

Opening Cases:

Choric Heritage and Erotic Violence in Nancy Drew

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...[I]f we say that [the *chora* is] some invisible and shapeless form—all-receptive, but partaking somehow of the intelligible in a most perplexing way and most hard-to-capture—then we won't be lying.

-- Plato, *Timaeus*¹

My dead mother hits harder than that!

-- Faith, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*²

In *The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* series, Carolyn Keene creates a highly gendered detective narrative ruled by a motherless teen sleuth with a penchant for danger.³ The remarked death of Nancy's mother at the beginning of each book frames the girl detective's domain of reason, proof and resolution through a litany-like explanation of maternal absence. By grounding the narrative's beginning in this lack, the series establishes a dichotomy of active presence and contextual absence, presenting an effaced feminine frame as the origin that produces Nancy's investigations. The maternal nature of this insistently absent origin evokes Plato's diagnosis in his *Timaeus* of the beginning as a strangely productive space of becoming. Through a detective narrative of his own, Plato offers as the result of his investigation of origin, the elusive and problematic *chora*.⁴ An identity-less receptacle for meaning, the maternal *chora* offers uncertainty and provisionality, rather than any reassurance of solidity or traceability; consequently Plato warns that only a "bastard reasoning" can hope to grasp it.⁵ Expanding his image of an

uncertain space of beginning, my project employs Julia Kristeva's reading of the *chora* as a subversively violent force,⁶ in order to trace this unsettling origin through Keene's fertile body of detective literature. By mobilizing Kristeva's formulation of a dangerous, destabilizing wet-nurse, my project shows how the starkly introduced origin, tacked on but once to a sentence near the beginning of each book, returns later in clandestine form to unsettle the story. This maternal absence negotiates the intelligible in a violently erotic manner by effecting a rhythm of corporeal sequences where Nancy sinks, slips or tumbles into uncertain waters, soaking herself in the process and thereby temporarily fumbling the investigation. By performing a bastard reasoning of its own, my project reveals how these unsettling *choric* negotiations simultaneously enable and refute Nancy's detective quest for resolution by calling into question the very format of the case, thereby rendering both beginning and resolution as always necessarily tenuous.

To advance upon this volatile origin, let us first consider how Keene consistently introduces main characters and themes at the beginning of each book. The series opens with *The Secret of the Old Clock*,⁷ where the reader encounters Nancy for the first time driving home from running errands for her father, a famous lawyer. In the first two chapters, Nancy pursues a gang of thieves that have stolen furniture from two poor aunts raising a child Nancy has just saved from a fatal accident. In this sequence Keene immerses us in the main themes of the series: detection, law, criminality, horror, near death, and salvation performed by Nancy. This emerging image solidifies the protagonist as an independent young woman immersed in danger, who takes risks in order to resolve problems.

This second chapter of the first book then introduces Nancy's mother, long dead, as the third family member. Her dead mother, contrasted with Nancy's brave and rational yet feminine action and her father's eminent practice of law, regulates the narrative in a different way than their affirmed presence. Her mother manifests instead as a recurring absence that serves as a point of chronology and contextualization in almost every single one of the first 56 stories. As Nancy returns home from her pursuit of the thieves, the reader discovers her mother for the first time.

“Hello, Nancy,” greeted the pleasant, slightly plump woman who opened the door. She was Hannah Gruen, housekeeper for the Drews, who had helped rear Nancy since the death of the girl's own mother many years before.

Nancy gave her a hug, then asked, “Dad home? I see his car is in the garage.” (13)

The fact that Nancy's unnamed mother is dead immediately explains the presence of Hannah as surrogate mother-figure,⁸ but the persistent use of her death as contextualizing tool alludes to many other results of her absence, such as Nancy's following in her father's footsteps and their shared intimacy. Her mother's absence allows Nancy to pursue her reckless, independent lifestyle more easily. It perhaps renders less glaring the fact that the teenager is never mentioned going to school. Nancy's keen identification with her father, as a rational, level-headed practitioner of law, is allowed to burgeon, rather than being moderated by the emotionally sensitive, nurturing maternal force one might otherwise expect to temper a fictional household of the 30s and 40s. Hannah Gruen lacks the maternal authority to sway the sleuth's decisions, and while fond of Nancy, does not fulfill this standard role. The absence of her mother in this series, then, allows Nancy to become the risky but rational independent detective that her fans so adore.

The mother's death is explained in a similar way in almost every book.⁹ Yet besides the fact of her death when Nancy was three, her mother is never “fleshed out” as

an absent character; that is, her character is not detailed for the reader to place in the Drew world as absent. One never learns what color hair she had, or what her favorite food was, let alone her dominant personality traits. Mrs. Drew's absence fails to graduate fully into the realm of presence; instead she subsists, not as a person exactly, but rather as a fuzzy past event, "the death of the little girl's mother." Thus the series begins its narrative rhythm at the start of each book by positing several figures as present, and framing them through maternal absence. Through this dynamic, Nancy's mother functions in a more complex way than merely allowing Nancy her fun and independence. As each volume begins, the *being* of Nancy, her father and Hannah materialize for the reader within this maternal frame. Put another way, the present characters only fully *become* present once this absence has been established. Each book chronicles, in its first pages, this process of becoming of the characters that possess being, enabled through insistently neutral maternal absence.

To better grasp the effects this insistent absence has on the being of Nancy's narrative, let us turn to Plato to get a sense of the nature of the *chora*. As he himself writes in the first pages of dialogue, any discussion of the *chora* necessitates a return to the beginning.¹⁰ While describing the birth of the cosmos, Plato first distinguishes between two kinds of form, Being and Becoming, which exist prior to that birth. He explains Being as that which "simply" is; having no beginning or end, Being is the everlasting force that remains always, before and beyond time.¹¹ Becoming on the other hand consists of that which comes into existence, thereby necessitating a beginning and foreshadowing a possible end.¹² He introduces the *chora*, the Greek term translated by Peter Kalkavage as 'Space,' as a third kind of form (although this definition proves to be

immediately problematic). The *chora* is the Space from which form emerges, from which everything with a beginning becomes.¹³ Thus the *chora* is not exactly a form, but rather a kind of formlessness that exists before the creation of the cosmos along with Being and Becoming.

Plato then further distinguishes the *chora* from “that which comes to be”; it differs not only from the force of Becoming, but also from physical instances of birth.¹⁴ He also differentiates it from “that *in which* [what comes to be] comes to be,” in other words, the medium of form.¹⁵ Thus we have three categories that interlock to create the cosmos: things that become, the form into which they become, and the Space out of which they become. Plato likens this third category of Space to a receiver or mother, while the category of form is likened to father. The category of that which comes to be is unsurprisingly likened to the offspring of the two. The *chora* is necessarily designated as shapeless in order for it to accommodate all that might spring from it. As the makers of fragrant oils ensure of the base for their fragrance, Plato explains, the *chora* must be as odorless as possible in order to maximize its accommodating role.¹⁶ Consequently the *chora* is a maternal, identity-less origin for form and meaning, a wet-nurse-like receptacle that suckles the world into existence.

Viewing the rote reference to Nancy’s lineage in each *Nancy Drew* book through this Platonic lens, the mother emerges more clearly as a glaringly blank defining absence that not only enables but *produces* the being of the narrative itself. Instead of possessing a physical presence, her impersonal name functions as a mark to signify that which initiates and allows beginning, but which can never be properly named. In other words, the mother’s death stands in for the Space out of which the series emerges as a network of

active presence. And what her death specifically allows, as the signifier for this *choric* force, is the proliferation of a recursive series of highly gendered investigations enacted by the daughter. Accordingly, Nancy questions her way through the series, performing the becoming that her un-figured mother produces by using rational methods of proof to uncover truth. Thus the detective series effectively functions as the interlacing of a neutral (“odorless”) maternal origin and her fragrant, well-reasoned offspring. Given this conception of Nancy’s mother as nameless and formless, how does one account for her production not only of a boldly sleuthing daughter who seeks out danger to achieve resolution, but also of that daughter’s law-practicing father, whose respected name is on everyone’s lips? What, precisely, is the relationship between neutral mother, troublemaking, mystery-solving daughter, and paternal figure of the law? What, in other words, is the relation between effaced frame and detective story?

Julia Kristeva’s re-framing of Plato’s *chora* clarifies this relationship between maternal absence and detective presence as a relation of struggle and subversion. Kristeva fleshes out Plato’s formulation of the *chora* in her theory of poetic language, in order to articulate a violent corporeal force that participates in signification but simultaneously exceeds it.¹⁷ She describes the *chora* as the force that operates in the signifying process before language springs from it and takes hold.¹⁸ In Kristeva, language acts in the same manner as Plato’s form: it emerges from the origin, constituting itself as present and intelligible. While language, for Kristeva, establishes a law that binds us to syntax and position, the *chora* orders a plural movement of violent upheaval that works to undo that established position in lawful language.¹⁹ For Kristeva, the *chora* is ordered by the mother’s body, as the locus of infantile sensation, of multiplying patterns of

pleasure and pain; thus she imbues the *chora* with sensual, corporeal rhythm.²⁰ This bodily rhythm circulates through systems of meaning and destabilizes the structure established through language, sometimes eliding the meaning we are given to understand.²¹ Through this destabilization, the *chora* troubles the either / or dichotomies of something / nothing and sense / nonsense, opening up a third non-category of uncertainty that stems from physical sensation as opposed to linguistic structure. In this way, Kristeva complicates Plato's figure of the nourishing wet-nurse by rendering it violently subversive. In summary, then, the *chora* enables language to form, but once established, language turns on its origin, suppressing and denying it. In turn, the *chora* pries language apart, undoing its syntax and wresting its meaning from it.

With Kristeva in tow, we can now view the maternal in *Nancy Drew* as producing and contributing to the narrative in a particular way, as an unsettling force in a series hinging on processes of reason, proof and law. In keeping with Plato's formulation, the mother's death is a maternally nourishing source of becoming and being, but with Kristeva this subsisting figure simultaneously undoes, in some way, the reasoned discourse she produces. But if, as we have seen, the mother's introduction is neutral and bereft of details, in what way does her figure enact this undoing of her own narrative product? How does her subversion of form manifest? Staying with Kristeva, we encounter a motherly source, but a specifically corporeal one; the reader engages with a textual wet-nurse, but one continuing to vibrate, post-birth, through the narrative in rhythms of pleasure and pain. Maternal absence here offers a peculiar kind of care to narrative structure, a care that physically takes its charge apart, bit by bit, unsettling reason, signification and law. Imagine the mother's violent blood coating the newborn,

which still forms and informs the child years after it has been washed away. If one proceeds from Kristeva's evolved formulation of *chora* as meddling origin, then its traits of instability, violence, rhythm and corporeality must continue to leave their trace on anything possessing a beginning. In this way the subversive nature of the *chora* functions like a live stamp of becoming. As one can now perform genetic tests, might it not be possible to trail the meddling nature of this origin in the narrative it generates?

To frame the act of reading the *Nancy Drew* series as an attempt to trail an absent origin through it, let us return to Plato's discussion in the *Timaeus* in order to clarify how one might go about this textual investigation. Given the *chora*'s pre-linguistic nature, it will come as no surprise that from the outset of his discussion, Plato makes clear the difficulty in trying to grasp it.²² He explains that it partakes of the intelligible in a perplexing way that is difficult to capture,²³ and that this necessary yet elusive Space is graspable only by a bastard reasoning.²⁴ He describes this illegitimate reasoning as:

hardly to be trusted, the very thing we look to when we dream and affirm that it's necessary somehow for everything that *is* to be in some region and occupy some space, and that what is neither on earth nor somewhere in heaven is nothing."²⁵

This passage explains that people *need* to believe that everything occupies a place. The bastard reasoning through which we grasp the *chora* is the raft to which we cling as we believe that each thing in our world always exists safely in its proper location; further, we need to know that where we are is presupposed, proven in advance. So then, it seems that the intellectual gateway to the *chora* is designated by Plato as illegitimate for two reasons: that the *chora* is itself formless as opposed to our form (thus it is alien to us), and that our yearning to understand it stems from a human need to believe our world is held tightly in the formless arms of a cosmic wet-nurse who soothes our fears in the dark (thus our logic reduces the *chora* to that in which we take comfort: a convenient

placeholder ensuring our stability). In this way, Plato acknowledges the *chora's* extraordinary, difficult to acknowledge, and rather terrifying unsoundness, by articulating how we self-servingly reduce its nature to the indication of a comfort zone for human meaning.

Before addressing the implications of Plato's insight for the act of reading Nancy's stories through a *choric* lens, let us first consider how his acknowledgement of our illegitimate use of Space as a comfort zone renders clear the fact that the remarked absence of Nancy's mother functions narratologically in this same way as a kind of textual raft to which the reader clings. Once we reach the standard paragraph stating her mother's death, we rest easy in our knowledge that the story is safely underway because Keene posits a neutral origin for the narrative. The mother's death ultimately soothes the reader by guaranteeing this meta-space in which the reading experience is held (by invisible maternal arms). Each book's introduction assures the reader that Nancy's mother made way for us, and that she's out of the picture now, guaranteeing us that we exist, while she fails to. Yet while what her mother stands for certainly enables everything else in the story to occupy a place in Space, that occupation is not a safe one, because the *chora* meanwhile rolls like a subversive sea beneath the characters it allows to become. The explanatory narration of maternal absence ("the death of the little girl's mother when she was three") creates a surprising textual safe space, but remembering Kristeva's image of corporeal subversion, this reassurance of context fails to actually keep the *chora* at bay; it merely explains it away.

As we will see, the origin continues meddling in its produced realm of lawful presence regardless of its narrated death, manifesting violently when Nancy stumbles

across its absence in the course of her investigations. But before we consider those fictional processes, let us first now address the implications of investigating the *chora* through an act of critical reading. Plato's insight into the standard method for approaching origin lays bare the terrifying delicacy of approaching Space in any way, critical or otherwise. The tendency to reduce the subsisting origin seems, from his text, to be programmed into human nature; thus an image emerges of the nervous critical reader afraid to crowd the elusive *chora*, losing, in her attempt to avoid reduction, any semblance of this Platonic progenitor of meaning.

In considering how one might grasp the *chora*, Kristeva again expands Plato's ideas, this time by offering a critique of understanding. She suggests that when considering the *chora*, one proceed so as not to reduce the subject to (merely) one who understands; instead, she argues, one must operate pre-, or extra-understanding.²⁶ How, then, might this method manifest pragmatically in literary studies? When investigating a text through a *choric* lens, one tries to open up the material, not by grasping the nature of the content in question, but rather by performing an oscillation between gentle prying and wresting, thus opening the dark, tight places in the text. By engaging in a variable rhythm of ones one, the reader might engage with *choric* rhythms in the text, not in order to "arrive" at understanding, but rather to engage the interplay of presence and absence contained within it. This method of reading appropriately is, like the *chora*, delicate and difficult, because it attempts to grasp both the intensely corporeal and the escaped ineffable in the text. The method must encompass both tenderness and violence, tuning in to the beats and lacunae held within the text, holding them open as one explores them. But to return to Plato, one must remember that no matter how delicately one reads for the

chora, the method remains an ultimately illegitimate one due to our foreignness and the resulting inevitable reduction of Space to that which we need in order to feel secure in our foundation. In order to venture remotely beyond Plato's diagnosed illegitimacy by enacting Kristeva's mode of extra-understanding, the reader must embrace her inherent foreignness as she reads.

Thus to pursue how the *chora* partakes of the intelligible in *Nancy Drew*, the current project embraces the series in a playful search for manifestations of corporeal experience that exceed its characters and context, focusing on tones, textures and events that temporarily unsettle Nancy's progress toward resolution of her case. This attempted methodology conjures the image of the critical reader feeling around Nancy's figure for kinks in narrative coherence, gently feeling her up, as it were, in order to tune in to a different order of patterned pleasure and pain. In order to trace *choric* heritage in the detective series, the task at hand is to discover what interplay of bodily rhythm and textual absence enables it to unfold.

Before we turn to interruptive instances of Nancy's grappling with this effaced origin, we need to determine the nature of the investigative method she employs. The detective work in which she engages functions by dint of a double inheritance of the *choric* trace and Nancy's biological relation to this signifier of Space. As a risky yet rational detective, this double trace manifests through Nancy's oscillation between mental or verbal questioning and physical risk. In this sense, her methodology parallels the one I envision for myself in this project as textual detective: she fulfills the role of risky inquisitress²⁷ by balancing gentle prying with violence. In this way, her clearly portrayed femininity, which tempers the otherwise unacceptable forwardness so

characteristic of her methods, functions in the texts not only as a sexist dampening technique, but as a necessary gentleness and sensitivity without which her mode of investigation would crumble.

The reader finds Nancy most often in the series either gently prying a question open or physically struggling against an assailant. During the course of her investigations, the sleuth regularly enters near-death situations in which she is physically assaulted, attacked with weapons, hog-tied and imprisoned. Her stream of questioning essentially constitutes a flirtation at the border between life and death, between *is* and *is not*. This continuing embrace of morbidly acquired knowledge effectively eroticizes Nancy's body as a site of self-induced danger: in nearly every one of the 56 books, she finds herself bound tightly in the arms of a (usually male) assailant, kicking and scratching to get free as he laughs at her struggles. This fictional repetition of manhandling conjures a guiding image of Nancy with her arms and body wrapped lovingly around danger itself. The sexual nature of these encounters, already underscored by images of struggling embrace and bondage, is thrown into relief by the juxtaposition, as in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, where Nancy emits a low cry of joy as she confirms the piece of evidence for which she risked her life in the arms of her assailant. Her assault often functions in the stories as a means to an end, as the muscle-work or foreplay resulting in resolving orgasm. Nancy's self-positioning in dangerous situations thus sets her up as an eroticized agent of the S / M variety. In other words, the becoming of each mystery apparently necessitates explicitly corporeal confrontation and power play before resolution can be obtained. Her method for working through a mystery thereby constitutes an interrogative flirtation with

death. This oscillation between question and risk crystallizes into a rhythmic system of intelligibility that pries open each case so that she can “come” finally to a conclusion.

Through her questioning, Nancy weaves a space of investigative anticipation, entering into a temporary world where her questions remain unanswered and she finds solace in the risk their resolution requires. In lingering in this space between question and answer, between life and death, she momentarily inhabits a third non-category of uncertainty. By discovering a hybrid space located *in* her investigations instead of at their anticipated conclusion, she temporarily subverts the idea that things either exist or do not, that principle through which Plato claims we reduce the *chora* to our secure foundation. Through her rhythm of *question, violence, question, violence*, she develops a method of variable opening that depends on physical sensation to mobilize. The system of language in which Nancy exists centers around this hybrid, non-translatable power source, housed within her climactic struggles; thus her positioning in intelligibility depends upon the liminal space she opens up within the investigation. The heritage she receives from her significantly absent mother consists of this unresolvedness that laces her investigations. When in this in-between space, she temporarily inhabits the possibility produced through her question / danger counterpoint. This sensation of possibility, of openness that the counterpoint produces, can be likened to the high achieved through the production of adrenaline in sex or trauma—thus is Nancy rendered as dependent on this erotically violent heritage, as it fuels and informs her contrary inclination to get to the bottom of it all.

But while steeped in climactic unresolvedness, her dependency on this sensational high concretely contributes to the firm resolution of her mystery. She opens up an

intensive space while struggling in the arms of her assailant, temporarily touching an inherited liminality, but this act simultaneously places her squarely within the intelligible telos of the narrative, thereby pushing the story along to conclusion. While her struggles are certainly violent, the violence exists within a predictable trajectory, functioning to “work out” the resolution through quickened-breath conflict. The assailants do serve to hold open her solving the case—they keep her from closing the deal, from getting to the bottom of it all. But they simultaneously function as a formulaic sign that she is nearing resolution, like a paged announcement for structural readers: “15 more pages to go until the mystery is solved!” In a similar vein, the eroticism in these scenes of physical struggle is evident; again, one has only to consider the combination of gendered power-play, flesh-on-flesh friction, muffled moans and cries, and the obvious bondage motif that manifests as Nancy is stuffed, hog-tied, into closets, cellars and carriages. One can imagine an add-on to the paged announcement: “P.S. Enjoy the structurally safe container of adrenaline-producing muscle- and rope-play!” This erotic violence fails to exceed the frame of the narrative; while Nancy opens a space within her struggle and temporarily inhabits a morbid regime of uncertainty and unresolvedness, the scenes containing that space function to serve up the triumphantly solved mystery. In other words, Nancy’s uncertain, extra-linguistic source of anticipation is largely covered over by her positioning in lawful language as a gendered, moral practitioner of the law.

Yet following Kristeva’s formulation of the *chora* as subversive force, this source on which Nancy’s mode of intelligibility depends, and from which it springs, enacts in turn an obscure yet violent upheaval that works to undo her system of intelligibility. The formulaic erotic violence arising in scenes of struggle fails to constitute an upheaval, and

it is certainly not obscure. The destabilization by the *chora* of the intelligible manifests in a deeper, more troubling manner, thereby providing new insight into the concept of erotic violence. In their unsettling of resolved identity, Plato, Kristeva and Nancy's mother collectively push us toward a new definition of violence as *that which fragments or dislocates coherence*, rather than confirming anticipated resolution. Likewise we gain a new view of eroticism as *that which pushes sensual experience to a limit*, rather than relying on standard sexual tropes to confirm narrative positioning. In the current project, this reformulated erotic violence must occur through struggle not with a formulaic assailant, but with the *choric* source "itself." This obscure struggle will work to undo narrative coherence by acting physically on Nancy to push her to corporeal extremes.

Following these definitions like a trail of clues, we find in *Nancy Drew* that the destabilizing *chora* manifests most explicitly when Nancy attempts to return, during the course of an investigation, to her family origins. Her enactment of return occurs explicitly in both *The Hidden Window Mystery*²⁸ and *The Clue of the Whistling Bagpipes*.²⁹ This attempted return manifests in these two books as an extraordinary double movement: Nancy initiates a search for a given thing tied to one of her foremothers (but never her actual mother); she and her friends then perform this investigation by somehow or other being forced physically *downward*, which movement results in their being repeatedly soaked with water from various sources. This tie to a family heirloom, and the girls' resulting soaked falling, toppling or diving occurs repeatedly in both books, forming a rhythm of inquisitive searching, forceful movement and overwhelming sensation that evinces an unsettling, violently erotic relation to Nancy's foremothers.

In *Hidden Window*, Nancy indirectly acquires a family heirloom, via a magazine article offering a reward for a lost stained glass window containing an image of a peacock. Nancy reads the article and then passes it to Hannah, who responds in a curious way. She turns a bit pale, then launches into a brief diatribe about superstition, and concludes by saying affectionately to Nancy, “But I always taught you not to be superstitious” (4). The standard paragraph explaining her mother’s death follows this scene. Later the same day, Nancy sits in her living room with her cousins, explaining the new mystery. Bess has just broached the issue of peacock-related superstition when the friends are interrupted by a loud bang.

The next moment a gust of wind blew into the room, carrying with it a large peacock feather, which came to rest at Bess’s feet! The girl shrieked.

For a few tense seconds the girls did not move. Bess was too terrified, George and Nancy too startled.

Then Nancy sprang from her chair and dashed into the hall. Wind roared through the wide-open front door. She slammed it shut and looked around, wondering where the peacock feather had come from.

“Hannah!” Nancy exclaimed. The housekeeper was descending the steps, a bunch of peacock feathers in one hand!

[...]

“Where did you find those feathers?” Bess asked.

“After talking with Nancy, I remembered these in the attic,” Hannah explained. “They belonged to her grandmother.”³⁰ (14-15)

After the floating feather, the first uncanny presence in this scene is the wind roaring through the front door, which apparently was blown open, although the cause of the bang is never confirmed. In the midst of this eeriness, Hannah is rendered as an incomprehensible messenger, bearing an omen of horror; she temporarily breaks out of her role as pleasantly plump caretaker and puts Nancy in touch with a horror-tinged relic from her past. The teenagers stare at the mysterious sight of Hannah with a fistful of peacock feathers in amazement; this lingering eeriness only dissipates when Hannah explains their origin, explaining away as well her curious reaction to the article. The four

characters have barely recovered from this break in continuity to admiringly examine the feathers when Carson Drew enters, kisses his daughter, and settles into his favorite chair. The feathers are never mentioned again, apparently swept away by the presence of her father. After this incident, however, Nancy launches fully into her investigation of the peacock-themed window. Thus an emblem of the *chora* ventures into language, to be subsequently covered over by the intelligible figure of the law, only to return, as we will see, to unsettle that intelligibility.

Once the investigation has been launched, Nancy, Bess and George explore an attic in the hopes of finding a “ghost” linked to the missing window. During this exploration, Nancy and George plunge through a trap door triggered by a hidden suspect, thereby sliding down a chute that runs through the house to its foundation. As they attempt to escape, George slips and falls even further into an underground well, sinking underwater momentarily so that she is unable to respond to Nancy’s worried cries. Once Nancy fishes the drenched George out, they claw their way back to safety.

This dynamic, in which the girls plummet downward while in pursuit of evidence and become soaked as a result, repeats two more times to form an investigative leitmotif physically triggered by her grandmother’s peacock feathers. When following the footprints of the “ghost” (apparently a man walking on bronze casts of peacock feet), Nancy and George are both violently knocked to the ground and drenched by a fire hose. The third time this motif appears the three friends are following another suspect in a canoe. Failing to adequately maneuver through the rocky stream after him, their canoe hits a rock, splinters, and fills with water, nearly toppling as the girls get soaked.

This almost ritualistic repetition of forceful, unanticipated soaking highlights the girls' violent, erotic relation to the origin. Each time they draw close to the root of the mystery emblemized by the grandmother's feathers, a variable, elusive force renders them terrified and wet. Teetering on the brink of maternal absence, Nancy's desire for resolution gets intercepted and corporeally overwhelmed, temporarily fragmenting the coherence of the detective narrative by literally surrounding her seeking body with water, obscuring her vision and path. In the first two instances, the girls have their drenching experiences forced upon them by assailants; in the third instance, their lack of criminal dexterity bars them from following the suspect down a path leading to the unknown. This unknown crops up not only in front of Nancy, as the object of her questions, but also, now, behind her, as a foundation that lurks beneath her and continues to refuse her grasp. This surrounding of Nancy by the unknown clarifies Peter Kalkavage's choice of "Space" as a translation for *chora*—Space reveals itself in these sequences as that which holds us, both from the front and from behind. The more Nancy traces the guiding theme of her grandmother's feathers, the more violently the unknowable exposes her to these baptismal thwartings.

This motif appears again in *The Clue of the Whistling Bagpipes*, in which Nancy travels to Scotland to claim a missing heirloom from her maternal great-grandmother. While traveling through Scotland, she and her friends get caught in a storm characteristic of the series: the wind blows so hard it actually moves the car across the road.³¹ They pass a row of houseboats rocking violently on the shore; when one topples over, they stop to help. As they don their raincoats and hats and approach the houseboats, the wind

pushes Bess from a safe spot on shore *into* the water. “She tried to get up twice, only to be knocked over again by a lashing wave” (51-4).³²

They struggle onward to discover, inside the toppled houseboat, a small girl crying by the side of her unmoving mother. Keene narrates, “Nancy gazed at the tear-stained face. She fervently hoped that the little girl’s mother was only unconscious” (55). This extraordinary scene, taking place in a houseboat overturned by natural forces and teetering by a violent body of water, crystallizes Nancy’s dangerous and uncertain return to origin. The houseboat, an enclosed space for living in water, constitutes a hybrid form that joins the specificity of location / land with the movement of travel / water. As the girls enter the houseboat, they leave behind the distinction between location and lack thereof: they are somewhere but they are not; they are standing but they are moving. Just as Nancy occupies an unsound in-between space when repeatedly embracing near-death experiences, here again she inadvertently subverts the “things exist or do not” principle by discovering a hybrid space between stillness and movement, between life and death. The girls’ difficulty in reaching the houseboat signifies the fight to return to that pre-linguistic Space lost to language and location. What they find there echoes the series’ enabling absence: its theme of morbidity sharpens as Nancy wonders if the little girl’s mother is dead or alive. For a moment Nancy is back at the scene of her own mother’s death: standing by as the mother slips from presence into enabling subsistence (in this sense the scene is an extraordinary example of the series speaking about its own *chora*-enabled dynamic from within its narrative). While we have already seen that Nancy regularly taps into this hybrid space, in this scene she is physically thrust into its realization.

When she discovers that the mother is still alive, the girls revive the woman and help woman and child out of the ominous space. The story continues, until several days later the girls are forced from the road by a suspect and plunge into yet another body of water. The third recurrence of the downward plunge occurs at the end of the book, when another criminal, now captured, reveals that the sought-after heirloom Nancy was to inherit lies at the bottom of her great-grandmother's pond. Naturally, Nancy and her pals go diving and skim the bottom of the murky waters until Nancy finally retrieves the brooch. Soaked once more, she finally grasps a testament to her own becoming. However, her retrieval of the heirloom does not prompt a single reference to her own mother, even though the story revolves around her *maternal* great-grandmother's estate! Only her great-grandmother's jubilation at the reclaiming is detailed; direct maternal heritage is never referred to in this story of matrilineal stories. Thus the barely marked absence of Nancy's mother continues to lace the series, enabling her investigative trajectory.

The forceful manifestation of water in these sequences clearly evokes an ungraspable but highly affective force that lurks in the space where Nancy anticipates resolution. Like the wind that suddenly roars through the front door as Hannah retrieves the feathers from the attic, these interactions expose Nancy to an unexpectedly brutal propulsion that complicates what it means to be a detective. As forces of nature that surround and mold to the form inhabiting them, both wind and water function in the series as unintelligible, unruly yet rhythmic *choric* media that tear into the realm of language and syntax. While Nancy's general embracing of physical danger reveals the violently erotic nature of her methodology, the "downward soaking" leitmotif in these

two books clarifies her struggle as a linguistic subject bound to the law. When Nancy gets physically soaked, there is a moment of shivering reprieve from her drive to resolve the case; the image of Nancy shivering and uncertain, having been acted on from without, is the counterpart to the image of her lovingly embracing danger. This phenomenon of falling and soaking is less voluntary, and more frightening, pushing Nancy's body to an overwhelming limit of sensation and destabilizing her investigation in the process. Soaked at the brink of the maternal, she always climbs back out of her puddle or stream, shaking herself off like a bloodhound, and continuing the investigation, only to trip over this brink again and become soaked once more.

The fall down into uncertain liquid during her investigation renders explicitly corporeal Nancy's unquenchable desire to "get to the bottom of it all." Sometimes she and her friends hit a bottom, and sometimes, as in the underground well into which George falls, they fail to. In both cases, however, their flooding functions simultaneously as an embrace and a rebuttal of the searchers by the searched. The force of origin simultaneously manifests and refutes its accessibility. In other words, "where you're from" swells beneath, around and in front of you, flooding you when you are closest to it, stealing your agency and bodily integrity (George actually loses her slippers to the underground well). Here Plato's form loses "ground" to formlessness, in two senses: first, formlessness destabilizes form by intervening into intelligibility, and secondly, as precisely the uncertain origin or "ground" upon which form is built (and out of which it becomes), formlessness denies form its very foundation, leaving it bereft of certainty. The origin simultaneously effects you and affects you; it simultaneously renders itself untraceable, for all the efforts of our reasoning.

Having detailed her fraught closeness to this untraceable force, Nancy's strained positioning between her mother and father comes more clearly into focus. She certainly follows in her father's footsteps in that she in some sense practices law, but her father is not a detective and he seldom enters into the investigative space she weaves. In fact, the *choric* trajectory in the series necessitates a departure from her father, as figure of the law. Nancy and her father share hunches and clues over Hannah's deliciously prepared breakfasts, but her father is for the most part seen either sitting at his desk or coming home from work. Meanwhile, Nancy wrinkles her forehead in interrogative thought, struggles in the arms of her assailants and dives below the water's surface. This differentiation offers Nancy as a figure stretched between the unspeakable and the necessarily spoken, between mother and father, between (absent) body and (present) word. Her mode of reasoning emerges as a result of this positioning: Nancy simultaneously functions at the rational, conclusive level and Kristeva's level of "extra-understanding," just as I myself must do in order to articulate her method. Operating between mother and father, between absence and presence, between question and violence, our hybrid inquisitress thus opens the body of the case, consecrating the question's opening as *choric* wound as she holds her mystery open to reach inside.

Yet despite her rhythm of risky interrogation, and despite her interactions with the *choric* force into which that rhythm leads her, at the end of her workday Nancy strives for resolution. Unlike Kristeva's *choric* realm that in its very definition renders form unsound, Nancy's system of intelligibility is sharpened to a point where the ultimate goal consists in her closing of the case. Thus ultimately she tries to reduce the force of origin to a resolved "bottom," a secured foundation. It is for this reason that her investigative

method earns Plato's label of "bastard." In her attempt to reduce origin to a set of explanatory solutions, she verifies his dictum that people reduce the *chora* to a bedtime story confirming that everything occupies a (safe) place. This illegitimate reasoning forms the raft we cling to in order to believe that each thing in our world is always somewhere, and further, that there exists no in-between space, that is, that there is no gradation between the something of us and the nothing of nothing. Through her investigative form of this bastard reasoning, then, the girl detective covers over the fact that her resolve-driven world continues to be moderated by *choric* instability.

When Nancy shines her flashlight into the supposed Space of origin, she finds herself on uncomfortably intimate terms with a force that unsettles her intelligibility. Thus she finds herself handicapped as an investigator by the taste of a source which physically undermines her, and of which she remains unsure. This uncertainty lays bare the frailty of every beginning, of every foundational moment, of every time that "I begin." To continue the parallel between Nancy's investigative situation and my own as critical reader, it is in this same predicament of unsettled terms that I find myself entangled when I attempt to embrace my own illegitimacy as a hopeful agent of Kristeva's method of reading. When Nancy and I shine our flashlights in the anticipated direction of the *chora*, we discover a set of meta-questions to which there are no correlating answers. The unspeakable origin effaces itself as it pulses and tumbles, bequeathing experiences of violence and eroticism through which we might form new questions rather than establish solutions. In this way, our *choric* adventures plunge us further into our liminal space, prompting us to extend the boundaries of that space by complicating the form of our intelligibility.

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport: Focus, 2001) 83.

² *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, perf. Eliza Dushku, writ. David Greenwalt, dir. James A. Contner, The WB, 13 Oct. 1998. Faith utters this memorable line in the third episode of the fourth season, in which she is first introduced.

³ The *Nancy Drew* series was written under a collective pen name—Keene doesn't actually exist except as a group of changing ghostwriters. I address this issue elsewhere, but for the purposes of the current essay, I treat "her" as an autonomous author. In this essay, I refer in all cases to the revised Grosset & Dunlap editions (the "yellow spine" hardbacks).

⁴ Plato begins his discussion of the *chora* on p. 79.

⁵ Plato 83.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U, 1984 / 1974). Kristeva begins her discussion of the *chora* on p. 25.

⁷ Carolyn Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1987).

⁸ Hannah is a fourth invariant character, but tragically there is not ample space here to account for her; I will cover her production by the absent mother in future research.

⁹ Here are three other samples: "Upon the death of the little girl's mother, Hannah had assumed the responsibility of helping to rear Nancy." *The Message in the Hollow Oak* #12 (1972), 3. "The motherly woman, who had taken care of Nancy since the death of Mrs. Drew, smiled." *The Whispering Statue* #14 (1970), 3. "By this time Hannah Gruen,

the Drews' motherly housekeeper who had helped rear Nancy, hurried in." *The Secret in the Old Attic* #21 (1970), 8.

¹⁰ Plato 80. Timaeus, the character speaking in Plato's dialogue, indicates that he will return at this time to the beginning of the all, but acknowledges his inability to fully speak of it. Acknowledging the difficulty of the speech, he concludes the passage, "...let us once more begin to speak."

¹¹ Plato 58-9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Plato 80.

¹⁴ Plato 82.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Of this issue, he writes, "It both always receives all things, and nowhere in no way has it ever taken on any shape similar to the ones that come into it; for it's laid down by nature as a molding stuff for everything, being both moved and thoroughly configured by whatever things come into it; and because of these, it appears different at different times; and the figures that come into it and go out of it are always imitations of the things that *are*, having been imprinted from them in some manner hard to tell of and wondrous..."

¹⁷ Her discussion of the *chora* begins on p. 25.

¹⁸ Kristeva 26.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kristeva 25, 27.

²¹ Kristeva begins to explain this eliding circulation on p. 26, but continues on p. 72-89.

²² Plato 84.

²³ Plato 83. To drive this point home, a supporting affirmation by the translator of the term's non-translatibility runs concurrently, below Plato's warnings, in the footnotes. Kalvakage echoes other translators in footnote # 80 and in his appended glossary.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kristeva 27.

²⁷ I have borrowed this term from Monique Wittig. She uses it as a term of endearment in Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon, 1986 / 1973) 27.

²⁸ Carolyn Keene, *The Hidden Window Mystery* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1975).

²⁹ Carolyn Keene, *The Clue of the Whistling Bagpipes* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

³⁰ The book never clarifies whether it is her maternal or paternal grandmother that owned the peacock feathers.

³¹ I am indebted here to Erica Olsen for her reading of storms as manifestations of wildness in *Nancy Drew*. Erica Olsen, "Into the Wild: Nature in the World of the Girl Sleuth," Nancy Drew and Girl Sleuths Conference, Wilson College, Chambersburg, 17 Feb. 2007.

³² Compare their experience in Scotland to the very first storm Nancy endures, in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, 37. "Nancy turned on the windshield wipers, but the rain was so blinding in its intensity, it was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Almost in an instant the road had dissolved into a sea of mud. Nancy had been caught in a number of

storms, but never one as violent as this.” Is it coincidental that her first bad storm occurs during her first chronicled investigation, an investigation that like so many, concerns a family’s inheritance?