

# meaning part 1

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# things

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“Things”—the word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday.  
—BILL BROWN, “Thing Theory”

Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is.  
—ALBERT CAMUS, *The Rebel*

Having provided in the introduction some attention to key concepts and the presentation of an intellectual map for this project framed in light of the work with which it might be assumed connected, in this chapter I tackle dimensions of materiality—types of things. This attention to things is highlighted here and discussed as representing two fundamental mechanisms at work in my understanding of religion.

## Things

As Daniel Miller rightly reflects, materiality figures into our systems of religion as a benefit or a problem to solve. Either way, matter matters. But there is a difference worth stating for the sake of context. For Miller in what he frames as the “humility of things,” the significance of things and their impact on us is most forceful when we do not see them. “The less we are aware of them,” he writes, “the more powerfully they can determine our expectations

by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge.”<sup>1</sup> With respect to materiality, this points to something Foucault says regarding the “power” of discourses found in the disappearance of discussion—imposing parameters, shaping and controlling bodies without being spoken.

My sense of things is different in that I want to highlight what I believe takes place when things are noticed, when we are confronted by things consciously arranged in selected time and space. And within this interplay I want to highlight the flexibility of things, which points out the “thingliness” of things.<sup>2</sup>

Thingliness—having something to do with “duration and presence” recognized and encountered—is not, for me, another way of speaking simply about human intentionality.<sup>3</sup> Sure, humans create and display things, arrange them, and name them—and in this way the human body-thing of concern here is a “naming” thing over against things named.<sup>4</sup> But there is something about this placement in time and space often against the assumed utility of these things (e.g., chairs not for sitting) that calls to the fluidity of things beyond our first observation of them, or in other words our first creation/placement and learning of them.<sup>5</sup> All of this points to things as opposed to objects in that the latter might be understood as pertaining to that which is “relatively stable in form.”<sup>6</sup> Objects, in this case, are materials metaphysically flat and lacking dimension in terms of their connection to human life. Things, unlike objects, have a pedagogical quality to them. Things have an interactive, connected quality. As a way of pointing to this “activity” or “presence,” I use “thing” as opposed to “object.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in speaking of the naming-thing, it should be noted that my concern here is not with the ontology of the human—what the human is. Rather, I am concerned with the body, which I want to understand as a particular type of thing.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the function of things celebrated by religious tradition systems, religion as a technology, as I define it, does not point to some metaphysical *something* beyond the reach of our historical grasp.

The thingliness (or openness) of things is the stuff of religion as a technology’s use of things.<sup>9</sup> Put another way, things, by means of religion as a technology’s interrogation, are pushed beyond them/themselves—beyond what we first notice about them—and offer opportunity to train a different awareness as this is encouraged by recognition of their openness (i.e., their presence together, to borrow from Camus). What do things push us to do, to think, to sense? They are invested by us (with us) in the same way a speed bump “is not made of matter, ultimately; it is full of engineers and chancellors

and law makers, comingling their wills and their story lines with those of gravel, concrete, paint, and standard calculations.”<sup>10</sup> The thingliness of a thing is constituted in an important way by its ability to push on bodied naming-things—to urge a particular set of questions and concerns about the world as we think we know it, encounter it, and want it to be.

For Bill Brown, things are objects imbued with “a metaphysical dimension.”<sup>11</sup> I do not want to go that far. While this might be the intent within the framework of traditional religious systems, again, my concern is with the working premise that religion is not a system as such but a technology and, hence, does not invest things with deep meaning. Still, what Brown and others associated with thing theory posit is of value here in that it offers a lens by means of which to observe what takes place when religion as a technology engages.

The thingliness of a thing is the thing active and impinging beyond its physical space—oozing or seeping beyond the boundaries we had hoped to set for it. This openness of things involves a disruption by means of which material is reconfigured, combined, and put to a work not necessarily intended in the material’s borrowed form. Things are also sticky in that they connect beyond themselves; there is fluidity to their interactions marked by an ability to shape change—which is not a quality present in objects despite what importance they might have in the daily workings of human life. “So things,” writes Ian Hodder, “are connected by the fact that they work together. . . . In all these ways the material world is connected to our bodies, to other things, to society, to the other parts in the complex networks.”<sup>12</sup> Things, therefore: (1) force a confrontation with ourselves in that we are connected to, related to these things with which we have a shared history; (2) prompt us to wonder if there is more to this relationship: Do these things urge other considerations and scopes? Do the production, arrangement, and interrogation of these things tell us all I can know about others, the world? These questions have to do with what we perceive as the fragility but also durability of things over against the particular limits of bodied naming-things in motion.

### Observing Things

Things and/with/against/for naming-things: There are numerous formulations of this relationship. For example, there are the various ways Heidegger represents things: “present-at-hand” or “ready-to-hand,” which give a sense of things, including utility. But there are also things thinging as a way of framing the human’s (i.e., Dasein or “being there”) relationship to things. And

as numerous scholars have pointed out, there is a growing move from a strict functional concern with human use of things to some consideration of things as things.<sup>13</sup> I conceptualize the relationship by thinking in terms of the *naming-thing* (i.e., the human as bodied thing/being/doing) and things as thing being thing (or *thing-thing* for short). Over the course of the book, what I mean by and intend to perform by means of this conceptual framework will become clearer.

More will be said on art and things in chapter 2. For now, I want to further clarify the nature of things within the context of artistic work. In exploring the technology of religion's potential relationship to the arts, I highlight particular genres and moments of artistic presentation, in part because art as discussed here is a wide scope in that it incorporates into it other strategies (e.g., other things meant to speak about naming-things such as written texts, images, statues, wood, stones, and music). In offering this argument, I am making a distinction between the technology of the artist and religion as a technology. I am not concerned fundamentally (although this will come up at times) with the specifics of the development of artistic work—the mechanics of putting together an exhibit, for example; instead I refer to artistic production examined through religion as a technology, arguing that this process of exploration does not require the status of, say, a preacher (artist as religious leader), but rather the artist as a naming-thing interacting with thing-things offers opportunity for a particular type of analysis and interrogation of our circumstances. Encounter with circumstances (e.g., the world) is inevitable as a type of “spewing forth” marking the naming-thing-human condition, but *particular* modes of encounter and particular expressions of that encounter are not.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to suggest that things beyond their creation do not impact the naming-thing. To the contrary, naming-things are influenced and affected by all sorts of materiality.<sup>15</sup> There is a mutual orientation and impact between naming-things and thing-things. They are open and, as the title of the book claims, marked by presence together. I do not want to push this point of mutual influence too far in part because my concern with art means a limit on conversation to those things-things manipulated and placed by naming-things; and this might include things not created by naming-things but rather simply placed in alternate spaces (e.g., rocks and wood). In this way, I also give attention here to things not necessarily created by naming-things but impacting naming-things as they (thing-things) are pulled into artistic expression.

Through artistic production and presentation, I mean to highlight the plasticity, the nonfixed quality, or the openness of things so as to better

understand the activity of things.<sup>16</sup> Use a chair in this way, or wear a pair of pants that way, and so on is lost as the logic of interaction is shifted by the artist and the placement of things.<sup>17</sup> What naming-things know and understand about thing-things is shifted, and this fosters a productive dissonance by means of a deeper awareness of openness to things. Art, then, involves a particularly useful mapping of the relationship between naming-things and thing-things that shows at one time something about both. Art that highlights what we understand as ordinary things—things that we encounter during the course of mundane dealings—provides an important lesson related to the significant linkages between naming-things and thing-things. There is something important in the effort of figures such as Antony Hudek to demonstrate “the artist’s privileged role in rerouting, recycling, deviating, transforming and *deturning* . . . the object.” And Hudek continues, “This role is far from one of mastery of ‘subjectivity’; rather it hints at a capacity to inhabit the object world, to engage with and translate it for the benefit of other objects and subjects alike.”<sup>18</sup> I would make a modification to this assertion, one in line with the work of thing theorists such as Bill Brown, and that is to note the manner in which objects become things—in this context through the arts.<sup>19</sup> By means of artistic production, things are exposed to themselves, naming-things, and to circumstances, and this takes place without the ability of the artistic exhibit location to limit significantly the impact of this scope of openness.<sup>20</sup>

What Arthur Danto says when reflecting on Andy Warhol’s *Hammer and Sickle* and other work such as *Campbell’s Soup* in a general sense speaks to what I mean by the work of things. According to Danto, “His soups are in sacramental celebration of their earthly reality, simply as what one might call one’s daily soup, as what one eats day after day. . . . If this sacramental return of the thing to itself through art is the energy which drove him as an artist to bring into the center of his work what had never, really, been celebrated before . . .”<sup>21</sup> I end this section with this incomplete thought because it is sufficient to frame my point. Religion as a technology often employs artistic production to highlight the thingliness—or openness—of things, and in this way makes possible through interrogation of things in time and space greater awareness of our circumstances (i.e., world) and our place in those circumstances. It provides no answers, just clarity, or what one might call deeper awareness regarding the connotations of our circumstances as naming-things in a world of other things. Before offering more detail regarding art and things, it is important to further explicate what I mean by naming-things.

## Other Things

There are types of things. Here I offer some distinction between things by giving attention to what I above referenced as naming-things. In so doing, the general theme of things presented previously obtains greater detail through this somewhat rough categorization of things in the form of thing-things and naming-things.<sup>22</sup> While the potential scope is expansive, in this book I limit myself to a particular naming-thing—the bodied naming-thing.<sup>23</sup> Through attention to the bodied naming-thing, I mean to highlight a particular structure of the naming-thing (i.e., body) and its relationship to other things.<sup>24</sup> In this way I provide a discursive mechanism for framing the interplay between things that undergirds chapters in the remaining two sections of the volume. I entertain the perception of the body as signifying or “naming” thing akin to what John Frow has in mind when arguing, “Persons, too, count or can count as things. This is the real strangeness: that persons and things are kin; the world is many, not double.”<sup>25</sup> And recognition of—perhaps even naming of—circumstances (i.e., world) and human/circumstances amounts to a moralistic awareness or lucidity in relation to the conditions of life.<sup>26</sup> Hinted at here, but more fully expressed later, is the notion of things—including bodied naming-things—as “open.”<sup>27</sup>

Naming-things are bodied, and other things—still other things. They have “form,” but they ooze into each other, inform each other. “Abjection,” one might say, works in the shadow of an assumption, an assumption of a difference as possible—cleanliness, for instance.<sup>28</sup> This said, and in light of the scope of my argument, the most compelling depiction of bodied naming-things and their interplay is found in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorizing of grotesque realism.<sup>29</sup>

## On the Grotesque

Before addressing what Bakhtin’s sense of the grotesque offers my thinking on open-bodied naming-things, I provide contextual comments on what I consider a negation of a Bakhtin sensibility. This negation takes place through a theological taming of the grotesque that reduces it to service on behalf of a theistic sensibility tied to immaterial hope. In offering this discussion, I am not suggesting all theology works in this manner and produces a desire for closure framed by an energetic appeal to transformation in the form of wholeness or union with something greater. I am not interested in grotesque as a theological category—or even aesthetic category—but rather as a way of

theoretically capturing the nature of the open body—the body put on view by religion as a technology. And so my purpose is not a critique of theology per se as if it uniquely lends itself to matters of wholeness—for example, closure through bounded life. Rather, I use this discussion in a more limited fashion as a helpful counterpoint in that it also provides a direct reading of Bakhtin in light of a traditional definition of religion (e.g., highlighting institutions, doctrine, and ritual). And by means of this contrast I offer a way to further mark out and clarify my application of his theorizing of the grotesque in line with my sense of religion as a technology and over against traditional notions of religion. To make this point, I turn to Wilson Yates’s reading of *Rabelais and His World*.<sup>30</sup>

The open body, Yates acknowledges, is for Bakhtin a vital and vibrant body—whose eating, pissing, and defecating is not to be denounced or hidden.<sup>31</sup> “The grotesque,” writes Yates, “refers to aspects of human experience that we have denied validity to, that we have rejected, excoriated, attempted to eliminate and image as a distorted aspect of reality.”<sup>32</sup> Yet he narrows the scope of the grotesque by reading it through the “perspective of the Christian mythos” and in light of a series of questions: “Does the grotesque take on a different meaning for one who creates and looks at it from within a faith stance and from within a world already well-formed by its own mythos? And . . . what does the grotesque have to say to us about basic Christian perspectives such as the nature of creation, the human condition, the possibility of transformed life?”<sup>33</sup> These questions posed and, more to the point, the answers Yates provides entail a taming of the grotesque—an effort to confine its reach and implications for the messy nature of life. Yates forgets the context of carnival—of an antichurch moment in certain respects—within which Bakhtin finds and celebrates the grotesque. The grotesque is not simply physical deformity, monsters, as Yates seems to think. Bakhtin presents it as a description of the state of being porous, open, exposed.

Some of what Bakhtin has in mind, I believe, has been demonstrated recently in exhibits by Tori Wrånes (*Ældgammel Baby*) and Overtaci (*Overtaci and the Art of Madness*), both at Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, Denmark.<sup>34</sup> The former involves several rooms set apart and marked off by darkness except for a few dedicated lights illuminating various objects accompanied by the haunting sound of a voice. Projected on the walls are figures wearing bright-colored outerwear and with faces disturbing in their proportions, colors, and exaggerated features that resemble the extremes of the grotesque discussed by Bakhtin. They are suspended in space and seem to come toward the viewer. In another room is a figure without a head, with

shoulders pinned to the ground and legs outstretched, with another character balancing with one foot atop the bottom figure's foot. The body seems in motion, but this is not the odd component. Instead, the grotesqueness is expressed through the replacement of much of the top figure's face with two birds emerging from/as the face of the figure. This is not a monster, but rather the blending of "things," pointing to the porous nature of bodied naming-things. Overtaci provides an even more graphic depiction of this porousness giving way to blending. This is captured through the presentation of figures that intermingle various life-forms and in the process create something novel, something new—such as an eye in the palm of a hand or the head of a "creature" whose large eye is composed of (or houses) smaller creatures and whose other orifices contain bodied things that have penetrated the head.<sup>35</sup> Neither artist rejects penetrated and penetrating figures; instead, they seem to endorse or assume the normative status of such open things.

The mimicking of the bodied naming-thing through technology can further create dissonance-prompting recognition of the blending of things (e.g., video, plastic, and the characteristics of the naming-thing) as a sign of mutability. Ed Atkins's *Ribbons*, part of the Louisiana Museum (Copenhagen, Denmark) *Being There* exhibit, provides a graphic example of what I have in mind.<sup>36</sup> In a room, there are three large video screens with the avatar Dave speaking (in the voice of the artist), drinking, farting, urinating, bleeding, "all signifiers of a physical body leaking with imperfection." And while the artistic statement calls into question the ability of technology to capture a "physical being's vulnerability and imperfection," I would suggest the discomfort fostered by Atkins's use of technology to ape the bodied naming-thing is enough to suggest the nature of this naming-thing is without clear boundaries; it is without an integrity that prevents disruption.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, it can be aped, and through technology the aping renders the limits and vulnerabilities of the bodied naming-thing perpetually present.

Returning to my read against Yates, the porous and penetrated nature of the bodied naming-thing (with all the accompanying sights, smells, sounds, and activities) is not rescued by the myth of salvation premised on the lingering image of God contained in and by that bodied naming-thing. Yates claims his depiction does not cause the grotesque to lose its edge. But to use a musical analogy, Yates positions the grotesque as a hymn of sorts complete with a desire for closure from the world, while I argue that a more useful framing involves the grotesque sung through the blues—for example, the graphic and celebrated interaction with and exposure to the workings of life. In other words, Yates sees the grotesque as a condition of life to be resolved

through faith and the workings of divine forces.<sup>38</sup> According to Bakhtin, and I follow his lead here, nothing is gained by attempting to overcome grotesquery; to think so is to paint it as a negative and to fail to recognize the nature of embodied life. This is not to say that values are missing from human thinking and doing; they are present. However, there is no reason to assume such values bend to the will of Christian doctrine. Rather, these values might just signify doctrinal-theological assumptions concerning embodied and material life. They are bluesy values that relate porous thing to porous thing, rather than porous body to its “fix” called “god.”

For Yates, the grotesque speaks a theological language framed by a grammar of “sin” and “judgment.”<sup>39</sup> Hence, grotesquery might on the surface disturb or create a certain type of dissonance, but according to Yates, “the horrifying character they take can itself speak, both to and out of the context of the church.”<sup>40</sup> Yates notes that the grotesque upends “our world view and moral codes,” but he does not have in mind the worldview and moral codes of the religious in relationship to the church. Yates means unproductive—nonfaithful moral codes and worldviews—codes or values that will not bend to staid Christian doctrine and that refuse priority of the church over against the “folk.”<sup>41</sup> He wants to understand the moral codes and worldview under threat as being those that do not point in the direction of the will and eternal truths of the divine. The grotesque, he would have us believe, is a rejection of efforts to turn humans into gods.<sup>42</sup> I would not assert divinity as the agenda for Bakhtin; no, the goal is to render humans more fully material—porous and unfixed. This is what Bakhtin means by the value of the degraded. Grotesque realism is content with this world and projects little concern for unseen realms populated by more perfect beings. This is because it refuses to see oozing, defecating, urinating bodied naming-things as a problem to solve. With Yates’s Christianization of the grotesque a wager is established: one can have one’s theology or one’s bodied naming-thing.

Yates fails to note that the activities—the defecating and pissing in public—Bakhtin’s sense of the grotesque highlights (without judgment) were roundly condemned by the Christian church as oppositional to its theological-ethical sensibility. He believes imagery of the grotesque “in the drama of religious life” takes us “out of everyday life and provides us with a different way of seeing the center—the center in its demonic manifestation and the center as the place alone where we can know the grace of God.”<sup>43</sup> However, it is the stuff, the activity of everyday life, that is highlighted by the grotesque in that these are the activities pointing to the porous and open nature of the body and thereby its capacity for mutuality. Christianity, to the contrary, seeks

to seal off the body for the love of God and only allow its penetration (on special occasions) by the divine. The Christian tradition, among others, is notorious for its suspicion concerning the body—preferring the clean soul to bodies so easily soiled. Mindful of Bakhtin’s presentation of the defecating body, what Coco Fusco says concerning the “West” (i.e., the West as a posture or mindset as opposed to geographic location) in general is applicable to the religious “West” in particular: “Excrement derives its subversive power within the history of Western art as the least abstractable substance in a society with a prevailing modernist aesthetic that privileges transcendence over the material.”<sup>44</sup> Yates truncates the body whose openness is addressed, and to some extent ended, through relationship with God: communion, pain, and suffering (as exemplified by the Cross) resolved through hope and redemption. In this sense theodicy, sacrology, and eschatology are intertwined. And in this theological framework, religious tradition and practice are in fact a betrayal of religion to the extent it turns a technology into a substance.

So much religious studies and theological work assumes the body and claims a paradigmatic attachment to embodied bodies. Yet this is visual, metaphoric, and symbolic in nature. Yes, in some cases it is acknowledged that these bodies eat, they cum—but they do not defecate or piss without shame. To the extent traditions like Christianity dominant through a figure of excellence (i.e., Christ) that evacuates waste only in the form of ethical sin, how could it be otherwise? To the extent body waste is “eliminated” from discussions of bodies in theology and religious studies, they are discourses of mythic bodies addressing a range of ideas but without sufficient material grounding and premised on a rather sterile logic—an idyllic Christian formulation of life and embodiment honoring a shadowy figure of Christ. Followers of the figure expel waste, but their Christ does not—although he eats and drinks. He is the fulfillment of the law, as they note, but not with respect to its acknowledgment of human waste and other fluids.<sup>45</sup> This has had conveniences for a Christian sense of bodies: “And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know ye him no more. Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:15–17). Through Bakhtin, *imago Dei* is exposed as a lie. The human body, unlike the exemplar Christ, is known to be porous—with openings that expose it. Human waste, for instance, announces the deception of the life of *imago Dei*. Christ did not defecate, although those in his line of

descent, as the Hebrew Bible points out, did. Artists have pointed out this open and grotesque body whereas so many religious thinkers have attempted to overcome it.<sup>46</sup>

As Yates demonstrates, the effort to posit a Christianized grotesque theology loses something. It loses the “realism” in Bakhtin’s grotesque realism and pushes for an altered perception of the bodied naming-thing—one that loses its openness through a fixed *imago Dei* perception of being. Thereby the more graphic and earthy dimensions of this grotesque body, as Bakhtin presents it, are sanctified. Rather than being degraded (in Bakhtin’s sense of the word—e.g., materiality and integration into the world), the human body—as I read Yates—is exulted and freed from the urine and feces between which it is born, according to St. Augustine, and through which it speaks to the life-death binary that is its frame of reference. Yates and others working within traditional theological discourses might agree with Bakhtin that the human is “becoming,” but they would mean something different by that statement. Bakhtin points to the dualism of life-death, food-waste, and so forth, framing the movement of the grotesque body. For some theistic theologians, on the other hand, this is a becoming that pushes in a cosmic direction with the intent of freeing the bodied naming-thing from more troubling dimensions of that porous status.<sup>47</sup> This, according to these theologians, entails a vertical dynamic of growth and increasing closed-ness. For Bakhtin, the better read involves openness to horizontal development by means of which the embodied (and oozing) nature of embodied life is not lost but is amplified.<sup>48</sup> In terms of the role of religion in this: religion as a technology probes and turns back on the bodied naming-thing and exposes its grotesque nature.

Maintaining a focus on *Rabelais and His World*, I now want to offer a different read of the grotesque, one less constrained by the theologized body of Christ and traditional framings of religion.

### Grotesque Realism

The folk practices of carnival—intriguing to Bakhtin—undercut the authority of the church, belittle its awful proclamations, and highlight those activities of the body long held with disdain by many Christians.<sup>49</sup> Think in terms of carnival’s rejection of “grand unity” of any kind that pushes beyond what is tangible about the world: “it,” in fact, “was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.”<sup>50</sup> For instance, carnival replaces ritualized penetration by the divine with the open naming-thing defecating in public. Grotesque realism, a grand theory of collective engagement emerging out of the practices

of embodied “folk culture,” is for the open-bodied naming-thing a safeguard against theological efforts to pretend the integrity of boundaries. The church, and what Yates wants to claim from the grotesque (salvation for the individual soul), works against the very nature of the grotesque: it rejects efforts toward individualization that cut off naming-things from other open naming-things and thing-things. Instead, grotesque realism arranges material life in terms of groups—of collectives.<sup>51</sup>

Such framing of life in terms of the “people” gives the activities of naming-things a more significant presence, which is difficult for theological organizations and their teachings to undo. Grotesque realism by means of a carnivalistic impulse is something of an existential centripetal force resulting in the centering of the defecating naming-thing exposed to and in the world. For Bakhtin, eating and drinking are two of the most significant illustrations of the naming body as open. It is through these activities, for example, that the world is taken into the body whereby “the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense.”<sup>52</sup> And of course, this open naming-thing pushes itself back into the world as it urinates and defecates. This is not to suggest that the naming-thing has no distinctiveness; rather, it is to say this distinctiveness is superseded and countered by its openness and by its “points of intersection.”<sup>53</sup>

Whereas Christian theologizing cannot resist a grammar of transcendence, the grotesque represents a different register in that “the essential principle of grotesque realism is *degradation*, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”<sup>54</sup> Degrading in the theological language of thinkers such as Yates is a negative, but for Bakhtin it is a positive: it connotes a reminder of flesh, that the earth is the naming-thing’s place, and it is a reminder that the naming-thing that eliminates waste is significant and the openings that allow for the oozing of thing-things are to be celebrated. In crude terms, degradation means acknowledging without shame the importance of the mouth and the anus. How could Christian theologizing do this when it finds it hard to even acknowledge that the figure of Jesus had a penis? If that organ cannot be named, what is to encourage belief that the anus can be named? Both the penis and the anus mark openness in and to the world, and the interplay between the bodied naming-thing and other things gets expressed in human waste. Is this proper church talk? It certainly verbalizes a claim beyond “We are born between feces and urine.” The latter encourages movement away from both; the grotesque embraces them: “The

grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it's unfinished, outgrows itself, and 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."<sup>55</sup> This is the nature of interplay in that the naming-thing which "swallows the world . . . is itself swallowed by the world."<sup>56</sup>

Bakhtin gives to the material world and its functions a type of sacred emphasis that destroys the sacred as an individualized and individualizable revelation or specialness.<sup>57</sup> In this case, that status involves recognition of incompleteness, porousness. One might frame it as a type of lucidity geared toward the protecting, safeguarding, or fulfilling of the naming-thing. Through this grounding in naming-thing thingliness, circumstances are brought to earth and thereby are resolved through the workings of materiality and not left to the vague cosmic claims of theological traditions. As Bakhtin notes, folk culture and grotesque realism stem the flow of "cosmic fear" resolved through abstract theological claims and religious ritualization that isolate the individual.<sup>58</sup>

The grotesque is often referenced as a way (within artistic production, for example) to outline a challenge to normative notions of beauty and life, thereby rendering the familiar unfamiliar. It centers a particular "disjuncture and shifting," or "lack of fixity," as well as "unpredictability and . . . instability" as awakened through a privileging of what was once despised or at least hidden and reassessing its context and content.<sup>59</sup> Abject/abjection speaks to a discomfort and effort to remove openness or in-between status, whereas the grotesque seeks to amplify this openness. The grotesque body is the quintessential open naming-thing entangled and entangling the world of things. It is a naming-thing content to be exposed and to be penetrated while it penetrates. It is associated with the stuff—the things—of life and death.

I am intrigued by that moment when the bodied naming-thing and thing-thing fain affrication.

The naming-thing through this presentation of openness is "purged" of its illusion of stable distinctiveness, the pretense of being bounded and closed. Again, the bodied naming-thing defecates! The public presentation of this body function is not limited to the world described by Rabelais and celebrated by Bakhtin. For example, Yoko Ono alludes to this process through the "Toilet Thoughts Film No. 3," which includes a close-up shot of a buttocks poster to be hung in public toilets and then photographed over the course of time. Images were shot of the poster in public restrooms in various stages

of disarray.<sup>60</sup> Or one might think in terms of the song “Sympathy for the Devil” (*Beggars Banquet* album)—with which the Rolling Stones celebrate, so to speak, the “degraded” and ethically alternative dimensions of historical engagement—attached to an (rejected by Decca) album cover containing the image of a soiled and well-used toilet against a wall marked (penetrated?) by written sayings and images.<sup>61</sup> And while these—Yoko Ono’s art and the rejected cover image of the toilet—are not the same graphic arrangement of public defecating present in Bakhtin’s description of openness, they nonetheless highlight and normalize the removal of waste and in this way highlight, both through the image and the location of the image, the relationship of naming-things to thing-things.

The grotesque appeals because it rests in the moment of interplay, and in this way it maintains the playful and played-out intersectional nature of bodied naming-thing and thing-thing engagement.<sup>62</sup> This moment of interplay is an “undoing”—pointing out the organizing deception; the subject is not whole, guarded, and fully distinct. It is never bounded because it is porous and marked by fractures and fissions by means of the various normativities “arranging” the socially situated and coded (e.g., race, gender, class) bodied naming-thing.

The naming-thing is framed in accordance with an open system of movement, geography of activity, and processes, as the cultural and social codes shaping and guiding discourse of an epistemological, existential, and ontological nature shift and change. Furthermore, there is entailed here a system at work, in action—the flow of blood, the shifting of chemical languages, the development and death of cells, and so on. Naming-things involve movement, and they move. Religion as a technology assumes this movement, depends on this movement, informs and is informed by this movement in that the trail of this bodied naming-thing’s flow constitutes the human experience manipulated by religion as a technology.

### Brief Examples of the Grotesque

To further clarify what I have in mind, I want to give some attention to a reading of Nella Larsen and Richard Wright through Bakhtin.<sup>63</sup> I do this in part because I perceive a similarity of insight in Bakhtin’s sense of a carnivalesque viewpoint and the moralist (Larsen and Wright) sense of lucid rebellion. Hence, art—in this case literature—provides a description (to play off Bakhtin) or a dynamic cartography of sorts regarding the interplay between naming-things and thing-things.<sup>64</sup>

In making this argument, I highlight Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, a novel published in 1928—shortly before the Great Depression but during the reign of “Jim and Jane Crow,” as popular and deadly restrictions on the life circumstances of African Americans meant to reinforce the power of whiteness after the end of formal structures of dehumanization in April 1865.<sup>65</sup> It tells the story of Helga Crane, a mulatto moving between the southern and northern United States and Europe. Yet it is not the typical story of the tragic mulatto. While the racialized and gendered process of being named is certainly in play, circumstances framing life for her are beyond traditional markers of social identity and instead reflect issues of a metaphysical quality. There is, of course, what one might expect regarding critique of social status, class dynamics, educational attainment in a racist-sexist society, and many of the other troubling circumstances of life for African Americans—particularly those whose light skin color places them between worlds. But there is more to Crane's story than this. Through a process of signification and performance—such as offering alternate naming for things and alternate relationship to other things—she resists the limitations of Harlem classed interactions and refuses to be the “exotic” other in Europe. Instead, she signifies all expectations by surrendering to a religious force and marrying an unlikely “suitor” in a southern preacher. He takes her from Harlem to the South, where she encounters a radically different environment—yet one like the others in which even her best efforts did little to break down her outsider status. She, as a naming-thing, is impacted, altered, and shifted. In certain ways her ability to name as a naming-thing is reduced through contact with other things. Religious doctrine fails to provide resolution to her metaphysical concerns and instead tries to seal her up in a framework of racial and sexual restriction. And the demands of her home life eat away at her physical being. She is consumed; child after child has sapped her strength, and a husband who values only her ability to please him has robbed her of dignity. Combined, these forces bring her to a breaking point—a point at which she denounces transhistorical assumptions of aid and instead plots for her well-being, which does not come. But still she rebels—pushes against circumstances despite circumstances.

Richard Wright's “The Man Who Lived Underground” shares Larsen's sense of the manner in which naming-things naming and being named can have deadly connotations regarding openness and closure.<sup>66</sup> And, as in Larsen, Wright's main character moves through a process of performed rebellion. This short story is from a collection titled *Eight Men*—each “man” representing a particular narrative.<sup>67</sup> Initially published in 1961 (a year after

Wright's mysterious death), this collection reflects Wright's rehearsal of racialized life in the United States from his self-imposed exile in Paris. While many of its themes reflect his philosophy of life graphically expressed in best sellers like *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, it has received little of the recognition and commentary reserved for those books published while Wright was immersed in the turmoil of life as a U.S.-despised and blackened named naming-thing—impacted and named in relationship to economic, sociocultural, political, and psychological “things.”<sup>68</sup> Yet Wright also speaks to the manner in which all naming-things (not just blackened naming-things) are impacted by circumstances; things interact with things, often in unaccepted ways. Or as Paul Gilroy describes the text, “Wright,” for instance, “demonstrates that some of the supposed beneficiaries of white supremacy are no less likely to be unhinged by its operation than its black victims.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the interplay of things—the grotesquery of this interaction—is performed in this collection through Wright's attention to the proximity of things.<sup>70</sup> Racial disregard and its mechanisms of deployment might suggest distance, but the actions and the thinking of Wright's characters suggest that interaction—impact of things—is an ever-present dimension of collective life, a marker of power dynamics often at play in the arrangement of things. This is surely the case with the main character in the story I highlight in this chapter, where even in the relative isolation faced, he is always exposed to and mindful of the ways in which he encounters other things—things that have consequence for his understanding of himself and his relationship(s) to the larger world. Even segregation, or more generally confined space, as Wright reflects in this story, entails a particularly antagonizing mode of encounter. In describing an underworld of decay and darkness, Wright crafts literary situations pulled from lived circumstance that involve the grotesque as performance of the impossible possibility of openness—as, if nothing else, a defiant signification.

Bakhtin highlights the folk realm of carnival as a location where the grotesque body takes center stage. Of course, it is not the only context for the presentation of the grotesque. In “The Man Who Lived Underground,” Wright offers the sewer as another, urban, locale. Having gotten away from the police who tried to hold him for a crime he had not committed, Fred Daniels makes his way to the sewer, where “he snatched the cover far enough off to admit his body. He swung his legs over the opening and lowered himself into watery darkness.”<sup>71</sup> Inside the sewer his body is confronted with thing-things. The world is turned inside out, and its elements penetrate him, affecting and influencing him—demonstrating the manner in which he as a naming-thing is unfixed and exposed. The water washes against him, urging

the question of life or death. Water is significant in religious culture, performance, and teachings—but this is different. Daniel’s interplay with water seems a mode of degradation whereby going down into the sewer, as Bakhtin might explain, involves an entering into flesh. It is a pushing into the world through denouncing its codes and structures. Bakhtin, in discussing Rabelais, remarks on the manner in which traditional religious thought on bodies tends to position them as down (toward hell) or up (toward heaven). He rejects this normalizing narrative, as does Fred Daniels, for whom down is life. He vertically enters into the sewer, but vertical entering points to a horizontal reality of material place occupied by bodied naming-things. Daniels leaves the “upperworld,” where restrictive encounters question his humanity, and enters the lower world of penetrated material being; the underworld enters Fred as he fills “his lungs with the hot stench of yeasty rot.”<sup>72</sup> Life gains a different materiality for Daniels in the sewer; even time is knowable through materiality. As Wright narrates, “He heard the noise of the current and time lived again for him, measuring the moments by the wash of water.”<sup>73</sup> Everything revolved around the interplay of him as an exposed naming-thing with other things found within the waste passages below the city.

This situation promoted for Daniels a different perspective, one which might be named a kind of grotesque realism: living and dying occupy the same space, and this space is a location marked by life in fleshy bodies that are open to the world. For instance, smoking points to this openness—the manner in which a thing-thing penetrates and infuses while also being expelled:

[Daniels] crept down and, seeing with his fingers, opened the lunch pail and tore off a piece of paper bag and brought out the tin and spilled grains of tobacco into the makeshift concave. He rolled it and wet it with some spittle, then inserted one end into his mouth and lit it: he sucked smoke that bit his lungs. The nicotine reached his brain, went out along his arms to his fingertips, down to his stomach and over all the tired nerves of his body.<sup>74</sup>

Wright also spends time describing the proper use of the mouth. And he does so in a manner I argue would appeal to Bakhtin. The mouth marks penetration, the movement of food into the naming-thing—the extension of the grotesque body beyond itself. Daniels, continuing to devour the food he had stolen, “ate the other sandwich and found an apple and gobbled that up too, sucking the core till the last trace of flavor was drained from it. Then, like a dog, he ground the meat bones with his teeth, enjoying the salty, tangy marrow.”<sup>75</sup> This is interplay with things that heightens materiality. In so

doing, flesh is privileged in a way those in the church he overheard could not muster. The failure to recognize this embodied, fleshy, open body on the part of church people he hears singing songs of “Zion” constitutes misuse of the mouth and denial of the rest of the body.<sup>76</sup> The same is the case for those in the theater, whom he watches denying degradation as they “were laughing at their lives.” This, if one follows Bakhtin, is a misuse of laughter in that it closes off the body rather than conquering fear. This is not laughter of the grotesque body—a laughter that “degrades and materializes,” but rather the whimper of those who refuse to embrace the unimaginable who “were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves.”<sup>77</sup>

Daniels’s is the grotesque body (i.e., the open, bodied naming-thing) that takes in from the world and expels a bit of itself into the world. Wright, like Bakhtin, sees body waste as a sign of this interplay; regarding that, Wright describes the following as Daniels breaks through the sewer into a room:

He went to the sink and turned the faucet and water flowed in a smooth silent stream that looked like a spout of blood. . . . His bladder grew tight [after drinking the water]; he shut off the water, faced the wall, bent his head, and watched a red stream strike the floor. His nostrils wrinkled against acrid wisps of vapor; thought he had tramped in the water of the sewer, he stepped back from the wall so that his shoes, wet with sewer slime would not touch his urine.<sup>78</sup>

The notion of the grotesque body played out in Wright’s story is also highlighted through the blending of forms—naming-things and other things in a state of mutuality: like the old man comfortable in the dark like a sightless worm. Into the room—entered through the sewer—where Daniels has located himself, the old man enters to shovel coal into the furnace but he does not turn on the light. Wright says, “The old man had worked here for so long that he had no need for light; he had learned a way of seeing in his dark world, like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch.”<sup>79</sup>

At the end of the story, Daniels leaves the sewer to confront the police and bring them into his “truths,” but instead they murder him and throw him back into the sewer. This time, rather than encountering life, he “sighed and closed his eyes, a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth.”<sup>80</sup>

Helga Crane, the protagonist of Larsen’s *Quicksand*, also knows water—the way in which it penetrates the open body, exposes it, but is also exposed by it. In fact, the major transitional moment of her life, the point at which one

might say she is most aware of the grotesque nature of her body as open to the world and penetrated by the world, takes place after an encounter with water. She stumbles into a church lured by the sounds but also wanting to get out of the heavy rain. In that loud room, there are moving bodies, penetrating bodies involved in what Larsen describes as a performance that “took on an almost Bacchic vehemence.”<sup>81</sup> That is to say, the church scene is a display and interplay of bodies marked by riotous energy and excitement—as if in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry. If read in light of Bakhtin, Crane encounters a carnivalistic gathering marked by blending of things (i.e., women slithering on the floor like reptiles) and a general heightening of the flesh. The consequences are the same for Rabelais and Larsen—the flesh is highlighted, and the body is known for its openness. Like the “folk,” Crane embraces this situation: “She remained motionless, waiting, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place—foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies. . . . And as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious feeling penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about.”<sup>82</sup> She was penetrated by a sensibility that pulled her from the city to the rural world—where the smell of manure lingered and sweat on bodies confronted her.<sup>83</sup> She was a preacher’s wife, having married the minister from the carnivalistic gathering. And while the openness of her body brought her into the collective, the social codes within that collective sought to close her off. Church could not accept this openness despite its efforts to co-opt it. Her body had to be consumed, just as she was told Christ had surrendered his for her salvation.<sup>84</sup>

Sadly, this is not the degradation Bakhtin writes of and celebrates. The religious tradition—practices, rituals, theological formulations and so on—that points beyond the human to some cosmic mystery or comfort is actually a shortsighted surrender by means of which the unity of a being without pores and openings—or at least its potential—is desired. Bakhtin claims that laughter opens to this realization of shortsightedness. Perhaps something of the embodiment of this laughter is found in the defiant impulse undergirding Crane’s embodied rebellion against herself, other bodies, and the world. There is an impulse to render material that typically has been situated as abstract or above. This is certainly the case with Crane, whose body is ravaged by children. Crane discovers the deception with each child she delivers: The body is not whole, fully formed, fixed, and nonporous. It is porous, open to the world, open to itself, and prone to release itself in such a manner that the

things produced are both of the naming-thing and foreign to it. This is the realization that with each birth she is pushed closer to death.

In either case, Daniels or Crane, the grotesque nature of the bodied naming-thing is highlighted, and its interplay with other things is performed. As Bakhtin reminds us, it is within this context of mutuality, the realm of “presence together,” as Camus might name it, that naming-things are most vibrant.