Geological Fantasies, Haunting Anachronies Eros, Time, and History in Harriet Prescott Spofford's "The Amber Gods"

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Published by Washington State University

DOI: 10.1353/esq.0.0041

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Standing before her mirror on the morning of her wedding day, Giorgione Willoughby, the narrator-protagonist of Harriet Prescott Spofford’s 1860 short story “The Amber Gods,” announces, “I’m not good, of course; I wouldn’t give a fig to be good.” Since the story she goes on to recount concerns, in part, her seduction of the young painter Vaughan Rose away from his childhood sweetheart, her virtuous cousin Louise, the reader may well be inclined to believe her. But it was the “of course,” the casually tossed-off assertion that her lack of virtue is something already expected, that troubled some readers of the then Miss Prescott’s fiction. An anonymous reviewer of her first collection, *The Amber Gods, and Other Stories* (1863), declared that despite the “many passages of gorgeous magnificence, of intense interest, or of startling power” in each of the stories, he or she could not ignore the “low, murky atmosphere” and “morbid and unhealthful tone.” These faults could be attributed, the reviewer thought, to the author’s unusual attention to “illicit love,” since

a writer who makes the interest of her love-stories . . . depend on the development of an unlawful affection, commits a grave artistic fault. Illicit love in ordinary life is the exception, not the rule; and it is certainly making
rather an extravagant use of the exceptional for a writer to employ it in four cases out of five. . . . The constant contemplation of a diseased side of human nature can scarcely fail to produce an unhealthy state of mind, and thus to exert a dangerous influence.

This critique’s preoccupation with “unlawful affection” combines the moralistic and the aesthetic: not only is this preoccupation “dangerous” to the reader (the reviewer notes, in particular, that “a writer, whose stories are so eagerly read . . . ought not to be unmindful of the influence which she may exert on the young”), it is also an “artistic fault,” since it misrepresents “ordinary life” by depicting the exceptional as normative.

Two years later, in a review of Spofford’s novel Azarian: An Episode (1864), the young Henry James Jr. would also accuse her of violating the rules of realism. James, however, locates Spofford’s fatal “extravagance” not in her subject matter but in her style, specifically in the excessiveness of the very descriptive tendency the earlier reviewer had admired. Describing the volume as “a wearisome series of word-pictures, linked by a slight thread of narrative, strung together, to use one of Miss Prescott’s own expressions, like ‘beads on a leash,’” James sternly advises Spofford to pay attention to realist writing, in which “things are all described only in so far as they bear upon the action, and not in the least for themselves.” Conversely, he insists, “the reader feels that Miss Prescott describes not in accordance with any well-considered plan, but simply for the sake of describing,” a habit he characterizes as wasteful to the point of morbidity. James’s witty and scathing condemnation of Spofford’s style declines to judge the morality of content, insisting that subjects “questionable . . . in point of morals or of taste” may still possess merit if presented skillfully; yet the review nevertheless retains an echo of the moralism that suffused the earlier review in the way it insists on a specified productive end for literary description. Exhorting Spofford to study modern realism and to strive “to be real, to be true to something” external to the fiction, James leaves no room for
an aesthetic that comprehends description itself as a (queer) kind of action—what is not narratively productive, he insists, can only be a waste of time.3 James’s review reminds us that even the most sophisticated engagement with aesthetics may be directed toward projects of normalization, requiring the artistic encounter to confirm a preexistent truth rather than create truth anew.

The intersection of what appears, here, as morbid sexuality and wasteful waywardness, and the queer possibilities that emerge from this intersection, are precisely what draw me to “The Amber Gods,” originally published in the Atlantic Monthly in January and February of 1860. Queer literary studies has historically focused on the matter of the first review, the depiction of “unlawful” sexualities. More recently, however, it has turned its attention to the generation of standards of productivity and wastefulness, and to how these standards underwrite not only what appears as artistically acceptable, but also what counts as sexually “lawful.” It has begun to comprehend the historical production of sexual dissidence as temporal dissonance—a dissonance embodied, in Spofford’s time, in such figures as the rake, the fallen woman, the onanist, the spinster, the hyster, and, by century’s end, the homosexual. These and similar figures signal eccentric and marginal modes of being in time, as distinct from the normative development of the child into a responsible and properly reproductive adult.4 Against this familiar taxonomy of waywardness, Spofford’s Giorgione Willoughby is harder to locate; “not good, of course,” unabashedly sensual and shamelessly narcissistic, Giorgione, called Yone by her family, nevertheless exceeds common types like the seductress in her peculiarly freighted intertwining of ”illicit love” and unproductive time. (Spofford had not known, she later wrote, that the word yoni also serves as the ”symbol of woman–kind.”)5 Modeling the ornamental style for which James would later lambaste Spofford, Yone seems committed to the pursuit of distraction. Frequently pausing in both her story and its telling to suspend herself in contact with sensual substances, she prizes these moments well above any end-directed labor. “Dear me!” she tells the unnamed auditor of the story’s first half, “you think I’m never coming to the point”—and then
immediately interrupts herself to rhapsodize over the "ravishing" scent of her perfumes (40). Yone’s narration contains so many digressions, suspensions, and pauses for luxuriant description that we might well conclude these are, in fact, “the point”: that the story’s topic is not (or not only) sexual transgression but temporal deviation. As if to underscore this point, both sections of the story (the first, a recital of her amorous history on the morning of her wedding day, and the second, set ten years later, a middle-of-the-night deathbed recounting of her failed marriage while Rose and Louise hover nearby, waiting for her to die so they might resume their interrupted romance) close upon the chiming of the hall clock, with which Yone remains markedly out of sync. Her inclination toward expansive narration makes her late both for her wedding ceremony and for her own death: she becomes so involved in her story and its substance(s) that she neglects to mark the passage of time—or, in the latter case, to note her passage out of it.

Although Yone’s death at the story’s end has prompted many readers to view the tale as a cautionary one, I want to suspend the search for the story’s moral, or meaning, in favor of examining the action generated by the intersection of the tale’s extravagant style and its meditation on the queer temporality of amber. Spofford’s tale, as I will show, radically revises the customary temporal map of perversity by incorporating a geological, planetary timeframe, in the form of the prehistoric fantasias spurred by an amber necklace (the “amber gods” of the title) that Yone comes to possess. Yone’s passionate investment in amber, and in the geological past it recollects, triggers a tangle of relations between animate and inanimate objects that unsettle the status and teleology of life itself, in ways that threaten not simply “the young” but humanity as a whole. In its preoccupation with manifestations of eros beyond the human, “The Amber Gods” points toward a trajectory of thought queer theory has only recently begun to explore: a recognition of queerness as, in Gilles Deleuze’s terms, “not a question of being this or that sort of human, but of becoming inhuman . . . unraveling your body’s human organization, exploring this or that zone of bodily intensity.” Yone’s attachment to amber’s time, in this sense, unmakes the “human” body toward
another mode of being in the world, a move that is, I would propose, the primary event of this story: the exploration of alternate sensory possibilities beyond our own era’s persistent anthropomorphic framing of sex.

Even as “The Amber Gods” foregrounds these possibilities, however, it also addresses a potential risk of the form of time that makes this kind of becoming possible: specifically, the (continued) erasure of all-too-human histories of sexual and colonial violence and trauma, such as those that brought the amber necklace into Yone’s possession. In this sense, the planetary timeframe of the tale is counterpointed by one we can more properly describe as global, one that maps the transnational movements of the slave-trading Willoughby family. Yone inherits the amber necklace from her mother’s family, but it was originally obtained from a Pacific Islander enslaved (and, it is suggested, sexually abused) by both Yone’s New England paternal and Italian maternal grandparents. Yone seems to be concerned with this unnamed girl’s story only insofar as it explains how she came to possess the amber, but Spofford’s tale permits unspoken aspects of the islander’s history to be excavated from Yone’s narration. In its engagement with this resurfacing of the past, “The Amber Gods” develops a non-linear, spectral history, bringing together the islander’s story and Yone’s in unexpected ways, facilitating an exploration—at once pleasurable and ethical—of the erotics of deep time against and alongside the wounds of historical time and the question of what lives on from those wounds.

ON PLANETARY TIME

The amber necklace knots together a number of different socio-temporal formations within the tale. These include the primitive and the archaic, which are brought into the story by the necklace’s previous owners, a “little [Pacific] islander” and an Italian Catholic girl; the time of prehistory, a fiercely irruptive and, in Yone’s view, compellingly sensual manifestation of deep time; and the time of progress in the modern, Western sense, which Vaughan Rose advocates as a rebuke to
Yone’s predilections. Rose’s faith in progress comes to the fore in a conversation with Yone, as he interrogates her affection for the tropics. Disdaining her rapturous praise of West Indian landscapes and their sensual satisfactions, he insists upon something more cumulative:

"But a mere animal or vegetable life is not much. What was ever done in the tropics?"

"Almost all the world’s history—wasn’t it?"

"No, indeed; only the first, most trifling, and barbarian movements." (53)

“History,” for Rose, names an evolving chronicle of civilized accomplishments, directed, teleological, and triumphant. The modern West, champion of this mode of history, comes to know itself as such by means of the temporal contrast it posits against the barbaric geopolitical Other, who has scarcely progressed beyond the bare life of the animal. The advance of the “civilized” nations, in this view, has left the tropics far behind; time there is static, stuck, unproductive, in contrast to the exhilarating march forward of the Western world.

Rose’s dismissal of tropical barbarism finds an echo in the “little islander” who first carries the amber necklace from some unspecified tropical location to New England. The girl, whom Yone’s great-grandfather, a slave-trading sea captain, brings home without explanation, is described as an "Asian imp . . . wilder than the wind . . . like a thing of the woods,” infamous in Willoughby family lore for her inability to adapt to civilization: "My great-grandmother couldn’t do a bit with her,” Yone recalls (43). Although characterized as stuck in time, the islander nevertheless manages to cover a great deal of space; tossed about the globe on colonial trade winds, she and her necklace are transported from the tropics to New England to Old Europe, enabling the tale to track the layering of global temporal alterities as the “modern” American knew them. After Yone’s great-grandmother, fed up with the girl’s wildness, commands her husband to take her away again, the islander becomes the sole survivor of a shipwreck, which Yone’s family
imagines her causing through a spell cast with the help of the amber necklace. Another trade ship picks her up off the coast of Africa and brings her to Italy, where she escapes, and winds up in service to an aristocratic Florentine family. The amber necklace, figured initially as a polytheistic artifact over which the islander “mumbled all manner of demoniacal prayers, twisting and writhing and screaming” (43–44), is blessed by the Pope and transformed into a rosary used by a daughter of the Florentine family—although, as Yone notes, the string of “heathen gods” seems “queer for a Catholic girl to have at prayer” (40). The Christianizing of the necklace might seem to move it, if not the islander, into the era of civilization as Rose views it; yet as a Catholic artifact, it continues to signify “superstition” and embodied religious practices that have since been transcended. The archaic status of the Italian scene, birthplace of Yone’s mother, is underscored elsewhere in the story, when, after Yone makes an offhand reference to “penance,” Rose admonishes her “not to bring” her “old world” into his “new” (59). His refusal of this attempt to muddle global times indicates how the great achievement of modernity, its unquestioned historical leadership, propped itself upon this conception of distance from both the polytheistic primitive and the obsolescent Catholic and aristocratic world.

Yone, however, insists on dwelling rhetorically upon, and corporeally partly within, a timeframe that radically displaces this evolutionary hierarchy. When she asserts that “almost all the world’s history” unfolded in the tropics, she is not simply trying to dislodge Rose’s Euro/American-centered thinking in favor of a more “global” approach, a recognition of what “other cultures” have contributed to the stock of civilized accomplishments. Rather, she is affirming planetary history in the deepest sense, as a history of being—“being” understood as material presence, the presence of active, animate matter, which existed eons before humanity and its catalogue of civilized attainments. “All the world’s history,” in this sense, encompasses the time of planetary cosmogenesis, to which the “amber gods” offer access—not theologically but geologically. When informed that amber is but “fossil gum,” she responds, “Can you say those words and not like it? Don’t it bring to you a
magnificent picture of the pristine world,—great seas and other skies,—a world of accentuated crises, that sloughed off age after age, and rose fresher from each plunge?” (55). The blunt phrase “fossil gum” evokes, for Yone, an epoch of wild exuberance, a time differently paced, more sensual, less predictable, and more capacious than the usual experience of the present, and attractive to her for precisely that reason.

This fascination with amber as a remnant of another era at once transposes and preserves the echo of the sacred found in the story’s title. Even as the polytheistic plural noun “gods” indicates a primitive religion transcended by modern monotheism, the geological reverie that amber provokes points us toward a secular account of cosmogenesis. That is, the belief in an exceptional and recurrent time of origins that religious historians have identified as the foundation of the sacred is both suspended and partly recollected in the way Yone’s intimacy with amber provokes an engagement with deep time, which Stephen Jay Gould calls “the great temporal limitation imposed by geology on human importance.” This geological assault on the human-centered, biblical account of cosmogenesis, begun in the eighteenth century by James Hutton and popularized in the nineteenth century in Charles Lyell’s three-volume *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), had largely succeeded, by the time “The Amber Gods” was published, in persuading scholars and laypersons alike to reckon the earth’s age in millions rather than thousands of years. Yet even as the advance of scientific knowledge in this field contributed to the nineteenth-century romance with progress, the immensity of the earth’s age posed a significant challenge to that romance. Revealing not only the minuteness of the human life span but also the brevity of human existence itself in relation to the rest of the planet’s history, the depth of geological time imperils any narcissistic attachment to the superiority, or even the self-evidence, of given human structures of meaning.

This disruptive effect is the property of deep time Wai Chee Dimock seizes upon in her innovative study *Through Other Continents*, which highlights the developing geological imaginary and other currents of deep time in an attempt to undo the constraints of the habitual reproduction of nationhood in
literary history. Both the geological *longue durée* and nineteenth-century U.S. writers’ responses to it, Dimock contends, ought to provoke a significant shift in how we understand American literature. What Dimock calls a “‘deep time’ in human terms”—the sonic, visual, and print histories that constitute what we have come to know as the humanities—demands that we stop reifying national and period divides imposed by the last century of literary scholarship and instead engage literature within a frame of “planetarity,” in terms of “input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world.” This reframing, she urges, would ultimately resituate humanity as “one species among others, inhabiting . . . a shared continuum.” The string of amber beads in Spofford’s tale, I would argue, does more than trace these channels and routes in its planetary peregrination; it enables an ecstatic relation to prehistory, an erotic manifestation of deep time, which pushes the challenge even further, demanding that we attend to the way literature gestures toward the dissolution of corporeal as well as cultural borders, the way it unmakes the self-evidently “human” body along with the self-contained nation. Pointing beyond Dimock’s expansion of humanism toward a species continuum, the amber beads’ ability to animate the inanimate, and vice versa, suggests that a truly “planetary” (as opposed to global) framework would effectively explode modern conceptions of the human, radically remaking the possibility of relations to and in the world.

Vaughan Rose senses precisely this kind of explosion rumbling beneath Yone’s praise of amber’s time. In response, he declares himself disgusted by amber, calling it an “unnatural” thing with “no existent cause” (55). Rose explains that he finds amber hateful because, “when we hold it in our hands, we hold also that furious epoch where rioted all monsters and poisons,—where death fecundated and life destroyed,—where superabundance demanded such existences, no souls, but fiercest animal fire” (56). Notably, Rose’s illustration of this “furious epoch” bears not a substantive but an affective difference to Yone’s depiction of a “world of accentuated crises.” They imagine prehistory roughly along the same lines, but Rose is horrified...
rather than exhilarated by it. The time that amber contains signals, for him, an undirected, undifferentiated, and inhuman existence, obliterating the individual and his or her capacity for spiritual elevation in its insistence on the merely carnal. This, perhaps, is why he conjectures that the “gods” depicted on the string of beads represent “all those very Gnostic deities that assisted at Creation” (54). In the Gnostic account, the creator-deities generated a world bound entirely to material existence, without avenues for transcendence; Rose indicates his awareness of this account when he asks Yone whether she is “not afraid that the imprisoned things work their spells upon” her (54).

Rose’s allusion to Gnosticism hints at the mystical fervor with which Yone speaks of deep time; while she cares nothing about religion, describing herself as “a great creature without a soul” (56), her version of the geological imaginary preserves certain qualities of sacred time that distinguish it from the empty, homogenous time of modernity. Not only is it differently textured and paced, it is also “reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present,” though one transposed from the time of the purely mythical into that of geo-history. Most chilling for Rose, and most thrilling for Yone, is this paradoxical possibility of recurrence: the suggestion that this other time has not been wholly transcended, that amber, a “friable” solid (40) that retains the memory of its liquid origins—indexed above all by the pervasiveness of its earthy scent, which Rose detests and Yone adores—merely coagulates around the primordial past without wholly containing it. Yone suggests as much when she declares that the “furious epoch” is held in human hands, along with the amber it produced. She imagines that those same human hands might generate the possibility of return: “What if in some piece of amber an accidental seed were sealed; we found, and planted, and brought back the lost aeons?” (56). This fantasy of prehistory’s return frustrates any attempt to recuperate this period for the paradigm of progress, to situate it, like the “primitive” life of the tropics, as the necessary (but lesser) precursor to a more highly developed and superior mode of existence. The possibility that the age of accentuated crises stands always ready to return, in other words,
undoes the self-flattering conception that human civilization constitutes the apex of geohistorical development, proposing that it might, instead, be simply another incident in the long life of the planet.12

Yone’s amber-induced engagement with the geological imaginary is not a retreat to a time before time, an “innocent” or “Edenic” natural world free of conflict or change.13 Rather, the depths of time accessed through amber are immanent within our time, the effect of looking at time otherwise, refusing the lure of a linear, teleological history and recognizing the unevenness and variations within it: recognizing time itself as geological, able to erupt in other directions without notice. In this sense, Yone’s geological reveries also pose a challenge to the very projection of “innocence” onto nature as a foundational and normalizing fantasy of Western culture, illuminating a nature more wayward, and more perversely productive, than this sentimental fantasy will allow. Yone’s meditations on the time of amber threaten, then, not simply because they recall a non-Edenic past but also because they suggest a future that is not the one we have learned to expect—not the one the anonymous critic from the *North American Review* sought to protect by shielding “the young” from Spofford’s perverse influence, but the unknown future that is, as Jacques Derrida observes, “necessarily monstrous.”14 The rioting monsters that haunt the self-image of the civilized menace precisely to the extent that they illuminate what time might do when wrested from the forms that Western modernity has imposed upon it.

### BLESSED MOMENTS

When Rose declares amber to be “unnatural,” he has in mind an idealized vision of nature as that which tempers, supports, and stabilizes the linear and teleological time of progress: nature, that is, as embodying a cyclic time understood to provide an index of restoration and a faith-renewing reminder of the divine promise. Shortly after his return from Europe, Rose tries to renew his relationship with his childhood love, Louise, by enacting an intimate May Day ritual that plays on this
vision. He brings her a shower of mayflower blossoms because the sweet, pale blooms remind him of her, a ritual that connects the pair’s attachment, through an imaginative dilation upon the mayflower, to the foundation of the nation itself. They envision the flowers as “fair little Puritans” greeting the “winter-worn mariners of Plymouth” and helping to renew their spirits, much as Rose finds himself restored, after a year spent abroad improving his painting, by the sight of his devoted lover (59). The New England blossom is thus conscripted into an account of middle-class American time-values, a system in which the nurture provided by a cyclical, nature-bound, and supportive femininity makes possible the civic and cultural progress associated with the masculine.

Counterposing the predictable construction of a dependable nature that shores up this all-American coupling, the excessive vision of nature conveyed in Yone’s account of amber moves time in other directions. Yone’s picture of the “pristine world” as one of “accentuated crises, that sloughed off age after age,” resembles Georges Bataille’s unsentimental conceptualization of nature as a “squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation.” Nature’s squandering signals, in this view, an eroticism defined against the reproductive drive; nature is not bound to that drive, not committed to the mere perpetuation of survival, but rather comprised of “a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order.” And it is very much against the concept of reproduction, the stable, generational propagation of sameness, that Yone imagines amber’s generation, connecting it, instead, to moments of impassioned fulfillment, moments in which the pleasure of being becomes an end in itself: “That’s the witchery of amber,—that it has no cause,—that all the world grew to produce it, maybe,—died and gave no other sign,—that its tree, which must have been beautiful, dropped all its fruits,—and how bursting with juice must they have been—” (55). Yone identifies amber as the lingering trace of primordial jouissance, the preservation of a supremely annihilating pleasure. The opposition of this explosive pleasure to ordinary modes of (re)production comes through in her deliberate perversion of amber’s origin story. As Rose interrupts to point out, the
trees from which amber came were not fruit-bearing but “coniferous,” something Yone already knows, as she has elsewhere identified amber as a product of resin. Her deliberate substitution, in this rendition, of “fruits . . . bursting with juice” seems intended both to heighten the orgasmic dimension of the image she is developing and to underscore the waywardness at amber’s origin, its turning aside from the expected reproductive order. Amber signals another mode of production: accidental and unforeseen, and valuable precisely for that reason. In this way, Yone’s excessive vision wrests nature free of its sacralization by middle-class sentimental culture and assigns to it, instead, the time of a world of “accentuated crises”—an irregular, transformative, and fulfilled time, marked by a careless squandering of energies that permits the unexpected to emerge.

Yone’s fantasies of nature’s ecstatic anti-reproductivity do not limit themselves to the prehistoric era, however. She also lauds the “fierce heat and panting winds” of the present-day tropics, which she credits not with having regenerated her, in the common term for the restorative capacity of travel, but with having generated her otherwise (52). As she explains, a visit to the West Indies for the sake of her ailing mother’s health brought an end to her incarnation as an awkward adolescent, turning her into a languid, seductive beauty; as soon as she reached the islands, Yone recalls, “all that tropical luxuriance snatched me to itself at once, recognized me for kith and kin; and mamma died, and I lived” (46). In this account, the gorgeous, excessive version of nature found in the tropics is severed from and opposed to the sentimental and moral functions cited by Rose and Louise. Far from propping up the family form, it possesses the power to kill the mother and substitute an alternate lineage for the “natural” bond between mother and child. Yone’s narration of her mother’s death establishes her own living as an event comparable to her mother’s dying, and one for which that death seems a necessary prerequisite. And for a culture that insists on separating sexuality and maternity, the kind of liveness Yone manifests does stand irreconcilably opposed to the maternal function, so that her tropical coming-of-age becomes a growing-otherwise, away from the established developmental sequence and domestic
**Giorgione. Sleeping Venus (c. 1510).** Oil on canvas, 108 x 175 cm.
By permission of Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
duties of the middle-class daughter, raised eventually to take the mother’s place. Indeed, when Yone flatly refuses to go and nurse a dying aunt, a task her father presents as her familial responsibility, she insists that her own “rank redundant life” makes it “impossible” for her to comply (70).

The profuseness that Yone associates with tropical life not only thwarts established bourgeois patterns of generational reproduction; it also counters the very doctrine of productivity those patterns are meant to perpetuate. Pleasure, instead, appears as a (sacred) end in itself: “You are full of blessedness in those climates, and that is the end and aim of all action; and if Nature will do it for you, there is no need of your interference. It is much better to be than to do;—one is strife, the other is possession.” “Blessedness,” for Yone, is a state that resists both the Protestant work ethic and the transcendence of the spiritual; when Rose responds to this speech by proposing that “being as the complete attainment” belongs to God alone, she accuses him of sliding into metaphysics and hushes him, 16 prompting him to remark on her lack of the spiritual variety of blessedness (53). Yone’s insistence on the “blessedness” of the fulfilled moment, like Walter Benjamin’s messianic historical materialism, employs and transforms the language of theology to serve purposes other than religious ones. This transformative tendency manifests itself in her recollection of the Giorgione painting for which she was named, located in a Catholic church in Fiesole, “a quiet place, full of twilight and one great picture.” Trying to identify the subject of that picture, she muses: “It was a Venus;—no, though, it couldn’t have been a Venus in a church, could it? Well, then, a Magdalen, I guess, or a Madonna, or something” (37–38). Giorgione was indeed known for a painting of Venus: the Sleeping Venus (1510), one of the largest and best-known female nudes of the period. It was said to have inspired Titian’s Venus of Urbino (1538), which Mark Twain called “the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses” on account of the draping of the woman’s hand over her genitals, inferring masturbation—a position Titian’s painting copied from Giorgione’s. 17 Yone’s offhand reference to the goddess infuses the remainder of her reflections with the languid, autoerotic sensuality of this celebrated
figure. Even after she corrects herself, her confusion over whether the woman was a Magdalen or Madonna underscores her indifference to the spiritually didactic function of church paintings. The casual conflation of goddess, whore, and virgin in Yone’s imagination reflects her disinterest in Christianity’s moral distinctions between types of femininity. What matters, for her, is not whom the painting depicts but how it depicts her: in rich, gorgeous colors that, illuminated by a chance ray of sun, had so bedazzled her father that the scene became forever fixed in his memory, a moment out of time.

We might see Yone herself—the Yone whose liveness is actualized in the tropics—as generated by this suspended moment with the painting, for which her father, later, “gratefully” names her (38). This could be said in the conventional reproductive sense, since the woman who will become Yone’s mother is also present in the church, praying over the amber rosary, attended by a “little slave” who turns out to be the “little islander” (37, 43). Yet Willoughby’s moment with the painting actually defers this proto-reproductive convergence, as he is so distracted by rapture that he loses sight of the praying woman and does not find her again for a number of years. (Yone’s narration echoes this deferral, detailing the scene and her father’s intense pleasure but failing to explain, for a number of pages, that the picturesquely praying woman would also play a part in her story). The painting, then, intimates the radically anti-reproductive potential of the aesthetic encounter: Willoughby’s sunlight-drenched contact with its “rich colors” might be said to have birthed Yone directly, much as the sea was said to have birthed Venus. And indeed, Yone describes herself in a similar manner, as looking like she has stepped directly out of a sunbeam: “the complete incarnation of light, full, bounteous, overflowing” (38). This vision of light incarnate thwarts any attempt to claim light for a spirituality that transcends the body; its fleshy materiality emphasizes, rather, that its function is carnal fulfillment, as Yone later explains:

You’ve no idea what light is, till you’ve been in those inland hills. You think a blue sky the perfection of bliss? When you see a white sky, a
dome of colorless crystal, with purple swells of mountain heaving round you, and a wilderness in golden greens royally languid below, while stretches of a scarlet blaze, enough to ruin a weak constitution, flaunt from the rank vines that lace every thicket,—and the whole world, and you with it, seems breaking to blossom,—why, then you know what light is and can do. (53)

One of the things light can do, apparently, is to bring this scene of "tropical luxuriance" to an erotic crescendo, an orgasmic "breaking to blossom" that enfolds both subject and world—an enfolding that echoes and extends her father’s sunlit contact with the painting that gave Yone her "identity" (38). Light, accordingly, enkindles the kind of liveness that positions Yone outside the bourgeois domestic family, through a kind of eroticized photosynthesis that activates a beauty fierce enough to kill the mother, powerful enough to birth a "changeling." The strangeness of the modes of eros engaged in these aesthetic encounters—ravishment by a painting, copulation with a landscape—marks a move beyond even those varying forms of minor or "transgressive" sexuality that queer studies has so productively taxonomized, and into realms of sexuality removed from both the norm and its transgression.

Of course, the tropical scene Yone paints, racy though it is, lends itself to such conventions as the "language of flowers," a familiar frame of meaning from sentimental literature that was often redeployed in nineteenth-century American women’s erotic writing. Paula Bennett declares, along these lines, that the combination of sentimental and Orientalist imagery renders "The Amber Gods" "an unusually good example of how nineteenth-century women writers could talk about sex and about variant styles of sexuality without using the word." The story, she suggests, was "safely importable into bourgeois parlors because [it was] written in a widely employed code that readers could decipher or not as they chose." Though Bennett’s observations make sense—the anonymous *North American Review* critic was evidently able to read "illicit love" and "unlawful passion"
at work in the story—I would still question the extent to which this notion of “coding” wholly captures the tale’s insistent and strange presentation of sexuality. Certainly the story may be seen to code “variant” but familiar human sex acts (Bennett, for instance, hypothesizes that much of the flower talk circles around “oral sex or, better perhaps, about men’s discomfort with women who might want it”) both through displacement into other languages, such as that of sentiment, and through ameliorative rhetorical moves that depicted wholly forbidden sex acts as mildly scandalous ones. For example, at one point, as Yone and Rose share a stolen kiss, her hair enacts the orgasm her body, in the pages of the Atlantic Monthly, presumably cannot:

“The full passion of his soul broke to being, wrapped me with a blinding light, a glowing kiss on lingering lips, a clasp strong and tender as heaven. All my hair fell down like a shining cloud and veiled us, the great rolling folds in wave after wave of crisp splendor. I drew back from that long, silent kiss, I gathered up each gold thread of the straying tresses, blushing, defiant” (75).

This barely masked description of coiffure jouissance renders an otherwise overly explicit sex scene permissible for parlor consumption. Yet while Yone’s “straying tresses” may encode a sexual straying, what we see in this scene is still recognizable as something like heterosexuality, as, that is to say, a form of human sexuality with which we are already familiar. At other moments, however, we may well question whether what we are seeing is best understood as the “coding” of sex acts that we readers are already equipped to recognize and taxonomize, or as the creation of new sexualities though couplings not only unsanctioned but scarcely foreseen. These unconventional couplings—with paintings, landscapes, worlds—point toward a Deleuzian conception of sexuality as unleashing and enabling transformative becomings, eschewing imitation and identification in favor of “experimentation, hybridization, and ‘unnatural participation.’” From this perspective, we can say “The Amber Gods” works to generate a mode of engaging the erotic that does not simply “express” a given sexuality, even a marginalized or repressed one, but that actualizes the aesthetic to produce bodies anew.

This newness is made possible by the actualization, within

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such moments of intensive contact with warmth, light, and color, of what Yone understands as the “accentuated” time of the prehistoric, apart from the predictable pace of generational reproduction. Amber’s generation within this time reflects the sinuous contact that enables the taking-on of other qualities: “I like amber . . . because I know how it was made, drinking the primeval weather, resinously beading each grain of its rare wood, and dripping with a plash to filter through and around the fallen cones below. In some former state I must have been a fly embalmed in amber” (43). Amber’s liquid prehistory, which Yone recollects in highly sensual language, returns in time to render bodies and objects fluid and queerly transformative. Yone’s sense of intimacy with amber indicates that she herself already constitutes a partial return to this era, in defiance of the putative linearity of time. That intimacy, however, enkindles an imaginative transformation of herself into other animate forms—as a “fly embalmed in amber,” feeling within herself the “plash” of the resin on its way down through the ages, and as a beetle soaking up the carnal qualities of light: “I’ve watched little bugs—gold rose-chafers—lie steeping in the sun, till every atom of them must have been searched with the warm radiance, and have felt that, when they reached that point, I was just like them, golden all through,—not dyed, but created” (38). The insectual manifestation of pleasure suggests the way sexuality, in the tale, swerves toward the non-human, away from the confirmation of familiar forms and into new circuits of possibility. The capacious and intensified time of prehistory enables a shift to what Deleuze and Guattari would term a molecular sexuality, engaging forms of desiring-production “beyond the anthropomorphic representation that society imposes on this subject, and with which [the subject] represents its own sexuality.”22 The molecular names a level on which “sexuality” breaks free not simply of the obligation to be reproductive (that is, of children) but also of the perpetual reproduction of a field marked out by the distinction between idealized and deviant sexualities, that locked-down game of opposition in which manifestations of queerness as Other ultimately come to bolster the normativity they supposedly subvert. “The Amber Gods” sets up this game of opposition, casting Yone as the
sexual outlaw against Lu’s purity, but Yone’s strange intimacies, so far astray of both law and norm, displace the reproduction of known forms of sexuality in favor of a passage beyond the anthropomorphic, establishing erotic pathways between the human and the inhuman—between flesh and light, men and paint, women and beetles. These as-yet-uncharted paths remind us that the crucial question to ask concerning sexuality is not what something is, or means, but what it can do, what it can create, and how it might change our ways of living.

In this light, the fundamentally social direction of attachments that, like Yone’s, would ordinarily signify as fetishistic and autoerotic perversions comes into view: along with new forms of pleasure, they are inventing new worlds—drawing out the “world-making” activity embraced in (and as) queer theory beyond the human as such. As Elizabeth Grosz affirms, in the erotic encounter “both a world and a body are opened up for redistribution, dis-organization, transformation; each is metamorphosed in the encounter, both become something other, something incapable of being determined in advance, and perhaps even in retrospect, but which nonetheless have perceptibly shifted and realigned.”

Yone’s apprehension of nature on planetary time moves it away from its colonization by the fantasy of progress, using it to probe ruptures with/in the present, to experiment with what is potentially present in bodies directed otherwise. And yet, insofar as the “new worlds” she locates in this other dimension of time partly overlap, in space, with the “New World” historically projected by the forces of colonization, the question remains: how might the nonlinear time of the former engage ethically with the histories we have yet to confront adequately in the latter? It is to this intersection that I will now turn.

HISTORICAL TRACES

Generative as Yone’s eroticized deep time may be, it yet offers no more of redress for—or even a way to give attention to—the global historical wreckage that we may identify as the cost and consequence of the ideal of progress.

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perspective, the radical decentering of the human threatens not just to overlook but actively to thwart the possibility of critical historical practice. That thwarting is evident in Yone’s blithe inattention to the histories of others and manifested in her comments concerning New World slavery, which she treats as neither an ethical nor an economic/political question but an aesthetic one. As she tells the story of the Asian girl from whom her amber necklace was taken, whose growth was evidently stunted by a childhood of hardship and illness, Yone comments, “nothing could have been finer than to have a dwarf in those old palaces, you know” (44). And her rhapsodies on the luxuriant color of West Indian foliage include the observation, “What a blessing it is that the blacks have been imported there,—their swarthiness is in such consonance!” (53). These images appear to her evacuated of history: effects without cause, sources of pleasure that have no time but the present. Or rather, we could say that, like amber, Yone’s narration absorbs and contains the wreckage of history without working it through; though she gives little thought to the traumas of the past, they resonate in and against her recounting of events.

This is most obvious in her presentation of the story of the “little Asian” from whom Yone’s family took the amber necklace, and whose narrative is “handed down like a legend” in the Willoughby family, along with the portraits, jewels, and other tokens of their slave-trading wealth (44); Yone identifies her own rehearsal of it as being about the necklace—“how this rosary came about”—and not the girl (43). The story is riddled with gaps: the girl’s name, her place of origin, her ethnicity (Yone refers to her both as “Asian” and as “islander,” and variously gives her skin color as brown and black) and even her language (composed, Yone insists, of “short shouts and screeches” [43]) all remain unidentified, and the precise reason her slave-trading great-grandfather chose to bring home a six-year-old child is likewise passed over. The legend instead concentrates on creating an effect by describing the girl’s behavior once in New England:

She turned the house topsy-turvy, cut the noses out of the old portraits, and chewed the
jewels out of the settings, killed the little home animals, spoiled the dinners, pranced in the garden with Madam Willoughby’s farthingale, and royal stiff brocades rustling yards behind,—this atom of a shrimp,—or balanced herself with her heels in the air over the curb of the well, scraped up the dead leaves under one corner of the house and fired them,—a favorite occupation. . . . (43)

The comical effect produced by the image of a whirling dervish wreaking havoc on the Willoughby estate almost, but not quite, deflects attention away from the question of why, precisely, a child might want to burn a house down—a consciously targeted effort at destruction that seems to exceed the Willoughbys’ generic assumption that the girl was just too savage for civilization. And while we might be tempted to ascribe this campaign of destruction to enslavement alone, a further complication is introduced by the way her “wild” behavior in New England compares to her behavior in Florence, where she remains with Yone’s mother’s family for decades, a “mysterious tame servant” (44). Yone conjectures that the ague the girl contracted shook the “effervescence” out of her, but the gaps in the story point toward another explanation: the intertwining of colonial and sexual violence, culminating in the birth, after her transatlantic journey and subsequent Italian wanderings, of an illegitimate bi-racial child whom the Fiesolan family adopts as their own.26 The “illness” that leads her to appeal for shelter, which Yone characteristically over-describes—“scorched with malaria fevers and shaken to pieces with tertian and quartan and all the rest of the agues” (44)—may signify a difficult pregnancy and labor, whereas the sudden change in her attitude toward servitude, and especially her devoted attendance on the young woman in church, to whom she has gifted her most cherished (and apparently sole) possession, can plausibly be explained by the existence of a blood tie between the two.

More disturbing still is the implication that the islander’s child is a blood descendant of the Willoughbys. She may have conceived the child as a result of sexual abuse by Yone’s great-
grandfather (an account that would problematically require the
girl to be older than six by the time she left his estate, though
the oral transmission of the story through the years might well
cause the detail of her age to be mistaken). Or, conversely,
she herself may be great-grandfather Willoughby’s daughter,
the result of an overseas liaison, conceived during one voyage,
brought home later on a whim that would be abandoned in
the face of wifely wrath, and impregnated sometime after her
ejection from the household (a possibility again permitted by
vagueness concerning the length of time of her Italian peregri-
nations). In either case, the existence of this blood tie would
furnish a reason not only for the fury with which the islander
greets the return of the Willoughbys in the person of Yone’s
father but, more to the point, for her determined resistance
to his romantic pursuit of Yone’s mother: Yone reports that
when Willoughby identifies himself, she ”became livid, seemed
always after haunted by a dreadful fear of him, pursued him
with a rancorous hate, but could not hinder his marriage”—a
failure that prompts Yone to interject into her narrative, with-
out further explanation, the telling aside, ”The Willoughbys
are a cruel race” (45). All the islander can do to express her
distress at this coupling is to take away the amber necklace and
curse it in an attempt to prevent its return to America; yet the
Italian family simply waits until she is dead, then sends it to the
Willoughbys in defiance of her wishes.

If the islander seems ”haunted” by a fear of Yone’s father,
Yone’s story is no less haunted by the shadow-history of impe-
rial and sexual trauma unfolded here, a history that ultimately
takes spectral form. The Willoughby family, in its imaginative
retelling of the islander legend, tends to characterize the girl in
supernatural terms, as a demon, an ”imp,” a ”witch,” a ”sprite,”
and a ”Thing enchanting all her spirits from their beads about
her” (44). But the paranormal figure most responsive to the
islander’s refusal to be erased by the legend, to the way the
violence in her story continues to insist, to force its way into the
present tense, is the specter, which Jacques Derrida identifies
as the ”Thing” that ”looks at us and sees us not see it even when
it is there.” Not that the islander herself ever appears as a
ghost; rather, what I intend here is to align the way her story
disrupts Yone’s telling, making it appear otherwise, with the Derridean specter as the figure of another kind of history, a history that is untimely, belated. These undated, non-progressive remains of a time “out of joint” demand, as a consequence, the development of a “noncontemporaneous idiom for justice,” an idiom that seeks to honor the claims that pasts and futures make on the present without fixing or finalizing the relationship between them. The spectralization of the islander’s story does not, then, equate simply to obscuring or effacing it; on the contrary, it ensures that this story will continue to return, that its presence will remain diffused and insistent throughout a latter-day account ostensibly unconcerned with its demand to be read.

Though Derrida does not pursue a specifically queer reading of the specter, the Shakespearean phrase that provides the epigraph for his *Specters of Marx* positions time, as Elizabeth Freeman observes, "as if its heterogeneity can be felt in the bones. . . . In this metaphor, time has, indeed is, a body.” The long-standing cultural habit of embodying time, not simply as a measure of mortality but also as an index of affective and erotic states and sensations, suggests a number of possible relations between asynchrony—out-of-joint-ness—and queerness; as one of these, queer spectrality would insist not simply on the desirability but on the ethical necessity, within its reconceptualization of justice, of attending to the resonances and echoes among varying forms of sexual alterity and marginalization across time and space without collapsing them into anything like an identity. The spectral mode of embodying time is distinguished by the way in which the specter is “a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit . . . some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other.” The in-between-ness of the specter’s corporeality resists the possibility of its settling into any known forms, but at the same time counters the assumption that a specter is a disembodied phenomenon. There is body in the specter, but it is never quite the same body: "For there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever.” This return is not a restoration of the body as a whole, unbroken
entity, a “curative” move; rather, the embodiment of the ghost is the mark of the impossibility of such wholeness, of the defer-
ral of its redemption. In this sense, the ”abstractness” of the spectral body does not necessarily counter the singularity of the specter, or dissolve into nothingness such particularizing historical markers as class, gender, race, or sexuality.

Given these caveats about the status of the body in queer spectrality, we are left with the question of precisely how we can justly connect the broken corporeality of a time out of joint with the pleasurable intensities and transformative suspensions that mark Yone’s erotics of deep time—and, more to the point, how the two can be thought together without the former simply rebuking the latter, without having the brute fact of sexual violence and trauma check or negate the creative potential entwined in sexual pleasure. The kind of reading that critiques a politics of pleasure, in such dire historical conditions, as the mere playground of the privileged mistakes moralism for ethics, indicting pleasure itself as the problem rather than the history of its uneven distribution. Many contemporary critics of the story, as I remarked earlier, view Yone’s fate in the second half of the story in this light, reading her death as a kind of delayed retribution for her immoral wildness in its first—or, at least, as a canny simulation of such retribution, in order to bring the story within the bounds of what it was permissible to publish. Yone’s long illness and ultimate transformation into a ghost, from this vantage point, shut down the manifold possibilities unleashed through her narration, reaffirming that the inevitable ending for the sexually free woman—as well as the unrepentant racial “passer”—must be death.

Yet it is also possible to see in this ending (which brings to a close Yone’s family line, since she, her father’s only child, dies without offspring) not a moral but an ethical charge conveyed by the islander’s return, via the realization of the curse she placed on the amber beads: a declaration that ”all their blessing would be changed to banning, and that bane would burn the bearer, should the salt–sea spray again dash round them” (45). Though Louise has kept the amber necklace for most of the summer preceding Yone’s marriage (Yone, knowing Rose’s antipathy to amber, is happy to have him associate the scent with her rival),
she returns it the night before her cousin’s wedding, and it remains with Yone for the remaining ten years of her blighted life—until, at the moment of her death, the string breaks and the “little cruel gods” scatter (82). To read this return, in the guise of the curse, as simple revenge, however, is to miss the kinds of illumination queer spectrality might offer, as it insists that relations across time not reduce to repetition or simple causation. This kind of retribution—the thwarting of Yone’s life in exchange for the thwarting of the islander’s—is not “justice” in the sense associated with spectrality, not least because it would presume that justice, once Yone is dead, has been done. Yet as though to underscore the impossibility of reducing the “doing” of justice to a concrete moment in which a single act somehow evens the score between past and present, Yone actually misses the moment of her own death, identifying it only after the fact, in the story’s celebrated final line: “I must have died at ten minutes past one” (83). The belated revelation of Yone’s revenance closes and reopens the story at the same moment, sending the reader back in time to seek out the sign of her death within the narrative, a move resembling the way the specter begins, as specter, by coming back, confounding efforts to hold on to order, sequence, or origin. The two paragraphs spanning the period between her demise and this realization, moreover, complicate any attempt to render that demise as transparently punitive. Yone’s first posthumous movements instead establish death as a space of ecstatic liberation: “How clear the space is! . . . There is the quarter striking. How free I am! . . . Drop, mask! I will not pick you up! Out, out into the gale! back to my elements!” (83). Only after she has wandered downstairs to face the “great ebony clock” in the hall and realized that, although she can hear the chimes, she no longer sees the hour passing, does an ambivalent tone enter her musings: “To and fro, soundless and purposeless, swung the long pendulum. And, ah! what was this thing I had become? I had done with time” (83). It is difficult to view this as a negative outcome, however, particularly as the reader will recollect that Yone has never, in any case, had a strong attachment to the “great ebony clock” or to the domestic time it marks.35 The backwards ed-dying that the story’s last line sets off may prompt the reader
to notice that the phrase "back to my elements" echoes her description of one of the amber gods as depicting a "calm, satisfying death, a mere exhalation, a voluntary slipping into another element," and also that the kind of "life" she admires in the tropics is the "life of the elements" (40, 52). Read as elemental transformation rather than termination, Yone’s living on as a specter is not the grim retribution it might at first seem but the calling forth of another mode of time, one that points both reflectively (and multiply) backward and suggestively but uncertainly (difficult as it is for us to imagine how to shape a future outside clock time) forward.

The double temporal movement of Yone’s spectral turn also returns our attention to the spectral presence of the islander in the story’s second half. Though she is never directly referenced in this section, her story lives on in Yone’s, through the resonances called out by the aforementioned curse. That curse, as I have proposed, does not manifest here as simple vengeance. Instead, it illuminates unexpected resonances between the islander’s and Yone’s histories through its distinctive phrasing. Its promise that "all [the amber necklace’s] blessing will be changed to banning" does, in fact, narrate the course of Yone’s erotic life, if we see blessedness, Yone’s term for erotic fulfillment, ending in the banns that traditionally herald a wedding. The amber necklace foretells marriage in the very manner of its arrival, against the islander’s wishes, in New England, sent in a package along with Yone’s mother’s wedding veil, likewise intended as a gift from Yone’s aunt. And when her father pretends to hesitate over giving it to her, Yone tries to charm it out of him by saying that she wants the necklace "to have and to hold, for better, for worse" (41). These ties between the beads and the wedding ritual point not to the necklace cursing the wedding but to the wedding itself cursing the beads’ more pleasurable connotations, their connection to the capacious, inhuman eros of deep time, by reinscribing Yone into a line of generational descent. She appears to have a satisfyingly "blessed" sex life with Rose before they marry, in her own distinctively photosynthetic style: "In the burning noons, we hung suspended between two heavens, in our boat on glassy forest–pools, where now and then a shoal of white
lilies rose and crowded out the under-sky. Sunsets burst like bubbles over us” (72). After their marriage, however, erotic fulfillment disappears from the relationship along with all other pleasures: Rose, Yone reports, “became artist,—ceased to be Man” (80). The banning of blessedness in this marriage is linked to Rose’s return to aesthetic productivity, and in particular to an achievement that had long eluded him, the ability to paint Yone’s portrait. (Not incidentally, it is the inherited Willoughby wealth that enables Rose, who “ha[s] only his art,” to devote all his time to it [76]). Once Yone becomes a subject for Rose to paint, she is rendered as merely another familial possession: “Revealed and bare, all our histories written in me, he hung me up beside my ancestors. There I hang” (80). Positioned, via portraiture, as “the last term” in this lineage, Yone finds her privilege countered by the patriarchal violence required to keep the descending generations in line: “A fierce weapon thrust into the world for evil has that race been,—from the great gray Willoughby, threatening with his iron eyes there, to me, the sharp apex of its suffering” (78). Yone’s reinsertion into the family line signals an imprisonment within this form, her capacious corporeality constrained to signify as an empty placeholder within reproductive history.

By identifying this turn of events with the spectral return of the islander’s story, I am not trying to suggest that Yone’s painful reduction to familial term is somehow analogous to the islander’s position as a sexually abused slave: this kind of equation is not what is at play in spectral historiography. On the contrary, as Wendy Brown points out, the spectral mode emphasizes how history “changes shape”: “that is, the same event or formation does not haunt in the same way across time and space.” Similarly, while the family form consistently constrains bodies, it does so differently across time and space. The occluded sexual trauma and disavowed blood tie in the islander’s story highlight another aspect of the violence engaged in the name of the family. They emphasize how, even as it celebrated the affectionate ties of kinship, the very form of the bourgeois American family depended, to no small extent, on the erasure or denial of certain kinds of biological kinship, particularly those produced by the irregular sexual ties
facilitated within colonialism and chattel slavery. The distinctive histories of violence within each woman’s story are, accordingly, best engaged neither by collapsing them together nor by ranking them against one another as “greater” and “lesser” oppressions. Rather, the challenge we confront is to find ways to think these differing manifestations of violence together toward the development of an idiom of justice for histories of trauma, sexual and otherwise—one that would not foreclose or deny the deployment of sexual and corporeal pleasure as part of what “justice” might mean.

The lush extravagance of “The Amber Gods” makes possible a quasi-palimpsestic layering of two forms of nonlinear time that are tied, respectively, to the pre- and the post-human: the deep geological time Yone associates with amber’s prehistoric generation and the spectral resurfacing of erased histories of dehumanization. The tale approaches these exceptional forms as latent within the ordinary, requiring new modes of looking—sensual and/or critical—in order to actualize their presence. The differing shapes of the (overlapping) stories of Yone and her unnamed ancestor, however, demand that two presumably distinct modes of critical response be made to work together. In my engagement with “The Amber Gods,” I have worked from an understanding of reading as eventful rather than interpretive: addressing the tale as a kind of action, trying to trace out what it can make happen. I posit this approach as a way to comprehend the new forms and inhuman encounters that proliferate throughout the tale, as distinguished from a mode of interpretation that seeks to analyze or decode the text, locating within it already-known forms and truths. Yet reading the islander’s story within Yone’s does require a certain kind of decoding work—not in the guise of looking past a “cover story” for the truth “beneath,” precisely, but of learning to listen to silences, to work with fragments that cannot be restored to wholeness. This sort of decoding does not, ultimately, reaffirm familiar terms, since it is itself also a way of unsettling equations and assumptions we are used to making. In this sense, interpretation also becomes eventful.
"The Amber Gods" has a good deal to tell us about the activity of literature in its historical moment: about the intersections of Orientalism and "exotic" sexuality; about the domesticating pressures placed on female literary expression; about the perennial New World preoccupation with slavery, the "haunting nature" of which, according to Edouard Glissant, leaves "the American novelist, whatever the cultural zone he [sic] belongs to . . . struggling in the confusion of time." Yet given the story's focus on the possibilities of nonlinear time, and the way in which its opulent and irruptive construction catches and refracts different moments, it may tell us even more about how the literary might be activated in our own time: as a kind of optimistic intervention in thought. Part of what I am proposing, then, is that "The Amber Gods" suggests to us how the image of the specter, so frequently evoked in contemporary criticism and theory to index the (re)surfacing of historical trauma, might also be made to figure other kinds of transhistorical transmissions: of pleasure, inventiveness, radical departures not just from the norm but also the known. Being "responsible" to the past, in this light, would mean finding ways both to address its brutalities and to respond to and actualize its ecstasies—to recognize that history is not only what hurts, in Frederic Jameson's infamous phrase, but also what may, given time, be rendered (pleasurably) otherwise. The restless questing after new worlds of eros in "The Amber Gods" might be understood as a sedimentation of these other histories, ones that we have not (yet) lived, but that nevertheless live on within it.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Samantha Pinto, Katherine Biers, Susan M. Griffin, and the editors of this special issue for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Press, 1989). 39. Further references to this story will be cited parenthetically within the text.


4. See, for example, Elizabeth Freeman, introduction to "Queer Temporalities," special issue, *GLQ* 13 (Spring-Summer 2007): 161–62.

5. Harriet Prescott Spofford to Fred Lewis Pattee, 11 November 1914, Fred Lewis Pattee Collection, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State Univ. Libraries; quoted by permission. I am grateful to Alfred Bendixen for pointing me to this letter and for supporting my work on Spofford.

6. Susan M. Griffin has also analyzed Spofford’s tale as an experiment in time-based aesthetics; her assessment of this "accretive" style as an alternative model for female artistic practice in the second half of the nineteenth century has greatly influenced my own reading. See Griffin, "Concretions and Growths: Narration and Metamorphosis in Spofford’s 'The Amber Gods'" (paper presentation, Society for the Study of Narrative Literature Annual Convention, Washington DC, 15 March 2007).


11. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 70.

12. Yone is not unique in thus fantasizing about the return of prehistory; indeed, she shares this notion with one of the great scientific historians of the Victorian age, Charles Lyell. Lyell’s three-volume Principles of Geology (1830–33), widely credited with laying the biblical account of the world’s creation to rest in its thorough (and reader-friendly) overview of the scientific basis of deep time, oddly included a speculation that future climate change might allow dinosaurs and other fossil remains to live once again (see Gould, Time’s Arrow, 101). Despite this ostensible agreement on the possibility of return, however, Yone’s world of “accentuated crises” differs markedly from the slow, steady movement of Lyell’s version of deep time. His Principles of Geology argued for the uniformitarian view of geological development, insisting that there had been no significant difference over time in the forces that shaped the earth. Yone and Rose’s perspective on the “furious” pace of prehistory, in contrast, resembles the catastrophism of Georges Cuvier, who hypothesized a series of dramatic “revolutions” that saw the destruction and rebirth of life on earth. Lyell insisted that the catastrophic theory was a relic of the backward desire to hold onto a biblical time frame, and Cuvier’s work did attract geologists and “natural theologians” who sought to maintain a geo-history consistent with biblical accounts. Crucially, however, though Cuvier did list the Great Flood as the last of the catastrophic revolutions, his understanding of

13. Here, I disagree with Lisa Logan’s reading of the way “The Amber Gods” engages prehistory. Logan argues: “In an attempt to escape this history of colonization and to locate a history from which she can speak, Giorgione reverts to a narrative of a prehistorical, pre-colonial past world. Her amber is synecdoche for an imagined moment of lush, tropical, Edenic prehistory, when beauty was not made by art and culture was not determined by power. . . . Unfortunately, her constructed world, like the one which she means to escape, depends on cultural narratives that polarize light and dark, civilization and nature.” While Long seems to read this “escapist” fantasy as an essentially romantic construction of “nature,” I am arguing, in effect, that Yone’s conception of nature displaces that very opposition, producing a far more turbulent and unpredictable “nature” that is not wholly “past,” but co-present with the time of “culture.” See Logan, “Race, Romanticism, and the Politics of Feminist Literary Study: Harriett Prescott Spofford’s ‘The Amber Gods,’” *Legacy* 18 (Spring 2001): 46.


16. The Rutgers University Press edition of this work has transposed two lines here, making the comment appear to be Rose’s, not Yone’s, but it is clear in the original *Atlantic Monthly* edition that Yone is speaking.


18. Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800–1900* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 163, 165. Dorri Rabung Beam also explores the language of flowers as a means of exploring female sexuality, specifically in the fiction of black women writers pressured to quell all expressions of sexuality, rage, and other untoward feelings by the postbellum discourse of racial uplift. Beam, however, speaks in terms not of “coding” but of folding, in the Deleuzian sense: “Pleasure is often secreted in the nooks and crannies of the text; to read into these folds is to discover not evacuated ground.


20. I write ”something like heterosexuality” in the awareness that, as Jonathan Ned Katz has argued, heterosexuality as we generally understand the term is still an anachronism at this point in the nineteenth-century, not emerging fully until century’s end. Of course, a tale so deliberately out of step with its own times as “The Amber Gods” could well be read as forward-looking in this respect. See Katz, The Invention of Heterosexuality (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).


25. Rose’s historicism does provide him with some awareness of causes; accordingly, he caps Yone’s thoughtless comment about the Caribbean by observing, ”No; the native race was in better consonance” (53). But this awareness, like the conventional white lament for the “vanishing American,” deflects the critique of the costs of progress from the present to the past, and hence provides no means of addressing the injustice it purports to recognize. Rather, such comments testify to the elevated sensitivity of the civilized speaker and, as such, reflect sympathetic awareness of past inhumanity as a regrettable part of the “progress” made by the West. In this way, the awareness furnished by Rose’s historicism is scarcely less narcissistic than Yone’s.

26. I first heard this reading proposed by Allan Lloyd-Smith in a paper titled “Race and American Gothic,” delivered at the American Literature Association Symposium on American Gothic, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on 5 December 2002.


30. Freeman, introduction to *Queer Temporalities*, 159.


33. I draw this point from Bobby Benedicto, who argues that "the value of Derrida’s spectrology lies in its refusal to distinguish clearly between abstraction and corporeality, allowing us not only to imagine the figure of the ghost but to figure it as both classed and gendered." See "The Haunting of Gay Manila: Global Space–Time and the Specter of Kabaklaan," *GLQ* 14 (Spring–Summer 2008): 318–19.

34. See Logan, "Race, Romanticism and the Politics of Literary Study"; and Bendixen, introduction to *The Amber Gods, and Other Stories*. Both critics acknowledge the moralistic reading of the ending but see it as an obligatory gesture or "compromise" on Spofford’s part.


