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Re-Enchanting Materiality: Speculating on the (Un)Natural Narrative of Zoé Valdés's *Dear First Love*

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Abstract

Narratology gives us a systematic way to understand how stories work and how they capture our attention. Unnatural narratologists work with narratives that ignore, challenge, or transgress the conventions of mimetic narratives. These unnatural narratives problematize our ontological status, often intentionally disrupting our cognitive processing and imploring us to speculate, even if just momentarily, about the plausibility of the encounter. In making sense of these speculative texts, readers use a variety of existing schemata to reconcile perceived impossibilities and naturalize unnatural elements of the narrative. But what if the process of naturalizing narratives also encouraged us to speculate past our initial discomforts and cognitive reconciliations in a way that acknowledged the vibrancy of objects? How might reading 'unnatural' narratives implore us to re/consider our understanding of 'natural' itself?

In this article, I employ an explication of the speculative fiction text *Dear First Love* by Zoé Valdés to place narratology and the frameworks readers use in attempting to naturalize the un/natural elements of the text in dialogue with the Continental philosophies of speculative realisms. In doing so, I aspire to articulate a point of entry through which both sets of theories, might be re/engage(d) within the creation of new schemata of understanding. With this engagement, I further seek to assert that a strategic use of anthropomorphism, as discussed by theorist Jane Bennett, might encourage not only a re/enchantment with narrative itself, but also an equal and potentially more impactful re/engagement with all matter.

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> My purpose is to tell of bodies which have transformed into shapes of different kinds.
>
> — Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

> I am the suitcase, listening to the woman who owns me. Before being a plank that later became a suitcase, I was a tree. Trees listen. Wood never loses its poetic properties. I am a happy suitcase, though sorrowful as well, because I suffer from an excess of emotion- an *extreme* excess sometimes. I am that thing that listens.
>
> — "The Arborescent Suitcase" in Zoe Valdés, *Dear First Love*

> *Thing-power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.
>
> — Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*

In narratology, the term 'unnatural' denotes any "impossible" scenarios and/or events that defy the "laws governing the physical world" or our principles of logic (Doležel in Alber 80). These unnatural narratives problematize our ontological status (Herman et al. 20), often intentionally disrupting our cognitive processing and imploring us to speculate, even if just momentarily about the plausibility of the encounter. Reading a narrative which defies the written and unwritten rules of our human existence, for example an anti-chronological depiction of Nazi Germany, a narrative whose ending returns to its beginning or one in which inanimate objects narrate[1], calls upon the reader to activate existing schemata and potentially build upon or extend the structures in a way that reconciles these perceived impossibilities. Anti-chronological chronotopes might become allegorical in nature. An ouroboros sjuzet could perhaps be read as a statement on the structure of narrative itself. And, narrating inanimate objects may be read as anthropomorphizations aiding an implied author's intent to parody an event or mask a political ideology.

But what if the process of "naturalizing"[2] narratives also encouraged us to speculate past our initial discomforts and cognitive reconciliations in a way that acknowledged the vibrancy of objects, animate and inanimate, language, and even time? How might reading 'unnatural' narratives implore us to re/consider our understanding of 'natural' itself? Might we then be called

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upon to consider that all bodies, human or otherwise, are actants[3] and that these actants "have an inherent liveliness that allows them to act in the world at large, not just on us" (Harman 125), but also with us, around us, and even in us? This form of speculation would implore us to look past our narcissistic and anthropocentric constructions of liveliness, listening, and language, and consider the distributive nature of vitality. In this chapter, I place narratology and the frameworks readers use in attempting to naturalize unnatural narratives in dialogue with the Continental philosophies of speculative realisms. In doing so, I aspire to articulate a point of entry through which both set of theories, speculative realisms and narratology- but specifically unnatural narratology- might be re/engage(d) within the creation of new schemata of understanding. With this purposeful engagement, I further seek to assert that a strategic use of anthropomorphism, as discussed by theorist Jane Bennett, beyond a reader's engagement with a narrative, might encourage not only a re/enchantment[4] with narrative itself, but also an equal and potentially more impactful re/engagement with all matter.

This exploration will begin with a consideration of a speculative text, Zoé Valdés's *Dear First Love* and an explication of its un/natural elements. Following, I will discuss narratology and in particular, unnatural narratology using the writings of Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. Accessing Jan Alber's frameworks on how readers make sense of (or naturalize,) unnatural narratives and Brian Richardson's work on unnatural narrators, I consider the many ways the unnatural elements of Zoé Valdés's *Dear First Love* might be mediated by readers. Building upon this analysis, I posit an additional tool for a reader to consider by first discussing speculative realisms and Jane Bennett's vital materiality, and secondly considering what a speculative realist reading of the novel might look like. Lastly, I close with a consideration of how a strategic anthropomorphism as offered by Jane Bennett might be employed to restore a "childhood sense of wonder" (Bennett 20) in the way we engage with speculative narratives and our world.

Zoe Valdés's *Dear First Love*

> [W]e're not human beings, she thought, we're Cuban beings.
>
> — Danae in Zoé Valdes, *Dear First Love*

Zoe Valdés is a prolific and internationally renowned poet and novelist. Born in Havana, Cuba in 1959, the year the Cuban Revolution ended[5], Valdés left Cuba for Europe in the mid-1990s during what was called Cuba's Special Period.[6] In exile since then, many of Valdés novels have criticized

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the Castro regime and the lost promises of the revolution.[7] Her novel, *Dear First Love* has been called a narrative of the Special Period[8]. *Dear First Love* is a story of the spiritual and sexual awakening of a young woman, Danae, during the 1970s regime of Fidel Castro. In the novel, a middle-aged and unhappily married Danae recounts the time when she, as a young student, left a poverty stricken and deadened Havana to work in the tobacco fields in the country.[9] Surrounded by the natural world and all of its spiritual wonders, Danae falls in love for the first time with a local girl named Tierra Fortuna Munda. Torn apart at the end of her work period, years later Danae returns to the country in hopes of reuniting with her lost love despite her responsibilities to her family and Cuban law at the time which forbid homosexual relationships. For many, Danae's story is the story of Cuba itself. It is a hymn to the soul and spirit of the island of Cuba lost at the hands of a beleaguered people and a misguided regime and it speaks to the inability to return to the promises of the early days of the revolution itself.

On one level, the narrative is a mimetic tale of a middle-aged woman's attempt to recount and recover the promises of her youth. This mimetic reading, however, is problematized by the existence of anti- or non-mimetic[10] factors including a polyphony of narrators. While the text includes multiple human voices, most are nonhuman both animate and inanimate. They include an arborescent wooden suitcase; an old ceiba tree; a royal palm tree; a manatee; the dark light, time, and the music of the city of Havana; and La Milagrosa (the Miraculous). Though they function at multiple levels and serve different purposes in the narrative, these narrators can be read not merely as extensions of Danae's interiority, but actants in possession of efficacy who ultimately in each case alter the course of events of the story itself.

Among the many narrators in the novel, the suitcase is "the most important voice in the novel" (Borland 262). The "maleta arborescente" serves as mediator between city and country, Danae's past and present, and even between the reality and fictions of the Cuban Revolution. In the narrative, the suitcase-narrator functions not only as that which holds Danae's belongings and accompanies her on her first journey, "first desire for freedom" (Valdés 65), but also that which symbolizes her entry into the world of love and poetry, which for Danae are one in the same. When she first picks up the suitcase she "[senses] that it would make [her] soul vibrate the day [she] used it for the first time" (Valdés 66). The suitcase itself is literally vibrant matter. Made of pine and paper and smelling of Persian calligraphy and Chinese ink (Valdés 78)[11], the suitcase opened "a labyrinth, or Ali Baba's cave full of treasures" (Valdés 66) before Danae. At various times in the

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novel it functions as a "monster" (Valdés 67) devouring her possessions in one gulp, as a "savior" (Valdés 75) linking the known, Havana, to the unknown country, and that which not only listens and recounts, but also connects "with the labyrinths[12] of [Danae's] mind" (Valdés 99). Lastly, Danae leaves the suitcase with Tierra Fortuna Munda when she departs from the countryside to return to Havana. In this way, she leaves the beauty and promise of poetry and love in the country with her first love, Tierra. Poetry remains ultimately tied to the innocence and beauty of the country, incapable of existing in the asphalt and stale air of the city.[13]

When Danae encounters the next narrator in her first moments in the countryside, she gazes in wonder stating that it looks like "a queen, a goddess, all the beauty of the universe combined," and "on the verge of falling on her knees" believes the ceiba tree "[sends] a message" to the "deepest darkest depths [of] her soul" (Valdés 78). The ceiba tree, who has nightmares and nervous disorders (Valdés 112), laughs at the children encountering the countryside for the first time (Valdés 116), and "[puffs] and [blows] to put out a fire engulfing a fellow tree" (Valdés 184), finds its voice in the narrative when it remarks,

> I, too, despite being a ceiba tree, got a terrible scare when I heard the rumbling voice of the human being… I had barely slept a wink, thanks to the tickling I'd been getting from that restless owl the livelong night, with her talons in my branches. Plus those hutias- I don't know what had gotten into them, they were usually such sleepyheads… they were up and down my trunk all night, carrying food back and forth and scurrying around and tucking the dead little animals they'd caught into every furrow of my skin. (Valdés 111)

The ceiba tree offers a soul connection for Danae and a moral and ethical compass for the narrative speaking for all those, human and nonhuman, who have been victimized by the pitfalls of the revolution, offering that "[W]e trees suffer I [experience] the same pain as humans, and [bleed] just like [them]" (Valdés 115).

The royal palm chimes in as narrator when a young girl attempts to remove a red ribbon from its branches. The royal palm who "could talk just like a person" (Valdés 200), demands she "not touch that" (Valdés 200) and then calms the girl's fright by following with, "No need to be afraid, I won't do you any harm if you don't harm me" (Valdés 201). The royal palm informs the implied reader that "[I love] a good time; anybody who wants to get something out of me, wants me to do 'em a favor, all they have to do is invite me to a party, especially one where there's

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dancing…" (Valdés 215). And with that, "in a mad passion to dance," the royal palm beckons the young girl to dance, insisting they "teach [her] to dance flamenco," "heel-tapping" all along like "a hysterical tree" to gain her attention and affections (Valdés 215). But the royal palm is about more than pleasure and wooing. They also, "love, absolutely love, to work" (Valdés 220). "Sacrifice for the cause, that's me," the royal palm insists (Valdés 220). "[W]hen I give," they add, I *give*, and without asking for anything in return" (Valdés 220).[14]

In their own words, the manatee, the last of its kind, "can be very pessimistic," (Valdés 168) has a "sharp ear" (Valdés 168), is "extremely fastidious about [their] personal hygiene" (Valdés 169), and ultimately performs mouth to mouth resuscitation to save a young girl who almost drowns in a latrine. Additionally, the "time of the city" laments the loss of youth and promise, the "sensitive light of the city" (Valdés 249) provides the implied reader with multiple possibilities regarding what might have become of Danae and Tierra in the narrative's closing, and the "music of the city," who witnessed and accompanied Danae's cheating husband on his many dalliances, testifies in court about how Danae's husband abandoned her, recounting the many escapades they had through a musical tune of "Cumbaquín, quin, quin, cumbacán; cumbaquín, quin, quin, cumbacán; cumbaquín, cumbacán, baquín bacán" (Valdés 282).

Lastly, La Milagrosa, "The Miraculous One," created and brought to life by the royal palm and the ceiba tree, materializes suddenly in one of the narrative's proposed endings when Danae and Tierra are on trial for indecency as a lesbian couple. Upon its intrusion into the narrative, La Milagrosa proclaims the difficulty in solving material problems "from the realm of the immaterial" (Valdés 275). Demanding justice at what is shaping up to be a burning at the stake, La Milagrosa cries out,

> No more bloodletting!… No more torture of innocents! Bring in the witnesses, stand back, and make way for the witnesses! The real witnesses, not the ones that have been paid off. Enough of backstabbers and betrayers! Now the victims will speak. (Valdés 286)

With that, no longer able to contain their emotion "and knowing that the triumph of those under [their] protection" means an end to their own "pain and grief (Valdés 286), La Milagrosa faints into the arms of a bystander.

Valdés imbues a suitcase, two trees, a manatee, light, time, music, and an act of agency with what one would consider human characteristics. But these narrations are not the only

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disorienting elements in the narrative. A series of seemingly disorderly framing devices provide the narrative with a nonlinear sequence of events. There is no chronological fabula underlying the sjuzhet. There are also a plethora of metalepsis including the intrusion of characters and text from other novels by Valdés, discussions and emulations of works by other Cuban writers including José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Gastón Baquero y Díaz, and Lydia Cabrera. Furthermore, Tierra Fortuna Munda has six teats and emits guava jelly from her belly button. Moreover, the manatee and the ceiba tree fly, the royal palm dances, and the suitcase dreams. Together, these characteristics impact the narrative's overall unnatural quality.

Reading Unnatural Narratives

In his series of essays in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, narratologist Brian Richardson points to the lack of discussion of "nonhuman or posthuman narrators in narrativity, as well as the fact that a narrative does not need to have a single, overarching anthropomorphic narrator figure," asserting that this ultimately "stem[s] from the insistently mimetic nature" of the definition of narrative (Herman et al. 241). As reference, he cites the definition of narrative used by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz in the same volume: "Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something" (Herman et al. 3). Though Phelan and Rabinowitz offer no definition of the "body" in "somebody" akin to the discussions we will have regarding distributive materiality in speculative realisms, one can assume that because the field of narratology "grew out of Western narratives and narrative forms, particularly realist fiction" (Kim 240), the body of which they write is the human body.

As referenced in the opening of this paper, in the field of narratology, unnatural "denotes physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by acceptable principles of logic (Doležel in Alber 80)[15]. These unnatural narratives call our own ontological status into question through a "[radical deconstruction of] the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, or [even our] real-world notions of space and time" (Alber 80). In doing so, they momentarily estrange us from the narrative, calling upon us "'to project upon [these fictional] worlds everything we know about reality, and [perhaps]… make only the adjustments dictated by the text'" (Ryan in Alber 81).

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Acknowledging that many readers may not want to engage with unnatural narratives via what he calls a "Zen way of reading"[16] (Alber 84), Alber discusses five strategies readers use to naturalize unnatural scenarios and texts. In the first strategy, "reading events as internal states," the reader explains the impossible or unnatural as relating to the interiority such as "dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations" (Alber 82-83). In "foregrounding the thematic," the second strategy, the reader accesses their "literary knowledge" and thematic devices to overcome any disorientation (Alber 82-83). The third strategy is a more specific version of the second in which readers "read allegorically," looking for abstract meaning or symbols about life, or a particular political or historical situation (Alber 82-83). Lastly, the fourth and fifth strategies encourage the reader to create new scripts "by combining or extending pre-existing schemata" (Alber 82). "Blending scripts" involves the "merging" of two or more "pre-existing frames to create new ones"[17] (Alber 82-83). And, lastly, the final strategy, "frame enrichment," is accessed when a reader "stretches" their existing frames in such a way as to include these new unnatural elements as possible (Alber 82-83).

In an attempt to naturalize the narrative of *Dear First Love*, a reader might consider the plausibility of the unnatural narratives and their actions as "dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations" (Alber 82). This framework would be supported by several textual cues in the text. Early in Danae's own narration, she confuses a train station for a "madhouse" questioning whether it was a fellow traveler or a nurse she had just spoken to and wondering whether she had just heard "buzzing currents running through the invisible labyrinths of her brain's emotional spasms or just electroshocks" (Valdés 15). Further, one of the possible endings the narrative presents places Danae in a psychiatric ward (Valdés 253) remarking upon how essential electric shock therapy is (Valdés 262) and how lucky she was to have been admitted to an insane asylum (Valdés 255). The existence of these potential cues are compounded by the general unreliability of Danae as a narrator. Frequently, the reader is confronted with Danae's inability to keep her own story straight. She speaks of Tierra Fortuna Munda as her first and only love and yet, repeatedly tells herself how much she loves her abusive husband, Andrés. She swears to Tierra that another lover has never touched her and in the same breath tells her of the beautiful children she and Andrés made together. Danae seems unable to recount the truths of her own existence and thus it would be quite easy for a reader to assume that fascinating tales of talking trees, flying manatees, and exploding courtrooms are indeed the hallucinations of a madwoman.

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Additionally, a reader could impose naturalness on the text by referring to their knowledge of Cuban and Latin American literature and the tradition of magical realism. Magical realism "combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris 1) These texts tell stories through (the guise of) realism (Aldama 36) while deftly calling attention to their own artifice through the employment of anti-mimetic and even non-mimetic characteristics. The narrative in question exemplifies many of the elements of the literary genre presenting an "irreducible element" (Faris 7-14) and a "phenomenal world" (Faris 14-16) in the use of the nonhuman narrators, both animate and inanimate narrators, a ceiba and royal palm tree which burst through the floor of a courtroom, and a manatee that flies. The reader hesitates and ultimately merges the multiple worlds despite the "disruptions of time, space, identity" (Faris 23-27). The focalization is indeterminable[18], the presence of spirit is pervasive in and integral to the narrative (Faris 63), framing resembles a series of "Chinese boxes" rather than an orderly and sequential progression (Faris 122), and the implied author engages in ventriloquism (Faris 145) dis/engaging from the political and historical realities confronted in the text by speaking through normally 'other/ed 'bodies. In the narrative's outrageousness, the reader is able to envelop the extraordinary in the ordinary and the ordinary in the extraordinary while acknowledging the creative play in the narrative's "rebellious mimetics" (Aldama 41).

This rebelliousness encourages some readers to consider the allegorical nature inherent in the narrative structures. *Dear First Love*'s inanimate and animate narrations point to the existence of a cunning implied author who addresses her exile from her Cuban homeland by displacing her voice through the narrations of a ceiba tree, a royal palm, a manatee, and the light, time, and music of her lost city of Havana. This disorienting narrative device highlights, through a juxtaposition of the mimetic and antimimetic the fabrication of the Castro regime itself. Despite the promise and guise of the revolution, much injustice exists beneath the surface. The ceiba tree speaks to these injustices remarking that,

> I have witnessed countless personages pass through this place. In the last few years alone I have seen, not counting the people who actually live in the area, prisoners, religious leaders, intellectuals and artists of all kinds, doctors, lawyers, and, among other groups of depressed persons, suicides, murderers, innocents, and a whole craft of etceteras. (Valdés 114-115)

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This kind of mask narration "occurs when an author uses a character narrator to express the author's beliefs" (Herman et al. 51). The unnatural elements of the narrative give voice to the exiled and in their antimimetic nature, call attention the absurdity of the 'real 'and textual mimesis.

A blending of these and other schemata might encourage a reader to reflect upon the importance of the "botanico-religious cosmology" (Allewaert 7) of Santería to both the narrative and to the Cuban culture. In the belief and practice of Cuban Santería, aché is believed to be the sacred energy or a "supernatural power, immanent energy, [and] universal vibration… assumed to be in humans [and] in all of nature" (Sandoval 83). Inanimate objects are also receptacles of aché. Though all of nature is imbued with aché, trees, particularly the ceiba, the siguaraya, and the royal palm[19], are regarded as sacred receptacles of aché's power (Sandoval 83). Thus, the ceiba, the royal palm, and the arborescent suitcase, having once been a tree, are reflections of a belief system informed by an epistemology that acknowledges a balance of, a harmony among, and an interconnection with all beings- plant, animal, physical, and metaphysical as well as an ontology that refers to order and balance in the universe (Canzares 5). In this reading, La Milagrosa is aché itself stepping in to maintain ethical order and balance in the narrative storyworld. In the context of this belief system, these animate and inanimate narrators exist not as antimimetic narrative qualities, but as nonmimetic- or perhaps for some, even mimetic. Further, the reference throughout the narrative to the belief of Santería, its intuitive sympathy with nature, and its concern for ethics and harmony, allegorically addresses a Marxist regime that sought to silence the voice and impact of the indigenous religious practice.

In the stretching of existing frames of understanding, further projection might encourage a reader to re/examine the agency of animate and inanimate materiality and critically consider the benefits of anthropomorphism beyond the discursive. What if the humanization of animals, objects, light, time, and music propels a questioning of our anthropocentrism and an acknowledgement of the need to understand and address the symmetries among multiple and differing bodies? Might we be able to contemplate what the ceiba tree has to say about its three hundred year life on the island of Cuba? Would the Cuban Revolution look different if we hypothesized from the vantage point of the royal palm, the light and time of the island's capitol city, or even the suitcase tucked under a human bed? How might we speculate in order to approach this sort of shift in listening and understanding? And, lastly, might doing so renew a sense of wonder in the practice of engaging all materiality, including narrative.

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Considering Speculative Realisms

"Man" is not the measure of all things.

—Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*

The study of speculative realisms asks us to interrogate our own human exceptionalism and consider the ways in which all matter is not only agentic, but capable of producing its own meaning. Speculative realisms critique "post-Kantian philosophy's entrapment in human-world 'correlationism' that refuses to speculate on the possibilities of a realty that's entirely beyond human life" (Keating 64). Instead, it posits humans as merely included in an entanglement, or assemblage[20], of beings consisting of all types of matter, animate and inanimate. Speculative realisms shifts the focus away from a "human-centered epistemology" towards an object-oriented ontology (Keating 64). This focus speculates the existence of a flat ontology which radically reconsiders agency as distributive and relational. It is one in which, as philosopher Levi Bryant asserts, there exists "a democracy of objects" where humans are not *the* beings, but entangled and implicated with other beings (Bogost 17). Moreover, as a set of theories, speculative realisms is a "commonsense reminder that reality greatly exceeds human beings" (Keating 64). Not only is anthropocentrism interrogated, and human significance and entitlement called into question, but one is invited, even implored, to speculate upon how things themselves speculate (Bogost 31). All matter, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, is telling their story and because all things are intimately imbricated in our existence, these stories are ours as well. Here, "[m]atter, in all its forms… becomes a site of narrativity, a storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces" (Iovino and Oppermann 83). Matter itself is a text, embedded with and constructing meaning. The concern and task for humans, in accepting that these other bodies "speak," is not only to listen to their varied voices, but also to amplify them (Bogost 34).

Theorist Jane Bennett builds upon this discussion of all bodies as more than simply objects by also considering the vitality of these bodies. For Bennett, vitality is "the capacity of things- edibles, commodities, storms, metals- not only to impede and block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett viii). Bennett asserts that our Descartian dialectics that "quarantine" life from matter, "ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of [all] material formations" (Bennett vii) and deny the ability for all things, animate and inanimate, "to animate, to act, [and] to produce effects"

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(Bennett 6). The power of these bodies to act is enhanced "in or as heterogeneous assemblage[s]" (Bennett 23) in which all bodies "the us and the it- slide into each other" (Bennett 4). All things exist in a "complicated web" (Bennett 4) of relations in which each animation, action, or production by one thing, animate or inanimate, ripples across the confederation of things. Acknowledging this relationality, implores the human 'thing' to consider not only the impact of their actions on all bodies, but also to seek more meaningful and sustainable alliances with these previously unacknowledged bodies.

In an attempt to build understanding, Bennett encourages the cultivation of a "childhood sense of wonder" (Bennett 20) which invites us to linger upon the objects we encounter and (re)acknowledge the enchantment they once held for us (Bennett 17). Bennett suggests a strategic anthropomorphism. "A touch of anthropomorphism," Bennett asserts, "can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" (Bennett 99). Attributing human characteristics to a thing, or things, might allow us to cross the Descartian divide between human and thing, animate and inanimate, us and them, and acknowledge the resemblances in our individual, and confederate, existences. Thus, "anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms" (Bennett 99). This acknowledgement implores us to reconsider the ecology in which we reside, interrogate our role in the dynamic, and seek more equality in the "channels of communication" by cultivating a thoroughly compassionate practice of listening.

Speculating on a Reading of an Un/Natural Narrative

> Now that we know how similar, and how closely related, we are to all the other living things on this planet, we cannot continue to consider ourselves unique. And we cannot isolate our own interests, our own economies, from processes taking place on a cosmic scale in a universe whose boundaries we are unable to grasp.
>
> —Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*

> Procuremos inventar pasiones nuevas o reproducir las viejas con pareja intensidad.
>
> —Jose Luis Lezama, *La Habana*

A speculative realist reading of Dear First Love might first ask the reader to acknowledge the agency of all bodies in the narrative and perhaps even the material narrative itself, as agentic. While we might consider the ceiba tree, the royal palm, and the arborescent suitcase as actants, we

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would also be called upon to consider the material text, its paper and ink, as imbued with the same vitality as the suitcase constructed of paper adorned with Persian calligraphy and Chinese ink. How might we listen to this body in its telling? Further, this reading might implore us to acknowledge the telling of not necessarily multiple alternative narratives, but of contributing narratives. What might the whispers of the bodies traditionally segregated to the margins of existence and knowledge inform us of if we cultivate open and honest listening practices? How does the light of Havana regard the failing infrastructure of its beholden city? What level of resentment does time feel as a reaction to Danae's rueing of her past losts? And, what does a ceiba tree's pain tell us about our own human inabilities to live in a historical and social context beyond our immediate and limited existence? Undoubtedly, the answers to these questions are all speculations at best. We can only attempt to know that which we are not through "metaphors and similes" (Shaviro 91), but how might the very act of strategic and speculative anthropomorphism change the way we not only read texts, but also theorize about narrative? Might it potentially infuse the process with a childlike sense of profound and prolonged wonder and enchantment?

What is needed here "is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces" (Bennett xiv). Such a practice might call on us to reconsider our confederacy with an array of bodies and the political and social impact of that relationality. Would we then be moved to call for a radical reconsideration of our ethical responsibility to the entire world of bodies around us, animate and inanimate? A monist acknowledgement that all is created of the same "atoms, quarks, particle streams, [and] matter energy" (Bennett xi), would demand we no longer exscind the world and our knowledge potential in two. Considering, amplifying, and listening to the voices on the fringe of our current understanding, through a process of strategic anthropomorphism, would inspire the contemplation of new forms of knowledge. These new recognitions and insights would gently, or perhaps not so gently, and ideally, nudge the academy towards the creation of a truly democratic and interdisciplinary model of understanding. Throughout, humans would have to transcend their narcissistic and anthropocentric constructions of liveliness, listening, and language in the cultivation of, or a re/membering of, a grammar of agency inclusive of all bodies and the wonder of discovery.

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Endnotes

[1] *Times Arrow* by Martin Amis, *Finnegan's Wake* by Ulysses, and *Dear First Love* by Zoé Valdés respectively.

[2] In their article, "Impossible Storyworlds- and What to Do with Them," Jan Alber refers to the work of Monika Fludernik and Jonathan Culler in articulating naturalization as a process in which the reader refers to "familiar interpretive patterns" (Culler 134) and "frames based on both real-life experience and exposure to literature" (Fludernik 34) in an attempt to make sense of impossible and/or unnatural elements (Alber 2009).

[3] Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, uses Bruno Latour's discussion of an actant as "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett 9).

[4] The use of the word enchantment here is coincidental and does not reference Jane Bennett's book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, which was not referenced in the writing of this chapter.

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[5] While most history books report the Cuban Revolution as having begun in 1953 and ended in 1959, many Cubans regard those dates as an arbitrary reference to the armed conflict necessary to topple the Baptista regime and regard the revolution as the on-going process of cultural, political, and economic change in the country since 1953.

[6] This was the decade and a half long period immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, when Cuba, already a victim of the US embargo on the nation, suffered further economic hardship when the Soviet Union was no longer able to support the nation financially and politically. Aside from great economic hardship, this period was also characterized by many political and social changes and an exodus of Cuban citizens from the island to the United States and Europe.

[7] There exists much paratextual information to support this assertion as Zoe Valdés has been very vocal about her opinions in articles, speeches, interviews, and even in discussions on her own web site: zoevaldes.net.

[8] Narratives of the Special Period are characterized by "narrative experimentation, proliferation of intertextuality and fragmented narratives in which humor and irony permeate and subvert traditional notions of the text" (Dorado-Otero 5). They also question pervasive and fixed national identities and require "an active reader who will explore… [the texts as being] open to interpretation" (Dorado-Otero 5). Additionally, sexuality becomes a site of resistance (Dorado-Otero 135) in these texts.

[9] This was a common practice throughout much of Fidel Castro's early leadership. Students and adults left their jobs or schools in the cities temporally to support the country and share the workload of the nation through various endeavors elsewhere on the island.

[10] In this discussion, the difference between anti-mimetic and non-mimetic is contextual. Non-mimetic refers to a device which, though not mimetic, does not problematize the ontological grounding of the narrative. Anti-mimetic, on the other hand, intentionally foregrounds the synthetic.

[11] Valdés's reference to Persian calligraphy and Chinese ink references a poem by the Cuban poet, Gastón Baquero y Díaz, a member of the Orígines group of Cuba poets who collaborated through the 1940s and 50s. Baquero left Cuba at the time of the revolution in 1959 and settled in Spain. Baquero's poetry was banned in Cuba upon his leaving and not reintroduced in his homeland until 1994. In referencing Baquero, Valdés links her narrative to a broader discussion of Cuban exile narratives.

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[12] It is not a coincidence that Valdés repeatedly uses the word "labyrinth" to describe the complexities of a story from *One Thousand and One Nights* with the intricate recesses of Danae's mind calling attention to thematic and narrative elements of *Dear First Love.*

[13] Early on in the novel when Danae begins to recount her journey and the powers of the suitcase, she remarks that "poetry… taught me everything I know. Poetry has shown me the world… the love I feel for nature, the earth, the trees, the ocean… Poetry taught me how to talk" (Valdés 65). One could infer that the suitcase is representative of poetry here, or that poetry itself is an actant possessing agency. Here, also, poetry is equated with the natural, not the man-made. And lastly, as a reference to the lost promise of the Cuban Revolution, when as an adult in Havana, before returning to the country to find Tierra, Danae seeks out the poet she heard of as a child, she finds that he is dead. Poetry, and therefore the beauty and promise Danae associates with poetry, no longer exist.

[14] The royal palm is the national tree of Cuba. For Cubans, the tree represents the steadfastness of their culture in the face of constant and ever-changing adversity. Here, this dynamic of work hard, play hard can be read as a reflection on the Cuban people as a whole.

[15] A number of other additional and slightly nuanced, or less nuanced, definitions of unnatural narratives exist. Brian Richardson defines an unnatural text as "a narrative that contains a number of anti-mimetic events" (Alber et al. 102). Alber "restricts the use of the term 'unnatural 'to physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events" (Alber et al. 102). Stefan Iversen links "unnatural" to "narratives that present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld" (Alber et al. 103). Lastly, Henrik Skov Nielsen posits unnatural narratives as those that "cue the reader to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those she employs in nonfictionalized, conversational storytelling situations" (Alber et al. 104).

[16] For Alber, a Zen approach to reading is one in which "an attentive reader who repudiates [his five strategies naturalizing unnatural texts] and simultaneously accepts the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, or worry that they invoke in [them]" (Alber 83). Alber calls this a "laissez-faire approach" (Alber 84).

[17] Alber asserts that this strategy is particularly important to readers when naturalizing narratives in which the narrator is "an animal, a corpse, or an inanimate object" (Alber 82).

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[18] Faris coins the term "defocalization" to account for the particular circumstances of focalization in magical realist narratives (Faris 43).

[19] The royal palm is actually believed to be home of and lightning rod for the Santería orisha (deity) of thunder, Changó.

[20] In this discussion, I refer to the discussion of Deleuze and Guattari as accessed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* which defines assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite presence of energies that confound hem from within" (Bennett 23-24).

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