asking us to consider the ways in which Singer experiences the social world through queerness without any regard to the ways in which his queer and crip identities are intrinsically linked. She never explores the importance of his suicide as a result of his depression and/or his deafness – as a simultaneously grotesque performance of disability. As a deaf individual, Singer is constantly at war with his social and environmental surroundings, struggling to navigate a world that has been constructed by and for able-bodied individuals, making the needs and functions of able-bodied individuals the norm or standard (Garland Thomson "Integrating" 77). Those who hold crip identities are differentiated and marked by their inability to normatively occupy social spaces, and this marking "penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment" (Garland Thomson "Integrating" 77) where the ability to hear and speak are dominant cultural norms. Singer's inability to hear and selective non-verbal communication consequently mark his body as freakish, resulting in a discriminatory isolation that deliberately separates him from the normative world. To add to his hardship, Singer's best friend and deaf lover dies, an act that, alone, could have driven him to suicide.

In solely considering Singer's queer desire to reunite with his friend and lover, Gleeson-White also fails to acknowledge the ways in which Antonapoulos's death meant the loss of Singer's one link to the disability community – a fellow deaf signer. Without Antonapoulos, Singer is alone in the hearing world, surrounded by non-signing individuals who talk at him rather than with him. This isolation and lack of communication could also have been enough to drive Singer to suicide. But Gleeson-White never considers the possibility of approaching McCullers's characters from a queer crip lens. She focuses on their grotesque performances through their designation as queer and their queering of the social world. The end result is a valuable queer studies analysis, but it is also incomplete - an oversimplification and flattening of McCullers's radically complex queer crip characters.

## Cripness

To only examine McCullers's characters via their crip identity, as I did in my counter analysis of Gleeson-White's work, however, is just as detrimental as the solely queer analysis, denying the presence and political importance of the simultaneously queer identity in McCullers's characters.

Recent reclamation efforts in the disabled community have led to an increased use of the word crip to describe the identity of being disabled. I will use the word *disability* when referring to non-normative physical and mental conditions of the body and the word *crip* when referring to the identity and experiences of living with a disability. It should be noted, however, that the two are contingent upon the existence of one another and are intrinsically connected through both the social and corporeal[11].

[11] Disability is to crip as LGBT is to queer. "Crip" is a shortened version of the word "crippled," and following contemporary reclamation efforts, "crip" has gained popularity as an in-community descriptor for both disability culture and people with disabilities.

Sharing its similarities with queerness and queering, to be disabled is to hold an identity that has been shaped by practices of disabling the world in which one's physically and mentally non-normative body moves. For characters to disable the social world, they must be conscious of their condition and how it positions them in the sociopolitical sphere. I use the vague term of "condition" because what constitutes a disability is, and has been for quite some time, quite contested. Historically, the medical approach to interpreting disability has been used when constructing a "valid" definition. The textbook "disabled individual" is "a person having a physical or mental condition that limits movements, sense, or activities" ("disability, n."). This medical definition itself is also vague, however, and Kafer argues that this ambiguity is a result of the social world's inability to identify "disabled individuals" as a discrete group of people with similar essential qualities (10). It is a testament to the parameters of disability as political, fluid, and open for debate. It renders the category of disability "as events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than as simply entities and attributes of subjects" (Kafer 10).

Similar to the fluid and widely-encompassing nature of queerness, "the cultural function of the disabled figure is to act as a synecdoche for all forms that culture deems non-normative" (Garland Thomson "Integrating" 76). Consequently, disability studies scholars have spent much of history challenging the normative construction of "healthy" bodies and "denaturaliz[ing] disability by unseating the dominant assumption that disability is something that is wrong with someone" (Garland Thomson 77). That disability is something that is wrong with someone – something visually and corporeally wrong – is what scholars have termed the individual approach to disability. "We know it when we see it," writes Kafer of an individual approach to perceiving a disabled body, and the problem with this distinction lies in its "we" – the collective "normal" individuals – and the "it" – the dehumanizing distinction between "complete, normal"

bodies and “unhealthy, unnatural” bodies (4). This approach also wrongfully presents individuals with disabilities as freaks of nature rather than freaks of culture, putting the onus of disability on the individual rather than the systems and structures that preclude the individual’s participation in the social world. The individual approach to disability is also closely linked to the medical approach, which posits individuals with disabilities as "deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms” (Kafer 5). Again, this approach puts the onus on the deviant individual rather than the exclusive society, and the “fixing” of the body is seen as more desirable than the fixing of the restrictive social policies and practices (Kafer 5).

Two critical responses that disability studies scholars have devised to counteract the ableist individual/medical approaches are the social and political/relational models of disability, which position the disabled individual within a biased social and architectural environment. The social model of disability places importance on the distinction between impairment and disability. It is common knowledge in disability studies circles to differentiate between the two, acknowledging that impairment is located in/on the material body whereas disability is an experience, precisely the non-normative social experience of existing in a world created by and for able-bodied individuals (Kafer 7). A disabled body, then, is a body that has an impairment and is therefore unable to participate in the social world in the same ways that a normative, able-bodied individual is able to participate. But Kafer takes issue with this distinction, noting how

> a sharp divide between impairment and disability fails to recognize that *both* impairment and disability are social; simply trying to determine what constitutes impairment makes clear that impairment doesn’t exist apart from social meanings and understandings. (7)

Much like how solely queer or crip analyses of queer crip characters fail to recognize the

importance and interrelatedness of the other identity, a distinction between impairment and disability inaccurately categorizes them as separate entities. In addition to this imprecise divide, the social model ignores the importance of medical interventions and perpetuates the depoliticization of the disabled body's participation in the medical system by removing the disabled body entirely from a medical context and viewing the perpetuation of negative disability discourses solely through a social lens. It is for these reasons that Kafer proposes the reinterpretation of disabled bodies through a political/relational lens. Rather than an individual/medical approach to disability, which paints the disabled body as an apolitical object that needs repairing, or the contemporary but still problematic social model of disability, which, alternatively, only acknowledges the social environment that creates disability and ignores the importance of medical interventions, Kafer's political/relational model works to re-politicize the disabled body, forcing it into the social sphere by making it a site of endless possibilities and contestations.

I tell you all of this not so that you can become professionals on modern discourse surrounding disability studies. Rather, this information is significant when considering why disabled bodies have historically been analyzed under the lens of the literary grotesque. Stripped of their bodily agency, voice, and participation in society, disabled bodies have come to epitomize the abnormal. Those of McCullers's characters with disabilities do not have the option to "pass" for normal or hide their disability from plain sight. In their hyper visual non-normative existence, Singer, Mick, and Biff are forced to expand or bring to view different possibilities for navigating the structural world – in both freakish and grotesque ways. Their corporeal difference and consequent non-normative social experiences define their very existence – as different from

able bodies, as strange, as precluded from navigating the social, structural, and oftentimes sexual world in both the novel and in McCullers's larger Southern community.

Emily Russell pinpoints one of these different possibilities for navigating the social world in her analysis of Mick's nervous conversation with Singer after she loses her virginity. The grotesqueness of the performance, per Russell, is located in Singer's non-verbal deafness.

> In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter,* the young protagonist Mick Kelly describes her sense of language's failures: "What she had to say was terrible and afraid. But what [Singer] would tell her was so true that it would make everything all right. Maybe it was a thing that couldn't be spoken with words or writing. Maybe he would have to let her understand this in a different way" (307). Mick understands that in a world where language is under the service of an economy of exchange, words may be insufficient to account for something "terrible," something outside the accepted norms of the social body. In this case Mick looks to Singer's extraordinary body as the possible site of expression that will move beyond the neutered imitations of everyday words. Singer serves as the embodiment of truth and, by the necessity of unspoken communication, seems to offer an escape from the problems of everyday language. (67)

As a socially anxious androgyne, Mick is often isolated from the social circles at school, which are comprised of young Southern Belles who find Mick noticeably freakish in her defiance of female gender norms. As a social outcast, Mick's experience of the social world is entirely non-normative, albeit comfortable for her, and her participation in a normative social act (such as the loss of her virginity) is consequently a moment of intense anxiety and unfamiliarity. After the experience, she runs to Singer, who acts as her wise older brother throughout the novel, listening to Mick talk at him for hours and occasionally reading her lips and writing a response or two on the notepad he keeps at his side. But Singer is deaf and non-verbal, something Mick is unaware of as a young child. Her consequent metaphorical abstraction of Singer's romanticized

corporeal existence – “Maybe it was a thing that couldn’t be spoken with words or writing. Maybe he would have to let her understand this in a different way” – is a linguistic performance of the grotesque. The value in Russell’s work is that it acknowledges Mick’s social anxiety and Singer’s deafness under the lens of the literary grotesque, positioning Mick’s abstraction of Singer’s non-verbal communication within a Bakhtinian understanding of the socially transgressive body. Where Russell’s work lacks, however, is that she only analyzes the Mick-Singer exchange through the lens of disability, asking readers to consider the ways in which McCullers’s use of language is grotesque solely because of her portrayal of Mick’s social anxiety and Singer’s non-verbal deafness. She fails to acknowledge the ways in which the characters’ queer identities are intrinsically linked to this exchange as well. Mick is a tomboyish introvert with social anxiety that results from her androgynous physical appearance, and Singer is a non-verbal deaf individual who consequently communicates in a queer (or gender non-conforming way). How does Mick’s queerness – arguably the cause of her disability – impact her response to the hyper social experience of losing her virginity? How does Singer’s queer form of communication – a result of his deafness – impact the ways in which he is able to communicate with Mick? How are the characters’ shared queer crip identities implicated in this scene? How do they impact it? What implications does a strictly crip analysis of this scene have on the reception of McCullers’s work as a form of social protest? In her strictly crip approach to this scene, Russell fails to acknowledge the importance of Singer’s and Mick’s intersecting identities. The end result is a valuable disability studies analysis, but it is also incomplete - an oversimplification and flattening of McCullers’s radically complex queer crip characters.

## A Queer Crip Analysis of *Heart*

*Queer* as a derogatory identity term marking gendered and sexual difference and the individual/medical models of disability would have been the dominant modes of analysis at the time of *Heart's* conception. Through both dominant discourse and lived experience, McCullers would have been taught to associate queerness and disability with the deviant, pathological, and defective body that is in direct violation of cultural norms. Yet, despite her socialization, McCullers wrote *Heart* with an overwhelmingly queer crip character base (overwhelming for the time period, of course). To then name only one – queerness *or* disability – as relevant in the grotesque existence of McCullers's characters is to deny the presence and importance of the other identity in both McCullers's life and her protest fiction. Critics who solely look at the queerness of Mick and Biff or the cripness of Singer not only fail to recognize these characters for their true and complex existence, but they fail to recognize *Heart* for its grand resistance to strict cultural norms. McCullers and her work precede the political reimagining work done by contemporary queer and disability studies scholars. But contemporary reimaginings of queer crip bodies provide readers with a new and more productive lens through which to analyze the political implications of Singer's, Mick's, and Biff's existence. In the ensuing final chapter, I will ask myself "How do these characters defy normatively social interactions throughout the novel?" "How do they experience the social world through their freakish embodiment and performances of the grotesque?" and "Why are their defiance and freakish/grotesque existence important?" By answering these questions, I will situate that which queer crips and is queer crip in *Heart* within the political realm of the literary grotesque. This will allow me to effectively rework unproductive analyses of McCullers's *Heart* and provide readers with a broader, more productive lens through which to position McCullers's work in the canon of protest literature.

# Chapter 3: *Heart* through a Queer Crip Lens

Now that we've situated the queer crip identity within freak embodiment and freakishness within the literary grotesque, we can begin to politically rework historically flat analyses of McCullers's work through a broader, more productive queer crip lens.

In this final chapter of my thesis, I will examine the ways in which John Singer, a distant, reserved deaf individual who communicates via sign language; Mick Kelly, a free-spirited tomboy; and Biff Brannon, a quiet, conflicted widower, all move outside the confines of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity. Their queer crip positioning, McCullers shows, impacts the characters' abilities to navigate the social world, marking their bodies as visually different – freakish – and consequently defiant of the socially normative. In this defiance, there is always the potential for a performance of the grotesque, and in these performances of the grotesque, readers of McCullers's fiction can see precisely how McCullers's creation of Singer, Mick, and Biff was, and continues to be, an act of social protest – a result of and response to her own experiences growing up in a conservative Southern community. McCullers's writing of *Heart* was a means of protesting her corporeal restrictions in the material world, where her own queer crip social performances were limited by her Southern community's view of non-normativity as freakish and grotesque. By asking how Singer, Mick, and Biff are queer crip, how they experience queer cripness, and how they queer crip the world around them, we can begin to appreciate and fully comprehend *Heart* as a social protest novel.

Recall that, in 1940s Southern U.S. culture, the literary grotesque was rooted in freakishness and freakishness in deviance from the strict gender tropes of the Southern Belle and the Gentleman, which required compulsory able-bodiedness as part of their performance. The literary social world in McCullers's mid-twentieth century novel is therefore comparable to mid-twentieth century U.S. society in that a hierarchical value system favors those with these

hegemonic expressions of gender and able-bodiedness, positioning the Southern Belle and the Gentleman in opposition to freak embodiment and the literary grotesque.

In *Heart* queer crip freakishness is embodied by three central characters: John Singer, Mick Kelly, and Biff Brannon. These characters' lives are complicated by their inability to conform to cultural expectations, resulting in isolation from the group – the dominant culture's identity. Consequently, Singer's, Mick's, and Biff's bodies are torn between the physical need to express themselves and the abstract tension of their social relationship, resulting in freakish embodiment.

For John Singer, the freak identity is maintained by his deafness and his non-normative gender expression. Unlike it does for Mick and Biff, the novel recognizes Singer's disability and frequently reminds readers that he is unlike the other characters in more ways than one. The opening line of the novel introduces Singer as one with a bodily defect: "In the town there were two mutes" (McCullers 3). Yet as a result of health complications, Singer becomes the singular local "deaf-mute" (32), "deaf-and-dumb" patient (84), and, because of the townspeople's alignment of "disability with other-worldly wisdom" (Russell 61), he is often thought of as a "home-made God" (McCullers 232). These identifying descriptors, albeit the effect of his freakish bodily defects, are merely meaningless words without an examination of their relation to the social world. Take, for example, Singer's subtly yet remarkably grotesque interaction with Jake Blount, the local drunkard whose demonstrations of belligerence epitomize hyper masculinity. In this scene, Singer performs the grotesque through his queer cripping of the social world via his expansion of the masculine repertoire, a consequence of his deaf identity:

> Blount was very angry, and now it could easily be seen how drunk he was… He walked in zigzags around the table where the mute drank his coffee. His voice was loud and cracked. 'I'm one who knows. I'm a stranger in a strange land…'

> Blount paid no attention to anyone in the place except the mute. They were both looking at each other. The mute's eyes were cold and gentle as a cat's and all his body seemed to listen. The drunk man was in a frenzy. (McCullers 23)

In this spectacle, McCullers takes care to establish a dichotomy, with Singer and Blount occupying opposite ends of the masculinity spectrum. The loud, angry, zig-zagging, and frenzied Blount sharply contrasts with the calm, gentle, attentive, cat-like Singer. According to Russell Shuttleworth, Blount, in his over confident and drunken ramblings, embodies hegemonic masculinity by exhibiting cultural expectations of manhood: "initiative, competitiveness, assertiveness, and independence" (167). He initiates a conversation with Singer, asserting his presence and inviting competitiveness with his obnoxious voice and drunken gait. Conversely, Singer sits and stares, withholding any sort of corporeal reaction to Blount's antics and embodying what cultural expectations would deem the feminine trait of passivity. It is simple to see how Singer's defiance of the normatively social in this interaction is a result of his disability, yet it is wrong to assume that Singer performs the grotesque solely because he is deaf and non-verbal. One cannot ascribe Singer's passivity to just disability or just gender. How does Singer queer crip the social world? Owing to his deafness and non-verbal communication, Singer's physical body also functions as a confining means of performing and conveying gender, which directly results in queer crip interpersonal practices. Contrary to other men in the bar, Singer does not taunt or jeer at Blount, reciprocating assertiveness and initiating competition. Rather, he sits and attentively watches the drunken Blount's antics because he is physically incapable of doing otherwise. He cannot hear what is being said, and even if he could read Blount's lips through his drunken slurs, Singer does not talk, making social initiative, competitiveness, assertiveness, and independence rather difficult. Instead of embodying these masculine characteristics, Singer is "expanding his masculine repertoire" (Shuttleworth 175), meaning he is

assuming a flexible – or rather, queer – gender identity and using his body in a non-masculine or alternatively-masculine way in order to establish a relationship between his freakish body and the social world, albeit a rather queer crip relationship. Nevertheless, Singer falls short of embodying hegemonic masculinity. And when McCullers later writes from the perspective of the others in the bar, that Singer "was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. He did not seem quite human" (24-25), readers are able to also understand how Singer experiences the social world through his queer crip identity. Forced to read the hearing world's lips and interpret their bodily movements yet unable to respond in the same way, Singer is marked as different, unhuman, and not of this world. His deafness paired with his consequent queer expansion of the masculine repertoire is a mark of non-normative participation in the social world. He is discriminated against and consequently isolated. It is for this reason – the isolation that Singer experiences as a result of his intersecting identities – that critics must approach their analyses of Singer's ultimate suicide from a queer crip lens.

As mentioned previously, Gleeson-White does extensive political work examining the grotesque nature of Singer's suicide through a queer lens, arguing that his death is grotesque in that it is a blatantly queer attempt to reunite with Antonapoulos, his fellow deaf lover, in the afterlife. But seeing as how Singer's queerness is so delicately intertwined with his crip identity, with the two often indistinguishable in creating his freakish identity, it would be an injustice to McCullers's political work to analyze the scene from a strictly queer lens.

The entirety of chapter 15 is devoted to this climax, and McCullers prepares her readers to analyze it appropriately by providing extensive clues as to what leads Singer to this point. "His right hand moved nervously inside his pocket […] The faces crowded in on him out of the

darkness so that he felt smothered […] she said a good deal that he did not understand in the least […] Singer wriggled his shoulders uneasily" (320-321). In this passage, we not only see how Singer experiences the social world as a queer crip individual, but we are able to experience the world along with him. Hearing individuals are verbally speaking at him from all directions. His hand wiggles but he is unable to sign because none of them will understand what he's saying. He knows he is being watched – they "looked at him queerly" (325) – and labeled as freakish. He shakes from unease. And in all of this commotion, he sees Antonapoulos's face: "Behind each waking moment there had always been his friend. And this submerged communion with Antonapoulos had grown and changed as though they were together in the flesh" (322). Despite being physically apart (Singer does not know that Antonapoulos is dead yet but rather thinks he's still in the institution), the thought of Antonapoulos – Singer's queer lover and fellow deaf signer – brings him great calm, so much so that he begins to conjure the image of Antonapoulos even when the two are miles apart. And when Singer learns of his deaf lover's death on the following page, he brings "out a pistol from his pocket and put[s] a bullet in his chest" (326).

The precise reason why Singer puts a bullet in his chest is impossible to tease apart. Gleeson-White is correct in her argument that Singer wishes to romantically reunite with Antonapoulos in the afterlife, but she also disregards all that leads up to this grotesque performance – including, but not limited to, his deaf and non-verbal identity that results in his feelings of intense isolation from the normative social world. It is reasonable to argue that Singer felt crippling sadness after hearing that his friend/lover, fellow deaf signer, and only connection to the disabled community passed away. Without Antonapoulos, Singer is left alone in the hearing world, surrounded by non-signing individuals who talk at him rather than with him. One

would therefore be correct to also argue that Singer's suicide is grotesque because it is an attempt to reconnect with the disabled community in the afterlife. Singer ultimately pulls the trigger with his hands – his primary means of communicating (signing) with the world. Through a strictly disability lens, his death could be read as one final act of cripping the social world – one final act of defiance against the world that so selfishly failed to accommodate him. But the importance is not in either one analysis. In analyzing the grotesque nature of the scene, it is important that readers understand how Singer's multilayered identity makes it impossible to distinguish his grotesque existence by any one factor. He committed suicide because he was sad that his lover died – his lover who was also his only deaf signing friend.

Part of what makes *Heart* so profound in its political work is that it is not singular in its motivation. It is twisted, confusing, and complex – which is precisely how McCullers identified herself and sought to rework her own social environment. In failing to acknowledge these same aspects of her characters, critics' analyses are incomplete - leaving readers with an oversimplified and flattened reading of McCullers's radical protest novel.

Another of McCullers's characters who has suffered under the analytical reduction of her identity is Mick Kelly. Mick is also no stranger to embodied freakishness and social seclusion, yet Mick's case is notably different from Singer's. She is not formally disabled in the way that the novel recognizes Singer's deafness. Rather, Mick is socially disabled, with strong evidence suggesting that she is autistic, although it is not formally mentioned in the novel. The evidence for this claim can be observed when analyzing Mick's queer crip relationship to the social world. She prefers solitude and the hum of music to the antics of other children her age, saying that "next to a real piano [she] sure would rather have some place to [herself] than anything" (51). She is unable to establish relationships with other children in school, noting how "she walked up

and down the halls by herself […] She wasn't a member of any bunch" (104), and she does not enjoy sharing her interests or achievements with others: "She had always kept things to herself […] Nobody knew […] Nobody knew" (53-54). This crip relationship to the social world is in many ways maintained and heightened by Mick's queer – androgynous – identity. Mick is introduced early on as "a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve," who is "dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so that at first glance she [is] like a very young boy" (18). Mick's choice of clothing is not a result of her socioeconomic positioning. She has access to her older and hyper feminine sisters' clothes, but she chooses to present herself as androgynous:

> 'It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy's clothes. Somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave,' Etta said. 'Shut up,' said Mick. 'I wear shorts because I don't want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don't want to be like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day.' (42)

Despite the threats of her older sisters, Mick actively defies the normative gender roles of her time, resulting in a freakish embodiment that has a similarly stigmatizing effect to her autism. Young school girls around Mick's age do not wish to socialize with someone who prefers solitude, daydreams about music all day, and struggles to hold a normative conversation, nor do they wish to socialize with a girl who intentionally dresses like a boy. Similar to Singer, Mick's freakish embodiment results in intense social seclusion, giving her a constant "queer feeling" (101) to assure readers that she is aware of her social positioning and the ways in which her normative peers see her queer crip social expressions. Mick's awareness of her social seclusion is a driving force for her grotesque performances throughout the novel. In an attempt to fit in more with the girls at school, Mick attempts to suppress – or rather, transgress – her queer

crip identity in order to become something different – something more – than what she appears to the normative eye. It is for this reason that Mick throws the prom party that we looked at in chapter 1. Recall that Mick's preparation for the prom scene, in which she was able to temporarily subdue her feelings of freakishness and the consequent pressure to conform to social norms by dressing in a way that embodies the Southern Belle, is a performance of the grotesque - a transcending of the threshold of normative existence by passing as feminine and able-bodied while living as an autistic, androgynous freak. This grotesque performance has been analyzed by Gleeson-White again through the lens of queer studies. She argues that, in her preparation for prom, Mick bathes herself so as to wash the queerness away. It is only after she is cleansed – pure, like the Southern Belle – that Mick is able to don the hyper feminine clothes that her sisters gave her – to become something more than the androgynous freak. But in the same way that her analysis of Singer's suicide is limited by its unidimensional examination of his identity, Gleeson White's analysis of Mick's prom scene is limited by its failure to acknowledge the ways in which her crip identity is intricately intertwined with her embodiment of the Southern Belle. Inherent in the adherence to compulsory heterosexuality is the adherence to compulsory able-bodiedness. In an analysis of Mick, one must identify her defiance of both in order to adequately address the ways in which her freakish embodiment influences her ability to navigate the social world.

Mick's prom scene reaches its climax during the prom, at which point Mick, rather than solely having to reconcile the discord between herself (as a queer crip) and her bodily performance (as a normative social participant) like she is challenged to do in her prom preparation, Mick is now torn in three directions – forced to reconcile the incongruent relationship between herself, her bodily performance, and her social environment (her body performs what she and society want it to perform).

During the prom, Mick's fancy Vocational invitees intermingle with the lower-class, rowdy neighborhood kids, and Mick is both ashamed and disappointed. She had hoped to impress the Vocational students so that she could create a new Mick at her new school – a normative Mick that has friends. But her old life – her freakish life – and her new life – her "masquerading as a Southern Belle," grotesque life – clash at the prom. The result is a circus-like gathering at the ditch down the end of Mick's street, where the lines between adulthood – the dressed up Vocational students – and childhood – the dirt-stained kids on the block – are blurred. All of the children sprint to have a "regular old playing-out" together at the ditch (115), but unlike the other kids, Mick is unable to normatively inhabit the space. The discord between her desired performance (as an autistic androgyne), her bodily performance (as a masquerading mature Southern Belle), and her expected social performance (comingling with the other children in a simultaneously childlike and mature social interaction) is too much for her to maintain. The result is a highly grotesque queer crip performance in which Mick accepts that she will never be a member of any bunch.

> 'The ditch!' […] She ran until she reached the little wavy flames and then she jumped. With her tennis shoes she would have landed like a cat – but the high pumps made her slip and her stomach hit this pipe. Her breath stopped. She lay quiet with her eyes closed. The party – For a long time she remembered how she thought it would be, how she imagined the new people at Vocational. And about the bunch she wanted to be with every day. She would feel different in the halls now […] It was O.K. about the ruined party. But it was all over. It was the end. Mick climbed out of the ditch […] Nothing was changed about the party except her. She walked home slowly. When she passed kids she didn't speak or look at them. The decoration in the hall was torn down and the house seemed very empty because everyone had gone outside. In the bathroom she took off the blue evening dress. The hem was torn and she folded it so the raggedy place wouldn't show.

> The rhinestone tiara was lost somewhere. Her old shorts and shirt were lying on the floor just where she had left them. She put them on. (116)

Mick, in her forced transformation into the womanly Southern Belle, is unable to simultaneously occupy the roles of playful child and mature adult. Whereas the transition for the other children is natural, insofar as their genders and ability statuses do not shift, Mick's transition is complicated by her masquerading. Playful, childlike Mick is the autistic androgyne. Mature, adult Mick is the grotesque Southern Belle. To reconcile her body's need to be an autistic androgynous child with her mind's desire to be a normative mature young woman and her peers' expectations that she exist in flux between adulthood and childhood – the two Mick's, but also a more normative version of the childlike Mick – becomes a daunting and nearly impossible task. To perform in a normative way would mean not merely masquerading as a normative young woman but entirely reconstructing her identity so as to erase the part of her childhood self that is an autistic androgyne. The performance would be entirely grotesque. Impractical as it may seem, Mick attempts this transformation by leaping into the dirt pit – the first one of all the other children. She got a running start, and there exists a moment of intense hope for Mick, who, as a character, has experienced little more than a deep isolation from her normative peers.

She jumps…

She jumps…

And she lands painfully. Her stomach hitting a pipe, and all of the breath, along with her hopes, escape from her body.

Mick is unable to reconcile her freakishness – her queer crip identity – with her participation in the normative social world. Her disregard for the other children on her

melancholic, slow walk home is a secession. It is a realization for both Mick and *Heart's* readers that a performance of the grotesque is merely that – a performance. The Mick that we see in this scene is not *truly* Mick, nor is it how the normative world perceives her. Despite her failure to complete this final transformation, Mick's performance is still grotesque in that she is queering and cripping the social world by inhabiting social spaces in a non-normative way. But it is certainly not solely her queer identity that makes this performance grotesque.

Contingent upon the "washing away" of her queerness is the "washing away" of Mick's disability, as to practice compulsory heteronormativity is to simultaneously practice compulsory able-bodiedness. In her masquerading as a mature Southern Belle (non-queer, as Gleeson White notes), Mick also masquerades as able-bodied in her drastically unnatural attempts to socialize with her peers. Recall that "next to a real piano [Mick] sure would rather have some place to [herself] than anything" (51). The sole motivation for Mick's performance in this scene, then, is to conform to overwhelming social pressures – especially those from her sisters – that encourage her to not be read as freakish anymore so that she can have and make friends and normatively participate in the social world. But for Mick to not be a freak means she must be both heteronormative *and* able-bodied. The two are contingent upon one another, so it is again difficult to tease them apart. But simply arguing that Mick's heteronormativity includes able-bodiedness without giving importance and recognition to the crip part of her identity is to flatten and oversimplify the importance of her queer crip existence in the social world. It should also be noted that one could argue that Mick might have friends if she was solely androgynous and not autistic, as Mick's autism might be the reason for her intense social isolation. Nevertheless, even this argument would seem to erase the importance of her multilayered freakish embodiment. Mick's initial isolation from her school-aged peers is a result of her dually androgynous and

autistic practices. An analysis of her grotesque performance, then, - her normative masquerading – must be an analysis of her queer *and* crip transgression.

For McCullers, herself, was both queer and crip, and, as explored previously, both McCullers and her critics support the claim that her fiction is an autobiography of her life. So, what do we lose by only acknowledging the ways in which Mick is queer or crip in her freakish embodiment? In our failure to understand the complex ways in which Mick is challenged to navigate the normative social world, we also fail to fully see and understand McCullers's existence in 1940s Southern culture, where queerness and disability were also signifiers of freakish bodies, cause for discrimination and isolation, and resulted in McCullers's grotesque participation in the social world. Therefore, if we cannot see McCullers's intersecting social positionings and the challenges that she faced, then we cannot securely position *Heart* within the canon of protest literature. Its creation as a work of social protest is therefore diminished by its limited public reception – limited in the way of thought, not in physical access. So, while acknowledging the important "first steps" work that Gleeson-White has done in these past two queer studies analyses, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which her analysis is now obsolete. They fall short in their understanding of the grotesque through freak embodiment. Taking a queer crip approach to analyzing these characters is now the more accurate way of doing this kind of work.

And a queer crip approach to analysis is precisely what we will take in our final reworking of a scene in which Biff Brannon performs the grotesque. Like Mick's androgynous, genderqueer existence, Biff Brannon, the New York Café owner and recent widower in *Heart*, is referred to with masculine pronouns yet wears feminine rings on his fingers (234), sews (123), wears perfume (224), washes his hair with a feminine lemon rinse (226), carries a purse (233),

and wishes he was a mother (133). But this femme performance is not a constant state of being for Biff throughout the novel. Prior to occupying his widower status, Biff wore a facade, unnaturally altering his identity in order to conform to the masculine ideals that both his wife and society demanded from him. It is for this reason that one could argue that Biff is performing the grotesque for the entire first half of the novel - performing in the social world in a way that the "normal" individual is unable to do by passing as straight and able-bodied while living as a queer crip. It is only after Alice passes away that Biff is able to openly navigate the social world as a femme queer crip.

But his dissatisfaction with the long-lasting suppression of his identity does not go without notice by readers. In a scene in which Biff stares longingly at Mick's androgynous gender performance, he reflects

> Why was it that the smartest people most missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches. And he even proved it himself – the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids. (132-133)

Biff's later openly femme performance is rooted in his earlier impotence, a result of the complicated relationship he has with his wife, Alice, and his struggle to reconcile his body dysmorphia – his desire to be a woman but his social need to be a man. Biff also suffers from crippling social anxiety when interacting with women. This social anxiety causes his impotence and is a result of his body dysmorphia, making Biff's queer crip identity, perhaps more so than any other character's, intricately intertwined and impossible to distinguish as separate entities.

Also unlike other characters, Biff's queer crip identity is constantly in flux. In the parts of the novel where he is forced to perform "heteronormativity," he develops anxiety as a result of his queer identity suppression. In the parts of the novel where Biff is able to express his queerness, his anxiety fades.

In the following bathroom/bedroom scene where Biff bathes himself before crawling into bed, we can observe the interrelated nature of Biff's queer crip existence as well as the full extent of how he experiences the world through his queer crip identity.

> He stripped off his undervest and began to wash himself. Always he was scrupulously clean from the belt upward. Every morning he soaped his chest and arms and neck and feet – and about twice during the season he got into the bathtub and cleaned all of his parts. Biff stood by the bed, waiting impatiently for Alice to get up. From the window he saw that the day would be windless and burning hot. Alice had finished reading the lesson. She still lay lazily across the bed, although she knew that he was waiting. A calm, sullen anger rose in him. He chuckled ironically. Then he said with bitterness: 'If you like I can sit and read the paper awhile. But I wish you would let me sleep now.' Alice began dressing herself and Biff made up the bed. Deftly he reversed the sheets in all possible ways, putting the top one on the bottom, and turning them over and upside down. When the bed was smoothly made he waited until Alice had left the room before he slipped off his trousers and crawled inside. (McCullers 32)

This scene, although a seemingly normal interaction between a sleepy husband and wife, is essential to the examination of Biff's queerness and disability, as the couple's relationship is reflective of Biff's relationship to the greater social world: forced, fearful, strained, and angry. Owing to his body dysmorphia, Biff is hesitant to look at his penis, which is why he only bathes himself from the belt up each day. This body dysmorphia results in Biff's anxiety in front of

Alice – his unwillingness to take his pants off until she leaves the room. This anxiety then causes Biff to be impotent, which is why he fears getting into bed while Alice is still in it.

At this point in time in the novel, Biff is attempting to embody hyper masculine characteristics while being forced into social situations with which he is not comfortable. Like Mick's unnatural suppression of her true queer and disabled expressions, Biff's "normative" performance is forced and creates a strained relationship between his body and his social environment. In order to avoid social stigma and seclusion, he buries his truly queer self to mold to that which is socially acceptable, resulting in a simultaneously crip identity. Yet unlike Mick's brief transformation, Biff's queer crip suppression is long-standing. Throughout his entire life, he has never been able to express his true gender or participate in a comfortable social scenario with his wife, and, at this point in the novel, his suppression has no foreseeable end. Therefore, his bitter anger at Alice can be seen as a rational response to the forced social environment that he has been ceaselessly placed in, which, per Alice's unwillingness to move from the bed, is an unforgiving an unaccommodating environment. And Brannon's bitter desire to "sleep now" can be read, albeit quite figuratively, as a desire to escape from the unaccommodating, fiercely heteronormative and able-bodied world that he inhabits.

Yet, after Alice dies, Brannon is free to embrace his freakish identity. He openly displays his feminine characteristics to the social world and is no longer forced into heteronormative sociosexual encounters, allowing his anxiety to wane. Although the result of this open embracing of his freakishness is seclusion and the lasting demarcation as an "abnormal" freakish outsider, Biff, like Singer, chooses to expand his masculine repertoire in order to establish a queer crip relation to the social world rather than maintain a suppressed form of his identity.

For “nature is not abnormal, only lifelessness is abnormal. Anything that pulses and moves and walks around the room, no matter what thing it is doing, is natural and human,” McCullers wrote in an article for *Esquire* in 1959. Her determination to advocate for those who were stripped of their personhood for being non-normative according to the “backward Southern community” that she inhabited is seen clearly in her creation of *Heart,* its queer crip characters, and the lasting impact that their lives (and therefore McCullers’s life) has had and continues to have on its readers. By depicting freakish bodies that grotesquely navigate the social world, McCullers was given a global spotlight to comment on the unjust sociopolitical limitations of personhood. Her portrayal of freaks as bodies that transgress social norms and challenge the normative social world effectively redefined the bodily experience by challenging the discreteness of identity. By taking a broader, more productive approach to analyzing *Heart,* which I’ve done by using a queer crip lens, future critics will be able to preserve the political promise and potential of McCullers’s grotesque novel, a literary vehicle through which she hoped freaks could enter public discourse.

# Afterword

So, what? We have completed queer crip analyses of McCullers's *Heart* and have effectively reworked past critical analyses that are too flat and oversimplified in their acknowledgement of *Heart's* political potential. Is our work done? Our work is never done. What are the implications of this queer crip analysis? Why is it important that we did it? This political reworking of McCullers's semi-autobiographical novel not only securely and more accurately positions *Heart* within the canon of protest literature, but it has larger implications for how future critics analyze literary performances of the grotesque. Rather than approaching a character's freakish embodiment from a unidimensional lens, this work encourages critics to explore the many complex ways that a character's identity has been constructed to perform the grotesque. For one cannot truly recognize an author's vision – a work's political potential – by examining that which is most visible or obvious. For the most revelatory moments of this work have occurred when recognizing that which is so closely associated with something else, that the two entities seem nearly indistinguishable.

I can only hope that future critics of McCullers's work will someday converse with my analyses in the same way that I have done with other scholars of *Heart*. As our collective understanding of intersectionality, critical theory, and feminist work continues to grow, I can only assume that one day my analysis will be interpreted as flat and oversimplified in its acknowledgement of the queer crip. In much the same way that the work of the critics with whom I've engaged in this thesis was at one point revolutionary, my work will cease to fully acknowledge the ways in which McCullers's characters embody freakishness and perform the grotesque. Future critics will ask questions like, what about their socioeconomic status? What about their age, race, and other identity factors of which I have not yet considered? For now, I

can answer that I have sat with these questions and given them some deep thought, and I stick by my decision to solely look at the ways in which these characters navigate the social world as queer crip individuals. For our modern understanding of the literary grotesque, freakishness, and McCullers's *Heart*, the work that I have done is the extent of the critical thinking done in the field. But I say this knowing, and hoping, that future scholars make obsolete – or rather, view it as a first stepping stone to a larger understanding of life as literature as social protest.

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