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"Human"/"Non-Human"*

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crossings

swarthmore undergraduate feminist research journal

Volume 1, Issue 2
Special Issue: Explorations of the
"Human"/"Non-Human"

About *Crossings*

Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal is an open-access undergraduate interdisciplinary research journal that provides a forum for discourse on feminist theory and scholarship. The title is inspired by M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, which takes as its basis the concept of the Middle Passage crossing to understand Black transnational feminism's erosion of boundaries—disciplinary conventions, respectability politics, national borders, and bodies that are gendered, sexualized, and racialized, among others kinds of categories.

Editor-in-Chief:

José Eduardo Valdivia Heredia (they/them/elle/ellx) is a graduating student of Latin American/Latinx Studies and Religion at Swarthmore College and incoming Ph.D. student in the Comparative Ethnic Studies program at UC Berkeley. They are also the co-founding editor-in-chief of *Crossings*. José's research interests are at the crossings of music, art, literature, *cuir*/queer studies, and activism in Indigenous & Afro-Latin American/Caribbean religions and cultural productions. They are also working on a project related to aesthetics, pain, and religion in the Americas.

Editors:

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Editors:

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Contributors:

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Crossings:

Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal

Special Issue: Explorations of the “Human”/“Non-Human”

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Introduction: Toward an Ethical Mutilation of the “Human” and “Body”

José Eduardo Valdivia Heredia

Swarthmore College

That order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile [...] But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions [...] Before the “body” there is “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse.¹

Crossings and the Boundaries of Humanity

This special issue of *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal: Explorations of the “Human”/“Non-Human,”* comes out of a trend in the submissions we have received—both in terms of creative projects and research articles. We promote the Journal as a “forum for discourse on feminist theory and scholarship,” which is quite a general concept, open to any fields that emphasize the experiences of women, femmes, and queer folks. It’s quite interesting to note, then, a striking pattern in our scholarship on examinations not so much about what it means to be a “feminist” but instead what it means to be *Human*—and more notably, *who gets to be Human?* In our calls for undergraduate feminist research, we have overwhelmingly received explorations from Afropessimism and Afro-surrealism, critical animal studies, eco-feminism, medical anthropology and medical humanities, posthumanism, and queer ecology from scholars of art history, ethnography, film, literature, natural sciences, among others—these have largely focused on Western conceptualizations of the “Human” and “Body” as universal concepts reliant on white supremacy. In our first issue (Volume 1, Issue 1), authors like Anisha Prakash (“Masculinized Sovereignty”), Eden Segbefia (“Àşę After Man”), Jared Z. Sloan (“Sitting Here with You in the Future”), and Yeh Seo Jung and Ray Craig (“Queer Ecologies”) explored the Human/non-Human and the limits of the body through Afropessimism, Black feminism, and queer ecology. Within the humanities and social sciences, the body has been a prominent site of analysis and discourse—whether it is the “physical body” of which the medical sciences are so concerned or the symbolic body. Generations of thinkers have

¹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

variously theorized the body, arguing for its cultural embeddedness, historicity, and symbolism. In this issue of *Crossings*, then, following a trend in increasing explorations of posthumanism within the humanities and social sciences—as well as at the critical intersection with the medical and natural sciences—we ask, what are the boundaries of humanity? And what are the limits of the body? In this Introduction, I will seek to frame how the (human) body has been conceptualized by scholars in the humanities and social sciences, primarily during the “boom” in body and corporeal studies of the 1980s into the early 2000s, before discussing the varied ways in which the contributors to this issue have interrogated the Human/non-Human.

The contributors to this issue are particularly interested in analyzing how uncritical generations of scholars were in their interaction with bodies; while many of these theorists advanced our understanding of the body as something “imagined,” socially constructed, culturally embedded, and defined by accumulations of discourses and histories, they have failed to question the very usefulness of the “body” as an analytic category available to all subjects.

Bodies With/In History

In the mid- to late-twentieth century, there was an expansion of studies related to the body, particularly in anthropology and sociology. The “boom” of this work is relevant to the context of the 1980s and 1990s, which, on a global scale, witnessed the intensification of governmental bodily control. Italian philosopher and political scientist Giorgio Agamben, writing about biopolitics and “bare life,” argues, for example, “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception.”² He adds, “[t]oday politics knows no value (and, consequently, no nonvalue) other than life, and until the contradictions that this fact implies are dissolved, Nazism and fascism—which transformed the decision on bare life into the supreme political principle—will remain stubbornly with us.”³ Additionally, the Australian-British sociologist Bryan S. Turner writes in 1997, for example, “in recent years the human body has emerged as a central focus of research and theory in sociology and anthropology. No doubt this growing academic interest reflects broader social changes in which the body has become increasingly the target of consumerism, political surveillance, and scientific research.”⁴ The “body” that Turner refers to, however, is not the physical/organic/material body of the natural sciences or medicine, per se. Instead, in his work as a social theorist, Turner points to how the body has been imagined or constructed, particularly through discourse (or the conventions of language). In

² Agamben, “Introduction,” 6.

³ Agamben, “Introduction,” 10.

⁴ Turner, “The Body in Western Society,” 15.

this, he would seem to agree with the Islamicist Scott A. Kugle in relation to his ideas on “embodiment”: “[T]he body is both the foundation for and the product of the coming into being of a meaningful world, which is human being. By using the abstraction ‘embodiment,’ theorists stress that the body is not a thing, as if its materiality made it a simple object. It is instead a *concatenation of actions, affecting and affected by culture*. It is as much a product of society as it is a precondition for a social person.”⁵ I believe it is particularly important to dwell on the body as a “concatenation of actions, affecting and affected by culture” to understand how, beyond being a material “thing,” the body is crafted through culture, history, politics, and society. Beyond the “thingness” of flesh, there are the many (imagined) bodies we carry through the worlds we navigate.

This is a succinct explanation for four related perspectives of the body in social theory, as outlined by Turner. Firstly, drawing from Michel Foucault’s focus on the history and genealogy of discourses/knowledge, “the body is an effect of deeper structural arrangements of power and knowledge.”⁶ While this is a position that, by today’s standard, may be taken for granted as matter-of-fact, this theorization has been key to advancing our knowledge of the body. It is to understand that, far from being individual agents of our bodies, we are impinged upon by an accumulation of history, brought into the world and configured by “structural arrangements of power and knowledge,” like governmental bodies, the medical sciences, religion, social norms, etc. The second and third perspectives, closely related to this first, is the body as “a symbolic system which produces a set of metaphors by which power is conceptualized” and the body as “a consequence of long-term historical changes in human society. *In short the body has a history.*”⁷ Again, following Foucault and such thinkers as Mary Douglas, Marcel Mauss, and Pierre Bourdieu, the body is a rich site for metaphor and symbol. It is the primary mechanism—or, in the words of Mauss, “techniques of the body”—through which we come to be inhabited and habituated to the social symbolic order. The final position around the body that Turner identifies is the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and is related to the “body in the context of the lived experience of everyday life.”⁸ For Merleau-Ponty, the body is both internal and external; it is the primary mediator and generator of being, consciousness, and identity.

Ultimately, what we can conclude from the different perspectives of the body in social theory is that the body is a consequence or an “effect”: “[R]ather than being a naturally given datum, [it] is a socially constructed artifact rather like other cultural products. The body (its image, its bearing, and representation) is the *effect of innumerable practices, behaviors, and discourses* which construct and produce the

⁵ Kugle, “Introduction,” 13 (emphasis added).

⁶ Turner, “The Body in Western Society,” 15.

⁷ Turner, “The Body in Western Society,” 15–16 (emphasis added).

⁸ Turner, “The Body in Western Society,” 16.

body as a culturally recognizable feature of social relations.”⁹ This is not dissimilar to the queer feminist theorist Judith Butler’s ideas around the body as something that is “not quite ever only our own.” She thinks of vulnerability (pain) as a means through which we are “[imprinted]” by other(s) bodies:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life.¹⁰

The body, it would seem, is a crucial and necessary part of living as a social being, of participating in public/political life. So what of those bodies that are not considered bodies? What of their politicization and sociality?

Dis-Membering Bodies

The aforementioned social theorists’ insights into the body have greatly expanded our ability to move beyond the “thingness” or “materiality” of the body in order to speak of its discursive, historical, imagined, and symbolic elements. While these have been key to scholars of humanities and social sciences, I believe that—especially white scholars—have foreclosed the possibility of questioning the very category of the “body” as something inaccessible to certain subjects (or objects). We’ve moved past the “fixity” of categories like “human” and “body” but have failed to be critical of their essentialism or universality. Butler, in contradistinction to this trend, has found ways to address the “dehumanization” of certain subjects through discourse, for example: “It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.”¹¹ She has not taken it far enough, however, because of her emphasis on the effects of discourse, as opposed to the ontological impossibility of possessing a body or humanity. Insights from the post-humanist religion scholar Donovan O. Schaefer reveal how this has largely been an issue with the “linguistic fallacy” in the humanities/social sciences—an overemphasis on the conventions of language as

⁹ Turner, “The Body in Western Society,” 16 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 26.

¹¹ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 34.

opposed to the experiences of lived bodies: “Animal bodies—our bodies—are invested in fields of power that are not mediated by language. Although language is an important feature of human bodies, it is only one of many channels for the operation of power. Where concepts and language are part of the religious matrix, they, too, must be considered as part of an embodied complex that loops through the material forces of affect that direct bodies. Affect theory is a necessary tool for mapping religion [...] because affect constitutes the links between bodies and power.”¹² What would it mean, then, to shift the analysis from the “human body” (read: white/non-Black body), to that of *other(s) bodies*—animal, Black, non-white, etc.

For Afropessimist scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, the “body” has largely been the problem of humanist discourses, which fail to see how Black people—Slaves, in the words of Wilderson—cannot possibly be accounted for by such frameworks. In her now-seminal work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman examines quotidian acts of terror and violence related to the subject formation of enslaved Africans and their descendants. She argues that the enslaved person’s existence as property is inextricably tied to our understanding of the (white) Human:

In attempting to explicate the violence of slavery and its idiom of power, *Scenes* moved away from the notion of the exploited worker or the unpaid laborer toward the captive and the fungible, the commodity and the dominated, the disposable and the sexually violated, to describe the dynamics of accumulation and dispossession, social reproduction and social death, seduction and libidinal economy, and to highlight the vexed relation of the enslaved to the category of the human.”¹³

Additionally, Wilderson argues that “[h]umanism has no theory of the Slave because it imagines a subject who has been either alienated in language or alienated from his or her cartographic and temporal capacities. It cannot imagine an object who has been positioned by gratuitous violence and who has no cartographic and temporal capacities to lose—a sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible.”¹⁴ For Wilderson, Black people are “object[s] who [have] been positioned by gratuitous violence.”¹⁵ This is different from the “human” subject—whether white or non-Black—which lies at the position of contingent violence based on transgressions of the symbolic order. For oppressed non-Black people, for example, there is no fundamental ontological dehumanization (“gratuitous violence”) but instead, violence based on alienation

¹² Schaefer, “Introduction,” 9.

¹³ Hartman, “Preface,” xxxiii.

¹⁴ Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 54–55.

¹⁵ This is succinctly explained by the phrase “dead but sentient thing.” Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 55.

and transgression; conversely, violence is the ontogenetic starting point of Blackness. The central divide within humanist discourse, then, is not that of Black/white but of Black/non-Black, with all other subjects inhabiting the position of (oppressed) human. He thus forecloses the possibility of a “Black subjectivity,” such that the very precondition of (human) subjectivity is the exclusion of the Slave from the symbolic order. This means that, within the New World order, Blackness “is less a site of subjectification and more a site of desubjectification—a ‘species’ of absolute dereliction, a hybrid of ‘person and property,’ and a body that magnetizes bullets.”¹⁶ This “birthing” of white subjectivity can be related to Agamben’s theorization of “the relation of exception” in sovereign power: “The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule [...] We shall give the name relation of exception to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion.”¹⁷ As the antithesis of humanity, Blackness is not fully excluded from the category but instead serves as the backside of it, the “inclusive exclusion” of Black life births (white) life, such that Black non-subjectivity “constitutes itself as a rule.”

Philosopher Jacques Derrida, similarly, theorizes death/sacrifice in relation to the state and sovereign power in terms that could be read through Black (non-)subjectivity: “[B]ecause of the mechanisms of external debt and other similar inequities, that same ‘society’ *puts to death* or [...] *allows to die* of hunger and disease tens of millions of children [...] without any moral or legal tribunal ever being considered competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of others to avoid being sacrificed oneself. Not only is it true that such a society participates in this incalculable sacrifice, it actually organizes it. The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal affairs, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience presupposes the permanent operation of this sacrifice.”¹⁸ What would it mean then, to think through “[bodies] that [magnetize] bullets” as “the sacrifice of others [Black people/Slave] to avoid being sacrificed oneself [white/non-Black/Human]”? How is the subjugation of Black bodies the “permanent operation of this sacrifice,” upon which society relies for its “smooth functioning”?

Supplementing Wilderson’s work is the scholarship of Black feminist theorists, specifically Hortense J. Spillers’ now-seminal 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” While Wilderson focuses more on the category of “human”—and who is, or is not, afforded this status—Spillers points us back to the very “thingness” or “materiality” the social theorists so despised: flesh. Discussing the bodily mutilation—actual and symbolic—of the enslaved, Spillers writes, the New World order, “with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African

¹⁶ Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 78.

¹⁷ Agamben, “The Logic of Sovereignty,” 18.

¹⁸ Derrida, “Tout Autre Est Tout Autre,” 86 (emphasis original).

and [I]ndigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked the *theft of the body*—a willful and violent [...] severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire [...] [T]he captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor.”¹⁹ For those persons transported across the Atlantic and into the Americas, existence was completely predicated on a “theft of the body” or “becoming being for the captor.” In essence, the very notion of the enslaved was to exist as property, as an extension of the being of the Master—the Black/Slave (Thing), having lost her “motive will” and “active desire,” instead births the subjectivity of the white/Master (Human). For Spillers, it is such that Black people do not possess bodies but instead are made up of the visceral and mutilated element of flesh: “I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions [...] [B]efore the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization [...] If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.”²⁰ As the “captive” subject-position, Blackness is marked—or scarred—by the brush of “flesh,” dispossessed of bodily autonomy and will. The Black Caribbean feminist M. Jacqui Alexander, poetically renders this “fleshing” of Black bodies across the Middle Passage as follows:

We lay in a dungeon. Many more of us lying in death, 21 times 21 times 21 and more. Crossing water on backs with sores and bellies empty except for those filled with air or swollen with child. Lying in rot and moon blood with skinless ankles and wrists, black skins turned yellow from chains acting like saws on our fearful flesh. Rocking. Wracked bodies numbed from pain. Rocking the dark noise, the loud silence of trembling hands and feet and whole bodies turned cold and numb from shock and heat and longing for the rhythm of daily living. Rocking.²¹

What I read in Alexander’s re-imagining of the Middle Passage is an *attempt* at dehumanization, the forceful conversion of “wracked bodies” into “fearful flesh” through acts of mutilation and terror. Similarly, Black queer literary critic Tinsley, in her “queer re-imagining” of the Middle Passage, writes of the process of indifferentiation, the liquidation of bodies into oozing flesh: “Once loaded onto the slave ships, Africans became fluid bodies under the force of brutality. Tightly or loosely packed in sex-segregated holds [...] surrounded by churning, unseen waters, these brutalized bodies themselves became liquid, oozing [...] On this Atlantic, then, black body waters, corporeal effluvia, and the stains of gendered and reproductive

¹⁹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67 (emphasis original).

²⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

²¹ Alexander, “Pedagogies of the Sacred,” 288.

bodies were among the first sites of colonization.”²² What all of these scholars suggest, then, is that the construction of modernity, through colonization and the continued effects of coloniality, is fundamentally predicated on the subjugation of Black bodies (or flesh).

As the “zero degree of social conceptualization,” Black flesh and blood become the very building blocks of the New World, modernity via colonization, and specifically, the United States. The historian Paul Christopher Johnson similarly argues this point in his analysis of (spirit) possession in Black religions: “Modernity, it has been argued, was the name for the attempt to strictly separate *agents* from *nonagents* and *persons* from *things* [...] Slaves were mostly regarded as things, though they were also on occasion, and in certain respects, considered persons (for example, as juridically responsible for their acts, and thus punishable by law). This contradiction produced legal oxymorons of *thing-human hybrids*, manifested in the United States in 1787 as the three-fifths calculus of personhood.”²³ With a particular attention to history, Johnson argues that the enslaved were transformed into “thing-human hybrids” or “person-things,” objects that were readily disposable yet not completely exempted from the rule of law. Marked by violence, produced through dispossession, objectified through “fungibility and accumulation” (in the words of Hartman and Wilderson), Black bodies are “cultural texts,” anti-humans and anti-bodies, in the creation of white/Human subjectivity: “These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color [...] This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.”²⁴ How, then, do we sit with the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” and learn to read this “cultural text,” understanding that the body has been produced through the systematic (inclusive) exclusion of Black flesh?

Scholars like Alexander, Hartman, Spillers, Tinsley, and Wilderson, then, have worked prodigiously to complicate the very categories upon which humanist social theory relies for its validity: “body” and “human” (or, the “human body”). By questioning who is granted access to such statuses, Black feminists and Afropessimists, alike, have demonstrated the limits and non-universality of these social theories. Beyond arguing for the non-fixity, mutability, or historicity of the body, these theorists point to the necessary exclusion of Black life in the creation of human subjectivity. Between the aforementioned Black feminists and Wilderson, I believe the latter takes a more rigid position on the Human. As the central distinction in modernity is Black/non-Black for Wilderson, he forecloses, altogether, the possibility of a coalitional politics with non-Black subjects—white or oppressed—for there is no reconciliation between the zone of subjectivity (Human)

²² Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” 197–198.

²³ Johnson, “Introduction,” 5 (emphasis added).

²⁴ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

and that of gratuitous violence, fungibility, and capitalist accumulation (Black/ Slave). He writes of the “multicultural” paradigm within Black studies and related fields: “[T]hey are entangled in a multicultural paradigm that takes an interest in an insufficiently critical comparative analysis—that is, a comparative analysis in pursuit of a coalition politics (if not in practice then at least as a theorizing metaphor) which, by its very nature, crowds out and forecloses the Slave’s grammar of suffering.”²⁵ The only possible move forward, the only way to account for the “Slave’s grammar of suffering,” according to Wilderson, is to destroy the zone of subjectivity (Human)—total mutilation of the human and her body. While Wilderson does not uncritically dispose of the category of “human,” I do believe that he overemphasizes societal constraints and thus precludes *other* paths, the emancipatory strategies that subjects wield in their everyday lives.

Re-Membering the Body or Bodies That Remember

While I believe that Wilderson’s argument offers key insights into the limitations of such categories, I do not agree with his complete foreclosure of coalitional politics between Black and non-white subjects; and I emphasize, against Wilderson, the possibility of Black subjectivity. The work of Black feminist scholars offers alternative paths structured in a radical world-building project that resists such objectification. For example, while Hartman is often thought of as the foremother of Afropessimism and theories of social death, she reminds us in her re-reading of her own text about the ways in which the enslaved and their descendants resisted their status as property:

Scenes endeavored to illuminate the countless ways in which the enslaved challenged, refused, defied, and resisted the condition of enslavement and its ordering and negation of life, its extraction and destruction of capacity. The everyday practices, the ways of living and dying, of making and doing, were attempts to slip away from the status of commodity and to affirm existence as not chattel, as not property, as not wench. Even when this other state could not be named, because incommensurate or untranslatable within the conceptual field of the enclosure, the negation of the given was ripe with promise. The wild thought and dangerous music of the enslaved gave voice to other visions of the possible and refused captivity as the only horizon, opposed the framework of property and commodity, contested the idea that they were less than human, nurtured acts of vengeance, and anticipated divine retribution.²⁶

Additionally, in her 1987 essay, for example, Spillers writes of excess and accumulated meanings imposed upon Black women like herself. She looks for a

²⁵ Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 57.

²⁶ Hartman, “Preface,” xxx–xxxii.

path out of this through her world-building or “inventiveness”: “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.”²⁷ It seems to me that while she recognizes the attempts at stripping her of a body, rendering her into flesh, Spillers does not accept her condition of objectification. For example, she writes that the condition of the Slave is not just that of property but of forced kinlessness. Still, she argues, the enslaved find ways of forming horizontal relationality among each other: “The point remains that captive persons were *forced* into patterns of dispersal, beginning with the Trade itself, into the *horizontal* relatedness of language groups, discourse formation, bloodlines, names, and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement.”²⁸ While these kinship ties occurred under the conditions of bondage, the relations were forged despite the objectification of the enslaved—it is the radical condition of caring, loving, or feeling for others when their bodies were never meant to be loved.

In a similar manner, Tinsley references radical feeling—not to be confused with the objects/subjects of affect theory but more with a radical, queer, feminist tradition—as a way out of the commodification that is so central to Afropessimist discourse. Writing about erotic relationships between the enslaved, Tinsley states, “African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships.”²⁹ These are precisely the kinds of kinship ties—or “horizontal relatedness”—that Spillers argues were crucial in the lives of the enslaved. The only exception is Tinsley’s queer reading of kinship, which radically alters the position of the enslaved: “[These relationships] are one way that fluid black bodies refused to accept that the liquidation of their social selves [...] meant the liquidation of their sentient selves [...] [They were *queer*] in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths.”³⁰ For Tinsley, then, queer love—that feeling despite commodification, that loving of bodies that were never meant to be bodies—is the way out of the “living death” that so concerns Afropessimists.

With this in mind, the mutilation of the body is a complicated phenomenon. We must sit with the markings of Black bodies—the “hieroglyphics of the flesh”—as ways to read attempts at the objectification of these *subjects*. What would it mean to

²⁷ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.

²⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 75 (emphasis original).

²⁹ Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic” 192 (emphasis original).

³⁰ Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” 199.

sit with the very material markings of the flesh? For Butler, writing of “qualified life,” markings seem to be more of a metaphor: “There is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a refusal of discourse that produces dehumanization as a result. Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a *mark that is no mark*.”³¹ But what of actual mutilation? How is “ethical” mutilation one path forward that does not completely discard the category of the body? Discussing the scarring and mutilation practices of Haitian Vodou, Alexander addresses precisely this question: “Far from being merely superficial, these markings on the flesh—these inscriptions—are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body. One of these requirements is to remember their source and purpose. In this matrix the body thus becomes a site of memory, not a commodity for sale, even as it is simultaneously insinuated within a nexus of power.”³² For Alexander, these hieroglyphics or “inscriptions” are the evidence of divine presence within (Black) bodies. They are the traces of bodies inhabited by divine beings, Spirit, and thus, they disarticulate the dehumanization or commodification of Black flesh, even through a “nexus of power.” For her, sacred or religious mutilation is a form of resistance and reclamation of the body, for it is not Black flesh but instead a vehicle for the divine. While she does, in fact, claim that Black bodies are commodified, Alexander’s Black feminist vision sees ways out of the de-subjectification of Blackness. In her opinion, the “body” is not completely useless but must instead be *re-membered*: “Of immediate importance to feminism is the meaning of embodiment and body praxis, and the positioning of the body as a source of knowledge within terms differently modulated than the materiality of the body and its entanglement in the struggle against commodification, as it continues to be summoned in the service of capital. But here again that materialism has absented Spirit, and so the contemporaneous task of a theory of the flesh, with which I think Cherríe Moraga would agree, is to transmute this body and the pain of its dismemberment to a remembering of the body to its existential purpose.”³³ Alexander, then, believes that Black bodies are re-membered bodies, bodies that remember their potential for harboring the sacred, even in the face of commodification.

So, even as Spillers writes that Black people do not have bodies but instead are flesh, she too imagines alternative possibilities based on resistance. While she wrote her essay as a young scholar, even in her maturity she looks for ways to resist, to not succumb to the condition of the Slave. Here lies her criticism of Afropessimism. For Spillers, this framework of critical theory is important but incomplete. She believes it romanticizes social/metaphorical death without

³¹ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 36 (emphasis added).

³² Alexander, “Pedagogies of the Sacred,” 297.

³³ Alexander, “Pedagogies of the Sacred,” 329.

offering paths toward wholeness. Death was all too real for the historically enslaved, and it is an issue to disregard the materiality—the ruptured flesh—of these people in place of a metaphoricity. She questions the utility of such a reification of “social” death: “Who is benefiting from understanding that it is death? Social death, metaphorical death—why is that beneficial? [...] So, I want to know why it is useful, therefore, for me to have this image of that kind of vulnerability in my head? When it seems to me what I really need alongside it is the power to resist and belief in the efficacy of that resistance [...] Yes, I understand that my humanity is called into question. I understand that, but no, at the same time that I am always working against it.”⁵⁴ Hartman, too, writes of Black feminist utopias, “this subjugated knowledge or speculative knowledge of freedom would establish *the vision of what might be*, even if unrealizable within the prevailing terms of order.”⁵⁵ This *vision of what might be* is the Black feminist praxis of world-building and freedom-dreaming that sustains life beyond “social death.”

It is in this vein of thought, then, that I argue for the ethical mutilation of the human body, moving towards different paradigms for understanding the category of “body.” Paths forward are already being crafted by such scholars as Alexander, Spillers, and Tinsley—as well as by post-humanist work like that of Schaefer—that move away from the reification of the Human. While social theorists like Bourdieu, Douglas, Foucault, Mauss, and Merleau-Ponty have offered key insights into our understanding of the body as a non-fixed category, I believe that we need to re-think this “imagined,” social body; we must *dis-member* and *re-member* it, mutilating the parts of it that are no longer useful for us. What would it mean to sit with the attempts at calling into question the humanity of Black subjects without dwelling on the idea of “social death” or the continuation of a “historical slavery”? How can we hold together the objectification of Black bodies—which is a material and symbolic reality—without foreclosing the possibility “to resist and [to believe] in the efficacy of that resistance”? Are there ways to reconcile “Human” and the “body,” especially in relation to non-white subjects, that would still allow for the kinds of radical feeling, world-building, and coalitional politics at the center of Black and Brown feminist and queer scholarship?

Discussion of Articles

It is in this vein of thought, considering the limits of humanity and the usefulness of the “body” as an analytic category, that our contributors explore dimensions of posthumanism in feminist scholarship. By questioning Humanism, post-Enlightenment thought, and Scientific Rationalism, the authors seek to chart new territories of being, or becoming-with, in the words of Donna Haraway.

In Logan K. Shanks’ article, “A Meditation on Afrosurrealism, Black Gender, and the Non-Human,” interrogates Afropessimism and Afrosurrealism in Black

⁵⁴ Spillers and Gordon, “Afropessimism and its Others,” 1:04:29.

⁵⁵ Hartman, “Preface,” xxxi.

culture to unearth the gendered/sexed nature of the categories “Human”/“non-Human.” She begins by outlining the current trends in Afropessimism and Afrosurrealism which have made clear how limited the terms and conditions of “freedom” and “humanity” are under whiteness. Shanks asks if there is any use in our current understandings of “freedom” and the “Human” if these Western categories are always already tied to white supremacy and the non-subjectivity of Blackness? She explores the figure of the Black abyss/hole/void/womb to understand how the non-Human is gendered: “the gray area in between life and death is largely stewarded by Black women whose bodies and labor serve as the foundation of modernity.” Finally, Shanks explores Afro-surrealist elements of Atlanta Trap music to note the ways in which Black masculinity can be read against the grain, when understanding the ways in which Black subjects are precluded from access to the “Human.”

Turning to multispecies theory and critical animal studies, Nicole Daly’s “Multispecies Kinship in Fabrizio Terranova’s *Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*,” blurs the line between personal narrative, spectator theory, and “humanimal” kinship to question our interrelatedness to the world around us, including the human and non-human animal companions with which we daily interact. Daly draws on Donna Haraway’s cyborgian, multispecies, posthumanist feminism and concludes that “non-human animals shape human practices as much as humans have shaped non-human animals and learning to pay attention and respond to companion species is a part of our obligation as human beings on a shared planet. The boundary between humans and non-human animals is not as distinct as a culture of human exceptionalism leads us to believe.”

In an incisive autobiographical research paper, “Landmarks: ‘Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality’ and *A Room of One’s Own* Applied,” Grace Benson “examine[s] the relationship between perception, queerness, and self-confidence.” She applies Iris Marion Young’s understandings of the feminine body, as well as metaphorizing Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, through her quotidian experiences in which the limits of the feminine body become painfully apparent. Broken up into “lessons,” like “my existence is determined by my objectification”; “I am controlled by my position in space”; and “my body is my enemy,” Benson explores and inhabits the wounded space of her “body,” especially in relation to the free movement of men’s bodies. Throughout her narrative, Benson disrupts the social constraints of her body, given as “lessons,” by stating “truths” about her existence: “I am my body, my body is me; I am not a threat.”

Marley Goldman’s article, “On Becoming a Woman: A Body Horror Examination of *Dance Nation*” examines the feminine body—with all of its carnage—in the horror play *Dance Nation* (2018), as well as the films *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) and *Pahanhautoja (Hatching)* (2022), through a “body horror” framework. She argues that grotesque body horror represents the pain of lost childhood

uncontrollably transforming into womanhood, but also that embracing the monstrous body can be a source of catharsis, reclaiming savage feminine power.”

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A Meditation on Afrosurrealism, Black Gender, and the Non-Human

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Troubling the Human

Fleeing and escaping, second-class servitude in their own “home” countries, refuged white Europeans mimicked their intimate familial class violence to create the New World mercantilist-capitalist system by stratifying themselves into a higher class, enslaving African people and Indigenous people in the process. These white insecurities manifest in laws, literary genres, epistemological constructions, and every facet of American life. One of those is the American romance literary tradition that writer Toni Morrison explicitly names in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison gives us the language to understand America as a white, nationalist, hegemonic world-building project that brands its aesthetic as generative and restorative through the shadow of slavery: “The black population was available for meditations on terror—the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man.”³⁶ Ultimately capitalism derived from feudalism to free the peasants and serfs who were the least powerful in Western Europe and established a new white hierarchy that “freed” them from their poor, oppressive class conditions.

The white reordering of history acquaints us with a narrative of historical progression and controls when the tape stops, plays, and rewinds. I use Black feminist literary scholar Michelle M. Wright’s concept of “linear process narrative” to acknowledge how white linear historiographies play on a loop to place Blackness in constrictive, barricaded time-spaces in which whiteness uses Blackness as a historical causality to map out its regressions.³⁷ As Black folks attempt to break “free,” they must appeal to and reason with fallacies of white freedom and equality through the same forms of language, mediums, and textiles that are used to hold captive Black matter in its anti-Black world-building projects. Through the destabilization of historical time periods, the Black collective will be better

³⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38.

³⁷ Wright, “The Middle Passage Epistemology,” 38.

equipped to destroy the machinery of white supremacy that naturalizes anti-Black normative assumptions of gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

As whiteness defines freedom in the form of white patriarchy (dependent on the suffering and oppression of stolen African people), Blackness runs the risk of inadvertently re-inscribing signifiers of white humanity in their new constructions of subjectivity and humanity. While the abandonment of freedom as a concept could seem degenerative and pessimistic to the survival of Black people, I beg the question of why Black existence is predicated on running and escaping the whip, ultimately an inescapable, slow necropolitical death? Perhaps, surrendering could possibly be more “freeing” than rendering Black matter legible to the category of the white Human. In our swapping of (white) Humanist conceptions of freedom for the non-Human, we are liberating ourselves from limiting, fixed categorization. In solidarity with Jayna Brown’s *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music Of Other Worlds*, I recognize “those of us who are dislocated on the planet are perfectly positioned to break open the stubborn epistemological logics of human domination. These (im)possibilities open up where the human has abandoned us and onto a much bigger universe, when we jump into the unknowable.”³⁸ Brown’s statement has facilitated my choice to abandon the white Human category. The intimate interiorities are expressed in the Black feminist quilting of both Afrosurrealism and Afropessimism as artistic traditions and philosophical meditations that highlight how Blackness exists beyond the limiting concepts of white gender and the illegibility of white assumptions surrounding Black family, sexuality, and gender.

The category “Human” rests in the condition of gender; gender enters on the stage of European colonialism and sexual conquest. I call upon Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s overrepresentation of the man to define Black freedom’s attempt to perform citizenship in the desire to be “Human,” in others words, a white Man:

Other, the abnormal Other, the timeless ethnographic Other, the most salient of all these was to be that of the mythology of the Black Other of sub-Saharan Africans (and their Diaspora descendants). It is this population group who would come to be made, several centuries on, into an indispensable function of the enacting of our present Darwinian “dysselected by Evolution until proven otherwise” descriptive statement of the human on the biocentric model of a natural organism. With this population group’s systemic stigmatization, social inferiorization, and dynamically produced material deprivation thereby serving both to “verify” the overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human, and to legitimate the subordination of the world and well-being of the latter to those of the former.³⁹

³⁸ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 38.

³⁹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 267.

There is no “Human” and white regime without the control of Black reproduction and life. The American colonial law “Partus Sequitur Ventrem” was imagined as a curse that assigned subjects with a Black female genitalia to be slave-producing vessels: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman shall be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother—Partus Sequitur Ventrem. And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.”⁴⁰ On the basis of white reproductive logic, this law fertilized the grounds on which the colonial mappings of the “New World” were reinforced in every Black striving towards freedom. However, it is important to note that Blackness does not emerge from whiteness, but it is rather whiteness that exists because of the coercion of Black matter. To be white is to be human as to be human is to oppress and dominate. In our captivity, Blackness is expected to show up in specific ways that stabilize the existential insecurities of whiteness.

Black Feminist Quilting of Afropessimism and Afrosurrealism

African diasporic cultural practices and expressions center story-telling. In his crediting of fellow Afrosurrealist writer Henry Dumas, Amiri Baraka measures his execution of Afrosurrealism in his ability to create “an entirely different world organically connected to this one.”⁴¹ Afrosurrealist artists can be read as modern-day oral griots who create worlds through the tethering of epiphenomenal time-space portals. The following question that perils the essence of our collective existence, plays on loop as a soundtrack: “It’s yours! Whose world is this? The world is yours, the world is yours. It’s mine, it’s mine.”⁴² Black bodies and labor are found in the construction of the New World but are erased by the curse of the black womb—partus sequitur ventrem. My entry into Afropessimism is mediated by the work of Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* and Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Additionally, Afropessimist scholar Frank B. Wilderson III builds upon sociologist Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death to further detail how anti-Blackness is integral to every facet of the world’s “civil society.” Hartman details in her article, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, how the Black womb/abyss functions as both a life/death giving portal as it naturalizes Black social death: “The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. Partus sequitur ventrem—the child follows the belly.”⁴³ In this essay, I will use Hartman’s Black womb/abyss imagery to trouble gender. I will

⁴⁰ Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, 170.

⁴¹ Baraka, “Henry Dumas,” 164.

⁴² myclef9, “Nas - The World Is Yours,” 0:05–0:13.

⁴³ Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 166.

also reference Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness*, an Afrosurrealist sketch comedy television show on HBO that addresses interesting issues of homophobia, transphobia, sexism, misogynoir, and anti-Blackness.

In season one of Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* "Everybody Dies" segment, Rippa the Reaper, a Black woman, is in charge of the Department of Black Death. Reminiscent of *partus sequitur ventrem*, the Department of Black Death is Rippa the Reaper, a Black matriarch figure who serves as the intermediary presence between the anticipating inevitable death of young Black children: "Kids you know That you will die, No matter how hard you try, You can squeal Or whine or pray, Everyone dies one day, I'm your last and only friend. Cause this is where your story ends."⁴⁴ Black mothers' subject-positions possess them with a foresight that identifies the varied slopes of death, risk, and injury that a Black life could encounter; the role of the Black female is to prime children with techniques to mitigate and evade injury. There is a specific scene where Rippa the Reaper beats a child while they are in a black trash bag; the trash bag is a Black womb that is detached from its mother. The mother is Rippa who ultimately expedites the anticipated necropolitical death and suffering. This scene can be read as over-exaggerated and gruesome, its Afro-surrealist expression exists as both familiar and extra-real as Blackness is fixed as a slave category by way of the legacies of *partus sequitur ventrem*.

Further, Ra Malika Imhotep's *gossypiiin* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* speak to how Black woman (subject-positions who hold the assumed responsibility of the race) take control over Black life forces through cotton to prevent unwanted pregnancies and taking the life of their babies to save them from an already predetermined life of suffering and death. While these acts can be read as horrific and animalistic, the system of slavery creates the conditions in which Black life is not offered choice nor freedom, therefore, escaping an anti-Black world is synonymous to death. Through this Afrosurrealist tradition of Sankofa, the brewing pot bubbles with voices from the past that inform both the present and future: "Afro-surrealism is art with skin on it where the texture of the object tells its story, how it weathered burial below consciousness, and how it emerged somewhat mysteriously from oceans of forgotten memories and discarded keepsakes."⁴⁵ Afropessimism and the past of slavery remind Black people that we eternally occupy the position of slave on the plantation, which lingers in Afrosurrealist imagery. Centering Atlanta Trap-Rap music as an object of study, I do not aspire to problematize Atlanta trap-rap music or incite Black gender wars that reinforce normative assumptions about Black sexuality and gender but rather define what subconsciously is being represented in the collective genre and communities. Rappers express deep interiorities and pain as they meditate on the predetermined, inevitable death of their Black gender: "I looked over my shadows and seen a

⁴⁴ HBO, "Random Acts of Flyness," 0:33-0:56. (Season 1, Episode 1 Clip)

⁴⁵ Francis, "Meditation," 94.

woman. Can't fuck over everybody, nigga, death comin.”⁴⁶ I propose that reorienting our analysis of Trap music as an Afrosurrealist meditation is a step to analyzing the overdetermination of Black gender, specifically Black masculinities. Through highlighting its absurdities, Afrosurrealism places emphasis on the everyday survival and transgression thus denaturalizing of white hegemony. Afrosurrealism functions as a paradigm that brings wholeness to the condition of pessimism and social death that Blackness rests in. This wholeness is achieved through the destabilization of normative categories.

The Black Hole

Much of our survival as a community roots from Black feminist epistemology of alchemy, or in other words, making do with what we've got/making sum shake/making a way out of no way, the gray area in between life and death is largely stewarded by Black women whose bodies and labor serve as the foundation of modernity. In Ja'Tovia Gary's "An Ecstatic Experience," viewers sit and workshop a collective existential Black meditation regarding suffering and Black matriarchal labor.⁴⁷ Gary holds viewers in a captivating, reflective gaze that makes sense out of "the shadow" in our lives. Once over, viewers left disassembled, returning back into our mother's wombs, in a deeper feminine plane and presence, we weep, waiting for a Black mother to nurse us. Black feminists enter as doulas, politicians, professors, mothers, sisters, partners, and maids facilitating both the maintenance of the white man's matrix and the treatment balm for its intimate injuries and violence. Specifically, the white gender binary becomes exhausting to the category of Blackness, as the Black female subject rests in overdetermined normative properties that give other non-Black female subject-positions the disillusion that they will be able to break "free" and enter the "Human" category. Their presumed "distance" from the category of the Black female is a disillusion as all properties of matter rest in the Black hole/womb. To be running from the female within is the denial of one's true self: "the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."⁴⁸ The orientation of history's singular, individualistic "freedman" that runs alone without family and pulls himself up by the bootstraps as a father of American patriotism and citizenship renders absence to not only Black women and children but the true existential meaning behind the Black collective as a whole. Perhaps the "emasculating," nagging mother, girlfriend, and the Black woman is tasked with reminding community members to surrender to the survival of the collective rather than selling their soul to white patriarchy—the aspiration to emulate the power of white man. Afrosurrealism seemingly operates on a

⁴⁶ Sahbabii, "Sahbabii - I See (Official Lyric Video)," 1:40–1:44.

⁴⁷ Gary, "An Ecstatic Experience (2015)."

⁴⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

pessimistic, plane but its realism reminds one of the apocalyptic conditions we rest in.

In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, a text that mothers and births the field of Afropessimism, Black feminist literary scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman coins redress as “a re-membling of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement.”⁴⁹ This generation of Atlanta’s rappers embrace the darkness and dwell in the Black hole; many are planted and grown from the ashes of Sherman’s March to Sea, a historical moment that marks a time of transitional failure as the enslaved subject attempts to shapeshift “American citizen” and “Human.” The hoods and projects that rappers like SahBabii and Yung Nudy originate from represent the instability and corruption of ethics relating to American pragmatism and ethics. Many of these homes were promised to Black Americans after fighting in World War II and saving up enough money to escape their racially violent conditions in the South; however, no amount of performance of citizenship could shift an already fixed anti-Black necropolitical system. Eternally, Black matter, living-unliving corpse, rests in a state of fungible ungendered flesh: “the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”⁵⁰ Under partus sequitur ventrem, the intimate familial grounds of sexual violence breed the grounds for particular psychoanalytical realities to arise as the father of an enslaved mother’s child was rendered null and void in the court of law. This causes the assimilation into the category of “citizenship” and “Human” to be further complicated as it is defined under the logics of white gender binary. Without recognition of a paternal father figure, how does one easily transition into the “Human” category? The failure to explicitly recognize the intimate and familial nature of sexual violence on the plantation must be read as parallel to the Black American’s exclusion of aspired American citizenship.

Trap music, specifically the genre of Atlanta Trap music, ought to be considered Afropessimism tradition as it embraces the failure of the “Black Man” to be fully assembled and neatly fitted into the category of the “Human,” in other words, the White Man; rappers curate their image through villain-like imagery, such as Vampires (PlayBoi Carti refers to himself as King Vamp) to represent a psychoanalytic craving for self-esteem and acceptance in the face of oversexualization, criminalization, and failures to assimilate into hegemonic masculinity. Patrick Moynihan's rhetoric is retained through state propaganda that claims the socioeconomic failures of the Black community root from the inability to possess a strong family unit with a male head of the household. In reality, the question is not in relation to the “effectiveness” of Black families but rather its failures to assimilate into a white patriarchal family that owns land and retains its generational wealth through the sexual conquest of the Black womb. Political

⁴⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 76–77.

⁵⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

campaigns and programs, such as the welfare system and criminal justice system, are created to reap profit from “Black pathology” by hyper-surveilling and controlling Black inner life in attempts to “correct” an already “pathologized” community of people who lack a stable family unit. Due to the legacies of *partus sequitur ventrem*, a white enslaver’s paternal involvement is invisibilized; in contemporary Black urban culture, the narrative often blames Black fathers for leaving their children without contextualizing abusive racial-sexual violence committed against Black families. Subconsciously, Black men in a way attempt to reconcile with the deadbeat enslaver who they were unable to inherit any land or generational wealth as they were assigned to enter as human commodities and not “sons” (heirs to property). The question to be proposed is how does an enslaved Black person, both property and commodity, inherit other properties? The contemporary Atlanta “rockstar” rapper lifestyle of money/sex/drugs and overall apathy and detachment from one’s self can be read as a fusion of an imagined dream-space of Afrosurrealistic expressions in a white, Chaucerian social matrix. In this realm, Black men cosplay as their deadbeat white enslaver fathers who owned land and women as sexual property. The requirement of the stabilizing Black feminine subject in an over-sexualization postured, can perhaps relate to the racial-sexual geographic structures of the auction block. Black men’s gendered performance could be read as a process into the psychoanalytic reckoning of the category non-human’s failure to assimilate white gendered performance. In a failed attempt to disassociate from the traumas associated with the legacies of slavery, the white social matrix is replicated in Black dwellings; it is here where the strip club represents a memory that “enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affliction.”⁵¹ Rape and sexual violence is almost a necessary initiator for this Black performance of ownership of property to occur; I wonder how a culture of dissemblance (which is defined as “the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressor”) holds the secrets for white patriarchy’s ego to be satisfied in the vessels of Black male rappers?⁵² The sexualization of violence is preserved in not only geographic space and place but expressions of Black male subjectivity that dwell in the collective reckoning of slavery’s sexual violence. In Atlanta strip clubs and digital spaces, as a twerking ritual, Black women from Atlanta twerk to SahBabii’s “Pull Up wit ah Stick” and “Tonight”; both songs sexualize the realities of Black gun violence and death: “Mob shit, big sticks, get killed. Thought she was dancin’ on the dick, that’s the clip/ She gettin’ on top tonight (Yeah) I’m riding with that Glock tonight.”⁵³ SahBabii’s “Pull Up wit ah Stick” and “Tonight” function as an expression

⁵¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 74.

⁵² Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915.

⁵³ WORLDSTARHIPHOP, “Sahbabii ‘Pull up Wit Ah Stick’ Feat. Loso Loaded (WSHH Exclusive),” 1:10-1:16; and SahBabii, “Sahbabii - Tonight,” 0:45-0:51.

of Afropessimism-surreal, a state of Black living-unliving; the haunting, sensual nature in which he narrates death is engendered in an expression of Black male sexuality and violence that feels contradictory and misogynistic, but exists in Black Southern spaces as alchemizing ritual of Black female flesh where Black femmes free their flesh in movement and are showered with money and erotic admiration. Twerking is a sacred, erotic act that catalyzes knowledge-making. In the name of the Lorde, this sacral-creative labor (the erotic) “functions as the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.”⁵⁴

The distinction between the non-Human and dehumanization refers to the requirement of white proximity and non-Blackness to have protection in this hegemonic state. These Afrosurrealist, yet white Chaucerian social matrices, are governed by memories as being held of human property and eternal social death; it is no coincidence that the subject of oppression may aspire to perform racial class structures to be granted economic power. Perhaps, including Trap music in the Afrosurrealist tradition has the ability to challenge white essentialist binary epistemology in Black music rather than reinforcing Black male trauma (depression, loneliness, police brutality, incarceration, sexual violence, etc.) as naturalized properties to signify as Black Man. The lack of advantages that white patriarchy has to offer to the intimate lives of Black men is a testament to not only the lack of integrity of gender in the social lives of Black people but an affirmation of bell hooks’ teachings and meditations on the effects of white patriarchal culture on men: “The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.”⁵⁵ Music and art exists as the only outlet for Black men to meaningfully express and articulate emotions, while confined in some regard, as the entry into subjectivity relies on misogynistic, stabilizing Black feminine figures; its ability to convey Black men’s subconscious interiority is a representation of Black literacy and collective thought that ought to be valued rather than problematized under the rules of white epistemology’s criteria of good/bad. Art is a medium that is most distant from the white time matrix and has the ability to rupture white epistemologies that otherwise would go unchallenged in white hegemonic societies. Without the performance of white gender, Black art and Black feminist world-building gives *all* Black folks the space to exist in a way that affirms their bodies and souls as sacred. We return to the Black feminist literacies, intellectual genealogies, and world-building as the origin to map and dream our freedom.

⁵⁴ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic.”

⁵⁵ hooks, *The Will to Change*, 66.

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Multispecies Kinship in Fabrizio Terranova’s *Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*

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Fabrizio Terranova’s 2016 documentary *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* provides a non-traditional portrait of Donna Haraway’s life and contributions to feminist scholarship.⁵⁶ Terranova avoids a conventional, biographical style of documentary and incorporates a variety of eccentric audiovisual techniques. The techniques range from the use of a green screen to place Haraway underwater with jellyfish to cyborgian art superimposed atop the natural landscape of the Los Padres Forest surrounding her home, creating a work that in both style and content reflects many of the ideas Haraway is known for — dissolving binary distinctions between human/non-human animal, organism/machine, and physical/nonphysical, questioning essentialist logic, and multispecies kinship. The presentation of various contact zones between humans and non-human animals in the film is particularly notable, ultimately destabilizing a human/ non-human animal hierarchy and urging viewers to pay attention to the inevitability of non-human animal involvement in the process of becoming(-with). The inclusion of bird-song, fragments of Donna’s relationship with her dog across time, and tentacular invertebrates through various rhetorical strategies reflect Haraway’s view of the often taken-for-granted, reciprocal relationship between humans and companion species, pushing us to embrace multispecies kinships with companion species to work toward “earthly survival.”

Haraway borrows the concept of contact zones from postcolonial scholar Mary Pratt and extends it to conceptualize the spaces and practices in which humans interact with the non-human others she deems “companion species.”⁵⁷ In contact zones, “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other (...) often within radically asymmetrical relations of power,” and companion species are “ordinary beings-in-encounter in the house, lab, field, zoo, park, truck, office, prison, ranch, arena, village, human hospital, forest, slaughterhouse, estuary, vet clinic, lake, stadium, barn, wildlife preserve, farm, ocean canyon, city streets, factory, and more.”⁵⁸ The first shot of the film is a wide view of the redwoods

⁵⁶ *Donna Haraway*, dir. Fabrizio Terranova.

⁵⁷ Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.”

⁵⁸ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 216 & 5.

surrounding Haraway's home which includes the diegetic song of the birds that live amongst them, subtly alerting the viewer of the birds' presence and situating Donna's home as a contact zone in which both Haraway and the birds are affected by each other's presence, albeit asymmetrically. Bird-song continues anywhere the redwoods are present, including for the close-shots of Haraway sharing her musings directly, for example, when she springs into a story about the origin of orthodontics and her impetus for learning about the subject. In an interview in 2019, she shared, "I have a habitat zone for song – the migration routes of the songbirds – the songbirds have me."⁵⁹ The choice to leave purely diegetic sound throughout Haraway's dialogue bolsters the idea that for Haraway, the process of knowledge production and inquiry is inseparable from the environment in which the process occurs, which includes the specific non-human critters who are either present or whose livelihoods are at stake in the knowledge-making process.

Sitting in the bed of my dorm room, my miniature projector spread the film across the blank wall in front of me. Seconds after the film began, my emotional support cat and companion, Orlando, woke from his slumber and jumped up beside me in bed. His eyes were glued to the projection, his ears wiggled, and he made a noise distinct from his usual "meows" in response to the bird song. Feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis argues in her seminal (ovular) work "Rethinking Women's Cinema" that the effect of a film is constituted at least in part through the way it interacts with its viewer(s)/ audience/ "spectators" and that the subject positions of a film's spectators can never be fully imagined or predicted.⁶⁰ De Lauretis' perspective urges paying attention to the question of "who and what is the film for?" in analyzing its effects, and it wouldn't be possible to determine the film's impact without acknowledging the fact that it drew the attention of my cat, thus shaping the way I viewed and interpreted the film. Given my conditioning into an ocular and anthropocentric mindset, I likely wouldn't have noticed the birdsong in the audio if it weren't for Orlando's response. Terranova's work not only reflects the imperative of multispecies kinship through its style and content but elicits a response from non-human critters not typically prioritized in targets for viewership and therefore invokes their participation in the knowledge-making process that comes from engagement with the film.

According to Haraway, multispecies kinship requires learning to notice and respond to non-human others, which Orlando's response aided me in doing. She writes, "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention."⁶¹ Bird-song is present throughout the majority of the film, but only in the background until it was explicitly pointed out 28 minutes into the film through a clip of Rusten, Donna's partner's radio show *California Bird*

⁵⁹ "Donna Haraway and the 'Chthulu' Way of Life," interview by *Le Monde*.

⁶⁰ de Lauretis, "RETHINKING WOMEN'S CINEMA."

⁶¹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

Talk, demanding the viewers’ attention. The clip of Rusten’s show features two different bird songs, indistinguishable until they are slowed down and heard from the perspective of the way birds’ ears receive sound. Privileging the bird’s method of hearing by slowing down the sound deprives human sensory modalities and humans’ role in knowledge production. Language is used as evidence under the Western humanist tradition to promote human exceptionalism but as Haraway writes in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, “language, tool use, social behavior, mental events—nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal.”⁶² By intentionally drawing attention to the language, or the “talk” of the birds, Rusten, and Terranova by way of including Rusten’s show in the film, reject a binary and hierarchical distinction between humans and birds and demand the “response” required for multispecies kinship.

A more overt example of multispecies kinship in Terranova’s work is evidenced through his choice to highlight Haraway’s relationship with Cayenne Pepper, her Australian Shepherd dog, who has played a central role in Haraway’s theorizing during their 10 years together. Terranova includes footage of Cayenne at various stages of her life, including a photo of her as a puppy, found footage of her and Haraway together at an agility competition, and unstaged shots of her and Haraway interacting in the present day. Footage of the agility competition takes up a hefty three minutes and features Cayenne navigating three different courses with Haraway, with varying levels of success.⁶³ For the third course, the footage is slowed down to provide a closer look at the inter/ “intra-actions” occurring in the contact zone between the two.⁶⁴ The relationship between Haraway and Cayenne reflected in the footage aligns with feminist and decolonial scholar Julietta Singh’s notion of humanimal bonds, which she defines as a bond between human and non-human animal in which neither party can simply stand as conceptual unities, rather, they are specific beings that share a relationality founded on individual and collective needs, and what they each can and are willing to sacrifice.⁶⁵ In the footage, we see that both parties rely on each other to navigate the course; they simultaneously act in unison but as distinct agential entities. The photograph of Cayenne as a puppy comes later among a montage of photographs of Donna Haraway’s loved ones, including her mother, father, and Rusten, all “kin” to Haraway, which she defines as “those sorts of beings that have claims to each other.”⁶⁶ The montage style of photo presentation puts Cayenne’s history and role in Haraway’s life at the same level of significance as Haraway’s human family.

Cayenne and Haraway’s relationship, characterized as humananimality and kinship, is also presented through unstaged inter/intra-actions at the time of

⁶² Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 10.

⁶³ *Donna Haraway*, dir. Terranova, 15:39–18:45

⁶⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁶⁵ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

⁶⁶ “Donna Haraway and the ‘Chthulu’ Way of Life.”

filming. As Haraway explains the significance of the Navajo woven basket on her desk, Cayenne barks demanding Haraway's attention, ultimately leading Haraway to reflect on the "intimacy of inheritance" and the productivity of "interruption." Haraway comments that she and Cayenne are both white, "not as a color but as an apparatus."⁶⁷ Considering Haraway is a descendant of colonizers of Turtle Island and Cayenne is a descendant of sheep herders on conquest ranches, their histories are intimately connected to Haraway's current, wrongful possession of the Navajo basket. This comment relates to a view expressed in her *Companion Species Manifesto* that to consider non-human animals companion species requires recognizing their historicity and their impurity. Non-human animals are not innocent, docile, or "blank" beings for us to project our feelings and desires. Like humans, they are rooted in a web of histories and technologies that are worth paying attention to. As an example of non-human animals' historical impurity, Haraway writes, "Before cyborg warfare, trained dogs were among the best intelligent weapons systems."⁶⁸ The unstaged intra-action between Haraway and Cayenne also leads to insight into the process of aging and the obligation of kin to one another, as Haraway feels obligated to accompany Cayenne through a process of aging that although on a different timeline, is not unlike Haraway's own. Leaving in clips of Haraway tending to her provides a real-time example of what it means to tend to and accompany companion species as kin.

Another key aspect of Haraway's theorizing relevant to cultivating multispecies kinship is the breakdown between physical and non-physical; the non-physical is still material and not all contact zones are physical places. Terranova incorporates tentacular invertebrates through the use of a stuffed animal prop, a green screen, and underwater footage to allude to Haraway's notion of the chthulucene and indicate our interdependence with, and the necessity of being in kin, with even the non-human animals not among our physical presence. The chthulucene, as opposed to Anthropocene, is "made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake." Additionally, the chthulucene "does not round off; its contact zones are ubiquitous and continuously spin out loopy tendrils (...) tentacularity is symchthonic."⁶⁹ The octopus stuffed animal prop is present throughout most of Haraway's direct musings and is presumably entangled with the other artifacts on her desk selected to be showcased. Toward the end of the film, as Haraway talks about her Catholic upbringing, and the stakes of living and dying on a damaged planet, a jellyfish suddenly appears behind her with mystical audio, slowly swimming out of frame but leaving behind many long tentacles. Soon, the film transitions to almost 3 minutes of underwater footage of the jellyfish.⁷⁰ The inclusion of invertebrates

⁶⁷ Donna Haraway, dir. Terranova.

⁶⁸ Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*, 105.

⁶⁹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.

⁷⁰ Donna Haraway, dir. Terranova, 46:00–48:44.

provides a visual representation of the structure of the chthulucene while also highlighting a non-human animal Haraway sees herself as kin with and responsible to, given the “loopy” and “symchtonic” nature of its contact zones. It is rare to come into contact with tentacular invertebrates physically, but their presence is still impactful, and their consideration is important given how human action or inaction might affect their livelihood.

Through various kinds of contact with non-human animals throughout the film, namely bird-song, fragments of Donna’s relationship with her dog across time, and sea invertebrates vis-a-vis eccentric stylistic strategies, Terranova asserts Haraway’s view that a multispecies kinship with companion species is key to earthly survival and that humans are not a superior species. Non-human animals shape human practices as much as humans have shaped non-human animals and learning to pay attention and respond to companion species is a part of our obligation as human beings on a shared planet. The boundary between humans and non-human animals is not as distinct as a culture of human exceptionalism leads us to believe. Terranova’s work ultimately serves as a call to viewers to recognize the critical role of companion species, which include but are not limited to the companion animals we come into contact with the most like dogs and cats, in shaping who we are and what we might become.

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Landmarks: “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” and *A Room of One’s Own Applied*

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I've always relied on landmarks for direction, never able to trust my internal compass. The mountains are to the west, the river is to the east, school is to the north, home is to the south. My landmarks tell me which direction to walk if I'm lost on a hike, or how to accurately sketch a map. My landmarks show me what is right and what is wrong.

In “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” Iris Marion Young discusses the role of the body. Girls exist in limited space. When a boy throws a ball, he will swing his arm back and forth, taking advantage of his full range of motion.⁷¹ A girl will freeze above the elbow.⁷² When a boy swings a bat he will approach the ball where it is, fighting its existence with his own; a girl will react to the ball's position, allowing its existence to dictate her own.⁷³ When the boys and I goof off in class they laugh freely with no regard for potential punishment or harm; I keep an eye on the teacher and other students, trying to gauge when their tolerance will run out. My uncertainty in direction has never been limited to the map. I stumble on my words and look to my neighbor for reassurance. I wear a new shirt and look to the stranger on the street for approval. New landmarks develop. The girl is embarrassed when we are playing catch with the older boy and I can't catch his throw—I stop trying to join the game. My math teacher tells me I look sad, I should smile more—I practice turning the corners of my mouth up as I walk down the hallway. At first I did not know many things; I knew what it meant to be lost, but not what it took to recenter. My landmarks helped me learn.

Lesson: I exist primarily as an object; my existence is determined by my objectification.

⁷¹ Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

⁷² Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

⁷³ Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

My landmarks taught me my body was a case I must stay within if I hoped to succeed. I exist as subject and object. I stand at the whim of the men around me. The boys around me gain an inordinate amount of power over my choices without their knowing. I base my decisions on how I think the boys around me will feel, what they will think of me. Life inside my body is one of separation. My body is a chair and I sit atop it waiting for someone to come ask me to move, to get out of their spot. I live my body as a thing separate from myself; I live my body as a worldly object—like my kitchen table or a loaf of bread.⁷⁴

I run up a hill with hundreds of other pairs of shoes. My pink feet spray mud on the legs next to me and they retaliate in kind. My body hurts and cannot keep up with the people around me, but I tell myself to keep running. I don't care much about finishing the race quickly, but I cannot let these people see me fail. My perception is more important than my comfort. I lose my footing, and I feel eyes turn towards me as I fall; I feel myself being seen in my failure, but no one stops. I am left alone with my worst enemy in the dirt. I go shopping and think I would like that shirt, but my body will not. I try on a dress and am overpowered. Like oil and water my body rejects the fall of the fabric as I watch from the corner. Eventually I grow tired of being eaten alive, of losing this war, and I walk to the mirror. The dress stops fighting my body and starts fighting me. The tension in my existence begins to soften, but instead of extending wholly into subject, I sink further into object. I know what I want, but I am still lost on how to get there. I am stuck three feet off the ground on a climb, but I want to keep trying; I think I can get past it. My friend takes more slack from the rope and with it pulls me up the wall, out of the sticky section. I decide that must be what I really want, and I stay with my body. I begin apologizing to my belayers for taking up their time, taking up their strength. My body is an object for me to exist around, exist within.

*Lesson: my existence is determined by how I am perceived; I am controlled by my position in space.*⁷⁵

Iris Marion Young writes that women's lived space is enclosed, confined.⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf writes that a woman needs a room of her own.⁷⁷ Both writers agree that women experience their lives based on how they are positioned in the world. Girls learn not to use the whole physical space available to them, to shrink themselves.⁷⁸ Women learn that if they write, they must write only letters, because they can write letters in the company of men, because letters will not interfere with

⁷⁴ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 148

⁷⁵ Young, "Throwing like a Girl."

⁷⁶ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

⁷⁸ Young, "Throwing like a Girl."

their responsibilities.⁷⁹ The space a woman occupies revolves around those nearby and her position to them.

When I write an essay, I sit in a coffee shop. People walk in and out; people talk loudly; people occupy then vacate the seats next to me. If I sit at the bar, my elbows make a box, and my papers don't cross its borders. If I'm alone at a table, I keep an eye over my shoulder in case someone can't get past. I need to be sat near others, need ambient noise to distract me from my task. I need my existence to be dictated by my position in a collective, so that my work can remain separate from myself. If I'm not alone while doing my work, I can't take it too seriously, people can't think that I do. If I am not alone while doing my work, my existence cannot be threatened by a change in my position.

Virginia Woolf says a book adapts to the author's body.⁸⁰ Men's writing evokes freedom of the mind, freedom of the author—it is direct and free of interruptions, a luxury women writers can never afford. Someone's writing, someone's work, the output of someone's efforts are manifestations of their existence. Someone's writing, someone's work, the output of someone's efforts are manifestations of their body. If a woman's existence is determined by her position, so too is her work. A woman's work can only go so far when she, and it, is trapped within how she is positioned, how she is perceived.

In music class as a kid, we played the statue game. One person would stand in the middle of the room and the other students would instruct them on how to move their limbs. The boys would tell us to jump, to throw our arms over our heads, to stand on one leg with the other kicked out in front of us. The girls would tell us to tilt our head to the left, to the right, to curl in a ball on the floor. Our permitted space depended on what the boys told us it was, and we couldn't think beyond their boundaries. Later, in English class we were given the option to read our work aloud. The boys would read confidently and laugh at their mistakes; the girls would apologize before they had even begun speaking. I sat quietly and watched the boys whisper and joke around while the girls spoke, then sit attentively and cheer for their friend when he had finished. I wrote quickly but stayed silent when the teacher asked for volunteers. I learned whatever I wrote would always be trapped within how the boys perceived me, within the positions they prescribed to me. I learned the boundaries for my existence as I learned the boundaries for my body. I was forced into positions I didn't want to occupy but didn't know how to break out of, afraid of what might happen if I did. A woman needs a room of her own to escape her family, to escape her responsibilities. A woman needs a room of her own to escape her interruptions.⁸¹ When a man writes, there is a sense of physical freedom and well-being communicated by his writing; he is, and always has been,

⁷⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 40.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 59.

⁸¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 59.

able to stretch himself whichever way he should like.⁸² He needs no room of his own because he has never been without one. His existence is not determined by his experiences as positioned in space.⁸³ He does not need to concern himself with how he is perceived. For a woman to have a room of her own, she must be able to experience her existence outside of how she is positioned and perceived.

Lesson: my body is my enemy.

When we were seven years old Rachel took the apple I was eating from my hand and threw it in the open dumpster. Jesse wouldn't jump in—he needed incentive. But it was my apple, and I wasn't done with it, so I jumped in after him. Later that month, I backflipped off Jesse's broken trampoline but didn't stop jumping until it collapsed a year later. When I was five, I fought the boys at recess with invisible lightsabers and chased them down until I won. The summer I turned ten, my friend told me the creek had piranhas in it, maybe alligators too. I knew this was a lie but pulled back from the edge and have stayed out of the water since. The boys encouraged me to squirt water at our deskmate, but the teacher sat me between them to bring order to their chaos, and I didn't want to fail at my one job. By twelve, my recess was occupied with sitting with my knees closed at the picnic table and avoiding the kids playing foursquare. The boys I used to be friends with abandoned me in my small responsibility for their own freedom and space. My landmarks were telling me to stay put, stay quiet, stay small, and I didn't want to get lost.

At lunch I ate pistachios, not wanting to wait in line for a meal and make other people's wait longer with my presence. I took the stairs one at a time so people could pass me easily, so I wouldn't slip and bruise my shin. I watched the rambunctious boys around me grow into over-confident but self-assured men and the confident girls shrink into cautious and soft-spoken women. I began mimicking those around me. I raised my voice and tried to take big steps with the boys but could never quite match their volume or the freedom of their limbs. Around the girls, talk flowed freely, but we were aware of being overheard or disturbing; the couches were full of girls sitting in their designated spot, not crossing into anyone else's space, or blocking any space from someone who might need it more. Where men move through the world taking up space with ease and assurance, women hesitate to put themselves wholly into movement out of fear that their bodies will fail them.⁸⁴ My comportment revolved around self-consciousness and timidity of the body.

⁸² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 75.

⁸³ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁴ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 144.

My landmarks tell me not to throw my entire self into something, to move through the world silently.⁸⁵ I learn my body can be used against me if I don't keep it contained. I wear a tank top and my friends warn me people will look at my chest; I wear shorts and yank at their hem when I sit down to contain my thighs as much as I can. The girl and I chat in class, but she is only friends with pretty people. The boy watches me climb and tells me I move well, then turns the music up when I try to start conversation on the way home. My body and myself cannot coexist. My body will always be my greatest threat.

Lesson: women love men, men love women; I am a woman which means I love men.

Growing up I did not know the difference between platonic and romantic love. Someone said my best friend had a crush on me, and I figured that must be how I feel too. I did not want to leave him alone in his feelings—even if I did not know what they really meant. As I got older, the difference became clearer. My friend excitedly left me alone at the dance when the boy asked her to. My classmates were caught beneath the bleachers. Still I felt uncertain, lost in the presumptive gazes when the boy and I spoke in the cafeteria. My friend gave her crush a ride home from school and told me every detail the next day. I decided it was in my best interest to match her energy and selected a family friend I saw once a year for whom I could feign feelings. If I couldn't escape the pressure of my friendships with men, I could at least control it. I began to position myself in terms of men as much as my peers were. When I first learned men were not my only option, the lessons I had learned began to crumble around me.

Lesson: I am a woman which means I love men. Truth: my life is not dictated by my relation to men.

When I first learned what it meant to be queer, I had already learned to be cautious around men. I had already learned the position I was meant to fulfill in the world. I had already learned my body was my enemy. The first girl I fell for did not know my name. She was the year above me in school and did not make herself smaller when she took books from her locker. I interviewed her for the yearbook and was embarrassed by how much more space she occupied, by the extent to which I had let myself shrink. My crush develops into a comparison, and I decide I must grow to where she is. I hate that I am still only allowed space by my romantic prospects, but I practice getting larger anyways. She graduates and I forget about her for months at a time. By then, occupying all the space I have access to has become a habit. I stop shrinking myself around the boys because I do not need them anymore. I dictate my own space.

⁸⁵ Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 146.

Lesson: I exist primarily as an object. Truth: I am a subject more than anything else.

The war between myself and my body lessens, and I start to experience my existence outside of how I was positioned in space.⁸⁶ I start to experience my existence outside of men, outside of anyone but me. The separation between myself and my body gives way to connection and solitude. I stand from the corner and re-enter my body. When I decide to finish a climb, I finish; when I decide to stop climbing, I stop. The space I occupy expands to fit my body, and my comportment transitions into one of comfort and ease.

Lesson: I am controlled by my position in space.⁸⁷ Truth: I exist outside of my perception.⁸⁸

This newfound wholeness cannot protect me completely from the reality of my position. I eat dinner at a friend's house and don't remove my coat because I can feel the eyes on me even with everything covered. His roommate makes a joke about me liking anal sex and later, when I say it made me uncomfortable, he thanks me for not saying anything at the time because his ex always did—that's part of the reason they broke up. I start laughing in public and get side-eyed. I start talking in class and get called loud; I have my points repeated back to me like new ideas. I find a room of my own but am unable to escape the knocks on the door. I wear a short skirt one day and a baggy sweater the next. I am not consumed by either choice. I stop considering the impact of how I am perceived and instead consider what I desire. The knocks on the door do not stop, but they do not cross the threshold. The room is not totally private, but it is my own.

Lesson: my body is my enemy. Truth: I am my body, my body is me; I am not a threat.

When I was eight years old, I fell off my bicycle and ripped a layer of skin from my arm. I cried for hours, not out of pain but out of surprise that I could be taken apart. My body was outside of my control. I avoided my bike for months. At 13, I took a five-day bike trip and fell off at least twice a day. When I came down a hill too quickly and flipped over my handlebars, the teacher complimented me on my ability to fall—she said I took it well despite the resulting bruises. My body was still being dismantled, but at least I was good at it. I started treating my body as a competitor. I fell off the rock and hit the wall. My body was hurt but my mind was

⁸⁶ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁷ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁸ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

not. I skipped a meal. My body was hungry, but my mind felt fine. Eventually I fall enough times my ego bruises as well as my hip. Eventually I'm hungry enough that my mind starts to lag as much as my body. My competition with my body is a competition with myself, and I've bested nobody but my own potential. The space I occupy is the space occupied by my body and vice versa.

I start to boulder. I abandon ropes with belayers attached and begin relying solely on myself. Now when I fall, I hit the ground, but I am the one falling. My bruises are not separate from one another but affect all parts of my being. I start to eat. A meal skipped is no longer a battle won but an opportunity lost. I spill coffee on my shirt. No one sees my mistake, but it is still a mistake made. I touch my stomach, and it belongs to me. My body is not a threat.

I discover a room of my own, and my landmarks begin to change again. The river is to the north, school is to the west. I walk down the street, and I focus on where I am stepping, not on what the people I pass might be thinking. I let my mouth sit where it falls, even when the store clerk asks if I am okay. I still don't join the sport, but I allow myself to watch from the sidelines. Where I once looked to those around me as guideposts, resigning my life to that lived by them, I now live it on my own. My existence is not determined by how I am positioned by others and instead by how I position myself.

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On Becoming a Woman: A Body Horror Examination of *Dance Nation*

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That's what I've got inside this tiny fucking body of mine and I don't have to deny it I don't have to disown it I don't have to be ashamed of it I can shout it from the rooftops because you are all my motherfucking BITCH.⁸⁹

People react viscerally to puberty long after its claws retreat from their bodies. This makes sense. Puberty is merciless, dragging your body to hell in a myriad of uncontrollable and unwanted physical changes then throwing it back again; crumpled and forever altered. Puberty is widely regarded as one of the most psychologically and physically challenging periods in a young person's life, so much so that there is an entire genre of literature dedicated to preparing young people for the storm of hail and fire looming on the horizon.

Despite doomsday-level preparation and groans from elder family members as they remember their own middle school days, this time is also culturally celebrated, creating a strange double-bind of enduring bodily terror while also being expected to celebrate it. When girls leak blood unwillingly from their bodies, they are told they are becoming a woman. The path to womanhood is paved with blood. The path to womanhood means losing your contained sense of self. Girlhood ends in a tangle of pain and change rendered upon agentless flesh. It is the feral rage of being ripped out of yourself and molded into a gendered object. In *Dance Nation* by Clare Barron, a play that is half coming-of-age narrative and half horror film, the young protagonists undergo a similarly triumphant and torturous loss of girlhood.

The darker recesses of the human body's potential, that of blood and seeping carnage, have long been associated with the feminine; and women themselves find dark catharsis in the genre of body horror. The concept of the monstrous feminine has been studied extensively in fields of gender studies, media studies, and psychoanalysis, all seeking to explain why the gendered experience can be portrayed so aptly through horror. The genre of body horror is designed to instill disgust as the sanctity of the body is violated before an audience's wide eyes: skin

⁸⁹ Barron, *Dance Nation*.

stretches, splits, limbs gnarl past recognition, and humanity is shattered. Despite the carnage of body horror women report finding the genre to be a subversion of the hegemonic femininity society expects.

Internet searches using the words women, feminism, and body horror generate countless articles and personal essays, reflecting a deep feminine identification with horror. Body horror movies portray lost human dignity and a lack of control over one's own flesh, which resonates with women in the audience who experience the same subjugations, albeit to a lesser degree, during everyday life in a patriarchal society. This identification means that "rather than being characteristically repulsed (...) women turn to horror for the way it releases them from expected reactions to what is imposed," providing violent catharsis that is not attainable in reality.⁹⁰ In this paper I will examine *Dance Nation* by Clare Barron as a work of feminist body horror alongside two films in the same genre, arguing through media sources and both personal and academic testimonies, that grotesque body horror represents the pain of lost childhood uncontrollably transforming into womanhood, but also that embracing the monstrous body can be a source of catharsis, reclaiming savage feminine power.

Dance Nation is a coming-of-age play that dissects the tension between girlhood and womanhood with the savagery of a rusty knife; its messages and violence echo other pieces of gruesome gendered body horror like *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *Hatching* (2022). I will use the two aforementioned films to underline how *Dance Nation* uses body horror tropes to portray that "on the cusp of teenagerdom, a girl is thrust into an awareness of her body as witnessed by others, becoming something other to herself" in a way that is simultaneously terrifying, alienating, and generative of potential power.⁹¹ *Dance Nation* and *Hatching* pair beautifully to paint a picture of girlhood pain. *Hatching*, the story of a young ballerina struggling with repressed anger and an image obsessed mother, holds a mirror up to the most tragic, desperate, terrified, lonely experiences of the girls in *Dance Nation* as they reckon with who they're becoming and what they want. *Jennifer's Body*, on the other hand, is an outwardly focused show of savagery that can be used to read *Dance Nation's* body horror as generative of womanly power as they advance life stages, similarly to Jennifer herself feeding her confidence with the blood of teenage boys. Though the story of *Dance Nation* is tame, it follows the practices and competitions of a preteen dance team and the heart of the play radiates a savagery described by the author as "pagan feral-ness and ferocity."⁹²

Until nearly 30 pages into *Dance Nation*, the play feels akin to typical coming of age narratives, but when the dancers begin to whisper-chant the word "pussy" during a rehearsal, the descent into dark feminine themes of body begins; a mere precursor to later chants and carnage. Though this chant is subtle compared to

⁹⁰ Wallace, *Why Women Watch Horror*.

⁹¹ Harkins-Cross, "Embrace Your Monstrous Flesh."

⁹² Barron, *Dance Nation*, 23.

what is to come, it marks the beginning of their “puberty phase” and is the first time attention is drawn to intimate, physical, or visceral topics in a non-childish way. Even the way the word “pussy” is presented, in hushed reverent whispers while the characters continue to dance like nothing has changed, evokes cultish fascination with their changing bodies. The scene begins with individual characters whispering the word between Amina’s dance instructions but builds until there is a chorus of “ASHLEE/CONNIE/MAEVE/SOFIA/LUKE (whispering) Pusssyyyyy.”⁹³ Amina, calling out instructions to her peers, remains alienated from the group and focuses instead on her form. This scene, though not body horror in its own right, deserves inclusion here because it utilizes the horror trope of gradual degeneration. It primes the audience, sets one on edge, and builds excitement for what is to come.

In the scene following the chant, another teammate named Zuzu sitting alone in the bathroom, plagued with fear of failure and all-consuming desire to overcome always being second-best, begins to undergo physical changes reflecting her mental state. As she sits in the stall alone, “somehow, some way she's grown little sharp teeth,” her very bones transforming to reflect the feral desire within her.⁹⁴ Unable to resist expressing the violence within, and since she is not able to exert her real desires to dazzle the world, Zuzu “bites her forearm hard, Harder. Blood spurts out. She chews off a chunk of her arm.”⁹⁵ Committing an act of consumption is common in body horror immediately following the first physical transformation. In *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer enters her friend’s kitchen and—unsure of what she needs but desperate for blood—consumes a whole raw chicken while “smiling with blood tinged teeth.”⁹⁶ She giggles and breathes heavily as she does so, reveling in a taboo new power but entirely unsure what to do with it. Both of these scenes occur early in their respective works, which further highlight their themes of puberty. Both scenes present the beginning of transformation as confusing to the insatiable victim and portray the characters as having unfulfilled desires motivating violent consumptive actions. Fangs, and oral consumption, are emblematic of the character’s disoriented, destructive, involuntary, and isolated experience, exemplified by Zuzu’s anxiety and bodily insecurity.

The play then turns from overwhelming uncontrollable primal emotion towards a display of equally savage but more confident transformation during Ashlee’s gripping three page monologue. Ashlee exalts her future self, declaring all of the things she will do and the power she will have as “her voice becomes the voice of some vengeful, ancient, pagan god.”⁹⁷ Her eyes become red, her fangs lengthen, and instead of floundering in consumptive self destruction like Zuzu, Ashlee vows to unleash her transformation on the world and declares that “[she]

⁹³ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 27.

⁹⁴ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 28.

⁹⁵ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 30.

⁹⁶ *Jennifer’s Body*, 23:47.

⁹⁷ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 31.

will make you [her] bitch.”⁹⁸ This monologue seethes with aggression and sexual self-confidence as Ashlee, compelled by involuntary transformation, embraces the changes like a friend.

As darkness unfurls inside Jennifer’s body, she finds herself desirable and godlike, even calling herself a god, just as does Ashley when she cries that “[she] is your God, [she] is the second coming.”⁹⁹ One of these self sexualized assertions of feminine power comes from a young woman feeling the magnitude of the woman she is growing into, and the other comes from demonic transformation, but they are of an ilk. This is because gendered body horror exists as simultaneous pain and monstrous power. Both have lost their original “innocent” childhood selves but are granted chaotic feminine savagery. Also, both of them are hostile and subjugating towards men while they are in control of this monstrous power: Ashley declaring men will worship at her feet, and Jennifer ripping them limb from limb to consume their organs.

Transformation can be feared, in the case of Zuzu, or revered, in the case of Ashlee, but it will morph regardless; growing into something that must be unleashed lest it fester torturously within. Halfway through *Dance Nation*, we see the team prepare to face an opponent for the first time and they gnash for blood. The girls in *Dance Nation* yell that they are monsters that are going to make their opponents lick the blood from the stage and scream together that they’re “your worst nightmares,” all while smearing menstrual blood on their faces like warpaint.¹⁰⁰ Though the term “monster” is traditionally pejorative, they claw back power by weaponizing it as a suit of armor, their raised discordant voices find agency in claiming monsterhood together.

Hatching’s exploration of monsterhood sits in contrast to this scene of *Dance Nation* because the central character Tinja, a young competitive ballerina, undergoes her terrors veritably alone. Tinja finds and incubates a strange egg in her closet, which emerges as a horrific avian creature somehow resembling herself. The creature, dubbed Alli, is loyal to Tinja as though she is its mother and savages those who cause Tinja pain. A thread between the two is that in *Dance Nation*, Barron utilizes language of horrific pregnancy in their declaration of anger, saying they’re going to “rip those babies from their wombs and dash them on the rocks.”¹⁰¹ That visceral phrase is deeply akin to the way Tinja incubated her doppelganger, feeding it on her anger and all of the dark desires she is forced to hide in daily life, creating a monster that knows only violence. Incubation and pregnancy themes in these films speak to lost childhood, uncontrollable transformation from within, and the unstoppable rush towards a point of no return. Puberty, pregnancy, and birth in general are themes lacking bodily control, deeply associated with feminine

⁹⁸ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 32.

⁹⁹ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 47.

¹⁰¹ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 50.

taboo, and their inclusion in both pieces firmly cements the works within the gendered body horror genre.

Both Alli’s existence and the dance team’s chant speak to the deepest and most savage desires burning inside young women during times of pubescent transformation, but they differ by either generating collective psychological motivation or causing isolated strife. Tinja and the dance team are competitive junior athletes, thus much of their violence centers around yearning for victory. Though the team cries that they’ll “cut their tongues out of their stupid fucking heads and then skull-fuck them where there tongue once was,” which is horrifically violent and sexual all at once, it is a safe voicing of such violence in the company of, and for the benefit of, their peers.¹⁰² This is a reclaiming of savage feminine power, generative instead of self-destructive—one that embraces monstrosity and sexualized violence instead of having it used against them.

Tinja and Alli, who are essentially two halves of the same tortured person, do not reclaim this power and chafe at their transformation, causing it to fester. When Alli physically maims a competitor to grant Tinja the competitor’s spot, something the *Dance Nation* team excitedly speculates about together, Tinja is so appalled that she desired this act of violence she tries to punish Alli by slapping herself, knowing the slaps will hurt Alli as well. But no matter how Tinja punishes her, Alli remains a loyal shadow and continues to care for Tinja the way she knows: by carrying out her darkest fantasies. Tinja grows more and more horrified at what lies within her, finally shoving Alli out her bedroom window in a desperate attempt to kill her own wishes alongside her doppelganger. Despite her best efforts, it was futile. Dark desires cannot be denied, bodily changes cannot be stopped, the flow of blood cannot be impeded, and Alli refused to die.

In order to reach the end of their transformation, the characters must undergo an ultimate disintegration of body and mind: any coherent human subject that existed before is shattered, and something else is formed from the scraps. When it comes to gendered body horror in particular, loss of subjecthood is both painful and generative of power because it is both a claiming of savage feminine power and a loss of any previous innocent self. It is the pain of lost childhood uncontrollably transforming into womanhood with no way to return. When the transformation is complete, something new remains—a broken wretch, desolate from the horrors within her own mind, or something else. Something feral and unholy and impure and powerful and joyous and furious. Poor Tinja, who could never embrace her monster, is killed by it at the end of *Hatching*. Alli weeps over Tinja’s broken body as they die together and drinks her pooling blood from the ground; crying all at once for Tinja’s unaccepted abyss within, for the mother figure who hurt it out of fear, and for the future they could have had.

Amina, who was always on the outside of her dance team, existing on the periphery of their community while undergoing the same changes, ends the play

¹⁰² Barron, *Dance Nation*, 47.

alone, centerstage, whirling, “vicious, stunning...she hisses... gnashes her fangs.”¹⁰³ She is “thankful for nothing (...) people won’t like [her] (...) [she] is alone.”¹⁰⁴ She is savage and unloved, but she is a winner. Her transformation stole from her any desire to be liked, to belong, to be soft or palatable. This made her incredible but it made her doomed to be alone, never again a girl who was conflicted between winning and sparing her friends’ feelings. The rest of the dance team is consumed by violence, becoming a clamoring throng sharing a single chant that they “wish [their] soul were as perfect as their [pussy].”¹⁰⁵ They embrace their dark feminine with open, bloody arms and lose all former humanity or self control, reveling in their bodies, crying again and again “I WISH MY SOUL WERE AS PERFECT AS MY PUSSY.”

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¹⁰³ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

¹⁰⁴ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

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