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Toward an Affective Repertoire of Feminine Feelers
Zorianna Zurba

I am, therefore, a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say a utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future.
Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You* (1996, 10)

Emotion and affect have long been equated with the feminine. Particular manifestations of emotion and affect have been understood to be more or less feminine and feminist. This special issue of *Feral Feminisms* called out to “feminine feelers” to use bodily experience to question the positioning of the feminine and the feminist. The feminine feeler cultivates sensory awareness as a strategy to decipher cultural and emotional hegemonies. The feminine feeler is an affective misfit who dodges and gathers affects to tune in to what is going on within and around them. The contributors to this issue each reflect and draw upon their own positions and limits to welcome, protect, or rebuff. If we understand a repertoire as an evolving archive, then works curated under the umbrella of feminine feelers offer an affective repertoire of feminine gestures, figures, styles, and strategies.

The affective repertoire of feminine feelers can be likened to the feminine genealogy of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray serves as a godmother figure who is either mentioned in or influential to many of the works in this issue. Irigaray’s work calls for an engagement with the feminine and the development of a feminine genealogy of figures who are not defined in terms of their masculine-other but rather of their own manifestation. As Alison Martin notes, “Although the feminine is given within patriarchy, the dominant masculine model cannot return that feminine to herself on her own terms—it cannot ‘reflect’ her back to herself—since the feminine role is to support the reflection of his identity” (2000, 137). Feminine feelers express feminine experience in feminine terms.

Feminine feelers cultivate self-affection as a starting point. Cultivating self-affection returns us to our bodies and helps us to “[be faithful to ourselves] and to respect the other in their singularity, reciprocity in desire and love—more generally, in humanity” (Irigaray 2013, 162). For Irigaray, “self-affection is the basis and the first condition of human dignity” (2013, 61). Having cultivated a relationship to ourselves from within our bodies, we lean in the direction of what pulls, of gravity.

Together, these feminine feelers open avenues for future feminine and feminist inquiry into the changing of affective relations. Feminine feelers do not simply reveal how affect moves—they reconsider the movements which bring us together or apart. The descriptive headings are temporary orientations, not anchors, for the current curator to organize these works. The feminine feelers repertoire is a humble beginning that motions toward a future of thinking, feeling, and being in the feminine.
The feminine feeler recalls and acknowledges the struggles of their ancestors and the inheritance of their way-finding. **Jodie Childers** draws upon Irigaray’s work on the need for a feminine divinity in order for women to have their own subjectivity. Childers’ images and poem narrow the gap between the divine and the human, neither restoring the presence of the divine in everyone nor the humanity of the divine. Childers ultimately locates a contemporary mode of feminine power: choice. Obliquely, **Celia Vara**’s work returns to the presence of feminine divinity in the form of the angel with *violeta esperanza* (violet hope). Between the rocks and the water, the woman is a beached domestic angel, shoring up others with her endless care and tending, the threads of which tangle her movements and drag behind her. Both Vara and Jenkins feature knitting as an embodied skill shared between women. **Catherine Jenkins** adapts the style of a knitting pattern to accommodate two voices. Jenkins takes up the issue of inheritance from our mothers and the affective knots that complicate our relations and, when let go, expand our horizons. Equating haunting and affect, **Daniella Sanader**’s reading of AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs’ queer séance invokes the playful spirits of feminine feelers now past.

The feminine feeler skills herself at honing her sensations with a body attuned to its own vibration, deciphering meaning with and against common-sense understandings of the body. **Corinne Teed**’s *Negotiations* illustrates the visible indistinction, the difficulty of understanding what goes on, in intimate acts such as nuzzling and wrestling. Marina Abramovic and female mystics are exemplars of the separation between the experience and the socio-cultural meaning of sensation. **Katherine Guiness and Grant Bollmer** study Marina Abramovic’s handling of bodily sensation, particularly pain. Abramovic teaches techniques for training and enduring at her Institute, which, Guiness and Bollmer argue, cultivates a kind of *panaffectation*, an internalized mode of removing perceptual boundaries to the world. **Sarah Clairmont** observes the bodily practices of female mystics for whom the eroticization of the body was a way to achieve communion with the divine. Clairmont draws upon mystics such as Marguerite Porete and Hadewijch of Antwerp, who mortify their flesh, making their bodies raw, not out of cruelty, but of a love inflected with carnality.

The feminine feeler repositions herself to relate in all her manifestations, not as an inspirational story or a mere intersection of adjectives. The feminine feeler continually reflects on the construction and positioning of subjectivity. **Angelica Stathopolis** guides us through the work of Luce Irigaray to open other potentials for feminine experience and subjectivity. Exploring styles intended to shift relations, Stathopolis feels through feminine expression and formulations of being. **Alexa Athelstan** articulates and recognizes the frustration of intersections that include black, crip, femme, etc. Athelstan examines the movement, gravitation, and expulsion that affect propels within and without the political tensions of various positionalities.

The feminine feeler circumnavigates the emotional landscape erected by socio-cultural forces to remap terrains and establish new vistas. The fat-acceptance bloggers, who are the focus of **Carolyn Bronstein**’s piece, steer the rocky paths of
fat women living in a hegemony of thinness to locate an orbit of positive affects in the fatsosphere. Bronstein argues that the happiness of the fat female depends not only her own self-love, but also the empathy of the feelers around her to embrace all bodies without judgment.

The feminine feeler challenges and continues to challenge social orders, following her own compass. The feminine feeler sometimes fails. Angered by the continual violence against women and the limitations of previous avant-gardes to revolutionize life, Valerie Solanas took matters into her own hands. **Marit Bugge** carefully scopes the archive of Valerie Solanas to plot the tensions between art and violence. Bugge’s own writing exemplifies the haunting of violence and how fraught with feelings a feminine archive can be.

Although several voices, representations, affects, caresses, traces, and tracks are not included in this collection, please consider these works as an invitation or incantation toward feeling a feral feminine future. *The curation of a feminine future is in our care.*

**Works Cited**


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**ZORIANNA ZURBA** is completing her PhD in the Communication and Culture programme jointly held between York and Ryerson Universities. Her research interests include continental philosophies of love, film-philosophy, and mindfulness in education. Her dissertation utilizes the cinema of Woody Allen to open a discussion for a praxis of a love of letting be. Zorianna is an avid sewist and natural dyer; she grows Japanese Indigo in her garden to dye fabric for quilts.
Our Mother of the Mud

Jodie Childers

Artist Statement

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. – Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women,” *Sexes and Genealogies*

Does female divinity represent a force of repression and control or a source of inspiration and liberation? This work explores a photographer’s ambivalent response to an unexpected encounter with simulacra of Mary, finding in the icon a paradoxical tension between degraded and sacred female bodies and a surprising metaphor for affective resistance.

The photographer is first attracted to Mary as other, seeing only difference between the feminist artist and the disembodied statue. Unlike Mary, the photographer is a childless dissenter, an atheist and an outcast, but she cannot help but admire the icon’s kitschy, anachronistic beauty and the ironic tension between her spiritual signification and her physical degradation. Reflecting on the subservience of the statue to God and nature, she begins to reimagine Mary as an altruistic submissive, an unprotected protector who opened her womb for the world, actively forsaking her own autonomy in an act of humility and vulnerability—now condemned by choice to pray over the mud, interceding for humanity in a futile but infinitely hopeful gesture, enduring both the weather and the neglect of all who pass by on the street. By transforming Mary from virginal victim to consciously compliant, the photographer reframes not only the statue but her own perception of reproduction and prayer, recasting Mary’s submission and supplication as affective labour. This framework challenges the photographer’s limited vision of feminism and complicates her understanding of what it means to resist patriarchy through the body, heart, and soul. Building an uneasy alliance with Mary allows the photographer to reassemble the incongruous pieces of her own fractured self into an imperfect whole.

The three shots, like the poem, tell a narrative that begins outward and moves inward toward a more profound understanding of Mary as a symbol for a type of sacrifice that the photographer respects yet resists from beginning to end. The first shot is taken through the gate emphasizing feelings of detachment and alienation from Mary and the church. The second photograph places the icon within the larger context of the dilapidated churchyard. Here the photographer begins to imagine the wildness in Mary and the possibility for affective rebellion through sacrifice, submission, and patient endurance. Zooming in to capture a more intimate, perspective of Mary, the final photograph highlights the color and detail in the physical form, conveying simultaneously the photographer’s discomfort with the weighted, sacrosanct tradition of the biblical Mary and her own complicated re-rendering of this particular Mary through her own sensate aesthetic experience of the statue in the rain.
This encounter, a moment of startling communion, causes the photographer to question her own simplistic understanding of what it means to be a feminist artist. Perhaps it is through a seemingly contradictory blend of materialism and mysticism that the artist can begin to understand what it means to create in and through the body, the mud of the earth infused with the mystery of life.

Works Cited

Our Mother of the Mud
Jodie Childers
The Photographer’s Magnificat

Mary, mother of the mud,
I hail you in this frame,

though I would have resisted
even had Gabriel ask nicely—

Not to be done
according to his word,

not to be done at all,
no savior to be born,

all to return to dust,
a lineage, forever lost—

But you have let yourself
be sculpted into supplication,

infinitely interceding
in divine subversion.

And for that,
blessed art thou

amongst women in the rain—
But I would have said, No.
JODIE CHILDERS: As a New York based writer and documentary filmmaker, Jodie Childers is primarily interested in the intersections between the arts and social action. She wrote and produced The Other Parade, which aired on RTE in Ireland and follows Brendan Fay, an LGBT activist who founded the All-Inclusive St. Patrick’s day Parade, and she is currently working on a multimedia exhibition for the UN Women’s Caucus for Art and a feature length documentary film about Pete Seeger’s environmental legacy. Her video work has been used by nonprofits, educational institutions, and has been included in In These Times. Her writing has been published in many literary journals including Eleven Eleven, Poetry East, and The Portland Review, and has received numerous awards including two Pushcart Nominations and a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Prize. She received an MA in literature from Duquesne University, an MS in library science from the University of Pittsburgh, and an MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College. She is currently an assistant professor of English at Queensborough Community College-CUNY.
Violeta Esperanza
Celia Vara

Artist Statement

To watch the video, visit: http://vimeo.com/violetaesperanza and http://vimeo.com/60551161

Patriarchy leaves marks, cracks, and scars on the body and soul of women.

As we walk to freedom we need a great deal of feminism and hope, signified by my project’s title, Violet Hope – ”VIOLETA ESPERANZA.” In this journey of personal growth we must provide symbolic images to nourish the path. We also need to believe that networking and community can create change and that images and art can function as a political tool.

This project is an ethnographic exploration and a personal feminist genealogy—incorporating data on customs, beliefs, myths, histories, languages—of the female collective imagination that we inherit or create.

From there it is possible to draw new symbols and forge new roads.

This project uses Mediabiografía, an interdisciplinary methodology developed by Virginia Villaplana Ruiz, to create stories and artistic narrations from personal digital archives. Mediobiografía is an experimental concept that questions the “technology of memory” as a deposit and a way to magnify images and their narration (Villaplana).

The performance is a never-ending weaving of green and violet, representing hope and confidence in feminist ideals. It never dies so long as the next generation continues. It is an allegory of freedom and the paths we walk every day to our emancipation.

We shed our skins, creating empowering networks. We entangle and disentangle, weaving paths towards our future. We create meeting places, bridges, and ties. The piece considers symbolic images such as the woman in white, the sea, the spiral form, and unfolding wings.

“Violeta Esperanza” is a looped video performance: a knitting of green (hope color) and violet (feminist color). The woman is knitting a piece that was knitted before by generations of other women and will be knitted by the next ones, representing feminist struggle as something that gets passed on from generation to generation. This is a piece that draws on the notion of feminist legacy and the path (that the bi-color knit piece represents) we traverse as a community. This path, represented by the knitted piece, takes a spiral form to remind us of its different trajectories. The spiral shape represents different women’s generations passing over and over through the same points but from other perspectives. The wings symbolize freedom: feminism
gives us freedom and the possibility to unfold those wings. But this is not an easy path to travel. We knit carefully but we find holes in this path, knots that need to be untangled, yarns that hook our feet, people who we lose along the path. But together, we continue to knit the hope of a feminist community.

This imagery comes from my own story as a woman who grew up under patriarchy with romantic love myths. This work comes from images of myself being a child (1982) dressed as a princess (as a symbol of the gender stereotypes) in the same place where the video performance was made: a cape in my origin town. This place bears several memories: a space where I grew up, where I lived love, where I mourned, etc. I have a love relationship with this place: the color, sound, texture of the sea, stones, etc. This is the place/space I belong to. The music is a mantra that rocks the soul. This is a work full of mourning, sadness, loss, ... but at the same time full of hope, magic and wishful thinking about a world with equality and fair relations.

Works Cited


CELIA VARA is a feminist psychologist and visual artist. She has been working as a psychologist in a pioneering centre in Spain with gender based violence. She has participated in numerous research programs and projects on international cooperation, feminism and art in Europe, Canada and the Caribbean. In 2013, her master’s thesis, Early Feminist Video Art in Spain (1970-1980): History and State of Affairs, won the 1st Prize – Award in Gender and Research at Jaume I University in Spain. She has been a practising visual artist since 2005 and has had international artist residencies and collective and solo shows in Spain, Canada, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. She is an active member of a feminist collective that does research on patriarchal strongholds on the human psyche. She is a member of Feminist Media Studio (http://feministmediastudio.ca) and Hexagram (Centre for Research Creation in Media Arts and Technologies). Her research interests are feminist media and culture, and her current project centers on the transnational dimensions of feminist video, collectives and activism across the Spanish-speaking world, focusing specifically on the ties between Spain and Latin America.
Violeta Esperanza
Celia Varu

Filmed by Alexandra Rodes
Filmed by Alexandra Rodes
Violeta Esperanza
Celia Vara

Filmed by Alexandra Rodes
My mother taught me to knit.

_Casting on:_

She was self-taught, reflecting pictures into mirrors
form a slip knot one metre from yarn’s end
translating dominant into left-handed gestures.
place the slip knot on a needle and hold the needle in the right hand
with the yarn over your first finger

She taught me to fear my emotions;
wind the loose end of the yarn around the left thumb from front to back
to hook my desires to the domestic
weave the needle through the newly formed stitch
to the financial
repeat to the desired number of stitches
if need be, to books.

My mother taught me to knit row after row of garter stitch
_Row one: knit_
sanctioning the creation of endless scarves with varying sizes of needles in varying colours
_Row two: knit_
sky blue and purple combinations
_Row one: knit_
awkwardly showing her backward right-handed daughter
_Row two: knit_
the slow travel of yarn across smooth metal.
_Row one: knit_

She taught me to lie;
_Row two: knit_
to speak partial truths when I knew my answer would offend
_Row one: knit_
when she was too reticent to voice her true question.
_Row two: knit_
When I tired of garter stitch
   Row one: knit
envying her more accomplished patterns
   Row two: knit
I asked her to teach me to purl
   Row one: knit
she said, “no, keep knitting, keep practicing”
   Row two: knit
I stopped knitting, bored.

My mother taught me that some men are only after one thing
unaware that I’d already discovered what that one thing was.
Trying to keep my face stern, I bit my lip hard.

At twenty-five, sick in bed, I cozied into knitting again;
a simple sweater pattern beginning with a knit one purl one rib.
   Knit one; purl one
I called my mother and again asked her to teach me to purl.
   Knit one; purl one
She said, “you just knit the stitch backward—put the needle into the front of the stitch
   Knit one; purl one
instead of the back—that’s all there is to it.” I learned to purl by phone.
   Knit one; purl one

My mother taught me perseverance, strength;
   Row one: knit; row two: purl
by chance she taught me true forgiveness, resolution, absolution.
   Row one: knit; row two: purl
Unsettled by the anniversary of her death, I engage with the needles again;
   Casting off:
open the pattern book to find my name
   cast off in pattern
written in my mother’s hand.
   cast off knit-wise on a knit row
Mould a straight line into fabric, into pattern
   purl-wise on a purl row
the logic, the mathematics, escape me.
   knit two stitches together, transfer the single stitch
I see only the magic.
   then knit the next two stitches together
Unfinished Business: Haunting and Affect in AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs’s *Invocation of the Queer Spirits*

Daniella E. Sanader

This essay explores the productiveness of “haunting” as a metaphor for articulating how affects of trauma and history saturate space through *Invocation of the Queer Spirits*, a book and performance-based project by AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs. *Queer Spirits* saw the artists performing a variety of (private) queer séances throughout North America and documenting their experiences in a book format. Reading *Queer Spirits* through texts by Tim Edensor, Ann Cvetkovich, and José Esteban Muñoz, I consider how Bronson and Hobbs’s performative figures both create utopian pasts and futures for accessing queer spirits, and I also evaluate their effectiveness for doing justice to these lost figures.

I have a white candle burning, my sage is at hand. I have a little vodka, and a cigar. The rain is relentless. I have set myself the task of writing this brief text over the next 24 hours. The writing of the text is itself a kind of invocation: a reminder to myself of the deep sense of queer being that inhabits me; and of the invisibility of queer narrative in the written history of the world about us (Bronson, 6).

Almost immediately in the introduction to *Queer Spirits*, AA Bronson works to set the affective stage for his extended project with Peter Hobbs. Using romanticized ritual and sensorial language, he situates his own body (as artist/recluse/shaman) as the locus for a vast network of specifically “queer” affects that have otherwise gone unnoticed. Every subsequent act of the *Queer Spirits* project is subsumed into the larger supernatural ethos of Bronson and Hobbs’s performative practice. Having developed the concept during a residency in Banff, Alberta, the artists organized a series of queer séances, each with highly different parameters and manifestations. The séances occurred throughout various sites in the United States and Canada, including Banff, New Orleans, Winnipeg, Governors Island, and Fire Island. In each location, the artists attempted to call forth the spirits of the queer and otherwise marginalized through a complex series of ritualistic practices, invocatory chants, and the accumulation of various queer totems and tools, including Ouija boards, Tarot cards, herbs, candles, crystals, butt plugs, lube, chocolate, incense, and whiskey. None of the rituals were formally documented; instead, all the research, ephemera, and ancillary evidence were compiled in *Queer Spirits*, a book published by Plug In Editions and Creative Time. The book also includes material sourced from archives of paranormal phenomena, speculative photographs and drawings of what “might have happened” (96) at various séances, and “The Art of Drifting: 43 Lessons from a Naked Cocktail Party,” a text by Hobbs that acts as a potential manifesto for queer shamans and other seekers of the supernatural. The accumulation of these various rituals, including their
traces, texts, totems, and residues, helps to imbue the multi-staged and complicated practice of Bronson and Hobbs with a sense of the romantic, the hyperbolic, and the seemingly endless potential of understanding affect through haunting.

As Bronson considered his introductory text an invocation, I hope to make use of the following essay as an exploration by examining how haunting operates as a productive (or counterproductive) mode of reading the affects of history as they saturate space. Reading site-specific affect works to bring the accumulative histories and memories of a place into the present, perhaps by imagining how the material traces of the site absorb these histories and become somehow “legible” to a new visitor or outsider. I am equating affect and ghosts, however provisionally in this essay, in order to speak to their similar shapes: both are invisible yet tangibly present both connected to the bodies of the living, yet (perhaps eerily) able to circulate beyond them. For instance, deliberately misreading the introductory line to Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* as a ghost story does not require a large stretch of the imagination: “is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” (Brennan, 1). If Brennan’s affect-soaked room is a haunted room, then the authors who engage with affect studies are perhaps enacting invocatory rituals, channeling spectral forces that circulate beyond their immediate bodies. Thinking about the affects of history as ghosts or hauntings, especially as counter-hegemonic histories of the marginalized, feminist, or queer, is particularly salient. Ghosts are often understood as outsiders: mournful, forgotten, even vengeful figures, left behind in spaces where they have been dealt injustice. If the traces of marginalized histories also enact a ghostly presence within space, do they ever grow tangible, or even malevolent, in turn threatening bodies in the present with their spectral influence, demanding recognition in the face of total erasure? Perhaps a deliberate conflation (or welcome confusion?) of ghosts and affect within historical space can help to affirm the feminist project of recuperating lost women, queers, and other marginalized figures from the forces of hegemonic history-making.

In order to push these ideas further, I will read various aspects of Bronson and Hobbs’s performative project through three main texts, each of which negotiates with ghosts, haunting, and its ephemeral or archival traces in different ways: Tim Edensor’s cultural geographies of ruinous space in the article “The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space” and the chapter “The Spaces of Memory and the Ghosts of Dereliction” from *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (2005); Ann Cvetkovich’s consideration of the affective weight of archives in “In the Archive of Lesbian Feelings” from *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003); and José Esteban Muñoz’s discussions of queer space and utopic nostalgia in the chapters “Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories” and “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Additionally, I would like to consider how the rituals of accessing ghosts equate with the rituals of accessing affect. When are ghosts/affects invoked to...
commune with the bodies of the living and when do their spectral presences become threatening? Or, if Bronson’s artist-as-shaman persona acts as a conduit for queer spirits, how do the writers discussed also situate their own bodies as vulnerable or open to the circulation of affect and what kind of performative rituals become implicit in their research? Lastly, throughout this essay I will consider how the “haunting” metaphor incorporates trauma into its logic. As folklore and popular culture tell us, it is tragedy and the threat of “unfinished business” that leave ghosts to wander in the physical world. As such, I will consider whether the “haunting” metaphor remains productive for representing trauma and its specific resonances, while discussing how Bronson and Hobbs access and mobilize the accumulated traumas that imbue each séance site. I will question whether their rituals do justice for the ghostly queer victims they attempt to call forth. In accordance with (and deference to) Hobbs’s guidelines for future shamans, I will organize my thoughts around five of his key lessons.

“Lesson 1: Allow yourself to be tricked” (131) or Reading Ghosts Reparatively

I begin by establishing a methodological framework for reading affective hauntings around what Bronson and Hobbs have identified as the most common question they received regarding their performative project: did they really see any ghosts? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the artists find these persistent questions counterproductive for their shamanic practices:

>To the shaman’s ears, the question of how many ghosts we have seen is bureaucratic and dull. It is in the wrong spirit. Concrete proof is more appropriate to the tasks of a bookkeeper or a lab technician (neither would make a good shaman) (169).

Despite the hyperbolic, and perhaps oversimplified, binary that divides the romanticized shaman from his so-called “dull” counterparts, Hobbs indicates how the epistemological emphasis placed on “concrete proof” in supernatural or artistic processes works to overdetermine their affective outcome. Instead of attempting to uncover what affect produces, Bronson and Hobbs are concerned with how it circulates, creating a suitable environment for accessing haunting in their ritualistic performances.

In accordance with these ideas, I assert a reparative mode of reading the *Queer Spirits* project, borrowing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction between paranoid and reparative epistemologies in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You.” As Sedgwick argues, paranoid epistemologies, or “hermeneutics of suspicion,” (138) rely heavily on critical debunking or forms of exposure in order to build knowledge (138-39). This automatically defensive position places the writer/critic at an immediate distance
from the subjects discussed, presuming an inherent truth-value that, once unearthed, will solve all identifiable issues, “as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction” (139). A paranoid epistemology takes knowledge as a given, as something that simply needs to be arranged anew in order to uncover some underlying critical truth. At the risk of sounding glib, a paranoid reading of the *Queer Spirits* project would make this essay considerably shorter. The “failures” in Bronson and Hobbs’s performative rituals are immediately obvious: there is no “proof” of the spirits they encounter and no formal documentation to confirm that their rituals even took place. Both the posturing of their shamanic personas and the expository style of the *Queer Spirits* project frequently veer toward hyperbole, idealization, and fantasy, almost soliciting a paranoid or skeptical reaction in return; however, remaining paranoid while considering Bronson and Hobbs’s queer séances diverts attention away from a consideration of how affective forms of knowledge circulate, create sensorial experience, and become emotionally resonant within their project. As Sedgwick writes, a reparative epistemology is “additive and accretive” over-destructive and skeptical (149). Reading ghosts reparatively allows me to consider how affect produces knowledge instead of fixating on what gets produced. As Sedgwick writes:

> […] moving [away] from the rather fixated question[...]: Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge do – the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it [...]? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects? (124)

Like Bronson and Hobbs’s project, my analysis here verges on the performative as well. It involves a speculative conflation of two separate terms (ghosts/affect) in order to consider what they can offer one another. My reading chooses to follow along, to be seduced by Bronson and Hobbs’s process, in order to understand how the affects they invoke offer knowledge of lost histories. I continually assert a well-worn adage familiar to all seekers of the supernatural and extraterrestrial: “I want to believe.” Reparative reading through the supernatural, in this sense, is perhaps a uniquely productive strategy for exploring the traces of memory and affect in historical space: dislodging us from the skeptic’s burden of proof, in order to create a space where the body of the author and/or reader is open to (and actively welcomes or seeks out) the affective residues of lost histories. Relying upon reparative modes of reading when considering *Queer Spirits*, then, opens the project up to a considerably wider scope of inquiry, without creating an overemphasis upon whether or not the séances truly “worked.”

Through a reparative mode of reading, the *Queer Spirits* project involves understanding *intuition* as a valuable epistemological tool. Tentatively defining intuition as a “faculty of immediate knowing without the process of reasoning,” (Fisher, 11) Jennifer Fisher has discussed the capacities of intuition to exceed
representational logic and produce synesthetic and extra-sensory experience, indicating that “intuition, then, pertains simultaneously to both embodied perception and to awareness that extends further than the five senses” (12). Intuition provides an appropriate conduit for reading ghosts or affect in this context, emphasizing a mode of experience that is open to the non-representational and the indeterminate. Intuitive forms of knowledge, then, offer an expanded vocabulary for engaging reparatively with the traces of history, supplying this supernatural-inflected analysis with a scope of inquiry that extends beyond what is perceptually immediate and obvious. By deliberately turning towards the intuitive, relying on forms of knowing that many are quick to denounce as “new-agey” hoaxes, Bronson and Hobbs are able to build a form of artistic production that calls attention to the ways that affect circulates in space and impresses upon bodies, often through a performative relinquishing of individual control. Fisher indicates that intuitive practices often work to destabilize concrete notions of individuality (i.e., “the self becomes another as it is possessed,” 13) and throughout the *Queer Spirits* project Bronson and Hobbs advocate methods that render the self vulnerable to affect: “I soon realized that a ghost couldn’t be hunted down like a fugitive or an animal. If anyone is hunting, it is the ghost. They do the hunting/haunting” (149) In this sense, Hobbs’s first lesson takes on a dual meaning. He writes that novice shamans need to allow themselves to be tricked in order to invoke ghosts and experience spiritual transformation (130-131). Yet additionally, as a reader/spectator to the *Queer Spirits* project, a voluntary move away from the paranoid desire to expose the “truth” of each séance can create a space where I am able to enjoy the experience of being “tricked” by Bronson and Hobbs, while still remaining cognizant of the evident shortcomings in their work. Ultimately, I hope that this destabilized and reparative critical position will allow me to further consider how affect saturates space throughout the *Queer Spirits* project. In short, I too want to believe.

"Lesson 20: Some buildings are unintentional beacons and archives that hold the history of a city long after they have fallen out of use" (150) or

**Affect and Ruinous Space**

Understanding how affect is experienced as a ghostly presence or trace is ultimately an exercise in understanding how affect saturates specific sites, becoming legible as visitors, whether familiar to the site or not, are exposed to its spatial resonances. Bronson and Hobbs’s project relies on the affective potentialities of certain spaces, as the artists chose specific séance locations based on their significance to the narratives of a distinctly queer history they wish to establish. For instance, three of the séances were located in national parks, spaces that, as Bronson indicates, were “all-male colonies for much of their recorded histories” (6), and each séance included research into the queer interests of the local community and history it attempted to invoke. Each localized invocation was written as a calling-forth of the historical traces of the queer and marginalized. For instance, the New Orleans invocation spoke to the
“witches, prophets, seers, priests, and Vodou practitioners,” alongside “the thirty-two men and women killed in the 1972 fire at a gay nightclub in the French Quarter called the Upstairs Lounge[...]” (26). The invocation in Winnipeg called forth some figures from the margins of Canadian history as well, including Louis Riel, the Freemasons, and the queer members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (36)² (see appendix). Following this logic of site-specificity, the chosen Winnipeg séance site was an abandoned army surplus store that Bronson remembered from his youth (4). The building was about to be transformed into the new location of Winnipeg’s Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, and Bronson and Hobbs wished to acknowledge “the contribution of queers to the city’s rich history and [they] invited these spirits to occupy the future home of Plug In” (149). The artists, accompanied by three other men, scoured the abandoned site for useful materials to build the cubic structure that housed the ritual. They also took extensive photographs of the ruinous space, many of which are contained in the book. According to Bronson, the affective charge of the site was palpable: “spirit seeped in all directions,” (38) and Hobbs echoed his sentiment regarding the accumulated memories that permeated its leftover objects: “the gas masks, army boots, flight jackets and blankets lining the shelves, all tell ghost stories of their former owners and the changing technologies of war” (150). Evidently, the abandoned United Army Surplus Sales building was chosen with its ghostly and affective capacities in mind.

The cultural-geography-based research of Tim Edensor similarly hinges upon the phenomenological and affective experiences of ruinous space. Edensor frequently writes about his experiences exploring abandoned factories and other industrial spaces left in decay. His writing offers one method for exploring how affect becomes understood as a ghostly presence in spaces that are deemed ruinous or materially and sensorially excessive. Arguing for an understanding of how memory becomes spatialized, he explains that ghostly traces of routine behaviour can become embedded in the residues and debris that remain after years of repeated use and activity (Edensor, 148). As he writes in “The Spaces of Memory and the Ghosts of Dereliction,” visitors to industrial ruins engage with its sensuous, decaying spaces in new ways, accumulated forms of affect infiltrate their bodies and memories, evoking associations with a past that seems intuitively legible yet remains indecipherable by normative modes of history-making:

Refusing the false securities of a stable and linear past, such an approach celebrates heterogeneous sensations and surprising associations, random connections, the ongoing construction of meaning, and also admits into its orbit the mysterious agency of artifacts, spaces, and non-humans from the past (138).

Edensor frequently refers to the affective capacities of excessive space as ghostly traces, a helpful mode of inquiry for my consideration of Bronson and Hobbs’s performative project. Imagining the accumulation of memory in space creates a
framework for understanding how the *stuff* of ghosts, or the absent-present material quality of affect, becomes accessible to the performative rituals of the *Queer Spirits* project. Through this logic, the specificity of Winnipeg’s abandoned army surplus store, with the strange assemblages of decaying and neglected items that generate “sensual affordances of matter” (139) perceptible to the shamanistic bodies of Bronson and Hobbs, becomes a rich location for accessing a queer spirit world.

While Edensor’s methodology provides a helpful vocabulary for reading ghosts/affect in ruinous spaces, his analysis falls short when faced with the ghostly model explored here. Edensor describes his own experiences as he walks through abandoned factories and industrial sites, encountering the ghosts of dereliction and being stricken with “involuntary memories” (143) that are not necessarily linked to his own experience or subjectivity. His writing tends to promote a romanticized vision of ruinous space that gestures towards these affective traces of the past, but only as they offer themselves up to his exploring body in the present. The sources of trauma, decay, destruction, and loss that imbue his industrial sites are given little mention in his writing: they are only useful as they provide him with the fodder for transformative or radically altered perceptual and affective experiences. Perhaps using the haunting model in an analysis of Edensor’s work exposes these shortcomings because it demands more from his exploratory approach. As a model, it recognizes the affective influence of history on the body of the researcher; in short, it solicits an otherworldly response. Edensor channels the affective intensities of the “ghosts of dereliction” in his abandoned sites, yet his ghosts are given little space to haunt back, to grow malevolent, to expose their traumas to the bodies of the living. Additionally, his writing also presupposes that all who enter these environments have equal capacities for (and inclinations to) basking in the radical new physical and sensorial affordances they offer. Only peripherally does he discuss how uneven relationships of power operate in ruinous factories, their ghostly traces left in “the banal signs which regulated bodies, in the hierarchies of offices and the divisions between skilled and unskilled work, in the apparatus of routine such as clocking off devices […]” (154). As a new visitor to these ruins, it is evident that Edensor would have no access to the specificities of power and trauma in their histories; yet it begs the question of how to *make use* of these affective hauntings once we are exposed to them. Once ghostly contact is made, what happens next?

Reading the ambiguous interplay between the specificity of trauma or power and its affective intensities in site-specific ways remains a large question in the *Queer Spirits* project as well. In some ways, Bronson and Hobbs remain inexact with these ideas, relying on a language of spirits and haunting that embraces the vague, speculative, and potentially homogenizing (e.g., “What is it about Winnipeg, what special spirit life inhabits its strange, harsh ecology?,” 40) yet their work also involves a vast array of dedicated archival research into the local community that attempts to *name* the spiritual context they seek. Therefore, a consideration of the archive could supply a helpful step in this conceptual bridge from affect to haunting, operating between some generalized notion of trauma and its lived specificities.
“Lesson 15: Collecting lists, inventories, maps, and anecdotes are effective ways of shadowing spirits” (145) or Archiving, Ephemera, and the Material Culture of Intuition

In “In the Archive of Lesbian Feelings,” Ann Cvetkovich writes that archives are extremely valuable for the preservation of queer histories, acting as spaces “which must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling” (Cvetkovich, 241). While Cvetkovich’s text does not deal specifically with ghosts or haunting, her discussions of how the affect of queer trauma circulates through archives is relevant to my examination of affective haunting. Archives are a valuable source of otherworldly power for Bronson and Hobbs; indeed, as Hobbs explains, “[m]agic has much in common with archival research” (138) and the Queer Spirits book itself acts as a literal archive of their practices, including of photographs, drawings, handwritten lists, and images of ritualistic items and other ephemera. Bronson and Hobbs also visited institutionalized archives for their research, including the Hamilton Family fonds at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections in Winnipeg, where they sourced several photographs of early-20th-century paranormal phenomena and séances for their book. As my only access to their performative work is through reading the Queer Spirits book, which situates me as something of an outsider-archivist, piecing together the events of these séances through the ephemeral tools, traces, and research left behind: items that Fisher has referred to as the “technology” or “material culture of intuition” (14). Referring to Raymond Williams’ oft-cited understanding of the “structures of feeling” that circulate within the art and culture of a particular social era, José Esteban Muñoz writes that the ephemeral is “firmly anchored within the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived” (Muñoz 1996, 10). As evidence of the specificities of lived experience—the trace or residues of a performance or action—ephemeral objects carry associative capacities that extend beyond their brute materiality.

Cvetkovich’s argument in An Archive of Feelings centers on the notion that an archive could be used for emotional or affective needs, rather than simply intellectual purposes (249). For queer and marginalized communities, building grassroots archives becomes a way of asserting or legitimating a heritage that has otherwise been forgotten by hegemonic modes of history-making. Towards the end of her chapter on lesbian archives, she discusses how, in the absence of evidence, fantasy and imagination become powerful tools for building an affectively resonant archive, writing that “the importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absences, so evident in queer documentary and other cultural genres, demands creative and alternative archives” (271). The communication of trauma in particular requires an archive that does “emotional justice” (269) to those who experienced it. These archives could create a space of accumulated affect, fantasy, and ephemera that recalls the specificities of a past traumatic moment: safeguarding against forgetting.
without threatening to overwhelm the archivist-researcher. The accumulation of
different traces of history in an archive could also build a sense of accumulated
haunting, bringing a community of ghostly affects together under one shared focus.
Unconventional or fantastical archives also provide spaces to implement alternative
structures of mourning for those lost or forgotten; for the performative practice of
Bronson and Hobbs, archiving functions to “pin down” traces of those long-dead,
ghostly queer presences that have disappeared from the cultural landscapes of
Winnipeg, Banff, and the other invocation sites. As Cvetkovich writes, “The specter of
literal death serves as a pointed reminder of the social death of losing one’s history”
(270).

Nevertheless, archives require structure and categorization: be it rational and
sequential, or intuitive and haphazard. Without proper categorization or attention,
certain voices can get lost in the dusty corners of archives. While archiving the traces
of marginalized or traumatic histories, this loss could be understood as a doubled
displacement, the dual violence of being cast out of hegemonic history, then lost
or neglected in the archive meant to recuperate that voice. Cvetkovich touches on
this issue in relation to trauma archives, indicating that “it is not enough simply to
accumulate archival materials; great care must be taken with how they are exhibited
and displayed” (271)—yet Bronson and Hobbs’s project embodies this problem in
a new way. In calling forth the “spirits of the queer and otherwise marginalized,”
the artists run the risk of homogenizing those they wish to memorialize. The
invocation written for each site acts as a form of textual archive of the specific bodies
that have been wronged in that location (see appendix); however, these massive,
undifferentiated lists threaten to oversaturate their readers, promoting a mode of
encounter that favours a cursory skim over attentive engagement. For instance, I
 glanced at these lists a few times before realizing that they rarely mention women.
Another reviewer pointed to the problems in equating both the spirits of lost First
Nations communities and the very colonizers who exterminated them in the same
invocation, arguing that “the indifference shown to this dangerous (a)historical
misstep is striking” (Morgenstern). How do these omissions alter our understanding
of which ghosts are accessible in certain spaces and which remain worthy of contact?
In this way, while accumulative, intuitive, and lateral forms of archival organization
are helpful for creating a space where non-normative affects can assert a powerful
presence, it can become difficult if their counter-hegemonic tactics distract from the
further displacement of those left neglected in their midst.

“Lesson 31: At night the park is haunted by witches and perverts” (161) or
Ghosts and Queer Futurity

Examining modes of cultural production that he sees as conducive to creating
“transformative queer political possibility,” (Muñoz 2009, 38) Muñoz’s Cruising
Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity also provides an alternative

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framework for doing justice to queer voices left neglected by hegemonic forms of history-making. In “Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories,” Muñoz refers to the nostalgic affects that circulate in former sites of gay male sex, acting as ghostly traces which imply a connection with a utopic queerworld of sexual possibility (42). For Muñoz, queer politics require visions of utopic space, despite the exclusions and discriminations that these visions potentially support (34), for utopias provide “a critique of the present, of what it is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be” (35). Like Bronson and Hobbs, Muñoz sees productivity in embracing the romantic, the ideal, and the utopian and uses this space as a platform to enact social change to provide queers with a future unavailable to them through heteronormative discourse. Examining what he calls “public-sex-mimetic cultural production,” (35) Muñoz then examines the ghostly auras that circulate in Tony Just’s photographs of men’s public restrooms in New York City (40-46). As sites that seem imbued with the affective remainders of sustained public sex between gay men, Muñoz argues that these images offer up a ghostly materiality that is neither visible nor tactile yet remains wholly resonant (42).

Bronson and Hobbs’s performances rely on the work of Muñoz in a number of ways. For instance, they also remain nostalgically drawn to the sites of public sex, understanding these liminal spaces as rich sources for queer haunting. The Fire Island séance involved an extensive photographic intervention into the winding paths of the Magic Forest or Meat Rack, a wooded area between two gay beach communities near the performance site, which operates as a well-known site for clandestine sexual encounters (113). The photographs – which glimmer on each page with a silver sheen – attempt to offer up what Muñoz has referred to as the “visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience and ground-level history accessible[...],” (42) documenting the ways in which queer affects (or haunting) remain resonant in these sites. The very name (Magic Forest) evokes a utopian or fantastical landscape, and Bronson and Hobbs work to further emphasize these romantic associations by rhapsodizing that “through this moist and misty universe float the spirits of the past, the many men who died here, and who came here to die” (113). Through their photographic and textual myth-making, Bronson and Hobbs create an alternative geography of queer utopias, asserting what Muñoz understands as the idealized, yet productive, transformative potential of public sex (34).

Additionally, Muñoz’s chapter on stages and the promise of queer futurity resonates with Bronson and Hobbs’s work at the Governors Island séance site. In “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative,” Muñoz considers the utopian quality in the “moment of hope and potential transformation” (103) that resonates through an empty stage prior to a performance, as exemplified by the photographic series The Chameleon Club by Kevin McCarty (101-113). These photographs of empty stages in queer bars, many of which Muñoz himself had frequented, operate as potential utopias of queer futurity, implying the possibility of an alternative performative temporality, and promoting community-building through transgressive subcultures.
Bronson and Hobbs situate their performative work through techniques of display that operate within a similar logic. At the Governors Island séance site (the officer’s house of a seventeenth-century military base) the ephemeral remains of this invocation were left intact and partially accessible to the public. A wall in the foyer provided peepholes (or glory holes, to borrow Bronson and Hobbs’s phrasing) through which visitors could peer inwards to examine leftover fragments of the ritual. Like the potential futurity of Muñoz’s empty stages, do similar affective potentialities saturate a séance space after the invocation is complete? Muñoz argues for the affective charge of performative traces in “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” considering how ephemeral material implies a non-normative temporality which implies the transpiring of a performance while remaining open to alternative pasts and futures:

Ephemera [...] is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things (10).

Through this model, the ephemeral materiality of queer ghosts mixes together with the other performative residues of the Governors Island séance site. Understanding the site as a stage for potentially alternative queer pasts and futures informs my consideration of how Bronson and Hobbs’s project acts as a form of queer history-making that encourages “participants to embrace the fiction of a queer family” (162). However, how are Bronson and Hobbs situating themselves as facilitators for the sedimentation of this deliberately utopian and fantastical queer family of the living and dead? Does their performative posturing as queer shaman-artists alter the structure and outcome of this ghostly community?

“Lesson 17: The shaman-artist doesn’t just make art, he is art” (147) or Locating Affect in Ritualized Art-making and Ritualized Research

A photographic portrait of Bronson in his séance regalia (leather cap and butt plug with rooster feathers) appears in the Winnipeg section of the Queer Spirits text, marked with the caption, “With my cap, sweetgrass, and rooster feathers, I am a hybrid of shaman, leather daddy, and Voodoo priestess. Gender has vanished. I am AA Bronson, gay priestess of Winnipeg, shaman daddy, trans medicine woman, man on the street” (47). Relying on hyperbole, fantasy, and the aggregation of various spiritual traditions and gendered/sexual identities, Bronson constructs a performative persona that, in its indeterminate and hybrid nature, allows him to act as a conduit for different types of queer affect. Elsewhere, Bronson has equally espoused the value of his “hybrid shaman” persona, emphasizing how it accumulates various spiritual traditions under one body:
It is the tradition of the shaman that interests me, not in isolation, but as a tradition that can be hybridized – with Freudian psychotherapy, for example. I have done quite a lot of research into specific traditions, mostly the pre-Buddhist Tibetan and Siberian, with a little dabbling in North American aboriginal practices (Bronson, 2003, 54).

However, like the textual archives of marginalized groups included in the invocations discussed above, does Bronson’s enthusiastic accumulation of spiritualities and identities threaten to efface the specificities of each? The ghostly presences of bodies of colour (from aboriginal peoples, to black slaves, to migrant workers) act as guiding forces throughout the *Queer Spirits* project: their spiritual and cultural practices are even mapped onto the bodies of Bronson and Hobbs as artist-shamans. Nevertheless, as once-living bodies with agency, they remain strangely absent from the project at large. This performative accumulation of spiritualities and identities is ultimately meant to assert a utopian view, an alternative archive of queer affects that embraces fantasy at its very core. Yet, it does so at the risk of a loss of precision and criticality, allowing the specificities of queerness, race, spirituality, and trauma to become indeterminate and vague, like ghostly presences of their own. For researchers attempting to channel these spectral figures and give them new tangibility in the present, this additional invisibility is perhaps too great a loss.

While it is clear that Bronson and Hobbs have developed their performative rituals around a romantic, hybridized, and seductive persona that acts as the appropriate conduit for the spirits they wish to attract, Edensor, Cvetkovich, and Muñoz’s work each requires its author to situate his or her body as vulnerable to affective forces in equally performative and ritualized ways. A consideration of how these authors ritualize their own research on affect could offer up some congruencies with and alternatives to the personas donned by Bronson and Hobbs. For instance, Edensor’s body is omnipresent in his writing yet it remains generalized: a nonspecific, abled body that has perfect access to the sensual affordances the ruins offer up to him. As mentioned earlier, Edensor does not allow himself to be haunted in turn. Much of “The Spaces of Materiality and the Ruins of Dereliction” sees Edensor describing his own corporeal experiences as he walks, jumps, climbs, crawls, and tip toes through precarious ruins. He speaks at length about the “involuntary memories” (143) generated by ruinous space, yet rarely names how these affects impress upon his *actual* body, providing him with specific memories and associations. In a way, Edensor’s approach has congruencies with Bronson and Hobbs: both posit their own bodies as able to accumulate the affects and specificities of other spaces and spirits with ease and able to negotiate with complex affective and sensory experiences with little to no resistance or influence from their own bodies or subjectivities.

Cvetkovich’s approach to investigating the affective pull of archives does not involve neutrality, but is deeply invested in the love, attention, or care provided by the archivist or researcher. Interviewing the volunteers of Brooklyn’s Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), Cvetkovich asserts that archival security and stability is not simply
supplied by financial or institutional forces; she quotes Maxine Wolfe, a longtime LHA volunteer: “let me tell you about security—it means that when there is a fire, someone wants to save your papers. At LHA, there are twenty-five women who would put lives on the line to save that stuff” (quoted on 248). Similarly, Cvetkovich writes that in archiving ephemera or pieces of pop culture, queer archivists often take on strategies inspired by fan culture: “I take the fan as a model for the archivist. The archivist of queer culture must proceed like the fan or collector whose attachment to objects is often fetishistic, idiosyncratic, or obsessional” (253). Implicit in these discussions is Cvetkovich’s own position as the archivist/researcher of her text, supplying the same love, devotion, and emotional investment to her objects of study as her interviewees in their archives. While Bronson and Hobbs also enact a ritualistic level of love, investment, and care for the spirits they seek to contact, Cvetkovich’s model complicates the performance of devotion they supply in *Queer Spirits*. Bronson and Hobbs seem ultimately more concerned with building the romantic and sumptuous ritualized landscape of their shamanistic characters than with investigating the specificities of their queer spirits in depth. On the other hand, Cvetkovich’s interview with the LHA volunteers leads me to wonder: is love a different form of haunting? Like a form of possession, the love the LHA volunteers felt for their archives imbues them with the history they wish to preserve, as they become mediums or conduits for those otherwise lost queer voices.

Lastly, Muñoz follows in Cvetkovich’s direction by exploring his own queer memories, intimacies, and friendships as they intertwine with the photographs he studies, supplying the pictured spaces with a personalized affective charge. Throughout the “Stages” chapter, Muñoz relies on his own experiences in the gay bars McCarty photographs, while remaining transparent about how his friendship with the artist has informed his own work:

> Queer intimacies underwrite much of the critical work I do. Yet I reject the phrase “advocacy criticism” and instead embrace the idea of the performative collaboration between artist and writer (101).

Muñoz situates himself as a member of a community; his investments in his written archive of ghostly affect are both intellectual and deeply personal. Yet do his experiences resonate beyond his own subjectivity and are these affects still valuable to those who do not have the same associations with these queer spaces? Muñoz imagines, in his deliberately utopian way, how the felt affects within these images can reverberate beyond his own personal accounts. As he explains how the various texts and images discussed relate to his own experiences, his vocabulary privileges a form of lateral or associative interconnectedness, emphasizing that McCarty’s images and statements resonate “alongside” and “beyond” his own biography (105). Refusing to close down these associations through a reliance on his personal experience, Muñoz affirms that it is the temporal and spatial indeterminacy of the images discussed that leave them open to alternate readings and resonances: “[McCarty] is narrating a stage of in-between-ness, a spatiality that is aligned with a temporality that is on the
threshold between identifications, lifeworlds, and potentialities” (105). Like Bronson and Hobbs, Muñoz remains willing to assert the liminal or ambiguous nature of the affects he explores; however, like Cvetkovich, his effort to name his own investments, intimacies, and memories throughout his affective reading of queer ghosts and utopias adds emotional weight to his project.

Many aspects of the *Queer Spirits* project remain enticing, enthralling, and romantic; for instance, the sumptuous photographs, extensive archival research, and mysterious and playful rituals enacted by Bronson and Hobbs. As a result, my approach to their work has involved a desire to critique and a willingness to be seduced in equal measure. However, the content of the performances remains inaccessible: once readers start to seek out the artists’ own personal attachments or the specific voices of the ghosts they claim to contact, we are met with impressions equally as spectral and diffuse. Perhaps appropriately, while the performative séances of Bronson and Hobbs resonate as transgressive and powerful, they remain like vocal invocations in the air, ultimately fading like the ghosts they hope to access.

**Conclusion**

Considering affect as a form of ghostly presence or haunting is a deeply seductive and evocative idea; however, when we seek the specificities of trauma and loss through its logic, its insufficiencies as a model begin to emerge. Perhaps what both entices and disappoints readers who seek out hauntings in order to recuperate traumatic affects is that ghosts seem to promise a connection to the marginalized or queer dead without guaranteeing its emergence. AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs’s performative project *Invocation of the Queer Spirits* makes evident both the possibilities and problems inherent in the haunting model, providing readers with a framework for considering where ghosts are helpful for reading affect, and indicating where the metaphor falls short. Through this paper I have considered work by Tim Edensor, Ann Cvetkovich, and José Esteban Muñoz to build my own archive of ghostly writing alongside Bronson and Hobbs’s project, exploring where the *Queer Spirits* model for ghosts is met with congruencies and helpful alternatives in other texts. Ultimately, when engaging with the *Queer Spirits* project, it remains important to consider both its shortcomings and the ways in which it seduces, endears, and appeals to readers as a utopian vision of a queer history and queer future. Like the ghosts it claims to seek out, *Queer Spirits* remains mystifying and difficult to pin down.

**Notes**

1. It should be noted here that given the size and scope of *Queer Spirits*, I will not be able to engage with every facet of the project here. Instead, I hope to focus my analysis on a few key séances that best exemplify the conceptual connections between haunting and affect that I am attempting to describe.
2. It should be noted that the invocation for Banff is not included in the *Queer Spirits* book.

3. Here Muñoz discusses Leo Bersani’s critique of the idealizing of bathhouses in a pre-AIDS era as sites of total sexual liberation: he “rightly brings to light the fact that those pre-AIDS days of glory were also elitist, exclusionary, and savagely hierarchized libidinal economies.”

Appendix


INVOCATION:

We invite into this circle the queer spirits of Winnipeg, those who have been marginalized or excised from the official history of Winnipeg. We invite you to join us in constructing this collective memory of a queer community of the quick and the dead:

The First Nations shamans and medicine men who recognized the magical and magnetic pull of the Forks and their geographic location as the geographical center of North America; the French, English, Scottish, and Irish explorers, trappers, traders, coureurs de bois, and other adventurers of an all-male life; the Métis under Louis Riel, whose rebellion and persecution marked the early days of Canada as a harsh environment of military rule, intolerance, corruption and greed; the Chinese railroad workers who built the Grand Trunk, the Canadian Pacific, and the Canadian Northern Railways that converged in Winnipeg; the loggers, miners, and cattlemen whose camps constituted all-male communities; the missionaries, priests, reverends, and rabbis; the homesteaders, farmers, and ranchers who came from the Ukraine, Poland, Iceland and Scandinavia – those who settled here and those who pushed west; the Doukhobors, Hutterites, and Mennonites who espoused universal brotherhood and settled here so that they could freely practice their beliefs; the queers working in the hotels, taverns, gambling houses, and brothels of frontier Red River; the queers of Winnipeg’s First Nations and Métis; the musicians of Winnipeg’s Philharmonic Orchestra, established in 1880; the dancers of the Winnipeg Royal Ballet, North America’s oldest running ballet; the queer professors, teachers, and students of the city’s schools; the mistreated workers who took to the streets in the General Strike of 1919; the queer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; the brotherhood of Freemasons who built many of Winnipeg’s landmarks, including Manitoba’s Parliament Building with its Golden Boy and sacred geometry; those who dedicated their lives to psychic research and pioneered psychic photography, turning Winnipeg into a spiritualist hotbed in the 1920’s and 1930’s; the artists of the Manitoba Theatre Centre; the men and women who frequented Happenings, Giovanni’s Room, the Office Bathhouse, and the Campus Gay Club at the University of Winnipeg, and in doing so homesteaded a queer community;
Also:

Those who were persecuted for their difference and murdered; those who suffered from abuse as children and adults; those who committed suicide; those who died of disease, including the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the encephalitis epidemic of 1922; those who died of HIV and AIDS.

To all those dispossessed and abandoned, to all those who have died but cannot leave this place, we invite each of you to join us in this queer community of the quick and the dead.

Works Cited


**Daniella E. Sanader** is an arts writer and researcher based in Toronto. Originally from Hamilton, she completed her MA in Art History at McGill University in 2013. Her writing has elsewhere appeared in *C Magazine, BlackFlash,* and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies.*
Negotiations

Corinne Teed

Negotiations explores the intersections of tenderness, play, and power in queer relationality, aligning these affects with animal nature-cultures. Two bucks lock horns while their muzzles lean in for a soft caress. While this pose is often interpreted as two males battling for dominance in a reproductive hierarchy, Negotiations prompts the viewer to question the nuances of the bucks’ seemingly tender relationship and, by association, the wrestlers’ relationship. As a species, white-tailed deer express an array of homosexual behaviours and intimacies. However, this area of zoological study has been historically dismissed as animal sexuality was solely understood as expressive of a drive to procreate for evolutionary purposes. In this drawing, the queer wrestlers and the bucks interpolate back and forth, emotional outlaws marginalized by speciesism and heterosexism, suggesting potential affective solidarity in a world that often seeks to domesticate and silence their experiences.

Artist Statement

I am interested in the utopic visions crafted from shared sites of marginalization that enable new biopolitical, multispecies communities. While potential alliances between queers and animals have populated queer scholarship for some time, dominant culture has relegated queers and animals to similar sites of subjugation and abjection. Foregrounding queer experience as maintaining commonalities with the animal world has a slippery past. Connotations of wild animals and ferality remain mostly negative: for example, human sexual acts which are coded as abhorrent are often described as “animal” and “bestial.” However, in the book Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect, Mel Chen uses theories of animacy to dismantle the logic of hierarchical subjectivities embedded within late capitalism, thus calling into question the negative connotations of the past. Chen refers to new biopolitical affiliations as improper and essentially queer, describing queerness as “social and cultural formations of ‘improper affiliation’ so that queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative” (104). As much as the erasure of animals from the sphere of politicized subjectivity is understood in Chen’s text to be patriarchal, the inclusion of animals within a new biopolitical community is a queer and feminist act—one not only of solidarity but based on emergent affiliations. Can we cohabitate with non-human species, in a manner that also encourages ruptures within heteronormative and human-centric paradigms? Can we construct a language or an affect that better enables human animals to engage in authentic alliances with non-humans?
Works Cited


CORINNE TEED is an artist, activist and educator who utilizes printmaking, drawing, installation and time-based media, often incorporating participatory practices into their work on queer relationality, cross species empathy and the poetics of ecological thought. Corinne received a BA from Brown University and is currently working towards an MFA at the University of Iowa.
This essay examines affect and the limits of experience in the work of performance artist Marina Abramović. Abramović's early performances play with the boundaries of pain’s transmission, emphasizing the social character of its expression and its use in constructing surfaces and margins. Recent works cast these limits aside in favour of a holistic understanding of affect, in which the space of performance produces sensible ontological affects that unite bodies. This shift in Abramović’s work mirrors debates surrounding the politics of affect in cultural theory and provides the grounding for The Marina Abramović Institute to train bodies to “properly” experience affect.

Why must you hurt yourself? Do you know that it hurts me?
—“Willem’s Song,” The Life and Death of Marina Abramović

When she was a child, artist Marina Abramović purposefully attempted to break her own nose. Fifty years later, two-thirds of the way through her seminal work The Artist is Present, she removed a table that stood between her and the work’s participants. These two events, seemingly minor and unrelated, reveal the power of—and huge discrepancies in—Abramović’s artistic history of feeling. As one of the most well-known and controversial performance artists working today, Abramović serves as a “feminine feeler” who explicitly deals with the potentials of feeling, revealing the limits of an affective politics in her work. Throughout her oeuvre, Abramović (often referred to as “the grandmother of performance art”) has used her own body to test the boundaries of pain and personal endurance. In the participatory aspects of some of her pieces, the expressive limits of pain overflow her own body and are mirrored onto her audience. While she may feel the pain she inflicts, for these performances to be effective the audience must bear witness to her feeling.

In the past decade, her work has progressed from the personal and the bodily to the institutional and collaborative. The grand scale of her work currently includes the Marina Abramović Institute, or MAI, a school of sorts located in Hudson, New York—and neuroscience research center—scheduled to open in 2015. At the MAI, Abramović teaches the public her “Abramović Method” of performance through workshops and exercises that include drinking water, sitting, lying down, and standing for long periods of time, with the intent to induce in participants “a timeless state of mind” and “to increase awareness of their physical and mental experience in the moment”—experiences associated with Abramović’s durational performances (MAI 2014). Abramović’s early works, in which her body appears subjected to the limits of pleasure and pain, have morphed into an institution that appears dedicated to teaching specific techniques for managing the body, its experience, its temporality, and its affects.
In this essay we will trace the history of Abramović’s work and its evolution from personal, self-inflicted pain subjected upon the body, through her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in which she performed *The Artist is Present* (signifying a turn towards a role as mediator of self-reflection), and ultimately to the establishment of the MAI. Abramović’s performances are often regarded as political for their emphasis on the presence of the female body. In the tradition of feminist performance art, Abramovic’s willingness to present herself as a fundamentally embodied subject of violence challenges the history of a “disembodied” male creator (c.f. Danto 2010). However, we argue that this reading disregards Abramović’s mobilization of affect to create surfaces and separations that are ultimately articulated to other issues of difference and control. In her recent work, the negotiation of pain has shifted to an attempt to regulate the feelings of others through a strict regime of control, one we will liken to Foucault’s theorization of the Panopticon, defined by self-management through the affective and embodied that renegotiates modern mechanisms of control exercised through vision and visibility.

Before we begin to address theoretical concerns about the body and affect, we must ask a few basic questions. What sort of child, such as Abramović, is not afraid of or chooses to ignore the pain that they know will come from throwing themselves against a very sharp bed corner? Abramović stated that she knowingly injured herself on the bed because she hated her nose and wanted an excuse to have reconstructive surgery. She had devised an elaborate plan to carry around photos of Brigitte Bardot in her pocket, so that once her nose was broken she could show them to her doctors as a helpful suggestion on how to fashion her new nose (Abramović 2013). What if the pain of Marina Abramović is not the same as the pain you or I feel? And a second set of questions: why did Abramović feel the need to have complete, unfettered visual access to the participants of *The Artist is Present*—access that was supposedly blocked by the presence of the table? She stated that the impetus for the table’s removal was when a man in a wheelchair came to sit with her, and she “didn’t even know if this man had legs or not because the table was obstructing the view” (Pearson & Kern 2010). Discussions of *The Artist is Present* suggest that the physical relationship between the two individuals produces an intense affective bonding that exists beyond speech; yet how is vision articulated to the transmission of affect in this work and what does this relationship between the visible and the affective signify? We do not presume to have the answers to these questions, but rather invoke them to draw attention to how affect’s transmission cannot be assumed to be generally “political,” and must also address additional contextual specificities that bring together and highlight the limits of the subjective and the ability to claim knowledge about another’s experience—along with other demands about visuality, affect, and the regulation and management of bodies. In other words, we begin with the assumption that, maybe, Marina Abramović does not feel like you.
The Performance of Pain

In any attempt to understand the experience of pain one encounters deep contradictions. Pain is invisible, expressed by and projected onto objects that substitute for the inability to know the internal state of someone else, communicated through metaphors that cannot capture the essence of feeling. The wound and the knife may signify pain, but do not reveal its experience. Consequentially, pain—or rather, the difficulty inherent in its expression—produces a boundary of subjectivity that, in its most dehumanizing form, can be used to legitimate violence against the other (Scarry 1985). Because one cannot directly comprehend the pain of another, the moment of recognizing or misrecognizing pain can be mobilized to deny the other’s personhood. At the same time, while pain is privately experienced it enters into public discourse to signify a powerful bond between individuals: “I feel your pain” is simultaneously an empty statement and a claim of empathy. Pain becomes visible socially, in relation to others, even though direct access to the pain of another body may never be possible. This affective relation is complex and contradictory, potentially unequal, and can likewise perform violence against the other. When we recognize pain, to quote Sara Ahmed (2004, 21), “the pain of others becomes ‘ours,’ an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralises their pain into our sadness.” Whose pain is recognized? How is it recognized? These questions cut to the political uncertainties that emerge at the nexus of the human body’s subjective experience and social desires, whether to assuage human suffering or to perpetuate acts of violence and terror that deny the possibility of the other’s pain.

Abramović’s early works often demonstrate these problems of expressing and recognizing pain. In Rhythm 0 (1974), she provided her audience with 72 objects, some of which could provide pleasure (honey, a rose, feathers) and some of which were to induce pain (scalpels, a whip, a gun and bullet). The members of the audience were invited to use the objects on the artist as she remained passive for six hours. Overwhelmingly choosing objects traditionally associated with pain, the audience carried her around, cut her clothes and skin, and pointed the loaded gun at her head. The work taught Abramović that “the public can kill you. If you give them total freedom, they will become frenzied enough to kill you” (O’Hagan 2010). Rhythm 0, as a collaborative, participatory performance, emerges from an inability to grasp the pain of another. The liminal space of performance (Turner 1969) stripped from the audience the desire to recognize the humanity of the other, when permitted by the performer to do so, becoming “free” but capable of violent acts usually prohibited by the norms of everyday life. This freedom only emerges from a sabotaging of affective relations, a willful disregard for the experience of the other. The performance requires the involvement of the audience—but rather than a kind of positive, shared world-making, the artwork is created out of Abramović’s willingness to serve as an empty placeholder for the violent desires of her audience, perversely completing the fantasy of the abject other through the evacuation of her own subjective agency.
Abramović’s 1975 piece *The Lips of Thomas* further demonstrate her experimentations with the relations produced or denied by the recognition of pain. According to the program notes, the performance (and thus her assumed pain) ends only if an audience member intervenes:

I slowly eat 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon.
I slowly drink 1 liter of wine out of a crystal glass.
I break the glass with my right hand.
I cut a five-pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.
I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.
I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks.
The heat of a suspended heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed.
The rest of my body begins to freeze.
I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes until the public interrupts the piece by removing the ice blocks from underneath me.

Here we have the inverse of *Rhythm 0*. The audience still collaborates in the work, but only to a limited degree. Abramović subjects her body to a series of unpleasant and painful acts, cutting herself open, bleeding, and whipping herself beyond the point of conscious sensibility. According to the notes, at a particular moment in the performance Abramović stops experiencing pain. The ability of the artist to walk away from *The Lips of Thomas*, rather than freezing to death in a form of crucifixion by ice, requires the audience to recognize these acts as painful and destructive, projecting onto the artist the experience of that pain brought about by the performance itself. That the performer supposedly lacks the ability to feel is corrected by the members of the audience, who are there to save the artist in spite of herself. *The Lips of Thomas* is a projection of pain where it supposedly does not exist, while the ability to inflict pain without its recognition is required for a performance like *Rhythm 0* to realize its artistic intentions. Pain, in these works, is not something communicated. It only exists as a problem articulated to the limits of recognizing the other as one who feels or cannot feel.

While *The Lips of Thomas* (supposedly) requires the audience to recognize Abramović’s suffering organically, any possible spontaneous recognition of pain is further problematized by its re-performance as part of her *Seven Easy Pieces* exhibition at the MoMA in 2005. In this series Abramović recreated seven famous works of performance art, including those by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and her own. In the re-performance of *The Lips of Thomas*, critics read the cutting open of the old scars, reforming the five-pointed star on her stomach, as “a test of endurance for spectators as well as for the artist” (Carlson n.d.). By the third cut, and surely with the memory of the audience’s position as saviour in the original performance, a member called out, “you don’t have to do it again, Marina!” The cries stirred a frenzy within the group, as audience members exclaimed that she should stop, dismayed because of the self-inflicted “pain”; the pain of the artist was experienced as the emotional horror of
the audience. Yet where is pain actually located in Abramović’s work? Is it in her own body? Apparently not, if the notes for *The Lips of Thomas* are to be taken literally. Is it in the audience’s ability to internalize and take possession of her pain, making it theirs, not hers? Moreover, reframing our earlier question, what if Abramović cannot experience pain herself, even before her notes suggest that she cannot feel it? Or, at least, what if she does not experience pain in the way others might?

These are speculations, as are those of one critic who, in watching the second *Lips of Thomas*, stated, “I had a strong desire to read [her] affect throughout, but her reaction to the ordeal seemed unaffected. Her face remained impassive as she cut her stomach…” (Carlson n.d.). We are all different people, with different feelings and different desires. The recognition and misrecognition of pain directly call up these differences, rendering impossible any judgments about the experience and feeling of others. Pain only becomes visible socially, but as a social force that nonetheless denies internal experience a place in public life, producing distinctions and affinities out of collective abstractions in which affect itself is merely phantasmagoric. In these early works, Abramović’s pain is never legible—only the social reading of her pain (or lack thereof) can be understood, as the members of the audience dehumanize her or save her from self-destruction.³

These suggestions move increasingly further from any claim that Abramović’s work represents the personal experience of pain. Her early performances play with the ability to comprehend the pain of others, revelling in the impossibility of knowing what the other may feel. Consequentially, *Rhythm o* and *The Lips of Thomas* do not merely represent a body pushed to its limits in the experience of pain, but rather require the interplay, recognition, and misrecognition of the experience of the other. They are not about the knowledge of experience that is transmitted affectively, but are about the very limits of that knowledge. In these works, pain is experienced socially, while internal, psychological experiences are marginalized. Abramović’s pain is a permutation of the audience’s willingness to inflict violence, resulting from the misrecognition of her humanity. Her pain is transmuted into the audience’s discomfort from looking and the ability of the audience to misrecognize the other in favour of subjectively felt emotions. These are not works about the body’s experience, but rather about the social embeddedness of the body, in which any knowledge about experience and feeling is forever deferred for a hermeneutics of the body’s surface in which visually present signifiers offer readings or misreadings of pain. The artist is, then, an empty signifier for the audience’s attribution (or non-attribution) of feeling. Abramović, in performing pain, renders herself an object for the projection of the audience’s own either humanizing or dehumanizing emotions and desires.
Upending Barriers, Removing Tables, Shattering Mirrors

The same themes are part of Abramović’s massively popular work *The Artist is Present*, which ran from March to May of 2010 at the MoMA. During this work, Abramović sat in a wooden chair set up across from another chair, initially separated by a table. Members of the audience were invited to come and sit across from the artist each day as long as the museum was open. Abramović has claimed that this experience was similar to what we’ve been asserting about her earlier pieces, stating that for participating audience members, “I’m just like a trigger for themselves. I’m like a mirror to them. After a while they don’t look at me anymore, their eyes look inward into their selves” (Pearson & Kern 2010). While the artist is no longer inflicting precisely the same sort of pain on her body as in her previous works, she is still positioning her body as a kind of pained receptor for the affect of the audience. Yet this encounter is inherently missed as those who gaze upon the artist inevitably turn back towards themselves. While the artist may be present, she is only there as a mirror for the desires and feelings of the MoMA visitor.

However, this reading was not Abramović’s only interpretation of *The Artist is Present*: “I gazed into the eyes of many people who were carrying such pain inside that I could immediately see it and feel it,” she claimed (O’Hagan 2010). This second understanding of the work is most clear after the key moment in which Abramović removes the table from her performance, when the relationship between the artist and the audience ceases to be one of a fundamental misrecognition, but of a profound intersubjective relation that transcends other forms of communication and association. It is not the internal states of the other that are misrecognized, but rather the fundamental unity of self, environment, and other. The performance enables a recognition of a state generally invisible to the public, brought about through the encounter with the artist. Most significantly, the revelation of this state has seemingly become Abramović’s desire in the creation of workshops and her institute, initially for other performers recreating her work and, increasingly, for whoever wants to pay for the privilege of the presence of the artist.

After the removal of the table, Abramović appears to have embraced a sense of feeling in which the ideal for an individual and her body is to embrace techniques of self-management to perform a holistic relationship with others and the physical environment. Pain ceases to express the limits of subjective experience and the projection of feeling onto another—and all the violence these feelings and experiences may entail. Instead, the negotiation of pain is merely an effect of a more authentic connection to the natural ground of the real. Strategies for dealing with pain become techniques to manage the body, abstracted into concepts that supposedly describe the ontology of embodied experience. This approach is most evident in the plans for the Marina Abramović Institute and her Abramović Method.
The impetus for her Method were the workshops Abramović held at her home in Hudson, New York for the performers of her MoMA retrospective. The MoMA decided to include, along with video and photo documentation of original performances by Abramović, re-performances of key works, enacted by young performers. At her home, these performers signed contracts that they would submit to her orders and relinquish contact with the outside, surrendering their mobile phones. Abramović taught them a regime of hygiene referred to as “cleaning the house,” which involved fasting, nostril flushing, and tongue scraping (Thurman 2012). She maintained complete control over their actions, which included how they governed their own bodies. One performer relayed, “Because of the show, everything in my life changed; my diet, my body, the depth of my sleep, my energy levels, the depth of my breath and most importantly my respect for my own limits and an eagerness to overthrow those limits each day” (Bailey n.d.). Whereas Abramović’s work once seemed to be about the limits and possibilities of pain and its intersubjective expression, her Method and Institute create a kind of subject that is better attuned to the experience of pain and is consequently more adept at negotiating the body’s relationship to nature, daily life, and other bodies. Her teachings extend beyond helping performers recreate her work and into what could be called daily life. Abramović made headlines late 2013 for using her methods of feeling to help pop-star Lady Gaga kick her marijuana habit. The singer claimed that she had lost control over her drug use, and “It wasn’t until I was with Marina and she said, ‘Okay you’re coming to my house, No television, no computer, no marijuana, no nothing, no food. For three days, art only. You eat only art,’” that she was able to quit (McGovern 2013). In short, Marina Abramović is teaching people to feel in the ways that she feels in order to regulate themselves with more self-control. If her early works were about the limits of pain’s expression, then her recent projects are about bodily management to deal with pain as a condition of daily life. She has invented a generalized method for being and existing in contemporary society. If Marina Abramović does not feel like you, then you need to learn to feel as she does.

Surfaces and Holisms

While Abramović’s work is often regarded as political for its emphasis on the female body and the pain it experiences, we argue that this reading disregards the mobilization of affect in creating surfaces and separations that are ultimately articulated to other issues of difference that are almost always neglected in art criticism (cf. Davis 2013). Our above reading of Abramović’s early performances suggests that her works were very much about playing with and thinking through the limits of the body and the ability to know the experience of another. The limits of pain’s expression are central to larger systems of dehumanization that legitimate violence against the other. Rhythm o and The Lips of Thomas are certainly attuned to these issues. While pain is social, we cannot disregard the limits of the experience and expression of the pain of others. Our attention should turn not only to the ways that
specific techniques of the body unite one with another, but also to the very divides produced by the same processes. Yet, in her recent work, the separations and divides of pain become a holistic affectivity, in which a kind of enlightenment is achieved through the intense management of the body and its relations. The Abramović Method stresses techniques of achieving stillness, spatially removing oneself from the temporality of everyday life. While initially intended to enable performers to recreate physically the feats of stamina often required by Abramović’s performances, with the MAI these methods become a self-help system that defines well-functioning selves as those in a proper relation with nature, able to be still for long periods of time, in a supposed balance with the world through an affective bond that conjoins once separated subjects. Yet it should never be forgotten that the Abramović Method was created so others could re-perform her earlier works; it was designed so one can accept the violence and pain forced onto one’s body. The Method is one in which privileged individuals learn to cope with the cruelty of the contemporary economic life (cf. Mirowski 2013), learning to sit and stand and endure, as if these acts are somehow enlightening rather than the things that many workers in the service industry have to do everyday (cf. Sharma 2014).

To make these claims, we next turn to affect theory, a body of literature that, in its most extreme version, suggests bodies and subjects exist not as individuated entities, but as abstract flows and intensities necessarily conjoined in relation to one another. Affect theory provides a theoretical context to examine the changes in how Abramović conceptualizes the role of the body and its experience in her art, from Rhythm 0 and The Lips of Thomas to The Artist is Present and the MAI. After this turn through affect theory, we return to discuss the MAI and the Abramović Method and how together they serve as a potential model for generalized techniques for the management of the body and its affects.

A Feeling for Affect

Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg suggest that affect “arises in the midst of in-between-ness,” is “found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (2010, 1). Affect is about relation and the flows that constitute relation. By turning to affect, rather than conscious meaning or interpretation, a “subject” can never be thought of as an isolated body, individual, or thing. One is inevitably bound together with others in a fluid encounter that dissolves clear boundaries between entities. The autonomy of the self is reframed as a kind of assemblage or process, extending beyond the physiological limits of biology to act and interact with others and the greater environment that, while it does not completely do away with the body, extends and transcends an individual consciousness into the open, virtual multiplicity of existence.
Defining affect in this way detaches it from any individualized, cognitive experience of emotion and feeling. Affect is not and cannot be located within any one body, but rather is an immanent force that transcends the individual as a uniting, binding, yet flexible substance. It traverses bodies while constituting them, bringing together isolated others in a way that reveals how autonomy is ultimately an illusion. The self overflows the limits of any one individual as it moves to a larger plane of immanence. Those once thought apart are unified through an ontological force that is a “non-representational” excess, unable to be fully brought into subjective, interpretive experience (Thrift 2007).

In cultural theory, the implications of affect take two different directions—directions that have radically different effects for the understanding of feeling and emotion in political and aesthetic experience. The first direction stresses how political formations have a necessary dimension that cannot be reduced to signification, meaning, and claims to reality. Bodies move and are moved by others in ways mediated by material reality often forgotten when meaning and signification are assumed to delineate the totality of what goes by “culture” and “society” (Grossberg 2010, 193-195). Yet affect is never purely disarticulated from meaning and emotion; bodies are not merely asubjective forces that uniformly act on and are acted upon by the ontological plane of reality. Instead, specific manifestations of affect are articulated with other cultural forces and discourses—as emotion, as intimacy, as passion—to advance political projects and goals that have no intrinsic progressive guarantee because of their affective qualities. The possibilities for relation are shaped and transformed in ways that may be liberating, but can just as well be oppressive and discriminatory. Affect, in this sense, creates boundaries between groups and populations through the policing of bodies and articulation of meanings ascribed to the experience of specific feelings (Ahmed 2004, 2010). It perpetuates personal attachments that guarantee the failure of everyday desires (Berlant 2011), legitimates the colonization of daily life by work (Gregg 2011), and reshapes the rights and abilities of citizens in the name of the regulation of sex and intimacy (Berlant 1997). While affect may seem to exist detached from signification and meaning at a purely ontological level, this theoretical dimension is irrelevant when juxtaposed with the everyday mobilization of affect as something that can be used to delegitimize specific experiences and bodies from political reality.

The second direction, in direct opposition to the first, emphasizes the political power of the ontological, never returning to the role of meaning and articulation to discuss the political. Instead of the messy reality of meaning and signification, affect is found in the biological nature of cognition. The politics of affect thus emerge from the physiological capacity of the body to act and be acted upon (Brennan 2004; Massumi 2002; cf. Grossberg 2010, 195-198). Some neurological capacity—be it the mirror neuron, the brain’s empathy circuit, or the “missing half second” of consciousness discovered by Benjamin Libet—is invoked as physiological evidence for the body’s affective capacity. However, this understanding of affect in cultural
theory relies on biological truth claims that it either distorts or simply cannot support without contradiction. These physiological processes "retreat to the singular neurophysiological body in order to explain the transmission of affect between people" (Blackman 2012, 77), providing an account for affect that is inherently contradictory, erasing from "ontology" subjects identified by the history of medicine and psychology as physiologically unable to experience and produce the affects that supposedly ground the immanence of all relation as such (Bollmer 2014).

This second sense of affect points to a politics in which the capacities of the body create an autonomic collective social bond; the force of the political intrinsically emerges from bodies being together and the self dissolves into the field of relation. This view of affectivity seems to be increasingly popular in cultural theory (i.e. Bennett 2010, xi-xiii; Manning 2013), often through reference to historical theories of social and communicative transmission (Sampson 2012), in spite of the numerous critiques that note the limits of neurological affect, both from historical and psychological perspectives (Leys 2011; Wetherell 2013) and those grounded in the concerns of cultural theory (Hemmings 2006).

These two directions mirror the mobilization of affect in Abramović's work. Rhythm and The Lips of Thomas examine affect as a bridge between individuals in a way that is not inherently reducible to signification, although many elements of her performances are clearly symbolic and Abramović's pain is articulated to symbolic structures of meaning represented by objects such as honey and wine. Yet this bridging is often problematized, as her works highlight the political articulation of affect that enables—or prevents—violence against the other. Affect is one dimension among others, interwoven with symbolic and social structures, and at best only partially capable of revealing intersubjective bonds that exist. The Artist is Present, on the other hand, marshals an apparatus for realizing the psychological transmission of affect between individuals, especially after the removal of the table from the performance. Instead of barriers that separate or surfaces upon which affect is refracted, producing imagined affinities out of proper and improper feelings, The Artist is Present is a work that supposedly reveals the intersubjective bonds that exist.

Another direction encontrar quebrar—violence against the other. Affect is one dimension among others, interwoven with symbolic and social structures, and at best only partially capable of revealing intersubjective bonds that exist. The Artist is Present, on the other hand, marshals an apparatus for realizing the psychological transmission of affect between individuals, especially after the removal of the table from the performance. Instead of barriers that separate or surfaces upon which affect is refracted, producing imagined affinities out of proper and improper feelings, The Artist is Present is a work that supposedly reveals the intersubjective bonds that exist.

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These two directions mirror the mobilization of affect in Abramović's work. Rhythm and The Lips of Thomas examine affect as a bridge between individuals in a way that is not inherently reducible to signification, although many elements of her performances are clearly symbolic and Abramović's pain is articulated to symbolic structures of meaning represented by objects such as honey and wine. Yet this bridging is often problematized, as her works highlight the political articulation of affect that enables—or prevents—violence against the other. Affect is one dimension among others, interwoven with symbolic and social structures, and at best only partially capable of revealing intersubjective bonds that exist. The Artist is Present, on the other hand, emerges as an apparatus for realizing the physiological transmission of affect between individuals, especially after the removal of the table from the performance. Instead of barriers that separate or surfaces upon which affect is refracted, producing imagined affinities out of proper and improper feelings, The Artist is Present is a work that supposedly reveals the intersubjective bonds that exist.

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The MAI as “Panffecticon”

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1977) famously argued that Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon prison was a generalized institutional model for vision and observation in Western modernity. The Panopticon served as a diagram for how social control is not maintained through actually being observed, but from internalizing the gaze of the other, of embracing a model of self-management in which one is potentially observed even if correction and punishment never actually arrive. Our context is one in which vision and observation, while still essential for countless means of control, are perhaps no longer as central as they once were in maintaining order, but articulated to other forms of sensation that change the meaning of vision and observation in contemporary culture. Instead, the regulation of *feeling* is required for contemporary control (cf. Berardi 2009; Gregg 2011); the internalization of a specific *regime of affection* is necessary for the crafting of today’s workers. Visual methods of surveillance have been replaced by techniques of neurological evaluation, in which the internal affective states of a body serve to define which bodies are “proper” and which are to be corrected, confined, or let die (Rose and Abi-Rached 2013; Bollmer 2014).

Following Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon, the Abramović Method, especially as embodied in the MAI, can be seen as a model for a kind of “Panffecticon.” Rather than the gaze of the observer, the participant in Abramović’s workshop internalizes a specific way of feeling, in which one is holistically synthesized with the world as a totality, in which the boundaries of self and other break down and one has a closer relationship with the materiality of existence than those who have not been processed by the Institute. As the MAI has not yet been completed, an MAI Prototype was built and tested at the 2013 Luminato Festival in Toronto. The structure, consisting of seven interconnected tent-pavilions, allowed participants to engage in a series of exercises that will eventually be available at the MAI. The MAI Prototype exemplifies how Abramović’s work has moved towards a holistic model of affective connection, but positions this understanding of affect as something that must be produced with the conditioning of affectively “docile bodies” through models of self-management similar to those discussed by Foucault (1977, 136).

Upon entering the MAI prototype, one must relinquish all personal items and means of communication (shoes, mobile phones, jewelry, purses, etc. are stored away in lockers) and don matching lab coats and headphones. Then a contract must be signed giving one’s “word of honour” to stay for the duration of the workshop. Control is enforced not through actual correction, but rather through the vague threat of contractually mandated punishment enforced through internalized self-discipline. The gaze too, plays an important role in maintaining control, as one steps into the next room and is met with the large, looming eyes of Abramović herself, as she welcomes participants with a pre-recorded video (fig. a). Next, the body and mind are prepared with physical and meditative exercises. The body is further regulated in the
“water-drinking chamber” in which participants are presented with several coolers of water containing various minerals. They are educated as to which minerals contain the best properties for their bodies’ needs, and then guided on how to properly drink the appropriate water. As with her workshops for the MoMA performers at Hudson, Abramović is controlling the body down to what is being put into it, not just through the limiting of harmful chemicals. She is governing the necessity of water, suggesting that there is a proper way to drink and absorb minerals to be in balance with the Earth. The MAI, as Panaffection, is an institution designed not to produce the internalization of observation, but rather the internalization of an affective holism with the physical world itself while relying on techniques of individualization, compartmentalization, and separation. While it uses biopolitical mechanisms similar to Bentham’s prison system, it does so not to manage prisoners, but to manage the affect between people, objects, and how one feels towards one’s self.

As we discussed earlier, one way of viewing affect is as an immanent force of the political that emerges from bodies being together, where the limits of the self dissolve into the field of relation. This deterritorialization of subjectivity can be seen in the next few rooms of the MAI Prototype. There is the “eye gaze chamber,” in which one stares into the eyes of another participant for a lengthy amount of time. This exercise echoes the results of *The Artist is Present*, bringing the participants closer, allowing them to become mirrors for each other’s inner feelings. As with the removal of the table, vision is mobilized as a force through which one can articulate the bodies of two separate people. In the next room, participants’ bodies are electrically dissolved into abstract energetic forces that transcend and traverse the limits of the biological through the use of a large Tesla coil. Each participant holds an electrical source and they “become transmitters and conductors of energy” as the current flows through them collectively (figs. b, c). Even sleep is regulated at the MAI, as the penultimate room is a sleep chamber in which one is allowed a set amount of time for rest. Once the process is complete, one receives a certificate of completion and Abramović invites you to see how it can “help you in your own life, and whatever work you are doing,” showing that this exercise is not meant to just be another pavilion at an art fair, but a lesson in the regulation of the self. The MAI Prototype is a crash course in how to feel like Marina Abramović, carried out safely under her watchful virtual gaze and checked against the threat contractually produced by one’s own word of honour.

**Conclusion**

Marina Abramović attempting to break her nose as a child reveals to us instabilities about the experience of pain. In her early works, these instabilities require the audience to recognize pain that may not be taking place, or misrecognize pain in a way that drains the artist of agency and humanity. The pain of the artist is never fully present. It only emerges in the interplay of the audience and performer, where internal experience and feeling drift off into that which cannot be expressed or known.
With the removal of the table from *The Artist is Present*, however, the pain of the artist and the audience become something expressed through the intersubjectivity of affect, made sensible by the visual relations produced in the exceptional space of the performance. With the MAI, the feats of physical endurance required by Abramović’s durational performances become a set of strategies for managing affect and pain in daily life. We suggest that this last moment be treated as the emergence of a technical apparatus for learning about the regulation of affect and the internalization of a specific holistic form of relation. The MAI is an institutional “Panaffecticon” that educates participants about feeling and the regulation of the body, a space external to daily life designed to produce subjects adjusted to the affective demands of contemporary capitalism. Her early works demonstrate the political complexity that necessarily comes with the experience of pain, with the ever-present spectre that Marina Abramović may not feel as you do; with the MAI—and the ontology of affect—this complexity is reduced to a self-help strategy that suggests the possibility of attaining an optimal relationship with the world, where one copes with the pain of daily life through the affects revealed in the pained experience of durational performance.

Notes

1. While this essay will discuss a few of her works in detail, the MoMA’s website has an excellent multimedia database of the works included in her retrospective exhibition with video and photo documentation as well as commentary from Abramović. (http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1970)

2. For more information on the MAI and the thought process behind its inception, see the large number of videos available on its Vimeo webpage, including this introduction: http://vimeo.com/71490705

3. There has been at least one occasion when an audience member saved (unplanned) Abramović’s life. During her 1974 *Rhythm 5* she jumped into the middle of a burning star, but because of the star’s construction and the large size of the fire, all of the oxygen was immediately sucked out of Abramović’s lungs and she collapsed, unconscious. She narrowly escaped being burned alive once audience members realized something was wrong and pulled her out.
Works Cited


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Marina Abramović Doesn’t Feel Like You
Katherine Guinness and Grant David Bollmer

(A) Marina Abramović Institute, video still from “Marina Abramovic Describes the MAI Prototype,” directed by Noah Blumenson-Cook, 2013, http://vimeo.com/71165004, Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 3.0 License

(B) Marina Abramović Institute, video still from “Marina Abramovic Describes the MAI Prototype,” directed by Noah Blumenson-Cook, 2013, http://vimeo.com/71165004, Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 3.0 License

(C) Marina Abramović Institute, video still from “Marina Abramovic Describes the MAI Prototype,” directed by Noah Blumenson-Cook, 2013, http://vimeo.com/71165004, Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 3.0 License
Whether early Christian women mystics perceive the body, embodiment, and woman’s identification with the material with sheer disgust or some kind of masochistic adoration is unclear, but their struggle with this tension is apparent in their asceticism and theology—presented in a stream of consciousness as raw as is it seductive. This paper explores “woman,” her embodiment, and her negative identification with the body and materiality, as juxtaposed to “man,” his disembodied life, and his positive identification with the contemplative and the immaterial, both historically and philosophically. I argue that early Christian women mystics reclaim the body as the locus for purification, philosophical thought, and holy union through extreme ascetic practices, supplemented with an intense eroticism validated by their exemplar Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

She chews up every injury: mockery, rudeness, tortures, and reproaches with great persecution; she bears hunger and thirst, cold and heat, as well as painful longings and sweatings for the salvation of souls. She chews up all these things in my honor, bearing and sustaining her neighbor. After she has chewed up this food, she enjoys its taste, savoring the fruit of her effort and the delight of the food of souls, tasting it in the fire of charity for me and for her neighbor.

—Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, Chapter 76

I. Introduction

Saint Catherine of Siena is one of many early Christian female mystics who dedicated her life to developing a theology, accompanied by extreme ascetic practices, centered around eating and the mouth of Christ. A Eucharist devotee, she survived on nothing other than the Eucharist for several years (Dickens 2009, 151); what is the appeal of this holy food for Catherine and other women like her? What feeds their asceticism? It seems that, for these mystics, it is not enough to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. The satisfaction of these women is inseparable from the eroticism involved in the act of consuming: salivating, chewing, tasting, drinking, swallowing, and savoring His flesh and blood as it lingers on their tongues.

The obvious Christian phenomenon that comes to mind when we think of consuming Christ is the holy sacrament of the Eucharist: receiving the sacramental bread that is Christ’s body and drinking the blessed wine that is his blood. The Eucharist sacrament symbolizes Christ’s self-sacrifice and honours His offering at the Last Supper as recorded in the New Testament. Holding the body of Christ in the mouth, then, is the meeting of divine flesh with our own and, as we will see, it is in the preservation
of this rapturous mixture that the early Christian woman mystic finds her ecstasy. What is it about this coming together of human and divine flesh that delights these women mystics? How does this fusion extend beyond the Eucharist and why do we find a particular emphasis on Christ’s corporeality as opposed to the Spirit? How does Christ’s materiality speak to our own?

Most Christian mysticism suggests a material conception of the body as far as the body is present, for these Christian medieval thinkers, woman or man, mystic or scribe, were certainly embodied. What to make of this embodied existence, how to understand it, and how to live within the skin while remaining close to God are questions that underwrite their theological teachings. Whether negated, affirmed, or affirmed in its negation, the body presents a peculiar condition for the mystics. Indeed, much of the language in early Christian mysticism suggests repulsion toward the body, a feeling of being trapped within the limits of the skin, mutilating it until it is no longer in the way of the disembodied and contemplative life. Nevertheless, we ought not to approach these texts with an anachronistic filter, regardless how evident a rejection of the body and the material world might seem for Christianity today. We see with prominent Christian woman mystic, Julian of Norwich (circa 14th century), for example, that even a diseased body is welcomed so long as [Julian] can live “to love God better and for longer, and therefore know and love him better in the bliss of heaven” (McGinn 2006, 239).

When considering Julian of Norwich and her wish to remain embodied in the material world no matter how much suffering her body caused her, we can think of the mystical life as one that bears suffering. Though many mystical texts speak of death and of a longing to be with God, mystics, especially women mystics, cannot be explained away as suicidal. Masochistic as it may seem, finding pleasure in (self-inflicted) pain, the mystical life is a mode of existence: it is a way of comporting oneself. No matter how self-destructive their rigid ascetical practices appear (self-torture, wishing for diseases, self-isolation, or, like Catherine of Sienna, refusal to eat) the mystics live on for God. Christian female mystics in particular are not interested in doing away with the body, but rather in treating the body and their embodiment as a place to house a relationship with the Divine. Our task, then, is to understand their rather unconventional treatment of the body.

Whether women mystics perceive the body itself with either sheer disgust or some kind of masochistic adoration is unclear. Their struggle with this tension, however, is apparent in their ascetical practices and manifests throughout their theologies, which are presented in a stream of consciousness as raw as they are seductive. Essential to grasping the complex theologies offered by early Christian women mystics and deepening our understanding of their fascination with the Eucharist is acknowledging woman’s historical identification with the body and the material. Eucharistic devotion cannot just be about eating: for a female Christian mystic, to receive the Eucharist is to chew on the flesh of Christ, literally bringing the teeth together and erasing the distance between her and the Divine.
Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century* sheds light on the link between 13th-century mystics and the Eucharist, while subsequently raising questions about female embodiment; close analysis of Medieval Christian mysticism shows patterns that emerge well beyond the epoch of the 13th-century, thus providing insight into such phenomena. With the aim of illuminating some of its consequences, this essay will first acknowledge a historical identification of man with the intellect and the immaterial contrasted by one of woman with the body and the material. Subsequently, I will argue that by virtue of their ascetical practices, supplemented with intense eroticism, Christian female mystics present a kind of reclaiming of the body and the material, thus offering serious works of philosophy. As validated by their exemplar Christ—God incarnate—Christian women mystics reclaim the body as the locus for purification and holy union, thus undoing a hierarchy that renders woman the fleshy, earthly, carnal, and therefore inferior sex.

II. The Disembodied Man: Contemplation of the Immaterial

Embodiment was not an exclusively female concern for the mystics; however, the language of the body, embodiment, the material, and the immaterial can be contrasted between men and women mystics writing in the Middle Ages. Saint Francis of Assisi is one example of many male mystics who depict a tensioned or paradoxical relationship to the material world. For Francis, this life and the material world act as a limitation to another (immaterial) world, yet at the same time, this life is a necessary stepping-stone to another, and presumably better, life in the perceived immaterial world. The life of Saint Francis (circa late-12th to early-13th centuries) is often praised for its likeness to the life of Jesus Christ. Saint Francis’ commitment to community and the renunciation of wealth and private possession inspired many of his contemporaries, eventually known as the Franciscan Friars, to do the same (Zweerman and Goorbergh 2007). It is worth briefly calling our attention here to the order that Saint Francis began, namely, *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* or the Order of Little Brothers. Even though the Little Brothers try to debase themselves (renouncing all wealth, possession, and property), they remain brothers—men—in a position of authority within the hierarchy of the church. Within Christianity, the prominent theological orders of Francis’s time were his, the Franciscans, and the Dominican Order. What is important to note is that these men were often priests or held a position of power within the church; women could not hold these positions (Zweerman and Goorbergh 2007).

For Saint Francis, however, the most celebrated event of his life is not the order he founded or the vast following he acquired, but rather his miraculous receiving of the physical wounds of Christ’s Passion in Assisi 1224 (McGinn 2006, 225). As his body becomes an intersection between the material and immaterial world, the stigmata of Saint Francis can be read as an instance wherein the body becomes a kind of ingress to the Divine; however, Francis never wrote about the event of his stigmata.
himself (McGinn 2006, 225), which proves significant for our gendered reading of these mystical texts. My speculation is that something as intimate as receiving the physical wounds of Christ’s crucifixion is too bodily, too fleshy, and too intimate for Francis’s theology. How can Francis offer a theology that, as we will soon see, situates the Divine at a distance or as something otherworldly, while also acknowledging the implications of this instance wherein God and man intersect?

Saint Francis’ poem “The Canticle of Brother Sun” offers insight into how he may have understood the link between his material existence and the immaterial or disembodied life to come:

Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Lord Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom you enlighten us, and is more beautiful and shinning with great splendor; and bears most likeness to you, Most High. Praise be to you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven you formed them... Praise be to you, my Lord, through Brother Wind... through Sister Water.... [and] Brother Fire... Praise and blessing to you, my Lord, and thanks and service with great humility. (McGinn 2006, 291)

In praise of God’s creations, each with male or female attributes, this hymn explores the notion of divine presence on earth. The fact that the sun, masculine in Francis’ description, is glorified as bearing the “most likeness to [God], Most High” suggests that Francis perceives God’s earthly presence to be somewhat distanced. For Francis, God’s likeness or representative on earth is up in the sky, something to be looked at from below, in contrast to the female mystics’ image of divine incarnation as literally pressed up to the skin. The important distinction, then, is the proximity to the flesh. In renouncing property, among other ties to the material world, Francis gets closer to God, but it is difficult to suggest that Francis thought he was—or ever could be—materially with God, absolutely occupying the same physical space, before his mortal death.

In “The Canticle of Brother Sun,” Francis refers to “Sister Bodily Death” and to a “second death.” The second death is a kind spiritual death and a trope that comes from the Book of Revelations. For Francis and other Christians, this second death would be worse than bodily death insofar as it signifies a turning away from God, leaving us in a kind of mental “hell” endemic to the human condition (Armstrong, Brady, and Vaughn 1982). All of us experience the first death, which is a mortal or bodily death, and only in accepting bodily death as a means to God can we escape the second death, bearing the first with patience and dignity. Hence, for Francis, we need the body, but only insofar as we need bodily death: we live this life for another. Though he does not outwardly denounce it, Francis expresses little interest in the body itself, let alone bodily pleasure. For Francis, embodiment is perceived as some strange but necessary step in the ascent into heaven. Unlike Julian of Norwich, who wished not to die, but to live in her diseased body, Francis accepts bodily death as that which opens the door to the Divine, offering a closer proximity to God. One question...
we might ask ourselves, then, is why does Julian of Norwich think her body, diseased or healthy, possesses the space to reach God? Why does she seem to find the Divine already within her corporeality?

The theology of many other male mystics presents accounts similar to those of Saint Francis regarding materiality and immateriality and how to endure embodied existence until the ascent toward God. This is not to say that women mystics were not invested in such an ascent, but rather an eroticism can be traced in their asceticism (their physical embodied practices) that is unmatched in the work of male mystics. Christian Women mystics are obsessed by the idea of sustaining the body and savoring its decaying flesh. She dwells in her rotten ecstasy. On the other hand, the work of male mystics is largely contemplative, linear, and philosophical. Well before the work of Saint Francis, for example, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) developed a theology that is more or less a work of philosophy or Biblical commentary. Gregory “rearranges” the story of Moses “to present the patriarch as the model of mystical ascent to God,” and the second and larger part of Gregory’s work is a “contemplation of the meaning of the story [of Moses]” (McGinn 2006, 13). Gregory’s theology is an interpretation of the Old Testament with the goal of teaching us how to live this life with knowledge of God and in accordance with God’s goodness (McGinn 2006, 14). Both Gregory and Francis, then, present a theology that is goal-oriented, shepherding their readers toward the good life.

Female mystics, on the other hand, are completely frenzied with experience. There is, unfortunately, no manual or rigorous guide to be traced in their confessions. There is little “shepherding” found in the work of Christian women mystics, for their writing tends to be more descriptive and phenomenological as opposed to the prescriptive work of men. Gregory’s work, though intellectually stimulating, does not evoke or stimulate our senses in same way that reading someone like Teresa of Avila will:

He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. (McGinn 2006, 358-359)

The reader feels Teresa’s passion and arousal as the text is imbued with physical, emotional, and bodily qualities. The difference between Teresa’s experience and Gregory’s commentary is that her text is sensual, appealing to our senses, whereas Gregory appeals to our more contemplative nature. Women mystics act out their experiences without a “why” or a reliance on interpretation—to call on Meister Eckhart, a prominent Medieval thinker, philosopher, heretic, and mystic who was part of the Dominican Order. Meister Eckhart “believed that the ‘excessive’ or ‘saturated’ nature of God’s overflowing and inexhaustible word invited the interpreter and listener not only to read the hidden message within, but even to ‘break through’ all
images in the text” (McGinn 2006, 35), hence ascribing to divine worship the act of interpretation. For women mystics like Teresa of Avila, it is not the interpretation of her experience that makes it divine, but the experience itself as it delights and brings her closer to God. While Saint Francis, Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and other male mystics contemplate the transience of this life, having thoughtful orgasms at the idea of another, Teresa and other women mystics find their satisfaction here in the body and all its fleshiness.

Undoubtedly, reading texts by male mystics that act as Biblical commentaries or interpretations can be mentally if not physically pleasurable (particularly for philosophers) because of the intellectual process that these texts encourage. In a way, these commentaries seek to uncover meaning and truth that might otherwise be overlooked. Biblical commentaries and interpretation, then, begin in a kind of philosophical quest. That is, these interpretations signify a longing for deeper insight into what shapes human existence. Although women mystics provide us with what I consider works of philosophy, their works also conveys a pleasure that is immediate and felt. Historically, immediacy of this nature is uncommon to masculine philosophical discourse. The philosophical process asks us to uncover radical ways of thinking—about morality, politics, human nature, spirituality, transcendence, immanence, natural laws, and so on—offering new insights and ways of looking at the world. In this way, the immediacy and corporeality of the work of women mystics invites an alternative sensibility and engagement on the part of the reader, opening up rather distinct modes of thinking and feeling the Divine, and thus I take these women to be radical philosophers.

As Bernard McGinn writes of women mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*: “for all her extreme language, it is clear that Hadewijch had received a sound theological education and had an original perspective on many of the doctrinal foundations of mysticism, such as the Trinity and the nature of redemption” (McGinn 2006, 102). In thinking about the Holy Trinity or the nature of redemption Hadewijch engages in philosophical analysis, as it is commonly understood. That is, she takes a complex concept, the Holy Trinity, and attaches to it a kind of metaphysical significance. Hadewijch also writes on “Love,” divine love, but she binds an affective quality to the concept. That is, Love, for Hadewijch, is an affective state that informs her understanding of the concept of the Trinity. She writes:

I saw a great eagle, flying towards me from the altar. And he said to me: ‘If you wish to become one, then prepare yourself.’ And I fell to my knees and my heart longed terribly to worship that One Thing...Then he came from the altar, showing himself as a child...he came to me in the appearance and in the clothing of the man he was on that day when he first gave us his body, that appearance of a human being and a man...with the humility of one who belongs entirely to another...I saw him disappear to nothing...melting away and fusing together...it was to me at that moment as if we were one without distinction. (McGinn 2006, 103)
Her analysis is a kind of affective philosophical investigation. She asks, how are we to understand what is three and at the same time one? She asks the philosophical question, how is the one connected to the many, a question explored from Antiquity to today.

Is the temptation to exclude Hadewijch of Antwerp from the philosophical canon simply because her visions and poetry informed her theology, and thus her work is not strictly intellectual reflection? As a discipline, philosophy is grossly disproportionate in terms of gender (as well as race, class, privilege) and the current, and exalted, philosophical cannon actively reinstates this disproportion. Students, faculty, and the academic community at large are making efforts today to effectively broach this issue (i.e., PSWIP’s 2014 Symposium), but we might benefit from further exploring this relationship between the historical rendering of women to the lesser or “second” sex and woman’s restriction to the material world and the body. What would it look like for philosophy to take seriously the idea of thinking through feeling? Although a major point of emphasis throughout this essay has been the immediate and experiential aspect found in the work of women mystics, I want to emphasize that it does not follow from this that there is nothing philosophical to say beyond these immediate sensations or that these sensations themselves are not saying something philosophical. What we say of the mystics in general ought not to be transcendent or other-worldly in order to have philosophical significance. The philosophical question is precisely what is to be said about such a profound bondage to the body.

III. Woman’s Historical Identification with the Body and the Material

Why is the work of male mystics typically characterized as intellectual and interpretative, as opposed to the affective, bodily, and material accounts of women? Perhaps one reason why female mysticism has generally been deemed less philosophical is that women were excluded from priesthood and were “unauthorized to [formally] engage in the interpretations of scripture” (Hollywood 2012, 1). Yet this limitation failed to keep all women from asking questions about human nature, Being, and so on—ultimately doing the work of philosophy. Woman mystic Hildegard of Bingen (late-11th to early-12th centuries), for example, has frequently been read as a philosopher, visionary, theologian, and theorist. The difference, however, is that many of the questions early female thinkers asked began with the body and worked toward developing a deeper understanding of the relationship between materiality and immateriality. Most medieval male thinkers, on the other hand, began in a presupposition that disembodiment leads to truth. Accordingly, many women mystics find their theology beginning with Christ and his materiality, which is most exemplified by the Eucharist. Likewise, with Hildegard of Bingen, we get a theology that is rooted in a cosmological and therefore material account of sexual identity (Allen 1985, 296). Though evidently influenced by Aristotle, Hildegard goes further in emphasizing that the sexes are unique yet radically dependant on each other. For
Hildegard, God is both male and female, which establishes a metaphysical equality between men and women. This metaphysical equality, however, does not obscure an important difference: man was created by God from the earth and woman created by God for man, from his flesh and bone. The insistence on this difference in Christian theology perpetuates the patriarchy, and renders women’s nature as having a more immediate connection to the body and the flesh and at a greater distance from God (Allen 1985, 297). What separates Hildegard’s theology from others is her insistence on “a new synthesis of body and soul,” which leads to a theory of human nature that requires “a complementarity, rather than a polarity [Aristotle] of the sexes” (Allen 1985, 301). As we will see, complementarity and synthesis are important to early Christian female thinking, especially in the work of women mystics; the body complements Christ’s body and in the reception of the Eucharist these bodies become one.

Marguerite Porete, a mystic who has been noted as “an exception” to the Eucharist devotion found in most major female Christian figures (Bynum 1991, 142), also writes in a language characterized by synthesis:

One must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be, burdening oneself down with several states of being, so as to unburden oneself and to attain to one’s being. (McGinn 2006, 174-175)

Here, Porete marks the body as that which must be gutted in order to make space for God. Her fixation with mutilating the body, shedding skin and opening up for God, however, is not far off from the kind of synthesizing that manifests as devotion to the Eucharist. She continues:

The sixth state is when the Soul does not see herself at all, whatever the abyss of humility she has within herself, nor does she see God, whatever the exalted goodness he has. But God of his divine majesty sees himself in her, and by him this Soul is so illumined that she cannot see that anyone exists, except only God himself, from whom all things are; and so she sees nothing except herself. (McGinn 2006, 178-179)

To what extent, then, can we say that Porete is really an exception? Arguably, what Porete is working with here is a notion of ‘negative synthesis’: one must negate both God and self into nothingness and out of this nothingness a union is achieved. Likewise, in Eucharist devotion, there is an implicit negation that takes place while the female mystic devours Christ, consuming Christ into her being. At the same time, the erotic quality of this consumption, namely, the physical and spiritual enjoyment she gains from this experience, speaks to the all-powerful character of the Divine and her relative dependence on this divine presence for her pleasure. The ecstasy she feels when nourishing herself with the food of Christ not only sustains her, but often renders her immobile, surrendering her will and her self to God. Because the enthusiasm women mystics have for the Eucharist is rooted in a desire to become one with God, or perhaps to understand God’s oneness (Hadewijch), I contend that Porete is not so much an exception but rather a different manifestation of the same desire.
What should we make of this desire for union and why does it characterize female mysticism in particular? Given that womankind was historically linked to the body—largely characterized as an impediment to reason ruled by deceptive senses and therefore a limitation of the soul—it is not surprising that we find such strong language of synthesis in Hildegard, Porete, and works by other women mystics. These women are pushing back against their subordination. Beyond pre- and early-modern Christianity, many female authors and artists have “linked embodiment to female creativity” and found their “subjectivity and voices centrally in the realm of the body and its pleasures” (DeShazer 2001, 375). Whether it is the negative synthesis that we find in Porete, a union with God brought on by the annihilation of self and God into nothingness, a metaphysical “complementarity” of the sexes (Hildegard), or general Eucharistic devotion, the goal is to bring together the body and soul, material and immaterial, woman and man, human and divine.

IV. Women Mystics: The Redemption and Reclamation of the Body Through the Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ

Many religious figures, male and female, were known to renounce material possessions (Francis of Assisi and the Poor Clares most famously), but it is important to acknowledge that women, as Bynum points out, had little property to renounce. What these women could refuse however, was food (Bynum 1991, 142). Food is a most basic material necessity, thus refusing to eat is one way a woman can escape or possibly negate her dependence on, and identification with, the body. My claim, however, is that women mystics used eating and the refusal of food in order to reclaim the body as that which can be acted upon, particularly through devotion to the Eucharist:

Not-eating was complemented by holy eating. Food was filth; it was also God. The woman’s revulsion at her own body...was given a theological significance more complex than dualism... The point of even the oddest of these stories was ultimately not rejection of the physical and bodily, but a finding of the truly physical, the truly nourishing, the truly fleshly, in the humanity of Christ, chewed and swallowed in the [E]ucharist. Even here, physicality was not so much rooted out or suppressed as embraced and redeemed. (Bynum 1991, 142)

In this passage, Bynum wonderfully articulates woman’s redemption of the physical, one that reclaims the body and her own corporeality as something to be sanctified through its identification with Christ: the figure which represents the material and immaterial, human and divine, woman and man. This redemption can further be articulated in the language of accident and essence: body, the accidental, becomes essential for the distinctly Christian salvation of humanity in the figure of Jesus Christ. Woman, relegated to the “dependent” and “accidental” sex historically, acquires an essentiality by making this gesture of bodily sacrifice an existential project.
Just as we find a God that is both male and female in Hildegard, the figure of Christ, as Christ is God, must also be feminine and masculine in nature. Aside from the “masculine” representations we find in paintings and other physical depictions, Julian of Norwich (among others) presents an image of Christ as mother, as feminine:

Our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love, bears us into joy and eternal life; blessed may he be! So he sustains us within himself in love and was in labor for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last he died. (McGinn 2006, 245)

Christ is mother and father, woman and man, human and divine. This suggests that the nature of Christ, and therefore of God, is changeable or one of becoming. Mysticism, then, challenges yet another theological, but also philosophical, hierarchy of being and becoming. In traditional Christian theology, this hierarchy appears as such: the nature of God (author of the universe and essential being) ought to be fixed, immaterial, and eternal, while human nature is one of becoming, ephemerality, and materiality. Mysticism brings the eternal to the material by locating and working within a concept of the Divine that is changing or becoming. Rather than deny that God is eternal or infinite, the Christian women mystics reclaim the body, that which is changeable and in a process of becoming, as a locus for divine manifestation. Mystical experience relies on an intersection between God and human and it has to happen here, in this world where the mystics live. In Christianity, Christ appears in at least two physical forms: a human being and as the Eucharist (bread as flesh and wine as blood). Likewise, the female body, as it was “believed to be more labile and changeable…and more open to penetration” (Hollywood 2012, 29) becomes a suitable place to house such divine becoming. Women mystics make this claim explicit through their extreme physical practices, ascetic practices that make a statement that inverts the stigma attached to the changeability of their material being, reflected in the changeability of Christ.

V. Some (more) Mystical Masochism

The Eucharist is perhaps the clearest example of the changeability of Christ’s physical form—changing bread into flesh and wine into blood—but there is evidence of Christ’s volatility, or perhaps His impassibility, in The Passion (Christ’s death on the cross) as well. When His flesh was pierced, Christ bled and suffered, suggesting that the physical form of God, the skin holding Christ together, was far from impenetrable. Blood, scabs, tears, scars, wounds, and so on are all physical signs of Christ’s corporeality and when these women mystics bled, cried, felt immediate pain, or inflicted harm on their bodies leaving physical reminders, perhaps they were reaching out to Christ, connecting with God through their shared materiality. Alternatively, blood, particularly Christ’s blood, is that which heals: in Catherine of Siena’s theology, for example, “the central symbol is the blood of Christ, the fluid that redeems, bathes, nourishes, and binds us to the Savior” (McGinn 2006, 540-541). Christ’s blood is so
important to Catherine because she too bleeds. Blood is necessary for life: the blood, as it flows from Christ’s body, makes the claim that God was alive, embodied, and human just like Catherine.

Though Catherine’s asceticism began with not eating and evolved into rigorous holy eating, the patron saint of Italy (next to Saint Francis) would eventually perform other trials of physical endurance, such as hours of flagellation, kneeling in prayer for impossible intervals, and scalding herself with hot water (Dickens 2009, 151). Angela of Foligno (late-13th to early-14th centuries), Julian of Norwich (14th century), and Marguerite Porete (late-13th to early-14th centuries) also work within a framework of pleasure characterized by extensive torture and torment. It is difficult, however, to think of a woman mystic who better expresses this intense mixture of pleasure and pain than Hadewijch of Antwerp:

And I was in such a state as I had been so many times before, so passionate and so terribly unnerved that I thought I should not satisfy my Lover and my Lover not fully gratify me; then I would have to desire while dying and die while desiring. At that time I was so terribly unnerved with passionate love and in such pain that I imagined all my limbs breaking one by one all my veins were separately in tortuous pain... This much I can say about it: I desired to consummate my Lover completely and to confess and to savor to the fullest extent—to fulfill his humanity blissfully with mine and to experience mine therein, and to be strong and perfect so that I in turn would satisfy him perfectly. (McGinn 2006, 103)

Whether it is about savoring the sweet fleshy taste of the Eucharist, or prolonging physical states so painful that they are euphoric (“desire while dying and die while desiring”), there is undeniably an extreme eroticism to the devotions of Christian women mystics: they want to sustain these sensations. Etymologically, the words “passion” and “compassion” are linked to the Latin terms *passionem*, “to endure” and *com* “together with” or “in combination.” We can thus think of Christ’s Passion, coupled with the endurance displayed by these women mystics throughout their extreme ascetical practices (starvation, self flagellation, etc.) as a kind of compassion or unified suffering. Accordingly, the goal for these mystical “masochists” is not simply to feel the physical pain or the existential pangs of this life, but rather to endure and bear them—not with “patience and dignity,” as the Franciscan way encourages, but instead by taking pleasure in this pain and consequently inverting another hierarchy, namely, an affective one. The Franciscans teach us to feel suffering with patience and dignity, or perhaps not at all. Women mystics, on the other hand, encourage feeling as a mode of thinking and spiritual reflection: they ask us to embrace the body, perhaps not in a manner we can consider conventionally dignified, patient, or silent, but instead to moan about in embodied euphoria.
VI. Conclusions

As most medieval women, and therefore medieval women mystics, spoke only in the vernacular, they had male scribes record their reflections on their mystical experiences, or, in some cases, the mystical experiences as they were happening. For example, consider Angela of Foligno’s brother scribe and especially the care he took to distance himself from her experience, as it makes for an interesting side note to this project. He writes:

I, friar scribe, did not take much trouble to write about the sixth step of the multiple sufferings, both through bodily ills and unnumbered torments of soul and body stirred up by many demons in a horrible way. I was not able to note down the many stories in writing that I understood would have been worthwhile and useful. But I have tried to write, just as I heard from her mouth, some little bit of the words of Christ’s faithful love about what she suffered and the testimony she bore. I do this as a hasty sketch, because I cannot understand enough to write down a full account. (McGinn 2006, 375)

Why he “cannot understand” or “was not able to note” everything is accounted for by the fact that Angela believed her struggles to be somewhat beyond comprehension, but Friar Scribe’s incomprehension is useful, nonetheless, to the juxtaposition of male and female mystics that this paper has put forth. He literally takes what she describes as indescribable and tries to turn it into something comprehensible. Even if it is at Angela’s request that her experiences be scribed and shared, there is still something beautiful about the incomprehensibly of her experiences; to comprehend Angela of Foligno, then, seems to require a kind of thinking through feeling rather than reading or writing. These female mystical raptures point to a certain kind of knowledge or exposure to the Divine, which many people, as evidenced by their scribes (often, if not always, men), did not have immediate access to. To comprehend their experiences is to live them—to feel them—in and through the body.

The insistence of disembodiment and the denunciation of all things material that seems to underscore many modern fundamentalist theories of Christianity should not lead us to think that things were always, or will continue to be, that way. Instead, the mystics, especially women mystics, challenge this claim and give an account of Christianity wherein the body is not denounced, but is instead central to humanity’s connection with the Divine. Though one might simply dismiss (as people did and some perhaps still do) these women as hysterical, insane, and unnatural insofar as they speak of hallucinations and delusions, a rigorously feminist scholarship does not. Women mystics ask us to recover the body and lived experience; they present us with a philosophy of feeling and their texts make fruitful contributions to feminist theories and philosophy classrooms today. To tell their stories and to take seriously the philosophical consequences of these narratives is to tell the history of the oppressed, subordinated, and forgotten. The woman mystic confronts the “problem” of the body and asks a significant question: what the hell should we do with it?
Notes

1. Catherine of Sienna, Angelino of Foligno, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Claire of Assis, Margaret of Ypres, Agnes and Lukardis, etc.

2. For autobiographical details of St. Francis I am also drawing on lecture notes from my time studying under Professor John Caruana in Florence, Italy. I would also like to thank Professor Anthony Paul Smith for our discussions on Francis and the Dominicans.

3. This was also referenced in lectures on the life of Saint Francis by Professor John Caruana.

4. This is not to say that men were more intellectual than women, but the point is merely to highlight a difference in their work and mystical experiences, a difference that has been noted before.

5. I would like to thank Professor Simon Critchley for bringing this point to my attention.

6. I recognize the philosophical implications of a term like “nothingness” but all I mean here is to stress the point that Porete seeks radical negation, she wants to cut up herself as well as God into pieces so small that they become indistinguishable.

7. Thank you to Professor Anthony Paul Smith for bringing this to my attention and for our discussions.

Works Cited


SARAH CLAIRMONT is an MA candidate in the philosophy program at the New School for Social Research in New York. Originally from Toronto, she came to New York with the intention to work with philosopher and professor Simon Critchley on a larger project that explores the intersection of philosophy and theology, specifically, embodiment. This idea was marked by her time in Florence, Italy, when studying under professor John Caruana, and upon her seeing the head of woman mystic, patron saint, and incorruptible, Saint Catherine of Sienna—flesh preserved. This paper is a foundational piece to this project.
In this text I elaborate the possibility of creating feminine subjectivities parting from one of Luce Irigaray's least known books: Passions élémentaires. I start by talking about style which in this book is inextricably linked to content. I then discuss different themes from Passions élémentaires and how they contribute to the creation of alternative femininities. In the last part of this text I assess relevant critiques of Irigaray's work.

Pourquoi m’exhaster dans ton monde alors que, déjà, je vis ailleurs. (Irigaray 1982, 41)

Why seek ecstasy in your world when I already live elsewhere. (Irigaray 1992, 34)

Luce Irigaray lets us experience another world. A world that is not other, but ours. A world that is lost, forgotten, erased. She presents a universe that is not outer but already inside of us. A world that we have always carried at the inner depths of our being. In Passions élémentaires, Irigaray talks about the rediscovery of this world, where a woman, I-woman, is walking alongside the memories of her own past, rediscovering a universe that has fallen into the untouchable oblivion of masculine thought. Irigaray tells us the story of a woman in search of her-self, an impossible being. For Irigaray, woman does not exist, but at the same time, she finds herself everywhere, in us. The/A woman exists in the same way as the roots of a flower exist: they are there but we cannot see them. I-woman in Passions élémentaires is singular in the same way as a root is singular, always-already attached to others, always-already rhizomatic. In this text, we will follow I-woman in search of her-self through a number of images that reoccur in Passions élémentaires. I have used these images to discuss the possibility of creating alternative femininities, in order to elaborate a feminine transcendency that is always-already located in between nature, body, and sky. I will start by discussing ways to approach Passions élémentaires in order to open up a discussion on the importance of style for feminist writing, a central theme throughout this text. I will then discuss how images of nature and corporeality allow us to elaborate a feminine subjectivity. In the last part of this essay, I will discuss how Irigaray’s specific style of writing makes us think differently about the development of alternative feminine subjectivities. I argue that the alternative form elaborated in Irigaray’s texts offers openness in regards to content; her writing deconstructs the boundaries between form and content, thus offering not only new ways of reading and writing, but also of being and of being-in-relation.
I. Ways of reading

I am reading *Passions élémentaires* again and again. Hélène Cixous said in her seminar at the Maison Heinrich Heine in the spring of 2013 that when you read, you do not think, you do not analyze. If you analyze, if you think, you are not reading. I am not thinking, I assure you. I am perceiving, feeling, reading.

When one writes, one does not think? “Are you writing, Anaïs?” I always say no. I call this breathing. I forget I write every day” (Nin 1996, 122). Hélène Cixous said in another session of the same seminar that she was always equally surprised when she heard Derrida talk about his own writing. He said that what he managed to put on paper was always only a small part of what he carried in his head. Cixous’s experiences were the opposite; her head is, she explained, always completely empty when she starts to write, her writing emerges while writing. It is thus the hand rather than the head that writes. It is our milk—the white ink of mother-milk, our tears, the moon, our bodies, the night—the black ink of the writing of Clarice Lispector—that constitutes our writing, rather than ideas, thoughts, our analysis.

At first, impossible to write. I know only reading, perceiving, feeling. Cixous says in writing on Lispector: “Maintenant je vais changer de ton, pour parler un peu plus froidement de cette étincelle divine” (Cixous 1989, 128). “Now I’m going to change my tone, in order to talk in a more distant manner about this divine flash” (My translation). So will I. I sit down, I conform, I start to think. I think and I write, I thematize. I begin and I’ll begin again, still reading, always feeling.

1. Poetic-readings

Entends-moi, entends le silence. Ce dont je te parle n’est jamais ce dont je te parle mais autre chose. Capte cette chose qui m’échappe et dont pourtant je vis et je suis à la surface d’une obscurité brillante. (Lispector 1973, 25)

Listen to me, listen to the silence. What I’m saying to you is never what I’m saying to you, but something else. Understand that which escapes me, and of which I live, at the surface of a shining darkness. (My translation)

How does one read a text that resists classification? How does one resist classifying it? How does one stay faithful to a text while reading it? How does one stay close? The question of how to read is easily asked while reading a text that finds itself between disciplines. Reading Luce Irigaray’s book from 1982, *Passions élémentaires*, I ask myself this question continuously. *Passions élémentaires* is a poetic text: not to ruin its flow, I have read it poetically. I have thus not (only) read it as a theoretical text, but I have rather tried to follow its own rhythm while reading. I have engaged with this text as in conversation rather than having treated it as a passive object to be interpreted. Instead of imposing a traditional structure on this text, I have followed
the paths that this other universe offers; as write Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen, the authors of Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Elemental Passions:

The reader cannot simply ‘consume’ her books but is made to participate in them by engaging with the allusions and free associations. (…) As such, it is a performative text, not merely a descriptive one; and although this makes any interpretation necessarily unstable and incomplete, it also enables creative engagement. (Canter and Jantzen 2005, 54-55)

Writing poetically makes it possible for Irigaray to discuss a subject without burdening it with words that are too invested in phallogocentric language. Irigaray often breaks syntax and grammar to create new words, to make us perceive the images that she produces to accompany that which she wants to make visible. In the words of Margaret Whitford:

The elements allow Irigaray to speak of the female body, of its morphology, and of the erotic, while avoiding the dominant sexual metaphoricity which is scopic and organized around the male gaze; she can speak of it instead in terms of space ad thresholds and fluids, fire and water, air and earth, without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it. (Whitford 1991, 62)

In this quotation, Whitford is speaking of Irigaray’s style. Since the writing of Irigaray is performative and not only descriptive, Irigaray inhabits the qualities of the subject that she is addressing. Talking about the female body, which for her is fluid and multiple, her writing becomes fluid and multiple. Passions élémentaires is one example where this performative writing emerges. The poetical writing of Irigaray is also a writing that accepts that feminine experience is located beyond comprehension; that it is not possible to describe. Her writing talks about femininity exactly as Whitford describes, “without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it.” Feminine experience thus finds itself between silence and speech, between the said and the non-said:

I compose my books as if I were able to speak silently; that is, I always create a counterpoint between speech [la parole] and silence. (Hirsh and Olson 1995, 101)

Reading Irigaray poetically is thus a reading that locates itself between silence and speech, beyond the compulsion of complete comprehension. It is also a reading that resists interpretation, in the words of Susan Sontag: “to put silence into poems and to reinstate the magic of the word, has escaped from the rough grip of interpretation” (Sontag 1964, 10).

In her text Poetic Nuptials, Judith Still establishes that the writing of Irigaray demands new ways of reading: one has to invest oneself corporeally in order to read her. Passions élémentaires demands more than our capacity to critique; it demands
our bodies. It is therefore not possible to read Passions élémentaires as one reads a theoretical text. If one distances oneself from the text, no exchange will be made between the reader and the author. Judith Still calls her own way of reading Irigaray poetic nuptials:

Poetic nuptials are an alternative to ways of reading such as critique which demand a particular distance between what become subject and object. Poetic nuptials would take place as if between (at least) two subjects, and lead us on to consider intersubjective relations in general outside any text in the narrow sense of the term. (Still 2002, 1)

Concerning the style of Irigaray, Whitford says: “One can see Irigaray’s own ‘poetic’ writing as attempts to mobilize a possible other (female) imaginary” (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 52). Reading Irigaray is thus always an exercise in not reproducing the gap between what is considered form and what is considered content; in Passions élémentaires, form is always-already content.

I stay close to be able to touch the text and I create space to be able to move with the text. Reading as conversation is also reading with equal respect for silence and for words; it is following the natural rhythm of breath, thus recognizing the circular movements of our bodies in relation to the text.

II. Still natural-corporeal

She finds herself everywhere all the time, in all times, in all directions. She must thus be represented at the same time, in all the times simultaneously, to stay true to her being. She is not yet; still being born, still giving birth. She is here and not here, simultaneously place and non-place. She moves while staying at the same place, this place without contours; she is these contours without place, this circumference without centre. She is the origin of the world, the original source of life, although she is not, yet. At the same time the most ancient and the least stable, at the same time eternal and temporal: she is woman, I-woman.

2. Opening

‘Elemental Passions offers some fragments from a woman’s voyage as she goes in the quest of her identity in love. It is no longer a man in quest of his Grail, his God, his path, his identity through the vicissitudes of his life’s journey, it is a woman. Between nature and culture, between night and day, between sun and the stars, between vegetable and mineral, amongst men, amongst women, amongst gods, she seeks her humanity and her transcendency. Such a journey is not without its trials.’ (Canters and Jantzen Forever, 52)

Luce Irigaray
In this quotation, Irigaray gives us an idea of her thoughts on *Passions élémentaires*. Passions élémentaires is one of Irigaray’s least-known texts. The only book I have found that discusses it at length is Canters and Jantzen’s *Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Elemental Passions*. Passions élémentaires is thus surrounded by very few texts that offer help in interpreting Irigaray’s allusive, elusive language. It is also possibly because of this language that the book has received little attention. It is written in a highly feminine style, and unlike her two other element books, *Amante marine* de Friedrich Nietzsche and *L’Oubli de l’air* - chez Martin Heidegger, which are also poetical works, *Passions élémentaires* is not directly related to a canonized male philosopher. Considering the reception of the oeuvre of Irigaray, one can argue that the books that have received the most attention are her critical books: early works such as *Speculum de l’autre femme* and *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*. *Passions élémentaires* has possibly received less attention by Irigaray scholars because it is highly feminine, because it does not conform to a masculine conception of what theory looks like, and because it is a creative rather than critical work, leading us to consider whether “‘femino-phobia’ is alive and well, even among feminists,” as argues Rosi Braidotti. (Braidotti 2002, 29). Irigaray teaches us to reject false divisions based upon false dualisms. One such division, often considered insurmountable, is the one installed between Irigaray and queer theory. Lynne Huffer discusses this (non) relation in her text “Weird Greek Sex: Rethinking Ethics in Irigaray” (Tzelepis and Athanasiou 2010,119-134). For Huffer, several paradoxes constitute the reception of the work of Michel Foucault in a queer context, in relation to the reception of the work of Irigaray in the same context. Huffer explains these paradoxes in the following way:

(T)he queer disinterest in Irigaray’s work is not, in fact, symmetrically mirrored by any feminist dismissal of Foucault. To be sure, many feminists have criticized the gender bias and the gender blindness of Foucault’s oeuvre, but some thinkers continue to find in Foucault a useful framework for understanding gender inequality as a particular kind of subjugating discursive formation. In other words, Foucault is very much on the feminist radar screen, while the inverse for Irigaray and queer theory is not the case. Obviously enough, like the queer-feminist divide, the division between Foucault and Irigaray is asymmetrical, repeating the falsely symmetrical, specular structure identified by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* as the exclusionary logic undergirding Western thought. In this sense, Irigaray herself becomes, in relation to queer theory, another version of the maternal feminine: queer theory’s excluded other, its silent and invisible ground. (Huffer 2010, 120)

Irigaray’s thinking has always been present within queer theory and she has nourished its development in the work of theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler. However, Irigaray is rarely recognized as a source of inspiration for queer theory as Foucault is. She thus becomes, as states Huffer, inert ground, the eternal destiny for women.

*Passions élémentaires* is a small book divided into fifteen chapters, in which we encounter the voice of a woman, *I-woman*, who tries to keep a dialogue with her interlocutor, *you-man*. It is not a chronologically structured text, nor does it follow a strict narrative; it is rather a highly allusive poetic work that presents images
from a woman’s journey. I have organized my reading of *Passions élémentaires* around two themes: *nature* and *body*. These images are not easily distinguished from one another. Because Irigaray’s writing is highly fluid, they “flow over into one another,” (Canter and Jantzen 2005, 5) to cite Jantzen and Canter. I have chosen these images to introduce aspects of Irigaray’s work that are under-theorized among Irigaray scholars and overlooked in feminist theory in a larger sense. Irigaray offers alternative ways to reconsider concepts such as *nature* that hold particularly convoluted positions within feminist theory. I wish that these images will show the width of the political project of Irigaray, as well as to offer new ways to attack concepts that I think of as central for contemporary feminist thought.

3. Natural

Et tu veux me faire fleur ? J’ai aussi des racines à partir desquelles je puis fleurir. La terre, l’eau, l’air, le feu, sont aussi mon partage. Pourquoi les quitter pour que tu me les redonnes, appropriées par toi. Pourquoi m’extasier dans ton monde alors que, déjà, je vis ailleurs. (...) Avant de te connaître, déjà j’étais fleur. Faut-il que je l’oublie pour devenir ta fleur ? (Irigaray 1982, 41)

You want to make me into a flower? I also have roots and from them I could flower. Earth, water, air and fire are my birthright too. Why abandon them to let you appropriate them and give them back to me. Why seek ecstasy in your world when I already live elsewhere. (...) Before I knew you, already I was a flower. Must I forget that, to become your flower?” (Irigaray 1992, 34)

Nature is germinating in *Passions élémentaires*. We find flowers, water, sap, plants and roots. We find a becoming-plant, we listen to flower-thoughts and we experience vegetal-love. We rediscover the *sensible-transcendental* in the non-schism of the sap, or mucous, running along the tree, or *I-woman*, who is about to reconstruct the history of her own past. She is always-already nature, as is *you-man*, but he continuously fails to recognize it. We will begin by turning toward Irigaray’s images of nature, characterized by an ambiguity between woman and flower, to be able to examine more closely its, or her, petals and roots.7

Petals

The authors of *Forever Fluid* establish that the petals in *Passions élémentaires* are, like the lips in Irigaray’s writing, an image for the female body. The petals of the flower are always simultaneously attached and separated, they are at once many and one, and they are touching, perpetually. The petals, like lips in Irigaray, are constituted by their own movement. As Canter and Jantzen explain: “[…] if lips were held constantly open, talking would be impossible: we are only able to speak because our lips move together, opening and closing. (Canter and Jantzen 2005, 108).

Flowers close and open in cyclical movements that contest the linearity of masculine
thought. \textit{You-man} watches the flower and reads it departing from himself, from his own logic, while \textit{I-woman-flower} is confronted with his gaze, his expectations, and she senses the conflict:

\begin{quote}
Veux-tu la fleur une seule fois ouverte ? (...) Le refermement de la fleur dans la nuit, son mouvement de repli en elle-même, n’y aurait pas lieu. (...) Son devenir serait arrêté dans sa révélation diurne par toi. Croissance extasiée dans cette floraison idéale pour toi. (Irigaray 1982, 38)
\end{quote}

Do you want the flower to open only once? The flower closing again in the night, her movement of folding herself in does not take place. Her becoming would be arrested in her daily revelation by you. Growth suspended in ecstasy, the ideal flowering for you." (Translation modified, from Irigaray 1992, 38)

He wants the flower to bloom; he wants his idea of the flower to correspond perfectly with the flower itself. She has to change her rhythm and stay forever open for him, for his gaze, and thus limit her movements, her closings and openings. According to Dorothea Olkowski, these two positions, being looked at and looking, corresponds to the visible and the invisible sphere. We will now turn to our ancestors, Demeter and Persephone, in examining more closely these two spheres.

Olkowski tells us the story of Kore/Persephone in her text “Kore—Philosophy, Sensibility, and the Diffraction of Light,” (Tzelepis and Athanasiou 2010, Chapter 3) while traversing the visible and invisible spheres. Olkowski begins her text at the field of flowers which Kore is crossing the day of her abduction by Hades. Kore is walking and starts looking at a flower: “...it was a narcissus, so overwhelming, so seductive, [...] a flower begging to be picked” (Olkowski 2010, 33). Kore is watching the narcissus, a flower known for its connection to the gaze, and she is thus, for Olkowski, about to look at the one who is looking: “For if to look at and to pick a narcissus is to look at and to pick the act of looking, it is to see it and through seeing, to understand” (Olkowski 2010, 34). Kore is thus walking on a field of flowers, stopping to pick a narcissus that enchants her, when the ground opens under her feet and she is swallowed by the underworld. Olkowski uses this story to talk about the prohibition that keeps girls from acquiring knowledge, a prohibition that prevents them from possessing the gaze and thus allows them only to be looked at:

\begin{quote}
For Persephone-Kore, for this girl, understanding was, at the beginning, denied. Wandering alone on a sunny morning amid clusters of blossoms; Kore stops to look. Precisely at the moment when she reaches out to pluck the flower, precisely at the edge of her own look at the act of looking, at the edge of understanding through seeing, the earth opens and she is taken away by an unseen power to a dark, invisible place. Is this not the fate of many young girls? In the full light of the sun, at the very instant when they begin to look at the act of looking, on the verge of seeing and of coming to understand through sight, are they not also swept away by some unseeable power, a power that sees itself in them but which they cannot see? And unlike Persephone-Kore, most do not return. (Olkowski 2010, 34)
\end{quote}
According to Irigaray, this event constitutes the way that masculine culture destroys the language of the girl: “I think the most destructive thing in our culture (mythology says the same thing, in Kora’s [Proserpina’s] abduction by the god of the underworld) is the loss of the little girl’s questions, her discourse. Even more than that of the mother, the little girl’s discourse is destroyed” (Hirsh and Olson 1995, 109). Men-Hades occupies the invisible sphere, a position from which they can control the gaze. Girl-flowers on the other hand do not possess the gaze, and are therefore left to dwell in the visible sphere. If, as Olkowski argues, knowledge is what is acquired through looking, then girls are systematically bereaved from acquiring knowledge since they are not allowed access to the invisible sphere from which looking is made accessible.

Kore is violently separated from her field of flowers, from the visible world, and at the same time or in another time, I-woman is beginning to discover her own history. She is realizing that the only possible way out of the world of you-man is retracing paths already taken. She thus turns back and into herself, following her own roots, to dwell in her own underworld. I-woman-flower seeks to escape you-man’s gaze by closing herself, by drawing herself back. She is escaping the homogenizing light of day by turning to her own sparkling night, she rediscoveres herself in her own darkness, next to her own roots, far from Hades’ hell: “Si elle n’en meurt pas tout à fait, c’est qu’elle reste encore sous terre. Que, dans l’obscurité, elle subsiste” (Irigaray 1982, 39). “If she does not completely perish, it is because she still rests underground. That in obscurity, she remains” (My translation). It is thus to this, to her, underworld that we turn next.

**Roots**

*I-woman* is about to rediscover herself through her own history, following her own roots. Realizing that the dichotomies and the categories imposed by you-man don’t correspond to her being, she exclaims: “Pour qui l’amour et la pensée se vivent-ils comme avènements différents ?” (Irigaray 1982, 41). “For who are love and thought experienced as different creations?” (My translation). She is thinking, but unlike you-man, her thinking is not linear; rather, she is growing toward different directions simultaneously, she is cyclic rather than logic. While realizing that she is blooming only for him, she withers, and to regain her strength, her own gaze, she escapes the blinding light of his day. In the underground she reunites with her own roots, and she relies upon her night vision, touch: “Pourquoi ce qui nous éclaire ne serait-il la nuit de notre jouissance ? [...] Le visuel n’étant plus notre seul guide” (Irigaray 1982, 46). “Why should we not be illuminated by the night of our jouissance?... For sight is no longer our only guide” (Irigaray 1992, 37).

In the third chapter of her book *Le grand théâtre du genre*, Anne Emmanuelle Berger analyzes visibility and invisibility while discussing the question of sexual difference in the United States and in France (Berger 2013). She shows how sexual difference in the hands of Jacques Derrida becomes invisible as text. The imperceptible is also extremely present in thinking the development of feminine subjectivities in Irigaray’s writing. We listen thus to the voice of *I-woman*: 
Imperceptiblement, je te ramène, te laissant croire que, seul, tu connais le chemin. En silence, je te parle pour que tu t’ouvres à ma voix. Et je te sauve, parfois, d’arrachements inutiles, te précédant dans ta démarche. Mimant, sans mot dire, ton prochain pas. T’évitant le pire? (Irigaray 1982, 13)

Imperceptibly, I wind you in, letting you believe that you know the way on your own. I speak to you in silence so that you open up to my voice. And, sometimes, I save you from useless torment, going before you on your way. Miming, without speaking a word, your next step. Protecting you from the worst? (Irigaray 1992, 12)

*I-woman* is beginning to understand, appropriating for herself a knowledge that women have always been denied. She understands that she is different from *you-man*, that she has a history and that *you-man* has forgotten his own. She is making accessible her own history through her body; *you-man* on the other hand is incapable of acknowledging his history because he does not recognize his own corporeality. *I-woman* begins to critique *you-man* for not recognizing her, for not realizing that she is his genesis:

Sais-tu que tu répètes ainsi, aussi en moi, la fleur que je t’ai déjà donnée. Qui t’es déjà apparue, mais sans jamais devenir visible. Enfouie dans le fond de ta mémoire, tu tentes indéfiniment de la ressaisir. De la redessiner. Mais cette remémoration de moi, qui n’est que tienne, tu la réimplantes entre ma terre et sa fleur. (Irigaray 1982, 42)

Do you know that you are thus repeating, also in me, the flower that I have already given you. That has already appeared without ever becoming visible. Buried at the back of your memory, you attempt boundlessly to recapture it. To redesign it. But this remembrance of me, that is only yours, you are reimplanting it between my ground and its flower. (My translation)

He is appropriating *I-woman’s* body, treating it as *matière inerte*, or inert matter (Irigaray 1982, 43). He takes that which she has already created with her invisible threads, reinstating it in a form that is his, ruining at the same time the imperceptible connection between her ground and her flower. In the story of *you-man* and *I-woman* we are experiencing the systematic appropriation of women’s work by men. For *you-man*, *I-woman* is a part of his body, and never has she been anything else. Her history also belongs to him, he is imposing, planting his homogenous structure—the hyper-visible logic of the One—on top of the imperceptible difference that she is trying to create; he suffocates all intervals that she is seeking to maintain. He is all, and she is this sex which is not one; a sex which is not at all: “Et tu t’ériges : je suis. Tel, l’être. Et qui ne dispose de quoi contenir la force, n’est pas. Hors de toi, le néant” (Irigaray 1982, 16). “And you rise: I am. Such is the being. And they who do not use that which contains strength, do not exist. Outside of you, nothingness” (My translation). *I-woman* has thus started to resist the being that he is, that she has also had to share, to discover how to be otherwise, other, elsewhere.
4. Corporeal

Covering up the original cover amounts to covering the original and actual process of all production, including the production of ideas. (Berger 2010, 65)

We have seen how man creates his world upon oblivion, on a forgotten past; that he has erected his story of parricide to cover up the precedent and even more ancient matricide.8 We will now turn to another masculine oblivion, the one that constitutes his relationship to his own body. We will examine this obliteration of origin through images of skin and envelopes. We will then follow *I-woman* in her rediscovering of her body through her cavities, holes, and placenta.

**Skin, envelopes**

Propriétaire, ta peau est dure. Un corps est une prison dès qu’il se replie en un tout. (Irigaray 1982, 20)

Propriétoir, your skin is hard. A body is a prison as soon as it takes the shape of a whole. (My translation)

Ton corps est ma prison. (Irigaray 1982, 17)

Your body is my prison. (My translation)

Cette enveloppe, sa première maison vivante, n’a pas encore la consistance tranchée d’une peau. Elle s’habite de l’intérieur d’une peau. Cette première demeure de chair sera à jamais perdue. Il restera à jamais enfermé dans sa peau. (Irigaray 1982, 17)

This envelope, her first living house, does not yet have the fractured consistency of skin. She is living inside of a skin. This first dwelling of flesh will never be lost. He will always stay closed in her skin. (My translation)

In *Passions élémentaires*, skin and envelopes are both shell-like figures, but their respective essence differs. We will begin this section where we left off in talking about flowers, in the totalitarian universe of the One. For *you-man*, skin functions as a limit, and he needs this limit to be able to define his being. Since he has proclaimed himself the One, the being, nothing can exist outside of him. *I-woman* is swallowed, he has included her in his being, in her words: “Je participe de ton sujet. Et de toutes ses déterminations” (Irigaray 1982, 56). “I contribute to your subject. And to all of its determinations” (My translation). Here, we are experiencing the enduring distinction between form and content where *you-man* is form, drawing the limits, deciding what to include in, and what to exclude from, his being. The only way that *I-woman* can exist is to exist for him, as Rebecca Hill argues: “Woman is only insofar as she functions as the immobile limit for man-embryo” (Hill 2012, 60). He is neglecting the idea that once he has been enveloped by another, in a house where he was not the master. As witnesses *I-woman*:
J’étais ta maison. Et, quand tu pars et plus n’habites ce lieu, je ne sais que faire de mes murs. Ai-je jamais eu autre corps que celui que tu m’as construit à ton idée? Ai-je jamais éprouvé autre peau que celle que tu me voulais pour demeure? (Irigaray 1982, 60)

I was your house. And when you leave, when you no longer live here, I do not know what to do with my walls. Have I ever had another body than the one that you have constructed for me in your thought? Have I ever experienced another skin then the one you wished for me as your dwelling? (My translation)

In the same way as the petals of the flower are constructed by his gaze, the body of I-woman is created by his thought. Man is form, which means that woman is content: “Tu avais la forme, je te servais de matière” (Irigaray 1982, 73). "You had form, I was matter for you” (Irigaray 1992, 60). She equips him with skin, houses, walls, envelopes, everything that he needs to exist:

Tu m’encerces en maison, famille. Murs décisifs, définitifs. Déplaçant, déportant ainsi ce que tu n’as pas eu ? L’enveloppe souple d’un corps. La peau d’un vivant. Ce que tu n’auras pas eu… (Irigaray 1982, 30)

You encircle me in a family home. Decisive and definite walls. Transporting, deporting thus that which you have never had? The supple envelope of a body. The skin of a living. That which you have not had… (My translation)

I-woman is realizing that you-man has forgotten where he came from: “Déjà tu recommences à oublier. Tu continues d’oublier” (Irigaray 1982, 16). “Already you continue to forget. You are made of oblivion” (My translation). She feels the constraining rigidity of his skin and begins to move. As the flower, I-woman can’t resist mobility; she cannot be kept from moving. Her being is movement:

Seule, je retrouve ma mouvance. Le mouvement est mon habiter. Je n’ai de repos que dans la mobilité. Qui m’impose un toit, m’épuise. Laisse-moi aller où je ne suis pas encore. (Irigaray 1982, 30)

Alone, I rediscover my movement. It is in movement that I dwell. I cannot rest but in mobility. The one that imposes on me a roof drains me out. Let me go where I have not yet arrived. (My translation)

Unlike those of her interlocutor, I-woman’s limits are fluid. You-man needs rigidity since fluidity frightens him: “Man’s violations and appropriations of woman-place emanate from his unconscious fear of the flowing interval, which betrays the man-embryo’s dependence on the maternal-feminine” (Hill 2012, 62). He is denying his origin to escape taking it into account in his becoming-subject. Therefore, everything that reminds him of this fluid genesis, such as hollowness or mucus, has to be erased.

The point of departure for I-woman is different from that of you-man, and so is that of her becoming-subject. I-woman might be form, but if she is form then the form that she is does not resemble the form that you-man has given her. Form for her is not hard, fixed or stable: “...woman is both place and the very unravelling of place,” (Hill
2012, 58) states Hill, concluding, “[w]oman is place for herself” (Hill 2012, 59). I am here talking about form as place where the dualism of content/form collapses, where, as in the interval, the sensible-transcendental manifests itself.

*I-woman* might have limits, but those limits are not characterized by the rigidity that defines *you-man*’s skin. She does not define herself using his concepts, but she does not neglect the importance of definitions, either. *I-woman* has a shell, but it resembles more an envelope than skin. She is enveloped by a suppleness that adapts after her movements and that change with her. Following Hill, we will now discover how woman is for herself, asking: what is her form?

Holes, cavities, placenta

Leur plaisir et leur crainte—les trous. En dessous, au-dessus, entre. Ils construisent ou déconstruisent sur, sous, autour, le long de, à travers, entre... des trous. (Irigaray 1982, 82)

Their pleasure and their fear—holes. Below, above, in-between. They construct or deconstruct on, under, around, along, across, between... holes. (Irigaray 1992, 67)

Tu me remplissais de tes vides. Tu me comblais par tes manques. Forte d’y apporter remède, je t’apportais ce que j’ai de plus précieux : mes creux. C’est toi qui devenais béant, moi pleine. (Irigaray 1982, 74)

You filled me with your vacancies. You replenished me with your lacks. To skillfully bring you remedy, I brought you that which was most precious to me: my cavities. It is you that became wide open, I complete. (My translation)

*I-woman* finds herself next to herself. She realizes that she has qualities of her own, and sometimes she even feels the possibility of being differently with *you-man*. *I-woman* is content since she has never erected walls between her self and her origin; she is also form, as the interior and exterior do not differ for her. She is not obligated to construct a world outside of herself, as is *you-man*. The world constructed by *you-man* is created through using his body as material, and in denying his maternal origin he becomes empty, he is thus in need of an external world to give him meaning. He detaches himself “pour constituer l’identité d’un sujet toujours métaphysique” (Irigaray 1982, 107). “to constitute the identity of a subject that is always meta-physic” (My translation). She, *I-woman*, brings him her cavities to cure his amnesia of origin.

We have seen that *you-man* is the One, everything, and we have heard *I-woman* talk about herself as full, as whole, but what constitutes the difference between these two wholes? *I-woman* accuses *you-man* of being empty and wide-open. For her, he is constituted by loss, but what is the difference between their respective holes?
Mais, quand je pars, dans ton horizon il y a un manque. Dans ta peau, un trou. Si je me soustrais à ta consommation, tu découvres un ouvert que tu ne connaissais pas. Une bouche que tu ne souçonnais pas. Un appel sans voix. Un besoin sans intention, sans direction vers. Ton tout s’écroule, s’écoule, dans un rien de désignable. Ce n’est même pas la nuit. Ta nuit. Ce là d’où tu me prends - l’ombilic de ton corps. De ton monde. Ce là que tu ne vois ni ne perçois. D’où tu ne me vois, ne me perçois plus. (Irigaray 1982, 19-20)

But, when I leave, in your horizon there is a lack. In your skin, a hole. If I subtract myself from your accomplishment, you will discover an opening that you did not know of. A mouth that you had not expected. A calling without voice. A need without intention, without direction toward. Your everything collapses, flows away into something unrecognizable. It is not even the night. Your night. This place from where you take me—the navel of your body. Of your world. This place that you do not see nor perceive. From where you no longer see nor perceive me. (My translation)

Even though his origin is inscribed on his body, you-man does not see it; he does not recognize his own navel. He, like her, also has holes, one in the middle of his body given to him by I-woman when she left him. To continue to forget his origin, you-man substitutes language for his body, a paternal language preoccupied with naming the world. He names to create distance between himself and that which he designates, he names to dominate: “Le nom propre, et même déjà le prénom, sont toujours en décalage par rapport à cette trace d’identité la plus irréductible : la cicatrice de la coupure du cordon” (Irigaray 1987, 26). “The proper name, and already the first name, is always in deviation with this the most irreducible trace of identity: the scar from the cutting of the umbilical cord” (My translation). Irigaray states that: “La femme parle toujours avec la mère, l’homme parle en son absence” (Irigaray 1982, 113). “Woman always talks with the mother, man talks in her absence” (My translation). The fundamental difference between their beings is thus that everything that she does is in accordance with her self, with her history and body. Everything that he does is artificial, in neglect of his body and history. She creates herself through relations, whereas he creates himself through divisions. He cuts the umbilical cord to forget the body at the other end: “Le père interdit le corps-à-corps avec la mère” (Irigaray 1982, 26). “The father is forbidding the bodily encounter with the mother” (My translation). She is trying, on the other hand, to reconstruct this hollow thread connected to her mother. In other words, their (w)holes differ concerning their different relations to memory and amnesia.

Irigaray describes in Passions élémentaires how I-woman holds a privileged position related to the creation of a world where difference is constituted on a non-hierarchical relation. The woman in this book always finds herself at the margins, she can exist, but only in the form that you-man decides. This decentralized position, at the margins of the phallogocentrique order, makes it possible for her to perceive its structure. You-man as centre becomes blind of the borders that are surrounding him. As says
Irigaray concerning her method in *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*: “J’essayerais peut-être de le renverser, mais j’y resterais incluse. Je vais plutôt m’efforcer—car on ne peut simplement sauter hors de ce discours—de me situer à ses frontières et de passer, sans arrêt, du dedans au dehors” (Irigaray 1977, 121). “Maybe I was trying to subvert it, but I remain within it. I will rather exert myself—since one cannot simply jump out of this discourse—to situate myself at its borders and to pass, without stop, from within to the outside” (My translation).

As the flower, Irigaray also moves perpetually back and forth over the borders raised by a logic that is not hers. Woman has no specific place in the phallogocentric order to develop her own femininity, she is omnipresent, she carries, like a snail, her house with(in) her:


Around them, placentas that they don’t want to leave. Between us, one for the other, we are placentary. This uniformity with the first dwelling, we are sharing it without ever shredding, cutting or scattering it in parts. We live one for the other, without confines. We are living outside. That which does not return to the emptiness of absence. Where we are, place is taking place. Before every other architecture than the one of our living bodies. (My translation)

It is in her own body that she finds her place, in her living skin, in her supple envelope, in her cavities and holes, in her body that is touching, continually. Her corporeal landscape is thus always-already decentralized.

For Irigaray, the most important and most archaic element is the earth, which is related to touch, the sense that precedes all other senses. We have already seen how woman digs through the soil where her roots are in order to find herself, a place where touch/the tactile replaces the gaze: “Du plus intime du muqueux au plus lointain du céleste et du transcendant, du plus charnel au plus divin, tout a lieu grâce au tact” (Irigaray 1982, back cover). “From the most intimate of mucus to the most distant and celestial and transcendental, and from the most carnal to the utterly divine, everything takes place through tact/the tactile” (My translation). Touch is fundamental for understanding her being, always-already present in her petals, lips, placenta. Woman, understood as plural, not-one, always touches herself; she remains placentary, as she is incapable of distinguishing her origin from her present. Thus, she is always touching upon the womb, the original matrix. But, as Rebecca Hill shows, woman also carries in herself the interval; she is no longer glued to matter:
Irigaray invokes the placenta as a threshold between the mother and the embryo. While this place is intimately related to the uterine mucosa of the mother’s body, the placenta remains separate from it. Woman is no longer collapsible into place. (Hill 2012, 69)

The placenta thus works as a mediator between mother-embryo, and it is not only this, it is also alive. The placenta is an active “negotiator” between mother and embryo:

[T]he placenta ‘negotiates’ a relationship between the embryo, which is in part foreign (half of its genes are paternal), and the maternal body. The mother’s body ‘recognizes’ and accepts the placenta and the growing embryo as other within herself. (Hill 2012, 69)

The body of the woman accepts that the embryo and the placenta occupy her; she accepts them as parts of herself. They can therefore harmonize without being reducible to one another. Woman as placentary and as guardian of the memory of this first house feels a proximity with the elements. Because the placenta brings blood, air and water, it is in relation to it that she experiences these elements for the first time. The placentary interval is located between the past and the present, and it is not graspable in the latter, as concludes Hill: “For Irigaray, the placental interval unfolds a living rhythm of times that cannot be mastered” (Hill 2012, 69).

In Irigaray’s thought, woman is at least two, a temporality thought from her body is thus necessarily polygonal and dispersed, she is: “[g]outte de temps qui se détache d’une pesante accumulation” (Irigaray 1982, 47). “A drop of time detached from heavy accumulation” (Irigaray 1992, 32). For Whitford, feminine time in Irigaray’s philosophy must be thought as durée where we find neither beginning nor end. Time considered by masculine culture is divided, whereas time for woman flows; thought from her body, time becomes as fluid as her mucus, half-open as her lips. An Irigarayan way of thinking time thus escapes from the phallic organization of time-space and is instead thought as durée or the interval.

III. Always-already half-open

Writing this text, my thoughts have largely circulated around the question of style. When thinking about the writing of Irigaray as form, openness is a way to describe that form; her writing opens (me) every time that I read her. What I talk about as openness in the writing of Irigaray corresponds to what Rebecca Hill calls the interval, what Judith Still names hospitality, what Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen speak of as fluidity, and what Margaret Whitford names durée. Irigaray’s openness makes available a different way of thinking the questions that she is asking; form and content thus collapse yet again. The interval, hospitality, fluidity, and durée are located simultaneously on the inside and the outside; they manifest the conflation
of form and content. Irigaray’s style in *Passions élémentaires* is open because it is situated between silence and speech, thus dependent on the conversation into which it invites its readers.

Irigaray’s non-definitions invite me to read her, to continue to not define with her; however, she also creates definitions. What I here call openness might for some Irigaray readers correspond to *negation*. This negation relates to her non-definitions, such as her critique of the non-representation of women in phallogocentric culture. Irigaray rejects in the first phase of her oeuvre the discourse produced by men about women, and she resists at the same time all definitions of the feminine, considering it to be indefinable.¹⁰ When entering into the second phase of her oeuvre, Irigaray finds negation to be insufficient for the creation of alternate subjectivities: “La philosophie s’intéresse beaucoup à la déconstruction de l’ontologie, à l’anti- au post-, mais peu à la constitution d’une nouvelle identité rationnellement fondée” (Irigaray 1987, 220). “Philosophy is widely interested in the deconstruction of ontology, in the anti- or post-, but less in constructing a new rationally founded identity” (My translation). That construction is thus the focus of her second phase. In passing from a negative to a more positive method when talking about feminine subjectivities, Irigaray is criticized for having defined, and thereby enclosed, the femininity which she is elaborating.

For Eleni Varikas, the female genealogies presented by Irigaray in works such as *Sexes et parentés* are problematic since Irigaray, in defining specific stories of relations between women in Greek mythology, excludes others. Moreover, the stories she excludes are, for Varikas, femininities that do not conform to a way of being feminine that Irigaray wishes to (re)create (Varikas 2010, 231-247). Irigaray becomes problematic for Varikas when her voice changes, when she becomes didactic. Irigaray’s voice is also at the centre of Anne Emmanuelle Berger’s critique of Irigaray’s later works:

*I Love to You* is a didactic text, as are many of Irigaray’s later works, which aims to teach the ‘way of love,’ to borrow the title of one of her last books. Its style is markedly different from that of *Speculum, Marine Lover*, or *An Ethics*. It is simpler, barer, ‘depleted,’ one might say, stripped of ambiguities. Indeed, she spends a number of pages explaining what the title of her first book *Speculum. Of the Other Woman* really meant, denying any playful ambiguity of style and intention, and trying to indicate what a proper translation might be. (Berger 2010, 75)

Feeling my way through theory, reading becomes almost completely intuitive. I find and I seek texts that harmonize with my body, texts that open up space for, and that encourage, feminine feelers such as myself. This space is, I believe, introduced and maintained within the interval opened up by the motion between theory, poetry, literature, philosophy, as well as between different languages, accents, and voices. Luce Irigaray has many voices. In *Passions élémentaires*, her voice is far from
didactic; it is open, and it opens. She manages to bring forth contours of a feminine subjectivity without locking it into a specific place. Yet reading other texts, such as her later works, the creative conversation between the reader and the author has been more difficult to establish. I feel as if she becomes less interested in conversation, and more interested in teaching, as Berger states. Thus, in Irigaray’s later works, I find less space for feeling, for being feminine.

Irigaray stresses that we have to identify with and in history to be able to create ourselves; in order to create such identification, we need a subject in history with which to identify. To quote Luisa Muraro: “I wanted to formulate an initial definition of the concept of female genealogies. It is obviously not a classic kind of definition, but rather a contextual one, or, to be more precise, an indexical one” (Muraro 1994, 319). Muraro explains how one can define and identify feminine genealogies in pointing at them, in recognizing them with the index. One thus escapes the weight of definition and its imprisoning aspect. “Indexical” definitions let us define without having to exclude:

> Why haven’t I given a classic definition? Because it is impossible. This theme lies on the border between the speakable and the unspeakable, like much—we do not know how much—of women’s experience. When, as in this case, we must make an uncodified reality speakable, the semantic field must open, like the Red Sea, to let things (experience) pass through, and the only valid definitions are those based on indexical signs. (Muraro 1994, 319)

We thus return to where we left off in talking about style. Because feminine experience finds itself between speech and silence, we must recognize that it is “an uncodified reality” in order to address it. To make it “speakable,” “the semantic field must open, like the Red Sea;” only in this fluidity can we experience valid definitions of ourselves. We need a double movement where we simultaneously recognize a genealogical line in history and also let it grow unbounded, openly, towards the/a future. Irigaray is a thinker who seriously considers the conceptual darkness that surrounds the difference between woman and femininity, between I-woman and a woman, and who tries to situate this relation in history through her genealogical and mythological work. The relationship between I-woman and a woman is not coherent or equivalent. I would say instead that the two terms carry between themselves the interval, which I think of as a space from which different ideas of how to create feminine subjectivities can emerge. For Gayle Salamon, difference in Irigaray never manages to transcend the binary man-woman, but she argues that: “Genders that find no easy home within the binary system are still animated by difference” (Salamon 2010, 191-201). We are thus all dependent upon the sensible-transcendental in order to become subjects. Even if Irigaray seeks to establish specifically the relation between woman and femininity, the tools that she elaborates in works such as Passions élémentaires are useful for thinking the becoming of all genders. The writing of Irigaray is constituted by the double movement of opening-closing. Following this movement, we can define our histories with our index, to follow Muraro, while
growing and creating space to grow towards the future: “Nous avons beaucoup de choses à faire. Mais mieux vaut avoir l’avenir devant soi que derrière” (Irigaray 1987, 33). “We have many things to do. But better to have the future in front of us than behind” (My translation). Instead of continuing to reproduce teleologically structured methods for writing developed by the masculine philosophical canon, let us be inspired by the hysterically feminine, highly fluid, and open universe that Irigaray invites us into, while rewriting the history of our own past. Her style is as important for understanding her texts as her content; drawing upon this style, Irigaray suggests useful tools and radical ways of creating and engaging with feminist thought today.

IV. Opening

In actual fact, the female function is to explore, discover, invent, solve problems, crack jokes, make music – all with love. In other words, create a magic world. (Solanas 1996, 13)

Irigaray lets us experience another world. She presents a political project for how to reach this other, magical, world. Her thinking opens our own thought, and she makes us think openly about the creation of an alternate universe. We are indebted to all our women-mothers, also toward Luce Irigaray, mothers of all life and all thought, always-already in us. Feminine subjectivity is *vegetal-airborne*, always moving between *ground-sky*. She is mother-earth always located between personal and genealogical memories, memories of oblivion that awaken a sleeping history. She is the stem that reunites the corolla with the roots. She is supple, sinuous, plastic skin; she is envelope, she envelops. Always-hollow, still-honeycombed, already-placentary. She is inside-outside all times, all the time. She is plural, always-already in (re)creation.

I am thus still reading, again and again, movement that never ceases; the only way to cease it is to cease... I cease then, these lines of thought, this time.

Notes

1. *I-woman* is the term that Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen use to talk about the protagonist in *Passions élémentaires*. I have also decided to use this term in my text since *I-woman* manages to maintain the gender of this character. English is not gendered in the same way as French; thus to translate the feminized "je" in this book merely as *I* would mean losing its gender, which is of crucial importance for this text and for the project of Irigaray in a broader sense.

2. The rhizomatic is a term many have borrowed from Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s collaboration *Capitalisme et schizophrénie : L’anti-Oedipe* (1972) to talk about non-hierarchical historical narratives. Although this term is not explicitly present in *Passions élémentaires*, I find the rhizomatic to be a useful way of describing the instable, always changing, intermingling qualities both of the book’s protagonist as well as its formal structure.
3. The transcendental is a central concept in Irigaray’s thinking. In discussing the sensible-transcendental, Irigaray makes sure not to forget the corporeal reality of our existence, while focusing equally on the importance of the divine. Becoming-subject is dependent upon the movement of the sensible-transcendental that departs simultaneously from the body and the sky. In Sexes et parentés (1987), Irigaray develops the sensible-transcendental traversing relations between-women. Here, the sensible-transcendental is manifested in horizontal and vertical relations between-women, thus emphasizing the importance of relating to a female god while creating a female sociality.

4. This darkness, this black ink, alludes to Lispector’s writing in texts such as Où étais-tu pendant la nuit? where the night is reconsidered as the space from which knowledge is conceived, rather than where it is obscured. The night offers another kind of thought then the lucid, intelligible, clear, rational knowledge produced by/in daylight. During the night one must rely upon one’s night vision: touch; writing with black ink is thus writing of and with the body. The question of darkness and (in)visibility is further developed in this text under the section entitled “Roots.”

5. The citation comes from the preface of the Japanese edition of the book, published also in the English translation, for the French edition no meta-text is available.

6. However, some scholars discuss whether it can be thought as a dialogue with Empedocles.

7. In French, nature is gendered female, la nature, as is flower, la fleur. In Passions élémentaires, it is often difficult to discern what Irigaray is referring to when she says she, or elle. In using terms such as nature-woman or flower-girl, I am referring to this ambiguity which always exists in French and which is difficult to reproduce in English.

8. Here, I am referring to Irigaray’s critique of Freud considering his oblivion of the matricide of Clytemnestra, which for Irigaray is more ancient than the parricide of Creon that Freud places in the center of his theory of male sexual development.

9. Irigaray uses “le tact” to simultaneously designate the tactile, touch, and tact, rhythm.

10. Concerning the three phases of Irigaray’s oeuvre, see Hirsh and Olson, “Je–Luce Irigaray.”
Always-Already Feminine –Thinking Alternative Creations of Feminine Subjectivities with Luce Irigaray
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Works cited


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Queer Feminine Affect Aliens: The Situated Politics of Righteous Femme Anger at Racism and Ableism

Alexa Athelstan

This article explores the politics of articulations of righteous femme anger by queer feminine affect aliens who occupy liminal spaces on the margins of feminist, queer, and femme belonging. The article examines the positioned nature of justified anger at dynamics of oppression, misrecognition, and exclusions from within our own queer, feminist, and femme communities. It addresses the affective tensions articulated by those queer feminine subjects occupying affectively alien(ated) spaces of (un)belonging that situate them in between solidarity and resistance, as well as the affectively loaded states of affinities and disidentification.

Introduction

This article explores the politics of articulations of righteous femme anger by queer feminine affect aliens who occupy liminal spaces on the margins of feminist, queer, and femme belonging. The article examines the positioned nature of justified anger at dynamics of oppression, misrecognition, and exclusions from within our own queer, feminist, and femme communities. It addresses the affective tensions articulated by those queer feminine subjects occupying affectively alien(ated) spaces of (un)belonging that situate them in between solidarity and resistance, as well as the affectively loaded states of affinities and disidentification. Inspired by Jose Esteban Muñoz’s Disidentifications (1999) and Sarah Ahmed’s Queer Phenomenology (2006), this article explores queer feminine disidentificatory anger in context of the concept of disidentificatory orientations. This concept combines Muñoz’s work on disidentifications and Ahmed’s work on orientations to understand how queer feminine subjects—particularly those inhabiting multiple marginalised positionalities—may simultaneously identify and disidentify with, or orientate themselves both towards and away from, femme representations, icons, models of identity, politics, and communities. Crucially, this article is also strongly informed by Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1984) in its understanding and exploration of anger as a relational, political, historical, and often positioned affect, which articulates a justified response to oppression (e.g. racism, sexism or ableism) and, thus, holds the productive potential of serving as a powerful source for engendering change. As Lorde writes: “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change” (Lorde 1984, 127). In exploring the politics of queer feminine anger, this article also draws on the work of Ahmed (2004, 2010) for a critical conceptualisation of femme affect aliens and, indeed, the femme kill joy, who find themselves occupying alienated and critical spaces on the margins of queer, feminist, and femme belonging precisely due to the various positionalities they inhabit that intersect with their queer feminine identities.
The first section follows Lorde’s own emphasis on examining justified anger at racism, by drawing on the politicised figure—rather than the racist stereotype—of “the angry black woman,” reclaimed and (re)conceptualised by black feminist theorists like Lorde, bell hooks, and Ahmed, to discuss issues pertaining to the intersection of “race,” ethnicity, whiteness, and racism within queer and femme communities.

The second section takes Lorde’s conceptualisation of anger as a justified response to oppression and Ahmed’s figure of the affect alien in a new direction to discuss the perspectives of the political figuration of “the enraged queer cripped femme” who is (implicitly, if not explicitly) denied access to certain typical forms of queer and femme identities, representations, communities, recognition, and belonging. The larger project on which this article draws for its discussion explores queer feminine identities, representations, and communities from various positioned and intersecting perspectives. I use queer femme-inist ethnographic approaches involving qualitative interviews and visual materials conducted with a diverse sample of queer feminine participants in the UK, as well as a discursive analysis of three contemporary femme anthologies on from the USA and Western Europe: Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri’s *Brazen Femme* (2002), Ulrika Dahl and Del Lagrace Volcano’s *Femmes of Power* (2008) and Jennifer Clare Burke’s *Visible: A Femmethology* (2009).

In particular, I discuss T.J. Bryan’s essay, “It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal femme Vixen in tha Makin’” (2002), and Peggy Munson’s essay, “Fringe Dweller: Toward an Ecofeminist Politic of Femme” (2009). It is noteworthy that while these essays and figures offer valuable insights about the positioned experience of being a femme of colour or disabled and femme, I acknowledge that these insights are not representative of all those inhabiting these positonalities. However, these examples can shed significant light onto these intersections and take our critical conversations concerning queer, feminist, and femme identities and representations into politically vital and productive directions.

i) Let’s Talk About Racism

There is a strong discourse of diversity, inclusion, and anti-racist politics present within queer and femme communities and writing, embodied, for example, in Dahl’s positioning of Leslie Mah’s take on femme: “Femme to you is a fuck off to racism and sexism at once” (in Dahl and Volcano 2008, 163). Furthermore, there is a significant amount of critical and creative writing by, on, and for femmes of colour and, indeed, a significant number of femmes of colour identifying strongly with femme, as well as being involved in femme communities and organising. However, there are nevertheless also significant stories about queers and femmes of colour occupying resistant disidentificatory orientations towards and ambivalence about identifying with queer and queer femininities. There are also significant stories containing moments of disidentificatory anger at dynamics of racist oppression and exclusion within queer and queer feminine communities. This subaltern strand of queer feminine experience is explored further in this section by drawing on a variety
of black queer and femme voices including Valerie Mason-John, Kopene Kofi-Bruce, Maria Rosa Mojo, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and in particular T. J. Bryan’s powerful and insightful essay, “It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin.” In her essay, Bryan reflects on various relational dynamics of racism that she has experienced within queer and femme communities as a black femme. Sometimes these are explicit forms of racism, yet more often than not they are implicit. Indeed, often these instances involve various forms of misrecognition. Bryan opens the essay by telling a story of being misrecognised as butch and masculinised as a black femme. On being misrecognised as butch, being positioned as masculine, and having her intelligent black femme identity erased and disavowed, Bryan writes:

In early 1997 I did a poetry slam in a Toronto boxing ring. I was up against a bunch of male poets and one other woman. I came dressed for success: red lips, kohl-lined eyes, beyond-skin-tight black dress, high-heeled black boots with big silver buckles, white, lace-topped, little girl angle socks, black gloves, leather wrist cuffs and collar.

Sometime during the next few weeks the city’s queer community rag printed a write-up of the event. The reviewer referred to me as (and I’m paraphrasing here) “powerful and brilliant.” Which was cool. However, there was something that did not sit right with me at all. Accompanying the article was a picture – my head stuck on the body of a Black, male boxer. I was angered and insulted, but not surprised. ‘This showed me that the person responsible for creating this collage was unable to imagine a brainy and articulate Black person (equated with masculinity?), who was also a Femme (reserved for others?).

This incident forced me to think about the roots of my Femme(ininity). About culture and aesthetics. About the ways that racism affects Black wimmin and more specifically, about the odd ways it can impact on those of us in Tha Life. We, Black femmes, can often be masculin(ized)—automatically viewed, treated, and cruised as butches. And even if we are seen as Femmes, we can still be devalued or just plain not perceived as Femme(inine) in any sense but the sexual—not just in the larger world, but also inside of queer/Black/“colored” communities of supposed resistance.’ (Bryan 2002, 147, my emphasis)

Importantly, this is one of the many events and interactions presented in this essay that lead Bryan to question the implicitly white roots of femme and queer femininities. This misrecognition of black femmes as butches or as being excluded from queer and queer feminine recognition is highlighted by several femmes of colour including black queer theorist Dr. Valerie Mason-John: “During my twenties I felt an unspoken pressure to be butch in bed from white women, as if we, black women, had to be sexually dominant” (in Dahl and Volcano 2008, 30-34). Whilst Mason-John speaks positively of queer culture as having a “huge impact” in terms of realising the possibility of being “femme one day and something else the next” and femme as “a revolution of female identity,” these positive experiences are not the experience of all
black queers or femmes of colour. Furthermore, Kopene Kofi-Bruce addresses the lack of queer recognition received by femmes of colour when she speaks of how femmes of colour are doubly excluded from “the nod” of queer recognition and related feelings of belonging, comfort, and safety: “The nod is a powerful thing. It’s about belonging and comfort and safety. Femmes rarely if ever get the nod, and femmes of colour are doubly excluded” (Burke 2009, 46), Maria Rosa Mojo (Dyke Marilyn) also hints towards these racialised exclusions: “There is a femme movement but the problem with groups is that they can also exclude. People who identify as femme shouldn’t feel excluded due to stereotypical attributes considered to be un-feminine” (Dahl and Volcano 2008, 49). Conversely, T.J. Bryan highlights how femmes of colour are also routinely hypersexualised within queer culture in ways that invoke oppressive racist colonial white supremacist patriarchal histories that surface in contemporary queer cultures in the form of everyday racist remarks. Bryan highlights this through a disidentificatory narrative account of how she is often referred to as “hot” by lovers:

Queered long before deviance was considered politically cool, my phreaky sex appeal is mythical. My truth shines through sensually. But is bent out of shape and refracted back to me as predatory, nymphomaniacal, good-to-go. Hot. The supposed amorous skills of my sistas have been in high demand for centuries. Yet there are still some who can’t or won’t describe melanin-rich skin, wide noses, generous lips, and complexly textured hair as beautiful, breathtaking, or divine. Seems like just yesterday...
We were societally force-fornicated to produce a biologically colonized labour source of millions. Mulattos. MULES by any other fuckin’ name. Colonizers constructed characteristics. Defined away our humanity. Pathologized our pain. Explained away their insanity. Normalized their depravity. Our psyches defiled. Denigrated. Bestial natures penetrated female bodies. Fist-fucked female minds. Hot (pussy)... An unwilling foil for their feminine ideals. Poor things. Sacrosanct yet cursed. Worshipped above all others, but burdened with an awesome and awful responsibility—the preservation of a heterosexist, pahllocentric, white supremacist society’s purity... (Bryan 2002, 151)

Indeed, this is not the only passage in which Bryan highlights the racism circulating in white queer cultural approaches towards black femininities and masculinities. Further on in her essay Bryan once again addresses the issue of contemporary and everyday instances of white butch misogyny and racism:

There are some Butches. No mistaking or avoiding them. There will always be those boyz willing for all the wrong reasons. Fecally full of all the wrong information. Crazy-ass Blackophiles. You always wanted to do WHAT with a Black woman? Sure, it’s true what they say ‘bout colored ‘nani and the blackest berries. And all my brethren have big, fifteen-inchers and live to juk white pussy. Stories passed down from shit-scared and intimidated explorer to slaver to slave
owner to their children and beyond. Self-serving stories. A collective white foot perpetually stuck in every ignorant ass’s mouth. But since these stories don’t say much ‘bout me, I’ll have to be the HOO/chee that got away. The hot pussy, an exotic curiosity, a tarnished and exciting new trophy who decided not to play. (Bryan 2002, 152)

Critically, in both extracts, Bryan aptly highlights the racist white-supremacist colonial histories—inscribed within and surfacing from these contemporary white queer misconceptions and misreadings of her black femme embodiment—that provoke her righteous, historically rooted, and politically motivated black queer feminine disidentificatory anger towards white queer cultures from within. Kopene Kofi-Bruce also questions the politicised use of sexualised feminine embodiment as a central part of femme politics and community, reflecting the raced, gendered, and sexual politics of being a black femme Radical Cheerleader: “We femmes offered up our objectified bodies, adorable in rebellion and seemingly desirous of the attention. […] Why do women, and especially brown women, expect to have to show off our bodies, even while protesting?” (Burke 2009, 55). Whilst the hypersexualisation of queer femininities might thus function as an effective strategy for subverting white and middle class forms of (queer) femininities—traditionally constructed as desexualised, meek, modest, and demure creatures—this strategy of subversion can sit uncomfortably for some working class or black (queer) femininities that are often already hypersexualised by mainstream (as well as subcultural) racist and classist cultures.

Along with these reflections on racism within queer and feminist cultures, Bryan also offers reflections on inherited racist dynamics within femme communities, as is evident in the following extract describing the racist tensions present in her interactions as a black femme with white femmes:

SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVAH HAPPEN AGAIN:
Attending a small event and helping a Sista/Femme/Friend in the process, I agreed to bring a tray of food in from her car. We entered the bar, hands full. One of the white, Femme organizers of the event skipped over to us. Instead of taking a tray or lending a hand in some way, Miss Mistress of the Manor very coyly beckoned us in with cocked finger and then, smiling, pointed to the table where she wanted the food set down.
WRONG!? SO VERY WRONG!
Fixed dynamics, subtextual dynamics surround and abound. Inherited attitudes may feel comfortable for some. Trigger my annoyance. Court my rage. Unexamined behaviours send me back…
Scarlet and Mammy…
Vivien Leigh and Hattie McDaniels. Big screen Femme/unknown supporting actress. Slayer’s woman and her Black slave woman, a subhuman. Play-acting their roles. Living out their roles. No question of their pre-ordained roles.
Colonizing Femme – her translucent, southern perfection, the centre of attention.
Subjugated woman – unknown heart of darkness, serving. Blackness a backdrop,
a shadow, not seen. [...]  
HOLD UP!  
This Attitudinal Vixen is NO house maid. Maid-in-waiting. NOT second best.  
NOT to be positioned behind the rest.  
WE  
You and I  
Exist eye-to-eye at the centre.  
Equal connection.  
Questioning privilege and situation.  
Sharing power.  
WE  
You and I  
Exist on a par  
Or not at all...  
[...]  
No mistaking or avoiding it, these are the sour grapes of a colored girl who’s had enuff. Enuff of working ten times as hard for one-fifth the adoration. Always striving to be ten times as skilled. Ten times as gorgeous. Now ten times as pissed with the inferior landscaping of the queerified Femme playing field.  
FUCK IT. (Bryan 2002, 151-152)

Bryan’s righteous queer feminine disidentificatory anger triggered by and directed at racist oppressions surfacing through “fixed dynamics” and “inherited attitudes” between white and black femmes lead to her being “pissed” and having “had enuff” of “the inferior landscaping of the queerified Femme playing field.” Again, recognition, or rather a painful lack of recognition which work along racialised lines—this time between femmes themselves—lies at the core of this moment of disidentificatory anger as Bryan’s identity as black femme is partially erased, disavowed, and denied, through the misrecognising gaze and gestures of the white femme organiser. Therefore, these enraging everyday micro-dynamics between white and black femmes arguably lead to Bryan’s own disidentificatory orientation towards queer feminine identities and communities more generally. Her demand for true equality is inscribed in the lines:

WE  
You and I  
Exist eye-to-eye at the centre.  
Equal connection.  
Questioning privilege and situation.  
Sharing power.  
WE  
You and I  
Exist on a par  
Or not at all...  
(Bryan 2002, 152)
Indeed, her writing recalls Audre Lorde’s own essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger” (1984), in which Lorde discusses dynamics of anger and solidarity between black women, who for Lorde occupy relational spaces of both “sameness” and “difference.” In Bryan’s essay, the problematised “sameness” is that of femmeness, whereas the difference is that of the continuing dynamics of racialised oppression and domination and how these racialised histories and continuing legacies are dealt with within contemporary queer and femme communities. Recognition and misrecognition is crucial in these incidences of racist dynamics of (white) femme on (black) femme oppression through the erasure of black femme identity, which also extends to the erasure of black femme culture, history and contributions. These dynamics of a lack of recognition of and for black femmes is also highlighted by Bryan in the following discussion of (white) femme icons and aesthetics, as well as the implicit whiteness present in the term “femme” itself:

Femme...
As far as I can see the Fatale is silent, not absent. Femme Fatale. Could any other two words have the impact of this phrase? Could any other linguistic grouping bring to mind the oh-so delicately flushed skin? The calculated blush? The spastically flicked hair? The peroxide blonde ambition? The obsessive wet dreamings of so many men and Butch wimmin? Could any other utterance conjure up the implied superiority of such specifically-shaded beauty? Femme....

Despite the involvement of femmes of colour in anthologies on, by, and for queerly feminine subjects, the implicit whiteness of this identity category, its idealised muses and, albeit queered, beauty standards, is nevertheless highlighted by many black femmes. Bryan offers a poignant critique of the white starting point and normative racialised lines of inheritance circulating in queer feminine subcultures through the use of “iconic” white feminine aesthetics and idols like Marilyn Monroe or Marlene Dietrich who are frequently cited as inspirational “iconic” figures for (white) femmes. Critically, Bryan (2002) also offers black-centric roots, history and lineage for femmes of colour which productively fail to inherit or reproduce normative queer feminine lines of whiteness, thereby disidentifying with and disrupting normative inherited lines of whiteness within queer feminine subcultures. She situates herself in a long line of often forgotten or sidelined “legendary sistas” and invokes the feminine lineage of her own family as inspirational models, whom she speaks of as passing down techniques of stylisation, lessons, and tools for survival in a classist and racist world. Importantly, Bryan’s essay highlights the implicit, often silent, and (in)visible racialised (white) starting points, centre, and performatively reproduced lines of inheritance present within certain situated queer femme communities and representations, despite their liberal claims of “diversity” and “inclusivity.”
Crucially, Bryan renders explicit racialised lines of oppression and power, as well as racialised lines of historical and cultural inheritance, identification, and orientation as she highlights the colour lines present in the racialised boundarying of white femme knowledge, experiential and cultural horizons and rhetorically subverts these inherited racialised power structures. Along with asserting black femme existence, history, and culture, Bryan delves critically into her own (black) femme identity and the (white) culture of femme more broadly, to explicitly question the implicit white centre or starting point orientating femme identities and communities. In the following extract, Bryan describes her own relation to femme as a femme of colour in disidentificatory terms, an identifying term that she has to use as a black femme “as if” it “fit” but which can never “fit completely.” Furthermore, Bryan invokes the metaphor of femme as a garment—which is implicitly positioned as white: note the “pink pastel” colours which “clash” with Bryan’s own aesthetics—that “can feel like someone else’s cast-offs.” Bryan writes:

Now...
Testing the waters cautiously, I critically delve into my Femme(inity). I wanna stand and be counted cuz me and mine done been here long enuff. Moving carefully though. Mindful of the ways I can be seduced into denying the woman I am. Which is easy when everywhere I look I’m reminded that any sort of contentment couldn’t possibly be attained from where I stand.

Femme...
Deep throating every last bit,
I’d swallow it whole.
Using the word AS IS...
If I could. As if...
It would evah fit completely.
If I could,
I’d sing it, proclaim it,
It’s rhyme and reason,
It’s pink pastel seasons
Didn’t clash with
Damn near everything
I own.
Sometimes...
Femme can feel like someone else’s cast-offs. Another woman’s old, worn-out frock. (Bryan 2002, 150)

In context of Bryan’s critique of femme as a white centric identifying term and line of inheritance which performatively circulates and places certain (white) idols and aesthetics on (white) femme horizons, while sometimes but not always rendering invisible black femme contemporary and historical contributions and existence—as well as the examples of disidentificatory anger at racism from within queer and queer feminine communities discussed in this chapter—it is understandable how the term and experience of “femme” and queer femininities can feel like an
uncomfortable, ill-fitting, second-hand dress for certain situated subjects. Bryan’s righteous disidentificatory anger provocatively dares and challenges (white) femmes to reject “liberal” race-blind perspectives circulating within (white) queer culture and theories and to reflect critically on the racialisation of queer and femme identities: on the question of which positioned subjects are implicitly if not explicitly occupying marginalised or excluded positions within queer and femme subcultures. This is a dare and a challenge that Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha also articulates in the infamous “FEMME SHARK MANIFESTO”:

**FEMME SHARKS ARE OVER WHITE QUEERS’ OBLIVIOUSNESS TO QUEER OF COLOUR, TWO SPIRIT, AND TRANS OF COLOUR LIVES. WE KNOW THAT WE ARE A CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE. WE’RE OVER WHITE FEMMES AND BUTCHES WHO THINK THAT FEMME ONLY COMES IN THE COLOUR OF BARBIE. WE’RE OVER BUTCHES AND BOYS AND OTHER FEMMES TELLING US WHAT WE NEED TO DO, WEAR, OR BE IN ORDER TO BE “REALLY FEMME.” FEMME SHARKS RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES, BUTCHES, GENDERQUEER, AND TRANS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOUR SINCE FOREVER. THAT BEFORE COLONIZATION WE WERE SEEN AS SACRED AND WE WERE SOME OF THE FIRST FOLKS MOST VIOLENTLY ATTACKED WHEN OUR LANDS WERE INVADED AND COLONIZED. FEMME SHARKS WON’T REST UNTIL WE RECLAIM OUR POSITION AS BELOVED FAMILY WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES.**

[...]

**LOVE AND RAGE,**

THE FEMME SHARKS (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2011, 286-291)

With love and (righteous) rage, the “FEMME SHARK MANIFESTO”—like T.J. Bryan’s powerful essay “It Takes Ballz”—highlights the (often implicit) white standards present in queer cultures, including those of butch and femme, and the absolute necessity of centralising queer and femme of colour perspectives.

**ii) Let’s Talk About Ableism**

Visible and invisible disabilities and righteous disidentificatory anger at ableist oppression, involving internal dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation, is another important situated experience which can have the effect of alienating femmes from and from within our own queer, feminist, and femme communities. Indeed, T.J. Bryan herself foregrounds this intersection in her blog entry “Challenging Ableism”:

moving away from my place of comfort and greater understanding—defining as the oppressed, the colonized, is terrifying.

i’ve studied my own identity as it stands in opposition of the power and privilege of others so deeply that it’s much easier for me to read myself and others who
are sitting in similar places of resistance to oppression. who’s struggling with what elements of their blackness and keeps cutting off their hair. who’s got issues with their queerness and compartmentalizes their life so they don’t have to deal. who’s got class issues and can’t tell the difference between being raised poor and becoming financially insolvent because you can’t tolerate being around your well-off family anymore... etc. etc.

moving from that comfort place of self-knowing is about growing. i can give myself permission to learn more about who i am because i want to keep growing not stagnate. and since i’m here to learn and to challenge myself even as i offer this space to you, i’m studying what it means to be able-bodied because i need to continue doing my work. part of this is realizing how i walk with privilege and oppression tightly bound at the root inside my skin.

it tastes odd in my mouth when i say: i have privilege.

i’ve been having these conversations with other able-bodied people about us and living in a barrier filled, ableist world where walking is defined as the ‘normal’ way of getting from point a-to-b. where seeing, speaking and hearing are narrowly defined according to the experience of those who do these things with ease. where we [able-bodied people] have built a whole world that centralizes our experiences. where we [need to] assume that the privileges we keep for ourselves are universally accessible. through defining disability as ‘abnormal’, ‘abhorrent’, ‘tragic’, ‘ugly’, ‘undesirable’, ‘uncomfortable’, able-bodied people, maintain our minority experience as the imperial measure of what is ‘right’, ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ in the world.

as a black woman who spent most of her twenties learning to recognize racial dominance, who learned to speak to it and to fight it, i’m recognizing so many, too many of the attributes i used to ascribe to white folks who didn’t want to deal with their white skinned privilege, in myself as i struggle with recognizing what it means to live in a privileged body. (Bryan 2005)

With admirable political and personal integrity, T.J. Bryan’s excerpt recognises that any one subject inhabits various interlocking and intersecting oppressed and privileged positionalities simultaneously. Bryan also notes various strategies for combating ableism that mirror those for challenging racism: recognizing, acknowledging, and interrogating one’s own privilege, becoming conscious through engaging in discussion, thinking and listening and using that knowledge or awareness for the politics of dismantling ableism, as this intersects with other, equally important, axes of oppression. This section therefore focuses on dynamics of queer feminine disidentificatory anger at ableist exclusions and marginalisation within queer, feminist, and queer feminine communities. One poignant example of queer feminine disidentificatory anger at ableist oppression and exclusion from within queer, feminist, and femme communities, from a disabled femme perspective is presented in Peggy Munson’s essay “Fringe Dweller: Toward an Ecofeminist Politic of Femme” (2009, 28-36). As a disabled femme diagnosed with Multiple Chemical
Sensitivities (MCS) and Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS), Munson describes her existence as a “fringe outlaw” who is “homebound and bedbound and often fighting for survival” and how this effects her disidentificatory orientation towards queer femininities as follows:

My requirements for socializing are more extreme than that woman’s. My exile has been political, economic, and personal, at times a widespread commercial stoning. Pushed to the margins of chemical culture, I live in an invisible bubble that one butch lover called The Biosphere and another pet named The Compound. I am a fringe dweller staring longingly at the human carnival that taunts me on the other side of a Lethe of industrial waste. Few people ever come in. It’s odd to talk about gender presentation from here. [...] I am just as femme stripped down to the organic camisole and outgassed. My relationship to femmes is often one of resistance. MCS turns most people into my adversaries. A friend with MCS, who as a survivor doesn’t use this word lightly, once said to me, “How do you deal with the fact that everyone has suddenly become your perpetrator?” People can cause great harm to me or kill me by making pedestrian product choices, yet they rarely stop using toxic scented products that erode my life. (Munson 2009, 28-29)

Along with her extreme social isolation, Munson articulates her disidentificatory anger and orientation towards exclusionary ableist femme constructions and practises through her own “relationship to femmes” as being “often one of resistance” and through the positioning of typical “toxic” femme constructions, practices and communities, as potential “adversaries” or “perpetrator[s],” from a disabled MCS suffering femme perspective. Munson details how her “extreme” social “disenfranchisement,” loneliness, and exclusion is supported by other people’s assumptions that she is making a lifestyle “choice” rather than that she is, as Munson herself puts it, a “prisoner” in “chemical exile” who was once “a vibrant part of the community” (2009, 29). Her exclusion is also caused and supported by others not being aware of how they contribute to the causes and effects of MCS and by not acknowledging that these everyday exclusions are occurring and not taking responsibility for contributing to these exclusions by making changes to their own daily choices, as they continue to use toxic products that cause chronically ill subjects, like Munson, significant harm. Indeed, Munson highlights how within queer culture, her disability is often seen as a “political choice” rather than an oppressed positionality or an equally valid and important “proletariat” “struggle” by a marginalised subject (2009, 31). Munson’s answer to both mainstream and queer ignorance, denial, and oppression is through a radical critique of “reasonable” accommodation rhetorics informed by a social model of disability. She highlights the relational nature of everyday experiences of disability (oppression) as entailing “a contact improvisation between a disabled body and an able body” in which the “burden for change” should not be put on the (oppressed) disabled subject, but rather on a “public” and “collective response” towards disabilities (2009, 30-32). Furthermore, Munson directs her righteous disidentificatory anger at disability
oppression and exclusion at femmes, with the aim of provoking intersectional discussions and encouraging femmes to put their fragrance-free product choices where their ableist “queer lip service” to disability inclusion is by actively and reflexively working on cultivating a “bigger container” of what being femme involves, one that is more inclusive of differently situated, and in this case differently abled, femmes:

Sometimes I read things written by femmes, and it’s like turning on the TV and being inundated with commercials for products that could kill me. One of my MCS friends quietly pointed out that she felt traumatized by such commercials, since they advertise the weapons that had already caused her physical harm. It’s not that I don’t like talking about shoes, clothes, and lipstick, but most femmes I ask refuse to grant me access by choosing fragrance-free, alternative products. As a femme community, it’s time for us to cultivate what Zen scholars call “a bigger container” instead of an empty polemic of inclusion. Sure, girlie accoutrements are playful and fun. But giving up chemical-laden, scented products instead of defending them as a privilege of identity takes a stand against toxic polluters moving into the neighbourhoods of poor femmes, celebrates black femmes with natural hair, supports post–mastectomy femmes fighting for a future, and honors femmes who got sick working at Ground Zero. Providing wheelchair ramps, sign language interpreters, and other accommodations should also be standard outreach for any gathering. [...] When I write about what it is to be femme now, I have to explore what it is to be at war with the concept of femme as it has been socially constructed under the auspices of toxic capitalism. But I don’t have the luxury of abstract theory. I can suffer permanently disabling consequences from chemical exposures. (Munson 2009, 30, my emphasis)

Here Munson’s disidentificatory anger is directed at an exclusionary model of femme that centralises toxic capitalist consumption above disability awareness and inclusion, leading Munson to feel “at war with the concept of femme” as a disabled femme who is actively writing and fighting for a (re)imaging and (re)construction of femme identities, communities, and representations that could potentially be more inclusive and accessible. Subsequently, Munson goes on to critique rhetorics of queer “diversity” and “inclusion” as being “at best, half-built ramps” and at worst “remarkably clueless”:

Efforts toward inclusion are, at best, half–built ramps that triage out the really sick and allow a few, not–so–sick people to the party. A few old–school dykes might have a half–assed fragrance–free event that is little more than lip service inclusion, since the participants don’t understand that fragrance–free means giving up all scented products for a period of time—not just perfume for a day. Then this good–faith effort might result in people associating “scent–free” with political correctness rather than disability access. Queer folks are remarkably clueless when it comes to disability and how it relates to inclusion rhetoric. (Munson 2009, 30)
One example of this is, of course, Munson’s exclusion from Lambada Literary Awards. Another example Munson provides is her experience of dating and the barriers she encounters due to discriminatory ableist stigma and assumptions. Munson recounts her experience of dating a “femme-loving transguy” who told her femme friend “that he would never date someone as disabled as I am (which was presumptuous anyway—I did not particularly want to date him)” (2009, 31). Munson subsequently choose to “educate” this “supposedly politicized dude” by “angrily” suggesting he attend a reading by Toni Amato of Sharon Wachsler and Peggy Munson’s “manifesto about fragrance-free access” through which further ableism and “queer lip service” about inclusion and accessibility within the queer community emerges:

The event was billed as fragrance-free and disability accessible, but Sharon and I knew this was queer lip service. We had included an exercise in the manifesto that asked the audience to stand up as a group, and then mentioned scented items they might be wearing, and asked those who were not fragrance-free to sit down. By the end, two people were standing—two fragrance-free people at a fragrance-free event. After that, the transguy did write me an apology, which was big of him. Still, I don’t know why I have to go to such great lengths to educate one supposedly politicized dude. (Munson 2009, 31)

Disidentificatory anger emerges in the choice of words regarding “queer lip service” paid to disability inclusion and accessibility, as well as the repetition and emphasis of the word “two”—in context of the “two fragrance-people at a fragrance-free event”—which illustrates the hypocrisy of this “inclusive” event. Disidentificatory anger also emerges in the sarcastic and ironic tone in the final sentences concerning the ableist—or at least disability-clueless actions—of the “supposedly politicized” femme-loving transguy whom she educates. Yet Munson also continues to direct her righteous disidentificatory anger against ableist oppressions at queer femininities from her own positionality as a disabled femme, through her critiques of a capitalist and consumerist “narcissistic” model of femme:

So what does this have to do with being femme? Well, femmes have the option of cultivating a narcissistic aesthetic of “impersonal glamour” or digging deeper for a gender that embraces a larger body politic and access for all. We don’t have to stop talking about lipstick and other girly products as gender insignia, but maybe it’s time to talk about where to buy sexy, natural, fragrance-free lipstick (if only for the fact that lip cancer is deadly and common, and perhaps using untested chemicals on our lips is senseless). In my experience, most conscientious people reading this essay will feel a twinge of guilt, followed by a wave of rationalization. It’s overwhelming to think about what I’m saying, that I’m talking about a rejection of all chemical artifice, a stripping away of self down to the trembling, vulnerable core. [...] So where are my ecofeminist femme sisters? Can’t we start our own makeup parties where we mix beeswax, shea butter, and sparkly mineral pigments from Bioshield Paints and talk about a zero-harm policy of femme inclusion? (Munson 2009, 32)
Intersectional queer and femme liberation, solidarity, and inclusion, as Munson suggests, does indeed need to begin in our own backyards through an increase in awareness, reflexivity, and conversations, as well as practical changes to address these issues in the way that we represent and organise ourselves as femmes, with the aim of building femme solidarity through working on not oppressing and excluding each other. In fact, Munson concludes by challenging femmes to “go on girls: give it up” on toxic products and by giving various suggestions for being gendered or sexually femme without the use of toxic products as a way of queers and femmes building a truly inclusive and intersectional community as well as intersectional solidarities between femmes across differences and similarities (2009, 34). Interestingly, her argument to “give it up” could be mistaken for coming close to fem(me)ininity phobic “radical” feminist perspectives and imperatives regarding how feminist liberation involves the stripping of the (female) self of, so-called, “false” feminine “artifices”—which are conflated with patriarchal oppression—to its, so-called “natural” core. However, what Munson—speaking from a disabled femme perspective—actually means is the reconfiguration of femme identity and community practices that moves us away from an ableist and exclusionary centre, towards a true—and indeed, truly intersectional—queer feminine politics of inclusion and diversity. As Munson writes:

The queer community can do better than lip service around disability: without this, we lose the vulnerable somatics of queer experience. Most conversation about body marginalization and visibility does a disservice to what we put our lips around, the actual flesh of the argument [...] Inclusion can’t be done with remote rhetoric but has to be this personal. It has to be riveted and riveting. It’s about the people we fuck, and whom we reach with our ramps, whose grit we’re willing to roll around in. The conversation about femme has to go beyond artifice to the pheromone-laced ether of the body. (Munson 2009, 33)

Interestingly, Munson is not calling for a stripping of the artifice of femme, nor a dictation of what femme should or should not be, but rather an erotically and disability-informed adjustment in what those artifices are and what femme might mean. Furthermore, like T.J. Bryan, Munson is issuing an explicit challenge to queer and femme individuals and our communities. Yet importantly these critiques and challenges are coming from within queer and queer feminine communities and from differently situated femme voices themselves. It is a challenge, a dare, that this article has set out to try to tackle by bringing these issues to the forefront through an analysis of moments of situated disidentificatory queer feminine anger and the figure of the femme affect alien who is the product of internal as well as external marginalisation.

Conclusion

Analysing moments of righteous and situated disidentificatory femme anger articulated by queer feminine affect aliens who find themselves telling stories of internal exclusions and occupying liminal spaces of (un)belonging within queer,
feminist, and femme communities brings to light a host of poignant issues within “our” queer, feminist, and femme communities that require further significant theoretical and political work. This article has brought to light some of the affective, political, and theoretical tensions present within these communities by looking at instances of explicit and implicit racism and ableism. Through the examples of femmes of colour like T. J. Bryan and disabled femmes like Peggy Munson—who articulate their righteous femme anger at some of the more “toxic” aspects of femme identity constructions, practices, and communities, and their relation to capitalism, ableism, and racist white supremacism, from the positioned intersecting starting points of femme, eco-fem(me)inism, ‘race,’ ethnicity, disability, chronic illness, and anti-capitalism—this article has addressed some of the underlying and uncomfortable truths present within “our” queer, feminist and femme communities. In so doing, this article challenged liberal rhetorics circulating within queer and femme communities with the ultimate aim of pointing towards potential new directions in scholarly and activist engagement. These new directions could, for example, address problems like how queer and femme identities, practices, and communities could be reconfigured and reimagined through the theoretical paradigm and political practice of intersectionality to make these more truly inclusive, accessible, and diverse. We might wish to rethink the starting points and central, hegemonic, ways of conceptualising, representing, living, and coming together as femmes in ways that challenge various positioned and intersecting forms of oppression, including but not limited to those of racism and ableism. Indeed, since anger, according to Audre Lorde, is an affect that when “focused with precision” has the productive potential of becoming “a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change” (1984, 127), the righteous expressions of situated femme anger explored in this article might thus serve as spotlights for exposing and as tools for eventually transforming dynamics of racism, ableism, and other situated forms of oppression present both within and outside of our communities. To conclude, I wish to suggest that such changes may be engendered through a combination of practices of reflexivity, learning, and action that strives towards interrogating contemporary queer and femme rhetorics and realities of community dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, privilege and oppression with the ultimate aim of building intersectional queer and femme solidarities across differences. Finally, although such reflexive politics and praxis may require the killing of a certain degree of queer, feminist, and femme joy—particularly regarding celebratory “liberal” rhetorics concerning queer and femme intersectional “success,” “diversity,” and “inclusion”—they are nevertheless absolutely necessary for queer, feminist, and femme efforts towards political and theoretical, as well as community and individual, solidarity and integrity.
Works Cited


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Women bloggers in the fatosphere, an interconnected network of blogs dedicated to fat acceptance, are engaged in political action. They call attention to a mainstream culture of prejudice against fat people and create a supportive community that encourages a fat-positive point-of-view. Their texts are emotion-laden, expressing feelings of unhappiness, anger, and grief directed at the individuals, popular media, and institutions that tell fat women that they cannot be happy or healthy unless they submit to the thin ideal. Female bloggers in the fatosphere can thus be conceptualized as affect aliens struggling against dominant social conceptions of happiness.

The last time anyone made fun of me overtly, was two times in the last five years. I had this woman at the library give me this horrified look of disgust who turned giggling to her friend next to her, and this woman at a health class for the elderly and disabled say mean things to me for being fat. So it’s going to happen. What do you do? Try and stand up for yourself and move to the nice people. There is always going to be someone who doesn’t like someone for the way they look or even are.

—blog entry from Five Hundred Pound Peep, The Life and Times of a 500-pound Woman (5 February 2013)

Bloggers in the fatosphere, an interconnected network of blogs maintained by people who espouse fat acceptance (FA), are attempting to change negative societal attitudes about people who are fat. Their blogs are individual identity projects with a social justice mission to transform the mainstream culture of prejudice against people deemed “overweight” or “obese” according to medical standards. Although there are high-profile male-identified FA bloggers, such as the author behind the blog Red No. 3, and transgender FA bloggers such as Meyllen Djaneres, who blogs about the challenges of transitioning while fat, most FA blogs are written by cisgendered women confronting the daily oppression of the thin ideal. These women share their feelings about their bodies and experiences “living while fat” and engage in somatic and emotional transgression. In this essay, I analyze how they consciously create a community of support that encourages a fat-positive point of view, where positivity means acceptance, empowering themselves and other fat women to resist the social pressure to be thin and the message that happiness exists only for slim women.

The fatosphere is not just an alternative celebratory space, though, where fat is always defined as good and thin as bad. Rather, it is a complicated terrain where fat women negotiate their embodied identities and are encouraged to locate themselves on a shifting emotional continuum. In the fatosphere, it is socially acceptable to express feelings of unhappiness one day, contentment the next, and resignation the
day after that. Like the blogger who writes *Five Hundred Pound Peep*, whose words above describe the experience of encountering negative responses and the reality that there may always be someone who turns against you on the basis of body weight, bloggers in the fatosphere respect participants’ diverse, embodied experiences of the social world. Issues of intersectionality, including the ways that racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identities can mitigate or worsen one’s experience as a fat person, are discussed in some FA blogs. Indeed, intersectionality is a critical aspect of an emerging feminist dialogue in a space where the most prominent FA bloggers and activists are predominantly white, middle class, and well-educated (Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012).

FA bloggers do not seek to silence or dismiss feelings of anger or grief among participants, although they do seek positive messages about fat identity. Instead, they recognize, as Sara Ahmed (2010a, 2010b) and Ann Cvetkovich (2012) argue, that depression and unhappiness can be productive modes for reflection and self-construction that can open up new possibilities for identity. These bloggers are willing to traverse the emotional spectrum and fully express their emotions around fatness, which often include embracing their own and others’ ambivalence. They accept a wide range of feelings as a normal and expected part of a difficult and non-linear journey toward fat acceptance, an ongoing process that involves rejecting unsustainable diet and lifestyle practices, recognizing the oppressions of the thin ideal and how it damages women’s lives, coming to terms with the disappointment of not being able to meet that standard, and exerting a conscious effort to disengage from the unremitting social and internalized pressure to be thin.

Like radical feminists who promoted Fat Liberation in the early 1970s and critiqued the thin ideal, women tend to participate in the fatosphere because they are experiencing emotional and practical “‘problems in living’” (Lieberman and Bond 1976, 372). Many women who came into the second wave of American feminism in the late 1960s were suffering under the condition that Betty Friedan famously named the “feminine mystique,” which told women that the unhappiness they felt was the result of personal inadequacy and maladjustment and that it could be “fixed” through greater consumption of material goods and a cheerful willingness to accept their limited female roles. Fat women might similarly be described as bombarded by the “thin mystique,” a set of cultural prescriptions for thinness well-captured in such clichés as “nothing tastes as good as thin feels,” words which have often been attributed to waif-like supermodel Kate Moss. The thin mystique tells women that everything in their lives will be better and they will experience true happiness once they achieve a slender body. Moreover, like the feminine mystique, this endpoint is presented as attainable through consumption—the purchase of expensive diet pills and powders, miracle supplements, exercise and yoga clothing, diet programs, and surgical procedures such as liposuction and gastric bands (Harding 2007). Fat women are motivated to participate in the fatosphere as a response to the thin mystique. They want to explore how being fat, and particularly being fat women, structures their lives in predictable and problematic ways, and they want to be in the (virtual) company of other women who know what being fat feels like, physically and emotionally. This community of
women struggles together against a gendered form of oppression that is accompanied by a shared set of emotions, including contradictions such as pride and shame, acceptance and resistance, hope and fear, and joy and anger.

In this essay, I seek to present female bloggers in the fatosphere grappling with the realities of living fat in a thin-obsessed society as examples of what Ahmed (2010b, 41) has termed “affect aliens.” Affect aliens are people who sense a “gap between the promise of happiness and how [they] are affected by objects that promise happiness” (2010b, 42) and they stand “outside the life-worlds created by passing happy objects around” (2010b, 217). In other words, fat women experience a disjuncture between something they have been told will make them happy (the pursuit of thinness) and the unpleasant reality and futility of pursuing that goal through diet regimes, vigilant weigh-ins, and the constant monitoring of one’s food intake and energy output, all of which are tools for maintaining a low body weight and remaining aligned with social expectations around the desired female body. In fact, they may experience happiness from fatness, the very opposite of the condition that society has stipulated as a prerequisite for happiness. As affect aliens, fat acceptance bloggers struggle against “the prescribed recipes of personal happiness” and locate their happiness elsewhere (Marling 2013, 5). Kath, the fat acceptance blogger who writes the Fat Heffalump blog, tries valiantly to explain her status as an affect alien to new readers: “So what I’m saying here on this blog is a radical concept to a lot of you. The idea that someone might refuse to believe that dominant rhetoric of fat = bad and actually be happy in their fat body is possibly confronting and confusing for many of you” (25 June 2013).

In turning to the fatosphere for solidarity with fat sisters, affect aliens may have given up wanting what is out of reach, with positive results. Blogging in the fatosphere and exposing oneself to the ideas around fat acceptance is an acknowledgment that the costs of wanting what women are consistently told over and over again that we must want—the thin body—are just too high for some. Ahmed notes, “Rather than simply becoming disappointed, or full of wretchedness, affect aliens might give up wanting what one wants to want, and want other things” (2010b, 240). Reading the blogs of the fatosphere, what many of these women want is not to be told by family, friends, and strangers that they would be so much happier if only they would lose weight. They want to be affirmed in their personal and social value regardless of body shape and size. These needs are well-expressed by the blogger who writes the FA blog, Big Fit Deal:

The truth is, I’m never going to be thin. I could get thinner, sure, by making weight loss my full-time job, by policing every bite that passes my lips, by reducing my caloric intake to starvation levels, and by pushing my body to extreme limits on a regular basis.... But unless I’m willing to continue that lifestyle forever, I’m going to regain that weight....It’s unbelievable to me that so many people can’t understand this. The arrogance of the thin, who love to remind us fatties that if we just try hard enough, we can be skinny too....You’ve heard me say this all before, but in dark moments like the one I had the other day, it’s important to reiterate—to society, to you, and to myself: The size of my body does not dictate my worth. (Big Fit Deal, 24 July 2013)
Following Ahmed’s theory, the experience of being outside the life-worlds created by what we are told is our only path to happiness, actually opens up alternative paths: “We might go further with happiness,” Ahmed writes, “if we don’t follow its objects around” (2010b, 217).

By calling attention to FA bloggers as “affect aliens,” I also hope to stimulate academic engagement with this community of women and the blogs and emotional space they have created in the fatosphere. Engaging with this group responds to mandates from scholars in both affect studies and fat studies. For example, Elizabeth Grosz has urged feminists to pay attention to the ontology of the body, “the conditions under which bodies are enculturated, psychologized, given identity, historical location, and agency” (2005, 2). In the relatively new academic field of fat studies (see Rothblum and Solovay 2009), scholars across disciplines call for increased attention to the specific lived experiences of fat women. Research and scholarship on obesity has certainly increased in recent years, but much of this work connects to a medicalized discourse that emphasizes physical health consequences and prevention models. Janna Fikkan and Esther Rothblum (2012, 575), writing from a feminist point of view, assert that “the disproportionate degree of bias experienced by fat women” has not been a focus of inquiry, whereas numerous large scale studies have investigated the psychological effects of exposure to the thin ideal (e.g. Harrison 2000, Stice and Shaw 1994, Hawkins et al. 2004). They also note that contemporary feminists have mobilized against other forms of discrimination (e.g. lesbian oppression, wage inequity, sex trafficking) but seem to “have made an exception” (592) when it comes to understanding the life-long emotional and practical consequences of weight-based bias.

Psychologist Joan Chrisler (2012) has called for “a new surge of activism in the women’s movement” dedicated to understanding fat women’s lived experiences, especially the diverse social identities of fat women. As it stands, she argues, we are currently leaving some of “our sisters” behind, which is an untenable position for feminist scholarship (614). Chrisler argues that more research is needed to discover how diverse groups of fat women manage stigma and cope with the stress produced by prejudice and discrimination; how fat women learn to accept their bodies; and how fat women experience positive and negative emotions (including the continuum from unhappiness to happiness) around their bodies and lives. Following this call, this essay presents women’s initial motivations for blogging, the contours of the fat-acceptance blogs that comprise the fatosphere, and offers a range of examples derived from FA blogs to illustrate their richness as sites for both activism and scholarship.

Women in the Blogosphere

By 2009, eight million American women had taken up blogging (Wright and Page 2009), with the vast majority writing personal blogs (Chen 2012). Personal blogs typically offer detailed accounts of events in the author’s life and focus on defined interests, such as DIY crafts or vegan cooking, or identities, such as queer black feminist or lesbian mom. They address themes of everyday life and resemble “an
amalgam between a diary, a web site, and an online community” (Jones and Alony 2008, 433; Primo et al 2013). Blogs are also recognized as “providing emotional and informational release for a growing proportion of the population” (Jones and Alony 2008, 434).

Prior studies have examined the particular uses and motivations for blogging for diverse communities of women, such as mothers who write *mommyblogs*, detailed accounts of their parenting efforts (Friedman 2010, Lopez 2009); Asian women living in diasporic communities (Karlsson 2007); female breast cancer patients (Orgad 2005); women with disabilities (Olson Blue 2007); and women who participate in sports (Antunovic and Hardin 2013), all of which point to the importance of connection and community-building. Karlsson (2007, 148) conducted interview research that revealed that readers prefer blogs that overlap with their own daily life experiences and subject positions and faithfully read those blogs where the author’s autobiography match up with their own. For example, activist Mia Mingus describes herself at the *Leaving Evidence* blog as a transracial, transnational, queer, physically disabled, Korean woman adoptee. Indeed, blogs are most effective at stimulating reader interaction when they bring together communities of individuals who share similar identities, problems, lifestyles, passions, or ideologies, making them ideal communication and activist spaces for fat women, whose commonalities often spread across these categories. As Maratea (2008) has noted, “blogging communities tend to develop around shared interests and experiences; they consist of passionate, demographically similar individuals engaging in highly partisan debates that build in fervor as bloggers advance claims…” (146). In the fatosphere, those claims often revolve around fat women’s rights to contest the pathologizing narrative that others attach to their bodies and to assert their feelings about what it means to resist the thin ideal.

May Friedman (2010) writes that one of the blogosphere’s defining characteristics is “its focus on connection and dialogue” (198). From the perspective of women’s history, blogs open up the lives, experiences, and emotions of women, many of whom have no other means of public voice, and they “cast a light into some of the often-ignored corners of contemporary women’s history” (199). In evaluating the usefulness of blogs as historical evidence, Friedman notes that bloggers have “total authority over their stories,” which she sees as having the potential to be “extremely empowering in a number of respects for a class of people whose authority is constantly judged and critiqued by so-called ‘experts’” (200). Friedman was speaking specifically of mommybloggers, but her words also resonate for fat women, who contend with generalized social stigma as well as a powerful, oppositional public health discourse that views them as diseased, as manifestations of the obesity epidemic (Boero 2007).

The Fatosphere

The fatosphere is an active subset of the blogosphere inhabited by a series of interconnected fat acceptance blogs and bloggers. It is an online space for fat activism comprised of a constantly changing community of vocal and active individuals who
embrace (or are trying to embrace) their size and whose writings typically encourage people to rethink their assumptions and beliefs about weight (Cooper 2008, Dickins et al. 2011). Members of the fatosphere community engage in and contribute to critical dialogue about fatness and the political aspects of weight, and they seek support from other bloggers of size. Harding and Kirby describe the fatosphere as a “smorgasbord of different takes on fat acceptance, body image, sexuality, disability and self esteem.” They place great value on the empathetic nature of the community: “By and large people are incredibly supportive of each other which really helps to mitigate all the pressure we get from family, friends and perfect strangers to feel ashamed of our bodies and try to become thinner” (2009, 83).

The fatosphere is anchored by Notes from the Fatosphere, an aggregate online daily news feed (http://notesfromthefatosphere.blogspot.com/) that alerts subscribers when new posts are made to fat acceptance blogs. The feed includes self-identified FA blogs that have been in existence for at least three months and focus their content on fat acceptance and fat-related commentary, but not pro-diet or weight-loss approaches. Subscribing to the feed via Feedly.com is a way for individuals to link to the major blogs of the FA community and begin finding opportunities for commenting and participation. In the two year period from January 2012 to January 2014, the number of blogs subscribed to the Notes feed varied from 40 to 66, indicating the dynamic nature of the blogosphere as a whole and the routine start-up and termination of blogs. As of July 2014, 40 blogs were subscribed to the feed.

What do fatosphere bloggers write about? Like mommybloggers who give detailed reports on bedtime routines, diapering issues, and the joys and frustrations of raising children (Lopez 2009), bloggers of size (who are predominantly female) post about their everyday experiences living as fat women in fat bodies. They describe the challenges of shopping for clothing, pursuing romantic relationships, showing up to job interviews, and finding health care providers who treat them with respect. They encourage one another to think positively about their bodies and to resist hegemonic cultural messages that demonize fat and equate female beauty only with thin, curvy shapes (Harriger et al. 2010, Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012). They tell stories of rejection, of anger at unwanted public comment and intrusion, and of emotional burnout. Yet they also revel in moments of self-acceptance and contentment. A common theme explores creative and empowering ways of transcending limitations, such as figuring out what to do when registering for a marathon as a woman prevents the fat female runner and author of the Big Fit Deal blog from requesting a men’s size XXL t-shirt. Another layer is confessional, such as admitting that you slipped and binged and purged again after promising to abandon those behaviors. In sharing these kinds of experiences, they are doing more than writing personal online diaries; they are also unmasking the ways that fat bias constructs their emotional states and constricts opportunities.

Fat acceptance bloggers use their blogs for the purposes of self-expression, to challenge social and medical assumptions about fat people, to escape the oppressive mainstream environment where the thin ideal is dominant, and to build a community
of supporters who see fat as a positive aspect of identity. FA blogger Kath describes the fatosphere as including “anyone who believes in and supports the rights of fat people to live their lives with respect, dignity and without discrimination or vilification” (Fat Heffalump, 25 June 2013). FA activist Ragen Chastain, author of the Dances with Fat blog, concurs: “I want to reiterate that all fat people... have the right to exist in the world without bullying, stereotyping or stigma. The rights to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and basic respect are not size- or habit- dependent. Fat people should not have to “earn” the right to live in the world without condescension...” (Dances with Fat, 10 March 2014). We should note that Chastain includes “the pursuit of happiness” in her definition. Readers of Chastain’s blog will discover that her pursuit of happiness includes not only the acceptance but also the celebration of fat and what she can do with her fat body—Chastain is a champion dancer—and a steadfast decision not to pursue the “wants” (the thin body) that society tells us to want in order to be happy (Ahmed 2010, 216). She consciously and vocally refuses to transform herself to accommodate other people’s happiness and by voicing unhappiness with the status quo, Dances with Fat becomes a political text.

Fat Acceptance Blogs and Redefining Happiness

In The Promise of Happiness, Ahmed asserts that unhappiness must be reconceptualized as a valuable emotional state. She argues that we need to move away from the dominant societal norm of happiness as the desired endpoint of all human endeavors and instead be more accepting of unhappiness—or at least of different ways of being happy. At present, rushing toward a prescribed type of happiness is presumed to be the logical course of human action. Consider an unhappy child and the way adults will coax, wheedle, and implore just to restore a smile to her face because we cannot bear to see her “unhappy.” Or, consider the scores of best-selling books on happiness, such as Gretchen Rubin’s The Happiness Project, which offers concrete daily strategies for quantifiably increasing one’s happiness quotient. If we stop insisting on happiness, though, we are able to slow down and really see social problems and injustices around us. In this way, unhappiness might work as “a form of political action: the act of saying no or of pointing out injuries as an ongoing present affirms something, right from the beginning” (Ahmed 2010b, 219). Being vocal about one’s unhappiness and its causal factors can be a powerful step toward corrective action.

FA blogs are full of musings on happiness and unhappiness and taken together they offer insight into the ways that fat bias circulates and how it creates injustice in the lived experiences of fat women. They can be read politically as “narrative[s] of rage” (Ahmed 2010a, 37) in which bloggers reveal that the object that was promised to bring happiness (thinness and the thin ideal) is actually a cause of disappointment and oppression. This disjuncture is expressed in anger directed toward various entities. These include most commonly: 1) friends, family members, and others who insist that happiness is achieved through the thin body and that a fat person can only be unhappy; 2) popular media that depict the fat body as a source of shame; and 3) the medical establishment that seeks to “cure” fat people of their disease.
Jeanette, a fat exercise instructor and Hollywood producer who blogs at *The Fat Chick Sings*, explains that friends, family, and media portrayals deny the possibility that fat people can truly be happy. She finds their patronizing insistence that she suffers from “false consciousness” personally destructive:

> I think one of the most difficult barriers I’ve encountered on my journey towards self acceptance is the constant barrage of input telling me that people in larger bodies can’t really be “happy.” In stark contrast to the “fat and jolly” stereotype is the notion that all fat people are unhappy deep down. And this information is everywhere. From our television and magazine advertising to barroom pop psychology to well meaning friends and relatives, it seems like a lot of people are pretty sure I would be a lot happier if I would just lose weight.

> “But I am pretty happy,” I tell folks. Their reply, “Not really. If you were really happy you wouldn’t be fat.” (*The Fat Chick Sings*, 7 March 2014)

JoGeek, the blogger behind *Unapologetically Fat*, also implicates popular media and advertising for their roles in oppressing fat women, tearing down their self-esteem and creating a roller-coaster of emotions:

> Through media, ads, and societal pressure we are sometimes fooled into thinking that it’s possible to go through life smiling 100% every day without fail or discouragement.... I have some days when I feel like I can conquer the world, write a novel and declutter the house in the same afternoon. On those days, body acceptance is easy. I can laugh off negative body messages with scorn and engage the haters with cool confidence. I have other days when a casual fat joke in a television show or a billboard for bariatric surgery will send me into a dark, unshakable, pessimistic funk for the rest of the day.... Most days are somewhere in-between. (*Unapologetically Fat*, 9 October 2012)

Kath at *Fat Heffalump* expressed feelings of grief, shame, and unhappiness on her blog when the American Medical Association declared obesity a disease whose sufferers require medical help:

> I feel so defeated today. I feel so disheartened. I feel so cheated. I feel like I’m being marked as inferior, defective, broken. Simply because my body happens to fall on the far end of a bell curve of diverse human bodies. Simply because my body doesn’t fall in the small peak of the bell curve, the median of human bodies, a tiny arbitrary band of people who are granted the “normal” status just because they’re in the middle statistically. (*Fat Heffalump*, 19 June 2013).

For Kath, this personal attack marks her body as a site of public health crisis for the seemingly arbitrary reason that she falls on the high end of the weight spectrum. It adds to her injury in a society that already rejects her body aesthetically, and now publicly labels it as unhealthy, dangerous, and in need of state intervention. In response, Kath uses her blog to resist this new shaming discourse and to refute the way that the medical establishment frames her as a problematic member of society:
But being at one end of the statistics doesn’t reflect who I am. It doesn’t reflect how I feel. It doesn’t reflect what my body can do. It doesn’t reflect my value as a human being.

Kath protests the diagnosis that society seeks to thrust upon her, and claims an oppositional stance to mainstream ideas about the need to “fix” fat bodies to make them healthy, productive, and capable of happiness. Jeanette, JoGeek, and Kath all use their blogs to contest what society tells them they should feel, that is, ashamed and remorseful about being fat. They are comfortable expressing their unhappiness with the way that they are treated in society. By refusing to capitulate to the thin ideal or to agree that thinness in practice is the only path to happiness, they also help us see how oppressive that ideal truly is.

Conclusion

One way to understand the radicalness of the fatsphere and fat acceptance blogging is to consider just how rigid the thin-ideal is for women. FA bloggers contest a dominant western, but increasingly globalized, way of seeing and controlling women that normalizes the extremely thin body and marginalizes and stigmatizes the fat body. The pressure for women to meet thinness standards is unremitting, and as our FA bloggers indicate, it is exerted by interpersonal, mediated, and institutional sources. Thinness has come to be “the basis on which other feminine achievement rests and without which happiness and success are undermined” (Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012, 415). FA bloggers deconstruct the thin ideal and the “religion” of body control, in which “women are socialized to view the ongoing surveillance of their bodies as a form of empowerment that arises from self-love” (Spitzack 1990, 35). They are working to reclaim the fat body from its pejorative context and to replace stigma with acceptance.

Being fat exposes women to bias across all sectors, including education, housing, employment, healthcare, and peer and family relationships (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012, Farrell 2011). The mandate to be thin is not only cosmetic, but also carries with it substantive privilege that benefits slim women at work, at school, and in every setting where negative associations with the fat body limit fat women’s opportunities. Research demonstrates, for example, that parents of fat daughters do not support their college tuition costs at the same rate and frequency that they support costs for normal weight daughters and sons (Crandall 1995). They attach the stereotypes of lazy and lacking self-discipline to the fat daughters and conclude that they are less likely to complete college successfully and are less deserving of financial help (Crandall 1995). Fatosphere bloggers are leading a political movement to highlight how insidious (and how socially accepted) fat bias is, to call attention to the injustice it creates, to explain how devalued fat people feel, and to try to bring about some degree of fat acceptance in a society that stigmatizes and ridicules fat people, especially fat women.

Clare Hemmings (2012) has analyzed the politicizing potential of affect and argues that “politics can be characterized as that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know” (2012, 151 emphasis mine). Most people living in western
nations recognize the existence of a thin imperative for women, that it is socially preferable to be thin. Yet far fewer understand the emotional realities of living as a fat woman. Unless one has lived in a fat body, and experienced what Five Hundred Pound Peep described on her blog as the “horrified look of disgust” and the resulting hot flush of shame to one’s cheeks that spreads like flames over the body, it is difficult to know the oppression that fat people endure in a thin-centered society. Yet this intense affective experience, what Ben Highmore (2010, 119) has described as “getting in among the murky connections between fabrics and feelings, between the glutinous and the guffaw” is precisely what is needed to understand the fat experience and be moved to corrective political action.

In this essay, I have argued that engagement with the authors and blogs who populate the fatosphere can help increase empathy and insight regarding fat women’s lived experiences and emotions. Just as heterosexual supporters of gay marriage have come to see this cause as a moral and civil rights issue, people outside the fat community could similarly be moved to stand up against fat discrimination by better understanding the issues and emotions at hand. Affect is a powerful mover; in the view of Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010, 25), emotions carry “intensities and resonances that impinge well beyond the printed page”—indeed, the blogs of the fatosphere are more than a collection of words and thoughts. Taken together, they are powerful political texts that have much to teach us about how fat discrimination makes people feel. Moving forward, it will be important for the fatosphere to represent accurately the multiplicity of voices, identities, intersectionalities, and subject positions that fat people embody. No one fat person can speak for all, nor can one speak for all fat women and/or queer fat women and/or fat women of color, etc. Multiple accounts representing diverse perspectives will open the door to a richer picture of fat culture than previously seen.

I have also argued, following Sara Ahmed and other affect theorists, that FA bloggers are “affect aliens” who are read as necessarily unhappy by friends, families, strangers, and society as a whole because they refuse to accommodate to what we are told is the prerequisite for female happiness. They interrupt the happiness of others who agree with dominant regimes and make them uncomfortable as physical reminders of the sexist ways in which women are valued foremost for their bodies. They frustrate those around them when they protest that the costs of agreement (what it requires to be thin) are unreasonably high, and when they insist on voicing their unhappiness with the discriminatory conditions that fat people face. The fat woman who stubbornly endorses her value challenges the very premise of socially sanctioned happiness for women. In this formulation, the fat acceptance activist demands freedom from that narrow vision of happiness—she demands the freedom to be affected by what is unhappy and to live a life that might make others unhappy through its nonconformity. Fat women who are public advocates for fat acceptance, and who are unrepentant, and even celebratory of their fatness, are claiming the freedom to live lives that deviate from the expected, rigid paths that denote “happiness” for women.
Finally, I close by noting that safe online spaces such as the fatosphere should not be regarded as utopian. Finding a supportive online community does not erase the realities of power relations in a patriarchal, capitalist, racist, heterosexist state. For fat women, the existence of FA blogs should be regarded as a significant support mechanism, but not one that will obliterate the very real structural forces of discrimination. To change the material conditions of fat people’s lives, and to deliver the freedom that fat activists seek, we will need both a shift in cultural attitudes so that the ridicule of fat people is no longer tolerated, and concrete legal change through anti-weight discrimination laws that offer formal protections.

NOTES

1. For example, the Chicago Tribune dubbed feminist author and fat activist Kate Harding, who is white, heterosexual, middle class, and holds B.A. and M.F.A. degrees, the “Queen of the Fat-o-Sphere” in April 2009. At that time, she was blogging on fat acceptance at Shapely Prose, which is currently inactive. Leading bloggers in the fatosphere, such as Marianne Kirby, coauthor with Harding of Lessons from the Fat-o-sphere: Quit Dieting and Declare a Truce with Your Body (2009), have argued that fat activists must do more to address intersectionality and the specific oppressions faced by fat people of color, queer fat people, trans fat people, etc. Writing on her blog, The Rotund, in 2012 and 2013, Kirby insisted that the fat acceptance movement would fail if it did not make a conscious effort to be more concerned with intersectionality and specifically more sensitive to issues of race. See Kirby, “Intersectional Fat Acceptance, Building Community and Not Being Part of the Mainstream,” The Rotund (blog), 26 June 2013, http://www.therotund.com/?p=1248.


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*Unapologetically Fat* (blog), http://unapologeticallyfat.blogspot.com


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This paper examines the archive of Valerie Solanas in relation to madness, rationality, and agentic power. Solanas’s archive is largely centered around two events: the publishing of the feminist treaty SCUM Manifesto, and the nearly lethal assault on Andy Warhol. There is a divergence in how critical responses account for the relationship between text and action, and I assign to these respective readings a humanist and an avant-garde function. While a humanist reading focuses on the narration and rationalization of Solanas’s individual life, an avant-garde reading sees Solanas as part of a collective fore-guard that seeks to revolutionize history. I question both readings and ask whether Solanas can be understood as arriving from behind, occupying her own queer position of the “rear-guard.”

The archive of Valerie Solanas, an assemblage comprised of her actions, writings, and their circulation and reception, is marked by deep tensions between history, fiction, and critical thought. Whether read as a homicidal inpatient, a near-fictional cartoon character, a militant writer, or a groundbreaking revolutionary, Solanas’s entire project has either been dismissed as driven by madness, or defended and in turn recommended for inclusion in mainstream discourse. In both approaches, Solanas’s archive is caught within a dichotomy of forced inclusion or complete exclusion from public discourse. These two approaches reveal an underlying binary between madness and normality, wherein madness has little or no agency and the “normal” is sanitized and reduced to select emotions. Reading Solanas as a feminist feeler driven by vision, intuition, and affect can offer an alternative to the binary that emerges from the hegemony of rationality in Western thought and society.

Solanas’s attempted murder of artist Andy Warhol took place in 1968, the same year that she self-published Scum Manifesto, constituting a powerful attack on the human male. Ever since, the connection between the shots and the manifesto has been discussed. In the critical responses to Solanas’s history there is a divergence in terms of how they treat the relationship between text and action. I assign to these diverging accounts either a humanist or an avant-garde tendency. While the former insists on a separation between the attempted murder on Warhol and the feminist treaty Scum Manifesto, the latter argues for a generative interplay between writing and performance, art and violence.

The humanist account becomes an attempt to recast Solanas into a position as a feminist icon that aims to (reductively) explain the events in her life and the SCUM Manifesto. The violence of Solanas’s assault on Warhol is ultimately circumvented in order to prevent it from contaminating the legitimacy of the (already and in itself violent) manifesto and the legacy of Solanas as a feminist icon. By contrast, an avant-
garde reading of Solanas refuses to separate manifesto and assault, but inscribes instead the famous shooting of Andy Warhol into Solanas’s project, a project that both exceeds as well as it invokes art, writing, and life. [1] Understood performatively, Solanas’s act can no longer constitute a singular biographical event, but is instead rendered as a multiple, unstable, and dangerously productive enterprise.

I draw the concept of the avant-garde tendency from James Harding’s essay “The Simplest Surrealist Act: Valerie Solanas and the (Re)Assertion of Avantgarde Priorities.” Harding argues that Solanas’s manifesto and assault of Warhol situated her within the boundaries of the avant-garde. Harding stresses the importance of feminist writings in the reception history of Solanas; however, he argues that the tendency to see the assault on Warhol and the violent content of the manifesto as indications of social problems faced by women is problematic. He suggests that a more fruitful reading of Solanas would be to see her more in alignment with the avant-garde. Following Harding, my claim is that much of Solanas’s reception takes a reductionist approach to Solanas’s defiance in order to include it into the feminist canon; ultimately, this approach works to reinstate the deviant female figure into the humanized discourse it originally seeks to avoid. In addition, I use the term humanist to describe a general orientation towards the human. This orientation is essentially centered on the traditional idea of the human as a thinking subject derived through the Cartesian Cogito (Derrida 2008, 76). Also, it privileges the position of “human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from the Renaissance” (Wolfe 2010, 38) that renders what is defined as human in a superior position to what is defined as non-human (as for example animals).

In Antigone’s Claim – Kinship between Life and Death, Judith Butler detects a loss of Antigone’s defiance due to a “trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims” (Butler 2000, 1). While not a mythological figure, Solanas’s legacy of defiance has been subject to much the same trend, and its loss and misinterpretation are due to a “humanization” of female defiance. As defiant female figures sharing much the same fate in terms of how they are used and misused in order to be included into a feminist discourse, it is useful to compare Antigone and Solanas here.

In Avital Ronell’s preface to the latest English edition of the SCUM Manifesto, “Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas,” Ronell points out that Solanas’s defiance is a process of “becoming man,” which leads Solanas’s project into confusion, if not even failure (Ronell 2004, 18). I interrogate this concept of becoming, opposing a becoming in language to a becoming as a body. Ronell’s reading of the becoming process of Solanas situates gender as a concept in language, whereas Solanas’s utopian visions for a purely female society are based on the concept of gender as a physical attribute. While the former is defined in terms of culture and residing within a “human” territory, the latter surpasses and exceeds the humanized territory of language.
An avant-garde reading places Solanas’s actions within a staged and to some extent premeditated context of the aesthetic event. In this context the act of violence becomes aestheticized. Such a reading does not only alter what an aesthetical event can be, but the direction from which Solanas is arriving. As part of the avant-garde, the loner and misfit Solanas is walking in the fore-guard. Defiant (and criminal) female figures such as Antigone, Medea, Medusa, and Aileen Wournos share what Susan Suleiman coins a “double marginality.” They are marginal by way of being both women and criminal. They arrive from the rear, the same direction from which Solanas traditionally has been seen arriving. A double marginality could easily be seen as a lack in (political) power and result in a desire to re-position these women to the “front.”

However, in Sara Ahmed’s view the “rear” does not need to become the “front” in order to gain force and political potential. Rather, its potential resides in it exactly being the “rear”:

We have to walk differently: it is not that those behind come to the front, but that staying back gives you the time to question, to ask rather than tell. A politics of the rear is still a movement. When the wretched are walking, the feet are talking. To keep walking, to keep going, to keep coming up, is a certain kind of talking, talking to not talking at (Ahmed 2013).

According to Ahmed, it is not the ones in the front who can change the course of history, but rather the ones coming from behind. As opposed to the avant-garde, the force of the rear-guard rests exactly in the fact that they arrive from this “marginalized” position. Unlike the “fore-guard” that only possesses the power to align itself with the already existing political structures, the rear-guard can transform the direction of politics and “can rewrite that history from this view” (Ahmed).

Legacies of Defiance

Solanas’s act is usually told to have taken place according to these lines: On June 3 1968, sometime around 9 A.M, she went to the Chelsea Hotel and asked if her publisher Maurice Giordias was there. After being told that he was away for the weekend, she waited around, with the hope that he might still show up. After several hours of waiting, she left, and headed to Andy Warhol’s studio, the Factory, to see if she could get hold of Warhol instead. Meeting Warhol’s associate Paul Morrissey outside, she told him, “I’m waiting for Andy to get money.” Morrissey told her that Warhol was out, to which she replied “Well that’s all right. I’ll wait.” At 4:15 P.M., Warhol finally arrived and Solanas accompanied him up the elevator. She was dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and a raincoat, her hair was styled, and she was wearing lipstick and make-up. She was carrying a small brown paper bag. Warhol commented on her appearance saying, “Look, doesn’t Valerie look good!” Warhol received a phone call. As he spoke on the phone, Solanas shot him three times. The first two
shots missed, at which point Warhol pleaded with Solanas not to do it. The shot went through several of Warhol’s vital organs. Solanas proceeded to fire more shots against art critic and curator Mario Amaya; one shot hit him above his right hip. She also turned to Fred Hughes, Warhol’s manager. She put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, but at this point the gun jammed. The elevator door opened with no one in it. Hughes suggested that Solanas get on the elevator. Solanas replied that that was a good idea, and left the scene.

The question I want to pursue is in this paper is: after Solanas left the scene, did her act end? As opposed to Solanas, Antigone is a fictional character. According to Butler, Antigone’s crime was to bury her brother Polynices after her uncle King Creon had prohibited such a burial. Polynices leads an army against his other brother, Eteocles, claiming what he believes is his rightful place as the inheritor of the throne. Both brothers die, and, as a punishment, Creon wants Polynices’s body to be left outside the city to be “dishonored and ravaged” (8). Antigone defies Creon and buries her brother twice; the second time, the guards report seeing her.

Butler considers Antigone’s crime in two stages: the physical crime of burying her brother, and her refusal to admit to the burial when standing in front of Creon. Antigone refuses to deny that it was she who did it, but, as Butler points out, Antigone does not simply say, “I did the deed.” By refusing to be forced into denial, Antigone takes on the language of Creon himself. Butler asserts that Creon “expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech by asserting her own sovereignty [...] her autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice of the one she resists” (11).

Throughout the scholarship on Antigone her intentions have been debated, whether they are due to gender issues, incestuous love and a confused sense of kinship, an intention to follow divine law, a strive for self-annihilation, or as a conflict between the state and family (Mader 2005, 19). Since Antigone’s defiance leads both to an alignment with the voice of her opponent and to her death, Butler questions whether Antigone is able to escape from the forms of power that she opposes. In Butler’s argument Antigone’s orientation changes as she takes up the “fore-guard.” As an alternative to the impasse described by Butler, Antigone’s intentions may, in much the same way as Solanas’s, be seen through the scope of the feral creature, motivated by vision, intuition, and affect. We can therefore see both Solanas and Antigone as taking up space, and as continuously arriving from of the “rear.”

Similar to Antigone’s acts, Solanas’ acts are delivered in stages: the physical crime of the shooting and a verbal testimony in front of the court. Brought before Manhattan Criminal Court, Solanas told the judge: “It’s not often that I shoot somebody. I didn’t do it for nothing. Warhol had me tied up, lock, stock and barrel. He was going to do something to me which would have ruined me” (Ebert 2010, 92). When asked if she could afford an attorney, she replied: “No, I can’t. I want to defend myself. This is
going to stay in my own competent hands. I was right in what I did! I have nothing to regret!” (Bockris 2009, 305) Her comments were stricken from the court record and she was admitted by the judge to Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric observation.

Both Antigone and Solanas refuse to deny the accusations against them. Antigone refuses to deny disobeying Creon’s decree, and Solanas refuses to deny the attempted murder on Andy Warhol and three others. Solanas openly declares to have not only broken the law, but also to have acted correctly in doing so. Solanas claims her act before the court of law. By performing these speech acts, Solanas, with an affirmation, and Antigone with a double negation in the refusal to deny as well as the refusal to confess, both articulate the discontinuities in legal discourse and in fact resist its performativity.

Solanas affirms her act. To say “Yes, I did it” is to “claim the act, but it is also to commit another deed in the very claiming: the act of publishing one’s deed, a new criminal venture that redoubles and takes the place of the old,” as Butler writes (8). And so Solanas publishes her deed. As such, her deed is redoubled—in fact her deed is no longer only one deed but a set of two, the original and the one she claims.

According to Butler, the female crime, when enacted in language, becomes a male crime whereby female defiance is caught in a problem of circularity. The publishing of the crime takes place in language and, as Butler notes, by acting in language Antigone cannot survive the act as a woman, for she is implicated in “the masculine excess called hubris” (10). The female perpetrator, paradoxically, embodies ‘the norms of the power she opposes’ (10). ‘And so, as she begins to act in language, she also departs from herself” (10). In her preface to the SCUM Manifesto, Avital Ronell makes a similar claim when she asks, “how can you launch a war against war?” (14). In order to go to war against war, Solanas ironically must embody the war machine of her opponent. She inevitably has to take on manhood, whereby she is reproducing “the war zone of her declared target,” in Ronell’s words (14). Solanas then comes to embody the full arsenal of the violence of her opponent, and this exchange of affect is how she re-enacts, with a difference, the assemblage of patriarchy: she comes to it through irrational language and perhaps insanity, pushing to the foreground, rather than towards the “double margins” of the defiant female character.

What is then the purpose of that act—how can defiance be possible if acting against an opposing force simply works to reinstate the opponent? Butler’s solution is that the distinction between the two principles is confounded on the rhetorical level, whereby the stability of the distinction is brought into crisis. This might be sufficient for a linguistic act, but what if the distinction between the two principles is not enough? What if the crisis that is sought goes beyond a crisis within mere “language” and seeks to enter “bare life,” the “zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast” (Agamben 1998, 109).
If Solanas’s target was precisely “life,” a life that exceeds the boundaries of language, then it might be helpful to follow James Harding in his argument that Solanas performed an avant-garde act that impatiently sought to exit the realms of reason or language in order to enter life, affect, and bodily matter itself.

In his essay, Harding attempts to situate Solanas’s manifesto and assault within the boundaries of the avant-garde as well as cutting these very boundaries open. The key to Harding’s argument is his reading of the shooting and the manifesto as part of the same performance, bringing Solanas’s archive into an altogether different course than the one described above.

At the basis of Harding’s reading is the small brown paper bag that Solanas was carrying on the day of the shooting. Solanas left the bag on the table close to where Warhol was talking on the phone. The bag contained three items: a pistol, Solanas’s address book, and a woman’s menstrual pad. The items echoed “a sense of incongruity” that “had been hovering about Solanas,” the incongruity being a sense that these small but “not insignificant” items served to stage the assassination (Harding 2001, 147). Of course, Harding stresses that the actual violence of Solanas’s act served as a harsh reminder that the assassination was not merely staged (147). But in the in-between of violence and art, in between the small items and the pistol shots, Harding finds a Solanas who “constructed a mode of performance that absolutely defied the conventions of mainstream theatre and tore at the very conceptual fabric of the avant-garde” (147). In doing so, the little brown paper bag played a major part, since it not only established Solanas’s act as an aesthetic performance but also as a performance that “transgressed decorum by calling attention to basic feminine experiences that were publicly taboo and tacitly elided within avant-garde circles” (147).

According to Harding, Solanas both employed and resisted avant-garde methods, and thus she reinvented the avant-garde for her own ends. The brutality of the shooting is not a problem in Harding’s argument; instead, it works to exceed language only to re-enter it immediately when her act, staged as a performance, becomes a union between radical art and radical politics.

When he emphasizes the “avant-garde dynamic” between the manifesto and the shooting of Warhol, Harding establishes a connection between art and violence—if shooting and art can indeed share such an intimacy—that, he argues, is also included Solanas’s writing.

The Physical Act and the Manifesto

In “We Who Are Free, Are We Free?” Hélène Cixous describes A Society of Lies that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable murder—if a man murders and rapes it is “pitiful and therefore acceptable,” but when a woman enacts the same it brings about an altogether different result (Cixous 1993, 212):
Inexplicable, monstrous, appalling, incomprehensible is the crime of that unnatural woman who has poisoned her husband. A woman kills: we are horrified. A man kills, nothing could be more natural. That’s what our society thinks: if a woman gets killed, we’re used to that, we understand that. I’m talking about my country. And here, how are things here? What I have just said is one of the ethical and statistical truths that disgust our society. It mustn’t be said. It mustn’t be touched. It’s foul (212).

As Harding has pointed out the sheer violence of Solanas’s shooting has tended to be silenced and reduced, reaching a marginalized state outside the human realm, much like what Hélène Cixous describes. However, as Harding notes, it is not only the female crime that places women on the margins. Harding links Susan Suleiman’s term “double marginality” to Solanas’s archive, as he observes “a fundamental and uncompromisingly irreconcilable antagonism between the cultural margins occupied by the avantgarde and the cultural margins occupied by women” (147).

When connecting Solanas’s writing and shooting, Harding’s aim is not to contest earlier feminist readings of Solanas’s significance, which have understood the shooting to have been dictated by the manifesto. However, he finds that, in these readings, Solanas’s act of violence has been justified as the misguided solution to the “real social problems that real women face” –the result of historical conditions, but not something that can be seriously endorsed (157). The result of these readings, according to Harding, is that they embrace Solanas’s writing (to some extent) but that they exclude the shooting in order to preserve the value of the manifesto as a feminist text (157). Because it is important to Harding’s argument that Solanas’s feminist concerns “derive much of their force from the avantgarde [sic] context that generated them,” he proposes a re-reading of Solanas’s significance (147). What Harding finds is that this re-reading encompasses a revision of the reception of Solanas’s work as well as the history of the American avant-garde itself. According to Harding, this revision begins with a “fundamental realignment of the respective cultural values that critics have given to her manifesto and to her act of violence” (147). Through such a realignment, Harding counters the tendency to force either shooting or manifesto to the background.

Both the avant-garde and Solanas’s projects can arguably be seen as failed (Heyd 1991, 69), and through his argument Harding shows that this assumed failure can be subverted for both by way of Solanas’s actions and writings. The important shift in Harding’s argument is a turn away from a biographical understanding of Solanas towards an understanding of her writing and action as part of a larger political and artistic movement. Harding’s aim is not to include Solanas within mainstream society, but rather to expand the reading of her project. Solanas’s role as a woman is of essence here. In acknowledging that Solanas’s and the avant-garde’s aims are directed towards the outskirts of the human field, or even towards a non-human or post-human existence, they can attain their force from the “rear” as described by Ahmed or as a “double marginality” as described by Suleiman. As when tracing the passage of
the agent’s action into language in Butler’s argument, language’s means to reach into a de-humanized field is under inquiry here. If language does not possess this ability, I ask whether the non-human field can only be reached by way of the very action itself. In particular, I inquire as to whether the defiant female act, such as Solanas’s, is especially prone to reaching this realm.

Although the woman who kills is apparently unspeakable, untouchable, and foul, she still lingers through history never to be quite forgotten. Here we find Antigone, Medea, Medusa, and Wournos residing alongside each other. Some are mythical and fictional figures and some are actual historical women. The incomprehensible monstrosity of a woman who kills brings the very real act of Solanas towards a ghostly appearance, paradoxically giving it what I call a “double ability.” As Harding has shown us, the ability to wound, to render both physical as well as cultural wounds, to align with the avant-garde as well as to exceed it, shows that a female crime causes wounds that are different than male crimes. Female crime is marginalized, but not failed. Rather, as a mystery, it attains a power that transgresses the borders of time, space and history into what can be called the archive of Solanas.

The Manifesto

As discussed above, Solanas’s acts inflicted bodily wounds, and exceeded the territory of language even as they were infiltrated by it. With the writing of her manifesto, she performed a double act of signification, wherein language becomes active and in fact catalyzes events. Solanas conceived of her text as divided into two sections: “the first part of the Manifesto is an analysis of male psychology, and the second is what to do about it” (Heller 2009, 143). SCUM Manifesto’s declared opponent is man: “a walking abortion…the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene, that is, it has an incomplete set of chromosomes,” employing scientific language to make her argument (Solanas 2004, 35-6). To be male, according to Solanas, is to be deficient; in fact, he is a disease and emotionally he is crippled (37). Man is in fact half-dead, “halfway between humans and apes,” (1) and “to call man an animal is to flatter him” (37). Not quite human and close to the animal, he is also a machine and “a walking dildo,” for the drive of his sexual desires lies as the basis for his every action (37).

According to Solanas, the male is utterly egocentric, unable to relate to others, to have empathy or to identify, and more importantly, he is inherently passive. What man does with his passivity is to hate it, and because man is unable to bear his passivity he projects “it onto women, defines the male as active, then sets out to prove that he is a Man” (61). His main means of proving that he is not passive is by “screwing,” as Solanas puts it. But since he is “attempting to prove an error,” he must “prove it again and again. Screwing, then, is a desperate compulsive, attempt to prove he’s not passive, not a woman; but he is passive and does want to be a woman” (37). In Solanas’s terminology, man is not really a man but spends his life becoming female, a
continual attempt that he tries to accomplish by “constantly seeking out, fraternizing with and trying to live through and fuse with the female, and by claiming as his own all female characteristics” (37-8). The female characteristics man takes on as his own are: emotional strength and independence, forcefulness, dynamism, decisiveness, coolness, objectivity, assertiveness, courage, integrity, vitality, intensity, depth of character, and grooviness, among others. Having taken on these qualities, he then projects his own traits onto women: vanity, frivolity, triviality, and weakness. Man does excel in one field though, Solanas concludes, and that is in public relations, where man has done a “brilliant job convincing millions of women that men are women and women are men” (38).

Aside from being passive, and projecting his weaknesses onto women, he is responsible for various crimes and unnecessary duties. He is responsible for war, as a compensation for not being female (38). He is the inventor of money, but “there is no human reason for money” (39). He works, but there is no reason for anyone to work, for “work could have been automated long ago” (39). He created the institutions of marriage, prostitution, and fatherhood, which “lead[s] to a lifelong obsession with being approved of” (43). Because he is deeply ashamed of his animality, man furthermore enforces a “social code” that suppresses his individuality. Man is, Solanas writes, merely a member of the species, he does not have individuality and is interchangeable with every other man: “males differ from each other only to the degree and in the ways they attempt to defend against their passivity and against their desire to be female” (46). What he is, however, “acutely aware of” is “female individuality” (46). He doesn’t comprehend it, it frightens him and fills him with envy; he therefore denies it and instead produces “identity,” which is the definition of everyone in terms of their function, and so “assigns himself of course the highest positions, president, doctor, scientist” (46).

The female has to take complete charge “whether she likes it or not,” Solanas argues, because man is in the process of “gradually eliminating himself” through wars, race riots, and because men are “becoming fags or are obliterating themselves through drugs” (67). Man is in the process of destroying himself but the process is slow and “SCUM” is impatient: “SCUM is not consoled that future generations will thrive; SCUM will grab some thrilling living for itself” (69). The key strategy needed for SCUM to take over, which can be achieved in a few weeks if a large majority of women became SCUM, is “simply by withdrawing from the labour force, thereby paralyzing the whole nation” (69). Additional measures that will be “sufficient to disrupt the economy and everything else” are for women to “declare themselves off the money system, stop buying, just loot and simply refuse to obey laws” (69). Women can also “simply” leave men, Solanas suggests. SCUM will become members of the “unwork force, the fuck-up force, they will get jobs of various kinds and unwork” (71). But beyond unworking, exiting the monetary system, and leaving men, SCUM will also actively “kill all men who are not members of the Men’s Auxiliary for SCUM. Men in the Men’s Auxiliary are those who are working diligently to eliminate themselves, men who regardless of their motives are doing good, men who are playing pal with SCUM” (72).
Defining SCUM

SCUM, according to Solanas, comprises those “females...who trust only their own animal, gutter instincts, who equate Culture with chicks, whose sole diversion is prowling for emotional thrills and excitement.” SCUM is also those who “by the standards of our culture are SCUM...these females are cool and relatively cerebral and skirting asexuality” (61). SCUM is those females who do not belong to a specific group but who possess certain characteristics: they are dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females, and they “consider themselves fit to rule the universe” (70).

SCUM is usually read as an acronym for “Society for Cutting Up Men” (Heller 2009, 168) and as an illustration of Solanas’s intentions for “what to do about” the male problem (143). The manifesto, however, never mentions the acronym, and in “Shooting Solanas: Radical Feminist History and the Technology of Failure,” Dana Heller argues that there is no reliable evidence that Solanas intended her title to be an acronym. In fact, as Heller states, “one source suggests that Solanas never intended SCUM as an acronym at all” (168). The source is an unpublished 1975 interview with Solanas. Jane Caputi, one of the interviewers, recalls Solanas insisting that “the acronym ‘Society for Cutting Up Men’ was the fabrication of her publisher, Maurice Girodias” (168). Solanas, Heller continues, did not intend any connection between the manifesto and the shooting, and her usage of the term “scum” was, Caputi recollects, “based on a subversive appropriation insofar as ‘scum’ signifies women’s debased status in a male-defined system of social values.” Solanas intended to playfully reverse this meaning so that SCUM would mean “female genius...the females who are the grooviest and most cerebral” (168). Solanas’s version of a genius or of the “relatively cerebral” comes to mean something else than greatness within what is culturally acceptable; in Solanas’s words, the female SCUMs are inverted into greatness, but simultaneously the implications of “greatness” and “acceptable” are confronted with new meanings (168).

Harding reads SCUM along a similar line as does Heller, and finds the term SCUM to be “the most famous but oddly the least discussed aspect of Solanas’s work” (148). Harding claims that the term suggests a more literal meaning, with reference “to the derisively low social status that, according to Solanas, women are relegated to in patriarchal society,” emphasizing the powerful inversion of “scum” (148):

one of the first instances of an individual or a group publicly embracing and appropriating an offensive characterization for a political agenda running directly counter to its derogatory implications. SCUM thereby subverts an accepted linguistic order as a titular point of departure for a group of women actively and radically engaged in subverting the social order that represses them (148).
SCUM, as Harding sees it, is the subversion of the derogatory status of women and here he is in alignment with Heller’s reading of Solanas’s intention. He departs, however, from Solanas’s rejection of the acronym when he continues to read it in terms of a striking back, although not physically, where the acronym SCUM “threatens a graphically violent response to the violence that historically has been perpetuated against women” (148). By the simultaneous inversion of the meaning of SCUM as well as the threat it poses, the manifesto’s title becomes a break with what Harding reads as “the existing traditions of the avant-garde,” and it becomes instead “a countervailing point of critical tension in a radical juxtaposition of irreconcilable, mutually exclusive aesthetic agendas” (148).

Ronell finds in SCUM the same double connection between female violence and the avant-garde. Ronell comments on “the unreadability” of the title and notes that if we accept the acronym, the “cutting up” links Solanas to Lorena Bobbitt. However, beyond a violent female background, Ronell observes that the title also links Solanas to avant-garde techniques such as “laughter, montage, editing” (11). In the juxtapositions between the verb “cutting,” as either a disfigurement of a body or as a collage technique employed by the avant-garde, Ronell’s argument parallels Harding’s:

[The verb “cutting”] may strike directly at male anxieties about dismemberment, there is a more subtle allusion in Solanas’s acronymic title. It recalls perhaps the most innovative aesthetic strategy of subversion historically employed by the avant-garde, namely the subversive cutting up, recontextualization, and radical juxtapositions that are the basic techniques of collage itself (148).

The inversion of “scum” into SCUM and the acronym’s juxtapositions between violence and an avant-garde technique enforce a willingness to exit writing and to perform transformations in minds as well as bodies. Further, the manifesto genre has been strongly tied to the avant-garde movement, but it is also a genre that aims to transgress the separation between the written word and the world as such.

The Genre

In “Manifesto = Theatre,” Martin Puchner examines “the history of the manifesto, with an emphasis on the manifesto’s particular form of performativity” (Puchner 2002, 451). According to Puchner, the manifesto is one of the “least understood and at the same time most important inventions of what is now called the historical avant-garde” (172). Its morphology includes: numbered theses, denunciations of the past, an aggressive attitude toward the audience, a collective authorship, exaggerated, shrill declarations, varied, often bold, letters, and mass distribution in newspapers, bill-boards, and flyers (172). These features, Puchner claims, characterize “the avant-garde manifesto from Marinetti to the seventies and beyond, spanning what one might call the era of the manifesto” (172).
Solanas’ manifesto can be said to share all of these traits: the past is denounced; the manifesto’s tone is certainly aggressive, particularly for those readers who are not SCUM; its statements are possibly [“shrill”] (172) exaggerations; its claims belong to a collective (SCUM); and Solanas went to the streets to distribute it. The tone of the manifesto makes it unclear as to whether each statement should be read literally. Heller notes a possible connection between “the brutally ironic tone of the SCUM Manifesto” and how Solanas was described by almost everyone who knew her as “terrifically angry and terrifically funny” (172). In reading the manifesto alongside a history of manifestos, the aggressive and “shrill” tone of Solanas’s text becomes a response to the Futurist Manifesto’s violent attitudes towards women.

Puchner notes that another “female” manifesto, “Isabella Rossellini’s Manifesto,” itself an ad for lipstick and makeup, departs from the traditional avant-garde manifesto in several ways. In particular, it transforms the writing of the manifesto into an individual and private (as well as a commercial) exercise (455). But it also lacks numbered theses and is primarily addressed to women. Interestingly, as it directs itself just to women Puchner notes that Rossellini’s manifesto opposes the traditional male manifesto:

[Rosellini’s manifesto] takes a stance toward the gender history of the manifesto. At least in the hands of Marinetti, a chief inventor of the avant-garde manifesto, the manifesto had been a genre celebrating the masculine: aggressive posing, virility, force. Pound and Lewis, for example, use their Blast manifesto to threaten the Suffragettes, whose cause they otherwise endorse. To say that the avant-garde manifesto is often masculinist is not to say that there are no manifestos by women—Rosa Luxemburg’s Sparakus Manifest, Valentine de Saint-Point’s Manifesto della donna futurista, and Valerie Solanas’s SCUM Manifesto testify to the opposite (445).

The Rosellini manifesto is written by a woman, directs itself to women, and encourages women to “write [their] own manifesto” (184). Puchner finds that the Rosellini manifesto diverges from the standard manifesto from Karl Marx through Rosa Luxemburg to Guy Debord, many of which were “written collaboratively and always on behalf of a group” (93).

Similarly, SCUM Manifesto does not direct itself to everyone, and is one person’s address to potential female members of the revolutionary organization and (possible) collective known as SCUM. However, as Heller points out, Solanas later asserted that SCUM is a “purely metaphorical function. It’s just a literary device” (183). In a 1977 interview with The Village Voice Solanas claimed that “there’s no organization called S.C.U.M. There never was and there never will be...I mean, I thought of it as a state of mind...women who think a certain way are in SCUM” (172). If the manifesto does not direct itself towards a group as such, and if SCUM is to be read as a mental state, to be shared as an invisible inter-subjective collectivity, then the violence that is to be performed by the “SCUM” comes into question.
Violence

In terms of the connection between the manifesto as a genre and violence, Solanas’s manifesto is historically typical. Janet Lyon writes:

Linked with the form’s passion for truth-telling is its staging of extreme rage. David Graham Burnett has offered the thesis that the “manifesto” derives etymologically from a Latin composite of manus and fectus, or hostile hand, and this translation acknowledges the nascent fury embodied in the form (148).

The violent implications of the SCUM Manifesto are particularly shared by the Futurist Manifesto with regard to how the latter embraces war as not only an efficient method of sanitization, but also an aesthetical one: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gestures of freedom bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman...We will destroy... feminism” (Ronell 5). Not only do the manifestos share a common beautification of violence, but as Ronell observes the Futurist Manifesto’s “uncringing attack on women” is returned by SCUM Manifesto as “payback,” and thus it shares an “anti-social edge with the destructive demands of prior manifestos” (5).

In its urge to transgress its own textual limits and in the spirit of the avant-garde perform alterations on life itself, SCUM Manifesto has a problem, Ronell notes. SCUM Manifesto’s dilemma, in “tripping over the pitfalls that await any speech act, the Manifesto nonetheless seeks to make itself binding; the fervent hope - that we would be bound by its effects (...),” is the problem of any text or speech act that aims to make any changes on the receiving end (5). According to Ronell, Solanas is unable to reach her goals and “shows up as a victim of the failed performative” (4). Solanas’s act not only fails as a performative act, but it is also restricted by the fact that she is a woman acting within a male language. As Ronell puts it, Solanas was “disabled by the very fact of language, by its phallic lures and political usages, by its disturbing record in the human sciences and liberal arts” (4). Although caught within a male-driven language, Solanas did know how to make use of it in order for it to “hurt,” Ronell concludes. Solanas inflicted wounds on the body as well as the mind, and her words could “land in the psyche or explode in the soma” (4). However, Ronell argues, Solanas wanted to go further than that; she “wanted to draw a social contract,” a revolution against the avant-garde, and against the male. In fact, she wanted an “end to all ends” (14). This further adds to Solanas’s dilemma:

Revolution is tainted by the insufficiency of the signifier, the corruptions of the male marked colonizations of language. “No genuine social revolution can be accomplished by the male . . .(...) Still, the revolutionary rebel starts out as “male”: in terms of her sense of slippage, Valerie Solanas runs with the best of them, none of these terms stick. [This] is why she remains a chronic misfire (7).
Solanas sets out to revolt and rebel, but in doing so she becomes a part of what Butler describes as the “masculine excess called hubris.” Similarly, the dilemma that Ronell finds Solanas to occupy is that when she rebels against “man,” she also takes on his shortcomings in accomplishing a revolution. This failure, which Solanas sees as a specifically male failure, appears to be transmitted onto Solanas herself. But if Solanas becomes “man,” what does that becoming mean? Masculinity, in Butler’s argument, stands for “kinship and state,” and resides as an entity within culture that also is transferable. However, as I mentioned above, Solanas posits herself directly in antagonism with the traditional feminist view on the gendered body as a social construct. In Solanas’s argument, gender is defined in terms of the biological body, anatomically if not genetically defined, and if gender is transferable it is only through physical alterations; men can become women solely through the use of technological intervention.

In her preface, Ronell points out that Solanas inverts basic assumptions around gender (that women are passive, men are active) because she establishes a new language around lack. Ronell writes, “it is no longer woman who is organized as and around lack, but man, trapped in his pernicious projection booth, who tries to come to terms with the desperate situation of lack: he is the woman-in-lack” (15). Turning ideas about gender around, her opponent is a man who is really a woman, and she is really a woman who is a man—thus a certain confusion around gender arises.

In Ronell’s argument, Solanas’s willingness for violence backfires against herself, and she becomes the negative being in lack (the male) that she was striking against. Yet if Solanas’s manifesto (and also her shooting) is payback for male crimes historically inflicted on women, how can the answer to the violence inflicted on women become the same violence against which she reacts? One comes before the other, and the other is payback to the former, a payback that would not be necessary if it were not for the initial male violence. Following Butler’s and Ronell’s arguments, it seems there is no difference between an abusive language and the answer to that abusive language, or between the ethical repercussions of an act that occurs chronologically before another.

Harding reads Solanas’s performance and manifesto as involved in a highly interactive relationship, wherein the two can be described more in terms of a becoming similar to a living organism—a process of interaction and redoubling. Ronell finds a performative lack in Solanas’s text—yet if the text is a performative failure, it becomes the opposite of the process of interaction that Harding describes. As a performative failure, the text is unable to reach outside its own ends and can only happen within its own limitations, with the ultimate result that as the text is written it has reached its closure, and has become something of the past.

SCUM Manifesto is “an indefensible text,” Ronell writes (15). Yet which part cannot be defended? Is it indefensible because of the connection between the assault and the propagation of violence in the text? To this question, Ronell does not give a clear
It seems there is no actual distinction between act and text in Ronell’s view, instead the two appear to become the same, one indicating the other, foreclosing, introducing, permeating, continuing the effect of the other. The actual violence is, however, separated from Ronell’s text, transformed into a cartoon-like event, performed by a person Ronell is intimate with, as she is referred to by her first name, Valerie.

Harding points out that in spite of the fury of language in the avant-garde texts, Solanas’s shots were unparalleled in the history of the avant-garde. Theoretically, it parallels André Breton’s “First Manifesto of Surrealism,” in which Breton asserts that “the simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd” (150). Harding points out that Solanas’s act “called the bluff” in Breton’s statement, as well as “cut through the rhetorical posturing of the Futurists (150). On the day of her arrest, Solanas was asked why she shot Andy Warhol, to which she replied “I have lots of reasons. Read my manifesto and it will tell you who I am” (147). Harding notes that feminist critics have understood Solanas’s statement to the reporters as an “indication that she was acting under the guidance of the dictates of her manifesto and that her act of violence was an understandable albeit misguided reading of the vitriolic implications of her text” (157).

Harding argues that feminist readings have tried to save Solanas’s text from the implications of the shooting by “advocat[ing] a separation of Solanas’s shooting of Warhol from discussion of the SCUM Manifesto” (157). However, as Harding points out, there is no clear indication in Solanas’s statement to the reporters that the contents of the manifesto would explain the specifics of her action, for the manifesto does not, as Harding puts it, “provid[e] a script for those actions.” The sections of the manifesto that contain passages that advocate a selective and discriminate use of violent destruction, as well as sections describing how SCUM will “cooly, furtively stalk its prey and quietly move in for the kill” cannot be used to explain the act itself (147).

Instead of a separation, Harding’s project is to emphasize an avant-garde dynamic that he argues is to be found between SCUM Manifesto and the shooting of Warhol. He clarifies that his reading does not stand opposed to a more “traditional” feminist reading of Solanas’s significance. According to Harding, “that reading has its own value, and, more importantly, is indispensable to understanding the manner in which Solanas ultimately revitalized the otherwise seemingly exhausted aesthetics of the historical avant-garde” (147). But he does however find that Solanas’s feminist agenda derived “much of [its] force from the avant-garde context that generated [it]” (147). This fact has been “generally overlooked,” he observes. According to Harding, the new way of seeing Solanas’s act and her manifesto begins with a “fundamental realignment” of how critics have read each act (the manifesto and the shooting) as separate entities, each with its own significance and cultural values:
The avantgarde dimensions in Solanas’s activities are located in the dynamic between the text she produced (the manifesto) and the performance she enacted (the shooting of Warhol), a dynamic which arguably corresponds to the theatrical avant-garde’s reconceptualization of text and performance as a radical juxtaposition of two equally weighted, autonomous art forms (147).

Harding finds that when, on the day of her arrest, Solanas refers to her manifesto (“it will tell you what I am”), she “establishes an identity and thus serves as a kind of credential,” thereby positioning herself among the likes of avant-garde figures such as Filippo Marinetti, Tristan Tzara, and André Breton (147). At the same time as Solanas makes use of the avant-garde rhetoric, she places herself in direct competition with the long history of misogyny that the historical avant-garde “uncritically absorbed” (147). The **SCUM Manifesto**, Harding concludes, “thus usurps the mantle of the avant-garde by skillfully inverting and thereby exposing its historically unacknowledged, gendered tropes” (147-8).

**From Avant-garde to Rear-guard**

In my introduction I proposed a distinction between two main tendencies in the archive of Valerie Solanas: an avant-garde and a humanist tendency. Throughout my argument, I have attempted to demonstrate her confrontation with the marginal, the other, and the non-human. Through an avant-garde reading, Solanas as the defiant female figure releases a set of possibilities, whereas a humanist perspective encloses her archive within a set of impossibilities, restricted by the limits of gender, language, or the “human.”

“We have to work from behind to challenge the front,” Sara Ahmed states. Instead of following “a part that fronts,” in the sense of the vanguard or the avant-garde (which literally means “front” or “before”), Ahmed proposes that we can work differently, aiming to transform by positioning ourselves differently from the “the rear-guard,” not the avant-garde. In Solanas’s case, she always approaches us from the outskirts and from behind, often read in terms of failure, because her presumed goals were not successfully executed. Seeing Solanas’s project as failed implies that it is terminated, concluded, and historical. I propose here that Solanas exceeded the territories of humanity, femininity, or writing by bringing about ruptures that are still taking place, still very much a part of our lives. Solanas was a human being, a woman, a writer and a feminist, but she was also the embodiment of an extreme otherness, an otherness that contradicts and complicates those very categories. Perhaps one of the lingering questions Solanas haunts us with is, “What in the human are we not willing to see as human?” Arriving from the rear, Solanas imposes her presence upon us and continues to linger as she participates in the conversation between the human and what has been pushed to its margins.
Notes

1. I use Harding’s concept of the avant-garde here, that largely is based on an understanding of the avant-garde in terms of the historical avant-garde as well as the neo-avant-garde. In following Solanas’s role within the avant-garde, I will work with simplified versions of the avant-garde and the humanist tendencies. These are more complex in their workings than have the time and the space to look into here, instead my focus will be to describe a general interplay between the two tendencies.

Works Cited


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