Structures All the Way Down: Literary Methods and the Detail

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Naomi Schor was right. The detail was long marginalized and feminized in Western aesthetics (1987). But for more than half a century now, almost every major literary studies method has advocated quite fiercely for the value of the detail. Close reading begins, always, with the "temporally extended attention to the very small" (Love 2013): we cannot make claims about a text before we have taken note of every element of a brief passage, however minor or inconsequential it might seem at first. Freud, of course, starts with the slip, the joke, the dream. From those odd moments where intention strays—the errant detail—psychoanalysis builds its accounts of the unconscious. For Clifford Geertz, so influential for literary scholarship, the study of culture must begin "from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters"—what he calls a "homely" approach" (1973, 21). Deconstruction too turns to exceptions, edges, margins—like Nietzsche's note, "I have forgotten my umbrella"—to unsettle the structuring principles of Western thought (Derrida 1978). Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argue that one way to capture New Historicist practices would be to call them "the method of the Luminous Detail," borrowing a phrase from Ezra Pound (2000, 15).[1] Feminism has long argued that "women's knowledge occurs through fissures in the socially knowable" (Gallop 2002, 9). Disability studies draws our attention both to the gritty details of "pain and everyday humiliation" that are invisible to the able-bodied (Siebers 2008, 65) and to the hyper-visible details of bodies considered freakish and strange (Garland Thomson 1997, 59-60). And Saidiya Hartman addresses silences in the archives of the Middle Passage by "laboring to paint

as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible"—that is, imagining a rich range of details that the official records of the slavers, including ledgers and legal cases, erase (2008, 11).

Despite their many and substantial differences, all of these schools of thought have a purpose in common: they turn to the detail in order to resist and unsettle prevailing systems of thought and belief. This value spans generations and schools of thought. We find it in defenses of close reading going back to R. P. Blackmur, who argues that close analysis of texts produces a "bewilderment" devastating to dogma (1935, 373), up through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who attends to the subtle details of texts as a way of countering the "monolingual, presentist, narcissicistic" perspective of imperializing power (2003, 20), to Jane Gallop, who favors close reading as a way of "resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bring things together in smug, overarching conclusions" (2007, 185). Attending closely to historical details, similarly, reveals a startling heterogeneity across times and places, which challenges imperializing Western claims to universal truth, those grand systematic philosophies that seek to subsume all experience into a single vision. "History opens up the possibility of strangeness," Janet Todd explains (1988, 98).

Subtending both close reading and historicism—the two most widespread and enduring methods in the discipline—the detail is valuable because it resists grand programs and universalizing assumptions and theories, jolting readers out of what they thought they knew to experience the shock of a radical otherness. And so, it is not surprising that literary studies scholars have so often insisted on a careful attention to the local, the specific, the small scale. Wai Chee Dimock warns against Franco Moretti's distant reading, with its "overcommitment to general laws, to global postulates operating at some remove from the phenomenal world of particular texts," because, she claims, "the loss of the detail is almost always unwarranted"

(2006, 79). Emily Apter argues in *Against World Literature* that all attempts to work on a "gargantuan scale" must always turn us into "flimsy" and "superficial" readers (2013, 3, 177). Large scales make it impossible to honor the vast array of surprising details that could unsettle our presumptions. And that means that the ethics and politics that go along with the resistance to Western imperializing knowledge, capitalism, and patriarchy also entail a turn to the small—to close reading, situated bodies, nuance, and anecdote. In short, the detail.

But as with all matters of scale, small and large are matters of relation, and the small can only emerge as such in relation to the large. The luminous detail that is so strange and resistant that it can unsettle a whole structure is not legible *as a detail* unless it is read against that larger regulating structure. The exceptional instance is covertly dependent on the predictable patterns it undoes—it is an exception *to* a prevailing norm.

In practice, what this usually means is that literary readers establish large-scale structures, conventions, or norms first, as a necessary backdrop, and then pay especially careful attention to moments that refuse or unsettle those norms as the most important sites of interpretive interest. This specific protocol describes a surprisingly wide range of approaches in literary studies. In *How to Read a Poem*, for example, Terry Eagleton writes: "The more stable, predictable elements of a text, such as metre, belong to what one might call its dominant code…. The text is at its most informative when it deviates unpredictably from one of its codes, creating effects which stand out against this uniform background" (2006, 55). We find a strikingly similar move in an otherwise radically different work: Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Ferguson reads Toni Morrison's 1973 novel, *Sula*, against a historical context regulated by "heteropatriarchal and nationalist" norms (2004, 111). Sula herself points "toward something else to be," Ferguson suggests, taking on the role of "female-outsider in

contradistinction to the normative black middle-class subject who could claim legitimacy within African-American communities" (2004, 131). Close reading and political reading alike depend on identifying existing rules and then valuing the strange and surprising exceptions that resist those rules.

This focus on the errant detail might be what best differentiates the humanities from the STEM disciplines. Scientists and quantitative social scientists also track norms and deviations, but they focus on the norms, whether discounting exceptions as unimportant anomalies, or understanding them as consequences of other generalizable patterns and systems. Jan Parker, Chair of the International Humanities in Higher Education Group, writes: "*Particularise*… that is what the humanities do—mount arguments from particulars and highlight and give narratives to the singular" (2013, 56). But if humanists emphasize the exceptions as the primary sites of meaning, and scientists focus on the norms, both are prone to forget that neither norm nor deviation is possible without the other. And in this, I want to suggest, both are missing something important.

Scientists and quantitative social scientists, as humanists know very well, risk failing to recognize the occlusions and marginalizations at work in dominant structures—the exceptions that might point beyond current systems of domination altogether, and remain unrecognizable within them. Less obvious to literary scholars will be the drawbacks of focusing too closely on the deviant detail. If we see our work as celebrating the startling exception, we presume that the rupture or break from the pattern is the primary site of value. Implicitly, what we are doing is valuing freedom from structure—resistance to any settled rules, unmaking and unsettling and undoing. And in fact, literary studies has focused a great deal of our energy on negating existing structures in favor of gaps and openings (Levine 2021). But while it is certainly true that many

political structures—including racial hierarchies and national borders—are oppressive and violent, it does not follow that we should always resist structuration. No human sociality has ever taken shape without organizations, patterns, and arrangements, such as designated spaces for rest, shelter, and gathering, rules for decision-making, norms and pathways for distributing food, water, and labor. As Anna Kornbluh has argued, this does not mean that any particular structure is natural or necessary, but that it is urgent to distinguish better and worse arrangements for justice and collective flourishing (2019, 5). In other words, we should not fight against all structures, since collective life will always depend on them. Prizing the exceptional detail, then, releases humanists from the hard work of figuring out—and fighting for—the best structures for living in common. And of course, politics has always required working on scales larger than one: it is about organizing groups, distributing and regulating and governing rights and resources at the scale not of the small detail but of the collective, which is sometimes very large indeed. In focusing on the singular detail that undoes structures, we cede the work of planning, building, and maintaining the structures of collective life to science, social science, government, and business.

In the argument that follows, I will make the case that norms, structures, and conventions never disappear altogether from literary studies: they are the necessary but reviled backdrop to the rebellious or luminous detail. In my own work, I have been gradually revaluing the structures that allow the detail to come into view, and this process has taken shape in two ways: one pedagogical and the other scholarly. I will turn first here to teaching, and argue for pattern-tracking in the literary studies classroom as a part of both close and contextual reading. In the second section I will turn to structuralism for a method that keeps structures in view, even when focusing on details. I start with a debate between Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss about

the role of the detail, and then I use Levi-Strauss's structuralist theory of the detail to guide two brief readings of novels, Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* (1992) and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). My proposal, here, is to bring structures from the background to the foreground of literary studies, to recognize their necessity and to think *with them as well as against them*. Because they have been there all along. And because we cannot do without them.

1. Tracking patterns in the classroom

For the past ten years, since students first fled humanities majors in large numbers in the US, I have deliberately taught mostly STEM and business students in courses that fulfill general education requirements or appeal to non-majors. I have wanted to figure out how to bring humanistic methods to other disciplines and domains, and especially to those who are skeptical or resistant. Much of what I have come to grasp about the relations between small details and larger structures in literary studies has come from these experiences in the classroom, where I have been struggling to teach literary methods to students who assume that literature is a "soft" and "subjective" subject, a matter of proffering an opinion.

I used to teach close reading as a protracted attention to a small fragment of a text which I would then ask students to connect to the whole text. Reuben Brower, in his famous essay on teaching close reading, argues that the distinctive characteristic of literature students should be seeking to understand is its "mysterious wholeness" (1962, 9). But with many students, and especially with non-majors, I found that the invocation of "wholeness" was thoroughly mystifying. Gradually I came to see that what I was really asking them to do was to connect the details they had noticed in a brief passage to repetitive patterns that appeared across the text.

Now we spend some time tracking anything that repeats, and we move back and forth between what we notice in a single passage and the resonances or echoes of this observation in other parts of the text.[2]

Most of the fundamental structuring elements of literary texts are, after all, repetitions. "Repetition is so basic to our experience of literary texts," writes Peter Brooks, "that one is simultaneously tempted to say all and to say nothing on the subject" (1984, 99). Poetic devices—including meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and anaphora—structure texts as tissues of repetitive tempos and sounds. Brooks himself argues for the importance of repetition to plotted narrative. Plots are structured around the unfolding of events over time, and as narratives push forward they must also look backward, recalling, repeating, or returning to earlier moments to allow readers "to bind one moment to another in terms of similarity or substitution rather than mere contiguity" (1984, 99). Character too—maybe surprisingly—depends on repetition. Conventional literary characters are built out of repeated patterns of thought and action. As Seymour Chatman explains, when we have the sense that "John is a loser," we are really projecting onto both past and future—that "'John has lost many times and will continue to do so'" (1978, 33). Even themes are nothing other than the repetition of an idea or concept. If a novel mentions marriage once in passing, then marriage is unlikely to be considered one of the novel's themes; but if a text returns again and again to the problem of marriage, then we say that marriage is major theme of that work.

Historical formations like race and gender norms, too, operate by way of repetition. Hierarchies are not established once and for all, but work by way of predictable patterns over time, such as stereotypes and expectations, privileges and punishments, which are enforced again and again, sedimented into dominant ideologies. "Everyday racism" in the contemporary U.S.

ranges from discriminatory labor practices and police harassment and brutality to racist verbal assaults and microaggressions, all of which become routinized—so conventional as to go unquestioned by many of those benefiting from racial hierarchy (Essed 1991). In the literary studies classroom, we often look to a particular text's reinforcement or deviation from these patterns to figure out whether a work of literature unsettles the dominant structures. When a novel refuses racial stereotypes or opens out alternatives to prevailing assumptions about Black and Brown people, we interpret its innovation or disruption against a backdrop of repetitive norms.

It was as I was struggling to introduce students to literary studies, then, that it started to seem clear to me that critics across schools—New Critical, structuralist, feminist, historicist, postcolonial, queer, distant, and surface—were all reading for repetitive patterns, although we were disagreeing about the scale and boundaries of the objects to be read, and selecting different repetitive elements to read. And when I started to introduce our methods in this way, my STEM and business students often understood me right away. They know how to engage in the work of pattern recognition, and they can readily turn their attention to moments that disrupt and disturb the patterns. The method itself feels rigorous and impersonal, a matter of simply observing, first, before interpreting what we discover. I invite students to entertain the thought that there is no culture without repetition, the transmission of values and practices across generations. Language itself, of course, is also built on repetition: words themselves take on their meanings only through repeated usage, their intelligibility governed by the replicable rules of grammar. Oddly, then, as I have started to say to my classes, humanists and scientists are engaged in strikingly similar methodological work—pattern-tracking—but humanists emphasize the exceptions as the

primary sites of meaning, while scientists focus on the routines as the matters of significance. Either way, we cannot have one without the other.

Since our attention to repetitive patterns has always been the backdrop to the work of the discipline, the method of reading I am modeling for my students is not, I think, a departure or an innovation. It is rather a refocusing and a revaluing. Instead of moving immediately to the luminous details that usually draw our interest, I pause with my classes to study the patterns that allow these exceptions to appear in the first place. Where do we see conventions? How do we know them? This means lingering for quite a while on the way to the exciting innovation, the revolutionary opening, the strange exception, to spend some time analyzing multiple forms of organization and their shaping of textual and social worlds. This pedagogical strategy has led me to conclude that we cannot rightly claim that humanists focus on the singular and the small. Large numbers are always in the background of even the most fine-grained individual examples in the humanities. In this respect, bringing repetitive structures into the foreground questions the basic opposition between quantitative and qualitative research, and between the humanities and the sciences.

2. Structures across scales

As I have increasingly foregrounded aesthetic and social patterns in the classroom, I have struggled to find literary studies methods that deliberately and explicitly value both the small, concrete, unruly detail and the large, abstract structure, and keep both in view, as they remain in ongoing relation to one another. Unfashionably enough, it is structuralism that has afforded the most robust and affirmative model. Here, Lévi-Strauss's debate with Propp over the importance

of the detail will my guide readings of two novels: Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*.

Propp is very deliberate about dismissing details in favor of structures, and in this respect, he is at the opposite end of the spectrum from most critics today. He seeks to distinguish the essential narrative forms of Russian folktales from all of the contingent details that shape different tellings. Whether it is a tsar or a witch who gives the protagonist an eagle or an owl to carry him away does not matter to Propp: what remains constant is the sequence of actions and the functions, and this is the core structure, the distilled significance, of the folktale (1968, 19). The eagle and the owl are interchangeable details: extraneous, irrelevant.

Lévi-Strauss responds: "That the eagle appears by day and the owl appears by night in the same function permits the definition of the former as a day owl and of the latter as a night eagle; consequently, the relevant opposition is that of day to night" (1983, 135). In other words, the contingent details which Propp tries to eliminate from a structural account are *other structuring principles*. If humanists today reproach structuralism for working at too high a level of abstraction and missing the specificities which give texture to literary texts and particular cultures,[3] for Lévi-Strauss, structural analysis moves easily back and forth *across* scales, understanding both the overarching plot and the peculiar detail of the owl or eagle as two different kinds of instances of repetitive structuring patterns. Or to put this another way: for the structuralist, any given plot arc could be seen as small—one specific instance among many like it—while any detail could be seen as large—evidence of a day/night pattern that repeats across cultures and time periods.

Of course, decades of scholarship have shown persuasively that structuralists were wrong to assume that either of these patterns was universal. But I think we can historicize structures

without losing the relation between repetitive pattern and specific instance. Take the feminist critique of Propp, for example: if the plot of the fairytale repeatedly revolves around entry into closed spaces and exit from those spaces, and if in European culture space is structured so that men are associated with movement outside and women are contained inside, then it follows that the European fairytale will not have female protagonists (see Roof 2018). Far from conveying universal truths, these stories entrench a particular heteropatriarchal power, keeping women trapped and without agency. At the same time, the gender binary and the story of entrapment and escape are not radically specific either: these two structures manage to repeat across borders and generations, and when storytellers bring them together, as they do again and again, they reinforce the containment and dependence of women.

Literary critics tend to respond to both of these powerful and abstract structures—the gender binary and the plot of mobility and containment—by looking for works of art that subtly and critically resist them. When it comes to folk and fairy tales, we might look to the retelling of Bluebeard in *Jane Eyre* (1847), or consider self-consciously feminist retellings, such as Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves" (1979), Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*, and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird.* In selecting these texts, critics might well see themselves as setting the small—the particularly brilliant and thought-provoking literary text—against the large—the heteropatriarchal patterns of Euro-American culture. Since literary critics would probably even home in on specific textual details and historical conditions for writing to show how each specific literary retelling disturbs and estranges norms and conventions, our attention might keep to units as small as a single line or passage in order to resist and estrange massive social patterns.

But would we really be moving back and forth between the rule of the abstract structure and the defiant concreteness of the specific? I want to suggest that Lévi-Strauss offers us a clearer account of our methods than this. Let me start with *Briar Rose*. This is the story of a young American journalist who tries to reconstruct the life of Gemma, her grandmother. She learns that Gemma has survived the Nazi extermination camp at Chelmno in Poland. Structured as a retelling of Sleeping Beauty, the narrative tells us that Gemma has been left for dead after being gassed by the Nazis when a stranger finds her and breathes her back to life. The stranger, Josef, is himself a fugitive because of his homosexuality. On one hand, his sexuality is a historically specific detail that is meaningful in two particular contexts, the wartime world of the novel's setting and the political landscape of the US, including the AIDS crisis, when the novel was written. But Josef's queerness also brings with it the powerful structural logic of heteronormativity—that social regulation that insists on adherence to heterosexual marriage and reproduction and punishes deviations through a whole range of institutions, including laws, social mores, medical interventions, employment opportunities, and cultural images and narratives of success. This structuring principle does differ from context to context—it is certainly not universal—but the basic hierarchical binary heterosexual/deviant is also surprisingly sticky; it endures across generations and borders, connecting Poland under the fascists to the late twentieth-century US. Imposing a simple logic, the powerful opposition heterosexual/deviant can regulate a huge range of social facts, from dress and labor to public spaces and medical care. I have argued elsewhere that structures like these are frequently neither nuanced or interesting, but this is part of why they endure (Levine 2015). As Jane Gallop puts it, "with most of the workings of gender and/or authority, the crude and schematic is usually all too apt" (2002, 25).

The queerness of "the prince" is in one sense a small-scale detail, then, but as Lévi-Strauss would remind is, it is also itself a structured and structuring force. If the conventional telling of Sleeping Beauty usually reaffirms both the gender binary and heteronormativity—the passive feminine beauty is awoken by the masculine kiss to consent to marriage and reproduction—Josef's queerness *necessarily* reroutes that plot. He cannot be the powerful, governing prince because, structurally, his sexuality makes him an outsider, and he will not be the husband who both contains and protects the princess into the reproductive future. It follows from this that the princess will not be the passive feminine object to the prince's power and agency, either, and that the kiss will not launch the "happy" ending of heterosexual marriage. When Yolen introduces one queer character, in other words, she introduces a set of social structuring principles that will also by necessity reshape the core plot of Sleeping Beauty. Or to put this another way: the narrative structure changes because the range of actions the character in a given structural position can undertake is itself constrained and produced by social structures already regulating the details of the text. There is no outside of structure. That does not mean that the structures are inert or unchangeable—Gemma and Josef work together in a band that is fighting the Nazis in a very different model of sociality than heterosexual marriage. But it also means that the detail is always already structured and that it has power to alter other structures. In this case, the sexuality of a single character transforms the very core—the sequence and functions—of one of Propp's classic tales.

I have argued that the detail in this text is structured and structuring, but in some ways, my reading here will seem familiar. I have followed the usual protocols of literary studies, focusing most of my attention on a single exception that resists and unsettles prevailing structures of heteronormativity. In part that is because *Briar Rose* is a retelling of a single

conventional and recognizable narrative—Sleeping Beauty—so that any single shift in detail is immediately noticeable against the backdrop of a known original. Few literary texts lend themselves so easily to a single structural transformation, so I want to introduce a second text, which reworks Propp's fairytale structures too, not by way of a single character or event but by deliberately foregrounding multiple structures, both narrative and social. In *Boy, Snow, Bird,* Oyeyemi asks: what if the wicked stepmother is also the abandoned daughter and the princess is under a spell? And what if Anansi the Spider, the Pied Piper, Hesiod, Cinderella, and *Alice in Wonderland* met with Snow White to try to make sense of race and gender politics in the US in the 1950s?

The narrative structure of Snow White helps to focus our attention on the social structure of anti-Blackness. The 1950s grandmother who loves her "fair" grandchild, Snow, turns out to be a light-skinned African-American woman who has spent her life trying to pass for white after escaping the Jim Crow South. She is eager to banish Bird, the half-sister to Snow who is born with dark skin, to protect her own social status. But Boy, Bird's strangely-named mother, intervenes, and sends her fair-skinned stepdaughter away instead.

Black and not-Black, evil and not-evil, beautiful and not-beautiful: the passing story makes it clear that all of these binaries are powerful artifices, fictions created by the "spell" of American racism. That is, they are like magical enchantments for those who benefit from them—magical, as Boy says, "not in origin but in effect" (308). History has managed to weave a terrible spell, dividing the world into simple binaries where one side always has the advantage. The spell can only be broken, according to Alecto the crone, when "the person under the spell is really and honestly tired of it" (308). The way to break the curse, she explains, is to "pester" those under it: "make the enchantment inconvenient for them, find myriad ways to expose their contentment as

false, show them that the contentment is engineered to make it last longer" (308-9). White contentment—with its illusions of "happily ever after"—is its own cursed misperception, like believing that you are the fairest of them all. To see the whiteness of Snow White as the paradigm of beauty is a form of historical bewitchment, and so the task of the storyteller is to break the spell by revealing the artifices of the structure, pestering those who benefit from it so relentlessly that they grow tired of the structure itself.

What is most interesting for my purposes here is that the novel invokes a vast number of tales besides Snow White. Every few pages we encounter a reference to a different fairy tale structure—usually the sparest plot, without much in the way of detail. Some are the novel's inventions—a story of a beautiful Black slave woman who is so like her white sister that she rejects and humiliates other slaves and is punished. Boy tells the story of a woman so beautiful that a magician cannot change her; she claims to be all costumes and appearances, and is revealed in fact to have the heart of a snake. Kazim, the young Black man who draws comics for Marvel, is asked what will happen next in his stories. By way of answer, Kazim tells a story of two children who fight the King and Queen for their lives. When they kill the King and Queen, and no longer have to struggle, they are suddenly weary and old, and they lose the struggle to the next boy and girl. "*What's next is what happened before*," Kazim says (104).

None of the many tales the text invokes is the single allegory that holds the secret to understanding the novel as a whole. But all are guides to revealing one social structure or another. We can understand the various marriages in the novel through models of damsels in distress as well as kind old couples and deceitful magicians; we can grasp feminine beauty as a matter of inheritance and of tricks, disguises, and bewitchments; and we can see how historical

trauma repeatedly curses the future. What Oyeyemi suggests—and this is of course the lesson of structuralism too—is that this is how meaning works.

No detail escapes structure. Even the dusty chess set in the bookstore Oyeyemi mentions in passing is both structured and structuring: “The black army faced the white army across their field of checkered squares; the kings and queens seemed resigned, companionable. There was never any change in their configuration” (90). Black and white face each other across a divide, a stark image of the racial segregation that organizes Flax Hill. Since different characters occupy the roles of kings and queens in the various tales told across the novel, the chess set points to the ways that powerful characters seem content to keep structures in place. They are also surrounded by other pieces, trapped in place. And of course, this particular set, gathering dust on the window seat, is explicitly still. It is not being played. The chess set works as an allegory for the oppressions of segregation.

And yet, although the scene is static this moment, chess also affords a huge number of potential moves that, when play begins, will necessarily change the scene. Perhaps black and white will be mixed across the board, even side by side; maybe someone will kill the king and queen or make it to the other side; in the end there is an equal chance for white to lose and black to win. The rules of the game are not totally open, of course, and chess imposes constraints that limit the range of possible outcomes. No piece can change colors, for example, which suggests that passing is not a viable option, and by implication, that Olivia can never really be queen.

Both the still set, gathering dust, and all of the possible unfoldings, strangely, work as persuasive readings of American racism. Oyeyemi thus condenses a whole theory of history into this single detail. The chess set models a divided social world, but suggests that these divisions do not have to remain entirely inert. On the other hand, the future is not wide open either. The

moves taken by the players matter, but are tightly constrained by the structures in place that limit them from the start.

What is so interesting about *Boy, Snow, Bird*, is not only that its details relentlessly invite attention to the structures that make them possible, but also that a single instance typically takes part in multiple structures. Boy, for example, is the wicked stepmother who banishes the beautiful girl from her father's house, but then again, she is also the brutalized daughter of a rat-catcher; she is the mother who is trying to protect her own daughter from anti-Black prejudice and masculine violence; she is the beautiful girl pursued by a handsome prince; and she is the evil snake practicing her own destructive magic. From a structuralist perspective, this is how social worlds work: we do not begin somewhere outside of systems; we always hold positions in pre-existing structures. We may occupy new positions, sometimes replacing others who have played that role before us, like moving from daughter to sister to wife to mother over time. And because we participate in multiple structures, we can occupy multiple positions at once: the white bookstore clerk who is also a mother to a dark child and stepmother to a light one.

Oyeyemi is always deliberate about offering us not one dominant structure but a dizzying array of them—hierarchical binaries of racism and sexism, plots of abandonment and treachery and romantic and familial love, kinship configurations, and repetitions across time. Some of these are captured in brief tales recounted by characters, others in the intertwined plots of the novel itself, and still others, like the chess set, implied through the smallest details. Although the novel is set in a particular, located, richly detailed situation, then, it is interested in the ways that its characters and their relations are recognizable in and through other plots, even—or especially—plots borrowed from and set in other times and places. None belong exclusively to the world of this text. And that is because structures—from binaries and hierarchies to chess

rules and plot arcs—are abstractable, portable, capable of moving across media, scales, and settings.

In order to recognize anything *as structural*, in fact, we must abstract it from any specific instance: we must recognize the way that it patterns, arranges, or orders multiple examples. And I want to suggest that this is turn to abstraction is important politically. As critics of racism and sexism have argued, structures are crucial to understanding social inequality and the uneven distribution of rights and resources. Structural accounts of the social world show that what might seem like the details of a given life—getting into college, buying a car, even walking down the street in this or that neighborhood—are not mere accidents or individual failures or accomplishments but the effects of organizing principles that continue to produce the same painfully unequal results over time: women contained and dependent, Black bodies policed, queer desires punished, disabilities hidden from view. But that does not mean that structures are inert or unchangeable. Oyeyemi invites us to recognize the ways that structures produce and constrain us, but they also furnish an array of positions, moves, and story arcs. And because there are so many of them, each with their own openings to possibility, sometimes overlapping and restructuring each other, no single structure—not even anti-Black racism—determines all of the outcomes. Boy takes on the role of the wicked stepmother, for example, sending Snow away, but in so doing she also undoes the logic of segregation, relocating the pale-skinned girl in the Black family and the dark-skinned girl in the white one. Snow and Bird, one light and one dark, divided from each other in early childhood, are set up to take on the roles of envious and antagonistic stepsisters, but at the last minute they decide to make common cause instead—as sisters who share a history of trauma. In this respect, structures provide not only a crucial analysis of the social world but also "strategies for dealing with situations," as Kenneth Burke puts it:

"equipment for living" (1973, 296). Structures afford both political understanding and templates for action.[4]

What Lévi-Strauss, Yolen, and Oyeyemi help us to see is that the detail is not the opposite of structure, but one of its most important effects. For Propp and for much of queer studies, the introduction of a queer character is at best a distraction and at worst a re-entrenchment of homophobic structures. But for Lévi-Strauss, the character's queerness can—and should—bring the structure of heteronormativity into view. It is treating it as an unstructured detail that is the analytical mistake. Yolen spells this out narratively, and she also goes a step farther, showing us how the queer detail is so crucially structural that it has effects on other orderings and patternings, reshaping the stories that can be told. And Oyeyemi goes farthest, using both details and plots to reveal the artificial structures of racism and sexism and also reveling in the extraordinary ubiquity and multiplicity of structures, inviting us to recognize that we live at the crossing of numerous social and narrative patterns, all of which are made things, and all of which are both constraining and enabling. Each of us may play more than one role even in a single structure—first daughter then mother, for example, or once a queen held under a spell and later a restless bird. But however mobile and dynamic each of us might be, none of us can be outside of all structure. The smallest details reveal themselves as parts of abstractable, portable patterns, which means that it does not make sense to search for that luminous detail as if it will save us from system and structure altogether.

When literary studies focuses most closely on disruptive and exceptional details that unsettle racist and sexist structures, the field is doing important work. But my argument here is that this is not the same work as understanding how details are produced by structures—the large patterns and ordering principles that make certain bodies appear ugly and others beautiful, or that

allow men to travel while women are enclosed and contained. Details, from this perspective, are valuable vehicles for revealing structures—pointing beyond their own specificity to the patterns that allow them to take shape at all. Because they are never altogether outside of orderings and arrangements, and even the smallest detail can carry large structures of language and culture with it. Or, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, it is really just structures all the way down.

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[1] "The best hope for preserving the radical strangeness of the past," they explain, lies in gathering "outlandish and irregular" fragments—"seemingly ephemeral details, overlooked anomalies, suppressed anachronisms" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 51).

[2] My colleague David Zimmerman at the University of Wisconsin calls this "echo analysis," and generously shared some of his teaching materials with me.

[3] The huge proliferation of scholarship work on bodies and on specific cultural milieux and events is in part a response to structuralist abstraction. See, for example, Turner, 2009.

[4] We might leap to argue that humanists should always call for fine-grained detail rather than more structure, but sociologist Kieran Healy makes the case in his aptly titled essay, "Fuck Nuance" (2017), that this call can also inhibit the kinds of conceptualizing work we need to do to solve hard problems. It is always possible to complicate abstractions, but is it always enabling?