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Toward a Theory of Embodied Boredom: Edgar Allan Poe’s “Hop-Frog”

“You’re not hungry, you’re just bored” has become a twenty-first century catchphrase. As the phrase travels from dietitians’ playbooks to memes, coffee mugs, and refrigerator doors, it presumes a correlation between the mind’s craving for amusement and the body’s craving for food. If boredom, then, is more than a mental state, how does boredom register at the level of the body’s materiality? And, conversely, how does the embodied, physiological experience of boredom help us reconceptualize its psychic mechanisms? Is boredom best visualized as an “empty stomach” of the mind? And, if such is the case, how do we begin to unravel the social implications of such a conceptualization? In the boredom-hunger equation, who gets to consume what, feed off and deplete which and whose resources?

My paper pursues these questions as they converge in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Hop-Frog” (1849). Poe’s tale, I argue, delivers a meditation on embodied boredom, depicting a King and his advisors as dangerously bored and hungry, seeking the instant gratification of food, wine, and practical jokes and going to despotic extents in order to satiate their appetites. Boredom is presented thus fluctuating between lack and excess: the king and his advisors’ “large, corpulent, oily” bodies contrast the disabled bodies of Trippetta and Hop-Frog, court jesters and dwarfs whose survival depends on their capacity to keep the ruling class entertained. In *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, Patricia Meyer Spacks contends that, “in a hypothetical world that lacks a concept of boredom, people would tend to accept their condition in life as given.” Poe’s tale of victimization and bloody revenge portrays the opposite world. Boredom here constitutes the precondition of violent social change, a status that Poe ties to antithetical bodies: the all-devouring, obese King and the emaciated dwarves that nourish him with food and fun. By means of a disability studies analysis of Poe’s constructions of obesity and dwarfism, this paper discerns in Poe’s text a prescient commentary on how contemporary society understands

boredom not as the prelude of creativity but an abject form of overconsumption and self-indulgence: a disability in full right.