DIFFERENCE:
SEXUAL, CULTURAL AND UNIVERSAL

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ISSN 1535-5551 / ISBN 978-0-9845662-4-2
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As our title suggests, this issue investigates the intersections of sexual and cultural difference in order to examine and undermine the universality and hegemony of Western philosophical constructs. We do not posit difference as ontological, but rather as what tests the limit of ontologies. And yet, as one embarks on any cross-cultural analysis, one is always at risk of romanticizing or prioritizing cultural difference for the sake of difference itself, a problem which Rita Felski argues has allowed the word ‘difference’ to “become a magic word of theory and politics radiant with redemptive meanings” (1). Extending Rodolphe Gasché’s claim that “[i]t is tempting . . . to read the philosophical history of difference as exemplifying the progressive emancipation of difference from identity,” Felski argues that the contemporary exultation of ‘difference,’ as an ontology, may ignore the struggles of women in the world and the gap between laudable theoretical pursuits and pragmatic exigencies (1-2). As the conservative gains made in the United States and Europe in the last year bear witness, we would be remiss to pursue difference in and of itself without first analyzing and contesting the historically exulted status of whiteness and masculinity. We argue that there are two ways of avoiding such magic generalizations.

First and foremost, we need more in-depth and complex genealogical and philosophical analyses of the ways Western and
non-Western cultures view difference. To emphasize the difficulty of this task, this special issue of *theory@buffalo* briefly begins by defining the ancient Greek and classical Chinese understandings of difference, specifically by comparing Aristotle’s notion of difference with the Chinese symbol of *Yin-Yang*. The moment, however, that we attempt to engage in this important endeavor, we are immediately embroiled in the problems of translation and the limitations of interpreting other cultures with all the metaphysics, ideologies, and suppositions of one’s own. Thus, the second way of avoiding what Felski calls the “doxa of difference,” is to begin our cross-cultural encounters with a vigilant criticism of the assumptions one’s own culture brings to bear on the world. Without this, it becomes all too easy for the hegemonic status of Western notions of difference to run roughshod over non-Western concepts. In such encounters, we likewise risk ‘romanticizing’ both Western and non-Western cultures. Further, a narrow understanding of the influences of one’s own culture may lead one to present a synecdochal, if not homogenized, perspective. It is for this reason that we acknowledge that Aristotle does not comprise the Western view, though his philosophy has no doubt been instrumental in shaping it. Moreover, while the Chinese symbol of *Yin-Yang* is at the center of several classical Chinese philosophical systems, not least among them Daoism and Confucianism, it does not represent all Chinese or non-Western thought. To argue otherwise would ignore the resistances, oppositions, and differences that have historically contested hegemony within both Western and non-Western cultures. What is at stake in our analysis is a brief indication of the enormous difficulties that ‘cultural difference’ poses for our understanding of sexual difference and indeed of difference itself.

### ‘Difference’ in Western and Non-Western Contexts: The Cases of Aristotle and *Yin-Yang*

In one of Aristotle’s most contentious claims in the *Politics*, he argues that the deliberative faculty in women, which constitutes their difference from men, is “without authority” [ἄκυρον] (*Pol.*1260.a.12). As Karen Margrethe Nielsen has recently observed, there are two
mutually exclusive interpretations of this famous passage. There is the “convention” view, on the one hand, which reads this deliberative lack not as a product of psychological difference, but rather as the outcome of women’s subjugated position in society. Then, on the other, there is the “natural” view, which Nielsen defends, and which contends that women’s limited capacity for deliberation is the result of their nature \( \text{oùσία} \)—what is sometimes also translated as ‘substance’ or ‘essence’ (572-573). Indeed, the difference between a description that names women’s subordinated socio-political position and a prescription that reads that social subjection as the result of women’s lack of deliberative authority is no doubt a significant one. If psychoanalysis, the discourse of the twentieth century perhaps most responsible for de-naturalizing sexuality and sexual difference, has also been charged with crossing the line of description over into prescription, one can see how challenging it is to depart not only from one’s philosophical heritage, but from the essentialist status of sexual difference in Western metaphysics.

As one can see, Aristotle’s understanding of the difference between men and women is based upon his argument of the different constituents of souls by nature \( \text{oùσία} \). This understanding of difference, what Aristotle would call \( \text{διαφορά} \), was in fact one of two main notions of ‘difference’ available to him. In addition to \( \text{διαφορά} \), which insists on absolute difference, such as between men and women, there is also the notion of \( \text{ἐτερότης} \), which denotes difference in the context of relation: the distinction between various parts of a whole \((\text{Met.1004a})\). On the one hand then, we have a term \( \text{διαφορά} \) that marks an essentialist difference and, on the other, we have a term that subsumes relative difference \( \text{ἐτερότης} \) with respect to the whole. Since neither a cross-cultural dialogue nor an understanding of sexual difference is imaginable within essentialist or non-differential standpoints, Aristotle fails to offer the philosophical terminology needed to define ‘difference’ for our purposes. In other words, if \( \text{διαφορά} \) would seem to render cross-cultural communication impossible and \( \text{ἐτερότης} \) risks collapsing crucial sexual and cultural differences, neither term is satisfactory as a starting point. Moreover, the Aristotelian differentiation of human beings from animals by nature \( \text{oùσία} \), as the only animals
who have *logos*, further entrenches the West’s anthropocentric and logocentric inclinations towards sexual and cultural difference. Indeed, such problems are only compounded when we fail to look beyond Western philosophy for understanding what might be called the universal.

By contrast, while ‘difference’ in Chinese can find its corresponding meanings through the character *bie* [別], it is primarily expressed through the Chinese cultural symbol *Yin-Yang* [陰陽], which denotes difference not as essentialism, but as dynamism. Since the Western Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), *Yin* and *Yang*, respectively, have signified woman and man in order to represent the cosmos as that which is fecund with reproductive energy or *Dao* [道]. According to The Book of Changes [易經], “One *Yin* and one *Yang* are called *Dao*” (The Book of Changes, “Xi Ci I”[繫辭上], 5.1). ‘Sheng sheng’ [生生]—“to beget to beget”, which corresponds, but is not limited to this sexualized understanding of the cosmos—conveys the Chinese idea of changes [易] and further becomes the name of Chinese spirituality. Sexual difference in this context does not pertain only to the anthropocentric difference between men and women but also to the world: “Heaven-earth transform the myriad things to be exquisite in their intermingling influences. Man-woman transform the myriad things to living beings in their generative interplay” [天地絪縕, 萬物化醇, 男女構精, 萬物化生]. (The Book of Changes, “Xi Ci II”[繫辭下], 5.12). The micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos mutually construct sexual difference as the condition of humanity, giving the world life and life the world.

From the perspective of Daoism [道家], *Yin-Yang* analogizes the natural cyclical processes to the principle of life in all its dimensions. According to *Yin-Yang*, the living condition of the world, is constitutive of constant change: the alterations between the sunny and the shady, days and nights, seasons and stars show themselves to be the alterations between “the manifested” [徼] and “the mysterious” [妙] (Daodejing [道德經], 1.1). Aligned with this constant state of flux, *Yin-Yang* blurs the differentiations of seeming opposites and helps one to see the world not only from the seen but also the unseen, to approach the world not only from the manifested but also the mysterious. Indeed, the apparent opposites of which
Yin-Yang is comprised are actually in an interactive, interdependent, and complementary relationship. And yet, despite the fact that Yin-Yang represents the interconnectedness of opposites in the context of natural processes, the commentaries on The Book of Changes nevertheless indicate that woman (Yin) is inferior to man (Yang) in the context of political life. In other words, while the dynamism of Yin-Yang offers an alternative to what might be called static ‘essence’ in Aristotle’s thought, Yin-Yang’s resistance to the violent binarism of sexual difference falls short precisely where politics seems to begin.

Just as Yin-Yang in the commentaries on The Book of Changes evolves to take on a politicized understanding of sexual difference, Modern Chinese is also constantly evolving to account for hitherto unrecognized Western meanings. For example, while Chinese traditionally does not rely upon sex or gender to propose understandings of sexual difference, Modern Chinese adds ‘別’ (differentiation, difference) after ‘性’ (xing) to translate ‘sex’ into ‘differentiation of sex’ or ‘sexual difference.’ An even more pertinent example, Modern Chinese did not previously have a character to represent ‘gender,’ which derives from the Latin genus. To account for this new construct, Modern Chinese has recently added ‘social’ (she hui 社会) to translate ‘gender’ into ‘社会性别’ (she hui xing bie), literally meaning, ‘social sex’ or ‘social differentiation of sex.’ Noteworthy perhaps is the fact that these new combinations of characters leave an irreducible trace of the elements of classical Chinese thought while at the same time they distort and discard the original Chinese understandings of them.

The difficulties in translating these Western concepts and the confusions they produce reflect the Chinese language’s resistance to not only logocentrism more broadly, where names are sometimes viewed as mere indicators of a true world behind them, but sexual difference as well. This point is further illustrated through the Chinese characters of man 男 and woman 女. While they are each pictorially signified via specific forms of labor, farming and weaving respectively, the characters do not necessarily refer to biological bodies. Indeed, in Chinese neither 男 nor 女 is referred or attached to the other in the way, for example, the English word
‘woman’ is derived from the word ‘wife’ (wīfmon), which in turn is a modification of the root word ‘man’ (mon). The characters 男 and 女, moreover, do not presuppose their referent’s sexuality, as we find in the case of ‘woman’ (wīfmon), nor are the two forms of labor depicted intended to be prescriptive with regard to gender.

The difficulties encountered in this comparison between Aristotle, Yin-Yang, English, and Modern Chinese are hardly exhaustive, but they address the threat of the hegemonic status of Western metaphysics in its relation to non-Western thought as well as the resistance of the non-Western to this hegemony. Indeed, it is perhaps only through an examination of cultural difference that we can begin to understand the ways different cultures have codified sexual difference and subjugated women. And while Aristotle has had a pervasive effect on Western metaphysics and may be in part responsible for contemporary feminism’s ongoing battle with essentialist discourse, Western definitions and distinctions are not universal and have not succeeded in subsuming all non-Western thought. Such an assumption is only possible if we ignore the crucial cultural differences that distinguish the non-Western from the Western.

CONTEXTS AND TEXTS OF DIFFERENCE

While not every essay included in this issue addresses a specific cross-cultural comparison, each does bear witness to the immense project of criticizing one’s own culture and the assumptions and defense mechanisms different cultural beliefs and practices bring to bear on the world. As Jeremiah Bowen observes in his review of Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue at the end of this issue, “[i]t is necessary for philosophy to engage with its ‘Others,’ in order to engage with itself” (156). Such a mode of self-criticism may also shed light on why, especially in the West, there is a tendency to romanticize those cultures with which one is unfamiliar. Indeed, it is perhaps one’s longing for cross-cultural transit and the exhilaration of exploring new cultures that sheds light on the ways one’s own culture is prohibitive of desire. “Culture,” Lucie Cantin writes in After Lacan, “imposes rules and behaviors” and thus “dictates the
framework, the places, the times, and the objects from which it is acceptable to gain satisfaction” (40). In other words, at the same time that the Law of the Father prohibits one’s jouissance of the (m)Other, it also shifts our focus to other more acceptable satisfactions, which differ from culture to culture. And yet, if “[e]ach culture has ways to represent the impossibility of total jouissance,” as Cantin also observes, all inter-cultural investigations would seem to offer new false promises for achieving this complete enjoyment (42). Just as the psychoanalyst must account for the subject’s split between the unconscious and the ego narrative, so cultural analysts must account for the ways culture compensates for and justifies what Cantin calls “the impossibility of total jouissance.”

While psychoanalysis no doubt offers us as editors and many of the authors in this volume the vocabulary and concepts necessary to denounce racist, sexist, and transphobic discourses, it too has been criticized, perhaps most famously by Judith Butler, for its binary approach to sexual difference and a certain fetishization or romanticization of failure. Indeed, if Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan revolutionized sexual difference and sexuality in their turn away from biology and turn toward the field of signifiers, its various terms—not least among them, the phallus, the Law of the Father, and the jouissance of the Other—still have consequences in the ‘Symbolic,’ however ‘in the Real’ they may be. Indeed, despite Juliet Mitchell’s reminder that the Freudian discovery is descriptive and not prescriptive of human experience, the insights of psychoanalysis can also reassert patriarchal and chauvinist norms if we fail to adequately explain and update its metaphors and heuristic apparatuses. Just as psychoanalysis draws from the field of signifiers to contest and undermine the logic of culturally-specific prohibitions, so the essays in this volume attend rigorously to the stakes of terminological signification and distinction in the context of sexual, cultural, and what might be called universal differences.

That the concepts we use to describe sexual difference matter rings especially clear in Andrea Bachner’s essay, “Hymenologics: Membrane Politics and the (Un)Making of Difference,” in which Bachner traces the hymen as a site of sexual and cultural inscription
through readings of Rosario Castellanos, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), Jacques Derrida, and Yu Hua, among others. As a series of folds that simultaneously reaffirm and renegotiate the terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, the material plasticity of the hymen allows it to function as a particularly tractable and thus undecidable text. However, as Bachner shows through a reading of Derrida’s “The Double Session,” it is not only the undecidability of the hymen (intact/ruptured) that matters; if anything, the undecidability the hymen represents for Derrida is meaningless outside of a phallic economy that (physically and metaphorically) “polices female sexuality” (24). And yet, if the intact hymen has historically signified male power, the source of this power, as we see through Bachner’s reading of Rosario Castellanos’ short story “The Widower Román,” has very little to do with what might be called the physical hymen. Mirroring the capitalist program of planned obsolescence—where artificial hymens sold at a discount in bulk function as especially uncanny instances—the very idea of a hymen presupposes its rupture and the male pleasure and power for which its meanings would seem to exist.

Despite the hymen’s historical vulnerability to chauvinist discourses, the transformation of the material hymen into a figurative object need not be a source of fantasy or power for male subjects alone. This much is clear in a scene Bachner analyzes in Yu Hua’s novel Brothers, in which both the male character (Li) and female character (Lin Hong) experience immense sexual satisfaction when they copulate for the first time after Lin Hong undergoes “hymenal reconstructive surgery” (32). In a sexual encounter that seems at once to undermine and epitomize Lacan’s famous claim about the failure of the sexual relation, both Li and Lin Hong experience unprecedented and mutual orgasm, but only by assuming the fantasy positions of consummating newlyweds. Li’s attempt to recreate this experience of mutual bliss by forcing Lin Hong, as Bachner writes, “to repeated sexual intercourse in a rape-like scene,” (34) of course, tells a different story and one that underscores a distinction Henry Krips draws in his essay, “The Difference Love Makes,” between jouissance, on the one hand, and love, on the other.
Challenging Colette Soler’s view that man’s and woman’s modes of love stem from a difference in their modes of *jouissance*, Henry Krips argues that love, for Lacan, is categorically the same for man and woman alike, namely, as that which “compensates for the inadequacy of *jouissance*” (44). If the sexual relationship inevitably fails because man and woman are out of sync in their experience of *jouissance*, it is precisely here, Krips reminds us, where “love is put to the test” (Lacan qtd in Krips 51). Indeed, Krips’ essay helps us to see that it would be a mistake to name Li’s incessant sexual attempts as merely the product of his phallic *jouissance*. It is perhaps rather on the basis of Li’s disappointment with this phallic *jouissance* and concomitant demand for love—or, as Lacan puts it, a “desire-to-be-One”—that he attempts to re-live this moment of sexual glory. Lin Hong’s reconstructed hymen and Li’s rupture of it then might instead be read as gifts each gives to the other, what Krips would call the *objet a*. Moreover, because Krips reads this desiring relation, contra Todd McGowan and Joan Copjec, as one in which the sexual interest functions not as object but as ego-ideal, the acceptance of the gift, Krips argues, is ultimately intended to give the gift-giver the permission to love themselves in turn. It is also for this reason, Krips asserts, that the gift immediately “turns into shit,” at least to the extent that its sole purpose is receiving recognition from their ego-ideal (Lacan qtd in Krips 56).

Read this way, Li’s unrelenting attempts to recreate this idealized moment of rupture signal the inadequacy not only of his phallic *jouissance*, which is unavoidable, but of his experience of love as well. In other words, if sexual difference and *jouissance* are in the Real for Lacan and cannot be fully symbolized or registered in the Symbolic or Imaginary, the stakes of Krips’ essay concern the role love plays in colonizing social life—and culture—around the disappointment of *jouissance*. However pessimistic Lacan might be about the status of love as a mere compensation, it is their “desire-to-be-One,” which man and woman share and which gives their different experiences of *jouissance* a common, if not shared, language. Indeed, as Krips’ title implies, love does not make a difference in terms of the different modes of *jouissance* man and woman experience; it does, however, give man and woman a
common language to voice their inevitable frustration, namely, the language of love.

As Henry Krips argues that the *objet a* is a gift that immediately “turns into shit” in the giving process, Jennifer Friedlander examines the status of the abject—and literal excrement—in “Corporeal Difference: *Body Worlds* and *Cloaca*.” In differentiating the modes of realism each art installation performs as well as the forms of the “abject” in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, Friedlander argues that the two installations enact a surprising reversal: “the seemingly entertaining dung-producing machine, *Cloaca* functions more like the corpse does for Kristeva than the actual corpses used in *Body Worlds*.” Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s distinction, Friedlander reads *Body Worlds* as realist *mimesis*, which maintains the difference between subject and object, and *Cloaca* as realist *mimicry*, which “challenges the illusion of subjective unity.” Through analysis of cultural objects as diverse as *Seinfeld*’s George Costanza and Michael Frayn’s novel, *Headlong*, Friedlander demonstrates the necessity of examining the “‘minimal difference’ a subject has to itself” before we can fully understand the differences between subjects (68; 74).

To the extent that the formation of the ego coincides with the repression of the erotic maternal body in Kristeva, abjection names the failed expulsion of one’s own object-status. If, as Friedlander argues, *Cloaca* “confronts us with the recognition that you are the object,” Robert R. Shane’s essay, “Motherhood According to Martha Graham: Dancing Jocasta” contends that the mother is nevertheless still a subject. Indeed, if the mother has been objectified and expelled on the basis of her role in the narrative logic of abjection, Martha Graham’s ballet *Night Journey* re-imagines this scene from the mother’s perspective. Following the suicide and then, retrospectively, the courtship and sexual relationship between Jocasta and her son, *Night Journey* stages and takes as its sole object the otherwise off-stage scene of mother-son incest. By enacting this imagined sexual encounter through the gyrating body of a female dancer who is simultaneously lover and mother, Shane argues that *Night Journey* gives form to a “lost maternal subjectivity” (103), a *jouissance* we could not (previously) bear. Implicitly challenging what is sometimes viewed in Kristeva’s earlier writing as a division
between the Semiotic and Symbolic registers, the erotic maternal body, for Shane, is not simply a precondition for male subjectivity, a passageway or canal to language. Rather, the child’s experience with the mother is indelibly intertwined with, if not, constitutive, of language as such. And as Shane’s reading of Graham’s ballet helps us to see, there are few art forms more equipped to enact the “affect of language” than dance (103). Moreover, if the classical account of the Oedipus complex defines the repression of the erotic maternal body as a precondition for male subjectivity, then Shane insists that this repression is not the end of the mother’s story. As Shane also argues, the perceived obscenity of female sexuality lends support to the policing of women’s bodies. Therefore, one of the central failures of Western culture may be its apparent inability to recognize that the mother, or woman, was not only an object of desire, but a desiring subject all along.

Just as Robert R. Shane insists that the child’s expulsion of maternal desire does not occlude the mother’s subjectivity, so Cheryl A. Emerson demonstrates, through a reading of Claudia Rankin’s Citizen, that white culture’s ignorance of non-white exclusion does not preclude non-white experience. Calling on Nicole Loraux’s problematization of amnesty in Mothers in Mourning, “Of Amnesty and Its Opposite,” Emerson analogizes white America’s erasure of slavery with the civic bans on memory in ancient Greece. Framed by Johari Osayi Idusuyi’s rebellious act of readership at a Trump rally in November of 2015, Emerson contends that the controversy surrounding Idusuyi’s act of political resistance has less to do with her public display of Rankine’s text than it does with her physical presence at a Trump rally. Indeed, if black or brown skin is already a “marker of memory,” (118) and more specifically the memory of slavery that undergirds the racial contract, then Mills’ “epistemology of ignorance,” according to Emerson, “demands both a cognitive and perceptual blindness,” with which Idusuyi refused to comply. In other words, despite the racial contract’s historically tacit and pervasive function in excluding non-white subjects from political life, the memories of these barring acts nevertheless persist, however uncomfortable they may be. It is precisely the impossibility of such an erasure of experience that is at stake in Rankine’s Citizen, which
Emerson argues “performs an act of non-oblivion: it remembers what is socially and politically more expedient (and much safer) to forget” (114).

Moving from a contested hegemony of ignorance to the radical heterogeneity of the subaltern, Namita Goswami’s essay “Crossing the Sexual Differential Into Utopia: a.k.a The Subaltern is (Better Off) Dead (Vertretung and Darstellung Revisited),” serves as a particularly incisive and insistently open-ended capstone to our collection. In the essay, Goswami revisits Spivak’s classical notion of the subaltern in a renewed context with two critical interpretations from Victor Li and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. While Goswami draws out the conceptual relationship between subalternity and death, she ultimately rejects the idea of taking the subaltern merely as “a sacrificial ideal (as Li suggests) or a figuration of failed speech (as Sunder Rajan suggests)” (130). It is rather the “irreducible heterogeneity” of the subaltern, as a force that discloses contingency, that allows this figure to at once “be in excess of identity and difference” and cross the bounds of what Spivak calls the “sexual differential” (148).

Reimagining the political stakes of the subaltern’s death, Goswami brings the subaltern back to life to reaffirm the singularity and exemplarity of this figure through Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त). Performing a close reading of the shifting textures of meaning in the story, Goswami traces, for example, how a girl’s dead body described as “cold meat” later becomes the basis for an affective and ethical injunction (146). And yet, if a sexual encounter with the dead girl transforms the male character’s expectations and compel him to refer to her as a “human-girl,” it is not, Goswami argues, on account of what might be called the young woman’s recovered humanity. Rather, by transforming an object of male desire into an irreducible brush with death, Manto shows how nothing is perhaps more human than the insistence of contingency, a lesson the subaltern reminds each of us. If identity is only a fiction, it is perhaps the instability of identities that links us as subjects universally confronted with the unknown. The impossibility of knowing, however, does not appear to be an excuse for escapist retreat, but as Goswami concludes, another opportunity for “one telling” at a time (148).
Notes

1. Ancient Chinese and Greek translations are Yitian Zhai’s.

2. Etymology of ‘woman’ comes from Oxford Living Dictionaries.

Works Cited


Andrea Bachner

HYMENOLOGICS: MEMBRANE POLITICS
AND THE (UN)MAKING OF DIFFERENCE

MEMBRANE POLITICS

What is in a membrane? When the membrane in question—this thin, flimsy, fragile, and eminently vulnerable flap of tissue—is the hymen, much, entirely too much, depends on its folds. At first sight, nothing should single out the hymen from all the other membranous tissues that form part of human and non-human bodies. Circling the recessed entrance to the vagina, opening it partly, closing it imperfectly—unless an anatomical exception causes it to grow over the whole opening, or else, its usual crescent shape is imperfect or absent to begin with—the hymen serves no discernable function. And yet, it is indeed the epitome of the membranous—both nominally (since ‘hymen’ means ‘membrane’ in Greek) and symbolically. In spite of the fixation on male tumescent or detumescent members in most cultures, the insignificant stretch that is the hymen is equally overdetermined by meaning. If female sexual organs often appear as an absence, the opposite of male presence in sexist discourses, it is this membrane that at once symbolizes and supplements female lack.

But the hymen in itself signifies nothing, or only insofar as it constitutes the canvas for another’s action. Only its rupturing
and the resulting flow of blood in an act of heterosexual vaginal penetration—or at least this has been and continues to be a common belief in many cultures—establishes full womanhood. Passive canvas for male action, the hymen is usually framed as something that is being acted upon, but granted no agency itself. As a placeholder for female sexuality in general, it symbolically subjects female bodies to male intervention, even negates her pleasure at times. If the breaking of the hymen seals matrimony in many cultures this scenario imagines sexual initiation as painful rather than highlighting the empowerment and pleasure that it entails. Of course, the all-important binary of virginity versus defloration that it suggests leaves not much symbolic space for other sexual acts. If sexuality hinges upon the rupturing of an anatomically unimportant membrane, it prescribes, indeed scripts, the meaning of female sexuality in conveniently male terms.

And yet, in spite of the necessity of a neat binary—rupture versus intactness, sexual experience versus virginity—the sexual and symbolic economies that center on the hymen also foreground the hymen’s liminality. Especially in more recent discourses about the hymen—both literary and theoretical, both medical and commercial—it manifests itself as a site at which meaning loses its clear contours and at which fantasies run in wild and often contradictory directions. In what follows, I will trace examples of some recent paradoxical representations of and around the hymen from a range of different cultural contexts. Their hymenologics underlines undecidability, even malleability. And yet, this does not necessarily destabilize or even unmake the often violent policing of difference by way of the hymen—a difference that is sexual first, but also profoundly cultural. After all, the hymen in itself, as material membrane, does not signify until it is invested with meaning. In fact, only the intertwining of the sexual and the cultural invests this fragile rim of corporeal tissue with meaning and value. The play with grey zones or the polyvalence of signification that frequently accompanies more recent representations of the hymen does not automatically unwork the logic of the hymen as a way of policing women’s bodies and pleasures as well as circumscribing sexual acts as penile-on-vaginal penetration within a heterosexual matrix.
The membrane politics of the hymen are themselves profoundly contradictory and paradoxical to begin with—which does not lessen their symbolical function. And yet, the hymenal scenarios that I will analyze here draw attention to the precarious ontological and epistemological basis on which hymenological maneuvers hinge. Moving from one invocation of this membrane to another, from one textual fold to another, I will trace different scenes that imagine the hymen as flexible and fungible, as open to multiple interpretations, as entering into the supplemental logics of the copy against the original, as eminently prone to remaking and reconstruction. That much of this oscillates between the undecidability of the hymen’s meaning and the plasticity of its materiality underlines that this is a problem of the way in which we imagine and script sexuality. The different textual folds, the different hymenological scenarios under scrutiny here engage with the violent logic around the hymen, taking on the problem on its own metaphorical terrain. As such, they cannot completely escape the fraught symbolic economies prescribed by hymenologics nor counter them with alternative scenarios. But they do point to the precarious ways in which objects become invested with meaning, in which specific corporeal matter becomes the basis for sexual and cultural scripts. It is here that textual representations of the hymen potentially develop their subversive energy, since they foreground the use and reuse of the hymen, pitted as it is upon the precarious link between the material and the symbolic, between the singular and the universal, between the sexually and culturally specific and the generally valid.

Evidence

The membrane politics of the hymen seem always stacked against she who has it, always determined, indeed overdetermined, by male acts of signification. In fact, male gazes and voices are often the arbiters of its value, even if this leads to profoundly paradoxical maneuvers. Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos exemplifies the hymenal trap that women face in a male-dominated society in her 1964 short story “The Widower Román” (“El viudo Román”). The story narrates the revenge the protagonist of the title wreaks against
the family of the man who presumably destroyed the love of his life. On his marriage night, Román receives the love letters his newly-wed wife wrote to a lover, thus realizing that his wife has been forced into marriage and remains in love with a man whose identity she does not disclose. After the wife’s death, Román puts all his effort into finding the culprit, going to the extreme of marrying another woman, Romelia Orantes, on the suspicion that the note the mysterious lover sent him with the love letters and a note from the deceased brother of his second wife that she keeps in a locket are identical. In fact, having gained access to the note—identical in content to the one sent him with the packet of love letters, namely “I hope you enjoy them”—and having obtained his proof, Román sends his wife back to their parents, claiming that she had lost her virginity before entering into matrimony. Romelia’s assurances to the contrary do not count as her invocation of evidence, that the sheets used during the marriage night be inspected, is dismissed. Instead, the question has become a “men’s affair [asunto de hombres]” (196 / 224), one in which the code of honor between men makes Romelia’s father side with Román against his own daughter.

While the story underlines Romelia’s physical discomfort after her marriage night with Román, the story’s ending highlights the sway of the male power of interpretation. Romelia will live the rest of her life in disgrace because of one man’s revengeful assertion backed by an entire culture of male privilege and female disempowerment. Romelia is but a vehicle in one man’s revenge against another one, much as Román’s revenge against a dead man—Romelia’s brother had committed suicide shortly after the death of his presumed lover—takes his whole family as a proxy. For Romelia, the tragic outcome in a fight over male pride is inevitable, in spite of the varying hypotheses of the townspeople as to the truth of the affair:

Who was Carlos Román? A deceived groom? An impotent husband? What about Romelia? Was she a loose woman, a victim? As for the Orantes, had they deliberately foisted off on their son-in-law a fake instead of the genuine article? Or had an apparently sound apple deceived them, too, by

Although rumors allow for different culprits and scenarios—while echoing the logic of patriarchy by describing women as commodity, either genuine or fake, either valuable or without value, exchanged between men—the hymenologics poignantly painted by Castellanos in her text functions even if it has to go against the very logic that subtends it. Against medical evidence—a hymen can be ruptured by any range of activities, or, given different anatomies, it might never have been ‘intact’ to begin with—patriarchal economies in a range of cultures take an intact hymen as the ultimate proof of virginity, and the flow of blood during first sexual intercourse as evidence that penile penetration has happened on the one hand and that a woman is now no longer a virgin on the other. And yet, in “The Widower Román,” whatever evidentiary force such a paradigm might have had is completely dismantled. None of this matters any longer in the face of the male code of honor in the Mexican society Castellanos describes, as the bloodstained wedding sheet that carries so much meaning in the rites or imaginaries of some societies has become an unimportant detail, easily overruled by a man’s statement.

What is more, Román’s cynicism as expressed to the priest Don Evaristo, challenges the reliability of the proof of defloration altogether by pointing to the hymen’s medical plasticity:

What does it matter whether she was a virgin or not? For a layman virginity is a guarantee of virtue, but not for a physician. There are second hand, third hand, nth hand virginities. In my profession there are those who specialize in patching up maidenheads. [¿Qué importancia tiene que hubiera sido virgen o no? Para un profano la virginidad es una garantía pero no para un médico. Hay virginidades de segunda, de tercera, de enésima mano. Y en mi profesión hay quienes se especializan en reparaciones de estropicios]. (205 / 233)
In a perverse maneuver of superfluous justification—after all, Ramón acknowledges readily enough that his accusations against Romelia were merely part of his revenge plot—the protagonist insists that his asseverations could have been true. He relegates the theory that a hymen’s intactness serves as unequivocal proof of a woman’s virginity to the realm of the unenlightened public. As a doctor, he insists that virginity can be medically reproduced. But if for Ramón the hymen and its supposed rupture during intercourse no longer signify a woman’s sexual innocence, he paradoxically relies on an at least equally unreliable clue as the basis for his revenge plan. Even as the protagonist denies that virginity can be read on the basis of corporeal signs—such as the intact hymen that bleeds upon being ruptured—he bases his entire vengeance scheme on the equally uncertain testimony of comparing two old pieces of writing. As the priest points out, the note that Ramón obtained from Romelia’s locket is insufficient evidence of the guilt of Romelia’s brother and the identity of the mysterious lover of Ramón’s first wife, since it only shows “characters . . . effaced by time, disfigured by folds in the paper [los rasgos habían sido limados por el tiempo, desfigurados por los dobleces del papel]” (204 / 232). With the paper’s folds and doublings, the letters’ lines rubbed off and erased, the note, so crucial to Román’s vengeful logic, becomes a double of Romelia’s hymen—either pierced for the first time or not, either originally intact or artificially remade. Much as the distinction between hymenal fake and original, between virginity and its other remains elusive, indeed unimportant, Román’s proof lacks any truth value, except the one he himself is ready to lend it. But the uncertain truth value of the supposed anatomical bases of hymenologics, even there where it is explicitly revealed, does not destabilize the violent gender differences pitted on the membrane politics of the hymen. In fact, Rosario Castellanos’s story “The Widower Román” showcases the indifference of undecidability. Virginity matters precisely because it does not matter. Or at least, the sign of virginity matters only selectively. Behind its flimsy façade of evidentiary power, Castellanos shows it to have been a male fabrication from the start, one that does not even have to follow its own logic to remain a powerful tool for framing gender inequality.
What if the hymen didn’t signify at all? If it remained truly a blank, not only a canvas that is forced to bear a certain range of meanings, often in male-dominated societies, but a space devoid of meaning? Danish author Isak Dinesen (one of the pen names of Karen Blixen) imagines the hymen as the ultimate undecidable in her 1957 short story “The Blank Page.” A story of barely ten pages, “The Blank Page” is framed by a situation of story-telling, in which a professional female storyteller, in a vaguely Middle-Eastern setting, plies her trade, regaling the “sweet lady and gentleman” she addresses with a tale in which the hymen constitutes the main protagonist, albeit in an oblique manner (99). The storyteller’s tale conjures up a convent in the mountains of Portugal that produces the finest bed linen used during the marriage nights of Portuguese nobility. As recompense for this service, the used bridal sheets are returned to the convent to be exhibited as if in a portrait gallery. They bear witness to the custom of displaying the bloodied linen to the public after the wedding night as proof of the bride’s virginity upon entering wedlock: “On the morning after the wedding of a daughter of the house, and before the morning gift had yet been handed over, the Chamberlain or High Stewart from a balcony of the palace would hang out the sheet of the night and would solemnly proclaim: *Virginem eam tenemus*—‘we declare her to have been a virgin’” (102-3). The scenario in which the hymen’s rupture, brokered and testified to by men, asserts female purity functions from the outset in a paradoxical manner: only once virginity has been lost can the stain of blood signify its presence; according to this logic only virginity’s post factum underlines a presence that is already lost. In fact, whereas the English translation of the Latin dictum ‘*Virginem eam tenemus*’ in Dinesen’s story underlines this temporal logic—the blood stain is proof of a woman’s having been a virgin (and because of the nature of the proof she can no longer be one, once this kind of proof has been provided)—the Latin original uses the present tense, i.e. ‘we have in her a virgin.’ The use of the first person plural form of a verb that indicates possession (from Latin ‘*tenere*’) depicts woman as the space of virginity (lost, but
duly preserved until the crucial moment of matrimony), while its use and adjudication are squarely relegated to a (presumably male) collective. Irrespective of whether a woman is or is not a virgin, she is being had by (male) others—even before the properly selected and sanctioned man enjoys (and thus possesses) her virgin sexuality.

In the gallery of matrimonial sheets (or at least of cut-outs of the parts that bear the stains) imagined in Dinesen’s tale, the bloodstain effectively stands in for the woman whose defloweration (and prior virginity) is pictured forth. Arranged in gilded frames, each piece of linen comes appended with the name of a princess. It is this one stain that defines each woman—whole lives reduced to the one first time that counts according to the hymenological economy invoked by Dinesen. As a catalogue of female virtue and purity, the gallery receives visits from those whose hymens—both membrane and matrimony—the sheets visualize and preserve or those who know the women who produced the stains. The forms of the individual stains are open to interpretation:

Within the faded markings of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs of the zodiac: the Scales, the Scorpion, the Lion, the Twins. Or they may there find pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword—or even a heart pierced through with a sword. (103)

In fact, the stains are said to function like a type of oracle, “from the markings on the canvas, omens were drawn” (104). Thus, the single event of the hymen’s rupture is believed to determine an entire life, much as “[each] separate canvas with its coroneted name-plate has a story to tell, and each has been set up in loyalty to the story” (104). The variations of the hymenal marks, however, whatever our iconic reading of their shapes or symbolic connections to the life of the woman who produced it, fade before its indexical importance: “virginem eam tenemus.”

With one exception: one of the frames bears no name inscription. And “the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page” (104). As oddity within the series of stains, the ‘virgin’ canvas attracts the most attention from visitors
and nuns alike. It is also, as the storyteller in “The Blank Page” comments, what causes storytellers to veil themselves and fall silent. What does this blank page signify? Within the patriarchal logic of the hymen, the blank sheet can only mean that no defloration, no rupturing of the vaginal membrane has occurred. This can signify two things: either the hymen was not intact upon sexual penetration or there was no (or only minimal) penetration during the wedding night. In any case, the question of female virtue and male sexual prowess remains suspended. In contrast to the tales the marked sheets tell—signs of only one meaning, stories with only one ending—the blank sheet lends itself to different interpretations. Precisely because, as a blank page, it does not tell a concrete story, it points to multiple possible storylines and outcomes. In fact, from the inception, before the story of the blank page starts, Dinesen’s tale emphasizes the meta-narrative reading of the blank page. The storyteller prefaces her tale with the insight provided by her grandmother who taught her to tell stories:

Who then . . . tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page. When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of its highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all—where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier and more cruel tale than that? Upon the blank page. (100)

The invocation of hearing the voice of silence, of beholding the blank page as sublime creative power introduces a clearly gendered element. In other words, at a first glance, this alternative form of storytelling, the inscription of a mark that is not a mark, seems to embody a type of female productivity that is not limited to and circumscribed by woman’s role in sexual reproduction. Of course, women also play a role in the production of the marked sheets (the nuns who provide the ‘canvas,’ the female blood that stains it) and finally in their reception and circulation. And yet, this scenario is likened to the “rarest ink of
all” (virginal blood) which is wielded by a “royal and gallant pen,” a turn of the phrase that implicitly underlines male agency in an extension of the metaphor of sexual penetration as an act of writing. In addition, the logic that makes the creation and exhibition of the marked sheets important is a male one. In contrast, in “The Blank Page,” storytelling is featured as a female art, and the blank page can be read as an expression of female creativity. Its suggestive silence counters what we could read, with feminist critic Susan Gubar, as the “sacrificial suffering of the inarticulate female body” (17) couched in the male-dominated membrane politics of the hymen.

This reading, however, faces two problems. On the one hand, it erases female agency from the scene of the inscribed page, the bloodstained marital sheets. And Dinesen insists that the gallery of virginal proof is a mainly female space, one that creates memories and inspires the imagination, even as it is subject to male logic. On the other, and more importantly, the blank page does not produce an alternative, female logic to the patriarchal obsession with virginity. Rather, we can read it as different and productive, precisely because, as an exception, it still occupies its place within the series of stained sheets. Its expressive power derives from its context. Without the violent hymenologics that frame women as virgins to be deflowered, as reproductive bodies that have to be controlled, there would be no stage for the blank page. By the same token, Dinesen’s story intertwines different media of expression—writing and orality—throughout, rather than aligning each in a gendered manner. The tale’s storytellers are female, but the act of proclaiming the outcome of the proof of virginity—‘Virginem eam tenemus,’ one supreme expression of male power over women—is oral too. And while defloration and virginal staining constitute a somewhat stereotypical metaphor of writing—or, vice versa, the scene of hymenal rupture is framed as an act of writing so that it can be made to signify—the blank page, writing’s female other, is nevertheless imagined as an act of inscription. Only that ‘writing’ here has somehow failed to happen. And while it can still be ‘read,’ the meaning of this writing that is also other-than-writing remains suspended, undecidable. The literary allegory on the basis of the
hymen that Dinesen invokes in “The Blank Page” does not elide the discursive violence of the hymen’s rupture read as evidence of virginity. Instead, the undecidability of the non-mark functions as necessary other within the symbolic economy of the hymen that polices female sexuality.

**Ruptures**

If, in Castellanos’s story “The Widower Román,” the evidence of defloration remains suspended, unimportant, in Dinesen’s “The Blank Page,” undecidability is produced by the absence of a concrete mark (such as the bloodstain of the wedding night). In contrast, Jacques Derrida invests the hymen itself with undecidability, not merely its uncertain rupture or its uncertain reading. In Derrida’s “The Double Session” (“La double séance”), a reading of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, the hymen signifies as a figure of difference and multiplicity, based on the textile, tissued metaphors for and etymologies of textual production. Explicitly aligned with such Derridean concepts as the pharmakon, the supplement, or *différance*, the hymen’s anatomical specificity as well as its semantic polyvalence epitomize liminality and the suspension and multiplication of meaning:

The hymen, the consummation of differends, the continuity and confusion of the coitus, merges with what it seems to be derived from: the hymen as protective screen, the jewel box of virginity, the vaginal partition, the fine, invisible veil which, in front of the hystera, stands *between* the inside and the outside of a woman, and consequently between desire and fulfillment. It is neither desire nor pleasure but in between the two. Neither future nor present, but between the two. It is the hymen that desire dreams of piercing, of bursting, in an act of violence that is (at the same time or somewhere between) love and murder. If either one *did* take place, there would be no hymen. But neither would there simply be a hymen in (case events go) *no* place. With all the undecidability of its meaning, the hymen only takes place
when it doesn’t take place, when nothing really happens, when there is an all-consuming consummation without violence, or a violence without blows, or a blow without marks, a mark without a mark (a margin) etc., when the veil is, without being, torn. [L’hymen, consumption des différents, continuité et confusion du coït, mariage, se confond avec ce dont il paraît dériver: l’hymen comme écran protecteur, écrin de la virginité, paroi vaginale, voile très fin et invisible, qui, devant l’hystère, se tient entre le dedans et le dehors de la femme, par conséquent entre le désir et l’accomplissement. Il n’est ni le désir ni le plaisir mais entre les deux. Ni l’avenir ni le présent, mais entre les deux. C’est l’hymen que le désir rêve de percer, de crever dans une violence qui est (à la fois ou entre) l’amour et le meurtre. Si l’un ou l’autre avait lieu, il n’y aurait pas d’hymen. Mais non plus simplement dans le non-lieu. Avec toute l’indécidabilité de sons sens, l’hymen n’a lieu que quand il n’a pas lieu, quand rien ne se passe vraiment, quand il y a consumption sans violence, ou violence sans coup, ou coup sans marque, marque sans marque (marge) etc., quand le voile est déchiré sans l’être.] (212-13 / 241, emphasis Derrida)

In addition to its anatomical (a piece of bodily tissue) and cultural meanings (matrimony via defloration), Derrida highlights the hymen as a place of polysemy that counters the reduction of woman’s sexuality to a lack by means of multiplication. What a woman cradles at the place where her thighs meet is not a hole. Instead, a whole landscape unfolds itself to the (male) spectator and theorist: a complex fabric of infinitely folded tissue. Or rather, the in-between of the hymen—Derrida puns on the near homonyms “entre” (between) and “antre” (cavern or cave), as well as on the related etymology of “interval” (between, but also between vales, yet another type of [con]cavity)—makes it both a gap (“fente”) and that which enters into, covers over, or extends between such a gap (see 212 / 241-2).

And yet, the double session around the hymen does not end here. In itself the embodiment of liminality, the hymen (as membrane and as matrimony) designates both intactness and rupture. Especially
in the second part of the “The Double Session,” this conjugation results from Derrida’s deployment of fold and hymen as almost synonymous terms, their difference nearly indifferent. Both terms stand for textual undecidability as multiplicity, but also as the radical opening of difference. Thus the fold—a privileged term in Mallarmé’s writing—is not a fold of the hymen, but the hymen is already folded matter:

The fold folds (itself): its meaning spaces itself out with a double mark, in the hollow of which a blank is folded. The fold is simultaneously virginity, what violates virginity, and the fold which, being neither one nor the other and both at once, undecidable, remains as a text, irreducible to either of its two senses. [Le pli (se) plie: son sens s’espace d’une double marque, au creux de laquelle un blanc se plie. Le pli est à la fois la virginité, ce qui la viole, et le pli qui n’était ni l’un ni l’autre et les deux à la fois, indécidable, reste comme texte, irréductible à aucun de ses deux sens.] (258-59 / 291, emphasis Derrida)

Derrida needs the contradiction between folding and tearing, folded into one, in order to conjure up écriture both as a violent force and as signifying excess ad infinitum. The linchpin that holds together and thus allows Derrida’s linguistic stretch lies in an extension of the hymen’s meaning, or more precisely, in a homeostasis between literal and figurative meanings of the word ‘hymen.’ Conceptually, it relies on the fold’s double allegiance: with female genital morphology as well as with its more cultural than anatomical change by penetration. Thus the hymen embodies the concept of textual différence, signifying both virginity and its end. In concept, if not in anatomy, Derrida’s hymen, as a contradictory union, is thus a ‘dehiscence,’ a gap and gaping of meaning.

By deploying female anatomy and its cultural inscriptions as a foil for textuality, doesn’t Derrida ultimately reintroduce sexual stereotypes into his theoretical reflections? Doesn’t the hymen, even read as folded abundance, as multiplicity and excess rather than as lack, nevertheless revert to a figurative gap or gaping liminality, worked upon, ruptured by, and as negative
double to the force of dissemination, metaphorically gendered male? Feminist critic Roberta Weston reads Derrida’s hymenal turn in “The Double Session” as a forced figure, one that reifies patriarchal and phallogocentric violence by other means. For all the terminological folds that Derrida’s text deploys with and beyond the morphology of sexual difference, the “various themes of the crack, the fold, the crease, and the blank,” as Weston points out, in the end “while Derrida pretends to replace the phallus with the hymen, his hymen serves merely as a front for the phallus,” allowing “for the economy of the phallus to continue its work at another more insidious level” (300). From this perspective, what is problematic in Derrida’s work with the hymen is its insistence on the violence of piercing and rupture almost as if, between the folded labial excess and the vaginal opening, difference cannot be marked sufficiently. Apparently, not even textual undecidability can do without the cut of penetration. Otherwise, why would we need images of penile penetration, if female genital morphology could already yield a rich crop of metaphorical undecidability in the complexity of its multiple folds, protuberances, recesses? Instead, for Derrida, nothing appears to happen between the vaginal folds, if not for an intervention from outside—or at least the invocation of such an intrusion that is equated with the folded female anatomy itself. And the instrument of penetration, the penis, does not appear as a differently plied fold—we could imagine this in the form of an “exvagination” to female invagination, thus rendering sexual difference simply a matter of differently folded material. But this is not the path taken by Derrida.

The hymen of Derrida’s text consists of an act: that of plaiting, tearing, or piercing—and hence a stereotypically gendered difference of activity and passivity haunts “The Double Session.” While Derrida does not have the hymen, his textual maneuvers effectively allow him to be (like) the hymen: penetration that is not penetration, folding that is also a type of rupture. And as the hymen becomes simply a token of deconstructivist difference, woman still appears as the gaping of lack (albeit on the conceptually desirable plane of undecidability, the dehiscence of meaning), unable to produce (it) herself. For that matter, we could scrutinize Derrida’s
textual maneuver here not merely for its problematic use of female sexuality, but also for conjuring up a somewhat limited economy of sexuality, one that hinges upon penile on vaginal penetration. But this might just be Derrida’s point. After all, saturated with symbolic, etymological, and conceptual meaning (all of which Derrida traces with the utmost care throughout his essay), the hymen cannot simply become a space outside of the at-times conceptual, at-times real violence of gender difference. Pitting the hymen against the phallus doesn’t work, and the line of flight from phallogocentrism cannot simply have recourse to the celebration of another (female) morphology. Instead, Derrida tries to destabilize phallogics and hymenologics from within. And thus, Derrida’s hymenologics cannot escape the multiply scripted hymenologies and hymenographies in place. It works with and through them.

This does not mean that Derrida’s conceptual use and appropriation of the hymen—with a tad of hymen envy maybe, that is immediately compensated by the fact that male penetration and female fold are equated—should not invite critical scrutiny. But the problem that needs highlighting starts at an even more basic level, there where specific anatomies (such as the hymen) become indistinguishable from texts. Or, to be more precise, when the link between the hymen and the text is unidirectional, namely when the hymen becomes merely a vehicle for illustrating certain properties of textuality with little regard for the discursive and real consequences of membrane politics around the hymen. Granted, Derrida’s hymenologics provides a suggestive image of textual undecidability and difference. But does it also help us rethink how the hymen is culturally constructed—not merely a bodily membrane without function, but corporeal tissue multiply inscribed with meaning and value? What remains problematic here, then, is Derrida’s movement from the specific to the general, from the material to the figurative. Sexual morphologies are always already metaphors, symbolically overdetermined with a view to forging sexual difference. But what happens when a second level of figuration is added—by way of which they (the hymen or dissemination) stand in for the movement, multiplicity, and force of textuality? Hasn’t (sexual) difference been overruled by the abstract difference of Derridean écriture here? It
is this conceptual movement that we need to scrutinize if we are to engage in a less violent type of hymenologics. Metaphors are not simply value-neutral vehicles. Their choice and execution (and the layers of meaning they have accreted) have real consequences, especially there where (as with the hymen) discursive politics override material realities.

**Remakes**

The hymen’s flimsiness extends not only to its uncertain anatomical reality or to the undecidability of its meaning. Its membranous character lends it a large degree of plasticity. Put more simply, much as the hymen can easily lose its intactness—if we can speak of a ring of tissue without any discernible purpose as ever being intact to begin with—it can also be remade quite easily. Hymenoplasty, the reconstruction of the hymen (also referred to as revirgination), while certainly painful, seems a relatively simple surgical procedure. As hymenorraphy, i.e. the suturing of the hymen, a few stitches in the right places remake the hymen. But why would anybody want to remake the hymen? Or, for that matter, why does its breaking accrete so much importance? The logic of hymen reconstruction is paradoxical, part and parcel of hymenologics and its fraught epistemology. For hymenologics to function, the rupturing of the hymen has to have uncontestable evidentiary value. If it is no longer intact, sexual intercourse has happened; its breaking and the blood flow that accompanies it mark male prowess as well as male possession of female purity, which is asserted the moment it gives way to sexual experience. Hymen reconstruction responds to the skewed value of virginity; it subverts it even as it reconfirms its validity. Even as revirgination subscribes to the inflated value of an intact hymen, it also devalues its intactness. After all, if it can be remade, its unmaking loses its singular importance. But then, this very importance has become the motivator for women to undergo hymenorraphy to begin with—a procedure that takes about thirty minutes, costs between one and two thousand US dollars and involves about six weeks of recovery.

The novel *Brothers* (兄弟) by PRC author Yu Hua 余華 weaves
the paradoxical value of the hymen into its plot about the diverging paths of two stepbrothers. One of them, successful entrepreneur Baldy Li, becomes obsessed with virginity after being sued by a group of women who insist that their offspring are Li’s sons and daughters, an allegation Li quickly counters by pointing out that he had undergone a vasectomy before leading a sexually promiscuous life. As a consequence, several of the women attempt to switch their accusations from having borne Li’s child to having sacrificed their virginity during sex with him. They describe their hymens as “more valuable to them than life itself” (452 / 2:289), while seeking monetary compensation, thus inserting the hymen into a system of economic transactions. To counter their accusations, Li alleges that he has never ever come across the valuable commodity of virginity in his whole sexually active life, a fact that he interprets as a lack of having experienced true love:

Today I have reached an epiphany and realized, to put it coarsely, that not until you’ve slept with a woman with her hymen intact can you say that you’ve really slept with a woman. Or, to put it more elegantly, it is only after you have slept with a woman who genuinely loves you that you can be said to have really slept with a woman. The sad truth of the matter is that there hasn’t been a single woman who has genuinely loved me. And so it doesn’t matter how many women I’ve slept with. I might as well have been sleeping with myself. 

This passage highlights the paradoxical hymenologics at work here, in keeping with the ironic light the novel sheds on the phenomenon of hymen reconstruction in China. As Carlos Rojas points out, *Brothers* satirizes this and other trends of cosmetic surgery rife in China, even as the hymenal membrane serves to renegotiate questions of Chinese identity in a global age.¹ Li’s own hymenal...
logic, one that weds virginity to true love, merely constitutes the first step of the complex membrane politics of Yu Hua’s novel. Virginity, that most elusive of goods in *Brothers*, symbolizes the supposed singularity of true love. Without it, sexuality is a merely mechanical act, one that does not involve another, but almost turns into an act of autoeroticism. Only the defloration of a virgin, as Li reasons, provides confirmation of an authentic sexual and amatory experience.

Obsessed with female virginity, Li sets up a beauty contest limited explicitly to virgins. As his PR agent, Liu, explains in an interview about the “Inaugural National Virgin Beauty Competition” the emphasis on the virginity of Chinese beauties is closely tied to an imaginary of the purity and intactness of Chinese culture:

The competition will help promote traditional Chinese culture, increase the self-respect and ultimately the self-confidence of today’s women, and at the same time support higher standards of health and hygiene. . . . The hymen plays a crucial role in preventing the invasion of foreign microbes, protecting the internal reproductive system and preserving the body’s reproductive ability. [為了弘揚祖國的傳統文化, 為了讓今天的女性更加自愛, 自愛後才有真正的自信, 同時也為了今天的女性更健康和更衛生 態女膜對阻斷病菌入侵, 保護內生殖系統, 維護生育能力, 是有十分重要 的作用。] (447 / 2:316)

The rupturing of the hymen here conjures up a scenario of foreign invasion and penetration against which Chinese culture has to safeguard by policing the bodies of its women (see Rojas 265-6). And yet, much as the hymen does not really act as an anatomical barrier against infection (although some medical theories speculate that it might have had such a function at an earlier stage of development), no foreign influences are needed to produce sexually experienced Chinese women. In fact, in keeping with the novel’s ironic stance toward Baldy Li’s hymenal fantasies, the sole outcome of the Virgin Beauty Competition is an increase in ‘remade’ virgins. Li’s emphasis on virginity only spawns imitations of virginity. In fact, hymen reconstruction surgery be-
comes a booming industry, so much so that people start to call this “the age of the hymen economy” (479 / 2:318). Hymenoplasty here becomes the epitome of capitalist production and consumption: a product that perfectly embodies (or actually outperforms) the Marxian notion of the commodity fetish. Based on a merely symbolic value (not even labor time), the newly reconstructed hymen is subject to immediate obsolescence and hence constantly in need of being reproduced. Li’s fantasy at one point of the novel, of picturing the Great Wall of China as made up of virginal hymens, lends itself to a double reading. On the one hand, it reiterates the protagonist’s obsession with virginity also as an expression of Chinese tradition and culture unadulterated with foreign influences. On the other, through the lens of the economic boom of hymenoplasty the novel evokes, a reader is also invited to imagine China’s strength as built on such commodities as remade hymens. Rather than dealing in the ‘genuine’ article, success actually derives from the fabrication of the fake. And this is both an ironic nod toward Chinese obsessions with preserving true Chineseness and toward the virulent critiques of fakes and imitations made in China.

Yu Hua’s Brothers in fact capitalizes upon the oscillation between the real and the simulacrum, between the original and the copy, so much so that the status and value of both become almost indistinguishable. At the end of the novel, as Li reconnects with the love of his youth, Lin Hong, who had married his brother, he attempts to relive his first, true love, albeit only through a precarious staging of singularity: Lin Hong has hymenal reconstructive surgery done in order to render one night with Li authentic—after they have enjoyed sex with each other multiple times. The whole sexual encounter is staged, starting with a romantic dinner during which Li acts the gentleman, copying Western patterns of behavior he had watched on TV, that soon gives way to Li’s demand that Lin await him in bed. Amused, as Li arrives accoutered with a miner’s headlamp in order to inspect (and appreciate) her hymen, Lin Hong does not at all resemble a virgin, as Li points out. As Li instructs her to act the coy virgin she masters a convincing performance only after several attempts. However realistic her performance, however, this never elides the
fact that this is not the first time for either of them. In fact, much
of the scene is scripted in imitation of common stereotypes, namely
that a sexually inexperienced woman cover her face at the view of
male nakedness, close her legs, and cover her private parts. Li
also frames this second first time as inspired by Lin Hong’s real
first time with his brother. And yet, even though the whole scene
constitutes a multiply imperfect copy of a first-time sexual
encounter, its outcome is described as singularly authentic:

The two hugged in the darkness, and after they caressed
each other for a while, Baldy Li inserted himself. Lin Hong
uttered a cry, and this cry was one of genuine pain. When
Baldy Li heard it, he trembled with excitement. In all the
times he and Lin Hong had done it, this was the first time he
had heard her cry out like this. She then started to moan—a
moan of agony, but also of ecstasy . . . . Her body had never
before experienced this sort of stimulation as she felt her
intense agony propelling her sense of ecstasy, like a rocket
propelling the space shuttle. Then her orgasm exploded like
a tsunami, the wave of pleasure that swept over her making
her tremble from head to toe. She cried out hoarsely, “That
hurts . . . .”

In the description of Li’s and Lin Hong’s sexual act, the novel first
zooms in on the woman’s sexual pleasure—in spite of its
constant focus on Li’s obsession with virginity elsewhere. But Li’s
jouissance is immediately described as equally unprecedented, so
much so that he also feels like having come to the scene as a virgin.
After this moment of sublime and mutually concerted enjoyment,
however, Li attempts to copy this ‘first time’ by forcing Lin Hong to repeated sexual intercourse in a rape-like scene. The restaged wedding night ends in tragedy, as both learn that Lin Hong’s husband, Li’s stepbrother, has committed suicide. The lovers go their separate ways and Lin Hong becomes a brothel owner who brokers other people’s sexual pleasure.

What is surprising here is not the failure of the remade wedding night, but rather its (albeit momentary) success. The unprecedented pleasure of both protagonists that the novel narrates, however, does not testify to a successfully remade virginity. It points to the importance of fantasy instead. Once Li has given up on his attempt to scrutinize Lin Hong’s remade hymen and the lovers both play the roles of newly-weds to their own satisfaction, the boundary between make-believe and reality is breached. After all, the mystique of the first time is entirely fake to begin with (even there where it really is the first time). By the same token, the singularly sublime moment of complete sexual fulfillment in the passage cited above (or in other literary renditions, be it of the first or the nth time) can only be rendered in the hackneyed images of waves or explosions after all—highlighted by the text’s indulgent recourse to such hyperboles as tsunamis or space rockets. If, as the hymenologics of Yu Hua’s novel Brothers seems to suggest, sexual pleasure and, we might want to add, true love, depends on fantasy, its truth status is as unimportant as the intactness of the hymen. And yet, foregrounding the fantasmatic status of the hymen does not in itself unwork the hymenal membrane politics. Rather, this is only a first step in the process of reframing hymenologics or else of dispensing with it altogether.

**Supplement**

If you don’t want to remake yourself a hymen, you can buy an artificial one, with no surgical pain and in a range of prices—from less than ten dollars for one Joan of Arc Red artificial hymen of Japanese fabrication to a bit under seventy dollars for a pack of two Virginia Care artificial hymens that boast quality fabrication in Germany—or so the brand Artificial Hymen advertises on its
website. The common name of ‘Chinese hymen’ cited on another similar Internet site, Hymenshop, indicates one culture in which fake virginity has become a particularly sought-after commodity. That many of its brands—some of them mentioned in Yu Hua’s novel *Brothers*, where a peddler trades both in the supposedly imported Joan of Arc and the indigenous Meng Jiang brand—suggest a foreign provenance, for instance boasting Japanese or German quality and drawing on a French icon of virginity like Joan of Arc, only speaks to the value infused into commodities not made in China. In spite of difference in price, these and other hymens advertised via different internet sellers consist of the same components: medical dye in a membranous pouch which, inserted into the vagina, begins to dissolve with body heat and vaginal moisture. If you time it right and allow for minimal foreplay—about fifteen to twenty minutes—sexual penetration coincides with the release of the red liquid, thus simulating the blood flow supposedly caused by the first rupture of a woman’s real hymen. In addition, the dissolution of the artificial hymen will “create a membrane that fakes the hymen” (Artificial Hymen). “During sexual intercourse the fake membrane created by the Artificial Hymen will break and the red powder will create fake blood that will spread and stain the sheets, thus simulating the breakdown of the hymen” (Artificial Hymen, emphasis original).

The language used on websites that sell artificial hymens oscillates between underlining its fake, simulated nature and obliquely promising a restoration of the hymen: Artificial Hymen describes its product as a means of “[restoring one’s] virginity” at some point, while also lavishly using the language of fakery. Another seller, Hymenshop, refers to its product as “an artificial hymen repair kit also known as artificial virginity kit” (and popularly referred to as a ‘Chinese hymen’ or ‘fake hymen’). And yet, Hymenshop also promises women to “become a virgin again”—at less cost and more conveniently than the surgical procedure of hymenoplasty. Of course, artificial hymens are just that: artificial. Their play with dye and membranes merely fakes the real thing. In spite of the make-believe of revirgination, artificial hymens merely simulate virginity by way of mimicking the supposed outcome of a loss of virginity.
Hymenshop even advises its customers to enhance the hymenological simulation by "[adding] in a few moans and groans," a performance that will make them "pass through undetectable."

The reasons for the hymenological subterfuge, the use of a membranous artifice can be dead serious in cultures that prize virginity above all and in which women who are not virgins when they enter matrimony can be subject to ostracism or even to bodily harm. Unlike hymenoplasty that often promises a ‘real’ revirgination and a better guarantee that the previous loss of virginity remains undetected—after all, the ‘bloody’ results of the ruptured fake hymen pouch are not always particularly authentic-looking—the artificial hymen also lends itself to other uses. Artificial Hymen, for instance, attempts to appeal to a diverse clientele: “Do you want to marry in confidence? Let your partner think you are a virgin? Would you like to surprise your partner or to spice up your sex life?” It conjures up both a situation in which a woman has to fake her virginity with a view to duping the expectations of a male-dominated society and one in which the use of an artificial hymen constitutes merely one possibility within a range of sexual experiments. Even a playful use of the fake hymen, however, might risk reiterating the crucial importance of a woman’s first time even as it relegates its singularity to a potentially infinitely repeatable experience. After all, if you buy not one, but several packages of artificial hymens at once, the product is offered at a considerable discount (for instance on Hymenshop), suggesting that the ‘Chinese’ hymen can become a routine tool rather than constituting just a one-time supplement in a moment of need or sexual experimentation. In other words, even as the artificial hymen owes its invention and market success to a membrane politics that values virginity above all—either as a proof of female purity or as a guarantor of sexual pleasure (more often than not of the male participant)—its supplemental nature also defies such logic. Once singularity has become so important as to have to be staged against all odds, against all reason, it should also lose its weight. After all, what is that real thing artificial hymens allow us to fake more or less successfully? Or rather, what is the ontology of
the hymen if not, from the outset, one that is radically open to different interpretations? Not without anatomical materiality, but infinitely malleable to meanings that are attributed to it in a scenario in which discursive power tends to trump medical evidence. Rather than merely embodying an imperfect simulacrum of the scenario of hymenal rupture, the artificial hymen elucidates the logic of the hymen itself: even a ‘genuine’ hymen is merely a smokescreen thrown up by gender politics and sexual fantasies.

**Virginities**

If for many women the key question is how to (re)make oneself a hymen or how to fake oneself a hymen, an even more important question is how to get rid of the hymen and its ideological charge altogether. How to unmake one’s hymen? Not the corporeal membrane, but its symbolic surcharges. One response, as commented upon in the queer-themed novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* (荒人手記) by Taiwanese author Chu T’ien-wen 朱天文 is the phenomenon of second virgin syndrome, widespread, or so a friend of the novel’s narrator and protagonist claims, among young women in Japan:

[Second virgin syndrome] means that young women who are no longer virgins can stop having sex. It’s like chicken pox or smallpox—the sooner you get it over with, the better; or you can get a vaccination to avoid it altogether. One of the reasons why this syndrome has become so popular is that published research has shown that many girls are not virgins, and that those who don’t appreciate the fact that they are different often go out and intentionally lose their virginity. From these publications they have learned that not everyone has to have sex, so they are quite comfortable without it. [第二處女症候羣, 即失去處女的年輕女性就此可以不性愛。好比痲疹, 水痘, 早出早好, 既然打了預防針即可免疫遂趕快去打。此流行病原因很多, 其中一項, 由於各種資訊調查顯示女孩們非處女, 故使大多女孩討厭自己和別人不一樣而特意失去處女。現今又從資訊知道人人不必然都性愛, 則不做也十分放心。] (83-84 / 115)
The second virgin syndrome impels young women to get rid of their virginity once and for all, with as little fanfare as possible, rather than preserving their virginity because of societal pressures. In such a scenario, defloration becomes in itself a stressful must for young women so as to fit in with their peers. In contrast, the value of the first time simply consists in getting it over and done with. And yet, being a virgin no longer effectively means for young women ‘diagnosed’ with second virgin syndrome—in fact, the Chinese original clearly describes this phenomenon as an illness (as ‘症’ or ‘病’) — that they can now live their virginity once and for all, stripped of all societal and peer expectations that they have sexual experiences at a certain age. Paradoxically, it is precisely because they have lost their virginity that they can maintain a virginal lifestyle. What would not have been possible, or at least undesirable in a state of original virginity becomes attainable after the first sexual experience. In this context, the first time does not constitute an initiation; rather, as commented in *Notes of a Desolate Man*, it works much like an inoculation: like the vaccine for chicken pox or smallpox, having sex so as to lose one’s virginity means that one can avoid sexual relations thereafter. Second (and secondary) virginity trumps the usually highly valued ‘genuine article’ here.

As strange other to the hymenologics that values a woman’s virginity and erects her first time into an all-important event, second virgin syndrome allows a woman to withdraw from sexual and reproductive transactions altogether. In fact, the protagonist and first-person narrator of *Notes of a Desolate Man*, a gay man who tries to find his symbolic place in a sexual economy based on kinship rules and sexual reproduction (pace his reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss) sees those young women as kin. Like him, they circumvent the injunction to reproduce and thus embody a scenario in which “heterosexual love has been homosexualized [異性戀亦同性戀]” (84 / 115). For the protagonist, this is a possible harbinger of a “sexless age” (84), one in which humanity no longer reproduces, but is replicated—with a reference to Ridley Scott’s 1982 film *Blade Runner* in which the limits between human beings and biorobotic androids are blurred beyond recognition. And yet, are asexuality and/or the refusal to procreate the other of compulsory heterosexuality and its
hymenological shadow? After all, second virgins still have to pay the tribute of defloration

**SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, CULTURAL INDIFFERENCE?**

As with most of the hymenal scenarios under scrutiny here, the question is not to frame them as radical alternatives to violently scripted hymenologics that police women’s sexuality and prescribe penetrative heterosexuality as the norm, as escape routes from oppressive (hetero)sexual scripts. If this was the case, such representations would try to bypass the hymen altogether. After all, without its symbolic surplus value the hymen is no more than a flap of bodily tissue. To invest in its symbolic economy, even by way of contesting its binary logic, by vesting multiplicity, plasticity, and undecidability in this membrane, risks reinforcing its problematic discursive force even as it also probes its paradoxical logic. But texts continue to succumb to the lure of the hymen, treating it as the basis for sexual as well as epistemological fantasies. And thus, even though it should be easy to disable the importance of the hymen—after all, much of the so-called common knowledge about the hymen belongs to the realm of half-truth, even myth—much hymenwork still needs to be done, it seems. Or maybe, undoing its logic would mean to bypass the hymen altogether, refusing to lend it any more power. And yet, even as most of the membrane scenarios unfolded in this essay explicitly or implicitly contest hymenologics that promote gender difference as a violent, unequal binary, aided by the dichotomy of sexual purity and promiscuity, of original and fake, their fascination lies precisely with the hymenal play between epistemological certainty and undecidability. And thus, representations of the hymen often become caught up in the very logic they aim to undo. After all, in all the play around undecidability the hymen’s connection to gender difference is never in doubt—even though male to female gender reassignment surgery can dispense with building a hymen.

Apart from its investment in sexual difference and epistemological paradoxes, cultural meaning pervades the hymen. Not only because the hymen is merely a flimsy anatomical tether for
a multiplicity of discursive inscriptions. As the range of hymenal texts discussed here shows, cultural difference, in addition to sexual difference, hinges upon hymenological imaginaries. Even though hymen fantasies are or were in evidence in many different cultures, they often operate on the basis of cultural and transcultural imaginaries. For instance, Danish author Isak Dinesen sets her hymenological scene in “The Blank Page” in the context of the Catholic culture of Portugal, while the frame of the tale invokes a vague oriental atmosphere, thus producing a hymenologics at a double cultural distance. The sale tactics of artificial hymens, a supplement probably invented in a Chinese cultural context as an alternative to hymen reconstruction surgery, emphasize cultural difference as a means of building trust in a product made in Germany or Japan, but not made in China. By the same token, the second virgin syndrome referenced in Chu T’ien-Wen’s novel Notes of a Desolate Man uses cultural Japan as a model for Taiwanese trends. In contrast, hymenologics can also be invoked as a critical or ironic comment on the author’s own culture—for instance Mexico’s patriarchal society in Castellanos’s story “The Widower Román” or China’s insistence on female and cultural purity in the face of global capitalism in Yu Hua’s novel Brothers. But whatever their cultural turn most of these examples underline that hymenologics are not merely a generally valid way of policing gender difference. Rather, in spite of similar imaginaries with and around the hymen, each representation clearly foregrounds cultural specificity by showing that the symbolic construction of the hymen relies on conjugating sexual and cultural scripts. This is even true of Derrida’s hymenal maneuvers in “The Double Session” that insist on a general theoretical valence, since the examples used—such as Stéphane Mallarmé’s Mimique, as well as the Indo-European etymologies of the word ‘hymen’—are indeed drawn from very specific cultural contexts. While cultural differences in the symbolic construction and use of the hymen matter, we cannot and should not erect hymenological differences into a binary of sexually ‘advanced’ or ‘enlightened’ cultures on the one hand and ‘retrograde’ cultures that we can frown upon on the other. Instead, we have to pay continued attention to the profoundly unequal ways in which hymenological
myths impact human lives—from the threat to a woman’s life if her virginity comes under suspicion to an adolescent’s fear that using a tampon might ‘deflower’ her—and combat their impact. It is where sexual and cultural differences intersect, collude, and diverge that the hymen and its membrane politics and symbolic charge become particularly virulent, but also subject to scrutiny. But precisely because the symbolic construction of the hymen has real consequences, we have to tread carefully around hymenologics, mindful of negotiating responsibly between the figurative and the material, the specific and the universal, the sexual and the cultural.

Notes

1. “The Double Session” is one of the essays published in the volume *Dissemination*, followed by the piece that gives the volume its name. Consequently, hymen and dissemination are implicitly paired.

2. Reconstructive surgery of the hymen is often referred to as ‘hymenoplasty,’ while strictly speaking hymenoplasty includes both hymenorraphy, i.e. the remaking of the hymen by way of sutures, and hynenotomy, surgical interventions used to open up an overly rigid hymen or one that covers over a woman’s whole vaginal opening.


4. My reading of the hymenologics in Yu Hua’s novel *Brothers* is inspired by Rojas’s analysis in *Homesickness*. Unlike Rojas’s immunological focus, my own reflections foreground the text’s play with hymenal fakery and fictitious authenticity.

**Works Cited**


Colette Soler and Slavoj Žižek both distinguish between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ forms of love. Soler does this by distinguishing between man’s and woman’s modes of producing jouissance, which she takes to be the difference between masculine and feminine forms of love. Specifically, following Lacan, Soler argues, that, even when (indeed, especially when) he is fucking, man is restricted to producing a dull masturbatory phallic jouissance, via an engagement with what Lacan calls the objet a. Woman, by contrast, has the advantage of access to an added, distinctively feminine, ‘poetic’ form of ‘other-jouissance,’ through a more direct engagement with what Lacan calls the Other (understood as the field of signifiers). Soler adds that the production of this other-jouissance comes at a serious cost: by undermining a woman’s key point of identification with the objet a, it risks driving her mad—‘ravages’ her, as Lacan says—by “dislodging [her] from the foundations provided by her identifications,” (Soler 242).

In the key point in her argument, Soler argues that this ‘ravage’ spills over from woman’s sex life—construed in terms of her production of jouissance—into her love-life (Soler 242). As a result, the difference between men’s and women’s modes of producing jouissance entails a difference between their ways of loving, which, in turn, Soler claims, manifest in differences in behavior between
men in love and women in love: man’s love, safe but lackluster; woman’s love, bold but crazy.

In *The Fragile Absolute* basing himself (as does Soler) upon Lacan’s discussion of love in *Seminar XX*, Žižek, like Soler, differentiates masculine and feminine forms of love. In particular, he says that, when it is “read in the Pauline sense,” love is “‘feminine’, it involves the paradoxes of the non-All.” Thus (as Soler does) Žižek distinguishes woman’s love from man’s, but he also makes the stronger and rather alarming suggestion that, insofar as love—‘real love’—is Pauline, it is not possible for man to love (Žižek 147).

I will argue that the assumption of a direct tie between love and the production of *jouissance*, upon which Soler bases her argument, is mistaken. In particular, following Lacan, I argue that love is what *compensates for the inadequacy of jouissance*, which, in turn, means that, rather than love and the production of *jouissance* being directly connected, love takes over, as it were, where *jouissance* fails (XX 144). More than that, I argue against both Žižek and Soler that for Lacan there is no difference between man and woman’s ways of loving. Instead, Lacan asserts, for both men and women, love takes the same form, namely a “desire to-be-One” (XX 6).

My contention that there are no differences between man’s and woman’s forms of love raises the question of how to explain the behavioral differences between men-in-love and women-in-love to which Soler points. One tempting possibility is to simply deny the behavioral differences. I follow an alternative approach: namely, for argument’s sake accepting the behavioral differences, and then exploring whether Lacanian theory might offer an alternative explanation for them—an explanation that, by contrast with Soler’s, does not simply blame them on a difference between men’s and woman’s forms of love. I will suggest such an explanation, although without necessarily endorsing the Solerian thesis that the behavioral differences that she suggests exist.

A precautionary note: It should go without saying that Soler, like Lacan, uses the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ neither for biologically defined men and woman nor for sociologically defined gender roles. Rather, for Lacan, the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ denote psychic positions from which subjects produce the *jouissance* that they
deploy strategically, on what may be a quite ad hoc basis, producing the jouissance that they use in defending against encounters with the Real. Furthermore, neither Soler nor Lacan assumes any sort of tight correlation between these psychic categories and the biological categories of the same name. In particular, in their use of these terms, they make no commitment, one way or the other, in relation to the objectionable position (of which Lacan, like Freud, is often accused) that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ exist as fixed biological types. Thus there is no question of looking for independently constituted differences between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ that explain their different modes of producing jouissance. Instead, for Lacan, the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are nothing but nominalizations of these different modes of producing jouissance.

Sex, Love, and Jouissance

Soler’s argument, I pointed out, depends upon making a direct connection between love and the production of jouissance, so that the distinction between men’s and women’s modes of producing jouissance leads to a distinction between masculine and feminine forms of love. But, at least at first sight, Lacan (upon whose views Soler bases her argument) seems to deny exactly such a connection. In Seminar XX, Lacan makes a distinction within the field of producing jouissance between, on the one hand, what he calls “the act of love,” through which, by engaging with his objet a, man produces a phallic form of jouissance, and, on the other hand, what he calls “to make love (faire l’amour), [which, he says] as the very expression indicates, is poetry,” and which Lacan associates with the production of a distinctively feminine other-jouissance (XX 72). But he then makes crystal clear that, from his point of view, there is no direct connection between what he simply calls “love” and the production of jouissance in either the (feminine) form of “making love” or the (masculine) form of “the act of love” (XX 72). In particular, he assures us, “Jouissance is not a sign of love” (XX 24, 38-39). In his earlier Seminar XI, Lacan makes this same point in even stronger terms. In particular, he affirms that the sexual partial drives, through which jouissance is produced, “come from the heart”
(the passions of the body) whereas “love . . . comes from the belly, from the world of yum-yum” (the narcissistic yumminess of the same) (XI 189).

In the light of this conflict between Soler’s argument and the Lacanian ideas that constitute her source, let us look more closely at what she and Lacan say. We begin by examining the concept of the objet a. For Lacan, the objet a constitutes a key point of identification for man and woman alike. What is the objet a? For the purposes of this article I begin with Lacan’s account in Seminar X, which says that, in the subject’s narcissistic stage, the objet a is the “remainder, this residue, this object whose status escapes the status of the object derived from the specular image [in terms of which the subject imagines his/her own body]” (X 40). In short, the objet a is that which, although presenting itself as part of the subject’s body, is omitted from the subject’s body-image, and as such stages the body as a site of lack (a lack that Lacan designates as a generalized form of ‘castration’). Lacan adds that, consequent upon entry into the symbolic order, the objet a becomes a new type of residual object, namely a site where the symbolic order fails to capture what nevertheless has being (that is, in Lacan’s terms, has “ex-istence” but not “existence”): specifically, the objet a is “what remains of the irreducible in the complete operation of the subject’s advent to the locus of the Other,” that is, to the locus of signification (X 161). In short, the objet a belongs to the category of the Real, where the symbolic order fails to account for what nevertheless is/ex-ists, rather than belonging to the category of reality where that which is falls within the reach of the symbolic order.

In Seminar XI, Lacan extends this concept of the objet a by taking it to be the site of a paradoxical form of identification for subjects, men and women alike: on the one hand, it is the most intimate part of themselves with which subjects identify (as Lacan puts it, is “in [them] more than [themselves]”); on the other hand, even as they identify with it, it is that which they exclude from their self-representations (XI 257, 263). This identification with the objet a is in tension with subjects’ other primary point of identification, namely with what Lacan (following Freud) calls their “ego-ideal:” the point of view from which subjects form an idealized image of
themselves (the “ideal-ego”) or, as Lacan puts it, “the point from which they look at themselves [as they want to be seen]” (XI 256, 144). The tension between these two identifications (to which we return later) creates a split within the subject, thereby producing the famous Lacanian “split subject”: fractured between, on the one hand, an identification with the ego-ideal and, on the other hand, an identification of what he calls “a strangely different kind” with the objet a (XI 257).

In Seminar XI Lacan further deepens his theory of the objet a, by assigning it the dual function of object-cause of the subject’s (unconscious) desire as well as object-of-the-drive around which what he calls “the partial drive” circles (en fait le tour), in the process of which jouissance is produced (XI 243, 168). As a result of this dual function of the objet a, as both object of the drive and object cause of desire, the subject’s relation to the objet a is always and already mediated (and thus screened) by the fantasy that stages the desires of which the objet a is the object-cause. This fantasy provides the subjects’ activities with (unconscious) meaning, thereby transforming the activities into signifiers through which subjects express their knowledge about their place in the world: a knowledge that, spoken by and through the body of what Lacan calls “the speaking subject,” is “unconscious” in the sense that it is in excess of what the subject “thinks” (XX 88).

A qualification to which we will return: In Seminar XI Lacan opens the possibility that the partial drive may operate in what he calls a “transgressive” mode in which it produces what he calls an “other jouissance.” Lacan leaves the nature of this transgression unclear, but at least tells us that it involves going “beyond the pleasure principle” (XI 183-4). On the basis of what Lacan says subsequently in Seminar XX, we may take him to mean here that the transgressive operation of the partial drive involves the suppression of the objet a as object of the drive, and foregrounding in its stead the signifier of lack in the Other, S(Ø), that Lacan associates with woman, and which, he assumes (again in Seminar XX) “coalesces” with the objet a in the operation of the drive (XX 84).

In Seminar XX, Lacan again extends his theory of the objet a by integrating it into a theory of sexuation. He asserts that men
and women engage differently with the objet a when it comes to the production of jouissance, a difference that is constitutive of their positions as “man” and “woman” from which they defend against encounters with the Real. To be specific, Lacan asserts that the jouissance produced by men is exclusively a phallic jouissance, which is the product of the partial drives when they are operating in accord with the pleasure principle (XX 86-88). In this process, men’s sexual partners (whether real or imagined) take on the function of objets a qua objects-of-the-drive. And since objets a also function for subjects as key points of identification, it follows that, in so far as the production of jouissance by man involves engaging with the objet a, his production of jouissance consolidates his identity. It follows too that man’s mode of gathering jouissance (which, for Lacan, is what passes for his sex life) is ultimately masturbatory. This is because in producing his jouissance, he invests his partner as his objet a. From which it follows, that, because his objet a is a key point of identification for him, he too identifies with his sexual partner. And this, in turn, means that, even when his sexual partner is someone else, man’s production of jouissance is ultimately masturbatory. In that respect we may say, with Lacan, that man’s jouissance is the “jouissance of the idiot”—not because (perish the thought) masturbation is idiotic, but rather because, even when he foolishly thinks he is doing “it” with an-other, he is doing it with himself (Soler 243; XX 81).

Woman, Lacan contends, is more flexible than man in her production of jouissance. In addition to phallic jouissance, she is able to produce an extra, distinctively feminine form of “other-jouissance,” a jouissance “en plus” (XX 77, 81-83). Its production too comes from the operation of the partial drive, but as Lacan puts it in Seminar XI, operating “transgressively, beyond the pleasure principle” (XI 183-184). I have suggested that this involves her disengaging from the objet a qua object-cause-of-desire, and therefore renouncing the desire that, along with the fantasy that stages it, is an effect of engaging with the objet a. And this, in turn, entails that woman is distanced from the meaning (and thus knowledge) of her actions that fantasy provides. As Lacan puts it, woman’s production of other-jouissance involves the “renunciation of thought itself” so that, in the arena of producing jouissance, she is “stupid,” in the sense that
“she knows nothing about it” (XX 12-13, 115). Instead, her *jouissance* involves a more direct relationship with what Lacan calls the Other *qua* the symbolic order.

To be specific, rather than playing with fantasy, she plays “poetically” with its signifiers, broken up into their component letters and stripped of their meaning. And as such, Lacan says, she “neither avows nor hides, she [merely] signifies” (XX 114). I indicated earlier that we may think of this strategy as suppressing engagement with the *objet a* in favor of foregrounding engagement with the signifier of lack in the Other (S(Ø)). Backing Heraclitus against Parmenides, Lacan then says by virtue of having access to his strategy, woman is on the “winning side” in the field of *jouissance* (XX 114).

Soler’s first key point, then, is that woman’s exclusive access to other-*jouissance* comes at a cost. By loosening her connection with the *objet a* with which she identifies, the pursuit of other-*jouissance* impoverishes her identity, to the point that, as Soler puts it, she may be “ravaged”—“destabilized,” even “annihilated” (Soler 242; Lacan, XI 257). Indeed, it is for exactly this reason, Soler asserts earlier in her book, that “except in exceptional cases, a woman [unlike man] does not make herself recognized as a woman by the number of her orgasms or the intensity of her ecstasies” (Soler 67). And, in a crucial remark, Soler then adds that “no such condition exists on man’s side, for phallic *jouissance* [to which his production of *jouissance* is restricted], far from being in opposition to the foundations of the subject’s identity, constitutes it” (Soler 243).

To summarize thus far: Soler points out that ‘man’ has access only to a phallic *jouissance*, whereas woman has access to an additional ‘feminine’ other-*jouissance*. But, Soler adds, woman’s access to this other-*jouissance* comes at a cost: namely that in so far as she avails herself of it, she loosens her connection with a key point of identification, the *objet a*. As a result, “for woman. . . at the very time when the orgasmic experience of *jouissance* is most affirmed, even most fulfilling, it never fails to destabilize the subject. . . dislodging the subject from the foundations provided by her identifications” (242). Soler then adds that this is not the case for man. To be specific, although man has access only to an inferior (phallic) form of *jouissance*, in return for his impoverished relation
to *jouissance* he is saved from the ravaging effects of the other-*jouissance* that drives woman crazy.

For present purposes, let us grant Soler’s Lacanian claims concerning the difference between men’s and women’s modes of producing *jouissance*. The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question for Soler is how to use this difference at the level of producing *jouissance*, a difference that, I indicated, is constitutive of the sexual difference between ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ to justify her proposal that men and women have different modes of loving. In order to do this, it seems, Soler must make an additional step in her argument: namely, she must prove that the production of *jouissance* (and the sex life that it underwrites) is linked to love in such a way that the difference between men’s and women’s modes of producing *jouissance* flows over into a difference between their modes of love.

And, indeed, Soler attempts to provide exactly such a proof, along the following lines: “The major subjective consequence of the other *jouissance*, even beyond its affective effects, is to be sought on the side of woman’s position in relation to love” (243). Soler then offers what she calls “a formulation” of what that relation might be: “I formulate it [woman’s position in relation to love] thus: her [woman’s] *jouissance* commits her to a logic of absolutizing love, a logic that pushes her towards an insatiable quest for the Other... to abolish herself, yes, but in the Other,” a quest that, Soler adds, ends in madness (243). Soler then draws an implicit contrast with man, whose *jouissance* is produced not in the course of (what Soler takes to be the self-destructive, maddening) “quest for the Other,” but rather via a more restrained engagement with the objet a, which avoids the specter of madness that always and already hangs over the woman in love (243).

I agree with the first part of what Soler calls her “formulation”: the claim that “her [woman’s] *jouissance* commits her to a logic of absolutizing love” (243). But I do so with an important qualification, namely that, *contra* Soler, I take it that the commitment to absolutizing love applies equally to men and to women. Why? Because, as Lacan emphasizes in *Seminar XX* (and I elaborate this point shortly) *for both men and women*, the inadequacy of the *jouissance* produced by subjects sends them down the primrose path to love, a path that, Lacan
affirms, has the benefit, indeed, the essential function, of providing subjects of both sexes with compensation for the inadequacy of their jouissance. As Lacan makes the point: “One’s jouissance of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate—perverse, on the one hand [in the case of man] in so far as the Other is reduced to object a, and crazy and enigmatic on the other [in the case of woman]. . . Isn’t it on this basis of the confrontation with this impasse [the necessary failure of the sexual relationship] . . . that love is put to the test?” (XX 144).1 Or as he puts it more succinctly elsewhere: “What makes up for [the failure of] the sexual relationship [for both women and men] is, quite precisely, love” (XX 45) where Lacan takes the inadequacy of jouissance to be equivalent to the failure of the sexual relation.2 Note that Lacan makes this same point in different terms in his discussion of “soulove” (âmour) in Seminar XX: soulove, he says, enables subjects “to bear what is intolerable in the world,” namely the failure of the sexual relation, and in that precise sense, we may say, (sou)love compensates subjects (man and woman alike) for the inadequacy of the jouissance that they manage to produce (XX 84-85).3

For my purposes, it is important to note that although, in making these remarks, Lacan differentiates between the inadequacy of men’s jouissance (which he blames upon its perversity) and the inadequacy of women’s jouissance (which he blames upon its craziness), he does not suggest a corresponding difference between the amorous compensations that men and women obtain for these inadequacies. That is, Lacan asserts that, for men and women alike, the compensation for the failure of the inadequacy of their jouissance (and a fortiori for the failure of the sexual relation) is love, but he omits any suggestion that the form taken by this compensation is any different for men than for women. My contention, then, contra Soler, is that this omission on Lacan’s part is no mere oversight, but instead an indication that, from a Lacanian point of view, there is no difference between the forms of man’s love and woman’s love. And, indeed, this is exactly what follows from the definition of love that Lacan offers early on in Seminar XX, namely that love is a desire to-be-One: “Love is. . . but the desire to-be-One” (XX 6). It is important to notice here (and this is a point upon which I focus shortly) that Lacan does
not say “Love is. . . but the desire to be Other” but instead “Love is. . . but the desire to-be-One” (emphasis mine), where the distinction between the “One” and the “Other” is one of the key distinctions around which Seminar XX circulates (XX 49, 129).4

On the basis of these comments, we can now see the error in Soler’s formulation that I introduced earlier: namely her formulation that, for woman, “the logic of absolutizing love. . . pushes her towards an insatiable quest for the Other. . . to abolish herself, yes, but in the Other” (243). If, as Lacan asserts, love is indeed the desire to-be-One (rather than a desire to-be-Other) then, contra Soler’s formulation, she should have said that the “absolutizing of love” triggers a “quest for the One” rather than (as she in fact says) that “absolutizing love” triggers a “quest for the Other.” In short, it seems that, in her formulation of “the logic of love,” Soler erroneously replaces the One with the Other, and as such illegitimately slips from the legitimate claim that woman’s pursuit of other-jouissance involves a quest for the Other to the illegitimate claim that woman’s pursuit of love involves a quest for the Other.

This surprising slip provides Soler’s proposal for a difference between men’s love and women’s love with a much needed but totally illegitimate justification. To be specific, it allows her to propose the following erroneous difference between men’s and women’s love, namely that woman’s love “pushes her [sic] towards an insatiable quest for the Other. . . to abolish herself, yes, but in the Other” (Soler 243), whereas “no such condition exists on man’s side” (Soler 243). My objection to this Solerian proposal is not to her claim that woman is engaged in an “insatiable quest for the Other” in which man takes no part, but rather to her further claim that this particular difference between man and woman’s relation to the Other makes a difference to the ways in which man and woman love.

But, despite what appears to be her momentary illegitimate substitution of the One with the Other, all is not lost for Soler’s argument. By virtue of the compensatory relation between love and the inevitable “inadequacy of jouissance” to which I pointed earlier, there is at least a correlation between the pursuit of jouissance and love, based upon the fact for which I argued earlier, namely that,
for both men and women, love is a compensation for the inadequacy of jouissance, and as such love will make an appearance whenever jouissance is produced. Let us now strengthen this weak, one sided correlation between love and jouissance by supposing that love only ever appears when it is plays this compensatory role for what Lacan calls the “inadequacy of jouissance.”

A consequence of the strengthened correlation between jouissance and a compensatory love is that the propensity to craziness that, Soler argues, attaches to woman’s pursuit of other-jouissance will also attach to her love that, by compensating her for the inadequacy of her jouissance, is correlated with her collection of jouissance. It follows, however, that, rather than (as Soler asserts) woman’s propensity to craziness being the direct result of her unique form of love, it attaches to her loving only because of the combination between (a) the correlation of love with the production of jouissance and (b) a propensity for craziness being the result of the production of other-jouissance to which she and she alone has access. In short, woman’s love-madness comes at second-hand so to speak: an effect of her production of other-jouissance, which, in turn, is correlated with her love.

In sum, this means that, contra Soler, the difference in behavior between woman-in-love and man-in-love, specifically the craziness of woman that man avoids (because his production of jouissance is restricted to phallic jouissance) is not (as Soler claims) a reflection of a deeper difference between man’s and woman’s ways of loving. On the contrary, man’s love and woman’s love have exactly the same form—both of them, Lacan says, a matter of the desire to-be-One with the beloved. This means that the differences in behavior between man-in-love and woman-in-love are explained not (as Soler suggests) by differences between man and woman’s forms of love, but rather by more fundamental difference between men’s and women’s modes of collecting jouissance, which, in turn, are correlated with their being in love.

To make the point in more general terms: men are less sensitive to the disturbing effects of love not because their experience of love is different from—for example, less sharp than—women’s love. On the contrary, love is the same experience for both men and women,
namely a desire to-be-One. Rather it is a case of men and women producing jouissance differently, and this, in turn, causing the difference between their behavioral responses to being in love.\textsuperscript{5}

**LOVE AND Jouissance**

The Solerian claim with which I have agreed (and which was essential to my alternative explanation of the difference in behavior between men-in-love and women-in-love) is that woman’s production of other-jouissance has the potential to drive her mad, a feature that, Soler adds, differentiates woman’s production of jouissance from man’s. But Soler also says, in apparent contradiction with this last claim, that “the solitary jouissance of the phallic . . . commands effects that push love to madness,” and, since phallic jouissance is man’s jouissance, it entails that man too is driven mad by love (Soler 241).

On reflection, however, it seems that Soler is operating with two different senses of madness here. The “madness” that she associates with woman is a matter of the destabilizing effects of feminine jouissance upon woman as subject, whereas the production of phallic jouissance by man “pushes [his] love to madness” in a quite different sense. To be specific, because, unlike woman, he is restricted to the production of a “barely (juste)” adequate phallic form of jouissance, the inadequacy of his jouissance is greater than woman’s (XX 64). And this, in turn, means that in the case of man there are greater demands placed upon the compensatory apparatus of love, ‘pushing it to madness’ not in the sense of making him crazy by loosening his ties to the ‘foundations of his identity,’ but instead by placing a burden upon his love (namely compensating for his pathetic jouissance) to which it is not equal.

In short, I agree with Soler that the deficiency of man’s love is not because he cannot love. But I diverge from Soler by suggesting that the cause of this deficiency is that the compensation his love offers for the inadequacy of the jouissance that he produces is less satisfactory than the compensation that woman’s love offers for the inadequacy of the jouissance that she produces: less satisfactory not because man’s love is different from woman’s love, but rather
because woman has access to a supplementary, distinctively feminine other-*jouissance*, which means that her love faces fewer demands than man’s love in compensating for the inadequacy of her *jouissance*.

A second complication: Except for a single quotation from Lacan (that love is “the desire to-be-One”) my argument so far has sidestepped a key question, namely, “What is love?” On occasions, Lacan appears relatively clear on this point (and here I expand the previous quotation):

> Love is impotent but it is mutual because it is not aware that it is but the desire to-be-One, which leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between ‘them-two’ (*la relation d’eux*) . . . the impossibility of establishing as such, anywhere in the enunciable, the sole One that interests us, the One of the relation ‘sexual relationship’” (XX 6-7).

Here Lacan defines the relationship of loving an-other to be the desire to-be-One with that other, specifically a relationship of One-ness that Lacan calls “the sexual relationship” (XX 6). And although the “sexual relationship” that love desires is, according to Lacan, not possible, the meta-relationship of desiring that relationship is quite possible, indeed (with a little bit of luck) it gets to be actualized in people’s love for each other. Lacan immediately qualifies this definition of love, however, by adding a more apocryphal remark: “love, in its essence, is narcissistic, and reveals that the substance of what is supposedly object like (*objectal*)—what a bunch of bull[shit]—is in fact that which constitutes a remainder in desire, namely, its cause, and sustains desire through its lack of satisfaction (*insatisfaction*), and even its impossibility” (XX 6). What is he getting at here?

In this remark Lacan recalls points that he emphasizes in his earlier seminars, concerning the aetiology but also the function of love. In particular, he takes a subject’s love for another love to be the result of the subject giving to an-other something of himself, which (if only in the very act of giving it) becomes excremental, *but even so* finding that the other accepts the gift. To be specific, the lover gifts
the beloved with the objet a that he doesn’t have (because, like a turd, he rejects/ejects it) and, although she too may not think much of it, accepts the gift (which is why, as Žižek points out, the act of love is such hard work). As Lacan puts it: “love is giving what one doesn’t have [because one has rejected it] to someone who doesn’t want it [but accepts it all the same]” (Žižek 128; Lacan XII, session of March 17, 1965).

But more is involved in the love relationship than merely giving the objet a to an-other. In Seminar XI, Lacan indicates that in order to love others (and of course there may be several of them), the lover places them (whether they like it or not) in the position of his/her ego-ideal, namely, the position from which he/she looks back at him/herself for approval: “by clinging to the reference-point [of the ego-ideal] the subject sees appearing. . . that point at which he desires to gratify himself in himself. . . [It is] from there [that is, from the reference-point of the ego-ideal] that he will feel himself both satisfactory and loved” (XI 257). In particular the lover looks to the beloved for approval of the gift of the objet a that the lover gives them, despite the fact that (as I indicated earlier) in the very process of giving it, the gift turns into shit (what in the previous quotation Lacan refers to as “a bunch of bull”): “I give myself to you. . . but this gift of my person—as they say—Oh, mystery! is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit” (XI 268). And, in return for their approval of this shitty gift of him/herself (if it is forthcoming), the lover extends his/her love to who/what-ever occupies the position of ego-ideal, and will do so even if the lucky/luckless occupants of the position have no idea of the honor/onus being bestowed upon him/her (XI 257). To put this is more stereotypical terms: the insecure lover looks for approval from the beloved for what, in the very act of giving it to her, he has come to find questionable about himself. In short, we may say, the lover turns to the beloved for permission to find himself loveable.

On the basis of what the lover takes to be the beloved’s qua ego-ideal’s acceptance of the gift of the objet a, it [the gift] is, from the lover’s point of view, sublimated: to be specific, elevated to the sacred from what, in the process of giving it, has become the excremental—a “rebirth” as it were. Indeed, we might say, it is precisely in return for this celebration of his gift, and a fortiori of
himself (since the gift is a part of himself), that the subject extends his loves to the other in the sense of desiring-to-be-One with her. Note that the beloved’s acceptance of the gift does not entail approval. On the contrary, she may be no less aware of the shitty nature of the gift than the lover who gives it, but even so, like the mother who gets the crappy birthday present from her child, she accepts it. Note too, that the acceptance in question may be more in the eye of the giver than the receiver: more a matter of the ego-ideal’s reaction to the gift being read as an acceptance than active acceptance, let alone approval.

Note finally the interesting change that takes place in the shift from sex to love: I indicated earlier that in his sex life, specifically in the production of jouissance via the partial drives, a subject (a male subject) takes his sexual partner as objet a, and a fortiori as a point of identification. In love, it is different—and here we see the incompatibility between sex and love: the lover (and this applies equally to men and women) does not identify the target of his affections with the objet a, but instead takes the beloved as the primary, narcissistic object of identification, namely the ego-ideal. Instead of the object of love, the objet a becomes the gift of love that the lover gives to the beloved.

In sum, for Lacan, a subject’s love for another is nothing but the desire-to-be-One-with-her, which results from her accepting the objet a that the subject has given to her in her role as his ego-ideal (XX 6). It follows that, contrary to what some commentators write (see my discussion of McGowan and Copjec below) the subject does not direct his love to the objet a, but instead, as a result of her approving the gift of the objet a directs it to the ego-ideal. Specifically, the objet a functions not as the loved object, but rather as object-cause of the love that Lacan says is desire-to-be-One.

It is important to note that this account of love does not seem to chime with some of the remarks that Lacan makes elsewhere, especially in his earlier works. For example, in Seminar VII he writes: “How is it that that the [objet] a, the object of identification, is also a, the object of love?” (X 117). And he replies to this rhetorical question that the objet a performs its function as an “instrument of love inasmuch as. . . one loves, when one is a lover, with what one hasn’t
got” to which he adds: “this a that we ain’t got no more [n’a plus] can be found again along the regressive path of identification in the form of the identification with being it [rather than having it]”. Here Lacan takes the objet a as the instrument of love, indeed the loved object that one loves in so far as one does not have it. But Lacan immediately qualifies this by maintaining that this identification with the objet a is displaced by what he takes to be a regressive form of identification with what (in the context that he writes) can only be the ego-ideal, with which the subject identifies (in the narcissistic stage) on the basis of what he is, rather than what he has. So again, it is the ego-ideal rather than the objet a that is at the forefront of the relation of love.

On the account that I am offering here, how exactly does love qua the desire-to-be-One emerge from the transaction between a lover and a beloved, in which the lover gifts the objet a to the beloved who is situated in the role of ego-ideal? For Lacan, love, understood as the desire-to-be-One, emerges from this transaction as an effect of the objet a that the lover gives to the beloved, operating in its role as what Lacan calls “the object cause of desire.” Of course, to say this, as Lacan does, merely by referring to the objet a as “object cause of desire” is one thing; but to explain the process by which the cause of desire operates, and produces a particular form of love, with a particular content, namely the desire to-be-One, is quite another. To do this we must take a step back, and explore the function of love rather than its cause in the ritual gift of the objet a.

Lacan, we have seen, argues that the function of love is to compensate for what he calls “the inadequacy of the subject’s jouissance”—an inadequacy that he equates with what he calls “the failure of the sexual relation”—and which, he adds, despite the difference between their modes of producing jouissance, is the same for man as for woman (XX 144): “one’s jouissance of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate—perverse, on the one hand, insofar as [in the case of man] the Other is reduced to objet a, and crazy and enigmatic on the other. . . Isn’t it on the basis of the confrontation with this impasse, with this impossibility by which a real is defined, that love is put to the test?” (XX 144).

How, then, does love function as a compensation for the
inadequacy of jouissance, and in what sense is there an inadequacy in jouissance in the first place? Subjects (both men and women) produce jouissance as a means of distraction from their primal lack. We may think of this lack as embodied in the subjects’ failure to satisfy their needs, a failure that subjects subsequently interiorize as their own lack, specifically the lack of something that, were they to have it, would make them One/whole. Lacan’s name for this interiorized lack of the subject’s body, is “castration” (X 89-90). The production of jouissance performs the function, then, of a distraction from—and in that sense a primary repression of—this lack. And, by extension, we conclude that what Lacan calls “the inadequacy of jouissance” is a matter of this distraction failing to adequately screen the lack. In short, the production of jouissance represses the lack, but, as in all cases of repression, the repressed always and already returns. This inevitable return of the repressed is what Lacan means by his claim that all subjects, men and women alike, sunder/cannot totally evade the phallic function of castration (XX 71, 79).

Love, as the desire-to-be-One, steps into the breach created by this inadequacy of jouissance/failure of the sexual relation. How does it do this? In particular, how does it help out the repression of lack/castration when the distractions of jouissance prove inadequate to the task? Love does this, Lacan asserts, not by distraction but by deception. In particular, Lacan argues, thanks to the “symptoms and affect” through which it is manifested, love “momentarily gives the illusion that the sexual relationship stops not being written” [that is, momentarily gives the illusion that the lack from which jouissance distracts us no longer exists]. Lacan continues that “there,” in the creation of this comforting illusion, “lies the point of suspension to which all love is attached” (XX 145).

In sum, in the course of the emergence of an act of love, the objet a shifts between dual roles. First, it takes on the role of object of the partial drive, through which the subjects produce the jouissance that distracts them from their primal lack. And because traces of the repressed originary lack always and already return, breaking through the distractions of jouissance, the jouissance proves to be inadequate (as a distraction). As a result, subjects try a different form of distraction: namely deceiving themselves with the illusion
of their One-ness, and it is here that love enters the fray, via a role-change for the objet a: to be specific, in its role as object-cause of desire, the objet a triggers love qua desire to-be-One, which, “momentarily” creates the “illusion” of Oneness (XX 145).

The outlines of this process are evident in the Fort-Da game that Freud’s infant grandson played, yanking a cotton reel to and fro, in and out of sight from the frontier of his cradle. By providing him with a certain jouissance, the game compensated him for, and thus distracted him from, his primary lack (qua his originary failure to satisfy his needs) which, we may speculate, began with his weaning or perhaps, less traumatically, merely with his mother not always coming when he cried: “For the game of the cotton-reel is the subject’s answer to what the mother’s absence has created. . . namely a ditch around which one can only play at jumping” (XI 62).

But, as usual, the compensation provided by jouissance was inadequate. (As Lacan puts it in Seminar XX, the “jouissance. . . is always inadequate,” specifically inadequate as a distraction from the subject’s primary lack [XX 144]). How do we know this in the case of the Fort-Da? Because a residue of the lack returned in the form of desire, as a result of which, Lacan tells us in moving terms, the outline of the child’s mother was “made up with the brush-stroked and gouaches of desire” (XI 63). And, Lacan implies, it is precisely through this process that the infant entered the lists of desire. To be specific, Lacan implies that as a result of the child’s attention to the game that he was playing, his originary lack, qua unanswered need, was transformed into a desire-to-be-One with the mother. In short, we may take Lacan as suggesting that the cotton reel started out as an objet a, qua object of the drive, around which a scopic partial drive formed as the cotton reel flashed to and fro across the child’s visual field. But the game, and the jouissance that it produced, proved to be an inadequate distraction. And as such, a residue of the originary lack persisted, returning in the form of a desire for the Mother—specifically a desire-to-be-One with her. In short, rather than the objet a remaining an object of the drive, which was providing insufficient distraction for the child, the objet a shifted into the role of object-cause of desire and triggered a burst of love that bolstered the child’s inadequate defenses.
In making these points about love, I strongly disagree with Todd McGowan’s claim that love is a disruptive rather than a “consoling passion”: “when we love... it bombards us with a series of traumatic jolts that preclude any piece of mind. Our very symbolic identity loses its stable coordinates” (McGowan 191). I also disagree with his separating love from desire, in particular with his claim that, although “love necessarily begins with desire, it doesn’t end there... removes the subject from the terrain of desire” (McGowan 180). And finally, I reject McGowan’s claim (which he takes from Joan Copjec) that the loved object is the objet a (from which he draws the conclusion that, because the objet a is a little piece of the Real, an encounter with it will be a disruptive encounter with the Real): “According to Joan Copjec, ‘when one loves something, one loves something in it that is more than itself’” (McGowan 180; Copjec 79), a point that McGowan repeats in saying “The beloved object’s response gives love its disruptiveness. In love what we can’t see [namely the gaze qua objet a] reaches back towards us” (McGowan 187).

By contrast with Copjec and McGowan, rather than taking the loved object as the objet a, I take it to be the ego-ideal, an encounter with which is comforting rather than disruptive. And correspondingly (again by contrast with McGowan and Copjec) I take the objet a to serve the function of object cause of love (qua the desire that is love) rather than, following McGowan and Copjec in taking it to be the loved-object. And finally, by contrast with McGowan and in accord with Lacan’s formula that “Love is... but the desire to-be-One,” I totally integrate love and desire (XX 6).

Note, however, that I am not denying McGowan’s further claim that, on occasions—in particular on the fictional occasions that he draws from cinema—love can and does have disruptive effects (McGowan 192-196). Rather my point, contra McGowan, is directed against his stronger claim that disruption is a necessary aspect of love. Rejecting this stronger claim enables me to make the main point that I am interested in here, namely that, in encounters with the Real that breach the defense of producing jouissance, love plays a comforting, compensatory role.

The key Lacanian points that I extract from this discussion of
love is that a subject’s love, *qua* his/her desire-to-be-One, functions as a compensation for the inadequacy of his/her *jouissance*, a compensation that develops through the bizarre little ritual of the subject giving away his/her objet *a* to his ego-ideal. Furthermore, despite woman’s access to an extra “other-*jouissance*,” both men’s and women’s production of *jouissance* is ‘inadequate’ in the sense that for neither of them does the production of their *jouissance* fully screen (distract from) the primary lack that is at the heart of their being. And finally, in both the case of man and woman, the effects of this ‘inadequacy’ in creating compensatory acts of love are exactly the same. That is, in both cases the inadequacy has the effect of shifting the role of the objet *a* from an object of the partial drive (by which *jouissance* is produced) to an object-cause of the desire that produces a desire-to-be-One that constitutes the relation of love. Each of us, we may add, will then adapt this desire to fit into a fantasy setting ‘of our own choosing,’ drawn from the (surprisingly limited) pool of fantasies that are open to all of us, men and women alike—fantasies that include the Platonic fantasy of a quest for one’s missing other-half, or Lacan’s fantasy of an asexual “soullove” (“âmour”), or (an old Hollywood favorite) the selfless, hopeless devotion of the attentive friend (XX 144, 84-85).^7^

In the context of making these points about love, Lacan is at pains to distinguish love from the expression of a subject’s “sexuality,” which (in *Seminar XI*) he defines to be the production of *jouissance* via the partial drives (XI 177), but which we may think of more generally as the production of *jouissance* by any means, including the production of the ‘non-sexual’ other-*jouissance* through which woman is able to “get off” (XX 76). Less controversially, he also distinguishes love from the biological finality of sex, in which reproduction and copulations take the driver’s seat. Unfortunately, Lacan’s terminology tends to confuse these otherwise clear distinctions between love, sexuality and copulation, a confusion that is consolidated by Lacan calling the production of phallic *jouissance* “the act of love,” and the production of other-*jouissance* “making love” (XX 72). This terminological confusion surrounding the term ‘love’ is compounded by the common usage of the term ‘making love’ as a euphemism for the physiological domain of sex,
including fucking, orgasms, and biological reproduction, which Lacan is careful to distinguish from what he calls the domain of ‘sexuality’ *qua* the production of *jouissance* (while allowing, of course, that on occasions, contingently, the production of *jouissance* may result in a subject ‘getting off’) (XX 72).

These terminological confusions concerning ‘love,’ and the related confusions between the different uses that Lacan makes of the term ‘sex’ make it difficult to determine exactly what he means when he talks of love (or, for that matter, when he talks of sex). In order to minimize this confusion, we distinguish between three areas in which Lacan talks about ‘love’:

1. a physiological/biological infrastructure of ‘sex,’ centered upon fucking, orgasm and reproduction, which encompasses ‘making love’ in the popular sense
2. what Lacan calls ‘sexuality’ that is concerned with the production of *jouissance*, and as such includes the partial drives, which, he says, are “partial with regard to the biological finality of sexuality,” and which he takes to include “the act of love” (on man’s side) and “making love” (on woman’s side) (XI 177, XX 72)
3. desire and fantasy, which includes love *qua* the desire-to-be-One that Lacan equates with a desire for what he calls “the sexual relation,” but also includes what Lacan calls “soullove” which is a matter of friends recognizing the courage with which they bear the intolerable failure of their sexual relation.

I have followed what seems to be Lacan’s primary use of the term ‘love’ and restrict it to the third of these senses, specifically the desire to-be-One. On this basis, we may say, contra both Žižek and Soler, that, for Lacan, love (by contrast with the modes of producing *jouissance* and intercourse) is not sexuated, but on the contrary is a desire to-be-One that transcends the sexuated distinction between man and woman.
CONCLUSION

The question I have been addressing—the question raised by Soler’s proposal—is how love in this last sense defined by Lacan, namely as desire to-be-One, intersects with the sexuated psychic profiles that Lacan designates as ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ In particular, the question is whether Soler is correct to propose that there is a significant difference between a form of love that is woman’s and a form of love that is man’s, which is responsible for (what she alleges are) the behavioral differences between “woman in love” and “man in love.” I have argued that, whatever one may think of her claim that men in love behave differently from woman in love, Soler’s proposal of a difference between man’s love and woman’s love is incorrect. Both men and women alike, I have argued, love in accord with the same psychic structure: namely via a desire to-be-One with the beloved that is triggered by the lover gifting his or her objet a to the beloved, whom the lover places in the position of ego-ideal.

Notes

1. In this context, it is interesting to note that, in his earlier Seminar X, Lacan presents the production of jouissance as, if not a compensation for, then at least “the price to be paid for... being saddled with the Other’s miscarriage” (by which he means the subject’s castration) (X 266). In this earlier seminar, however, he says this only of woman rather than of man; indeed, presents this point as a reason why “woman has to take her jouissance down a peg or two” (X 266).

2. To put it simply: the production of jouissance distracts subjects from, and thus represses, the originary lack of “Oneness” that is entailed by their failure to satisfy their needs. But the distraction provided by jouissance is always and already inadequate, with the result that traces of the repressed failure to-be-One always and already return. It is these returning traces of the failure to-be-one that Lacan calls the failure of the sexual relation (XX 6). And because these persistent traces result from the inadequacy of the distraction offered by jouissance, it follows that, what Lacan calls “the inadequacy of jouissance” is equivalent to the failure of the sexual relation.

3. The idea of love as a compensatory spin-off from the inadequacy of jouissance takes on additional plausibility when, as Lacan proposes, (a) the inadequacy of jouissance is equivalent to the failure of the sexual relation, qua the failure to-be-
One, and (b) love is equivalent to the desire to-be-One. To put it bluntly, if you cannot actually be the One you must be in order to satisfy your needs, then it seems the best but also the most you can do is desire to-be-One. (For a discussion of (b), see the previous footnote).

4. To put it very roughly, the One is the imaginary unity that the subject loses through its originary introduction to lack that is consequent upon its failure to satisfy its needs (embodied, for example, in the dry or absent breast of the nursing mother); the Other, by contrast, is the field of signifiers, or, equivalently the sum total of what can be said. The gap between these is evident in the fact that not everything that is can be said; in other words, there is always a point of failure in the field of Other.

5. Note that in this generalized form of my argument, the strong correlation of love and jouissance that I proposed plays no role. It merely strengthens the connection between differences in love behavior and being in love, from being a mere correlation to a constant conjunction.

6. Note that this is consistent with the concept of unrequited love. That is, even if the beloved protests that she has no interest in, even hates, the lover, the lover may persist in his “unrequited” love for her by insisting that, whether the lover knows it or not, she finds something in him that attracts her.

7. Interestingly, Lacan singles out “soulove” as the nearest approach to realizing the quest that love, qua the desire for One-ness, initiates. He asks by virtue of what do friends (philos) soulove each other? It is, Lacan tells us, by virtue of recognizing in each other the courage to bear the intolerable: namely the impossibility of achieving One-ness with each other (XX 85). Lacan adds, “this ethics [namely an ethics of soulove] is manifestly ‘beyond sex’ (hors-sexe),” by which he means that it has nothing to do with the production of jouissance. On the contrary, like love, soulove takes over from, indeed compensates for, jouissance at the point where its inadequacy becomes apparent.

8. Lacan’s effort to make an in principle distinction between biological sex and the psychic process of producing jouissance is evident in Seminar XI where he indicates that the partial drives are “partial with regard to the biological finality of sexuality” (XI 177). It is it is also evident in Seminar X, where Lacan says “In no way did I say that the satisfaction of orgasm was to be identified with what I defined, in the Seminar on the ethics, with regard to the locus of jouissance” (X 262). Although, it must also be said that, as Soler reminds us, Lacan changes his mind about the opposition between sex and sexuality in Seminar XIII: “The orgasm, like the symptom, is an emergence of jouissance in the space of the subject, as Lacan said in the session of April 27, 1966” (Soler 242).
Works Cited


Two art exhibitions concerning different representations of the human body set the scene for this paper: *Body Worlds*, Gunther Von Hagens’ unprecedented public display of ‘plastinated’ human corpses, and *Cloaca*, Wim Delvoye’s mechanical and electronic installation replicating the functions of the human digestive system, from swallowing to elimination. One might imagine that *Body Worlds*, an exhibit that encourages visitors to confront their ‘deathly doubles,’ would provoke horror and that a machine designed to eat and excrete would be regarded by viewers as little more than a novelty. However, accounts of the reception of these two installations reveal the unexpected. Media reports of visitors’ responses to *Body Worlds* indicate fascination but provide very few, if any, markers of a traumatic encounter. *Cloaca*, by contrast, seems to provoke a surprisingly disturbing effect among viewers. As one critic observed: “visitors walked out with a strange look on their faces, as if they’d just paid a visit to the devil... At a school visit, a little girl burst into tears in front of the machine” (Fiers).

I will suggest that although *Body Worlds* was heralded in the media as a spectacle of ‘the living dead,’ it reveals instead a comforting fantasy of the dead living. Rather than confront us with the chilling realization that we are beings heading towards death, the ‘plastinates’ uphold the ultimate symbolic fiction—that we can survive our own death. This comforting thought is expressed by comments made by people who have agreed to donate their bodies...
upon their death to Von Hagens’ Institute for Plastination. One donor, for example, describes his or her reason for choosing to be plastinated after death in these terms: “The thought of being buried in the earth after my death is a horrible one as far as I’m concerned, because I am completely disgusted by worms and grow panicky when I think of them. Now I can relax about the issue, though, since I can stay above ground after my death.” The donor here speaks about death not only as if he will live through it, but also as if he will remain saddled by his earthly phobias—a frightening new twist on the persistence of the symptom. Von Hagens’ corpses, in this sense, affirm a subjectivity insulated from intrusion by the Other.

Even for those, like myself, who did not take comfort in the exhibit, but rather found the display of corpses disturbing, I suggest that the exhibit nevertheless serves a self-protecting function. For Julia Kristeva, the corpse and dung occupy a special category of the abject: objects that “stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (Kristeva 71). She places these in opposition to a second category of the abject associated with “the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual),” of which menstrual blood is paradigmatic (71).

Within this first category of the abject as external danger, Kristeva makes a critical distinction between the corpse and dung as forms of the abject, by setting apart the corpse as the “utmost of abjection” (4). All other abject forms share a self-recuperative potential in that they, in Kristeva’s words, “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). The expulsion of the abject object thus helps to guarantee the integrity of the subject who does the expelling. The corpse, by contrast, annihilates the border between “the place where I am not and which permits me to be;” it operates as a “border that has encroached upon everything . . . It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (4).

But in comparing Cloaca and Body Worlds, we encounter a reversal of Kristeva’s expectations. Here, the seemingly entertaining dung-producing machine, Cloaca functions more like the corpse does for Kristeva than the actual corpses used in Body Worlds. Thus, Body Worlds and Cloaca present us with two different forms of encounter
between subject and object: whereas *Body Worlds* presents us with the threat of the other that lurks within, *Cloaca* confronts us with a more radically desubjectifying encounter with the subject that lurks beyond. Or to put it in other terms, *Body Worlds* presents us with the object in you, but *Cloaca* confronts us with the recognition that you are in the object.

**Mimesis, Mimicry, and Minimal Difference**

In order to develop this line of inquiry, we must first consider the ways in which the plastinated corpses and the shitting machine are like us—what representational forms and methods enable them to appear in some sense as our doubles? It seems that *Body Worlds* presents us with a fairly straightforward case of mimetic realism— the plastinates look like us. They not only resemble us under our skin, but they also mimic our daily pastimes, from playing basketball to chess. For Jeremy Bentham, who had his own body preserved and displayed after his death, the preserved corpse is the ideal embodiment of the subject—constituting what he called an “auto-icon.” As Miran Božovič explains, for Bentham, “Since nothing resembles an individual as well as that individual represents him or himself, the bodies of the dead need to be preserved as their own most adequate representations” (86). *Cloaca*, by contrast, is characterized by an anti-mimetic form of realism—what we might call a functional realism. As Delvoye puts it, the “shocking thing is that it doesn’t look like a human being…It is like a wheel. The wheel isn’t trying to look like your feet, but it does the same thing as…feet do” (Delvoye).

It would appear to follow that *Body Worlds*’ mimetic realism, with its potential for blurring the boundaries between self and other, would bring the threat of death near to viewers. For Roger Callois, mimicry, in its strongest form, involves a “drive to indistinction” (Foster 164). But, Jacques Lacan argues, mimicry, as it pertains to animals in the natural world, should not be seen simply “in terms of adaptation” or self-preservation (Lacan, XI 73). What should be emphasized in
the case of an insect blending into its surrounding environment is its engagement in a self-annihilating practice—a giving up of the boundaries that separate the organism from the environment—the self from the other (Homer 22). Denis Hollier complicates Callois’s account of mimesis as a “threat to difference,” by stressing that the insect “can only play dead because it is alive” (Hollier 13). Lacan, too, highlights this significant dimension of mimicry in arguing that “mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind” (Lacan XI, 99). This position illuminates the way that “resemblance” and “identity” function as differential terms: because the plastinates exhibited in Body Worlds resemble us but, they must not be us—this palpable distinction reminds us not of our impending death, but rather of how very alive we are. “Mimesis,” as Hollier puts it, “pretends to announce the end of differences . . . but only the better to reserve the vital difference” (13).

Miran Božovič contrasts this position to Bentham’s concept of the auto-icon, in which a thing best resembles itself, by pointing out, “a thing does not look like itself”—it is itself.” Here, as in Hollier’s account, resemblance “guarantees Non-Identity,” rather than identity. Indistinction, paradoxically, becomes a marker of difference, rather than sameness. At first sight, this move might seem analogous to the argument that mimicry functions as a self-protective mode, which Callois and Lacan reject. But a key difference separates Hollier’s account from traditional arguments regarding the adaptive function of mimicry: For Hollier, the self-protection offered by indistinction is gained not through the denial of difference, but rather through the very assertion of difference.

An example from the sitcom Seinfeld helps us to see how this phenomenon works: Jerry’s friend, George, often calls him for help when he gets into ridiculous predicaments that could only happen to George—that are quintessentially George (such as when he calls to ask Jerry to call in a bomb threat to his office in order to avoid being caught napping under his desk). As soon as Jerry answers the phone, George immediately blurts out his problem to which Jerry responds, with exaggerated mock-surprise, “Who is this?” This comical gesture engages with the psychoanalytic
tenet of how a too-close resemblance confirms difference; when it could only ever be George, then of course it can’t be George. The joke works by highlighting that when resemblance is too complete, we have encountered an excess—the objet a, which marks the thing that is “in you more than yourself” (Žižek, 2006 18). This acknowledgment points to the fact that the Other is within.

We see the inverse of this logic at work in Michael Frayn’s 1999 novel, Headlong, in which the protagonist desperately wants to believe that a painting he has come across is a lost masterpiece by Pieter Bruegel. When his research leads to ever-mounting anomalies between his painting and Bruegel’s known works, rather than be discouraged by these inconsistencies, he reads them as support for his belief that he must indeed have a genuine Breugel. How could it not be a Bruegel, he reasons, when it goes to such lengths to distinguish itself from a Bruegel? In this case, it is difference that confirms its authentic identity.

Božovič unites these opposing logics through Lacan’s account of the dual nature of the subject’s relationship to the signifier. The signified, in one sense, Lacan contends, “petrifies” the subject by reducing its “being” into “meaning.” As Lacan explains, “When the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as ‘fading,’ as disappearance.” Yet at the same time, the subject is nonetheless the subject of the signified, in the sense of being fully subjected to it through our utter dependence on the symbolic system—the “big Other” (Lacan, XI 217; 218). Since this system exists prior to our arrival, it always remains in some sense alien to us. As Sean Homer describes, “this Other can never be fully assimilated to the subject; it is a radical otherness which, nevertheless, forms the core of our unconscious” (44). The Seinfeld and Frayn examples highlight the signifier’s inverse methods of commuting difference and equivalence. First, through the Seinfeld example, we encounter the signifier creating difference out of what appears to be sameness. Rather than possess an intrinsic identity, the subject relies upon the precarious signifier—an entity whose relationships are held together by nothing more than mere convention—to provide the illusion of identity. Lacan demonstrates this function of the signifier through his well-known story of a brother and a sister, sitting face to face on a
train next to the window. The train comes to stop, leaving the children to look out at the platform upon which stands a set of bathrooms, side by side. As Lacan tells it: ‘Look,’ says the brother, ‘we’re at Ladies!; ‘Idiot!’ replies his sister, ‘Can’t you see we’re at Gentlemen’” (Ecrits 152). Only through the differences between their respective signifiers, the words “ladies” and “gentlemen,” do the two apparently identical lavatory doors take on distinct meanings. Like subjects, the doors are not inherently differentiated; it is only the signifier that provides the illusion of difference.

In Body Worlds, we primarily encounter the signifier in its function as making differences through the palpable recognition in the visitor that these organic bodies at which we look are not the same as the ones from which we see. Jacques-Alain Miller sheds additional light on this phenomenon through his discussion of the split that occurs during the mirror stage: “It’s as if this visual totality, staggered by the relationship to the being there . . . of its organism, was not a vital image but an already anticipated cadaver” (Miller 35). He continues by crediting the signifier with “allow[ing] the human animal to imagine himself as mortal . . . to anticipate his death.” But the signifier not only enables us to see ourselves as mortal beings, it also provides a symbolic framework for keeping the horror of that immanence at bay. These two complementary functions of the signifier illuminate a key difference between Lacan’s psychoanalytic account and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective regarding discussions of the mirror stage. As Vivian Sobchack puts it, Lacan emphasizes the “being seen”—the “object-me” in the glass—over the “seeing being,”—the “subject-I,”—which is only constituted retroactively. For Merleau-Ponty, although the mirror stage primes us for seeing ourselves as objects, it nevertheless privileges the “seeing I” over the “object me.” Subjectivity, in this account, is buoyed up by an encounter with the object-self, by highlighting that what is required for us to recognize the object-me is a corporeal, “bodily presence before it” (Sobchack 120). In the case of Body Worlds, this gap between subject and object is reinforced by the plastinates’ sterility: although they are indeed human cadavers, they lack any visceral markers of corporeality.

The signifier’s logic may strike us as more disturbing, however,
when carrying out its inverse function—creating sameness out of difference. We see this second mode of the signifier in operation in Frayn’s *Headlong* where the painting was identified as a Bruegel through its very attempts at distinguishing itself from Bruegel’s usual style. The ability to create sameness out of difference marks the uncanny logic of the signifier which operates in *Cloaca*. As Ferdinand de Saussure emphasizes, there is no intrinsic identity between words and concepts; it is only the differential relationship among signs that enables the correspondence between words and concepts to emerge—that performs the function of making them appear the same. By contrast with *Body Worlds*’ sanitized corpses, which lack any visceral emanation, the mechanical *Cloaca* exhibits the mess and smell associated with the corporeal. In this sense, it is so much more like the untidy bodies that we occupy than the sterile plastinates that we encounter. It facilitates an encounter with the self as object through a non-mimetic, and specifically functional, realism. Support for this view can be found in the reaction of visitors to *Cloaca* who, according to Delvoye, applaud “when the machine shits,” an event which is not purely ocular but an olfactory experience as well (Delvoye). Sigmund Freud notes in *Civilization and its Discontents* that although we are disgusted by the smell of another’s shit, we are not bothered by the smell of our own. Perhaps, thus, we identify more intimately with this machine than we do with our fellow human beings. *Cloaca*, it seems, facilitates a disturbingly uncanny encounter with the same when we expect nothing more than an amusing novelty of difference.

But this encounter with “sameness,” I argue, operates beyond the register of mimesis and occurs at the more disruptive level of mimicry. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha’s distinction, mimesis functions as a form of representation “in the order of the model/copy,” whereas mimicry is a repetition “in the realm of the simulacrum” (Hart 86). The plastinates in *Body Worlds*, as we have argued, can be seen as mimetic copies of their spectators—albeit mimetic copies which ultimately assert spectators’ distinction from them. This claim reinforces a view of verisimilitude in which a copy may be judged according to its fidelity to an original. But, if we draw upon Bhabha’s insights, we encounter a view of mimicry which differs from a
mimetic representational form that reproduces an original without altering it. Rather than merely instigating a question regarding the relationship between two distinct entities (as *Body Worlds* does via mimesis) mimicry serves the more disruptive function of revealing the “non-coincidence of the same with itself” (Žižek, 2004 85). Whereas the mimetic copy preserves, rather than threatens, self-identity, the simulacral product of mimicry disrupts the stability of the model itself. Through repetition, mimicry performs a simulacral operation of calling into question the identity of an original with itself. In this sense, while *Body Worlds* preserves “the vital” difference between subject and object, *Cloaca* challenges the illusion of subjective unity by introducing the recognition of the “minimal difference” a subject has to itself—an awareness of the “split” that exists “at the core of the same” (Zupancic 32). The signifier gives rise to the “minimal difference” a thing or subject has to itself through its inability to perfectly match an element in the signifying system with the place it occupies.

The notion of “minimal difference” brings together the two functions of the signifier discussed earlier: George’s excessive similarity to himself, and the “lost” Bruegel painting’s confirmation of sameness through difference. Both of these operations disturb the sense of coherence *within* a given entity rather than *between* one entity and another. I will argue that the minimal difference that appears as “the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition” can be thought of in terms of the Lacanian Real (Žižek, 2009 321). As a process of the Real, Lacan adamantly distinguishes repetition (which operates at the level of the drive) from the Symbolic process of return/reproduction (which operates at the level of the symptom): “in Freud’s texts repetition is not reproduction. There is never any ambiguity on this point: *Wiederholen* is not *Reproduzieren*” (Lacan, XI 50). Whereas return/reproduction occurs within conventional reality, as automata, repetition, appears as a Tuche from the Real—an irruption [which] . . . tear[s] th[e] blanket that reality constitutes for us” (Harari 97).

Return occurs when a repressed element re-appears via the signifier in a disguised form. For Roberto Harari, a key characteristic of return is homogeneity: although the symptom
appears in a new form, no new element is introduced. Repetition, by contrast, performs a heterogeneous procedure in which difference is produced through pursuit of the same. Like return, repetition also involves an element of disguise, but here disguise enters in at the level of temporality rather than through content or form. In popular renditions of Freud, the psychic process of repetition appears as an effect of trauma: a traumatic event occurs and because it cannot be reproduced by (returned within) the signifying system, we are fated to repeat it. Lacan, by contrast, emphasizes that, rather than a result of trauma, repetition functions as a condition for trauma to emerge. The repressed trauma is installed retrospectively through the act of repetition itself. “What is repeated,” Lacan emphasizes, “is always something that occurs . . . as if by chance” (Lacan, XI 54). The repetition which inaugurates repression is rarely of the traumatic episode itself, but rather of an accident or coincidence of a seemingly insignificant magnitude—as Harari suggests, a match between the numbers on one’s train ticket with one’s birthday for example. As Harari describes, “as innocent as it seems, the repetition of the same ending digit in the ticket numbers precipitates a traumatic situation because it may be construed as something inassimilable.” What initially appears insignificant at the level of importance, becomes insignificant in the more disruptive sense of being unable to be made significant—unintegratable within the symbolic system. These events mark a missed encounter with the Real—a tuche—in which the unease of the Real “bursts in” to our reality and changes its perceptible coordinates. In Žižek’s words, “although nothing changes, [as a result of this repetition] the thing all of a sudden seem[s] totally different . . . If the Real is a minimal difference, then repetition (that establishes this difference) is primordial” (Žižek, 2009 482). The same thing suddenly appears uncannily different in the aftermath of repetition. In their most radical form, such encounters refract back onto the subject, delivering a destabilizing blow to the subject’s illusion of individuation and coherence.

As a repetition in the psychoanalytic sense—a sameness with variation—mimicry produces an entity that is “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 86). But Cloaca, I suggest, pushes mimicry into the more “profoundly disturbing” order of “menace.”
Mimicry shades over into menace when the balance between difference and sameness tips in favor of difference: the “almost the same but not quite” comes to appear as “a difference that is almost total but not quite.”

Why is the confrontation with “a difference that is almost total but not quite” more disturbing than an encounter with the “almost the same but not quite”? Homi Bhabha’s response to this question hinges on the relationship of disavowal to narcissism and paranoia: The “almost the same,” his theory implies, is well accommodated by the process of disavowal. Disavowal enables subjects to manage well in the face of a disturbing encounter by providing the subject with the ability to hold together a contradiction—i.e. I know very well that this looks like me, but even so I know that it is not me. On the other hand, Bhabha argues that the “difference that is almost total” gives rise to an “uncontrollable repetition of narcissism and paranoia” (91). For Bhabha, the subject in the grip of narcissism and paranoia engages in projection, rather than self-protection. The narcissistic/paranoid formation shakes up our reliance on the symbolic system and its ability to confer social position by installing the possibility of (narcissistic) identification with a figure of power and then introducing a (paranoid) sense of the arbitrariness of authority.

An encounter with the “almost the same” provides an opportunity to exercise the self-affirming procedure of abjecting—the process of expunging the other from the self. This operation works to uphold the illusion that subjective coherence is indeed attainable—once one rids oneself of unwelcome intrusions of otherness. The abject paradoxically becomes the necessary symptom around which the subject’s illusion of cohesion is formed. It enables the subject to inhabit the belief that, rather than a constitutive gap, the obstacle to unity can be expelled.

“Almost total difference,” by contrast, confronts the subject with a more disruptive—“menacing”—encounter. The confrontation with an “almost total difference” raises the possibility that disunity might be a fundamental property of the subject. The idea that the subject may not be totally different than an object that appears to be radically different, suggests that the subject may be, at some
level, alien to itself. This phenomenon goes beyond pointing to the existence of something excessive within the subject, by moving toward the more disturbing possibility that there exists something intimate outside of the subject—an external dimension of subjectivity. As Roberto Harari elucidates, the Lacanian formulation of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other is a doubly externalizing phenomenon. Not only is the nub of subjectivity—the truth of the subject—located beyond the subject, it is also only ever encountered via the analyst in the role of objet a. Thus, rather than a subjectively recuperable experience of the discovery of an alien object in “I,” (as we saw in the case of the “almost the same”), here we are faced with a radically de-subjectifying phenomenon in which the “I” is in the object. As Lacan describes, it is “at the anal level” that the subject “has the first opportunity of recognizing himself in an object” (X 302). Akin to the destabilizing encounter with the gaze as the impossible, external, place from which the subject sees itself seeing, Cloaca provokes an encounter with the subject as radically externalized in the object.

**If it Looks like a Duck and Digests like a Duck...**

Although it may be more comforting to locate our unique “humanness” in the ways in which we engage in more expansive activity than animals, Slavoj Žižek observes that our humanness resides rather in the narrowest of our pursuits, namely, the drive. “We become come humans,” he argues, “when we get caught into a self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it” (Žižek, 2004 63). As a mechanical “organ without a body, Cloaca pursues a meaningless repetition, evoking what Lacan calls the “headless” drive, and, as such, echoes the disturbing phenomenon of “subjectification without [a] subject,” which characterizes the drive (Lacan, XI 184).

A discussion of an early precursor to Cloaca sheds additional light on ways of thinking about the relationship between the human and the machine which simulates human processes. Jacques Vaucanson’s Digesting Duck (1738)—or as Jessica Riskin terms it, “Defecating Duck”—gained public notoriety in its day by pushing
the genre of the automata from “amusement” to “philosophical experiment” (Riskin 604). The Duck, as purported by its inventor, “‘stretches out its Neck to take Corn out of your Hand; it swallows it, digests it, and discharges what it digested by the usual Passage’” (599). Vaucanson’s piece was regarded as an attempt to go beyond “verisimilitude” by aiming for “simulation,” “and thereby test[ing] the limits of resemblance between synthetic and natural life” (606). The sense in which Riskin refers to the Duck as a “philosophical experiment” resides in its ability to “simultaneous[ly] enact . . . both the sameness and the incomparability of life and machinery. . . . The defecating Duck . . . dramatized two contradictory claims at once: that living creatures were essentially machines and that living creatures were the antithesis of machines” (610). According to Riskin, by appearing to embody functions unique to living creatures, the Duck did not succeed in blurring the distinction between the living and the machine, but rather worked to sharpen it. Historically, she argues, simulating automata have, no doubt against intention, succeeded in bringing to stark relief “precisely those capacities of living beings that . . . [are] the likeliest to defy mechanistic reduction.” They have functioned, in a sense, to “sort . . . the animate from the inanimate, the organic from the mechanical” (613).

Cloaca, however, fails to draw such palpable distinctions. In rejecting that his machine be read as a philosophical experiment and arguing instead that it be seen purely as an artistic amusement, Delvoye initiates a more disruptive encounter between the living being and the machine. Here, again, we confront the power of the double deception in facilitating a disturbance within the given symbolic order. The Duck, it turns out, merely dissimulated the processes of digestion and excretion. After much speculation, it was eventually revealed that the Duck did not actually process the food it “ate,” but that a compartment of the machine was “loaded before each act with ‘fake excrement’” to provide the illusion that digestion had occurred. By hyping a machine whose success turned on a simple deception, Vaucanson left both categories of the human and the machine firmly intact.
Delvoye, by contrast, did indeed produce a machine that simulates the organic process of digestion. But rather than tout his invention as an authentic representation of an organic process (as Vaucanson deceivingly did), Delvoye positioned his machine within the rhetoric and the appearance of fiction. In addition to Cloaca’s anti-mimetic appearance—it looks nothing like an organic body, but does what only an organic body is purported to do—Delvoye explicitly frames it within the symbolic context notoriously associated with deception: advertising. He uses the hyperbolic rhetoric of consumer culture to place Cloaca’s multiple iterations among other more familiar, much-hyped products: “Cloaca Original, Cloaca - New & Improved, Cloaca Turbo, Cloaca Quattro, Cloaca N°5, Super Cloaca and Personal Cloaca” (Debatty). Cloaca also sports a variety of high-profile logos, citing, among others, Chanel no. 5, Coca-Cola, Mr. Clean, Chiquita Banana, and Harley Davidson, and in good marketing fashion, also spawns a range of spin-off merchandise: t-shirts, action figures, 3D view-master, toilet paper, (and much, much, more!).

But perhaps the most compelling merchandise to follow (quite literally) from Delvoye’s invention are the vacuum-sealed transparent bags containing Cloaca’s dried excrement, adorned with Delvoye’s autograph, that sell for over $1,000 a turd (Fiers). In this contemporary iteration of Piero Manzoni’s infamous Merda d’Artista (1961), the artist’s shit is replaced by the machine’s shit. By packaging the shit in clear plastic, rather than in a sealed aluminum can, Delvoye enacts a crucial variation on Manzoni’s project. Manzoni’s “Merda d’Artista” (priced at the going rate of an equal measure of gold) has long been thought to be a fake—a can devoid of the promised content. This suspicion gained momentum after the recent statement of one of Manoni’s collaborators that the tins are filled with plaster rather than feces (Glancey). But, neither the veracity nor falsity of the product has yet to be documented due to the market logic governing the value of contemporary art (Cotter). The aluminum makes x-raying the cans impossible. This leaves opening the can as the only possibility for verifying the product, but this act would nullify the value of the object. In this sense, the contents of the cans are rendered effectually
indeterminate. By packaging Cloaca’s turds in transparent bags, Delvoye makes a subtle nod at the “lingering uncertainty” surrounding Manzoni’s work (Howarth). But through this playful association with the double-bind of Manzoni’s work, Delvoye cunningly clouds his own formal claim to disclosure with a specter of uncertainty. Specifically, Delvoye plays upon the dilemma of authentication facing Manzoni’s cans professed to be shit by inverting it: Cloaca’s shit is offered in a transparent container, but this access does nothing to help adjudicate the ontological problem of its realism—is feces produced by a machine real?

Delvoye’s Cloaca, thus, performs the disruptive logic of “telling the truth in the guise of a lie” (Žižek, 1997 37). On first consideration one might predict that, by casting in fictional allusion the machine’s ability to repeat a uniquely organic process, Delvoye provided viewers with the opportunity for a comfortable, entertaining interaction with Cloaca. But, as I argue elsewhere, fiction provides the optimal conditions for an encounter with the Real. Fiction provides the necessary lure for coaxing out the truth that evades symbolic capture. Lacan’s formulation, “the non-duped err,” points to the importance of recognizing that our sense of reality and subjectivity are sustained by a necessarily fictional support. We cannot arrive at the truth through abandoning fiction; we must enter into the fiction itself in order to cipher its logic in which the truth is embedded.3

The logic of the fiction presented by Delvoye entails a clever twist: he does not explicitly claim that the piece is a fiction, nor does he straightforwardly assert that it is real. Rather, he articulates the machine with other fictional productions/products, casting it with a sheen of doubt by association. Such an equivocation is deepened by the fact that any claims to veracity that may be made on Cloaca’s behalf attest not to its realism, but rather to its status as a proper simulation. Unlike Vaucanson’s Duck, in which a fiction was presented as truth, Delvoye’s Cloaca presents us with the inverse case of a truth, presented within the context of fiction. Such a move points to how fiction provides the means to truth. Through its appearance as mere novelty, Cloaca succeeds in staging an encounter of “self-recognition” with “an object that bears neither
[the subject’s] image nor the marks of his individuation” (Safatle). It succeeds in evincing the “objective core” that lies at heart of subjectivity.

Notes

1. Much controversy surrounds the question of the provenance of the bodies obtained by Von Hagens. He faces frequent accusations that some of the bodies he uses are those of executed political prisoners from China. In 2004 von Hagens admitted having discovered bullet wounds in the heads of at least bodies and had seven corpses returned to China for burial. (Luke Harding, “Von Hagens forced to return controversial corpses to China,” The Guardian, www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/23/arts.china.)

2. Information packet accompanying exhibit 27.


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Motherhood According to Martha Graham: Dancing Jocasta

Introduction: Dance and the Maternal Semiotic

At the end of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, after the guilt-ridden king has blinded himself, a messenger from the palace brings news to the chorus and to the audience. He announces: “[Oedipus] is calling for someone to open the [palace] doors wide / So that all the children of Kadmos may look upon / His father’s murderer, his mother’s—no, / I can not say it!” (58). While the messenger can speak of Oedipus’ patricide, words fail him when he should speak of Oedipus’ incestuous relationship with his mother Jocasta. In 1947, American modern dancer Martha Graham choreographed the corporeal details of this unspeakable and unwritten incest in Night Journey, which retells the Oedipus myth from the mother’s perspective. In her autobiography, Graham writes of this dance:

Night Journey . . . is a dance between Jocasta and Oedipus, mother and son. It is a highly erotic dance. I have never believed in the necessity of interpreting either music or story in dance. I believe in writing a script of movement or a musician writing a script of music. (Graham 212-213)
In her choreography—literally her “dance-writing”—Graham writes the script for the scene that could not be written in Sophocles’ script, the event which the messenger “can not say.” Not only could it not be said, it could not be seen. In Sophocles’ play, and typical of Greek drama, the main acts of horror take place off stage, such as Oedipus’ self-blinding, Jocasta’s suicide, and Jocasta and Oedipus’ incest together. In Sophocles’ text we only hear that these events have happened through the speaking and singing of the chorus (Jowitt in Altshuler, 34; Jowitt, Time 225).

In *Night Journey* Graham reduces Sophocles’ cast to Jocasta, Oedipus, the blind seer Tiresias, and a chorus of seven female dancers including a chorus leader which she called The Daughters of the Night. Graham sets *Night Journey* not on the public steps of the palace at Thebes as in Sophocles, but in the interior and intimate space of Jocasta’s bedchamber. The décor, by sculptor Isamu Noguchi, includes a grim, bonelike, surrealist bed placed upstage center and angled so the audience can see all that takes place upon it. As revisionist myth, Graham’s *Night Journey* foregrounds Jocasta’s perspective: in contrast to all the other characters, Jocasta never exits the stage, and she dances downstage—that is, closer to the audience—more than anyone else (Burt 49; Morris 75-76). The dance begins at the moment in the play right before Jocasta hangs herself after learning she had unknowingly slept with her son and bore his children. As the curtain rises, we see Jocasta holding a rope over her head, softly swaying her body as if already hanged when Tiresias enters from the back solemnly zigzagging his way downstage toward her. The dance then transitions into an extended flashback in which Jocasta recounts Oedipus’ arrival, their sexual adventures, the discovery of his identity, and his blinding. Throughout the work, the chorus of dancing women plays different roles: mimicking Jocasta’s movement, announcing Oedipus’ entry, protectively surrounding Jocasta. As the dance concludes, we shift back to the present to finally witness her suicide. The majority of this approximately twenty-eight-minute dance consists of Oedipus and Jocasta’s erotic duet (but in the moments before and after we also see a powerful, introspective, and mournful Jocasta contemplating her fate). Significantly, Graham’s *Night Journey* omits
from Sophocles the attempted infanticide against the baby Oedipus, the riddle of the Sphinx, the Theban plague, and the patricide (Yaari 228), the tale which Sophocles thoroughly inscribed in his script by having Oedipus and a witness recount in detail the former’s murder of his father Laius: its location, its time, the number of men involved. The only Oedipal crime danced in Night Journey is the coupling of mother and son.

Oedipus’ relationship to his mother in Sophocles’ foundational text has shaped western constructions of sexual difference, particularly through interpretations by twentieth-century psychoanalysis. In the classical psychoanalytic account of the Oedipal phase, the male child must decathect from his mother and disavow the incestuous fantasies he has of her or else endure the father’s retribution, i.e., castration. This account describes the mechanism by which the male child then establishes his subjectivity in opposition to the mother from whom he separates. In contrast, Graham’s Night Journey—explicitly focused on the mother’s taboo eroticism—reinterprets the Oedipus myth in terms of establishing a female and specifically maternal subjectivity. To understand Graham’s revolutionary reading of the Oedipus myth and what is at stake regarding questions of sexual difference, I turn to the work of Julia Kristeva. In the realm of theory, Kristeva has essentially followed the same strategy as Graham: Kristeva’s ongoing project has been to reclaim maternal subjectivity from the Oedipal triangle by focusing on the mother’s bodily responses in the pre-Oedipal relationship between her and the infant (Litowitz 57). Throughout her writings on maternal subjectivity, Kristeva has been concerned with bearing witness to maternal jouissance and does so most recently with her work on maternal eroticism—a concept, as she points out, which is as taboo today as the concept of infantile sexuality in Sigmund Freud’s day (“Reliance” 69).

Through Kristeva’s work we can begin to understand why incest is unspeakable for Sophocles whose messenger “can not say it,” and why, by implication, he considers incest worse than the patricide which can be spoken.” The implicit locus of Sophocles’ bias is the erotic maternal body which surfaces explicitly in an act of incest. Kristeva writes in “Stabat Mater” that mother’s jouissance
threatens the Symbolic because it makes her a subject and not an “other” against whom male subjectivity can be founded (Kristeva, “Stabat Mater” 259; Oliver 50). Patricide, by contrast, while taboo, is the male child’s usurpation of the father’s authority, but patricide’s misdirected violence does not threaten the subjectivity of men in general. If male subjectivity in the Symbolic is defined in opposition to the maternal body, then that which is associated with the maternal body becomes abject. In her book The Powers of Horror (1980), Kristeva interrogates “the horror of incest,” a phrase she borrows from Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1913), and the underlying fear of the maternal body it represents. Symbolic culture, in its present form, is built to keep the horror of incest at bay. A feeling of abjection, a visceral sense of revulsion, appears when the sense of order and identity established through the Symbolic is violated. The abject fear of falling back into the mother’s womb and of losing autonomy, Kristeva argues, is generalized to a fear of woman, and hence the repression of women in culture. This psychodrama is played out again and again in the social realm through the regulation of women’s bodies, especially the maternal body, in society and law.

How can we rethink and restore maternal subjectivity rather than “othering” and abjecting the mother? This is a question that concerns Kristeva and ultimately, I argue, Graham as well. At the core of the mother’s subjectivity for both Kristeva and Graham is her eroticism. Rosemary Balsam explains that in Kristeva’s most recent work on maternity titled “Reliance, or Maternal Eroticism” (2011, trans. 2014), eroticism works in service of procreation and (sexually stimulating) interactions with the infant; thus Kristeva’s latest theory moves us to a mature female sexuality that accounts for the drive to conceive and life with the baby (Balsam 90, 95, 98). Bonnie Litowitz points out that in contrast to both the object relations model, which risks reducing the mother to a holding container or sublimating her, and to postmodern theories of gender construction, which read the mother’s body as a mere site for cultural inscription, Kristeva bears witness to embodied maternal subjectivity (Litowitz 58), as well as “the passionate violence of maternal experience” (Kristeva, “Motherhood Today”). It is the passionate, violent, and erotic maternal body that Graham spotlights in Night Journey. Dance
critic and scholar Sally Banes sees *Night Journey* as emphasizing maternal desire and sexual passion and women’s sexual pleasure: “... the dance, however bitter, is also a celebration of mature female sexuality ...” (157).

Using Kristeva’s classic and recent texts on maternity, I argue that through her “dance-writing” Graham writes the hitherto unwritten story of maternal eroticism through the form and movement of *Night Journey*. Furthermore, because her script of movement for Jocasta writes precisely those moments unwritten in Sophocles, Graham’s dance draws attention to the fact that the erotic maternal body has been largely repressed within the Symbolic order and specifically in the western tradition of writing. Kristeva’s classic distinction between “the semiotic” and “the symbolic” modalities in language, explicated in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and recurring throughout her work, can offer insight into understanding *Night Journey* as a revolutionary poetic language of movement that bears witness to maternal eroticism. For Kristeva, in opposition to Jacques Lacan, there is an order before the paternal Symbolic order of culture into which the child is inducted through the Oedipal phase, and there is a language before language proper. Kristeva argues that order, regulation, language, and writing are all prefigured in the pre-Oedipal bodily relationship between the infant and the mother. For example, the rhythm and syntax of language find their precedent in the rhythmic, tactile, kinesthetic, and bodily interactions between the infant and the mother, such as holding, feeding, and rocking. Thus the communication, order, and meaning generated in this preverbal, bodily infant-mother relationship lay the foundation onto which symbolic language is later grafted. Kristeva’s term for the visceral, corporeal, and affective dimension of both language and writing rooted in the archaic relationship with the mother’s body is “the semiotic.” “The symbolic,” by contrast, consists of the grammar, logic, and denotations that we generally associate with language proper. Language, both written and spoken, is always for Kristeva an intertwining of the symbolic and the semiotic (*Revolution* 23-24) and is therefore a “trans-substantiation” in which word and body inhabit each sign (“Place Names” 291).
However, while the semiotic is always operative in language, it is rarely acknowledged because of its intimate connection to the abject maternal body. As Fanny Söderbäck explains: “. . . the maternal body, for Kristeva, . . . is repressed. Insofar as we speak of maternity as a certain kind of corporeal-temporal experience—manifested in the rhythms and oscillations that emerge through the semiotic modality of language—it is, in Kristeva’s account, to a large extent made invisible to the point of erasure in our culture” (82). The cultural erasure of the maternal body underscores the importance of Graham’s visible rendering of maternal eroticism in Night Journey. Söderbäck writes that Kristeva calls for “a more integrated and balanced relationship between the two modalities of language: maternal and paternal, semiotic and symbolic. The interdependence between the two, for her, is a fact. The question remains whether we are willing to acknowledge and embrace this interdependence and give voice to both” (Söderbäck 79). In this paper I hope to show how through the symbolic medium of dance, Graham indeed gives voice to the semiotic.

The semiotic gives writing, art, poetry, and, as I argue, dance, their affective dimension. The following description of dance by phenomenologist and dancer Sondra Horton Fraleigh sounds very similar, in fact, to Kristeva’s account of the semiotic: “[Dance] is a preverbal expression, playing beneath words and at the same time moving beyond them. . . . As impetus toward speech proper, dance founds meaning; thus it is closer to the immediacy, rhythm, and origination of poetry than it is to linear language” (Horton Fraleigh 71, 73). This impetus toward speech, the foundation of meaning, and the immediacy and rhythm that Horton Fraleigh describes are all manifestations of the semiotic at work in dance. Dance, a cultural medium within the realm of the Symbolic that is focused on the body, can give voice to the corporeal and maternal semiotic substrate of language. This is particularly the case for Graham’s Night Journey which explicitly writes the unwritten story of the erotic maternal body.
THE VAGINAL CRY: FORM-GIVING

In Night Journey Graham went to great lengths to render visible the incest that would have taken place off stage and have been unseen in Sophocles’ play. Banes called Jocasta and Oedipus’ duet in Night Journey “. . . surely one of the frankest choreographic expressions of coitus in the Western canon. . . . They have no family life, no children, no relatives, . . . nor do they share a public life. All they have together is sex—on the floor, in bed, walking, and indeed, whenever and wherever they can” (160, 163). As Oedipus begins courting Jocasta, she rises while contracting and releasing her abdomen thereby sending her pelvis and torso into an erotic spasm. When she sits again, he bows his head into her lap in a gesture suggestive of oral foreplay. They separate to opposite ends of the stage, and the tension between them builds as she advances toward him again slowly along a diagonal. With each step she raises her leg and draws it across her body as if gesturing “Come hither.” He wraps her in his cloak and the consummation of their love begins. Turning, they remove the cloak together and brazenly present themselves as a couple to the audience. With their bodies open, arms raised and bent at the elbows so head and arms form the tines of human tridents, they use their calves to gently pulse up and down (relevé in ballet). The sex begins on the floor with Oedipus haughtily mounting Jocasta from above, then abruptly rising and lifting her with him. They spin around together with her legs lifted and splayed open to the audience. At times, the two dance intertwined on the Noguchi bed sculpture which elevates them above the chorus of dancers who later enter the stage. On the bed, Jocasta and Oedipus tie themselves to each other with a silk cord. Like an over-determined dream symbol, the cord simultaneously represents the umbilical cord and sexual union (and it will be the instrument of Jocasta’s eventual suicide). Along the floor, the chorus’s v-shape formation directs the eye to the post-coital couple standing at its apex, still bound together by the cord, as they begin to process defiantly downstage center toward the audience.

In choreographing this duet, Graham had to identify deeply with the figure of the erotic mother. In “Motherhood According to
Giovanni Bellini” (1975), Kristeva’s analysis of Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini’s images of the Madonna and Child, she argues that through an incestuous identification with the erotic mother, Bellini reveals a maternal body otherwise inexpressible in our culture and leads motherhood’s entry into symbolic existence by giving form to her “undiscovered jouissance” (243, 248-249). She uncovers a latent eroticism in Bellini’s Madonnas not found in those of his Renaissance contemporaries, such as Leonardo da Vinci. This eroticism can appear through a hand gesture, as in some paintings in which the Madonna touches the exposed genitals of the Christ child (e.g., Madonna with the Child, 1460-64, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo); or in a gaze, particularly inward gazes that suggest the mother’s psychic interiority (e.g., Madonna with the Child, 1460-64, Museo Correr, Venice). But most of all, the jouissance of maternal eroticism resonates within the form of the paintings, particularly their luminous space and color (e.g., Madonna with Blessing Child, 1475-80, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice)—the same color Kristeva celebrates in the modern art of Rothko and Matisse (250). Kristeva writes, “At the intersection of sign and rhythm, or representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where she [mother] is not, where she knows not. He delineates what, in her, is a body rejoicing [jouissant]” (242). This is to say, she sees Bellini’s paintings bearing witness to a maternal jouissance that runs counter to the canonical asexual account of the Madonna they depict (a point to which I will return in the following section). When the artist identifies with and speaks for an erotic mother in this deep way, Kristeva claims: “A kind of incest is then committed . . .” (248-249). In this section I show that in her “script of movement,” Graham similarly bears witness to maternal jouissance through the form of her medium, i.e., the moving body, specifically through her signature “contract and release” technique which I describe below.

Kristeva writes that when Bellini’s work reaches the threshold of repression and maternal jouissance, “We no longer hear words of meanings; not even sounds . . . the voice here is silent. It bursts forth as a cry after having gone through colors and luminous spaces” (249-250). The cry which burst forth through Bellini’s color and space, bursts forth in Graham’s movement as she too incestuously
identifies with the erotic mother. Graham calls this bursting forth “the vaginal cry.” Interpreting one moment in *Night Journey*, Graham writes:

... Jocasta kneels on the floor at the foot of the bed and then she rises with her leg close to her breast and to her head, and her foot way beyond her head, her body open in a deep contraction. I call this the vaginal cry; it is the cry from her vagina. It is either the cry for her lover, her husband, or the cry for her children. (Graham 214)

Significantly, as a silent cry ambiguously sounding for “lover, husband, or children,” the vaginal cry shouts the *jouissance* of a lover-mother, that is, an erotic mother. The vagina, in fact, speaks at key moments throughout *Night Journey*. For example, as Banes notes, at the end the same descent and pelvic rise is repeated from the beginning of the dance: “... it is her death as well as her last orgasm” (163).

Movement consistently originates in the pelvis and the vagina in Graham’s technique. The vagina is so central to her movement that Graham once even dismissed a particular dancer’s ability by saying: “She never would have been a great dancer. She doesn’t move from her vagina” (212). One of her male dancers once claimed that the Martha Graham Dance Company was the only dance company where men suffered from vagina envy (211). The dance movement generated in the vagina resonates and expands throughout the body as tensions and relaxations. The essential movement of Graham’s technique consists in the “contract and release” (e.g., Jocasta’s “deep contraction” in the quotation above); that is, a sudden, almost violent contraction of the pelvic muscles and abdomen accompanied by a simultaneous extension of the back, followed by a relaxation of those muscles. These “tensive, percussive, and angular motions” are “frequently executed through a contraction/beat/release pattern” (Corey 204-205), a pattern which recalls both orgasm and the rhythms of labor. Thus this technique which appears throughout her oeuvre is particularly suited to the erotic and maternal themes of *Night Journey*. In the words of dance scholar Katherine Power,
Graham’s “movement lexicon, sourced as it is in the propulsive, ecstatic contraction and release of the pelvis, provided the perfect vehicle for a dance predicated on female desire” (73).

Contracting and releasing, tensing and extending, the Graham dancer’s body divides in and against itself. When Jocasta’s character moves this way, the technique suggests a heterogeneity or division of the body that Kristeva describes as specific to maternity. Dance historian Mark Franko describes the bodily oppositions in Graham’s “contract and release” technique:

> When the dancer contracts, the concavity of the spine creates the feeling in him or herself and for the observer of retreating beneath or below or into the body’s surface structure; the release, on the other hand, reasserts that structure by stretching it outward into space toward its corporeal limits. (Franko 114)

As movement that constantly redefines the limits of the body by oscillating between its inside and outside and pushes the body in oppositional directions, the contract and release resonates with Kristeva’s description of her own pregnant body within which she feels an opposition between the pelvis and the torso. Kristeva characterizes the pelvis as the “center of gravity, unchanging ground, solid pedestal, heaviness and weight to which the thighs adhere” in contrast to the torso, arms, neck, head, face, calves, and feet whose “unbounded liveliness, rhythm and mask . . . furiously attempt to compensate for the immutability of the central tree” (“Stabat Mater” 253-4. Kristeva goes on to explain that the maternal body divides itself during pregnancy and engages in division and discharge at birth.

This division of the body provides the foundation for language: “A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so” (254. Since the mother’s body forms the substrate upon which symbolic language is built, symbolic language inherits this division in the form of differential meaning, syntactical divisions, grammatical divisions between parts of speech, etc. As a
codified technique, the contract and release operates as a symbolic modality within the language of movement; but more importantly it is simultaneously a non-verbal articulation of the maternal semiotic in language; that is to say, it is a writing with the body that bears witness to the bodily dimension of language proper.

The contract and release technique Graham developed is unique to her choreography and constitutes a revolution in the poetic language of movement, particularly in contrast to ballet against whose technique and gender roles Graham revolted. Through this revolt rooted in the female, and specifically maternal, body, Graham engages in what Sara Beardsworth would call the ethics of “form-giving,” that is, reasserting and giving form to the lost nature of maternal subjectivity (220-221, 226). The medium of Graham’s form-giving is the body itself. As former Martha Graham Dance Company dancer and biographer Agnes de Mille noted, Graham always taught that it was the body, “the torso—heart, lungs, viscera, and above all, spine—which expresses” (qtd. in Bannerman 268-267).

**JOCASTA VERSUS THE VIRGIN: MATERNAL EROTICISM AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Kristeva notes there is a common tendency in western society to associate sexuality with the (female) lover and desexualized object relations with the mother (“Reliance” 69). The Virgin Mary is the most venerated image of the west’s desexualized maternal ideal, and as Kelly Oliver points out in her reading of Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” and *Black Sun*, traditionally the Virgin Mary has functioned as a figure sanctioned by the Symbolic with which a woman can identify after having to abandon her own mother in Oedipal separation (Oliver 52). However, in choreographing *Night Journey* Graham chose instead to identify with the scorned figure of Jocasta. In the dance she is clearly lover and mother as numerous critics have noted. For example, dance scholar Marcia Siegel writes, “Oedipus and Jocasta’s duet in *Night Journey* (1947) is a series of twinings and inversions in which the dancers lapse from poses of lovemaking into poses of mother and child; one moment he straddles her and the next she’s rocking him in her lap” (313); Banes writes, “He picks
her up and swings her around, and then she yields, clasping him in a position that is both erotic and suggestive of childbirth” (161); and Power writes, “Graham effectively conflates the figures of mother and lover by creating a gestural text for Jocasta which merges the nurturant and the sexual in a provocative version of Mother-love clearly outside the confines of legitimized maternal affection. . . . dissolving the boundaries between maternal affection and sexual passion” (73).

Twice during the amorous duet we see echoes of the Pietà (Burt 42), that is, the rendering in Catholic art of Mother Mary holding her dead son Christ, typically in her lap, as famously sculpted by Michelangelo (Pietà, 1499, Basilica di San Pedro, Vatican) and painted by Giovanni Bellini (Pietà, 1505, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice). In Night Journey, Oedipus lies across Jocasta’s kneeling thigh, his arms splayed out so that he rests in an almost cruciform pose while she embraces his torso and head. As Graham later explained in her autobiography, the pose is both maternal and erotic for Jocasta:

. . . as her young husband, he seems to lie across her knees as though she were rocking him, and she hears in her imagination a baby cry. She does hear that cry; it enters from her soul. It is the cry of her lover as he subjects her to his wishes. It is the cry of a baby for its mother. (Graham, 215; qt. in Burt, 42-43)

Graham intertwines this Pietà on each occasion with highly erotic movements. After the first one, they lie on the floor as if expired from orgasm. After the second Pietà (which is a bit more mournful than the first), Jocasta then climbs up on Oedipus with her hands behind his neck and crosses her legs so that the weight of her body is supported by her shins pressing across his pelvis. He then pivots her on her shins, lowering her torso so she is upside down in what critics have described as a “kama sutra” pose. He hoists her back up, she drops her legs, and when she is standing again he slides down her body, lubriciously at first until she eventually holds him as if a baby. By provocatively invoking the pose of the Pietà within an erotic duet, Graham positions her Jocasta as a foil to the west's
idealized and desexualized mother of God.

Graham’s conflation of Jocasta and the Virgin thus contaminates the lover/mother dichotomy. In her recent work on reliance (which in the French connotes a linking or sharing between the mother and the infant), Kristeva offers an alternative to the lover/mother split which can help us to understand Graham’s Jocasta as a maternal subject. Kristeva shows how the libido of woman as lover does not disappear as she transitions to maternity; rather the drive toward libidinal satisfaction that propelled the sexual act which resulted in conception is also the very source of the maternal care she provides as she reorients the libido toward the urgency of life (“Reliance” 73, 79). The mother experiences a strong intensity of the drives, both of her own and, through projective identification, those of her baby; but her inhibition of the drives allows her to transform the affect into tenderness, care taking, and benevolence (Kristeva, “Motherhood Today”). For Kristeva, conception, pregnancy, labor, and birth are all flesh and basically erotic—“erotic” meaning not just a sexual force, but a life generating force that includes sexuality (Wilson 106). Thus the mother is necessarily already erotic for both Kristeva and Graham’s Jocasta. Of course, as a mother who had sexual intercourse with her son, Jocasta is not emblematic of the maternity Kristeva espouses in her notion of reliance in which part of the sexual libido transforms into a drive oriented to caring for life. Nevertheless, Kristeva’s theory of reliance helps to clarify Jocasta’s problem by demonstrating what it is not. Jocasta’s tragic flaw is not her inherent eroticism; rather that eroticism is necessary for maternal care itself.

So how do we understand Jocasta’s tragedy within Kristeva’s framework? We typically read the tragedy of the Oedipus myth as that of Oedipus’ losing his identity when he discovers he was not who he thought he was. In psychoanalytic terms, despite his conscious intentions to do otherwise, he did not properly separate from his mother (as one should do during his namesake phase) in order to become his own subject. Graham does, in fact, illustrate this traditional reading of Oedipus’ tragedy in Night Journey. While he and Jocasta are still bound together, Tiresias enters and, like the father of the Freudian or Lacanian Oedipal triangle, separates
them by symbolically cutting their cord with his phallic flexed foot and his staff. Realizing the truth of his lover’s identity, Oedipus holds the severed cord and gazes at it in abject horror. He violently throws it to the ground in a futile attempt to restore his identity in opposition to the mother into whose womb he had just returned. Finally Oedipus removes the broach from his mother’s costume, blinds himself with it, and gropingly exits.

However, the failure of separation was not Oedipus’ problem alone. Kristeva points out that separation—first through birth and second through resolution of the Oedipal conflict—in fact, provides a way for the mother to assert her own subjectivity. During pregnancy, which Kristeva describes as a splitting or folding of the flesh, the subjectivity of the mother-to-be is ambiguous (“Stabat Mater” 254). The expulsion of birth represents not only the emergence of the child as a separate body and subject, but also of the mother as a separate body and subject. Speaking from the perspective of the mother giving birth, Kristeva writes, “I abject the Thing into which we were fused, the biopsychical continuum I had become” (“Reliance” 76). Kristeva then maps the movement of the drives as the mother establishes her new postnatal subjectivity. To finalize the psychization, she transforms abjects into objects of care, survival, and life: “maternal eroticism separates and rejoins [rélié] . . . Beyond abjection and separation, tenderness is the basic affect of reliance” (75, 76). Abjection then is not simply an expulsion of that which is despised, but rather, it is a “normal” psychosexual element of maternal eroticism (76). Following this model, Jocasta’s tragedy is the same as Oedipus’—it is a crisis of her own subjectivity and identity, a lack of separation and abjection, a failure to de-fuse the prenatal biopsychical continuum. In Night Journey we see this crisis as well. After Tiresias intervenes, Jocasta lies on the bed as if she is already a corpse. The vitality of her jouissance snuffed out, she suffocates under the weight of “the Thing” she failed to abject. This crisis leads to Jocasta’s suicide, the ultimate destruction of her already devastated subjectivity (and an event like the incest which took place off-stage in Sophocles). Graham’s Jocasta, pensive and grief-stricken, takes on an almost heroic hue as she nobly faces her guilt (Stodelle 147). With gravity she steps toward the audience,
removes her over-garment, and finally reaches down to reclaim the fallen cord and hangs herself.

**“The Daughters of the Night”: Mothers, Daughters, and Reliance**

Söderbäck’s description of Kristeva’s ongoing project on maternity could equally apply to Graham’s *Night Journey*: “By bringing the mother out of the shadows, she provides women with a past (a genealogy of their own, a community of women, a history hitherto repressed) and, simultaneously, with a future (in the sense of liberating them from predefined roles and positions...”) (Söderbäck 65). Graham brings Jocasta out of the shadows, writes and renders visible her eroticism, and by replacing Sophocles’ chorus of older men with a danced chorus of seven young women called the Daughters of the Night, she provides a community of women who can identify with and share the history of the mother.  

13 If the chorus was an emotional bridge between spectators and actors in Sophocles’ time (Fagles and Knox 20, Graham’s chorus creates an emotional and corporeal bridge between mother and audience allowing us to see her maternal eroticism.

Graham could have simply called this ensemble of women a “chorus,” but her choice of the word “Daughters” in a dance about one of the most infamous mothers in the western canon, suggests we can read a familial relationship between Jocasta and the Daughters of the Night.  

14 As the “Night Journey” of the dance is Jocasta’s journey, these are the daughters of her night, and as such they share an intimate relation to her psychically and physically. Reflecting on mother-daughter relationships, Kristeva writes, “Women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers” (“Stabat Mater” 257). Frequently in *Night Journey*, the Daughters of the Night quite literally reproduce Jocasta’s movements. Banes notes that by doing so the women at times echo Jocasta’s thoughts and at other times input sympathetic commentary of sorrow, regret, or solace (158). The Daughters, through Graham’s dance-writing, bear witness to the semiotic mother’s embodied sexuality, desire, and loss by mirroring her with their own bodies.
The Daughters first appear in the beginning of the dance right after Jocasta has been contemplating the cord and Tiresias has made his entrance. The seven women swoop across the stage, and their leader’s path crosses Jocasta’s suggesting a kind of symmetry between the two women. Jocasta appears anguished as she stands with one elbow of a flexed arm pointed to the sky; the leader and the rest of the chorus quickly follow suit and hold a similar pose. They continue to embody her movement again and again in the dance. In one particularly poignant moment toward the end of the dance when a distraught Jocasta has collapsed on the ground and is barely able to hold her weary body up with one bent arm, the chorus in unison again echoes her by lying prone but in a sturdier, more geometric version of their mother’s pose. In both of these instances the chorus identifies with, strengthens, and in a sense idealizes the mother’s poses. Furthermore, throughout the entire dance, the chorus echoes Jocasta’s frequent and turbulent contract and release movements.

“The strange gamut of forgotten bodily relationships” to which Kristeva refers are the very kinesthetic relationships that structure the semiotic and are driven by maternal libido. Following the lines of Bellini’s aesthetic and incestuous identification with mother, in the above section on “The Vaginal Cry,” I suggested that by deeply identifying with an erotic mother “a kind of incest is then committed” by Graham (248-49). This incest is represented in turn by the Daughters’ relationship to Jocasta. However, whereas Bellini’s paintings of the Madonna and Christ child still enacted to some extent his unconscious male phantasies of the erotic mother, the exchange between the female chorus of daughters and Jocasta is a qualitatively different relationship. Thus I assert that the significance of Night Journey lies not only in the manifest incest of mother and son—the subject of the work’s erotic duet—but also, and perhaps more importantly, in a latent incest between mother and daughter(s) inscribed in the movement of the chorus. To explicate my claim, I turn to Kristeva’s The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt in which she describes the daughter’s Oedipal phase as a two-part phase which she designates with superscripted numbers: “Oedipus¹” and “Oedipus²”.
In the classical psychoanalytic account of the Oedipal phase, the son splits with the mother and identifies with the father. No longer part of a symbiotic relationship, the male subject takes on a new found sense of unity. Oedipus’ problem was one of falling back into the mother, which dissolved the borders of his subjectivity. The daughter too splits with the mother in the Oedipal phase, but as Kristeva points out, since the daughter is also female she in a sense splits from herself. That is to say, for both the son and the daughter, the mother’s feminine sexuality is rendered abject, but the daughter renders herself abject too insofar as she identifies her body with the mother’s body (Oliver 61). The first step of the daughter’s Oedipal phase, “Oedipus1”, is the masturbatory incestuous desire for the mother. In “Oedipus2”, she must change objects from the mother to the father. Both the boy and girl initially have an incestuous desire for the mother, but in making the shift to “Oedipus2”, Kristeva says the girl must deny a “primary homosexuality” that in turn denies her primary semiotic link to the mother (Sense 99, 102). Thus Kristeva points out that while boys and girls inherit the same symbolic phallus, it is not accompanied by the same sensorial experience (99).

The loss of the mother must be negated in order for the girl to traverse her trauma, that is, she must not only lose the mother but forget the loss itself. This negation of the loss of the mother signals entry into language (Oliver 62; Kristeva, Black Sun 43). As the girl forgets the mother’s body and adopts the symbolic phallus by acquiring language proper she participates in the familial and cultural devaluation of the mother’s body and by extension women, which leads to disappointment, dissociation, and melancholy (Kristeva, Sense 100). As Alison Stone notes in Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity, women cannot mourn their mothers because they cannot idealize them culturally; they must instead idealize the father, but they cannot become him as boys can (96).15

In her early work, Kristeva conceded that the girl must separate and forget the mother to become a subject, that the girl must in fact kill the mother in order not to kill herself (Oliver 62): “matricide is our vital necessity,” she writes (Kristeva, Black Sun 27). However, Stone offers a way of rethinking the mother-daughter relationship
without matricide. In lieu of mourning, Stone argues the girl uses primitive unconscious identification, that is, she incorporates the maternal body into her own (Stone, *Feminism* 96). Stone explains by writing from the perspective of the infant girl:

I learn to make sense of the bodily movements that I make on the model of agency I discern in my mother. To do this, I take the person of my mother as she figures into my experience and imagination, and I transpose her person onto myself. I incorporate the figure of my mother, and map it onto my own body with its emerging boundaries—boundaries that only become consolidated insofar as I repeatedly model myself upon my mother. (Stone, *Feminism* 102)

In turn, the mother reciprocates the infant’s modeling (Stone, *Feminism* 103). Paradoxically, through identifying with mother, the girl differentiates by incorporating the mother’s sense of agency for herself (103-104). The Daughters of the Night incorporate and map Jocasta’s body onto themselves, and by doing so emerge as strong figures with their own agency even if they cannot prevent the tragedy. While Stone does not ascribe the daughter’s reincorporation of the maternal body to an incest phantasy, I would like to suggest that at least in *Night Journey* in which the daughters map and incorporate a specifically erotic maternal body “a kind of incest is then committed” (Kristeva 248-249).

I read Kristeva’s newer work on maternity, particularly on reliance, as implicitly remedying the matricide she claimed to be “a vital necessity” in the past. Therefore, I believe we can now read Stone and Kristeva as describing a similar process but from the perspectives of the infant and the mother, respectively. Kristeva’s reliance can provide an important theoretical supplement to Stone’s work by accounting for the role of the drive in infantile incorporation and mapping, and Stone’s model describes how the infant incorporates and maps the semiotic substrate of language. Kristeva says the mother re-learns language as her child learns by speaking the echolalia and language of the child (“Reliance” 78). In a sense, the mother incorporates and maps the infant onto her body:
. . . the child’s language acquisition implies that the mother also re-learns language. In the projective identification of the mother and the child, the mother inhabits the mouth, lungs, and digestive tube of her baby and by accompanying his echolalia, leads him towards signs, sentences, stories: hence *infans* becomes a child, a *speaking subject*. (Kristeva, “Motherhood Today”)

Because of our often Lacanian emphasis on symbolic language acquisition when describing the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, we often forget the importance of this sort of sensorial, prelinguistic, and translinguistic experience in language (Kristeva, *Sense* 99).

Stone’s emphasis on incorporation and mapping and Kristeva’s emphasis on the mouth and breath and lungs are mutually revealed in the relationship between the chorus and Jocasta in *Night Journey*. The chorus and Jocasta not only learn each other’s movement, they inhabit the same breath. The breath’s relation to the body is central to Graham’s work, especially in the contract and release technique. Dance historian Henrietta Bannerman, quoting dance critic Anna Kissellgoff, highlights the importance of “the angular contractions in which breath is visibly expelled” and “the distortions those create in the body for expressive purposes” (Kissellgoff, qt. in Bannerman 272). As Jocasta and the Daughters of the Night share the same movement and same manner of breathing when they contract and release, there is a congruence between the mother’s breath and body and the daughters’ breath and bodies.

This more precise analysis of breath in both language acquisition and Graham technique allows us to expand our understanding of the aforementioned vaginal cry. As Graham explained in her autobiography, Jocasta’s vaginal cry is a cry for “her children” (plural), not just for Oedipus. While in Sophocles, following the standard Greek myth, Jocasta had two daughters—Antigone and Ismene (who do not appear in *Oedipus Rex*)—in *Night Journey*, Graham’s Jocasta has seven “daughters.” Thus the vaginal cry of the mother can be read as a cry not only for Oedipus, but for the Daughters of the Night. Conversely, the cry is the first sound the
infant makes to the mother, a distress call to make up for the absence of intrauterine components after the infant has been separated from mother’s body through birth (Kristeva, “Place Names” 282). As such, the cry is an important part of the semiotic foundation of language. The cry means the child must henceforth reckon with the mother’s desire: “the door is finally open to a relationship with the object, at the same time as representation and language make their appearance” (282). The cry in Night Journey—which echoes back and forth between mother and daughters—brings us to the semiotic modality of language developed in the early relationship with the mother’s body.

Both Kristeva’s theory and Graham’s dance offer a way to resurrect and care for the lost maternal body and lost maternal subjectivity within the Symbolic order. The Daughters of the Night demonstrate this caring for Jocasta several times. For example, in the beginning of the dance when Tiresias first exits the stage leaving Jocasta alone, she collapses on the bed. The chorus leader then reenters holding branches, ostensibly to announce Oedipus’ arrival, but she shapes her body in such a way as to suggest she is not there merely to offer his official introduction, but also to provide Jocasta with tender empathy during her psychological distress. The rest of the chorus enters in a stately phalanx escorting the rather pompous new king who extends his leg with flexed foot over Jocasta, but then they break formation to surround her as if protecting her. Parallel to the process of libidinal movement in reliance from mother to infant, the Daughters restore rather than disavow the primary homosexuality of “Oedipus” and use its libidinal energy for the maintenance of Jocasta’s life for as long as they can. The Daughters of the Night offer an antidote to the forgetting of the loss of the mother by radically remembering and idealizing her.

CONCLUSION: DANCE AND WRITING FROM THE PLACE OF FLESH

Mitchell Wilson points out that Kristeva’s theory is connected to a personal style because she is “writing theory from that place of the flesh” (103). In writing her “script of movement” for Jocasta, Graham too writes from the place of flesh and with the flesh itself.
While the dancer does not speak with language proper, she does speak with the body, and the choreographer writes with the body. In fact, it is significant that Graham writes and speaks with the body in telling the story of Jocasta in Night Journey precisely because it is her maternal body that has been repressed. In Sophocles’ play, the incestuous events surrounding the erotic maternal body are declared to have happened, but they are not shown in the performance or described explicitly in words. In Night Journey, Graham locates the absence of writing in Sophocles’ writing proper and intervenes by reasserting the primacy of the mother’s body.

Kristeva’s work demonstrates that the mother’s body, though repressed, persists in the rhythm, primal syntax, feeling, and affect of language, that is to say, the mother’s semiotic body is always intertwined with the symbolic in language. As Graham speaks with the body, she demonstrates Kristeva’s point that the semiotic always speaks within language. By emptying the Oedipus myth of all the other elements except the incest, Night Journey re-scripts the preverbal and pre-Oedipal mother-infant relationship as described by Kristeva. Kristeva now characterizes this relationship in terms of maternal eroticism or reliance. Mother is necessarily already erotic for both Kristeva and Graham. Therefore, when desexualized accounts of motherhood inscribed and idealized in the Symbolic deny maternal eroticism they also deny the mother of her subjectivity and agency. At stake in Night Journey is the possibility of giving form to lost maternal subjectivity.

Despite her tragic fate, the Jocasta of Night Journey still provides a powerfully defiant challenge to the Symbolic order. Kristeva argues that by identifying with the erotic mother, as she claims Bellini does and as I have argued Graham does, an artist can speak to the mother’s hitherto outlaw jouissance—outlaw because it is outside the Law of the Father which structures the Symbolic order. We do not normally see maternal eroticism precisely because it is rendered abject and deemed obscene in the Symbolic. By telling the story of Jocasta’s eroticism, which had not been previously written into the western canon, Graham intervenes in the Symbolic, revolts, and gives form to the maternal eroticism repressed throughout western culture. She undermines the dichotomous lover/mother...
logic of the Symbolic ideal image of desexualized maternity and offers instead an account of an integrated lover-mother subject.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the joint conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars + Congress on Research in Dance, University of Iowa, November 2014, and at the meeting of The Kristeva Circle, University of Memphis, September 2015.


3. My description and analysis of *Night Journey* is based on several staged versions: (1) An unpublished VHS recording in the collection of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts of the Martha Graham Dance Company’s April 1985 performance at New York State Theater with Janet Eibler as Jocasta; (2) an unpublished DVD recording in the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Archives, Becket, Massachusetts, of the Company’s August 11, 1994 performance at the Jacob’s Pillow Dance festival featuring Terese Capucilli; and (3) the Company’s live performance at New York City Center on April 14, 2016 featuring Blakeley White-McGuire. I wish to extend my gratitude to Norton Owen, Director of Preservation at the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Archives for his assistance. There is a widely available 1957 filmed version of *Night Journey* commissioned by Graham in which director Alexander Hammid took liberties with the camera’s point of view. Not only does this make it difficult to determine the dancers’ facing (that is, it is hard to tell if the dancers would be facing the audience or not as the camera moves in and around them), but at times it causes the chorus to obscure Jocasta and Oedipus during their sexual union in a way that does not happen on stage. The visibility of the danced incest in the staged versions, unfortunately compromised in the film, is an important element in my argument. Hammid also emphasizes Oedipus far more than he is in the staged versions. When Oedipus dances his solo on stage, for example, Jocasta sits downstage closer to the audience than he is, and thus we interpret the scene first and foremost as one from Jocasta’s memory. In the film, however, frequent close-ups of Oedipus or shots of him in isolation make it appear that the scene is about him. Victoria Thoms notes the film version has been used for major analyses, such as Ramsey Burt’s and Sally Banes’s both of which I cite in this article, and has become the “real” version of the dance though it is very different from the staged version (106-7). See Thoms, *Martha Graham: Gender and the Haunting of a Dance Pioneer* (Bristol, UK and Chicago: Intellect, 2003).
4. Some dance scholars have read this as a specifically feminine space. Nurit Yaari writes, “The purposeful neglect of the male public domain in favor of concentration on the female private domain enabled Graham to depict woman’s inner experiences and inner struggles in dance” (227). Banes describes the work as private and erotic, unlike the public setting of Sophocles: “...the relationship of both Jocasta and Oedipus to public life and the state, stressed in Sophocles, almost completely disappears in Night Journey. This intensely private, erotic perspective modernizes and feminizes the myth just as much as does the new centrality of Jocasta’s role in the tragedy” (158).

5. Graham switches the order of the suicide and blinding from how they had appeared in Sophocles text.

6. Regarding questions of sexual difference, I want to acknowledge the contested relation of Graham to feminism within the historiography of dance scholarship on Graham. Graham herself renounced feminism, like many American modern artists of her generation who denied their work was in any way political, though Victoria Thoms points out this is in contradiction with her feminist “living” and “doing” in Judith Butler’s senses of those words (Thoms 32, 34). Graham was a formidable figure in the world of the arts who challenged the feminine niceties of ballet and often dealt with sexually explicit and taboo themes. Thus Thoms argues that Graham’s life and work create a feminist consciousness despite her declaration to the contrary (Thoms 35). Graham’s rejection of feminism reveals the complexity of negotiating gender identity under patriarchy (Thoms 35). In Thoms’s compelling analysis, she neither dismisses Graham’s declaration nor takes it as the final word. Feminist scholarship on Night Journey is divisively split. In one camp are scholars like Deborah Jowitt who see Graham’s Jocasta as a victim or as too submissive to Oedipus and reduced to her sexual drives. Marianne Goldberg claims Jocasta too often dances in horizontal positions in contrast to the generally towering vertical postures held by Oedipus and Tiresias in the dance (Goldberg cited in Corey 206). Sally Banes makes similar arguments and says Jocasta acquiesces to Oedipus and seduces him by the basest means possible (Banes 160). Similarly, Marcia Siegel sees Jocasta as a weak character (Siegel cited in Burt 35). Furthermore the stereotype of woman as mother or temptress could be seen as reinforcing the post-WWII rise of the feminine mystique; the gender hierarchy and emotional extremes in Night Journey can be read as deeply conservative (Banes 3). In the other camp (with which I fellow-travel) are scholars such as Gay Morris who read Graham as deconstructing stereotypes and bearing witness to the psychical complexity of women and mothers living in an oppressive society. Frederick Corey reads Night Journey and many of Graham’s dances as examples of feminist revisionism. He understands Graham as taking male authored stories and re-centering them on women to express what Nancy Miller calls “stories of the body” (Miller 355 cited in Corey
205) while often emphasizing empathy between women (Corey 204-205). This applies to many other works in Graham’s so-called “Greek cycle” such as Graham’s retelling of Medea in Cave of the Heart (1946), and Clytemenstra (1958). Corey asserts that giving expression to the vulnerability of women in patriarchal society does not reinforce it but rather raises critical feminist consciousness (Corey 206). Ramsey Burt says that Night Journey reveals the historical construction of gender subjectivity in Graham’s era, but that also Jocasta’s strength is revealed in psychical concepts and the work’s “combination of death, eroticism, and the maternal body” (Burt 35, 37). He claims Graham depicts Jocasta as a powerful woman with desires without reducing her to a stereotypical femme fatale or a “man eating vamp” (48).

7. Sophocles remained steadfastly consistent on this point. In his later Oedipus at Colonus, for example, Creon says to the chorus leader, “. . . / they’d never harbor a father-killer . . . worse, / a creature so corrupt, exposed as the mate / the unholy husband of his own mother” (343, emphasis mine). See Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, trans. Robert Fagles in Three Theban Plays, Penguin, 1984. 279-388. Other playwrights from antiquity shared Sophocles’ view. For example, despite the fact the gods were punishing Thebes for the unsolved and unatoned murder of their king, Seneca’s Creon claims “. . . for Thebes’ crowning crime is—love of mother” (481). Seneca’s Creon goes on to asymmetrically blame and abject the mother more than the son: “but worse the mother than the son, again pregnant in her unhallowed womb” (481). See Seneca, Oedipus, trans. Frank Justus Miller, in Seneca in Ten Volumes, Harvard University Press, vol. VIII, 1979, pp. 425-522.

8. In addition to movement, Frederick Corey has noted that the costumes too put emphasis on the genitals (215). Graham’s focus on the mother’s body and the vagina provides an antidote to the focus on the phallus and castration in traditional psychoanalytic readings of Oedipus. Graham in fact minimizes Oedipus’ role. He is a “boy toy” in the dance, as Corey writes, a sexual object and not a developed character (209); and Katherine Power writes that Graham “all but reduces Oedipus to a one dimensional, posturing ‘index’ of phallic masculinity”; prominence and sophistication is given to Jocasta and to her “daughters of the night” (73).

9. The contract and release is the core movement upon which the rest of Graham’s technique is built. Its foundational importance for her system is analogous to that of the plié in classical ballet technique.

10. While Graham’s work is generally understood in this way by dance historians, Morris claims that holdover ballet elements mark Graham’s choreography as more conservative than it could be (61-62).
11. Kristeva wrote “Stabat Mater” in two columns, one giving her own account of pregnancy and birth, the other analyzing the figure of the Virgin Mary in the west. Söderbäck characterizes the two parallel columns of “Stabat Mater”: “. . . one depicting the lived and embodied (three-dimensional) experience of motherhood, the other unraveling and deconstructing an idealized (two-dimensional) image of Maternity . . . ” (82). Similarly, Graham’s Night Journey uses the embodied, erotic experience of Jocasta to deconstruct the idealized image of the Virgin.

12. Kristeva notes the French term ‘reliance’ resonates with a number of concepts: “It therefore seems justified to me to rehabilitate this word: reliance, in the back-and-forth between Old French, French, and English. Reliance: to link, gather, join, to put together; but also to adhere, belong, depend on; and therefore to trust, to feel safe, to share your thoughts and feelings, to assemble together, and to be yourself” (“Reliance” 79). The translators Rachel Widawsky and Perry Zurn note: “Reliance is a French neologism based on Latin and Old French meaning binding or linking. Kristeva is playing on this etymology to speak of sensorial, physical, or mental links” (“Reliance” 71). We get an even fuller sense of the word by seeing how the translators worked with the various conjugations and constructions of reliance, e.g., Relié: reconnected, linked; re-liéé: reattached; reliant: constructive; relié: reconnecting. Therefore, I will refer to reliance in French and italicize it in this article as to avoid limiting the meaning to that of its modern English cognate.

13. In some respects, this was, in fact, a return to the origin of the Greek chorus which began as a dance ensemble. “Chorus” comes from the Greek work for dance, as in the “chore” of “choreography.” Thespis added an actor’s speech to the dance and song of chorus, Aeschylus a second actor, and by Sophocles the chorus became commentator rather than active participant (Fagles and Knox 20).

14. My reading deviates from what Graham herself explicitly said about the chorus. In her autobiography, Graham describes the Daughters of the Night as furies and “memories of things we dread to remember, things we wish to forget—the terrors” (213) but does not refer to them as Jocasta’s daughters. Yet her choice of the word ‘daughters’ and the movement and behavior of those daughters, who do not terrorize Jocasta at all, but rather respond to her, I believe support my reading.

15. While Jocasta is a hysterical and despised figure in Sophocles’ texts, Oedipus is still idealized, most notably by his and Jocasta’s daughters Isemene and Antigone who remain loyal to him in the later Oedipus at Colonus. Jocasta, by contrast, is not named in the later play, and while Oedipus refers to his wife and mother in many of his laments, the daughters, refer to their mother as his mother, not their own. Antigone: “On all the woe thy sire and mother brought thee;” (146, emphasis mine). See Sophocles, Oedipus Trilogy, trans. Francis Storr, Harvard University Press, 1912. Kindle edition 2012). However, in Antigone the title
character does claim her mother by acknowledging she and Polyneices share the same mother, “To leave my mother’s son unburied there . . . ” (194). See Sophocles, Oedipus Trilogy (Kindle Edition).

16. Graham biographer Ernestine Stodelle notes that in contrast to Sophocles’ Theban elders “whose rambling discourses reveal lack of intimate knowledge concerning the action”, the Daughters of the Night “dance in a frenzy of knowing the inevitable path of the tragic events they witness” (148).


Works Cited


Cheryl A. Emerson

“In memory of . . .”

Citizen and Its Opposite

I. THE UNITED STATES OF AMNESIA

Claudia Rankine’s acclaimed Citizen: An American Lyric (2014)1 captured popular media attention when a woman was seen reading the book at a Donald Trump rally in Springfield, Illinois, in November 2015.2 The now iconic cover of Citizen, which features a dark hood against a stark white background,3 appeared amidst the crowd seated behind Trump as he delivered yet another race-inflected appeal for the Republican party nomination. Johari Osayi Idusuyi, a writer and community college student in Springfield, Illinois, was confronted by a white couple seated behind her and asked to put the book down. After a brief argument, Johari turned away and insistently resumed her reading, with a defiant head toss dubbed “the head flip heard ‘round the nation.”4 The layers of irony surrounding the Trump rally incident run deep, not the least of which is the media comparison between Johari’s rebellious stand and the American Revolutionary War, associating Johari’s head flip with the “shot heard round the world.”5 A war fought to establish the rights of American citizens, predicated upon Locke’s social contract theory and the “self-evident” truths of inalienable human rights, also codified the opposite of “citizen,” which of course were the non-rights of slaves.6 The Civil Rights Act of 1964
formally outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, but *de facto* racism persists with monotonous, melancholic regularity, as evidenced by incidents such as these, when a black citizen is verbally accosted for reading a book called *Citizen* at an American presidential rally.

The incident at the Trump rally could have been a scene from *Citizen* itself, which is a compilation of precisely such moments of encounter, when the social contract and the “racial contract” collide. If nothing else, the presence of Rankine’s book at the Trump rally stood as a silent testament of American racial tensions both present and past—tensions that continued to mount as Trump’s reactionary “white” capitalistic campaign gained traction. In a bitter inversion of white KKK attire, the black hood adorning the cover of *Citizen* is spectral and faceless: an insistent reminder of wrongful black deaths that carries with it an ominous air of vengeance. The scenes of encounter in *Citizen* are caught in a tension between melancholia and rage; between “the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization” and “. . . a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived” (24). At times the lyric voice of *Citizen* strikes a note of lament: “That time and that time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you . . . to arrive like this every day for it to be like this to have so many memories and no other memory than these for as long as they can be remembered to remember this . . .” (156). But the overarching tension in *Citizen* is epistemic: I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*, which is framed by two opening questions: “One is who is responsible? Another is *can you read*?” (Morrison 3). Above all, Rankine’s *Citizen* challenges a widespread social illiteracy in our inability to “read” the racialized constructs in moments of encounter, what the racial theorist Charles W. Mills calls an “epistemology of ignorance” which permits the presumably raceless social contract to function at all. Mills describes an “epistemological contract” which operates as “something like a cult of forgetfulness,” generating “a tortured ignorance so structured that one cannot raise certain issues with whites. . . . Evasion and self-deception thus become the epistemic norm” (97). If Rankine is correct, that the history of U.S. racial
violence constitutes a “domestic tragedy,” then one element of this tragedy lies in the fate of human lives doomed to remember what others are socially conditioned to forget. Social and political controls upon civic memory, however, like the institution of slavery itself, long predate the racial contract. Like slavery, the mechanism of forgetting was already in place, long before Locke’s investments in the Royal Africa Company and his assistance in drafting the slave constitution of Carolina. I wish to trace the “epistemology of ignorance” back to a time before widespread social amnesia was raced, following the example of Orlando Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death, in which Patterson traces the genealogy of slavery back to a time before racialized slavery was codified in Colonial America. By returning to slavery practices in ancient Greece and Rome, Patterson disentangles the identities of ‘black’ and ‘slave,’ which would not arrive until the 17th century.

The title of my essay derives from Nicole Loraux’s appendix to Mothers in Mourning, “Of Amnesty and Its Opposite,” in which Loraux explores civic bans on memory in ancient Greece. The civic need to carry on “as if nothing had happened” (88) in the wake of grievous loss demanded a certain public praxis of forgetting. Loraux’s primary example is one of literary censorship, when the playwright Phrynichus was fined 1,000 drachmae for his play the Capture of Miletus, for “having reminded [the Athenians] of their own misfortunes” (85, referencing Herodotus 6.21). Loraux’s essay raises the problematic question of “the dangers of recalling, when the object of memory is a source of mourning for the civic self” (85). As Loraux indicates, there is also a corresponding danger to oblivion, when the act of forgetting (amnesty), especially under conditions of legal decree, is harmful. Here she develops the metaphor of erasure, where “in Greek discourse about writing as the preferred tool of politics, the act of erasing (exaleiphein) is first a gesture at the same time institutional and very material” (89). Names, lists, laws, and decrees are added or subtracted, reinscribed, in ways that assure the continuity of the state. Erasures, however, are never complete: “To erase is to destroy by additional covering.” The erasure clears a space for a new text to be written, but the new text is also “susceptible, like all inscriptions, to erasing, whether this erasing is
beneficial, when thought . . . gets rid of mistaken beliefs, or whether it is harmful, when it is a matter of doing without mourning” (89). What is clear in Loraux’s essay is that memory is a conundrum—or as she states it, a phármaçon (96)—for the body politic. At times, forgetfulness is a balm that cures; but at other times, it is a false erasure—a mere covering over of unresolved grief. Under the latter condition, the persistence of memory stands in conflict to the state and may constitute “your fatal flaw,” as Rankine describes it in Citizen: “You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world’s had a lot of practice” (63). Indeed, the praxis of forgetting was foundational to civic order from the very start. Like Antigone, Citizen performs an act of non-oblivion: it remembers what is socially and politically more expedient (and much safer) to forget.11

II. TRAGIC KNOWING

Citizen: An American Lyric is a work of non-fiction. Rankine’s premise for the collection of scenes, a gathering of biographical and autobiographical accounts, was to ask multiple friends, both white and non-white, to recall “something that happened to you or that you were able to do” only because of your race. In her visit to Buffalo’s Babel lecture series in October 2015, Rankine remarked that her friends initially had no recollection of any such incidents, but then invariably, “three or four days later they would call. ‘Now that you mention it, there was that one time . . .’” they would say, and then recount an incident Rankine would later incorporate into Citizen.12 Rankine’s remarks invite the question of which moment was fictionalized: the actual moment of encounter, when “race” passed unnoticed, or upon reflection, when recognition arrived long after the fact? There seems to be a certain innocence to oblivion—to not knowing, as James Baldwin has suggested—yet the memories arrive regardless, in the form of knowledge as anamnesis: as recollection.13 In The Racial Contract, Mills notes that “a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities” are necessary “to establish and maintain the white polity” (19). Such
“blindnesses and opacities” (a sort of fiction) imposed upon all parties constitute a tacit understanding of the racial contract. Mills calls this “an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance . . . producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (18). Furthermore, the epistemology of ignorance operates upon all parties involved: “because the discrimination is latent, it is usually unobservable, even to the person experiencing it. One never knows for sure” (75-76, my italics). I recall again the query of Morrison’s narrator in *A Mercy*: “Can you read?” In terms of racial relations in the United States, the answer has to be “no.” Rankine captures the moment of doubt, when *one never knows for sure*, in her refrain, “did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?” In Rankine’s words,

> Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks. Still you want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you. (Rankine 9)

Implicit in this reflective scene is doubt in the instant (“Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?”) as well as a desire for inclusion no matter how much “the moment stinks.” The speaker wants to “walk out and stand among them,” where “them” references the trees but also, I suggest, the social. The speaker desires to join “them” and belong, even though “as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you.” While reflecting on the gathered moments, the speaker is indoors, looking out at a rain that is “lost in the trees.” “You need your glasses to single out what you know is there because doubt is inexorable.” The rain must be seen, felt, and experienced, because “doubt is inexorable.” It is the desire to *know*, even in moments when “you” are unknown. Typical
of Rankine’s deliberate ambiguity in insisting upon the 2nd person singular/plural “you,” the “you” of her reverie is either white or black; individual or collective. In each case, “knowing” always arrives after the fact, after the moment cannot be erased, the words unsaid, or the rash act of violence undone. Once “you” know the truth of the moment, it remains irrevocably done.

In light of Mills’ definition of the epistemology of ignorance as a “mechanism of structured blindness,” I turn now to Loraux’s exploration of amnesty as “the shadow of the political cast on memory” (83). Loraux discusses the term as both a formal legal decree (“I shall not recall the misfortunes”), as well as a general condition of lēthē as “the basis of life in the city,” going so far as to question whether “[there could] be a Greek politics that did not base itself on oblivion?” (87; 92-93). According to Loraux, the aim of “amnesty” (oblivion) is to restore a continuity that nothing breaks, as if nothing had happened,” through an “erasing of the conflict” (88, 92). Continuity of the state depends upon certain modifications and adjustments of historical recollection, perpetually renegotiating which events will be memorialized or minimized; honored or forgotten. In addition to the example of literary censorship of Phyrnichus’ play the Capture of Miletus, Loraux cites a second ban, which Plutarch refers to as an ‘amnesty’ (amnēstías): “After the military defeat of Athens and the bloody oligarchy of the Thirty, this is the ban on ‘recalling the misfortunes’ that seals the democratic reconciliation in 403” (86-87). Following the expulsion of the Thirty Tyrants, the victorious democrats “proclaim a general reconciliation with a decree and an oath,” binding all Athenians “one by one . . . ‘I shall not recall the misfortunes” (87). With a single decree, the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath is banned from public recollection.

The problem with amnesty, of course, is that the gift of forgetfulness can be granted by the gods (cf. Helen’s elixir in the Odyssey), but not through governmental decree. Even when forgetfulness would be a balm of healing to the state, every amnesty establishes the conditions for its opposite: if knowing is remembering, then knowledge depends upon a prior forgetting. As Loraux reminds us, oblivion and non-oblivion both operate
upon “a negative operation”—a subtraction (92). Forgetting and un-forgetting (lēthē and alētheia; amnēstías and anámnēsis) are built upon “a negation of the root of oblivion” (99). It is the negation of the “a” as in a-lētheia and a-mnēstías. Forgetting and un-forgetting are both an undoing, whether bringing to memory what was lost or banishing what is present. Loraux asks, “Can we truly see something like a strategy of oblivion in amnesty, the institutional obliteration of those chapters of civic history that the city fears time itself is powerless to transform into past events? It would be necessary for us to be able to forget on command” (83). However desirable on the level of civic or personal memory, there is no true oblivion, “antidote to bereavement and wrath;” a drug that “dispenses oblivion of all ills” (95). Furthermore, the shadow cast by the political on memory, “if it is presented with insistence as the oblivion of what cannot be forgotten, no approval, no consent is required from the one it befalls, who, momentarily subjected to this bracketing of misfortunes, is perhaps deprived of everything that made up his identity” (96). Loraux speaks here of “the one” it befalls, which is the price to be paid to ensure the continuity of the state. It is not a question of the individual “right” to mourn, but of assuring that the identity of the city-state takes priority over individual identity as well as individual groups within the polis (to include women). The bracketing of misfortunes, however, also risks the dread wrath of vengeance when individuals pursue a path of mourning at odds with the state and its decrees.

We are well familiar with the example of the dread wrath of Elektra, but to establish her as “a female model of memory,” as Loraux argues (98), risks advocating a stereotype of female grudge-holding that knows no bounds. Furthermore, it should be noted that Loraux’s distinction between “male” and “female” memory is drawn from the differential treatment of women’s mourning, “which the cities try to confine within the anti- (or ante-) political sphere” (98). The “wrath in mourning” manifests as female resistance to forced forgetting, thus the idea of a “female model” of memory is a social and political construction rather than a gendered difference of a cognitive faculty. In this context, Antigone presents “a female model of memory” in contrast to Elektra’s: one that also
defines her in opposition to the state, but not (as Creon suspects) as an agent of vengeance. By refusing the command of oblivion, she stands in defiance of Creon’s edict, but with no threat to the person of Creon himself. On the contrary, she insists that her brother’s death be remembered as a human death instead of that of an animal cast out to the dogs. One could argue that it is her sister Ismene, who refuses to help with the burial, who bears the most vehement force of Antigone’s wrath, even more so than Creon. In Antigone we encounter a grief and remembering that does not fester into vengeance, even if Loraux is correct that “anger as mourning makes the ills it cultivates ‘grow’ assiduously” (98).

A position of remembrance at odds with the state, however (whether male or female), sparks a perception of threat to civil order. If politics “is to act as if everything were fine” (91), then a position of non-oblivion, even in the face of our incapacity to forget on command, “suggests that one brandishes a memory in an offensive manner, that one attacks, or that one punishes someone else; in short, that one seeks revenge” (87). But what is one to do when the color of one’s skin is itself a marker of memory? It is at this point that Mills’ “epistemology of ignorance” demands both a cognitive and perceptual blindness: a tacit contract that race will not be ‘seen’, because seeing is remembering, and remembering is knowing: precisely the opposite of ignorance. Hence the association of ‘skin’ with ‘crime,’ where merely to be seen in public implies a threat to the assumed order, under a racial contract that required “no consent from the one it befalls” (Loraux 96).

III. ‘Always’

What model of memory do we find in Citizen: An American Lyric? Is it a “melancholy fed by repetition,” as Loraux describes The Mourning Voice of lyrical lament; or a dread wrath that yields “an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight,” as described by Aristotle in his writings on affect? Since the mere act of reading the book in public sparked the wrath of two white observers, it seems important to pause for a moment and ask what sort of remembrance the book represents,
and also to whom? Under the unspoken terms of the racial contract, the mere act of drawing attention to certain uncomfortable truths of our history carries the implication of incendiary intent—at least to those needing to persist in a state of perpetual oblivion. To those seated near Johari Osayi Idusuyi, her actions signified a political protest. Had a white attendee been seen reading Citizen would the couple have intervened, or intervened even more strongly as a betrayal of race? I cannot help wondering to what degree Johari’s mere physical presence at the rally was already perceived in the light of political protest, with or without a book (even this book) in hand. I have remarked upon the irony that the scene would easily fit so many of the others in Citizen, where Rankine marks an eternal return of the same: “Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn’t begin the same way, each time it begins it’s the same” (104-09). It is this aspect of eternal return, of the myriad, mundane repetitions and a knowing that “before it happened, it had happened and happened” (116). If anything, Rankine’s work is a coming to terms with a permanent state of social blindness, an epistemology of ignorance which convinces her that “all our fevered history won’t instill insight, / won’t turn a body conscious, / won’t make that look / in the eyes say yes, though there is nothing / to solve” (142).

Citizen strikes a note of sustained mourning—what Rankine calls “disappointment” (a rhetorical understatement)—which serves as a lyrical inquiry into the embodiment of memory itself. The marks are indelible, an always that is both intellectual and physical, with transient boundaries between: “You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard” (63). No amount of social or political pressure to “put the past behind you” or even more, not to notice or confront racist remarks and behavior at all [“the expected backing off of what was previously said” (10)], achieves oblivion. Citizen is less a study in rage than a lament for the irrecoverable damage done at the level of being itself. On the ontological level, Citizen offers a pause in the tensions—an interruption of the routine moments of encounter framed by the “schedule of structured blindesses and opacities” of the racial contract. Scene by scene, Rankine offers an alternate reading—another way to see, even if the insight sadly arrives long
after the fact. She pursues a truce with memory itself: “Though a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to breathe you have to create a truce—” but “a truce with the patience of a stethoscope” (156). Rankine might argue that memory is the house of being; even if it is a house in ruins, it is nevertheless a home—one’s dwelling. Such a reading offers a different sense of “always” from the perennial rage of Elektra: a remarkably unpoetic dwelling in that it lacks all measure of breath, truce, and the “patience of a stethoscope.” As a model of female memory, I prefer the lyric voice of Citizen, which also laments but without a call for retribution or surrender to eternal despair.

However, the repetition of events that are “wrongfully ordinary” pose a challenge of how to dwell in “these memories.” It is a challenge of knowing:

When you lay your body in the body entered as if skin and bone were public places,

when you lay your body in the body entered as if you’re the ground you walk on,

you know no memory should live in these memories

becoming the body of you. (Rankine 144)

Because of the lyric voice of Citizen, it is easy to imagine the voice of a singular subject; an individual “you” we attribute to Rankine herself. The “you” of Citizen, however, encompasses all 2nd person citizens—citizens once removed, so to speak [“Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on” (151)]. To understand the work of memory in Citizen, it is necessary for the “you” to simultaneously speak on behalf of the individual, singular “you;” the plural, racialized “you” thrown into sharp contrast against a white background; as well as the corporate body of memories becoming the body of “you,” on the civic, historical level. Far from a call for retribution, Citizen is a lesson in literacy: “Can you read?”
asking us to bring a level of care to how we “read” each encounter, knowing they will dwell in memories “becoming the body of you.”

Like Antigone, Citizen calls for remembrance. Each new acquittal of a police officer charged with the murder of a black man or woman testifies that black lives matter less and less. In the middle of Citizen, Rankine lists the names of lives lost to police brutality, joined by the simple refrain, “In memory of . . .” (134). The list is unfinished, ongoing, growing longer with each new printing of the book. My copy currently ends with Freddie Gray, but Rankine’s list goes on in a column of fading “In memory . . .” merely awaiting the names. Accompanying the names is a brief reflection, “Because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying” (135). It is a causal statement that spoken in another context would spark denial and retaliation. The brief lines are followed by two stark white pages, with no further commentary. Once again, the reader is left to fill in the blanks.

IV. CLOSING

In The Racial Contract, Mills asks “What does it require for a subperson to assert himself or herself politically? To begin with, it means simply, or not so simply, claiming the moral status of personhood” (118). I read Citizen as precisely that: a claim to the moral status of personhood. In response to an epistemology of ignorance, Mills calls for a new optics: a way to see differently, by way of a “gestalt shift, reversing figure and ground” (122-23). Rankine incorporates into Citizen a Glenn Ligon etching of a text from Zora Neale Hurston that illustrates the structuring of race at the perceptual level, with her words repeating over a darkening backdrop, until the black of the words vanishes: “I do not always feel colored / I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (Rankine 52-53). But how is it that whites so seldom “feel white?” “The fish do not see the water,” Mills remarks, “and whites do not see the racial nature of a white polity because it is natural to them, the element in which they move” (Mills 76). The challenge of “claiming the moral status of personhood” is the challenge of being perceived as a person. For both Mills and Rankine,
a starting point is to switch the understanding of “norm” and “exception” to emphasize that non-white racial exclusion from personhood [is] the actual norm rather than the exception (Mills 122). Both Citizen and The Racial Contract are far more descriptive than prescriptive, however, diagnosing historical conditions that seem never to change and in fact seem to be growing worse. In order to recover from a markedly “amnesiac account” of historical events, cast into oblivion, it is necessary to remember.

I close with two examples, which I offer as historical bookends. In 1977, the singer and poet Gil Scott-Heron wrote a spoken lyric in memory of Jose Campos Torres, the Hispanic 23-year-old Vietnam War veteran who was beaten by Houston police officers and subsequently left to drown in Houston’s Buffalo Bayou. Like the growing registry of black deaths at the hands of law enforcement officers, Torres’ death sparked massive riots and public protests but quickly faded from public memory. Scott Heron’s refrain, “I had said I wasn’t going to write no more poems like this,” repeats throughout the lyric, followed with enumerated reasons why he was wrong: “I had said I wasn’t going to write no more poems like this / But the battlefield has oozed away from the stilted debates of semantics / Beyond the questionable flexibility of primal screaming . . . I had said I wasn’t going to write no more poems like this / I made a mistake.” Like Citizen, Scott-Heron’s art responds to the call of non-oblivion.

My second book end concerns an account this week in The Guardian reporting that “George Zimmerman has listed the gun with which he killed Trayvon Martin in 2012 for auction, touting it as ‘your opportunity to own a piece of American history.’” Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of the unarmed black youth two years ago, and when the Department of Justice recently returned his gun to him “fully functional,” he decided to put it up for public auction, along with “photos of the weapon taken during Zimmerman’s trial.” The listing is accompanied by a statement that Zimmerman is “‘proud to announce’ that a portion of the proceeds raised would be used to ‘fight BLM [Black Lives Matter] violence against Law Enforcement officers’ as well as ending the career of Angela Corey, his prosecutor— ‘and Hillary Clinton’s
anti-firearm rhetoric.” Although we may not depend upon The Guardian or the Twitter social media feed for reliable reporting, the BBC has also picked up the story, following the online auction that seven hours from the writing of this conclusion had already reached $65 million dollars. The Washington Post article includes a statement from the Martin family attorney Daryl D. Parks, that “It is insulting to [the Martin] family that [Zimmerman] would sell the gun that he killed their child with.” The example of Zimmerman reveals yet another complication of the narrative of racialized violence, as the media identified him variously as “white,” “white Hispanic,” or “mixed race,” as if another narrative were needed to account for the shooting of black youth by a Latino. Questions of how we construct the stories and of how we read them are crucial as never before, as the scenes in Citizen teach us.

Each of my book ends marks an act of non-oblivion, one aesthetic and the other commercial. I am tempted to follow Rankine’s lead, and conclude with a stretch of white space without remark, allowing my reader to finish the reading of a scene. What I do know, here at the end of my reflection on memory through the works of Rankine, Loraux, and Mills, is that as of tonight, at least $65 million dollars are at stake over the rights to own an instrument of violence, and that Zimmerman is proud to dedicate much of his profits to vengeance against his public prosecutor and the Black Lives Matter movement. Centuries after Sophocles, it is not difficult to locate two expressions of memory: one that merely asks for remembrance, and another that promises revenge. I close with Rankine’s own remembrance of Trayvon Martin in Citizen:

My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. . . He won’t hang up. He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there. Good-bye, I say. I break the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up, don’t hang up, Wait with me. Wait with me though the waiting might be the call of good-byes (Rankine 90).
Pages later, Rankine again asks us to wait: “Wait with me / though the waiting, wait up, / might take until nothing whatsoever was done” (144). It would be naïve to think that Rankine will never have to write another poetry collection like Citizen, because with Gil Scott-Heron, I would be wrong. Poets and artists will persist in the work of non-oblivion, until something at last can be done; until the epistemology of ignorance yields to a sharing of memory and a shared public space. Rankine’s final word in memory of Treyvon Martin is “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on” (151). Meanwhile, his killer is exercising his citizen rights of ownership, “letting it go,” at a profit of multiple millions of dollars.

“Memory is a tough place…”
~Citizen, 64

Notes

1. Literary prizes for Citizen include the 2015 PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Literary Award; the 2015 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in Poetry; the 2015 Forward Prize for Best Collection; 2015 PEN Open Book Award; the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry; and the Poets and Writers’ Jackson Poetry Prize. www.graywolfpress.org/books/citizen. Accessed 12 May 2016.


3. Covert art: David Hammons. In the Hood. 1993. Athletic sweatshirt with wire. 23 x 9 inches (Citizen, back cover). On her visit to Buffalo’s Just Buffalo literary series in October, 2015, Claudia Rankine reminded us that the dark hood is in memory of the Rodney King beating on 3 Mar 1991, rather than the more recent Freddie Gray killing on 12 April 2015.


5. The famous line is found in the opening stanza of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn,” www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45870. Accessed 10 May 2016:
By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

6. The concept of ‘rights’ would require a much broader discussion that exceeds the scope of this paper, especially the conflicts inherent between rights of ‘citizens’ over those of ‘man’ and ‘human,’ all entangled—even implicated—in the language of identity politics. In this paper I unavoidably—even deliberately—fall into the vocabulary of ‘identity,’ both racial and gendered, as does my source material.

7. Cf. www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act

8. The term is from Charles W. Mills. The Racial Contract. (Cornell University Press, 1997) and provides the theoretical framework of this paper.

9. By “white” here I mean a specifically historic American “whiteness” as a racial construction instituted upon the establishment of racialized slavery in Colonial America. I view Trump’s campaign rallies as performative reassertions of these racial constructions, most visible in his ejection of “Black Lives Matter” protestors from numerous rallies where he ordered his security guards to “get him the hell out of here” (Birmingham AL, 12 Nov 2015). Trump lauded the use of physical violence against black protestors, whether real or assumed, even threatening to physically fight them himself: “I don’t know if I’ll do the fighting myself, or if other people will” (Birch Run MI, 11 Aug 2015). For a summary of incidents see Philip Bump, “Could Donald Trump be held legally responsible for inciting violence at his rallies?” The Washington Post, 16 Mar 2016. www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/03/11/could-donald-trump-be-held-legally-responsible-for-inciting-violence-at-his-rallies/?utm_term=.f5bc104a4135. Accessed 6 Dec 2016.

10. For a discussion of John Locke’s investment in the slave trade, see Mills 68.

11. Had I the space to pursue a broader exploration of the harms and blessings of “forgetting,” I would look to Friederich Nietzsche’s “The Use and Abuse of History” in The Untimely Meditations (Thoughts Out of Season). Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici and Adrian Collins. Ed. Oscar Levy, Digireads, 2009, 96-134, as well as Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents. Trans. and ed. James Strachey, W. W. Norton, 2005. Nietzsche cautions against the “excess of history,” arguing on behalf of life: “Forgetfulness is a property of all action . . . life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without forgetfulness” (98). For Freud, on the other hand, forgetting is the work of the unconscious, where the repression of
memories can be pathological. My approach in this project leans away from both a Nietzschean and psychoanalytic perspective towards the phenomenological, since Rankine’s *Citizen* is a study in perception.


13. I use the word *anámnēsis* in the general sense of recollection, rather than as the specific technical term developed by Plato, who proposes “that some knowledge could have been acquired only by our immortal souls’ acquaintance with the Forms before our birth and not through sense-experience.” [*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd Ed., Oxford University Press, 2005. DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199264797.0001, accessed 5 Dec 2016.] Phenomenology helps us account for the non-coincidence of perceptual experience. In Husserl, for example, “an experience is not, and never is, perceived in its completeness, it cannot be grasped adequately in its full unity . . . Only in the form of retention of in the form of retrospective remembrance have we any consciousness of what has immediately flowed past us” (*Ideas* 84).

14. One could ask the same of U.S. civic memory, especially the regularity with which law enforcement officers are declared not guilty or charges dismissed under mistrial. Formal bans on memory in U.S. history include presidential pardons of Vietnam War defectors, misconduct of past presidents (Nixon, Reagan), the censorship of books in schools (banned for use of the word “nigger”: *Huckleberry Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird, Native Son*, and others), and the removal of Confederate flags from governmental buildings in the U.S. South.


17. In yet another complication of identity categories, the police uniform paradoxically amplifies and covers over the race of the officers, an ambiguity that arises in *Citizen* in passages where Rankine removes all references to race from the scenes. The reader thus confronts her own conflation of “white” with “police,” as if the uniform itself is raced.

19. For the full lyrics, visit www.lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Gil_Scot-Heron:Jose_Campos_Torres; for the youtube video, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYt2K6vacv0. Accessed 12 May 2016.


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Since it is usually our mothers who seem to bring us into temporalization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks that particular intuition of origin by coding and re-coding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace. The daughtership of the nation is bound up with that very re-coding. (Gayatri Spivak Nationalism and the Imagination)

It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful ‘subject’. (Gayatri Spivak “Draupadi”)

I. INTRODUCTION

As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, Gayatri Spivak’s subalterns usually die (“Death and the Subaltern” 130). One could add that even the Rani of Sirmur fades away in what historians would describe as an uneventful event (she outlives her usefulness for the changeover of the episteme) (Spivak, Critique of Postcolonial Reason 238). Given that 2018 will mark the 40th anniversary of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) (and thereby its having been around for more than half of India’s 71 years of independence), this essay revisits Spivak’s concept of subalternity via the partition of India.
and Pakistan in 1947. In particular, the essay examines the play of *Vertretung* (proxy) and *Darstellung* (portrait) in Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त).\(^1\) Manto’s oeuvre has received considerable attention across disciplinary fields and geographical spaces. A majority of these readings focus on gender, nationalism, and postcolonialism.\(^2\) Many demonstrate the subaltern status of women who were raped, abducted, brutalized, kidnapped, and then allegedly rehabilitated by the state.\(^3\) By building on these thorough examinations, I focus on the *conceptual* relationship between subalternity and death and its potential implications for both representation and political struggle.\(^4\) Therefore, the second section of the essay analyzes Victor Li’s notion of “necroidealism” (“Necroidealism” 280) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s claim that “death functions as disclosure for subaltern identity” (131). The third section highlights some central aspects of Spivak’s concept of subalternity, primarily the subaltern’s irreducible heterogeneity.\(^5\) The fourth section reads Manto’s “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त) to provide some texture to the conceptual claim being made regarding Spivak’s concept of subalternity. The final section suggests that the subaltern is not merely a sacrificial ideal (as Li suggests) or a figuration of failed speech (as Sunder Rajan suggests).

Instead, Spivak tracks the *mechanics* of the constitution of the subaltern to mark the subaltern’s irretrievable heterogeneity rather than her ostensible authenticity (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 284). Tracking this irreducibility inaugurated by the “question of simple semiosis—What does this mean?” (297) disrupts the logics of equivalence that turn heterogeneity into contradiction. This move in the name of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* turns heterogeneity into contradiction to evacuate the very stuff of subalternity: the (living) heterogeneous rather than the nothing ([may as well be] dead). When understood as the staging of a process of unknowing rather than the quest for an authentic voice for authentic representation, which is inevitably predetermined by a logic of presumed commensurability, subalternity as a concept seeks to convey and uphold an *experience* of the (logically) impossible.

In so doing, the subaltern’s simultaneous singularity and exemplarity crosses the threshold of sexual difference to emerge as
subject by upending the sexual differential that makes her a subject (in the first place). While one is undoubtedly correct to point to the deeply symbolic nature of this alleged victory (as Li counters in his examination of the sacrificial subaltern), the essay suggests that precisely this imaginative labor provides the ethical and affective force (as Sunder Rajan explains in her reading of subalternity) necessary for difference. In other words, the logics of equivalence produce the play of identity and difference and, hence, assimilable difference is (actually) no difference. Thus, Spivak’s tracking of the subaltern is that imaginative exercise that allows one to conceive of difference at all.

II. SACRIFICE AND UTOPIA

In his examination of Dipesh Chakravarty, Li objects to the subaltern’s representation as a “utopian ideal” (276). If the subaltern signifies an absolute limit for hegemonic paradigms, then the “dead subaltern” is a dream come true (276). While such a representation is questionable, a dead subaltern seems to provide the most true-to-life example of itself. To achieve this threshold of unthinkability, Li argues that theorists use the subaltern’s death as the springboard for understanding subalternity itself as potentially disruptive of dominant frameworks. In other words, the literally dead subaltern is spiritualized into a conceptual subalternity to “secure a utopian opening into another mode of life” (276). Li takes his criticism further by stating that “the subaltern has to die in order to serve as an irreducible idea” (276, emphases added). Indeed, the theorist’s project in Li’s rendering is to perfect the concept of subalternity to ensure that it is a signifier that actually has no referent in the field of signification (to ab-use Hortense Spillers’ formulation).

What emerges from the subaltern’s lack of existence is what one could term as a neo-Platonic transcendentalization of the Idea or Form without even the possibility of anamnesis since the subaltern has to die. The subaltern’s literal non-existence is the only surety for conceiving it as radical alterity. This “political immortality” renders the subaltern both a symbol and utopic guarantor of the possibility of other worlds (276). Li states:
It is precisely this ‘absence’ or ‘impossibility’ of representing the subaltern that results in the paradoxical condition in which utopia and death are linked, in which the subaltern’s death or disappearance enables the subaltern to fulfill the ideal role of the resistant and inappropriable other. (277, emphases added)

Li’s own interested reading seeks to re-figure subalternity upon death as the subaltern’s keeping of (her?) a secret and protection of (her?) a singularity. Subaltern spaces resist encroachment in death because the dead subaltern is irreplaceable. (Although Li introduces this notion of subaltern secrecy or the subaltern’s cryptic secret at this juncture, he does not develop it during the rest of his critique. He does say remarkably that the subaltern chooses to keep its secret [282].)

For Li, Spivak’s understanding of subalternity paradoxically renders the subaltern both inexorably unrepresentable for hegemonic paradigms and inexorably appropriable for anti-hegemonic paradigms. As such, singularity transmogrifies into exemplarity when the subaltern is dead (has to die) (279). The subaltern’s discursivity is gained at the expense of the subaltern in life. Here, Li suggests that a “sacrificial logic” displaces actors with martyrs such that actual subaltern struggles give way to the “reassurance of a political ideal” (280, emphasis added). This leads to two consequences: first, the ambivalence and heterogeneity of subaltern struggle becomes measured by “an empirically emptied alterity” (280); second, subaltern insurgency is not necessarily native informancy or ventriloquism but may be the mark of (a) desire for hegemonic insertion. Rather than “extraordinary” “tragic heroism,” the subaltern’s resistance constitutes a transitional space between subalternity and hegemony (280, 284).

Li is absolutely right to caution theorists against overt confluences of the “aesthetic and the aporetic” that result in a form of subaltern martyrdom (286, 284). Such textual necropolitics and necroidealisms displace the subaltern’s “dense and throbbing lifeworld” (284) for (what can only be given Li’s logic) an aesthetic subaltern historiography (284, 285). The tautological result of Li’s
overdetermination is clear: to be subaltern is to be dead; to be dead is to be subaltern. However, several conflations occur in Li’s characterization of this rather dismal *fort/da*. First, ‘subaltern’ is equated with ‘dead’ and both are equated with ‘utopia.’ Second, ‘utopia’ is in turn equated with the ‘aesthetic.’ Third, the ‘aesthetic’ is equated with the ‘political.’ Fourth, subaltern/dead/utopia/aesthetic/political is equated with subaltern historiography. As a result of this metonymic chain, historiography itself becomes emptied of history while (the concept of) subalternity becomes meaningless. In other words, if the subaltern has to die, then why do theorists need literal referents for subalternity anyway?

Why would Spivak refer to Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s *sati/suicide* at all? (Of course, one can also look at the veritable cottage industry that has spun around Spivak’s concept of the subaltern, which includes examinations of sub-subalterns such as zombies and enquiries as to whether the subaltern can smile.) When ‘subaltern’ is equated with ‘dead,’ it seems unclear how one would differentiate a subaltern death from any other since the concept of subalternity seems to require (indeed necessitate) a lack of a literal referent. Also, is it possible for something to function purely as a conceptual category, that is, as *a priori*? The latter obviously refers to what is prior to all experience, which renders even the death of the subaltern gratuitous. If so, then can Li charge theorists with using the concept for political ends since he has rendered *Vertreten* and *Darstellen* as synonymous? Moreover, although Li mentions Spivak’s interest in heterogeneity, he glides over this interest rather quickly to conflate death with subaltern resistance (279, 285).

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also gives death a prominent role in subaltern resistance. However, unlike Li she also analyzes gender and does not focus primarily on the subaltern’s literal death. To avoid such simplification of the quandary that subalternity poses, she begins by suggesting that the subaltern’s death ought to render it as a full participant in human community (since we *all* die) (Rajan 117). Hence, she turns to “the meaning of ...a particular death that traverses the boundary between the living and the dead” (117). Eschewing the pursuit of either causality or visibility, Sunder Rajan reexamines Spivak’s rendition of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s death...
to focus on the “affective and ethical responses” it demands (119). At issue is the question of exemplarity in so far as Bhubaneswari figures the failure of a speech-act rather than its absence altogether (121).

Hence, contrary to Li’s claim, Spivak chooses an “imperfect” example of subalternity precisely to avoid the problem of literalism (Rajan 122). As Sunder Rajan reminds us, Spivak herself states that Bhubaneswari was a Bengali middle-class girl (120). In addition, Bhubaneswari not only leaves behind a letter but waits for the onset of menstruation before hanging herself (121, 123). Spivak uses the case of Bhubaneswari precisely to disrupt the identity between concept and example that Li posits as the martyrdom of the subaltern. Here, Sunder Rajan moves away from the synonymy of Vertreten and Darstellen (as established in Li’s rendition) to state:

[W]hile the nonidentity of Bhubaneswari as subaltern might remain the case at the level of the individual or historical anecdote, there is no mystification in Spivak’s reading of this figure at the structural level. . . Bhubaneswari’s subalternity is produced. (123)

As such, Sunder Rajan retains the critical force of Spivak’s concept in so far as her principal concern lies in tracking precisely how this production takes place.

Sunder Rajan like Spivak does not regard questions of motive desire or free will as necessarily determinative or decipherable. She is most concerned with the “foreclosure of meaning” (125) for the gendered subaltern such that transgression and excess are reined in by sexual difference. Thus, a regulative psychobiography (Spivak’s term) provides access to processes of gendering rather than simply reiterates female oppression (126). (This is not to posit the sex/gender binary but to suggest that the biological term ‘female’ not only presupposes culture but also presupposes hegemonic culture.) Changing the frame of the discussion to this double bind of crossing (a) sexual differential to speak as (a) subject is a “gesture of mourning” (127). Therefore, the affective and ethical responsibility entailed by Spivak’s “lament” (128) requires the plotting of (a) history.
Sunder Rajan understands subalternity as a form of “living on.” However, this is not because the example can be unproductively transformed into a counterexample of itself (128). One could add that Bhubaneswari had two cultural scripts before her: political assassination (as a blazing, familial goddess Durga) and marriage (as a chaste bride to be). Both remain within the purview of good wifehood, that is, posit an aggregate ontology, of sexual difference. Thus, it doesn’t really matter what she may ‘choose.’ Sunder Rajan does provide an example of subalternity produced by a narrative of not dying (in Amitav Ghosh’s *Shadow Lines*) to emphasize that death does not function as a *sign* of subalternity. She states, “There is no necessary syllogism here: x, y, and z die; they are all (produced as) subaltern; therefore subalterns (must) die” (130).

Death discloses subalternity because the failure of the speech act is simultaneously (re)produced and (re)instated in spite of the attempts to cross the sexual differential. As Spivak states:

I inserted the singular suicide of my foremother into that gap between the reasonableness of theory and the urgency of the revolutionary moment. . . I felt that Bhubaneswari rearranged that desire, coerced by situational imperatives [Hinduism and Nationalism]. She taught me yet another lesson: death as text. She made me read situations where no response happens. (Spivak, “In Response” 235)11

And so, Spivak’s concern with the absence of institutional validation somehow becomes (in Li’s reading) the conclusion that the subaltern is (better off) dead. It is this normalization of silence and oppression that for Sunder Rajan begs Spivak’s question and lends the lie to proxies and portraits seeking verisimilitude rather than effortfully established meaningfulness. Here, we can be reminded of Spivak’s assertion that the “colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 284). In fact, structural resistance to this heterogeneity produces subalternity. As a result, benevolent institutional aid to subaltern communities does synonymize *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* because the subaltern cannot speak.12
III. Measuring Silences\textsuperscript{13}

Because of this irreducible heterogeneity, Spivak explains that she “womanfully” (“In Response” 227) reiterated the difference of (what could then be called) the third world. At that time, the aggregate ontology of the colonized female body stood in contrast to the condition of philosophy that posited an unknowable subject. Indeed, the former remained knowable albeit by a more tortuous route. Against this desire for authenticity, Spivak interjects her notorious claim that the subaltern cannot speak.\textsuperscript{14}

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak demonstrates the geopolitical determination of discourses that ostensibly undermine the sovereignty of the western subject. This sovereignty is reestablished by rendering the other’s voice as transparently accessible and the intellectual as its transparent vehicle. Spivak seeks a more nuanced understanding of ideology in the interest of gleaning possibilities for subaltern women to speak (274, 271). The intellectual constitutively embodies a contradiction because representing the aggregate oppressed seems not to beg the question of the representer’s complicity in ideological formations that support the international division of labor (272). Conflating “consciousness” with “knowledge” disavows how the subject of knowledge is ideologically produced (286). This intellectual presumes to enable or transmit the authentic voice of the other.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, neo-imperialism’s beneficent impulses presuppose a “monolith … [called] ‘women’ … whose unfractured subjectivity allows them to speak for themselves” (278).\textsuperscript{16}

This subject of knowledge disavows the complicated terrain of desire, interest, and subjectivity traversed by ideological production to posit its own transparency. The subject/Subject is able to constitute itself as fragmented and disperse (‘subject’ rather than ‘Subject’) and the oppressed as unified and whole (for example, ‘the working class’). As a result, in spite of the condition of philosophy, the Subject’s desire and power remain irreducible. This desire and power is the spiritualized ground upon which the presumably self-conscious identity of the oppressed subject is posited. The subject/Subject thereby denies its geopolitical determination and
its normativity because of this transcendentalized ground (279-281). However, the subject/Subject cannot abdicate the responsibility of representation by presuming that oppressed subjects can “speak for themselves” (292). It cannot abdicate the responsibility of history by presuming that the west is sui-generis rather than a product of how it constructs the non-west. In addition, it cannot abdicate the responsibility of its own ethnography as it implicates itself in its canny positing of an other (291).

And so, Spivak shifts the burden of criticism from trying to give the oppressed subject a voice to discerning the mechanism that institutes silence (286). Critical discourse does not privilege “invocations of ... authenticity” but seeks the “mechanics of ... constitution” (294) to limn how the other’s silence is produced. Instead of presuming purity of consciousness, intellectuals retrace that itinerary of unknowing that results in an aporia (302). The affective and ethical challenges of such aporetic junctures disrupt disingenuous self-abnegations that in fact appropriate and reinscribe subalternity rather than clear the way for self-expression (289, 307). Therefore, the ability to self-represent is displaced from oppressed subjects onto intellectuals who must understand that being on the exploiter’s side is the subject/Subject’s incapacitation rather than privilege (287). Due to this charge, Spivak addresses “the female intellectual as intellectual” (295, emphasis added) and not the female intellectual as female. This intellectual “systematically ‘unlearns’ female privilege” (295) to avoid casting a romanticized and heroic colonized figure who remains irrevocably lost (295). Nor does this intellectual presuppose an identity-based methodology that could provide an adequate form of representation. This is because the “subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (284, second emphasis added).

Having stated the constitutive condition of subalternity, Spivak moves to her case study of sati/suttee. According to Spivak, this example provides an understanding of epistemic violence in the narrow and general sense, respectively: colonialism serves as an “imperfect” example of the violence intrinsic to establishing an epistemé (287). Colonial debates on sati/suttee oscillate between the woman’s subject- and object-status. Such oscillation has continued
in postcolonial debates on the practice. Spivak broadens the horizon of postcolonial enquiry from colonial discourse to the archive of antiquity: the Dharmasastra and the Rg-Veda. Her analysis of this archive demonstrates that both subject- and object-status mean the same thing: the self that is discerned in outline is a structural effect. As a result, she breaks the frame of culturalist accounts of sati/suttee. These accounts often rely on discursive constructions such as authenticity (the voice of the woman) or radical subjectivity (the will of the woman). However, the archive of antiquity structurally resists the living woman’s irreducible heterogeneity. In so doing, it renders this irreducible heterogeneity essentially irretrievable.

Because Spivak (re)turns to antiquity (as what postcoloniality cannot not want because antiquity is ‘lost’), she is able to ask her radically learned question: can the subaltern speak?. This learned question provides the (perhaps truly postcolonial) frame for her reading of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s sati/suicide at the essay’s end. Subalternity does not mean lack of voice or will but conveys and upholds the woman’s irretrievable heterogeneity. As the placeholder for the irreducibly heterogeneous, the subaltern provides new challenges for understanding subjectivity and agency. In other words, Spivak demonstrates how hegemonic discourses efface their own radical contingency. This effacement constitutes the mechanism for structural resistance to transgression and excess such that irreducible heterogeneity is recuperated as sexual difference. As a result, conveying and upholding the woman’s ‘voice’ or ‘will’ repeats this loss of heterogeneity to establish a foreshortened history of female victimhood. Spivak’s concept of subalternity signals that structural violence that displaces the widow as “female subject in life” (Critique of Postcolonial Reason 235). The widow’s displacement renders any attempt at ‘her’ replacement an “appropriation of a role in [‘her’] gendering”—yet again (227).

Making the widow cathect the space of fully intending subject so that her status as sheer victim can be refuted (211, 214) leaves ‘her’ cultural lineaments (or the domestic outline) intact. Instead, Spivak cannot encounter the subjectivity of the women who were burned and, hence, does not have the makings of a “countersentence” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 297). She opens out the hermeneutic horizon
of inquiry to move beyond the narrow sense of postcoloniality that remains mired in cultural overdetermination. The colonial/nationalist/postcolonial archive produces the fictional names of ‘ritual’ and ‘crime.’ These designations are retroactively established as real by virtue of their cohesive effects. They function as if they were facts of culture. These cultural facts displace the female subject in life. Her dissent cannot be decoded and remains institutionally illegitimate. As such, the (sexually) subaltern subject is textually unlocatable. She is not a logical threshold to be rhetorically crossed (out) for a cultural false positive: western culture gives women the right to choose (to live) and non-western culture gives women the right to choose (to die). Thus, to want postcoloniality (that is, also, to want antiquity) is to want irreducible heterogeneity at the site of that violence where encountering the subaltern becomes an encounter with nothing.

IV. “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त)

In every way possible, the subaltern in this story is subaltern. She is dead. She doesn’t speak. She is not present. She has no name. She has no religion. Her family is slaughtered. She is abducted. She is cold and meaty flesh (ठंडा गोश्त). She’s left to rot and be eaten in some bushes. If good wifehood is women’s aggregate ontology for colonialism and nationalism, then the partition of India and Pakistan posited their rape-ability. Women’s availability for raping, mauling, mutilating, assaulting, murdering, torturing, and vanquishing was understood as an intransigent is. The partition severed patriarchal bonds to render all men as entitled to rape.

In “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त), rape is treated as though a lover were cheating with another woman. As if it were a normal happenstance that naturally arouses murderous jealousy because of this other woman’s vamp-ish and demon-like (चुड़ैल) ability to seduce one’s man. A full-blooded Punjabi woman who is also her father’s daughter exacts her revenge. But she does so for her lover’s attempt to cheat, not for rape.

The entire story takes place in a hotel room. There are only two characters: Ishar Singh and Kulwant Kaur. They are Punjabi Sikh
lovers. Kulwant has been waiting for Ishar Singh. When he arrives, she uses her quick-sharp-expressive eyes (तेज़-तेज़ नज़रों) to give him a hard and hostile stare (घूरकर). She moves forward to lock the door. It is twelve o’clock at night and the room is shadowed by (छाया) a mystery-filled (रहस्यपूर्ण) silence. Kulwant returns to sitting on the bed cross-legged. And here, Manto begins the steady process of undressing Ishar Singh. At first Kulwant decides to leave Ishar alone because he seems to be unraveling the tangled threads of his various thoughts. He still has his kirpan (किरपान) in his hand and stands in a corner of the room. For moments, the same silence shadows the room. Even when Kulwant changes her position and starts swinging her legs, he stays silent.

Manto describes Kulwant as a full-full (भरे-भरे) woman. (Punjabi Sikh women per stereotype are ‘fair’ and ‘healthy.’ NB: ‘Healthy’ is the euphemism used for women who are not ‘slim.’) Her hips and muscles ripple because they are filled with meaty flesh (गोश्त से भरे हुए). Her breasts are raised very high on her chest and her eyes are quick-sharp-expressive (तेज़-तेज़ नज़रों). Her upper lip shows signs of her pent up feelings (ग़ुबार). When she’s gussied up it’s clear that she’s an impressive, larger-than-life (धड़ल्लेदार) woman. In contrast, Ishar Singh’s undressing continues. However, Ishar is still capable and deserving (योग्यतार) of a woman like Kulwant because of his features and body structure. He remains quietly in the corner, his tightly-bound turban starting to unravel, while his kirpan-bearing hand is shaking.

At this point, the two still haven’t exchanged a word. The silence seems to possess the same physicality and full-bloodedness as possesed by Kulwant and Ishar. Both bodies are awkward, as Kulwant’s grows more impatient and Ishar’s continues to unravel. Kulwant leaps up from the bed but even with her quick-sharp-expressive eyes (तेज़-तेज़ नज़रों) she can only say his name. We then realize that Ishar is standing with his eyes to the ground. He refuses to meet Kulwant’s gaze and even turns his face away from her. (Punjabi Sikh men per stereotype are ‘manly’ and ‘virile.’ NB: ‘Virile’ is the euphemism used for well-endowed manly men who produce well-endowed manly sons.) She screams his name again but immediately suppresses her tone. She seems to know how far she can go with
him. But from her question about his whereabouts we learn that he disappeared for many days. And here, Manto also begins the process of letting Ishar run dry.

Ishar moistens his lips with his tongue and tells Kulwant that he does not know. She gets angry at him and accuses him of trying to confuse her with his non-answer (माँ-या जवाब). Ishar Singh throws his kirpan to the side and lies down on the bed. He looks like he has been sick for quite a few days. The bed is full with his girth. Seeing her lover this way fills Kulwant with sympathy (साहानुभूति) and she touches his forehead. Ishar is still not able to respond. After looking at her familiar face, he just stares at the ceiling. Due to his continued silence, his progressive emasculation via his undressing, his body posture and movements, and his dry lips, we realize that he has witnessed something truly horrific. The effect is heightened because Ishar’s return to a hotel room rather his home suggests that he is a participant in the partition’s aftermath. Hence, what could have passed the limits given that all limits have already been crossed? If a manly man like Ishar is shaken, then what could happen to us when we find out what he witnessed? He is only able to say Kulwant’s name in a voice filled with pain and sorrow (पीड़ा).

Although Kulwant responds to his voice as though all the feelings in her heart have gathered in her upper-lip, she begins to playfully bite him. Now begins their foreplay, which seems misplaced given Ishar’s condition. It could be that Kulwant tries to distract him. However, Manto also portrays Kulwant as unshy about her own sexual satisfaction and Ishar as a man who is up to the task. But at this moment Ishar takes off his turban and seeks support in Kulwant’s eyes. He does spank her hips’ meaty-filled flesh (गोश्त-भरे कूल्हे) and snaps his head back to comment on women’s crazy minds. Perhaps he is amused at women’s lack of seriousness and their lust even at inappropriate times. At the moment he makes this statement, his hair comes undone. In a role-reversal, Kulwant runs her fingers through his long tresses. She lovingly asks him again where he went for all these days. He again tries to deflect her by telling her that he was at ‘bad’s mother’s house’ (बुरे की माँ के घर). By using this phrase, at once insult and warning, Manto evokes a feeling of dread. It has to be something really bad because Ishar
brings mothers into it. And mothers are simultaneously doting and punishing.

After saying that he was where all badness is born, he starts rubbing her ample chest. As Ishar rubs her raised chest, he swears to god that Kulwant is a woman full of life (जानदार). It seems that Kulwant has him where she wants him and gracefully shakes his hand off. She asks him to swear on her and tell her where he went. We learn that the hotel room is perhaps in a suburb because Kulwant wants to know whether he went to the city. The looting and violence would be taking place in the commercial districts. The cocoon-like quality of the hotel room, as also the scene of an illicit dalliance, is heightened because the events of the partition seem far removed. Ishar seems to get his strength back as he reties his bun in one swoop while responding negatively. Whereas before she seemed to have the upper hand, Kulwant now comes across as stereotypically womanish in her constant nagging. She refuses to believe him. She’s convinced that he’s looted a lot of money but won’t share it with her. Ishar responds by cursing anyone who lies to her as not created from his father’s sperm (वह अपने बाप का तुखम न हो).

Although this reassurance of his fealty and honesty makes her quiet for a little while, she bursts out again. She cannot understand what happened that night. He was totally fine and lying next to her. He dressed her in all his looted ornaments and was receiving her embraces. But all of a sudden he got dressed and went to the city. Either because she wouldn’t let it go, or her questions made him remember, Ishar’s face fell. Kulwant sees the change and tells him that he’s turning yellow. Now she knows that something isn’t right, that there’s something black in the yellow lentils (दाल में कुछ काला है), and she’s right to be suspicious. He tries to lie to her but his voice has no life in it. Kulwant’s suspicions grow stronger. She presses on her upper-lip and puts force into every word she utters. She taunts him that he is not the same man that he was eight days ago. Ishar sits up straight as if she assaulted him. He takes her in his strong and big (शाकिशाली) arms and embraces her forcefully. He reassures her that he’s the same. He tells her to let his embraces suffocate her so that the heat leaves her bones. She doesn’t interfere but continues to complain that she doesn’t know what happened to him that night.
He tells her again that he went to ‘bad mother’s house’ (बुरे की माँ के घर) but then he also says there’s nothing to tell her.

At this juncture, Manto has kept up the suspense for almost half the story. We witness this peculiar lover’s foreplay seemingly untouched by the calamitous events taking place in the world outside. Only Ishar’s constant deflection suggests that all is not as it seems. This incredibly private but banal repartee is dramatized by Kulwant’s womanfully melodramatic yet coquettish curiosity. Indeed, she tells Kulwant to set her on fire with his own hands if it turns out that he’s lying. Her described bulk and flesh give the room an erotic charge but Ishar seems to be ‘managing’ his woman. This is reinforced when he puts his hands around her neck and crushes her lips with his own. The fluidity between sex and violence is accentuated by these characters who by virtue of being Punjabi Sikh are expected (at least by Indian readers) to be loud and full-throttled: in their clothes, jewellery, music, dance, food, and, it follows, their love-making. They are a warrior people. So far Manto has catered to all of these stereotypes. He now makes his characters use equally corny analogies for having sex.20

The intensity of this moment is broken only when Ishar’s facial hair gets into Kulwant’s nostrils and she sneezes. Both laugh and Ishar looks at her lustfully. He uses the analogy of playing cards to invite her for sex. Kulwant has beads of sweat above her lip. Rolling her eyes she proclaims that the burying should happen (दफान हो) He bites her hips but she suffers and pushes him away and tells him to stop because it hurts. He takes her upper lips in his teeth and starts biting. Kulwant melts. Ishar takes off his kurta (recall Manto undresses him gradually) and announces the card game (तुर्प चाल).21 Kulwant is aroused and her upper lip starts trembling. Ishar takes her salwar-kameez in his hands and removes it over her head, as one would skin a slaughtered goat. He stares at her naked body and forcefully kisses her arm. He swears to god that she is a very spicy-hot woman (करारी औरत). Kulwant looks at the red mark on her arm caused by his kiss and tells him that he’s really bloodthirsty (ज़लिम).

Ishar smiles through his black moustache (facial hair also being a sign of Punjabi Sikh masculinity) and tells her to let an oppression or maltreatment (ज़ुल्म) occur today. He starts inflicting
these oppressions or maltreatments. He bites her upper lip, her earlobes, he presses her spread and heaving (अभी च) chest, licks her full hips with loud smacks, and fills her cheek-filled face with kisses. He sucks her entire body and covers it with saliva. Kulwant starts boiling like a pot over high fire-heat (अच्छ), but even all of this foreplay couldn’t arouse any heat inside him. Whatever techniques and ruses he remembered, he tried them as though he were a losing athlete (पहलवान also implies muscled and sinewed), but none were of any use. Kulwant’s body feels like an instrument whose chords were stretched to their highest pitch. She’s irritated for sure and says that he has distributed the cards enough, it’s now time to make a play (पत्ता फेंक).

When he hears her he feels as though the entire deck of cards slips from his hand. Breathing heavily, he lies down next (फहलू also has a military connotation as ‘flank’) to Kulwant. A layer of cold sweat covers his forehead. She tries to warm him up and they remain silent. But when her tense and aroused organs (अंगो) are sorely disappointed, she exclaims and gets out of the bed. She quickly-quickly (जल्दी-जल्दी) puts a sheet around herself, flares her nostrils, and asks Ishar who the despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute is (हरामज़ादी). Her voice is scattered and unclear. She wants to know who has squeezed him dry. Ishar keeps panting and remains lying on the bed. She starts boiling with rage. She wants to know who the vampish-demon (चुड़ैल) and card-thief is. He reassures her in a resigned and unenergetic (िनढ़ाल) voice.

True to form, Kulwant puts her hands on her hips and sternly-strongly (दृढ़ ता) lets him know that she will find out. She makes him swear to god that there is no other woman. Ishar tries to respond. Kulwant interrupts in a bitter voice that he should think before he swears. She is the daughter of Sardar Nihal Singh. If he lies she will suck each morsel of his meat (बोटी-बोटी) dry. He shakes his head with great sorrow. Kulwant completely loses her mind. She leaps and picks up the kirpan lying in the corner. She takes it out as if she were peeling a banana and attacks Ishar. At the very next instant, a fountain of blood starts gushing. She is still not satisfied and like a jungle-wild cat she starts scratching his hair. At the same time, she swears at her unknown rival (सौतन) with fat-fat (मोटी-मोटी) curses. After
a while, Ishar beseeches her in a soft voice filled with sorrow to let it go. She backs off. The blood flies from his neck onto his moustache.

We are approaching the end of Ishar Singh and the end of the story but we still do not know what he experienced outside these walls. Kulwant’s extreme actions are the result of her assumption that there is a rival. Her reaction comes from his inability to perform. This means that he is spent from love-making elsewhere. Given what is unfolding outside, she disturbingly presumes there to be another lover rather than a victim. Ishar looks at her reproachfully. He thanks her for piercing him with his kirpan even though she acted rather quickly. However, what has happened has happened for the better. Kulwant’s jealousy is awakened again and asks who she is. (She refers to the woman as ‘your mother’ to emphasize how beholden he is to her.) Blood reaches Ishar’s tongue. When he tastes this blood, a ripple or current runs through his body. Since he’s a bastard, he killed six people with the same kirpan. Kulwant only has the other woman in her mind. Ishar’s eyes are getting murkier (धुँधला) but a slight shine-light (चमक) arises. He tells her to stop swearing at that lady-pimp (महजी).

Kulwant yells that she’s asking him who she is. Ishar’s voice is suppressed in his neck. But he lets her know that he will tell her. He spreads his hand on his neck. When he sees his alive-blood (जिंदा लहू), he smiles and says that humans are strange things. Kulwant is waiting for an answer and tells him to speak about matters to hand. Ishar’s smile spreads further across his moustache. His neck is pierced so he can only tell her the whole thing (सारी बात) (the phrase is actually ‘whole telling’ or ‘whole thing to tell’) very slowly-slowly (धीरे-धीरे). When he begins, a layer of cold sweat again covers his forehead. At first he says that he cannot tell her what has happened to him. Human-girls (इंसान कुड़ि-या) are really strange things. When looting occurred in town, he participated just like everyone else. Whatever jewelry and ornaments as well as money he got his hands on, he gave to her. But he didn’t tell her one thing (एक बात). (The phrase is actually ‘one telling’ or ‘one thing to tell.’) His wound starts to hurt and he grimaces. Kulwant doesn’t pay him any mind and without any pity asks him what he withheld from her. He blows the blood dropping onto his moustache so that it flies in front of him.
The house he attacked had seven people in it. He killed six of them. He used the same kirpan she used on him. The seventh was a very beautiful girl. He picked her up and brought her with him. Kulwant listens quietly. He says he doesn’t know what to say to her because the girl was really beautiful. He would have killed her but then he told himself (he refers to himself in third person) that he enjoys Kulwant Kaur every day. He should taste this fruit (मेवा) as well. He left with her on his shoulders. On the way, he put her underneath the bushes alongside the railroad tracks. At first he thought he should distribute the cards, but then he thought he shouldn’t. At this point, in telling his ‘one thing to tell’ (एक बात), his tongue is completely dry. Kulwant swallows her spit and asks him what happened next. Ishar’s next words come out with great difficulty. His voice drowns after he says that he did throw the card or make his play (पत्ता फेंक). Kulwant shakes him. He opens his closing eyes and looks towards her body whose every morsel of meat (बोटी-बोटी) was palpitating. He tells her that she was dead, was a cadaver (लाश), completely cold meat (ठंडा गोश्त). (Here the fleshiness of meat disappears because of the adjective ‘cold.’) He asks her for her hand. Kulwant puts her hand on Ishar Singh’s hand, which was colder than ice.

**V. In Conclusion: Human-girls (इंसान कुँड़ि-या) in One Telling (एक बात)**

When Manto was charged and tried for obscenity because of this story, he argued that Ishar Singh demonstrates how humanity is recoverable. There is hope even for those who have committed evil. One could respond that, if indeed this is the case, then our standards for what is humane and rational are incredibly low. (It takes necrophilia for him to recognize his own humanity.) The dichotomies Manto establishes are readily evident: for example, hot/cold; hotel room/home; fire/ice; kirpan/flesh; life/death; lover whore; lover in hotel room/family woman at home; full-blooded/dry; and, mystery/knowledge. In addition, the clichéd repartee and sexual routine between Kulwant and Ishar is matched by the equally clichéd continuity between sex, food, animality, and violence. At one point, Kulwant is compared to a cat. Military imagery includes
tyranny, bloodthirstiness, the kirpan, use of words like ‘flank’ (पहलू) and ‘pahlvan’ (पहलवान), and Ishar’s turban and facial hair. The story is littered with domestic motifs of daughtership, motherhood, and patronymy. Kulwant even calls the presumed other woman her ‘sautan’ (सौतन) even though she and Ishar are not married. Domestic imagery includes slaughtering and skinning goats, boiling water, spices, meat, bones, and peeling a banana. These motifs and images occur even though the setting is a hotel room intended for a sexual dalliance, which is already a transgression of ‘Indian’ cultural mores.

The story is also replete with phallogocentric irony: for example, the kirpan that Ishar uses to kill others kills him; Kulwant uses the kirpan to penetrate Ishar after he could not penetrate her; and, blood bursts from the neck because semen does not burst from the phallus. Semen leads to life’s creation, but blood leads to life’s end. Kulwant refers to her rival as a demon-vamp (चुड़ैल), a despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute (हरामज़ादी), and as her lover’s mother (तेरी माँ). Ishar refers to this dead woman as fruit (मेवा), human-girl (संसान कुड़ि-या), and lady-pimp (भड़वी). As such, both phallic irony and pedestrian swear words are used to demonize the woman Ishar abducted all the while holding her responsible for Kulwant’s jealousy and Ishar’s predation. Both women are stereotypically represented as vampire-like beings who suck the life force out of men. If the alleged other woman dries Ishar up because of their lovemaking, Kulwant sucks dry every morsel of meat (बोटी -बोटी) in his body because of revenge. She literally exsanguinates him of his alive-blood (िज़ंदा लहू) to turn him into a cadaver (लाश) with completely cold meat (ठंडा गोश्त). However, in spite of this depiction of women’s vengeful wrath, rape-ability, and sexual submission, it is the subaltern who upends the entire card game.

Because subalternity is that irreducible heterogeneity that is in excess of identity and difference, it brings contradiction and duality to crisis. Manto’s story gives all signs of life to one side while the other side is nothing but cold brute matter. The duality neatly folds the story into halves on either side of that hotel room’s locked door (recall that this is Kulwant’s first act off the bed). However, this dividing line is effaced even when crossed. This is not to romanticize the subaltern or to deny that this ‘victory’ is pyrrhic.
Instead, this reading suggests that the dead subaltern crosses the sexual differential to disclose life’s intransigent unpredictability. Regardless of the concepts and categories that systematize our hatreds and sorrows, she caused in him a moment’s pause. The familiar became unfamiliar. What he expected was rape (or tasting new fruit), but something strange happened instead. He tries to revoke this strangeness by calling her a human-girl (इंसान कुड़ि-या). Using the word ‘girl’ (कुड़ि-या) reiterates his infantilization of women and his sense of entitlement and superiority. He willingly plays the role of the man rendered hapless by a strong, full-blooded, and spicy woman.

Nonetheless, the use of the concept and category ‘human’ seems to suggest some glimmer of humanity. This humanity emerges not because he recognizes her as a human being, but because he did not expect things to turn out this way. As such, Ishar’s exsanguination reiterates that blood is life, but it also shows how alive-blood (जिंदा लहू) moves inexorably into chaos. Even as systems are meant to create order, his experience of the impossible establishes how humans are the splinter that always breaks the system. What humans are capable of doing is the entropy that begs the question to reveal the system’s contingency. And so, now that human-girls (इंसान कुड़ि-या) are strange(rs), what else could follow the hyphen after ‘human’? Given that the subaltern is irretrievably heterogeneous, we cannot do the ‘whole telling,’ tell the whole thing, or understand the ‘whole thing to tell’ (सारी बात). We can only do ‘one telling,’ have ‘one thing to tell,’ or tell one thing (एक बात). After all, no one knows what happens next.

Notes

1. English translations of Manto’s stories abound. To retain my own native and, hence, intuitive sense of language, and colloquialisms, the translations from Hindi to English are my own. The text used is a pedestrian rather than academic one: Toba Tek Singh aur anya kahaniyaan (टोबा टेक सिंह और अन्य कहानियाँ). (NB: There is no capitalization in Hindi.) Please note that four languages are operative in this one story: Hindi, English, Urdu, and Punjabi. The syncretic fabric created as a result is cause for its own elaborations on national identity and language but cannot be undertaken here.


4. For an in-depth examination of the mutual implication of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* see Rosalind Morris’ “Introduction” to *Can the Subaltern Speak?*:
5. I will read the original essay and the revised version in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).


7. Spivak points out, the “theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known somehow seems not to have a problematic self” (Gayatri Spivak and Sarah Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, Routledge, 1990, 66). For Spivak, representation is not a choice: “Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologistic museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference ... You don’t give the subaltern a voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity” (Gayatri Spivak, “Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1992, pp. 29-47, 46). The subaltern is not a privileged subject. Only an insidious disavowal of power and privilege regards lack of speech or failure of the speech act to be the sign of untainted, whole, and seamless subjectivity and being.


9. Spivak lets her readers know that Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was her grandmother’s sister (“In Response” 228).


11. Spivak emphasizes that her interest in Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was also influenced by the misreading of Marx by those most gregariously invoking revolutionary struggle during that time in the academy. Such misreadings allowed intellectuals to avoid the burdens and quagmires of representation (“In Response” 233-235).

13. Spivak uses this term to describe her affective intervention (“In Response” 286).


15. Her analysis is centered on Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze.

16. As Kumkum Sangari emphasizes, “The disavowal of the objective and instrumental modalities of the social sciences occurs in the academies at a time when *isable* knowledge is gathered with growing certainty and control by Euro-America through advanced technologies of information retrieval from the rest of the world …[T]he operations of neo-colonialism … continue to be confidently carried out abroad and ... ‘return’ as the crisis of meaning, representation, legitimation at home” (Kum Kum Sangari, *Politics Of The Possible: Essays On Gender, History, Narrative, Colonial English*. Tulika, 2001. 244).

17. At this juncture, Spivak seems to move more explicitly to subalternity after the essay has discussed oppressed subjects per se and the current critical problems of representation.

18. Three primary communities lived in Punjab prior to the partition of India and Pakistan: Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh.

19. Sikh practice centralizes what are known as the 5 k’s: *kesh* (hair), *kach* (undergarment), *kirpan* (sword), *kanga* (a wooden comb), and *kada* (a steel bangle).


21. Manto seems to be referring to a card game popular in Iran, India, and Pakistan.

23. It is possible that they are married but in a hotel room for safety. However, her last name is different from Ishar’s. It’s unclear whether both of them are married and are having an affair.

24. Although this is not necessarily an aesthetic claim, that is, the twist at the end saves a ‘bad’ story, one could make that argument.

Works Cited


I remember a peculiar mix of gratitude and frustration, stepping for the first time onto a rugged dirt trail worn through the rough underbrush of a high desert mountain in the Sangre de Cristo range. I was still a teenager, picking my way up the snow-dappled slope to an unfinished cabin, which an acquaintance had generously offered as winter shelter to our little band of travelers. We were all grateful for those four walls in the snow, and for the switchback path in blue dusk as we lugged backpacks up the hill, but I was still impatient with its unfinished spots, where we twisted through the chaparral or stepped quickly up the incline on our soles’ rigid edges to stay above the slide of rocky soil. It took me years to trust the slow pace at which a path is widened, whether by deliberate and difficult work, or else by inadvertent repetitive wear: That difference, too, is worn away by age, in the accumulation of barely perceptible changes.

I recalled this moment of gratitude and impatience on a new path as I read Butnor’s and McWeeny’s proposal for “feminist comparative philosophy as a liberatory practice” (3). Their project
forms the basis for the anthology *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue*, and they define it with admirable earnestness and ambitious exuberance—and with good reason: It is difficult to imagine a future for what Eurocentric traditions call “philosophy” without the kind of changes they propose. Like a dirt path weaving up a difficult slope, they sketch the necessary minimal conditions for advance in pursuit of wisdom. Their combination of feminist and comparative philosophy calls for attention to cultural traditions and subject positions long ignored in philosophy, “integrating feminist and non-Western traditions in innovative ways.”

In one sense, it is strange that a feminist comparative philosophy is not already a part of common practice in the academy: The essays in this collection demonstrate how many topics central to contemporary feminism are just as central to Buddhist, Taoist and Vendantist traditions: among them, identity and identification, determination and change, interdependent co-origination, the relation of practice to view, etc. Or rather, it would be strange if one were not aware how consistently the Eurocentric philosophical tradition has, at least since Aristotle’s *Politics*, explicitly denied full recognition to the reason of women and “barbarians.” As the editors explain with optimistic patience, philosophy still has to learn to address the vast majority of human thought, so that it “regards the voices and experiences of women” and “non-Western” cultures as “philosophically significant” (4).

The only alternative, in the long run, is the forfeit of its claim to matter to an overwhelming majority of humans—a forfeit of audience that proceeds gradually and by many paths: “It is probably not coincidental,” the editors observe, that philosophy departments emphasizing feminist or comparative philosophy include “significantly more women and people of color as faculty and students than disciplinary averages” (13). It stands to reason that philosophy departments’ ability to attract and retain these professors and students is compromised by philosophy’s historical disqualification and denigration of them. The editors neatly summarize this history, explicated repeatedly over the last few decades, by quoting Rada Ivekovic’s observation that “women and the Orient are the two principal figures of the Other in the
Occidental tradition” (14).

Where Augustine, Aquinas or even Hegel are called “philosophy,” but Nagarjuna or Zhuangzi are called “religion,” it is plain that the centrality of “Western philosophers” is a practiced value, not a given fact. Butnor and McWeeny note that this centralization is maintained by the dispersion of “non-Western philosophies” into segregated discourses, which prevents them from finding “strength in numbers” (15). A tiny minority of the human species can thus maintain the illusion of universality by relying on what the editors call “apartheid logic,” borrowing the phrase from Sandoval’s observations about cultural studies. Where discourses concerned with feminism, race, queerness, disability, colonialism and its aftermath, or any “non-Western” culture are rendered “marginal,” it is not because they address or describe only a minority of the world’s population: They do not, though Eurocentric philosophy historically has. Instead, these discourses are constructed as marginal because they challenge the claims to universality enjoyed by those who wield power. Marginalized discourses are often dismissed or ignored, the editors note, “not because they are shown through argumentation to be ill-founded, but because those individuals at the center of the discipline incur no professional penalties by readily ignoring them” (16). This is a false universality maintained by argument from authority, rather than argument from reason. It therefore distorts the concept of universality itself, confusing self-evidence with common opinion.

It is necessary for philosophy to engage with its “Others,” in order to engage with itself: The editors emphasize the necessity, in feminist comparative philosophy, of heeding feminist critiques of the “assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and universalism” that shape contemporary epistemology, which presume “Western” white male “authorial subjects as the implicit referent,” the standard by which “others” are measured (5). As an alternative, the editors voice support for “endeavors to acknowledge and embody, rather than ignore and transcend, her own subjectivity” in order to make “genuine, authentic contact with another philosophical perspective” (12). In doing so, they treat particularity as a precondition for and gateway to universality, rather than its opposite or privation. Where
This insight is operative, it allows both feminist and comparative philosophy to “treat diversity as a philosophical resource”: One must identify the known variable, one’s particularities, in order to infer the unknown constant, the universal.

This utility of diversity to the inference of universality is an untimely insight in a period of relativism, and where Butnor and McWeeny speak of “genuine, authentic contact,” we see the danger of slipping back into discourses of substantialism. The false universality of privilege has for so long implied, as its complement, the false particularity of authenticity and essence, that one can hardly reject the former without risking an embrace of the latter. But in blazing a trail, we must be willing to play with fire, trusting that even our errors will be portals to discovery: In answer to the necessity of methodological reinvention, they propose a methodology of “world-traveling,” which “begins in the idea that philosophical content is inseparable from its context” (8). They observe that this metaphor of “‘traveling’ between the texts of distinct traditions and among multiple philosophical framings”—or among what they call, quoting Maria Lugones, “worlds of sense”—is common in both feminist and comparative philosophy. But the metaphor of travel is a succinct illustration of both the promise and the danger involved in such “comparative” endeavors, in which it is necessary to remain mindful of both the functional integrity and the historical contingency of the traditions one compares.

The pertinence of historical contingency is highlighted by the editors’ comparison of Lugones’ metaphor of “world”-traveling with Gerald James Larson’s travel metaphors: Larson employs the vocabulary of international travel and immigration—“passports,” “visas,” “permanent residence” and “citizenship”—to articulate a concern with legitimating one’s expertise (9). While Lugones emphasizes the disorienting shift among discourses that address her as a subject and those that only refer to her as an object, Larson emphasizes his capacity to occupy the place of the object of study, developing an “authentic” familiarity with the other. This familiarity, which he conceives as “second nature,” presumes the existence of a “first nature”—an object not constructed but given, an authentic cultural essence to be emulated by the expert. This agenda
is disturbingly close to the objectification of imperial subjects as what Spivak has called “native informants,” from whose testimony colonial administrators and metropolitan academics have derived their strategies and rationalizations.

In light of this resemblance, Butnor and McWeeny call attention to the pertinence of “colonialist legacies” to such comparative studies (11). Their concerns about replicating imperialist practices of knowledge production recall Edward Said’s repeated demonstrations that the cultural “essence” of the Orient is a fictional object of study underwritten by imperialist projects. Those projects have offered wealth and prestige in exchange for objects of study and narratives that support and rationalize continued domination. Said’s conclusions are consonant with those feminist traditions that insist that “Woman,” like “the Orient,” has never existed as a substance or essence. Both postcolonial and feminist projects rest on the argument that these objects are products of historical contestation, maintained by social practices. But at the same time, both projects presume that “Woman” and “the Orient” are consequential objects, because they are implicated in a functionally integrated system of belief and practice that must be understood in principle, or not at all.

The promise of the travel metaphor rests in its acknowledgement of this consequential integration. Larson’s questions about the capacity of comparative philosophers to achieve “citizenship” in another cultural tradition are valuable, insofar as they acknowledge the importance of cultural and historical context in shaping what Butnor and McWeeny call “philosophical content”: To remove any element of a tradition from that context is to surreptitiously comprehend it as if it were an element of one’s own tradition, ignoring the functional integrity of the tradition from which it came. Such decontextualization of a concept therefore ignores the problematic to which it responds, inadvertently redefining that concept.

But this schema, in which every element of a tradition is implicated in overdetermined relations to other elements, necessarily excludes any notion of “authenticity,” which presumes that the integrity of a tradition arises from the substantial identity or essential experiential givens of its practitioners. This bears upon the
editors’ invocation of Butler’s theory of “performativity” (2): The rhetoric of authenticity participates in an empiricist error that drags performativity in the direction of voluntarism. By contrast, the interdependent co-origination of content and context tendentially excludes voluntarism, given that the meaning of a performance is overdetermined by its relations to other practices. In consequence of this overdetermination, the transformation of performative practices cannot be accomplished all at once and by fiat, but gradually and collectively, by means of accumulating demonstrations.

Illuminated by its authors’ attention to intersecting arguments in feminist and Asian philosophical traditions, this collection functions as one more step along that path of demonstration, offering a range of new perspectives on what the editors call “perennial topics” (18): among them, gender and potentiality, consciousness and awareness, particularity and objectivity, and the ethics of care. In the context of such a project, even missteps make space for more to walk alongside us, until the universality of human significance can no longer be ignored. Let us make this widening way the basis of our reflection, where all are concerned to listen to all concerned.
Contributors

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Contributors


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**Jeremiah Bowen** is a doctoral candidate and former Presidential Fellow in English Literature at SUNY Buffalo. He has published three book-length poems: *Consolations* (2011), *Nazi* (2012), and *Faggot* (2012). He is currently finishing a dissertation that takes seriously Benjamin’s claim for an intrinsic fascist orientation in European aesthetics, tracing the genealogy of literary studies through the theory and canon wars of the 1980’s to its mythical Greek referent, to reveal *poiesis* as the fundamental fantasy of imperialist slave-production. Along the way, he explicates the homology between Alt-Right identity politics and canon fetishism, the predication of de Man’s slave moralism on the theoretical misrecognition of ‘materiality,’ and the consequences of Diotima’s synecdoche of *poiesis* for Aristotle’s substance metaphysics.
In recent years, the value of critical theory has been questioned by various thinkers for reasons that may seem contradictory. On the one hand, it has been subject to criticism for its excess, for being redundant in the face of actual facts. On the other, it has been seen as lacking, impoverishing the object of analysis by forcing upon it a limiting framework. In response to this, humanities scholars have sought out new analytic tools, for example in the fields of neuroscience, cognitive science, and biology. This 20th anniversary issue of theory@buffalo speaks to this ‘existential crisis’ being experienced in the humanities. Is it time to move on from theory and cultivate other ways of thinking? Or is it time to rethink the way we do theory and clarify its importance as a mode of engaging with the world—one that is just as indispensable as the scientific.

What is theory good for? In her analysis of critical theory, Eve Sedgwick argues that it tends to assume a predominantly suspicious or “paranoid” attitude toward its object of investigation while it can also take other forms, among which is “reparative reading”—a position that allows for ambiguity and a coming-to-terms with an imperfect world. It is with a sense that “whatever else we know, we know there isn’t time to bullshit” that Sedgwick asks what knowledge does. In this issue of theory@buffalo, we ask: What does theory do? What can we do with it? We want to explore...
the significance of academic work in a broader context and explore the ways theory offers and could offer for engaging with the world. How does/could theory facilitate transnational solidarity or coalition work? Perhaps, one mode of conceptualizing alternative engagement would be thinking theory through praxis—activism. What is the relationship between activism and theory, and, in a broader sense, academia?

Submissions should be no more than 10,000 words, book reviews (on any topic) no more than 1,200. Please send all submissions electronically as a Word document to theory@buffalo.edu. Deadline for submissions is March 1st, 2017.

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ISSN 1535-5551
ISBN 978-0-9845662-4-2

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