crossings

swarthmore undergraduate feminist research journal

Volume 1, Issue 1

About *Crossings*

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

Editors:

Eva Logan (she/her) is a senior at Swarthmore College studying Black Studies and Mathematics with a concentration in Statistics. She is a co-founder of *Crossings*. Most recently, Eva has researched the role of online spaces like Tumblr on the identity formation and expression of QTPOC and Black feminist responses to sexual violence. She is interested in the multitude of ways that Black feminist politics manifest, whether it be in the reproductive justice movement, the anti-violence movement, or anticapitalist movements.

José Eduardo Valdivia Heredia (they/them/elle/ellx) is a senior at Swarthmore College studying Latin American/Latinx Studies and Religion. They are the co-founding editor-in-chief of *Crossings* and a senior editor at the *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*. José's research interests are at the crossings of music, art, literature, *cuir*/queer studies, and activism in Indigenous & Afro-Latin American/Caribbean religions and cultural productions. They are also working on a project around Chicana and Black women's spirituality in response to questions of ritual pain, lament, self-harm, and suffering in the body.

Contributors:

Alma D. Elías Nájera (they/them) is a queer Guatemalan-Estadounidense scholar who uses Feminist qualitative theory to focus on different ethics and perspectives in understanding the dehumanizing histories of policed identities. As a Women, Feminist, & Queer Studies and Latin American & Latinx Studies double major at Vassar College, Alma focuses on the interconnectedness of border-thinking, ethics in counseling, feminist philosophy, gender, im/migration, policy reform, sex education, sexuality, sex work, and spirituality. Through their writing, they work toward decolonizing knowledge production, challenging the politics of truth, and denouncing the anonymous body by honoring, humanizing, and making visible the lives of women and queer, trans people of color.

Contributors:

Anisha Prakash (she/her) is an undergraduate student at Barnard College of Columbia University. She is majoring in Women's, Gender, & Sexuality studies (WGSS) and minoring in Chemistry on the pre-medical track. In writing this piece, Anisha aimed to push the boundaries of feminist research by questioning 1) biomedical practices and 2) the hesitation of humanities/social sciences to engage with scientific fields. She hope this piece not only teaches readers something new but also encourages them to question how the biomedical-academic industrial complex exploits nonhuman bodies. Beyond academic writing, Anisha has combined her interests in WGSS and science by creating *GYNECA*, The Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Women's Health & Gynecology.

Eden Segbefia (they/them) is a student at Barnard College studying Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This essay is dedicated to their communities and family in AfroCarolina and Accra, Ghana.

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Janessa Harris (she/her) is a student at the University of Georgia where she is currently studying Women and Gender Studies. Some of her personal interests include reading, spending time with her dogs and cat, and trying new restaurants with friends and family.

Jared Z. Sloan (he/him) is a senior at Haverford college studying Anthropology and Mathematics. His research interests are primarily in radical activism and non-western epistemologies. For his thesis, he is investigating the formation of non-Zionist Jewish communities and their role in reimagining Jewish life in the diaspora. He is also particularly passionate about research that subverts the traditional boundaries of academia to work collaboratively with research populations and is excited to find ways to keep making a difference with his research.

Katrina Jacinto (they/she), born in the Philippines and raised in Singapore, is a senior majoring in Anthropology at Yale-NUS College. They are currently researching assistance dog advocacy in Singapore for their thesis. They locate their work in the emerging field of eco-crip theory, with a particular interest in how care, intimacy and affect animate more-than-human interactions. Katrina's writing, both creative and academic, has been published in *The Babble Journal* and will feature in the upcoming volume Halo-Halo Ecologies.

Contributors:

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Ray Craig (he/him) is currently a junior ('24) at Swarthmore College majoring in Medical Anthropology with a minor in Educational Studies. In his free time he likes to cook, make pies, and hang out with his sisters.

Tania Del Moral (she/her) is a fourth-year undergraduate student at Wake Forest University, studying a major in Politics and International Affairs with minors in Art History and Sociology. She is most interested in the intersection of politics and art, specifically how language and aesthetics continue to be impacted by colonialism. As a first-generation American of Mexican descent, Tania has always been interested in the parallels between the story of La Malinche and her understanding of Chicanismo.

Yeh Seo Jung (she/they) is a senior at Swarthmore College majoring in medical anthropology and biology. They are primarily interested in how ecofeminism and environmental justice affects community health and social dynamics and hope to continue their research within these fields.

Zoe R. Grant (she/her) is currently obtaining her undergraduate degree in Women Studies and Political Science with a minor in Sociology at the University of Georgia. She is greatly influenced by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa who inspired her to write this paper alongside my family, and her professor, Cecilia Herles. Thank you to those aforementioned, as they allowed Zoe the opportunity to write authentically and openly.

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"The Work We Came Here to Do": *Crossings*, An Introduction*

José Eduardo Valdivia Heredia

Swarthmore College

You stop in the middle of the field and, under your breath, ask the spirits—animals, plants, y tus muertos*—to help you string together a bridge of words. What follows is your attempt to give back to nature,* los espíritus*, and others a gift wrested from the events in your life, a bridge home to the self.*[1]

Crossings as Offering

I start this introduction with acknowledgments and gratitude for the world around me. I thank my grandmothers, my mother, my sister, my best friends, and all the women of my family—alive and deceased—who have daily inspired the work I pursue. Thank you to my trans* and non-binary femme sisters/siblings for supporting me in my journey, for teaching me the sacredness of femininity and that it's okay to uphold my masculinity too, to love the parts of my body with which I struggle. Thank you to Spirit, my ancestors, *y todos mis santos/as/xs, en especial a San Judas Tadeo*. Thank you to Dr. Patricia White, coordinator of the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Swarthmore College, and Maria Aghazarian, scholarly communications librarian at the Swarthmore College Libraries—this Journal would not have been possible without your assistance and guidance. Thank you to the co-founder of this beautiful Journal, Eva Logan, and to all the contributors to this issue for sharing their vulnerability and wisdom with the world. And finally, thank you to my creative and intellectual ancestors, the Black and Brown women who have inspired the creation of this Journal: Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Alice Walker, Ana-Maurine Lara, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, La Bruja de Texcoco, Carol Boyce Davies, Cherríe Moraga, the women of the Combahee River Collective, Dora Silva Santana, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Hortense J. Spillers, Kimberle Crenshaw, Krudxs Cubensi (Odaymar Cuesta and Oli Prendes), Lía "La Novia Sirena," María Lugones, Mayra Santos-Febres, Mikaelah Drullard, M. Jacqui

* Audre Lorde, quoted in M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 303.

[1] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts" in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 540.

Alexander, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Patricia Hill Collins, Rita Indiana, and so many more.

These acknowledgments are necessary to open this Journal. They are the personal aspects of my life that inform every scholarly decision I make. The personal *is* political, *is* scholarly, *is* wisdom... Above all, this Journal is an offering to all the people I have mentioned and to all the women and queer femmes of color around the world, those who stand beside us as accomplices, before us as elders, and behind us as ancestors: take this spiritual offering. Take this Journal as an altar —read it, feel it, gaze upon it, contemplate it with an eye for aesthetics, for decoration, for that which is shiny and new. Writing of a "theory of altars," Natassja B. Gunasena states, "the theory of altars, a theory that thousands of Black and Brown women create and recreate daily in their work, resistance and survival, is one that challenges us t*o cross epistemological and disciplinary boundaries* to generate necessary and complex dialogues."[2] Additionally, Lara Medina writes of altars in the lives of racialized women and femmes, "[creating] sacred space is fundamental to nourishing our holistic sense of self and for reminding us who we are. Altars, or shrines, feed our spirit and psyche as they make visible our intent of bridging the physical and the spiritual realms and of sustaining the relationship between the two."[3] *Crossings*, then, is an altar of its own. It is the culmination of the creative, scholarly, and spiritual labor of the contributors and editors, as well as all of our intellectual ancestors. It is an offering "that challenges us *to cross* epistemological and disciplinary boundaries" in the pursuit of healing and knowledge.

The initial call for *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Research Journal* came from a lack of publications dedicated to the topic. Undergraduate research is abundant, but undergraduate feminist and queer research—especially that written by/about women and femmes of color—is few and far between. This is not because there is a lack of interest, or a deficit in quality research, but because there are no outlets for our kind of necessary activist, creative, political, and spiritual work. In the call to our contributors, we asked, what does it mean to cross boundaries within interdisciplinary feminist research? What are the kinds of epistemological traversals that arise at the Crossings, which push us, in the words of M. Jacqui Alexander, "to apprehend (...) new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised

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[2] Natassja B. Gunasena, "I am Pouring Sweet Water on my Altar for You: Theorizing Women of Color Feminism at the Junctures of Storm/water, Femininity, Race, and Power," M.A. Thesis (University of Texas at Austin, 2015): 22–23 (emphasis added).

[3] Lara Medina, "Creating Sacred Space" in *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, eds. Lara Medina and Martha G. Gonzales (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019): 37.

in difference to bring intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity"?[4] To live an epistemological, methodological, and personal-political Crossings, Alexander reminds us, "we would need to adopt, as daily practice, ways of being and of relating, modes of analyzing, and strategies of organizing in which we constantly mobilize identification and solidarity, across all borders, as key elements in the repertoire of risks we need to take to see ourselves as part of one another, even in the context of difference."[5]

Alexander's understanding of Black, feminist spiritual activism is based on transitions and movements: "These metaphors of links, charts, journeys, bridges, and borders are neither idle nor incidental, however, as we come to terms with the different cartographies of feminist struggle in different parts of the world; our different histories; where they change course and how they diverge."[6] It is both Alexander's and our call that the contributors listened to in their own Crossings of epistemological and methodological boundaries, in their charting of new journeys, in their crossing the borders of feminist research. Contributors have engaged in forms of scholarly work that are also healing; and, as Alexander notes, "to function as an antidote to oppression, healing work, that is, spiritual labor, assumes different forms, while anchored in reconstructing a terrain that is both exterior and interior."[7] This scholarly-spiritual labor, then, is what enables us as contributors and editors to, in the words of Audre Lorde, "do the work we came here to do."

M. Jacqui Alexander & *Pedagogies of Crossing*

Borderlands. Boundaries. Bridges. Crossroads. Horizons. Transitions. These are all words associated with fluidity, movement, the constant flux of energies, political and spiritual. But why Crossings? Why Alexander? What called us to this work? Why not any other word or any other scholar? Crossings is not an easy metaphor. It is a painful, bloody, and visceral (re-)memory of Blackness in the construction of empire and modernity. It rises from the Middle Passage. That more than three-hundred-year journey across the Atlantic, over and over again, is the space of liminal Crossings that left Black bodies in suspension, re-constructed—or, perhaps, unmade—into the chattel of white men. It is a fraught memory, tied together by aquatic histories of (dis)possession. As one of the contributors to this issue, Eden Segbefia, explains, "the ocean, specifically, plays a vital role in holding memory as a site of intense and expansive grief. Here, Alexander refers to a literal

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[4] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 7–8. I use several orthographical notations in referring to "crossings," Crossing/Crossings, and *Crossings*. The spelling without capitalization (crossings) refers to the act of moving across boundaries; it is the verb form of the constant movements we undertake as activists, artists, practitioners, and scholars. Crossing/Crossings (both singular), with capitalization, is the metaphorical and theoretical space of the Middle Passage and its re-memory. *Crossings* simply refers to the title of our altar-Journal-offering.

[5] *Ibid*: 265.

[6] *Ibid*: 264.

[7] *Ibid*: 312.

crossing of bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, but also an ontological crossing between spirit and flesh, between the human and the nonhuman. Grief, too, accompanied this crossing." For Alexander, "pedagogies that are derived from the Crossing fit neither easily nor neatly into those domains that have been imprisoned within modernity's secularized episteme. Thus, they disturb and reassemble the inherited divides of Sacred and secular, the embodied and disembodied, for instance, pushing us to take seriously the dimensions of spiritual labor that make the sacred and the disembodied palpably tangible and, therefore, constitutive of the lived experience of millions of women and men in different parts of the world."[8] The Crossings is a place of re-memory: a crossroads of violence and generation, of dismemberment and re-membering. Gunasena aptly notes that "'water always remembers' as Alexander reminds us, and like the practice of water gazing, the woman of color solidarity she invokes is never given to easy fluidity, but rather requires active, painful, work, learning and unlearning languages, making creative, courageous space for all of our weighted sorrows."[9]

There is nothing easy about Crossings; nothing simple about fluidity; nothing passive about the movement of these oceanic currents, filled with residues of memory, pieces of history, scraps of lives lost and regained. While we choose to engage Crossings—to contemplate the ambivalence of creativity and pain found within them—there are many other ways in which feminist activist-scholars have theorized similar kinds of movements. In keeping with the aquatic/oceanic, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley writes of "transoceanic currents," for example, "these are theoretical and ethnographic borderlands at sea, where elements or currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves."[10] Similarly, Black trans* feminist Dora Silva Santana, speaking on transatlantic poetics or "the right to write," says, "The transatlantic is in that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy and body, and the energy is also body and water. Transing, in this sense, is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. Water is the embodiment of trans orientation. The illusion of horizontality contrasts with the shape-shifting, leaking, bleeding, in-corpo-rating, *em corpo*; water is membrane, burial, means, memory, and a connection."[11] Other feminist activists, artists, and scholars, moreover, have explored the borders, boundaries, comings-together, intersections, and interstices of Crossings by many names and given particular contexts.

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[8] *Ibid*: 7.

[9] Gunasena, "I am Pouring Sweet Water," 12.

[10] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (2008): 192.

[11] Dora Silva Santana, "Transitionings and Returninings: Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 183.

The Boundaries of Feminist Research

Crossings is an apt metaphor for Alexander. She describes "the experience of freedom in boundary crossing"—the same freedom we find in *Crossings*.[12] But what are some of the other ways that scholars have theorized the boundaries of feminist research?

Borderlands and Bridges

Among Alexander's intellectual ancestors is the Chicana activist-scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942–2004). She is important enough to Alexander so as to receive a chapter of *Pedagogies* dedicated to her and Cherríe Moraga's edited volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Alexander writes of Anzaldúa:

> Your death was tragic, Gloria, not only because you died alone, but we relied on you as artist to provide our sanity, and we kept asking for more while you wrestled with terror day and night—the reality, as you said, of having a disease that could cost you your feet, your eyes, your creativity, the life of the writer you worked so hard to build… life itself (…) You who wrote the borderlands that we appropriate to signal how "queer" we were. There is no romance or seduction to living on the borders. You taught us about the need to shift consciousness, to build common ground, to move from the militarized zone to the roundtable, to view the artist as healer, without separation. You taught us that our politics would not be effective without a spiritualized consciousness. *Conocimiento*. You taught us about Divine intelligence. But we consumed without digesting. You taught us; the question remains, What did we learn?[13]

As Alexander aptly notes, Anzaldúa has taught us much. We, too, have decided to "appropriate" the borderlands, to use them as another space for understanding the Crossings.

Anzaldúa was among the first and most prominent "Third World Feminists" to theorize racialized women and femme's in-between existence in borderlands and bridges. According to her, the borderlands "is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition (…) *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"[14] The borderlands that we inhabit, then, is a non-place; it is the "residue" of our existence,

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[12] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 258.

[13] *Ibid*: 285–286 (emphasis original).

[14] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 3 (emphasis original).

a place of constant "transition." This place, like the Crossings, is one of ambivalence, contradiction, *mestizaje*/mixing... It is painful and visceral. It demands us to find new ways of surviving, strategies for resisting, and tactics for overcoming. Anzaldúa writes, "*cuando vives en la frontera*/people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,/you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,/forerunner of a new race,/half and half—both woman and man, neither—a new gender (...) To survive the Borderlands/you must live *sin fronteras*/be a crossroads."[15] La frontera, the borderlands, is a state of non-being or larger-than-being; it is to be something else, something Other. But the question remains, just how do you survive the contradiction of the borderlands?

Like the borderlands, bridges have been key to the legacy Anzaldúa has left behind for us. They are equally painful, as the title of this edited volume, *This Bridge Called My Back*, painfully connotes. Bodies that are constantly crossed, painfully crossed... For Anzaldúa, "there is an enormous contradiction in being a bridge (...) This task—to be a bridge, to be a fucking crossroads for goddess sake."[16] But what is a bridge?

While there are contradictions—ambivalences—to being a bridge, there is something more; something more generative, transformative. In a follow-up to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Anzaldúa and other feminists of color began to theorize a new way of perceiving the bridge; one that is, perhaps, less painful. In *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, Anzaldúa continues to capture the nuance of bridging:

> Whenever I glimpse the arch of this bridge my breath catches. Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call *nepantla*, a *Nahuatl* word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. *Nepantla es tierra desconocida*, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.[17]

Here, the key is transformation. The bridge, that place that women of color call home, is a space of transformation, liminality, and endless possibility. Like the

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[15] *Ibid*: 194–195 (emphasis original).

[16] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "La Prieta" in *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002): 229.

[17] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces" in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 1 (emphasis added).

borderlands, a non-place, the bridge is an "in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space." It is much like the Crossings, which refuses to be delineated by boundaries, epistemological, gendered, linguistic, national, racialized, temporal, or any other.

Intersections, Matrices, and Transversals

A discussion of Crossings—with its emphasis on the experiences of queer, trans*, non-binary, and racialized women and femmes—would be incomplete without an understanding of other kinds of crossroads: intersections, matrices, and transversals. Those spaces where ideologies, identities, languages, symbols, and systems violently collide—the turbulent transoceanic currents in which the Crossings resides.

Among the earliest theorists of what has now been termed "intersectionality" are the women of the Black lesbian feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective. Their statement, also published in *This Bridge Called My Back*, speaks to the specificities of their experiences as poor Black lesbians—experiences which were not captured by the Black Power movement, Women's Rights Movement, or even by other cisheterosexual Black feminists, at the time. In 1979, addressing the importance of their movement, the Combahee River Collective proclaimed: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives."[18] This early statement on intersectionality illustrated how racialized women's oppression was the coming-together of institutionalized and systemic forces—those of "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression." This is not dissimilar to the most prominent theorist of intersectionality, legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term. Dealing with the violence experienced by her Black women clients, Crenshaw argued that intersectionality was useful to understand how "race and gender intersect in shaping structural and representational aspects of violence against women of color."[19] Intersectionality has been a key framework to feminist theory, which has lacked in its attention to the experiences of disabled, poor, queer, and racialized women and femmes.

Later Black feminists, like Patricia Hill Collins, expanded on intersectionality to capture even more specificity, especially when dealing with the projects of domination that empire and modernity represent. She theorized

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[18] Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002): 234.

[19] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

"matrices"—or a matrix of domination—and transversals—or a transversal politics—to understand larger forms of violence (and how to resist them) than intersectionality could account for. Hill Collins writes, then, "intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression."[20] So, while intersectionality refers to the crossing of identities, the matrix of domination could refer to how major *systems* of oppression intersect and are organized on a global scale, "regardless of the particular intersections involved." Where other Black feminists have been unwilling or unable to deal with the global and transnational systems of oppression, Hill Collins understands that U.S.-based experiences cannot be the end in itself of Black feminism. In discussing the work of Nira Yuval Davis' "transversal politics," then, Hill Collins grounds coalitional politics between Black and Brown women on a transnational scale, further emphasizing the kinds of boundary-crossing that Crossings calls upon us: "Within this framework, African-American women and other comparable groups constitute 'political actors' or 'messengers' aiming to craft a Black feminist 'message.' Within the assumptions of transversalism, participants bring with them a 'rooting' in their own particular group histories, but at the same time realize that in order to engage in dialogue across multiple markers of difference, they must 'shift' from their own centers."[21] These kinds of movements, Crossings, journeys across experiences are the necessary forms of resistance to global projects of domination that are acted through and upon the bodies of racialized women and femmes.

(*World-)Traveling*

Another Third World feminist to deal with the trappings of Crossings, but in another form, with particular attention to the ways we resist, is Argentine feminist María Lugones. She theorizes "world-traveling" and "playfulness" as women of color strategies that allow for a coalitional politics based on resistance—not the resistance of victims but that of loving accomplices. For Lugones, women and femmes of color all inhabit multiple worlds that we are constantly crossing, moving between one and another in order to survive the realities of racial, gender, and sexual, and class oppression. Being that we inhabit our own worlds, what is at stake in crossing into each other's worlds? Lugones writes, "I am incomplete and unreal

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[20] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 18.

[21] *Ibid*: 245.

without other women. I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave, their servant."[22] This understanding of coalition is one in which radical relationality or "[profound dependence]" is not synonymous with subordination or subjugation to the will and worlds of others. Instead, it is to understand that even within and across difference, there are forms of identification that allow us to struggle together. We do not need to be the same person to fight the same battles, Lugones argues: "to the extent that we face each other as oppressed, we do not want to identify with each other, we repel each other as we are seeing each other in the same mirror. As resistant, we are kept apart by social fragmentation. To identify with each other, we need to engage in resistant practices that appear dangerous. We have not realized the potential lying in our becoming interdependently resistant."[23] To engage in world-traveling, then, is to become "interdependently resistant," not oppressed; it is to find a way of coalition which emphasizes our strategies of survival, more so than the tactics of our killing. I am particularly attracted to a combined understanding of Crossings and world-traveling because of its emphasis on playfulness and love, as opposed to oppression and pain—even if these are important parts of the Crossings.

Lugones can theorize her coming-to-consciousness as a woman of color alongside coming to love her mother—a relationship which is, especially for women of color, fraught with contradictions, as Gunasena argues, "the through-line between mother and daughter is rarely legible, is often bloody and blurry with historical waters."[24] Upon reflecting on why she didn't want to identify with her mother—to commit the same mistakes, to become the same person—Lugones concludes that it is ultimately playfulness and world-traveling which allowed this identification-as-love: "We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking. So traveling to each other's 'worlds' would enable us to be through loving each other."[25] Through her framework we can begin to ask, what would it mean to *be* through loving? How would this theory-praxis standpoint based on radical feeling—*sentimiento*—shift the boundaries of feminist research? These are among the questions that have motivated our call and the responses from our contributors in *Crossings*.

Discussion of Articles

For our inaugural issue of *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal*, we received an overwhelming amount of submissions that did exactly what we asked—cross the boundaries of undergraduate feminist research.

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[22] María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003): 75.

[23] *Ibid*: 76.

[24] Gunasena, "I am Pouring Sweet Water," 2.

[25] Lugones, "Playfulness," 76.

This response from undergraduates all over the world illustrates just how urgent a publication of this nature is. As with other interdisciplinary journals, it is often difficult to find ways in which articles from vastly different fields on varied topics could somehow be grouped into a single issue based on the Crossings. In order to account for the diversity of the articles represented in this issue, I have chosen to organize the research into "clusters" based on content, methods, and style. These clusters are "Queer Studies"; "Category of 'Human' and the Body"; "Science/Medicine"; "'Third World' Feminism(s)"; and "Personal Narrative." While there is significant overlap among the clusters—as several articles cross even the heuristic borders which I have created to organize this issue—I have designated each article into the category which it most *represents*. What follows is a short discussion and outline of our contributors' articles.

Queer Studies

Our contributor Max D. López Toledano's article, "The Afterlife of Jennifer Laude: Trans Necropolitics and Trans Utopias," explores the tragic (after-)life of one trans* Filipina woman, Jennifer Laude (1987–2014). On 11 October 2014, Jennifer Laude was murdered in Olongapo, Philippines, by Joseph Scott Pemberton, a Lance Corporal in the United States Marine Corps. He was convicted on homicide charges on 1 December 2015 but was later pardoned by President Rodrigo Duterte in September 2020. What ensued was mass protests from trans* rights and anti-imperial/decolonial organizations in the Philippines and abroad demanding justice for the life and death of Jennifer Laude. Analyzing news reports, art, and protest advertisements related to her death, López Toledano asks, "for the people who *laud* her, what does Jennifer Laude's afterlife mean?"

Taking into consideration the work of Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* and José Esteban Muñoz's Cruising *Utopia*, López Toledano analyzes the materiality of Laude's life, interrogating how an afterlife can be mobilized to disrupt the death-dealing politics of trans* lives and imagine livable futures. She argues that "Laude's afterlife, in this sense, is extremely palpable: its affective reach is expansive, as the political action that has been done in her name produces moments that not only memorialize her but also counteract the reality of her death." Ultimately, they "situate Laude's afterlife in the context of continued necropolitical violence" to conclude that "Laude's memorialization has been a crucial intervention that reconfigures trans bodies in life."

Category of "Human" and the Body

Many boundaries still need to be crossed within feminist research. Queer of color critique—particularly trans* and queer futurities—begins to chart journeys into new grounds of inquiry. But what are some of the most solid boundaries that we have yet to cross? Where has feminist research—and many other fields, for that matter—been the most resistant? The human and the body are sites of contentious theorization, shaky borders in the construction of our theories and practices. The

articles in this cluster attempt to deconstruct these categories from something "fixed" or "static" to something more "malleable," more "constructed" and "abstract" than humanist discourse has allowed.

Also grounded within queer theory, our contributor Jared Z. Sloan's piece "Sitting Here with You in the Future: Reimagining the Human through Digital Art" attempts to challenge these categories through its analysis of different artists' interactions with digital worlds. Taking into account Afropessimist and Black feminist theories of the "Human" such as those of Frank B. Wilderson III and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson—supplemented by the radical world-building of M. Jacqui Alexander—Sloan analyzes digital art by queer Canadian artist Lucas LaRochelle; non-binary Tanzanian artist Arafa Hamadi; and Black South African artist Natalie-Ann Paneng. Sloan identifies Wilderon and Jackon's work as the basis for his understanding of the relationship of between Blackness and the "Human": "[T]hese constructions of the Human position Blackness as its nadir (...) Under this framework, instead of conceiving of Blackness as non-Human, it is recognized as embodying the limit of the Human. In fact, it is only through the nadir of Blackness that the Human can cohere as an analytical frame." Analyzing the radical world-building and queer/Black futurities of these digital artists, Sloan argues that, unlike Wilderon's Afropessimist position on the destruction of the world, we must look to the radical futures imagined by Black feminist scholars like Alexander: "I contend that while the Human *must* be abolished in the pursuit of a truly free society, this abolitionist project, in the same vein as the generations of prison abolitionist organizers in the US, is primarily a constructive project focused on building new worlds rather than merely destroying the old."

Another one of our contributors who questions the category of the "Human" and understands the violence it imposes on non-human species is Anisha Prakash. In "Masculinized Sovereignty: Understanding Violence Towards Mice and the Nonhuman," Prakash combines personal narrative experiences of her research as a chemist and gender studies student, stating, "[t]here is no question that I, as an animal researcher, commit ethical crimes: I confine a mouse in a small cage, take it away from its family, anesthetize it, and physically take its body apart."She utilizes frameworks like "masculinized sovereignty," the "Black captive body," and the "masculine state" to understand how hierarchies of the "Human" are violently imposed upon both non-cisgender-male/non-heterosexual/non-White humans and non-human species. Situating her research in the context of scientific and medical intervention, Prakash concludes, "I view the lab as a site of social advancement where the differences between humans and nonhumans create a community of shared purpose. However, an interrogation of the lab as a site of violence can help us better understand how the State's capitalist modes of advancement and production harm those of Indigenous people, Black women, and other minorities."

Two of our contributors have submitted a unique piece to *Crossings*: Yeh Seo Jung and Ray Craig's zine, which was the product of their independent study course

at Swarthmore College, "Queer Ecologies." While the zine could have easily fit into the "queer studies" cluster, I decided to place it within "Human and the body" because of how it *mobilizes* queer theory. The authors hold that "[w]hile queer theory most directly interrogates the normative structure of heterosexuality both in humans and in biology, more broadly, these studies include analyses of hierarchy, power, and value." In other words, their *use* of queer theory does more than highlight the "normative structure of heterosexuality"; it deconstructs hierarchies of being (human) through its application of queer theory to biology and environmental studies. In analyzing her own queer body in relation to nature, Jung writes, "[t]he way a clownfish can slip from being father to mother to father again, how trees change their colors in the fall, how my queer body fits into the landscape seamlessly, as if it belongs there against all the odds. These are the things that I think about when I think about queer." Jung and Craig's use of queer theory in nature illustrates how the "Human" is intimately tied to the landscapes around it; we rely on so-called "non-human" species to be whole, to live, to thrive... The authors conclude that interconnectivity is key to queer ecology: "*Natureculture* also allows us to describe entangled multispecies histories and worlds that are more than human, encompassing hippo and human alike. It contests the dominant paradigm that separates man from animal."

"Third World" Feminism(s)

There are many borders and boundaries that, even in the twenty-first century, we must confront as feminist activist-scholars—national borders among them. This research cluster questions the very nature of feminism by pluralizing it —feminisms. By taking into account the work of racialized women and femmes outside of the U.S., the contributors in this section disrupt feminist trends that uphold Western, patriarchal values without acknowledging them. In its failure to deal with transnational feminisms, diasporic feminisms, "Third World" feminisms, U.S.-based feminists have replicated many of the same issues they seek to dismantle with their research.

Our contributor Eden Segbefia's personal narrative-research article, "Àṣẹ After Man: The Rupture of the Christian-Colonial Project as Decolonial Ceremony," precisely questions Western values through its use of Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions. Through their use of their own spiritual experiences, and the knowledge of Black Caribbean feminists M. Jacqui Alexander and Sylvia Wynter, Segbefia deconstructs the Christian-Colonial framework which dominates in the West, even in the most "benign" strands of U.S.-based feminism. In describing their experience whale-watching in Bahia, Brazil, Segbefia muses: "These nonhuman lives were much more than I had been taught. Humpback whales can immerse themselves in 700 feet of water for up to thirty minutes. Emerging from the papery thin walls of a cocoon, this inquiry, too, surfaced from the depths of the ocean. It appeared there millennia ago. I believe strongly that the personal is political but what of the spiritual? What of the limits of the personal? What of flesh and spirit intertwined

or... disentangled, ruptured, by the force of the Christian colonial project?" These personal spiritual reflections are grounded in the kind of spiritual labor that *Crossings* seeks to offer the world—scholarly work as healing work; theoretical labor as political labor; analysis as spirituality... Segbefia, then, "aim[s] to view Afro-diasporic spiritual concepts not as the antithesis of Christian coloniality but as a decolonial framework that could demolish Christian coloniality and its effects." They conclude that "[u]pholding right relationship between humans and the (un)natural world saves the lives of many, both beings whose lives are recognized as life and beings whose lives are not. Under the regime of Christian colonialism, it is difficult to maintain right relationship but not impossible. In fact, it becomes that much more meaningful and important to, in the face of hierarchy and oppression, hold ceremony, to hold ourselves, and those we love. And in the process, we detach from all that fails to recognize the vital force within us."

Two contributors have separately dealt with the historical-mythical figures of Malintzin-La Malinche. She is, perhaps, the most renowned woman of pre-Conquest and Conquest Mesoamerica due to her extraordinary language abilities. Through a complicated and not completely known story, Malintzin ended up in the hands of Hernán Cortés. Fluent in several Indigenous languages of Mesoamerica, she was able to learn Spanish and became the enslaved tongue (translator) of Cortés and the Spanish *conquistadores*. In popular (masculinist) Mexican culture, Malintizn is known as La Malinche, the great traitor, the woman who "facilitated" the Conquest of her own nation; she is La Chingada (the Fucked One), who, her enslaved status notwithstanding, has been demonized within the popular cultural imaginary. In her piece "Hija de la Chingada: Visibility and Erasure of La Malinche in Contemporary Mexican Discourse," contributor Tania Del Moral "[utilizes] Malintzín's story as a case study [illustrating] the deeper colonial structures that have created the figure of La Malinche as a dishonorable and treacherous woman." Attending to feminist and post-colonial theory Del Moral "intends to answer in what ways the metaphor of La Malinche has been utilized as a form of abstraction to both uplift and oppress the Mexican woman who is either 'traditional' or 'sexually treacherous.'" She connects popular myths about La Malinche to the kinds of victim-blaming that occur in the now-too-frequent rapes and feminicides of twenty-first-century Mexico. Similarly, in Alma D. Elías Nájera's "Malintzin: La Mujer Americana," they argue that "[t]hrough Malintzin's story, we recognize the interpretation of womanhood as a dehumanized identity that society freely abuses, exploits, polices, and silences, thereby showcasing gendered issues as a cultural concern rooted in settler colonial, misogynistic, and anti-Indigenous principles." Elías Nájera holds that "[w]ith the careful integration of feminist theory, Malintzin challenges the misogynistic anti-Indigenous narrative by reconfiguring the phallocentric Mexican psyche and its identity while simultaneously nurturing the wounded nature of the feminine entity in opposition to the adverse effects of patriarchal, manipulative control, and censorship."

Science/Medicine

The humanities have had difficulty dealing with the supremacy of the medical sciences, what Michel Foucault has termed "the medical gaze," because of its monopoly on legitimate knowledge. Without falling into the traps of the medical gaze, the contributors in this section attempt to grapple with medical institutions through their own personal narratives, crossing the boundaries of legitimate knowledge by de-centering medical professionals in a field that often lacks attention to the invisible subjectivity at its foundation.

Through their piece that combines autoethnography with literary and social theory, Katrina Jacinto's "Skin Stories and Family Feelings: The Contradictions of Skin Picking in Mother and Daughter," asks, "How could our picking be understood, and addressed, through such different terms? How does skin picking simultaneously link and separate my body from my mother's?" Analyzing what has been termed as "dermatillomania," a skin picking disorder, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), in her and her mother Jacinto utilizes polyvalence and Marcel Mauss' "techniques of the body," to question the kinds of relationships we have with our bodies. Jacinto argues that "[a]s a result of this stigma, skin picking becomes pathologized and rendered as a site of medical intervention. Yet, even the notion of 'medical intervention' is more pluralistic than one might assume. I was fascinated by how differently my mother and I treated our skin picking (...) This difference, I argue, reveals that skin picking is *polyvalent."* They *c*onclude that "the same technique can hold different meanings in different bodies (...) These meanings invite different kinds of medical intervention, influenced by our individual beliefs about the body in general and about our own bodies. Our bodies as medical objects thus come to be managed and produced through situated knowledge, practices, and socialities."

Another contributor, Janessa Harris, also questions the relationship between certain bodies and medical institutions in her piece "Mommy, Me, and We: Why Black Mothers Have Turned to Doulas." Through the personal narrative of her sister's pregnancy experience, Harris "investigate[s] the power in reclaiming and returning to these natural forms of healing for the Black community as an act of resistance." With a narrative style that exudes vulnerability, Harris confronts some of her most entrenched fears: "Here, in this moment and in this paper, I begin to come to terms with the reality that I may be enfolded within that sentence—that phrase, *Black mothers are dying*. I say that now I have no choice to come to terms with this reality because my sister is due to have her baby at the end of this week (...) My sister as a mother was a memory I was excited to witness, but it was my sister as a coffin plate that I could not bear to face." She concludes that "we choose doulas because they support us. We choose doulas because they help us... Live."

Personal Narrative

While several of our contributors have already combined scholarly analysis with personal narrative, the articles in this section almost completely take up a narrative style to produce boundary-crossing research that affirms just *how* the personal is political. Refusing to stay within the borders of "acceptable" or "respectable" scholarly voices, these contributors break with conventions to push us into new directions of feminist research.

In her extremely vulnerable piece, "Development of Southern Interracial Marriage and Divorce: Why Our Children Are Code-Switching," Zoe R. Grant narrates her parents' interracial marriage and divorce, locating it into the specificity of a U.S. Southern context. Grant states, "I am focusing on the aspect of code-switching amongst mixed-race children (...) The paper will hold the specificity of a case study with the emotion of a biography. I will shift from a third-person point of view, to a first-person point of view, and back again. It is crucial for a better understanding of what their children have gone through, are going through, and what they will continue to go through." Using notions of code-switching and *mestizaje* informed by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Grant describes the complexities and contradictions in the lives of mixed-race children, as they attempt to navigate the different cultural worlds in which their experiences are embedded. For Grant, code-switching is not a simple process: "So often with code-switching you don't even realize you're doing it. You think you're just listening to music. You think you're just being yourself. You don't realize that being yourself is actually a multitude of people and personalities inside of you that is creating this one person who can carry themselves across borders and conversations. Because you don't grow up listening to one kind of music, you learn what is put in front of you." She points to the ways in which a scholarly and personal voice are always already imbricated in any research project.

The final piece for the inaugural issue of *Crossings* is contributor Gabriella Raffetto's "Sex in the Bible: A Poetic Female Retelling." This piece of poetry-research breaks many of the conventions of genre and language through its use of scholarly sources, poetic retelling, and a unique use of punctuation and orthography that disrupts the coherence of its reading. It truly crosses boundaries that may be unsettling to its readers. Raffetto states, "[i]n my poetic analysis, I tease out the differences between Biblical and modern conceptions of rape. Many of my 'episodes' feature rape narratives between a husband and wife or concubine/slave; in the Biblical narrative, these relations were not considered rape, because rape only constituted relationships outside of legal bounds (...) In stories that originally assumed female perspectives, such as Leah's and Bathsheba's, I decided to re-envision their stories—because why should we assume consent when we never hear their thoughts or words?" Taking up the voice of women in the Bible, Raffetto's fictitious personal narrative blurs and *crosses* the lines between voices, between genres, between time and space, to offer a new reading of an ancient text.

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The Afterlife of Jennifer Laude: Trans Necropolitics and Trans Utopias

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Introduction

For a moment, I forgot that Jennifer is dead. After spending hours reading about the protests that bloomed following her murder, going through their footage, and reading about the different ways she was memorialized, I briefly allowed myself to forget that her political life is now accompanied by the prefix 'after-'. In her afterlife, Jennifer Laude's name has become commonplace in conversations on contemporary imperialism in the Philippines, its diaspora, and beyond, for she has been the emblem of several queer and anti-imperial demonstrations in Olongapo City, Manila, Hawaii, San Francisco, and even New York over the last 8 years.[26] While I have, unfortunately, seen her corpse more than once—as different media have insisted on showcasing it with no prior warning—I *genuinely* forgot that she is no longer alive.[27] For a short moment, as I looked at the poster for the event commemorating the seventh anniversary of her death (Fig. 1), I wondered what her next move would be, what the next speech she gave at a protest would prioritize, and what she might be doing now, away from all the journalists and academics who crowd her public life. Laude's afterlife, in this sense, is extremely palpable: its affective reach is expansive, as the political action that has been done in her name has produced moments that not *only* memorialize her but also counteract the reality of her death.

This is, of course, impossible—in a way. Jennifer Laude died asphyxiated in a motel bathroom in the Philippines on 11th October 2014. She was killed by a member of the United States' army, Joseph Pemberton, a 19-year old marine who was part of a military training exercise conducted in Olongapo, where the United States has an established naval base that has transformed most of the local economy to cater to its visiting forces.[28] Pemberton had hired Jennifer to perform

[26] Gina K Velasco, "Queer and Trans Necropolitics in the Afterlife of U.S. Empire," *Amerasia Journal*, 46, no. 2 (2020): 238–252.

[27] Meredith Talusan, "How the Killing of a Trans Filipina Woman Ignited an International Incident, *Vice News* (2015), https://www.vice.com/en/article/avyd4z/how-to-get-away-with-murder; PJ Raval, *Call Her Ganda: How One Life Galvanized A Nation,* 2018, 1 hour 33 minutes.

[28] Zachary, Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay: Jennifer Laude and Trans Necropolitics in the Philippines," Honors thesis (Georgetown University, 2018): 1–76.

sex work for him but, upon learning she was transgender, he killed her and ran back to the military base. However, though she was buried on 24th October 2014, less than two weeks after her death, her face and spirit refuse to remain underground.

Jennifer's afterlife has been full of vigor. There have been several moments were her spectral force has been wielded through political movements, as seen in a powerful protest in Olongapo City which unified trans people, other queers, working class individuals, and even Indigenous representatives in an effervescent burst of anti-imperial euphoria on the "National Day of Outrage"—the day of her burial (Fig. 2).[29] The protests, likewise, have not been limited to immediate responses to her death, since they have continued happening almost every year since. Some of the latest public protests took place in Hawaii and Olongapo City in September 2020, and even in 2022 there was a silent protest in the name of Laude during the latest graduation ceremony at University of the Philippines Mindanao.[30] Laude's afterlife, thus, seems to persist with self-renewing energy. Protests of all kinds have tied her name to the vibrancy and assertiveness that has been set forth by the activists who fight to bring her justice—primarily her family and other prominent trans activists in the Philippines.[31]

The protests that memorialize Jennifer Laude are not solely acts of post-mortem remembrance. Given that her death is entangled with a series of imperial systems that remain fully operational, protesting for Laude is inextricable from taking an anti-imperial and anti-military stance (and vice versa). The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the law that allows members of the US army to visit naval bases and (virtually) grants them legal immunity while in the Philippines, remains active despite Rodrigo Duterte's vacillations to terminate it in 2021.[32] Similarly, trans people—particularly trans women—in the Philippines remain subjected to a "necropolitical" regime in which "only by supplying their bodies as capital to satisfy male/Western/heterosexual desires (...) [can their] femininity" be recognized and their claim to life be made legitimate.[33] In such a broad imperial landscape, there is plenty to protest against, making the "achievements" so far seem few and short-lived. The initial momentum of the protests surrounding Jennifer's death led to

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[29] Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

[30] KITV. "Dozens protest pardon of U.S. marine convicted of killing a Filipino transgender woman," *KITV* (2020), https://www.kitv.com/story/42654202/dozens-protest-pardon-of-us-marine-convicted-of-killing-a-filipino -transgender-woman; Jonathan Cellona, "'Justice for Jennifer Laude': Groups oppose early release of Pemberton," *ABS CBN News* (2020), https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/multimedia/photo/09/07/20/protest-pemberton-early-release; Mindanews, "Transgender grads' silent protests draw loudest cheers in UP Mindanao commencement rites," *Mindanews* (2022), https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2022/07/transgender-grads-silent-protests-draw-loudest-cheers-in-up-mindanao-commencement-rites/.

[31] Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

[32] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."; CNN Philippines Staff, "Duterte cancels order to terminate VFA with US," *CNN Philippines* (2021), https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/7/30/Visiting-Forces-Agreement-Philippines-United-States-D uterte-Austin.html.

[33] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."

Pemberton's conviction, which was the first ever case of the Filipino judiciary convicting anyone under the VFA law.[34] Nevertheless, this "victory" has now been undone. The president of the Philippines, Duterte, granted absolute pardon to Pemberton in September 2020, sedimenting the 'imperial impunity' that the movements following Laude's death, so full of hope, have sought to uproot.[35]

Yet, despite the apparent futility of the protests in her name, whenever "Jennifer Laude" is spoken, a trace of heroism lingers. She has been turned into a "martyr" by both nationalist politics and queer organizations, who have produced an afterlife for her through heroic aesthetics and narratives.[36] The illustration made to commemorate seven years after her death attests to this (Fig. 1), rendering her a "Wonder Woman" (the female superhero *by default* in American pop culture) but replacing the traditional US-themed costume with the colors of the transgender flag (pink, blue, and white) and her original pale skin with Laude's unmistakable brown tone. Casting her as *the* champion for queer and anti-imperial liberation movements in the Philippines, Laude is remembered today as a "super woman." As such, despite the (apparent) lack of success in achieving "substantial changes" through activist mobilization, Laude's afterlife remains restless and heroicized. *Why?* How has Jennifer Laude's afterlife, through her memorialization, reached this heroic status, not only amongst queer people in the Philippines but also in its diaspora? For the people who *laud* her, what does Jennifer Laude's afterlife mean?

My aim is to situate Laude's afterlife against the context of a continuum of necropolitical violence against trans people in the Philippines. Laude's memorialization has been a crucial intervention that reconfigures trans bodies *in life*. In specific, I argue that the memorialization of Jennifer Laude has offered a paradigm shift away from a necropolitical logic that renders trans bodies *disposable* and *ungrievable*, offering instead an opening for trans and gender non-conforming people to see themselves as central and necessary to utopian imaginations of any anti-imperial Filipino futurity, as well as for its diaspora and beyond. Relying on Zengin's framework, who notes how "trans people turn death itself into ways of becoming political and intimate subjects, remaking the conditions of their living," I seek to understand Jennifer's Laude murder not *only* as something inflicted to her but also as something experienced by a larger and collective body. In this case, by trans and (un)feminized Third World bodies of color.[37]

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[34] Rappler, "Pemberton guilty of homicide," *Rappler* (2015), https://www.rappler.com/nation/pemberton-ruling-jennifer-laude.

[35] Richard C. Cornelio, "Presidential Pardon to Pemberton is Imperial Impunity Writ Large," *Philippine Collegian* (2021), https://phkule.org/article/360/presidential-pardon-to-pemberton-is-imperial-impunity-writ-large.

[35] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."

[37] Asli Zengin, "The Afterlife of Gender: Sovereignty, Intimacy, and Muslim Funerals of Transgender People in Turkey," *Cultural Anthropology* 34 (2019): 78–102.

Fig. 1: Queer Filipino organization "Bahaghari" announces its online event to commemorate both its 7th anniversary and the seven years since Jennifer Laude's murder. Laude is portrayed as resembling DC Comics' hero "Wonder Woman" accompanied by the text "Fight the US and Chinese invasion, fight for the full liberation of The Philippines" in Filipino and "Be Lauder" in English.

In that sense, if Laude's death is not only individual but also collective, so is her after/life. In the lingering utopian openings experienced by this collective trans body, she may herself be revitalized *in the future*. The anti-imperial futures of trans belonging—the utopian visions professed in the protests that call for justice upon Jennifer Laude's death—are an afterlife for *both* dead and living trans people in the Philippines and elsewhere. It is precisely because of the little-to-no "change" done to the imperial structures that produce necropolitical terror for trans people in the Philippines that Laude's afterlife appears heroic: it offers a tale of belonging and futurity to those whose bodies would otherwise be disposable and denied a present today. This makes Laude's afterlife a radical re-signification and remaking of "the conditions of their living" for *all of us* trans people who see *ourselves* represented by Laude in one way or another.

Trans Necropolitics: Lives Disciplined by Death

Jennifer Laude's afterlife is located in the broader *lethal* structure of "trans necropolitics." As many have noted, trans life holds an intimate relationship with death.[38] In the Philippines, as elsewhere in the Global South, to be trans is to be painfully aware of the "necropower" that structures one's life. I think with Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics," which refers to disciplinary processes that lead to "the subjugation of life to the power of death."[39] In a trans context, this is a difficult reality to ignore. To many, trans lives are seen as "unruly bodies" on whomst biopolitical governance by the state does not suffice as a disciplining technology, so an alternative "biopolitics of disposability" is wielded against them: trans bodies of color are recipients of a "new kind of politics in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and cosigned to fend for themselves."[40] This is leading to what several scholars and activists have identified as a global "transgender genocide" which is underway.[41] Trans people are primed to understand themselves as killable and disposable subjects. Trans lives are subjugated "to the power of death" through this awareness, producing their (*our*) subjectivities in relation to a feeling of constant vulnerability and disposability—death is an ever-present threat for the mere fact of existing while trans.

It is in this context that Jennifer Laude's death acquires its meaning. Her death was wielded by imperial interests as a "civilizing technology that persists (...)

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[38] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," *Transgender Studies Reader* 2 (2013): 66–76; Sayak Valencia, "Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* translated by Olga A. Zhuravleva, 6, no. 2 (2019): 180–193; Curran Nault, "Documenting the Dead: Call Her Ganda and the Trans Activist Afterlife of Jennifer Laude," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (2021): 24–57.

[39] Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

[40] Nault, "Documenting the Dead."

[41] Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics."

with colonial intermittency through (...) technologies of murder as a way of indoctrination."[42] As an "unruly body," being transgender, impoverished, racialized, and feminized, her death serves as a reminder that those like her are *disposable*, hence *killable*. Already abandoned by the state in life, her murder shows that, unless she complied with the expectations set by the "continual and flexible (...) ways [of neoliberal capitalism] to extract surplus from the bodies [that] the nation-state itself wants to exclude," death awaited.[43] By design, she was disposable and so are other trans people: "If there is no justice, not only will Jennifer be dead, *we will all be dead*," claimed Naomi Fontanos, a prominent *transpinay*[44] activist in a protest following Laude's murder.[45]

Jennifer's death, thus, ought to be understood in relation to other trans and gender non-conforming bodies, rather than in isolation. Following Frial's call to see Jennifer "not as a detached, individual body but as a node in a larger assemblage of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks"—a "collective body"—, her murder may be read as both collective and extended.[46] Her death, a "civilizing technology" wielded as disciplinary (necro)power onto others, is inflicted in a collective "body politic" that "regulate[s] populations (...) and (...) discipline[s] individual bodies."[47] Her death produces a 'corporeal excesses' in ways that make its experience transcend to other bodies beyond her own.[48]

Likewise, her death is extended not only across bodies but also across time. In the necropolitical context of trans disposability, her death materializes Lauren Berlant's notion of "slow death": the "wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people (...) that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence."[49] The forms of affect produced by her death are central to the necropolitical technologies that aim to discipline trans bodies. Without the trauma of her trans friends, the grieving of her family (both of which were extensively put on display by mass media), and the subsequent fear of other trans people in the Philippines, her (dead) body would be of no disciplinary use to

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[42] Valencia, "Necropolitics."

[43] Aren Aizura, "Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Others, and the Limits of Necropolitics" in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014): 129–148.

[44] "Transpinay" is a term that combines "trans," from "transgender," and "pinay" (or "pinoy"), which is a national identifier in the Philippines. "Transpinay" refers to trans Filipino women, whereas "transpinoy" refers to trans Filipino men.

[45] Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

[46] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay"; Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock, "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987): 6–41.

[47] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."

[48] Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics."

[49] Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (2007): 754–780.

Fig. 2: Dozens of banners with Jennifer’s face calling for “Justice for Laude” rallied around the burning sculpture of an eagle, a symbol of US imperialism, to the unison chants of “USA Imperialist, Number One Terrorist!” or “Junk VFA, Justice for Laude!” (Image taken from *Call Her Ganda*, 2018, PJ Raval)

the state and neoliberal capitalism.[50] The trauma of her death, thus, is politically useful. As such, her death is both a collective and temporally extended act, and so is her afterlife.

Neoliberal necropower, however, does not *only* operate through the subjugation of life: it extends its sovereignty to rule afterlives too. Necropolitics discipline the living not only through the dispensation of death but also by deploying tools that include the "political production and destruction of the afterlife itself."[51] Deploying power over the politics of grievability is key: "only some queer deaths are constituted as grievable, while other [queers] are targeted for killing or left to die."[52] The disposability of trans lives necessitates disposable afterlives too. Turning trans people who are killed into "ungrievable" corpses is crucial to the necropolitical terror that systematically disciplines other trans people. Through this mechanism, death is routinely and ontologically inscribed into trans life. Death is integral to this political economy, as trans death is necessary for the governability of "unruly bodies," making some lives disposable and their deaths ungrievable. Often, grief for trans death is denied, for those deaths are weaved into and normalized as a part of the social fabric itself. At times, grief may even be co-opted and colonized.

Jennifer Laude's death, in that sense, is contested through a war of the afterlife. Her remembrance has faced attempts of destruction that seek to render her corpse ungrievable. Rodrigo Duterte's pardon to her murderer, Pemberton, for example, reads as a governmental declaration of neglect. To the state, her death is not a source of grief, for it is not even a loss. It is part of the necropolitical constellations that facilitate neoliberal governance of the racialized poor, which has now become a defining feature of Duterte's presidential term.[53] Likewise, the continued validity of the VFA tells a similar story. Any grief produced by her death is not requisite enough to command political change, even if the "Next Jennifer" is impending. The death of Cindy Jones Torres, another Filipino trans woman, in almost identical circumstances in August 2021 is, unfortunately, not surprising.[54]

These deaths are central to a looming "continuum of neocolonial governance" that haunts the Philippines to the day.[55] Even Jennifer's burial was, in part, co-opted: she was buried with a banner containing both her chosen name (Jennifer) and her deadname, serving as a reminder to trans people that, *even* if

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[50] AP Archive, "Cremation of transgender Filipino as US agrees handover Marine suspect in killing," Youtube (2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA8hsVtumsE&ab_channel=APArchive; Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

[51] Zengin, "The Afterlife of Gender."

[52] Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, "Introduction" in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014): 1–29.

[53] Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."

[54] Metro Manila Pride, "Justice For Cindy Jones Torres and All Lives Lost to Hate Crimes!" *Metro Manila Pride* (2021), https://mmpride.org/post/justice-for-cindy-jones-torres-and-all-lives-lost-to-hate-crimes/.

[55] Valencia, "Necropolitics."

they get to be grieved, they may not be remembered for who they are but rather as who the state wishes to classify them as.[56] They continue to be disciplined post-mortem as their personal histories are rewritten in ways that nullify their "unruliness" in life.

Nonetheless, these deployments of necropower over her death have, at large, been muted. Jennifer is remembered in dominant narratives as herself, converted into a symbol of both anti-imperial and trans resistance. Laude's memorialization is situated in a larger challenge to the necropolitical regime that disciplines trans lives. The "corporeal excess" of her death, while being a key component to the "slow death" of other trans people, is also reclaimed in her afterlife in a project of "de-necropoliticizing" trans existence.[57] In the way activists remember her, she is no longer produced as a disposable, ungrievable body. Her death hurts, and it is in this hurt that her life is reinscribed with worthiness. She was supposed to live, and it is not 'normal' that she was killed.

The politics of her afterlife, hence, do not only perform a specific mode of memorialization but offer an opening to re-signify trans life and possibilities in the Filipino context as well. As activists, friends, and supporters alike mobilize her afterlife in a way that transforms the *life* of other trans people, the idea of "postmortem/transmortem politics" that Valencia speaks about becomes unstable.[58] If trans life and trans *afterlife* are hard to separate, it is hard to tell where the "post" in "postmortem" even begins. As alliances have been established across the boundaries of life and death by trans activism in the wake of Laude's death, her afterlife has been transformed to render her a "grievable body," opening horizons of possibility in the process. In return, this offers a critical intervention that allows for different imaginations of trans existence in the Philippines or wherever else trans people of color are subjected to disciplinary projects that employ the means of imperial necropower. By protesting Laude's death and making her a grievable body, a horizon of possibility for trans futurities opens.

Trans Utopias: Queer Imaginings in Laude's Afterlife

Utopianism is the feeling that is felt with most force in Laude's memorialization. Her remembrance blurs the boundaries between the present and the future and between life and death to open space for imagining anti-imperial and trans utopias. Here, "utopia" may be understood through Muñoz's framework: it is a methodology of escape to a "*then* and *there*" based on the desire of "what might be."[59] For queers, who are prescribed a life ruled by necropolitical terror in the "straight world," utopia is found "building and doing in response to that status

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[56] "Deadname" refers to the name assigned to her at birth, which she no longer used.

[57] Valencia, "Necropolitics."

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Fig. 3: Activist Filipino collective "Dakila" commemorated six years since Laude's death with artwork. A fist, symbolic of resistance, is accompanied by ribbons in the colors of the LGBT+ flag and the caption: "*Justice for Jennifer, for all. Life with dignity, Livelihood in Peace, Life in Freedom*." (Reprinted with permission from Dakila)

of nothing (but death) assigned."[60] Muñoz urges queer imaginations to engage with the 'world-making potentialities' that comprise utopia, requiring us to squint to "strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now," aiming for the "horizons of possibility" instead.[61]

The ways in which Jennifer Laude has been memorialized, then, are distinctively utopian projects. Resisting the ungrievability allocated to her death, the intersectional and transnational remembrance she has been given negates the necropolitical context of *the present* and opens alternative visions of what trans life "might be." In so doing, it articulates an alternative mode of trans utopia that is not only reliant on the future—it lingers "as an act *of* the present, *in* the present and *for* the present" as well.[62]

In that sense, utopian imaginations have been a defining tone of Laude's afterlife. Reclaiming the future has been a central aim of the work that activists have made to remember her. In the "National Day of Outrage," Naomi Fontanos' speech made this clear: "we fight against capitalism, we fight against racism, sexism, and militarism."[63] The struggle for a different *then* and *there*, an alternative world unshackled from these imperial structures, has set the tone of the "Justice for Laude" movement. Even amongst protesters whose grief and rage have been mobilized not because of direct solidarity with queer and trans struggles but rather because of anti-imperial nationalist sentiments, the search for utopia prevails. In their call to "junk VFA," a Filipino society liberated from the imperial grip of the United States is envisioned.

However, trans-specific utopias, imagining futures away from the rule of death of the present, have also blossomed. This is particularly noticeable in the artwork produced in different moments of her commemoration. In different pieces, utopian calls have ranged from claims to alternative forms of trans life, characterized by peace, dignity, and freedom (Fig. 3)—that which is denied to trans people today—, to casting Laude (and thus other trans women of color) as a superhero whose liberation entails "the full liberation of the Philippines" (Fig. 1). The latter, in particular, extends the possibilities of utopia to include Laude herself. Killed for not being "feminine enough"—for Pemberton murdered her when he discovered she was not cisgender—, her portrayal as a feminized superhero articulates an afterlife for her in which her womanhood is not contested, nullifying any necropolitical attempt to do so.

Moreover, Laude's remembrance has, in adequate utopian fashion, enacted alliances that give her afterlife a body that transcends and negates the *here* and *now*. The multi-sited phenomenon of protests in her name are indicative of this.

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[60] *Ibid.*

[61] *Ibid.*

[62] Caterina Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[63] Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

Filipino diasporas have led several movements in her name through queer and anti-racist organizations (primarily in the United States), but the transnational alliances have not been reduced to diasporic connections only.[64] Upon Pemberton's pardon, he was first relocated to a military base in Hawaii, and native Hawaiians seized the opportunity to protest against US' imperial militarism in the island.[65] Other activist scholars, likewise, have called for interracial alliances between trans movements in the United States, emphasizing that other trans immigrants and/or people of color are equally subjected to necropolitical terror in the face of the empire.[66] The potential for transcultural alliances has been an outcome of Laude's afterlife.

Similarly, these utopian alliances have not been imagined transculturally only but also trans-*temporally*. Some regional Southeast Asian organizations, such as ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, have prompted imaginations in which past, present, and future trans people across the region come together in resistance.[67] Particularly thinking of the colonial erasure of trans and/or gender transgressive Indigenous identities, a shared history of imperial anti-transness can establish solidarities across Southeast Asia. Thus, Laude's afterlife has been given a collective body that effaces colonially-ascribed geographical and historical boundaries to imagine trans anti-imperial utopias. Her remembrance mobilizes a re-signification of trans life that goes beyond the "here"—the Philippines—and the "now": trans people of color who are subjected to imperial necropower *anywhere* may all find in Laude's afterlife the utopian potentiality of a livable past, present, and future for themselves too.

Conclusion: After/lives that matter

The memorialization of Jennifer Laude, thus, tells a story of utopianism and resistance in the face of the "slow death" produced by necropolitical networks. The conditions of her life and afterlife are being radically re-signified. In the grief, hope, and resistance mobilized for her, she is being, in a way, revived: the disposability and ungrievability that regimented her life and death are being fought against. This, in return, is mobilizing utopia for trans people—visions of what life "might be" are being imagined, as Naomi Fontanos has urgently called for: "the trans community needs to learn that we do not need to sell our bodies to survive."[68] Learning this, however, in a context where things appear unchanging is not easy—imagination and a "squinting" vision are both required. Jennifer Laude's afterlife, nevertheless, offers precisely that.

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[64] Velasco, "Queer and Trans Necropolitics."

[65] KITV, "Dozens protest pardon."

[66] Velasco, "Queer and Trans Necropolitics."

[67] Mikee Inton-Campbell, "Transnational Transness: Imagining the Connections Between Southeast Asian Queer Identities," *ASEAN Queer Imaginings* (2021): 27–37.

[68] Raval, *Call Her Ganda.*

Her mass remembrance, infiltrating institutions previously complicit with the trans necropolitics that led to her death, whispers a song of change. Even major religious authorities in the country have grieved her, re-signifying her, and other trans people's disposability.[69] In the midst of this, connections between trans activists have blossomed in the Philippines and elsewhere, strengthening mutual aid networks that radically change the material opportunities that trans people have access to in response to necropower and its complex technologies of death.[70] Thus, while utopia may be found in the openings of futurity, it is just as much about "what is *already* happening."[71] Through Laude's afterlife, trans life is *already* being transformed.

Laude's life, death, and afterlife, hence, are experienced collectively. Trans activism has re-signified her death with an echo that ripples across all trans bodies of color: her life was not disposable, just as *ours* is not. Her utopian remembrance is the promise of a different afterlife for all trans people too: living or dying, there is a life *after* this one that is free of empire and its deadly violence. Her afterlife, thus, is collective and continued just as her murder was. If her death is ours—for it is central to our slow death—, then our life ought to be *hers* too. Jennifer Laude, in that sense, is not *really* dead. The arbitrary line of what 'life' is relies on an individual model of the body that trans existence simply does not fit, at least not while subjugated to imperial necropower. As such, that I forgot, even if just for the briefest moment, that she is dead is not coincidental. The vigor of her afterlife, carried on by trans people of color in life, expands our possibilities of living as well. Jennifer Laude's spirit is our utopia, for it is our very own spirit too. The duty to honor her, hence, entails honoring ourselves, for in our own transness Jennifer lives on.

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[69] Robert Shine, "Filipino Religious Superiors Affirm Their Solidarity with Murdered Transgender Woman," New Ways Ministry (2018), https://www.newwaysministry.org/2014/11/08/filipino-religious-superiors-affirm-their-solidarity with-murdered-transgender-woman/.

[70] Naomi Fontanos, "#TransLivesMatter: Ms Naomi On Being A Gender And Development Advocate," *OpenTable MCC* (2020), https://opentablemcc.ph/blog/worship-podcast-2020-11-22-trans-lives-matter-ms-naomi-on-being-a-gende r-and-development-advocate/.

[71] Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias.*

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Sitting Here with You in the Future: Reimagining the Human through Digital Art

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Scholars like Frank Wilderson, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Frantz Fanon have spent significant time exploring the nature of "the Human" as a construct of European colonization and Trans-Atlantic slavery. Wilderson and Jackson, among others, convincingly argue that not only do these constructions of the Human position Blackness as its nadir, the Black is the structuring principle behind the Human. Under this framework, instead of conceiving of Blackness as non-Human, it is recognized as embodying the limit of the Human. In fact, it is only through the nadir of Blackness that the Human can cohere as an analytical frame. However, this is where various critical schools diverge. Writing from a distinctly American perspective, Wilderson holds that to be Black in America is—and always has been—to be a Slave, and that "anti-Blackness is the genetic material of this organism called the United States." Thus, under his analysis it would be a contradiction in terms to have a United States that was not anti-Black.[72]

While this conclusion is not fundamentally different from the conclusions reached by generations of Black scholars (one can see echoes of Cesaire's equation "colonization = 'thingification'" here), Wilderson departs from others in where he takes his analysis.[73] Instead of taking up the charge of activists that have worked for generations to build a new society—one that would be unrecognizable as the "United States" that Wilderson discusses—he seems resigned to the perpetual enslavement of Black people. Here, I mark my point of departure from Wilderson. I contend that while the Human *must* be abolished in the pursuit of a truly free society, this abolitionist project, in the same vein as the generations of prison abolitionist organizers in the US, is primarily a constructive project focused on building new worlds rather than merely destroying the old. In an exploration of radical world-building, art is a fruitful venue for analysis as it welcomes explorations of the unreal and the not-yet-real. In keeping with M. Jacqui Alexander's call to "engage that confluence of the local and the global," we will

[72] Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, First published as a Liveright paperback (New York London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021): 196.

[73] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000): 42.

focus specifically on international and transnational art.[74] Through an exploration of digital art created by three Black and/or queer artists, we will work to construct a new understanding of the Human grounded in its fundamental opacity and malleability, enabling an emphasis on queer Black futurity.

Before we begin our analysis, we first need to introduce the three artists whose work forms the bedrock of this paper. Lucas LaRochelle is a queer Canadian artist who built the crowdsourced platform *Queering the Map* in 2017.[75] *Queering the Map* is a website where anonymous individuals can contribute their stories about queer experiences and pin them to location on a minimalistic, hot pink version of Google Maps. The site retains no information about who uploaded a particular story—there are no user profiles or data tracking embedded in the site—and steps are taken through moderation to prevent other identifying information from being shared in the stories. The stories shared here range from short snippets of joy ("As soon as I saw her I realized I was in love") to heart-wrenching tales of rejection and homophobia, to fictitious queer imaginings ("I met a gay shark here once").[76]

Arafa Hamadi is a non-binary Tanzanian artist whose work engages powerfully in envisioning new worlds for queer African bodies. Their recent project, Letu ("ours" in Kiswahili), utilizes 3D rendering software to create two individual worlds—one for them and one for Nyokabi Kimari, a queer Kenyan artist —that embody their personal utopias.[77] The viewer is invited to walk through their worlds and listen to the associated soundscape, although they are unable to interact with anything in the worlds.

Lastly, Natalie Paneng is a Black South African woman whose work draws heavily on the aesthetics of vaporwave (Fig. 4 offers an example of this) and "[centers] around the idea of being watched and engaged with by viewers and audiences."[78] One of her projects, "Hello Nice," consists of a series of YouTube videos and blog posts from the perspective of her alter ego, Nice, where she merges explorations of aesthetics with Afrofuturist imaginings of alien worlds. We will put these three works in conversation with one another to explore a new understanding of the Human.

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[74] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, eds. Judith Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 264.

[75] Lucas LaRochelle, "Queering the Map," *LUCAS LAROCHELLE* (blog), http://lucaslarochelle.com/queering-the-map/.

[76] The examples of rejection that I could find were all too long (and exceptionally personal) to reproduce here. The fully anonymous nature of the site precludes crediting any direct quotes, but it also ensures that this reproduction maintains the individual's privacy as the entries are not searchable. An in-depth discussion of these privacy concerns can be found in: Emma Kirby, Ash Watson, Brendan Churchill, Brady Robards, and Lucas LaRochelle, "*Queering the Map*: Stories of Love, Loss and (Be)Longing within a Digital Cartographic Archive," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 6 (September 2021): 1043–1060.

[77] Arafa Hamadi, "Letu," *ICAonline* (blog), https://icaonline.net/artwork/arafa-c-hamadi/.

[78] Natalie Paneng, "Artist Statement," *ICAonline* (blog), https://icaonline.net/artists/natalie-ann-paneng/.

With those introductions out of the way, we can now lay the groundwork for our commitment to better worlds. Boaventura de-Sousa Santos describes how neoliberal capitalism constructs a "conservative utopia" that is identified with the present moment rather than radical change.[79] These utopias claim that all present ills—poverty, starvation, exclusion, etc.—are merely the result of the incomplete application of the market. In such a utopia, no other possibilities exist; we have reached Francis Fukuyama's "End of History."[80] Jose Esteban Muñoz articulates a framework of queer utopia grounded in the work of philosopher Ernst Bloch.[81] Bloch (and, by extension, Muñoz) responds to a general perception of utopia as unreal fantasy, instead choosing to ground utopia in his idea of the "not-yet" as a realm of future potentiality and centering the importance of hope in articulating visions for a new future.[82] Queerness is central to Muñoz's utopia, as to be queer in his terms is to reject societal principles that seek to control the forms of pleasure and relationality that the individual is allowed. Following Muñoz's framework, art is a powerful means by which to challenge our conceptions of what is possible in our pursuit of the utopian.

Now that we have laid out our utopian pursuit, we can begin to explore more closely the digital world. Much has been written in recent years about the so-called fourth industrial revolution (4IR), characterized by the widespread use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and wireless technologies.[83] It has been hailed by economists and many scientists as heralding new, unprecedented progress, especially for Africa and the rest of the global South. For those in the South, it promises expanded access to not only the internet but the entire world, while revolutionizing the nature of work for everyone as automation eliminates the need for humans in many jobs. Medical advancements, particularly in genetic modification and cybernetics, have the potential to lead to a new sort of human—one without many of the "flaws" that exist in humans today. However, scientific progress alone cannot fundamentally change the mechanisms of racial capitalist exploitation or imperial violence that form the constitutive elements of

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[79] Boaventura de-Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalisation" in *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, eds. Jai Sen and Peter Waterman (Viveka Foundation, 2004): 235–245.

[80] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York;Toronto;New York: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992).

[81] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, London: NYU Press, 2009).

[82] Muñoz, Cruising Utopia; For further articulation of Bloch's concept of the "not-yet," also see: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "A Critique of Lazy Reason: Against the Waste of Experience and Toward the Sociology of Absences and the Sociology of Emergences" in *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016): 262–295.

[83] Landry Signé and Njuguna Ndung'u, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitization Will Transform Africa into a Global Powerhouse," *Brookings* (blog), January 8, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-and-digitization-will-transform-africa-into-a-global-powerhouse/.

Fig. 4: A screenshot from Paneng's project "Vaporwave Response Computer"

modernity.[84] Additionally, 4IR discourses are rife with Western imperial epistemologies and conceptions of the human. Foremost among these is the implicit claim that everything that exists in the world—including every person—is fully knowable with the right tools, allowing for the creation of universal frameworks that assimilate all ways of being. Édouard Glissant writes powerfully against such pursuits in his advocacy for a "right to opacity," arguing that we should not seek to reconcile and erase difference (which is inherent in any attempts at fully understanding others) but should hold it up as a bedrock of our ontology.[85]

Given these critiques, we would do well to look beyond the 4IR for technological salvation. Another analysis of technological change charts the transition from an economic model based on centralized, professional production of goods for consumption by the public into a system of "prosumption" where the public adds significant value to goods or services that are produced, generally with little to no compensation. Examples of prosumption include Ikea furniture, where the user has to build the items themselves; self-service checkouts, where they are responsible for scanning and bagging their own items; and crowdsourced projects like Wikipedia, where volunteer users produce the entire content of the website.[86] While prosumption, like the 4IR, won't radically improve our lives on its own, the sorts of crowdsourced digital platforms that it has engendered prove to be a ripe realm for exploring new worlds.

Queering the Map is one particularly relevant crowdsourced platform. In its design, what LaRochelle refers to as a "counter-mapping" project, *Queering the Map* functions to create a queer archive of queer stories, rejecting many of the traditional features of both maps and archives.[87] LaRochelle describes how many of the site's features all contribute to the queer form of the map.[88] Notably, the site abandons many features that one would normally expect from something which, at first glance, appears like a form of social media; it lacks user profiles; an algorithmically controlled, vertical feed; and a search bar. The combination of these absences functions to prevent users from easily finding specific entries again

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[84] Notions of "progress" need to be problematized to reflect the inherently partial nature of Western scientific development. Since such concerns are somewhat tangential to the topic at hand, it is nonetheless a suitable shorthand here.

[85] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 189.

[86] Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography: Mapping Experience and Knowledge," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 45, no. 1 (January 2013): 19–36. While this source is relatively old, especially for discussions about technology, it should be apparent that this phenomena of prosumption has only gotten more pronounced over time, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic encouraging more people to limit physical interactions.

[87] LaRochelle, "Queering the Map."

[88] Lucas LaRochelle, "Queering the Map: On Designing Digital Queer Space" in *Queer Sites in Global Contexts: Technologies, Spaces, and Otherness*, eds. Regner Ramos and Sharif Mowlabocus (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021): 133–147.

and returns a level of explorational agency to the user, encouraging them to "get lost" in the stories.[89]

All these features position *Queering the Map* as an important venue for reimagining the Human. While all the stories that are shared on the platform came from someone, their anonymity serves to distance the user from an individualistic perspective, thereby creating a sense of collectivity. Even within stories that express profound loneliness, these stories are located next to others that document a queer presence.[90] Rather than focusing on the individual behind each story, the platform unifies the individual users into a shared, queer humanity. In this way, it helps to deconstruct the humanist investment in the individual in favor of a humanity vested in all members of the community. Thus, since all users share equally in the Human imagined by the platform, there is little room for the development of a strict Other to this formulation of the Human. Returning to our initial emphasis on Blackness and particularly transnational Blackness, however, Africa is one place where the limits of *Queering the Map* become apparent.

If we observe the geographical clustering of pins as a key source of the platform's collectivism, we must also consider the vast regions that are nearly entirely devoid of pins. While most metropolitan areas are so densely packed with pins that if you zoom out too far all you can see is black, there are many rural regions where there isn't a single pin for miles. Returning to Wilderson and other Black scholars like Alexander as our motivating force behind this endeavor, we further see that Africa embodies this lack of presence in the map (see Fig. 5 for a comparison between Africa and the UK). In this observation, I want to be careful to not reproduce discourse that essentializes rural and non-Western queerness as inherently alienating or perhaps aberrational, but to call attention to the exclusions that become apparent in a critical analysis of the platform. In discussing this urban/rural divide, Dodge and Kitchin's discussion of mapping bears relevance as they claim, "blank spaces on a map are not 'empty' but, rather, voids awaiting ascribed meaning."[91] While this lack of a queer African presence is largely unsurprising given both global asymmetries of internet access and the homophobia present in much of the continent, there are many African artists who are actively filling these voids with their work.[92]

Mbembe discusses the ways in which Western study of Africa constructs the continent as "a figure of lack."[93] We now turn our focus to the queer Black artists who are working to challenge this perception, asserting the existence of vibrant

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[89] LaRochelle, "Queering the Map," 144.

[90] Kirby, Watson, Churchill, Robards, and LaRochelle, "*Queering the Map*."

[91] Dodge and Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography," 31.

[92] Evan Mwangi, "Queer Agency in Kenya's Digital Media," *African Studies Review* 57, no. 2 (September 2014): 93–113; Arafa Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi" (Haverford College, April 18, 2022).

[93] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021): 26.

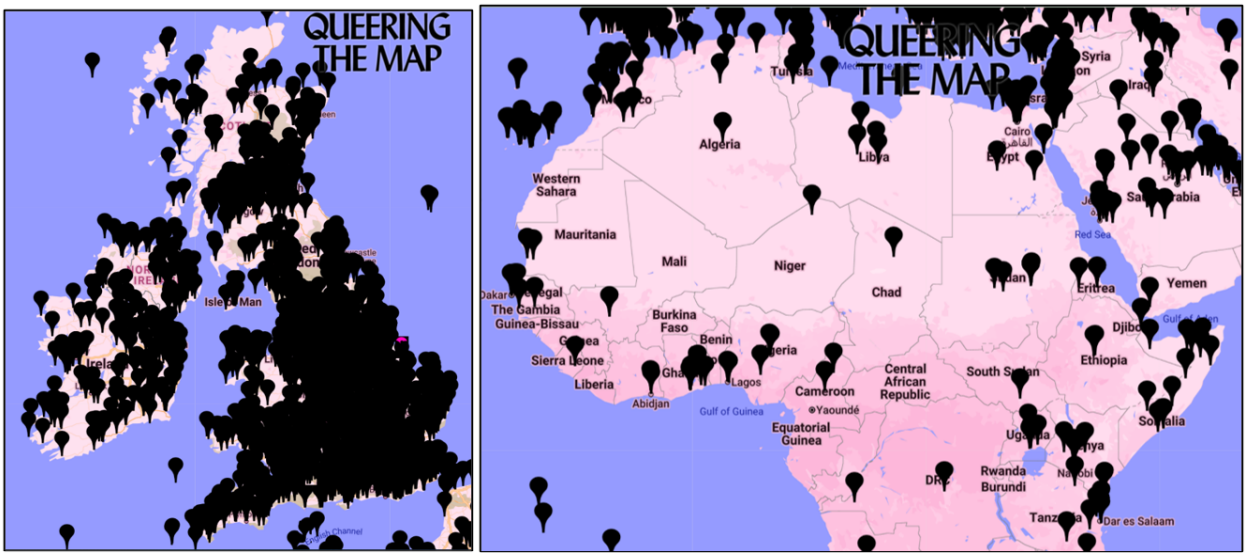

Fig. 5: A comparison of pins in the UK and Africa on *Queering the Map*

queerness on the continent and further challenging our understanding of the Human in the process. We look first at Arafa Hamadi's Letu, where their conception of the work and of the role of technology in it, resonates with Dodge and Kitchin's voids, describing how the tools they used became "empty stages for my queer body to occupy."[94] Their world-building is further an excellent example of Muñoz's queer utopia, as they explain that "my world's ideal, my worlds are unreal, my worlds are the worlds that do not exist in reality," echoing Muñoz's description of queerness as an ideal that we have never and may never truly experience, but nonetheless must strive towards.[95]

The nature of these worlds is further explicated through the lens of prosumerism and in conversation with *Queering the Map.* While *Queering the Map* is a characteristic prosumer platform built from user contributions, Letu consciously rejects interactivity. The user is invited to walk through the world, observing it and the people inside, but is unable to interact with any of it. In a talk they gave on their work, Hamadi explains that this isn't merely a limit of the technology they used but an intentional choice to preserve their worlds given the difficulty they describe of communicating a queer Black experience; if we don't share those experiences, we can enter Hamadi's world, but we can never truly embody it and therefore are unable to interact with it.[96]

Another African artist whose work speaks to questions of utopia and interactivity is Paneng. Through her avatar Nice, Paneng plays with the freedom and malleability of digital selves, not bound to any one personality or identity. Her work is also highly interactive. While blogs are generally not a very interactive medium, her "Hello Nice" series explicitly explores the performative nature of art, making it clear to the viewer that "she too is observing them observe her."[97] This sense of watching and being watched invokes modern debates about the tension between visibility and security.

All three of these artists negotiate the tension between visibility and security, which is highly salient to issues of racism and violence. For many activists on the Left, visibility is essential to security, emblemized in the successes of copwatching initiatives in various countries.[98] Conversely, the racialized surveillance of the state is instrumental in the maintenance of White supremacist power.[99] The strict

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[94] Dodge and Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography"; Arafa Hamadi, "Artist Statement," *ICAonline* (blog), December 12, 2020, https://icaonline.net/artists/arafa-c-hamadi/.

[95] Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi"; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia.*

[96] Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi."

[97] Her blog doesn't accept comments. Natalie Paneng, "Building My Internet Universe," *Ellipses*, no. 3 (2020), http://www.ellipses.org.za/project/vaporwave/.

[98] Bärbel Harju, "'Stay Vigilant': Copwatching in Germany," *Surveillance & Society* 18, no. 2 (June 17, 2020): 280–283.

[99] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015); Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures,* Sexual Cultures series (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

anonymity of *Queering the Map* emphasizes security while still making visible the collective queer stories. Conversely, Paneng's project creates the impression of hypervisibility through Nice's videos and blogs while hiding her real self behind the avatar, challenging us to question the impacts of such extreme visibility. Lastly, Hamadi negotiates this boundary through the malleability and impermanence of the digital, finding a sense of freedom online to control what kind of presence they create. Security is particularly relevant for them as a queer African person, where safety concerns are highly salient (homosexuality is strictly illegal in both Kenya and Tanzania). They describe finding a lot of power in the visibility that the internet can offer them, particularly insofar as it allows them to find queer community. Therefore, they emphasize how beneficial the impermanence of the internet is, making it so that they can be as visible as they want and, "if [they] do feel unsafe, [they] can delete it, and it becomes non-existent again."[100]

While malleability is particularly emphasized by Hamadi, it is present in all three works. The archival function of *Queering the Map* would seem to insist upon a certain degree of permanence, but this is challenged by the collectivized nature of the stories on the platform. Understanding the stories to collectively embody a singular queer community, the sheer number of different perspectives, experiences, and even languages present on the site make it impossible to assign any sort of fixed identity to the picture of the Human embodied by the platform. Similarly, Paneng's playful use of a digital avatar challenges our notion of what a human is, always retaining the ability to reinvent "herself" and resisting any fixed identity.

Malleability is further tied to Glissant's concept of opacity discussed earlier.[101] The anonymity embedded in *Queering the Map's* design immediately invokes a sense of opacity. However, if we consider that opacity is less about one's tangible visibility and more about their ontological status as different and therefore unknowable, we can consider some of the tensions embedded in the design. While the collectivizing nature of the platform can have the effect of flattening our understanding of queerness into a single identity, the persistent malleability of the site forcefully resists any monolithic descriptions of queerness, preserving its opacity in relation to heteronormative society. We find a similar level of opacity in Paneng's work where her engagement with futuristic worlds prevents an assimilation of her identity into hegemonic Western norms. Finally, Hamadi's insistence on the "look but don't touch" nature of their work can be read as an understanding of the inherent opacity of the medium. In articulating his framework, Glissant suggests that all literature is opaque, as it is merely a representation of the true intention of the author.[102] Therefore, if "even (...) the

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[100] Quoted in Valerie Amani, "'Living in Digital Utopias': On Existing and Art-Making | Tanzania," *Emergent Art Space*, February 18, 2021, https://emergentartspace.org/?forum=living-digital-utopias-existing-art-making.

[101] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

[102] *Ibid.*

Fig. 6: "Sitting here with you in the future" from *QT.bot*

most harmless sonnet" possesses an "irreducible opacity," how could we ever fully understand a piece of art?[103] However, despite the potentially isolating nature of their approach, Hamadi's work also functions as an invitation to the viewer to create our own worlds, to find spaces where we can construct the lives that we want to live.

Any extensive treatment of the Human as an analytical category would be remiss without some discussion of the position of non-human animals. Many scholars have documented the frequent use of animalistic language to reify anti-Blackness.[104] These scholars describe how non-White people (and particularly Black people) are associated with animals in order to justify their subjection and eradication. In considering the implications of our analysis for this dynamic, Kyla Schuller's formulation will be particularly useful.[105] She describes how notions of differential levels of malleability among different racial groups served as the foundations for early 20th century racial hierarchies. However, the picture of the Human that emerges from these artists' works is one that powerfully asserts its malleability, thus resisting such hierarchy. While my analysis does not address the claims of animal rights advocates who would challenge that any framework that reifies the separation between humans and other animals is problematic, I would contend that the vision of the human produced by these artists, grounded in principles of malleability and opacity, can be at least partially extended to non-humans, where an investment in opacity would resist human claims to dominance over animals based in our supposedly universal understanding of the world.

In his discussion of queer utopias, Muñoz emphasizes the importance of the future. By imagining new, utopian worlds, we preserve hope for a future that is all too often denied to marginalized people. Such futurity can be seen in another of LaRochelle's projects since the creation of *Queering the Map*. The project, called *QT.bot*, consists of two AI programs—one of which was trained on the stories submitted to *Queering the Map,* and another that was trained on Google Street View images from the pinned locations—that produce computer-generated versions of the entries. While many of them are just as nonsensical as other AI-generated text, one can see the software capturing certain themes from the platform. While there is clearly a lot of pain in many of the stories, there seems to be even more joy. So many of the stories generated by *QT.bot* capture snapshots of moments shared between lovers, people finding acceptance in their families (biological or chosen), and the magic and wonder of queer existence. When they started *QT.bot,* the first

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[103] *Ibid*: 115.

[104] Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings," *Social Text* 29, no. 1 (2011): 151–176; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures series (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Anima series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[105] Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling.*

phrase it spit out was "Sitting here with you in the future."[106] By radically reimagining the Human as something that is both perpetually malleable and essentially unknowable, we prevent the fixing of a defined Other, thereby preserving the futurity of all peoples and looking towards the queer utopia embodied in *QT.bot's* statement.

[106] Lucas LaRochelle, "QT.Bot," *LUCAS LAROCHELLE* (blog), 2022, http://lucaslarochelle.com/qtbot/.

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Masculinized Sovereignty: Understanding Violence Towards Mice and the Nonhuman

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My behavioral biology research on mice could potentially help the 130 million people living with diabetes. My experiments are motivated by a desire to secure my place in the medical industry. This desire, however, leads me to ignore the implications of exploiting mice as a model organism. There is no question that I, as an animal researcher, commit ethical crimes: I confine a mouse in a small cage, take it away from its family, anesthetize it, and physically take its body apart. Foucault's realm of "biopower," in which "metaphysical imperative instead of political or cultural rationality holds sway," describes the field of animal research ethics that studies why we make animals suffer intensely in pursuit of a scientific agenda.[107] In the eyes of the biomedical academic research industrial complex, violence for the "public good" justifies the erasure of animals' pain. Like the State, this complex dispossesses, takes, and displaces land and its habitants for the project of capital accumulation.

While conducting research, I view the lab as a site of social advancement where the differences between humans and nonhumans create a community of shared purpose. However, an interrogation of the lab as a site of violence can help us better understand how the State's capitalist modes of advancement and production harm those of Indigenous people, Black women, and other minorities. I will be applying my lived experiences of working *on* mice and the relations between humans and nonhumans to explore the masculinization of sovereignty (over both land and people) and the State's monopoly on violence. Using Black feminist standpoint theory, I will further examine the the "Black captive body" and the commodification other nonhumans.

Masculinized Human Sovereignty

What does it mean to be *human*, and who is given the authority to set the definition of human? By framing the human as a tool for violence, it can be used to categorize groups who do not fit into this definition and punish them for it. To

[107] Kimberly W Benston, "Experimenting at the Threshold: Sacrifice, Anthropomorphism, and the Aims of (Critical) Animal Studies," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 550.

animal researchers, a human is someone who has intellectual capabilities of reasoning, speaking, remembering, and intending, "making 'human' substance (rational, cultural, and moral capability) the measure of animal identity."[108] In thinking about human and nonhuman relations, speciesism is the conviction that humans are more important than other species, which is used to justify the exploitation of animals. In the lab, ideas of intellectual capability and speciesism combine to, for example, rationalize euthanizing a mouse that fails the behavioral test of not licking the correct solution bottle. In connection with the murder of Indigenous women, whose bodies represent alternative political order against settler colonialism, we see how the subjects that go against the dominant ideal of human are prohibited from living a free life, if not altogether eliminated.

Applying this conceptualization of how the definition of *human* changes in order to benefit the oppressor helps us understand how White masculinity is upheld. In Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," she explains how human means fitting in the "mythical norm": "In America, (...) is usually defined as White, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure."[109] Lorde identifies the feeling of "that is not me," where our identities fail to fit society's belief of what is normal and are labeled as being "less than" others. In Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?," she considers the connection between the *human* and *who is granted rights*, wondering why "[t]hey talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, 'intellect'] (...) What's that got to do with women's right or Negroes' rights?"[110] Here, *human* gets complicated by racist and sexist stereotypes, as it is not solely based on groups that fit into the biopower of racial, bodily, gender, religious, and class identity, but also whether or not they are associated with intellectual ability, a trait that is a discriminator between humans and nonhumans. With both mice and groups that do not fit into the "American human," not belonging to the given definition of human legitimates the oppression of the inferior group. Society responds to those in Lorde's "mythical norm" by dehumanizing these groups in the same way that I, as a participant in the biomedical industrial complex, do to mice.

The outlined definitions of human are difficult to conceptualize without linking them to power. How does the definition of human determine who has power over, or *monopolizes*, violence? European colonizers in the 1600s relegated minority subjects to positions of subordination through sovereign power, upholding their economic, political, and social domination. This violence, specifically through imperialist expansion, was supported by the colonial constructions of race. Similarly to social Darwinism in the late 19th century,

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[108] *Ibid*: 546.

[109] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020): 2.

[110] Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" in *Civil Rights and Conflict in the United States: Selected Speeches* (Lit2Go Edition, 1851).

"settlers suggested that the natives were inferior to the 'master race' and that 'primitive races' would inevitably (perhaps desirably) be wiped out by the more 'civilized' European ones."[111] Here, the "civilized" human becomes included in the definition of human, signifying Whiteness, property ownership, and desire for production. In human and animal relations, the civilized human hopes to produce scientific knowledge to benefit their own species. Therefore, humans are inevitably more deserving of living because their desire for scientific advancement (i.e. capital production).

The "Black Captive Body"

Colonialism, in combination with racist ideologies, produces the idea of the "Black captive body" as *not human*. Thus, the White colonizer's violence is justified, going so far as to convince "decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native people *should* be subjugated."[112] Violence towards the Black body is specifically exercised through criminalization and captivity; these methods both produce and reproduce the masculinization of sovereignty over people. In relation to the lab, 55,475 out of 3,936,723 procedures using live animals are included in the category of behavioral research that causes "pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm."[113] By denying their pain, we continue to claim mices' bodies, think of them as not human for the good of science, and reproduce our sovereignty over them. Moreover, lynch mobs served as an extra-legal means for reimposing racism, sexism, and other -isms that drive one farther from the category of human. By viewing African American male-White female relations as a crime and White male-African American relations as a right to property, White men claimed ownership over bodies. Accordingly, the White man's violence is never seen as damaging but as restorative, rightful, and unpunishable (i.e. the masculinization of sovereignty over people).[114]

The Masculine State

> *The State that I seek to name has a character, it has a male character, it is more than likely white, or aspiring to an unmarked center of whiteness, and definitely heteropatriarchal.*[115]

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[111] Mary Bosworth and Jeanne Flavin, eds., *Race, Gender, and Punishment: From Colonialism to the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007): 19.

[112] *Ibid*: 13.

[113] Kimberley Jayne and Adam See, "Behavioral Research on Captive Animals: Scientific and Ethical Concerns" in *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 520.

[114] Bosworth and Flavin, *Race, Gender, and Punishment*, 23.

[115] Audra Simpson, "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): 2.

Given the way that the White man comes to define himself by having a monopoly over violence, how do we understand how the masculinized State apprehends bodies? By viewing the State as "a Man," institutionalized rejection of difference, or in other words, the State seeing others as not human, creates systems of punishment attached to the colonial construction of race. In Audra Simpson's "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunder and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," she shows how masculinized sovereignty is exerted not only over people but also land. The Canadian government's "multicultural, liberal" settling of land is, in actuality, an ongoing dispossession of land, controlling who lives where and with what rights.[116] In this case, land does not just represent the physical soil. It is also the home, identity, traditional governance forms and, most markedly, "a dead body to be extracted from."[117] Indigenous women's bodies are less valuable and less human *because* of what they symbolize: "land, reproduction, [and] Indigenous kinship and governance"—a direct threat to settlement. Through the State's gendered and racialized elimination techniques of Indigenous women's bodies to "destroy what is not," he secures the masculinized settler sovereignty.[118]

Now, I will make visible the key concepts in order to frame animal research's application to the State's sovereignty and resulting violence over land and people:

> *The animal researcher dominated IACUCS* [*Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee*] [= the masculine State] has determined a priori that *experimental animals* [= Indigenous people] are of so little ethical worth compared to the value they place on hypothetically increasing *scientific knowledge* [= capital production] that the ends always justify the means.[119]

Analogously, mice in my lab are forced away from their natural habitats to captivity in order for their behavior to be observed and their bodies to be manipulated. This violent dislocation procedure forces mice to engage in social interaction that is distinct from what they would naturally experience. They are exposed to unnatural procedures, such as "being caught and handled, unfamiliar sounds, lighting and temperature, and cage cleaning."[120] The State's similar dispossession of land drives Indigenous people to live without clean water and proper housing in extreme temperatures. Their environment shifted but also their "traditional way of life."[121] The trauma that both the mice and Indigenous people face helps us comprehend the implications of colonialism.

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[116] *Ibid*: 2.

[117] *Ibid*: 7.

[118] *Ibid*: 2.

[119] Lawrence A. Hansen and Kori Ann Kosberg, "Ethics, Efficacy, and Decision-making in Animal Research" in *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 284.

[120] Jayne and See, "Behavioral Research on Captive Animals," 521.

[121] Simpson, "The State is a Man," 5.

Securing sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with upholding capitalism. Colonial construction of race is not only based on racial inferiority and savagery, but it is also entangled with the economic necessity of labor for colonizers and their home countries. As Lorde comments, an “institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders a surplus people.”[122] In other words, those at the top (who most likely fit the mythical norm) benefit from using difference as a tool, creating a large supply of workers whose labor is so exploited that they are made less than human. Even after the abolition of slavery, economic motivation drove the Southern elite to explore creative ways to reintroduce race-based involuntary servitude and now drives the criminal justice system to enforce mass incarceration for prison labor. It is the continuing ethos of capitalism that overrides any questions about morality. Thus, the nonhuman black body was and is not only captive but also commodifiable. In a capitalist world, violence drives and is driven by capital production.

As a scientist, there are many times when ethical grounds are divorced from scientific advancement. To give some examples, the death of a mouse becomes overshadowed by a successful experimental result. When mice have pups, reproduction is tethered to making commodities and is in service of the marketplace, while no thought is given to the dispelling of the mouse’s experience of motherhood. As Claude Bernard, a famous physiologist puts it, a scientist “no longer perceives the cry of animal he (...) perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve.”[123] I have experienced their “cry” from the approved killing methods for rodents such as neck dislocation and carbon dioxide suffocation. Nevertheless, the possibility of new advances in human health that benefit the biomedical-industrial complex is what reassures my colleagues and I. This erasure of an animal’s pain provokes the question of how the same is done to Indigenous women. Their “cry” results from the trauma, homelessness, poverty, and ill-health Natives face as a consequence of colonization. Their cries are silenced by eliminating Indigenous women, a gendered mode of violence that upholds the State’s sovereignty.

It is important to highlight how structural systems prevent change and make resistance difficult. The biomedical-industrial complex delegates researchers to determine if animal experimentation should be allowed. For example, in my laboratory, it seems that we are reluctant to consider adopting non-animal based research methods, because doing so would interfere with our own personal objectives and employment. The same is true with the State, as “the disappearances keep things in place, the narratives, the politics, the distributions in power that allow for land to still be taken.”[124] The State, himself, determines laws about what land is taken and eliminates anything or anyone that goes against him. If both the

[122] Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 1.

[123] Benston, “Experimenting at the Threshold,” 549.

[124] Simpson, “The State is a Man,” 1.

biomedical-industrial complex and the State make up the rules, how else can we envision change?

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory: A Solution

The pain, suffering, and exploitation of nonhuman groups show us how society falters when difference is seen as deviance, and deviance is seen as not human. Patricia Hill Collins' "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" calls for us to shift the ways in which we think about oppression by using Black feminist standpoint theory. Her frameworks help us reflect on how we can reimagine human and nonhuman relations. In colonizer and slave, State and Native, and human and animal relations, the problem lies in that "all categories of humans labeled Others have been equated to one another, to animals, and to nature."[125] In human and nonhuman relations, epistemic violence has been used to erase animals' pain and view matters solely from the human standpoint. Collins highlights how Black feminist thought fosters new ways of assessing the "truth" by placing Black women's *experiences* as the center of analysis.[126] In the lab, the problem arises when the researcher "perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve."[127] However, a decolonial perspective functioning in the biomedical-industrial complex would mean formulating questions but not always trying to find the answers to them through violent experimentation in order to fit homogenous knowledge formations. Utilizing Black feminist standpoint theory in human and nonhuman relations would allow us to decolonize the dominant, scientific viewpoint, defeat speciesism, and see from the animal's point of view, helping us gain empathy and giving us a way to practice feminism.

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[125] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 555.

[126] *Ibid*: 553.

[127] Benston, "Experimenting at the Threshold," 546.

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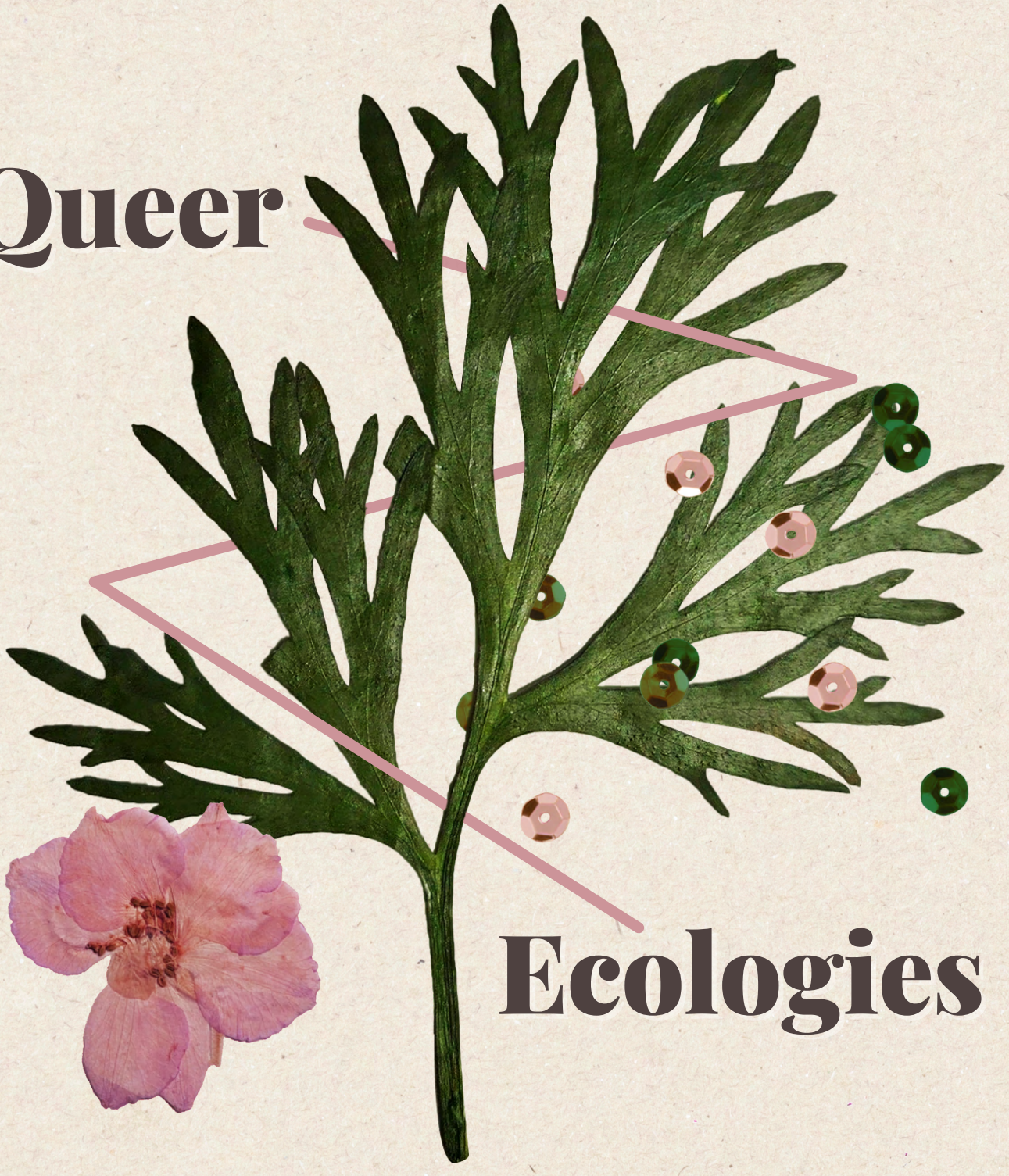
Queer Ecologies



Published
December
2022

Created by
Yeh Seo Jung
& Ray Craig

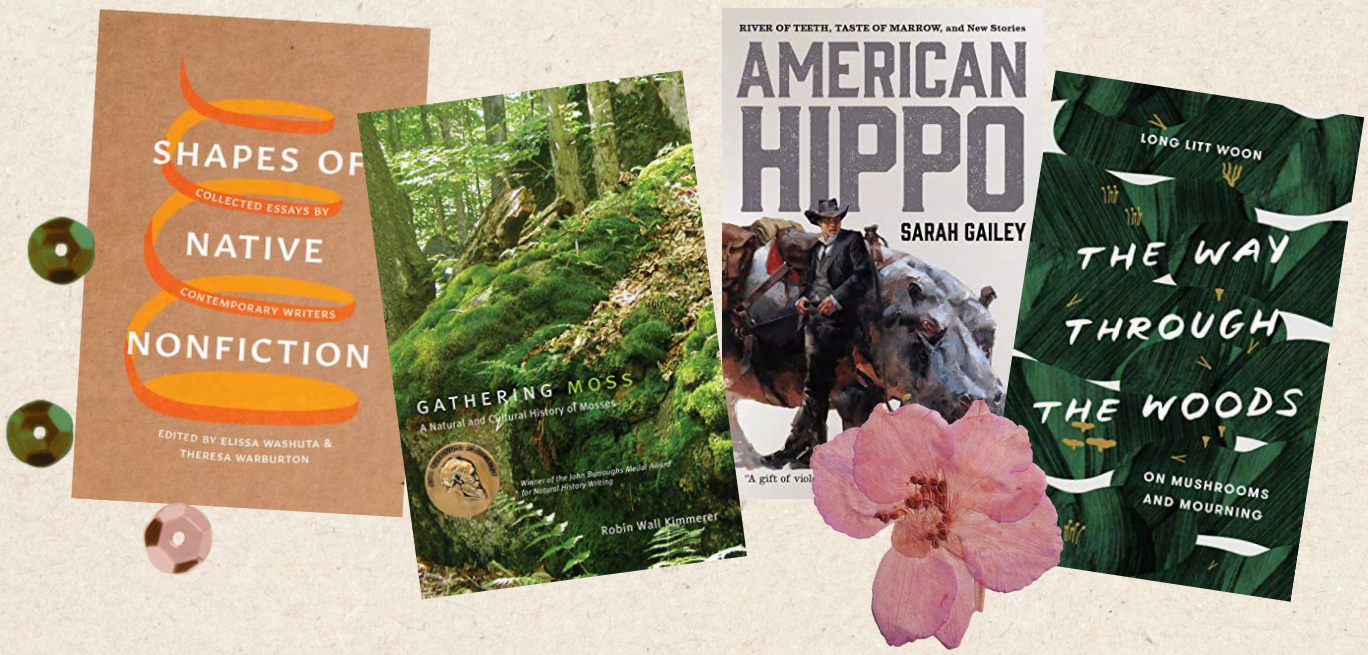
This is a zine borne out of an independent study with Professor Giovanna Di Chiro, and we would like to extend our thanks to her for nurturing our curiosity and pushing the boundaries of what we consider to be knowledge production.

Sincerely, Yeh Seo and Ray

When we started this independent study, we wanted to start an exploration of bio-social systems using a queer and feminist theoretical lens. We aimed to look critically at knowledge formation and construct alternative visions for more just and sustainable relationships between science, nature, and ourselves. While queer theory most directly interrogates the normative structure of heterosexuality both in humans and in biology, more broadly, these studies include analyses of hierarchy, power, and value. Through these readings, we sought to examine the core questions and debates in the field pertaining to gender and environment, sexuality, queer ecofeminism, climate justice, health and bodies, and decolonization. We are so excited to share what we have learned with you through this zine!

WHAT WE READ

Queer Ecologies edited by Catriona Sandilands & Bruce Erickson, Beast at Every Threshold by Natalie Wee, How Much of These Hills is Gold by C. Pam Zhang, Love After the End edited by Joshua Whitehead, Shapes of Native Nonfiction edited by Elissa Washuta & Theresa Warburton, Gathering Moss by Robin Wall Kimmerer, American Hippo by Sarah Gailey, The Way Through the Woods by Long Litt Woon



“We make choices as nations. We make choices as individuals. And all the choices we make leave a trace.”

— Long Litt Woon in *The Way Through the Woods*

I

WHAT IS QUEER ECOLOGY?

“You've done your work, say the clefted leaves that brush the earth. Now let me do mine.”

— Natalie Wee in *Beast at Every Threshold*, "Future-Proof"

When we ask ourselves what queer ecologies are, we must first acknowledge our own selves as being queer. To "queer" nature is to acknowledge the complexities present in nature, but to us, queering nature is already how we perceive nature as queer folks. **For us, queer ecologies is about imagining an infinite number of possibilities within the space that we consider to be "nature."** Queer ecologies then becomes a concept that helps us connect in nature and make sense of nature/queerness along axes of space, place, loss, and identity. We invite you to explore the unknown and to embrace the possibilities as you read this zine, and in doing so, we hope you can discover your own definition of queer ecologies as well.

“How a mother tongue becomes that which she guards alone....& now I wear my mother's skull, sour the native tongue with seethe. *You, Haunting. Where are you from?”*

— Natalie Wee in *Beast at Every Threshold*, "Can You Speak English?"

II

GRIEF & LONGING

“Grief grinds slowly; it devours all the time it needs... When you lose the witness to your life, you also lose a part of yourself.”

— Long Litt Woon in *The Way Through the Woods*, pg 4, 91

While reading the books, we realized that in spite of the different formats (speculative fiction, academic essays, lyric writing, poetry), the various authors explore melancholia, queerness, and grief in the environment. Using Catriona Sandilands' "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies" as a guide, we delved into how nature can hold grief and longing.

Catriona Sandilands begins by describing the relationship between an engagement with environmental loss and environmental responsibility. She asserts that meaning is gained *in negotiation with grief,* whether that be over the state of the environment, over an identity that is blatantly erased by Western society, or over modernity. Washuta and Warburton similarly echo that relationship with grief and melancholy. Specifically, they name their struggle with identity, sovereignty, and trauma as their source of melancholy. In their introduction to S*hapes of Native Nonfiction,* they describe the traditional structures of literature as being another form of settler colonialism that destabilizes Indigenous storytelling.

For example, Deborah A. Miranda writes about her father's traumas and how he finds solace in the river in her short essay, "Tuolumne." Her father was incarcerated, and he struggled with alcohol and a fractured family. "Did he know his body as anything but a weapon or a target?" Miranda asks. "Did he wonder how long he could bear the weight of his body, heavy with the blood of others, stained with indelible loss and grief, curled tight as a fist around a handful of shame?" (77) But the river becomes his solace, his new bloodstream. For both Miranda and her father, the river is not a pristine or pure thing to look at but rather, something to immerse yourself and your grief in. "We go there [to the river] because there is one prayer we have never forgotten: water is life," she writes (79).

This is a stark contrast to the way ecotourism commodifies mourning and grief. Sandilands argues that ecotourism exaggerates the idea of nature as being lost and that modernity memorializes its legacy and petrifies grief into permanent, unchanging national parks and monuments. Rather than creating a consumable, replaceable fantasy of wilderness, Indigenous writers like Miranda, Washuta, and Warburton love and understand landscapes, both in their devastated and restored forms.

"We are all amateurs at grief, although sooner or later every one of us will lose someone close to us."

— Long Litt Woon in *The Way Through the Woods*

In *How Much of These Hills is Gold,* Lucy and Sam are orphaned siblings who wander the hills in search of a burial place for their father. Unlike Lucy, Sam feels connected to their father through the landscape they must navigate, and nature offers Sam a place to process that grief. Similarly, Long Witt Woon makes connections between her deceased husband and the world around her in *The Way Through the Woods.* Between herself, the shadow of her dead husband, and the fungi that she creates relationships with, Long grapples with grief and finds a solution to her melancholy within nature.

"A queer ecology that both emerges from and politicizes melancholy natures, incorporating the experience of a 'world of wounds' into an ethical stance that resists, rather than fostering, fetish."

— Catriona Sandilands, pg 334

“Once, I lost myself & found an instrument of forgetting, let someone's lover fashion from the ocean of my solitude a shoreline for their sins to wash up on…”

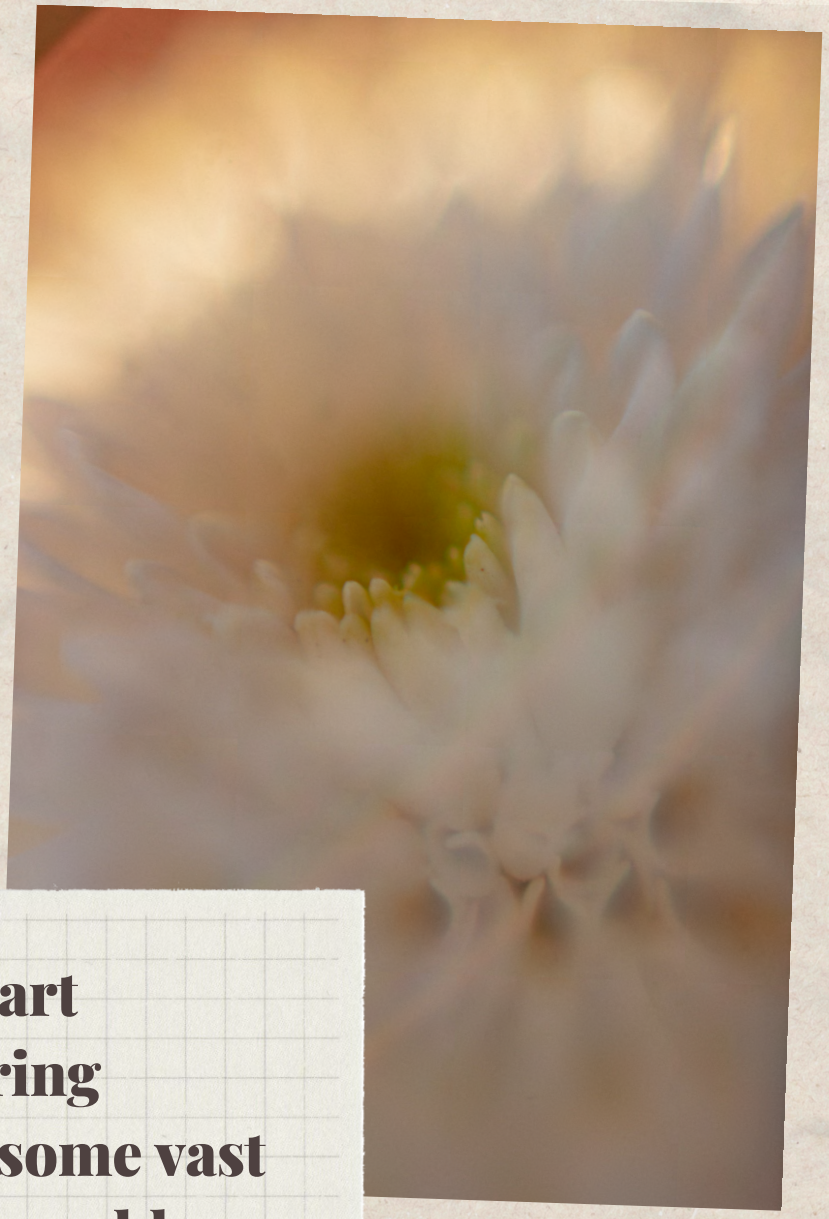
QUEERNESS & GENDER

“...maybe the trade-off for resurrection is shame vast enough to kill us & that becomes another execution to tongue our way out of.”

— Natalie Wee in *Beast at Every Threshold*,
"In Defence of My Roommate's Dog"

In *HMOTHIG*, Ba is the only person who has validated Sam's masculinity/maleness. Because Ba taught Sam everything they know about the hills, Sam's relationship with nature is a product and symbol of both Sam and Ba's relationship and Sam's gender. Having lost the only person who ever validated Sam's masculinity, Sam's knowledge of the landscape is all they have to affirm his gender identity. Natalie Wee has a more visceral take on queerness by confronting it with a sharp poetic edge. She uses the body to situate her queerness and express how her queer love becomes vicious and tangible. For example, the poem, "Skin Hunger, With Waves" has a line that says, "But your sharp kiss was a promise / I failed because the body is a question / only touch can answer." The poet shies away from the intimacy of queer love and the idea of embracing but like a wave to the shore, they are drawn right back to it because they are hungry for something good of their own.

Love After the End is a series of short stories that are primarily dystopian in nature, and this anthology specifically explores the ways in which queer relationships — platonic, familial, romantic — flourish and thrive in the devastated landscape. Although they do not explicitly name is as melancholy as Catriona Sandilands does, the Indigiqueer characters resist the allure of capitalist modernity and actively choose to create a world constituted of kinship. More specifically, they choose to kin in a way that is true to their queerness. Joshua Whitehead asks the question: "What better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?" This is a response to both loss and the erasure of queer identities within Indigenous communities. It is queer to flourish, it is queer to resist, and it is beautiful and natural to be queer.



"tiny heart thundering toward some vast & unknowable glory, in the name of not vanishing just a little longer"

— Natalie Wee in *Beast at Every Threshold,* "In Defence of my Roommate's Dog"

ON BEING QUEER

I think being queer requires a great deal of navigation through the thicket of desire, truth, and observations. There are the heteronormative values that I've absorbed throughout the short few decades I've spent on this earth, and then there are the things that I see with my own eyes that contradict them. The way a clownfish can slip from being father to mother to father again, how trees change their colors in the fall, how my queer body fits into the landscape seamlessly, as if it belongs there against all the odds. These are the things that I think about when I think about queer ecologies. I almost feel sorry for both my body and the earth, for all the destruction that they have both witnessed, but I am trying harder to do what Catriona says and keep myself from petrifying this grief into a singular legacy. These are the things that I think about when I think about queer ecologies.

— *Yeh Seo*

I UNDERSTAND HOW ONE MISTAKES THE KIND / -LING OF LOVERS FOR A FUSE.

— Natalie Wee, *Beast at Every Threshold*

"I ask, 'How do we build a relationship with this new planet?' She laughs, 'I would assume like all consensual relationships: we ask them out.'"

— Gabriel Castilloux Calderon in *Love After the End*, pg 76

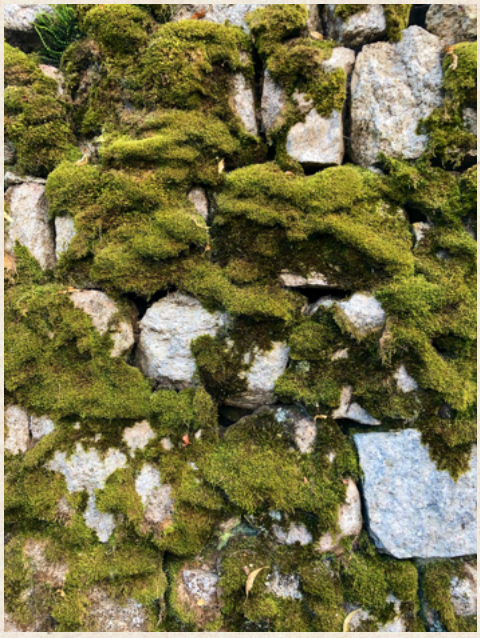
IV

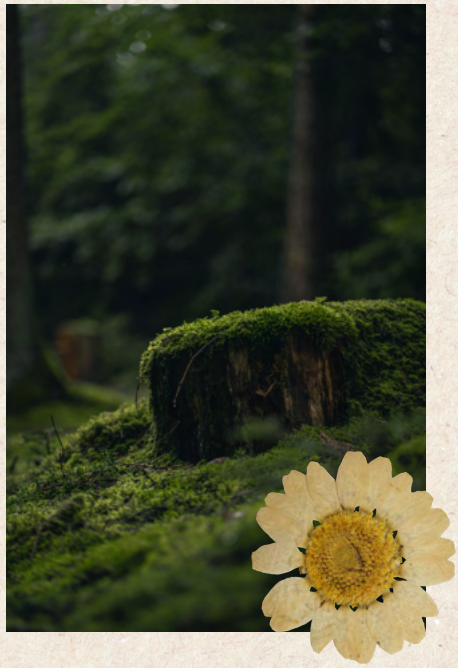
INTERCONNECTIVITY

"Through them [mushrooms], nature seems almost to be communicating and playing with us in a simple, wordless dialogue."

— Long Litt Woon in *The Way Through the Woods*, pg 13

In *Gathering Moss,* Robin Wall Kimmerer repeatedly emphasizes the importance of **reciprocity** and **interconnectivity** between humans and the world around them. However, in order to engage with nature, she asserts that you must see the world through body, mind, spirit, and emotion. Through **kinning** and understanding the different species around us, whether they be person, plant, or animal, Kimmerer believes that we are able to obtain a greater knowledge about the world and our own place in it.





American Hippo by Sarah Gailey is a piece of speculative fiction in which the bayous of Louisiana are full of hippos as a government response to invasive plant life. It follows the story of a mostly queer, mostly POC group of hippo-cowboys called hoppers. It explores queer joy, sorrow, community and violence alongside the hippos, and in doing so, Gailey offers up an important question about the tie between the domestication of hippos and their relationships with humans. What does it mean in that those doing the domesticating are mostly marginalized people? What is at the center of domestication and what is its relationship with kinning?

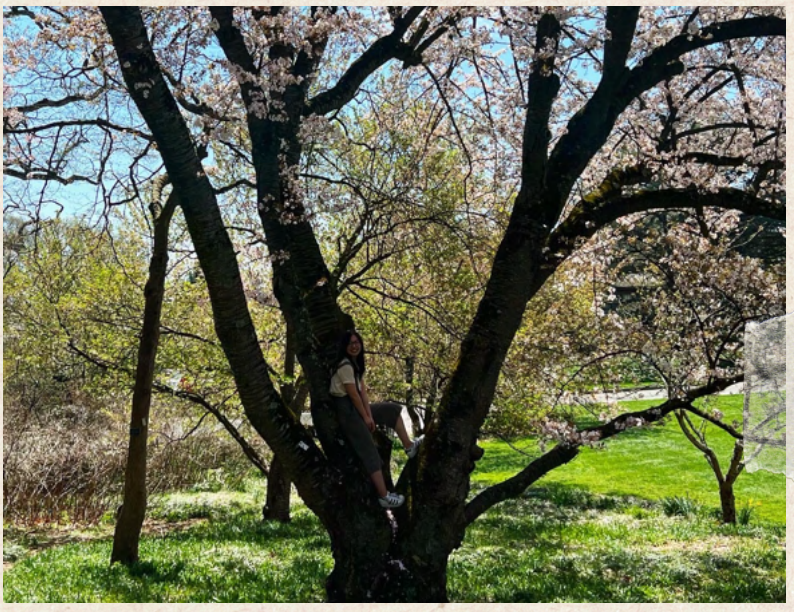
These kinds of animal-human relationships are similar to what Stacy Alaimo asserts when she says that human-animal dualisms should be supplanted with models of naturecultures. **Naturecultures** is the idea set forth by Donna Haraway that nature and culture are so tightly interwoven that they cannot be separated into "nature" and "culture." Natureculture also allows us to **describe entangled multispecies histories and worlds that are more than human,** encompassing hippo and human alike. It contests the dominant paradigm that separates man from animal. Although Alaimo's idea comes within the context of animal sex and human interpretations of it, we think that this addresses the kind of close kinning that we see in American Hippo.

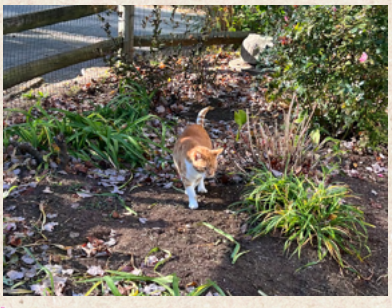
How much of the world must we pass through to arrive at ourselves?

ON COLLABORATION

I was not quite expecting the level of interconnectedness that we found in the texts and even in ourselves as we started to talk about things more and more in depth over time. One of my favorite ways we came to draw conclusions was when one of us would have a feeling or more of an undeveloped thought, and we would work it out together. For example, that was how we ended up drawing a connection that I shared in one of our meetings between *How Much of these Hills is Gold* and *American Hippo* despite that we focused on them in different weeks, about human-animal relationships, kinning, and meaningful relationships versus domestication and colonization. There are clearly lots of connections to be made between texts we did not focus on in the same weeks which we fleshed out a bit more in our conversations, but this one stood out to me because of the experience of teasing out a connection with peer support. I think that kind of supportive, generative collaboration represents a big part of what I enjoyed about this experience both academically and personally.

— *Ray*





“isn’t this the way we find our place, by participation in the life of the world?"

— Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Gathering Moss*

Overall, we have learned so much from this independent study. Talking about little details that resonated with us brought out similarities and shared experiences which facilitated better conversations and a closer interpersonal relationship than we were initially expecting. In hindsight, this level of bonding makes a lot of sense as an outcome based on many factors: the nature and themes of the course, Prof. Di Chiro’s values and our values, our shared experiences as queer people, and inviting in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s concept of kinning that we agree continues to shape our worldview and experience of interpersonal relationships. Even though that might not have been an unpredictable outcome, it was still a pleasant and welcome surprise.

"Queer ecology suggests, then, a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions."

— Catriona Sandilands, pg 22

Nature has no boundaries

Àṣẹ After Man: The Rupture of the Christian-Colonial Project as Decolonial Ceremony

Eden Segbefia

Barnard College

May we who are plastic become like water. May we who are plastic bend our souls forged by fire. May we melt back into ourselves. May we emerge again. May it be so. Àṣẹ.

Preface

Àṣẹ is life force because it imbues power. Breath into stone, àṣẹ is the lung of agency. This project stemmed from two experiences, which infused àṣẹ into the core of my being, rerouting my political beliefs in the process. One. An altar. A small white cloth supported a lemon, a cup of water, a bell, and June Jordan’s *Directed by Desire*. This was the first altar of many, and at the moment I felt unsure of its significance, did it have any? The next day, its meaning paid me a visit in the form of a large, dead moth in the center of the doormat. Next, a praying mantis, also rigor mortis. It was here that the breath that exited those insectoid lives entered every pore of my being, electrifying my belief in the unknown. Two. On a trip to Bahia, Brazil, I was a witness to Michaela Harrison’s Whale Whispering project, which explores the “moan of the Middle Passage” via whale and ceremonial song (Harrison is initiated in Candomblé, an Afro-diasporic spiritual tradition for which the concept of àṣẹ is vital).[128] Surrounded by humpback whales who cried out intensely beautiful melodies through their blowholes, I was transported back to the lemon, the moth, the mantis. These nonhuman lives were much more than I had been taught. Humpback whales can immerse themselves in 700 feet of water for up to thirty minutes. Emerging from the papery thin walls of a cocoon, this inquiry, too, surfaced from the depths of the ocean. It appeared there millennia ago. I believe strongly that the personal is political but what of the spiritual? What of the limits of the personal? What of flesh and spirit intertwined or… disentangled, ruptured, by the force of the Christian colonial project?

[128] Michaela Harrison, “Whale Whispering,” Michaela Harrison website, https://www.michaelaharrison.org/whale-whispering.

Introduction: Àṣẹ and the Christian Colonial Heteropatriarchy

The concept of àṣẹ (pronounced \'ahh-,shay\) in Yoruba philosophy and cosmology, which has spread via Afro-diasporic manifestations of the Ifá spiritual tradition (Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, Santería, Lucumí, etc.,), promotes the idea that a spiritual and generative force inhabits every being, animate or inanimate. Àṣẹ is a divine spiritual power or force that is "the actualization of a ritual utterance or command in order to effect change or to call for the materialization of a given desire (...) it is the power of sanction and authority."[129] Through the recombination of objects or words, additional àṣẹ may be given to an object or being. Some examples of this are ebó (spiritual offering), trance possession, song, and dance. Linguistically, àṣẹ is akin to "amen," "so be it," "let it be done," or the authority for something to be done. It is ultimately about power.

Many origin stories and explanations exist about the meaning of àṣẹ. While most textual definitions agree, it is crucial to note that the most accurate definitions are experiential in nature, which are often communicated orally by experienced practitioners of these spiritual traditions, not by academics. Neither English nor the written language, in general, can truly capture the essence of àṣẹ. In this study, I aim to provide an introductory explanation of the concept of àṣẹ for the purposes of accessing the reader's speculative imagination, in which methods of decolonial thinking are mobile and hold the capacity to embrace multiplicities of meaning.

The generation of additional àṣẹ (which all beings inherit) mirrors that of the transformation from pupa to insect. From potential energy to kinetic energy. A pupa is an immobile and non-feeding being that through the process of pupation, initiated by hormones, becomes a feeding, mobile insect. The potential of a pupa becomes kinetic in its arrival to insect-hood. Non-living beings hold energy too. Simply due to the positionality or arrangement of an object and/or its components, an object can be determined to have a substantial amount of energy. This energy is then transformed, and activated, into kinetic energy, which involves movement. Thus, àṣẹ in its many forms may articulate itself within physics, biology, religion, spirituality, etc. All energy is not only intertwined but undestroyable.

As an indestructible force, àṣẹ is an example of sacred ground upon which the Christian colonial project might shatter. Here, I aim to view Afro-diasporic spiritual concepts not as the antithesis of Christian coloniality but as *a* decolonial framework that could demolish Christian coloniality and its effects. One of the effects of Christian coloniality is what Sylvia Wynter refers to as "the overrepresentation of man." This term describes a phenomenon in which the descriptive meaning of "the human" is conflated with the "White bourgeois man." Wynter argues that most social problems can be attributed to the notion that the "standard" human is the White bourgeois man, ignoring the vast experiences and

[129] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005): 108.

identities of the rest of the humans on Earth. This belief upholds Christian coloniality by sanctioning the seizing of land and othering “foreign” lands and peoples in the process. The mechanisms by which the Afro-diasporic concept of àṣẹ becomes decolonial do not rely on a binary understanding of Christianity as it relates to Afro-diasporic spirituality. In other words, because Western epistemologies exist within binary thinking, some view non-Western cultures as the opposite of Western ones (centering the West as true and authentic). So, in the case of religion, and in the history of religious studies, non-Christian spiritual traditions are often perceived as “opposites" or “others.” In this essay, I argue that Afro-diasporic spiritual tradition is not the opposite of Christianity but rather *different* than. The distinction between alterity and dichotomy is an important one. In fact, a variety of examples could replace àṣẹ, especially considering that àṣẹ is a universal concept that goes by many names. However, in this case, Afro-spiritual-epistemological inquiry allows one to both reveal and deconstruct colonial epistemologies in a specific way. Investigating the decolonial aspects of the Afro-diasporic spiritual concept of àṣẹ, by way of deconstructing Christian colonialism, will reveal the religio-political and religio-scientific implications of decentering Man from the full and complete representation of the human.[130]

The overrepresentation of man relies on religio-political and religio-scientific hierarchies. The Christian-colonial project created religio-scientific taxonomies that rely on “a white patriarchal authority.”[131] The phenomenon of hierarchy is a vital pillar of Christian coloniality. I do not suggest that hierarchy is unique to Western Europe. However, Christian colonial hierarchies, specifically, rely not only on White patriarchal authorities themselves but the very conceptions of being that define what it means to be a *human.* A crucial manifestation of these “scientific” taxonomies is the Chain of Being, a system correlated to “the projected hierarchy of a graduated table, or Chain of all forms of sentient life,” which features classifications of “lower beings” and “higher beings.”[132] This hierarchy of power is imbalanced by nature as it disproportionately distributes agency, assigning more value to humans than other beings. These hierarchies fuel White heteropatriarchy by uplifting the notion that one being can be valued over another. When àṣẹ is spoken into existence, energy not only becomes mobile, oftentimes transforming in the process, but it mobilizes to enact balance. In her text *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty*, Ana-Maurine Lara emphasizes that Christian coloniality “requires valuation of some lives over others, some knowledges over

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[130] Katherine Mckittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 123.

[131] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 60.

[132] Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no.3 (Fall 2003): 306.

others, some ways of being over others."[133] Ultimately this hierarchization boils down to what Lara calls a "hierarchy of humanness."[134] Mel Y. Chen refers to this hierarchy as the "animacy hierarchy."

The Latin etymological origins of the word animate include the following: "animātus filled with life, also, disposed, inclined, f. Animāre to breath, to quicken; f. Anima air, breath, life, soul, mind."[135] At the intersections of breath, life, and soul lies àṣẹ. The term animacy was first popularized in the linguistic field when Michael Silverstein proposed the idea of an "animacy hierarchy," which originated in a comparison of different languages' tendency to rank the animacy of different subjects.[136] Mel Y. Chen uses this concept to point out that "if animacy not only works in different ways for different cultures but indicates different hierarchalization of matter, then it is critical to distinguish between relatively dominant formulations of animacy hierarchies and relatively subordinated" ones.[137] The "politically dominant" animacy hierarchies to which Chen refers are "shaped by the spread of Christian cosmologies, capitalism, and the colonial orders of things."[138] Ultimately, Chen transforms the concept of the animacy hierarchy from a solely linguistic concept to a political one.[139] Àṣẹ is life force and so is animacy.

Sylvia Wynter and the Overrepresentation of Man

Sylvia Wynter is a Jamaican author, playwright, and philosopher. Many of her works explore coloniality within the contexts of history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and economics. In her essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation–An Argument," Wynter attributes "all our present struggles" to the overrepresentation of the "Western bourgeois Man" as the only standard, full, and complete conception of the human.[140] In the piece, she explores the varying conceptions of "Man" in the West over time, relating each to the political, scientific, and religious realities of 15th and 16th-century Western Europe.

Wynter's work plays a vital role in this project. Similar to the fact that àṣẹ is only one example of a decolonial framework, Sylvia Wynter's concepts, and this article specifically, are only one means of explaining the Christian colonial

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[133] Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom, Black Sovereignty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020): 7.

[134] Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 7.

[135] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 3.

[136] *Ibid*: 24.

[137] *Ibid*: 29.

[138] *Ibid*: 30.

[139] *Ibid*.

[140] Wynter, "Unsettling," 260 and 265.

heteropatriarchy. In fact, later in this investigation, I will be calling in other interlocutors such as Audre Lorde, Ana-Maurine Lara, Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. The specific ways that Wynter examines the progression of Man and its overrepresentation elicit a provoking and complex interpretation of the pillars of Christian colonialism and its reliance on hierarchy. This interpretation reveals the role of àṣẹ in subverting hierarchies of being and the Christian colonial project along with it.

Wynter uses the terms “Man 1” and “Man 2” (Man 1 as conceived during the development of the physical sciences and Man 2 conceived during the development of the biological sciences) to describe the two different conceptions of Man.[141] There are great implications for the transition of Man, from a religious subject of the church (Man 1) to a political subject of the state (Man 2). According to Wynter, Man 1 sought to “redeem himself from enslavement to Original Sin by primarily adhering to the prohibitions of the Church.”[142] The Spirit (Redeemed Destiny)/ Flesh (Original Sin and Adamic fate) distinction parallels an ethno-geographical understanding of the earth as being divided into “temperate” or “habitable” landscapes and “torrid” or “uninhabitable” landscapes, which translated to the concept of “temperate” people and “torrid” people.[143] This otherization and sub-humanization of non-Western peoples as “no ones” and an extreme of the Human Other fueled the marginalization of non-western epistemologies.[144] Fallen Flesh then transformed into animalistic irrationality, and the Redeemed Spirit became that of human rationality.

The code of “Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh” was replaced by the code of “rationality/irrationality” so that life is associated with rationality and death is associated with irrationality.[145] In considering rationality as a concept it is important to return to the hierarchy of epistemology. There are “politically dominant” epistemologies (“rational”), shaped by Christian colonial ideals and subordinated epistemologies (“irrational”).[146] Instead of choosing between Flesh (Original Sin and Adamic Fate) and Spirit (Redeemed Destiny), Man must choose between “growing downwards into the lower nature of brutes” or irrational nature or growing “upward to higher and divine natures” or rational nature.[147] The hierarchy was resituated, not in content but in context. The hierarchy or order shifts from one of “degrees of spiritual perfection/imperfection” (a religio-political

[141] *Ibid*: 264 and 267.

[142] *Ibid*: 277.

[143] *Ibid*: 279.

[144] *Ibid*: 266.

[145] *Ibid*: 287.

[146] Chen, *Animacies, 30.*

[147] Wynter, “Unsettling,” 287.

designation) to one of "rational perfection/imperfection" (a politico-scientific designation).[148]

Wynter insists that the human/subhuman distinction, predicated upon the concept of race, played a large role in the formation of this new order "(resting on the relation between Man and its subjugated Human Others)" which served as the basis of modernity.[149] Thus, modernity hinges upon "the issue of race."[150] Wynter states that "Black, had become the preferred color for the depiction of 'demons' and the signification of 'sin'."[151] Now, Man 2 has replaced the Judeo-Christian notion of humanity, yet that theocentric order of existence has been replaced by a hierarchy of rational and irrational degrees of perfection. These degrees of perfection correlated to "the projected hierarchy of a graduated table, or Chain of Being, in which all forms of sentient life [were ranked] from those classified as the lowest to those as the highest."[152] This Chain birthed the "first 'scientific' taxonomy of human populations" deeming "the Negro as the projected missing link between the two sides of the rational/irrational divide," (humans as rational and nonhuman animals as irrational).[153] The notion of a projected missing link translated to a projection of "Otherness."[154] Though the former "theocentric slot of Otherness" classified non-Europeans as "Enemies of Christ," the "secular slot of Otherness" defined non-European populations as subhuman.[155] This "space of Otherness" functioned to validate the socio-ontological line now drawn between the rational and irrational.[156] The disruption of this socio-ontological barrier would require communion between the human and the nonhuman.

Alternatives to Christian Colonial Hierarchies

What is decolonial about àṣẹ, about the concept that every being, both animate and inanimate, has authority through divine force? How does àṣẹ's disruption of the Christian-colonial animacy hierarchy allow for freedom from racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy? How do different teachings and political frameworks incorporate the concept of àṣẹ under a different name? What happens when spiritual power and political power are at odds? A compelling point within Sylvia Wynter's essay is that one of the pillars of coloniality, and the Christian-colonial project more specifically, is the distinction between the human and the

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[148] *Ibid.*

[149] *Ibid*: 288.

[150] *Ibid.*

[151] *Ibid*: 302.

[152] *Ibid*: 306.

[153] *Ibid.*

[154] *Ibid.*

[155] *Ibid*: 292.

[156] *Ibid*: 306.

spirit or the spirit and the flesh, which Wynter argues stemmed from otherization. Àṣẹ as a philosophical and spiritual framework disrupts the distinction between the human and the spirit or the spirit and flesh, thus rupturing otherization as a fundamental tenet of the Christian-colonial project.

Animacy most explicitly lives in Wynter’s discussion of the Spirit/Flesh code, where she associates Spirit with “symbolic life” and Flesh with “symbolic death.”[157] The difference between àṣẹ and animacy is that animacy, rooted in Western epistemology, is defined by a hierarchy, whereas àṣẹ depends on harmony, balance, and interrelationship. The notion of àṣẹ disrupts the notion of an animacy hierarchy because of religio-political dissonance. This dissonance is caused by the different conceptions of “Man.” A philosophical paradigm shift around animacy would allow for a literal and figurative reclamation of power by all oppressed peoples.

Western epistemology often assumes that difference and dichotomy are equivalent. The soul/spirit divide engenders difference but not dichotomy. Ana-Maurine Lara draws on Audre Lorde’s definition of difference, which insists that only “within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future.”[158] Interrelated difference hinges upon the lack of a complete knowledge of the unknown, while dichotomy assumes knowledge of the unknown. Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s concept of “seascape epistemology approaches difference as an interactive relationship rather than a rigid dichotomy.”[159] In Ingersoll’s notion of the human/sea distinction, the human holds the capacity to commune and even become part of the sea but does not possess the capacity to become the sea. Similarly, when Wynter specifies the distinction between the human and subhuman, especially, a colonial epistemology would argue that the slippage between humans and subhumans is so great that one could not become the other; of course colonial epistemology is famously contradictory, allowing the Black individual, for example, to inhabit what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson might term an “ontologically plastic” role, traveling between the human and subhuman based on the circumstances. Conversely, Lara’s conception of the human/spirit distinction mirrors that of Ingersoll, an interrelated distinction or interdependent difference, implying that humans can embody spirits, and spirits, humans (notably through trance possession).

Àṣẹ contains multiplicities. Not only does it declare the existence of a universal energetic force, but it also allows for the creation of material space in which energetic forces may convene. This material space is often referred to as “ceremony.” For example, Bellegarde-Smith declares àṣẹ as a “domain” in which

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[157] *Ibid*: 278 and 279.

[158] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin Books, 2019): 111.

[159] Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 98.

"the living and the ancestors commune and communicate."[160] One major instance of communication between humans and spirits is the process of trance possession. Trance possession disturbs the Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh dichotomy that Christian coloniality promotes.[161] This dichotomy suggests that in order to escape the fates of original sin, one must desire the technically unattainable destiny of the redeemed spirit. The Church justified colonization with the notion that those who refused the Christian gospel were barbaric and therefore lost their right to land.[162] Trance possession upends these religio-hegemonic legacies by balancing the power between the human, spirit, and natural worlds.[163] With Rachel Harding, I assert that àṣẹ stimulates and maintains "right relationship" and the "continuation of interdependence."[164]

In non-western epistemologies, difference does not inherently produce dichotomy or opposition but opens a chasm of new epistemologies via interdependence-here difference is "necessary polarity."[165] According to Ingersoll, "seascape epistemology" preserves "a concern for Otherness, a relationship of respected alterity that forges rich, complex, and, paradoxically, intertwined identities."[166] Given the concept of "respected alterity," returning to Wynter's correlation between the human and subhuman, as well as the framework of otherization, is vital in understanding the role of difference in otherization, which proves crucial in examining the human/spirit distinction from both a colonial perspective and an Afro-diasporic spiritual perspective.

Returning to Lara and the Spirit/Flesh divide, it is important to note that, as Lara writes, "Christian coloniality points to the violent and continual management of the most intimate levels of being (...) that named as alma (soul, spirit, intangible essence of personhood)."[167] Here, an exploration of the soul as ruptured by the colonial project, which set a precedent for the human/animal divide as it relates to raciality, allows for the possibility of spiritual repair. If the spiritual could suture a soul affected by colonial-induced ontological rupture, then "the hierarchy of humanness that resulted through Christian colonization" (or the animacy hierarchy) would splinter, collapsing beneath the weight of decoloniality's rejection of "Christian theo-philosophical" concepts.[168] Lara promotes this

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[160] Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*, 108.

[161] Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 18.

[162] Wynter, "Unsettling," 294.

[163] Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 39.

[164] Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003): 77 and 79.

[165] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 111.

[166] Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing*, 98.

[167] Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 6.

[168] *Ibid*: 7 and 13.

splintering by reminding us that “decolonization must take place on spiritual-religious grounds.”[169]

Àṣẹ initiates transformation. One danger is that transformation or plasticity can serve Christian-colonial notions of being. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s concept of ontological plasticity “maintains that black(ened) people are (…) cast as sub, supra, and human simultaneously and in a manner that puts being in peril.”[170] The role of Black peoples as the physical referent or ontological other (as Sylvia Wynter might put it) is important here. The role of “Other” must be plastic because of the West’s “lack of an ontologically absolute self-description.”[171] In other words, Western epistemology requires an Other to counter the white patriarchal notion of being human. Ontological plasticity exposes the West’s need for a plastic Other.

Though Western logic lays claim to a sturdy conception of the human, Christian coloniality actually requires Western conceptions of humanness to be flexible enough to allow for unrestricted expansion. Just as colonizers expanded their territories without restrictions, the colonial conception of Man occupies unrestricted space within the definition of the human. Thus, the “physical referent” or Other, a role that Black peoples have been pushed into, must too be plastic. This phenomenon allows the Black body to traverse between human, subhuman, and suprahuman dependent on the definition of Man that is being referenced. Ontological plasticity is a sort of “material deprivation.”[172] But, what are the implications of plasticity, manifested through the concept of àṣẹ? Àṣẹ, instead, offers a framework in which all beings are inhabited by the same generative force thus creating an infinitive (not dichotomous) understanding of unification between all beings, animate and inanimate. In this framework, plasticity is wielded only to emphasize the presence of agency or force in all beings and does not require ontological shifts in accordance with hierarchies of being.

Conclusion: Intimacy in the Lives of the Dead–Àṣẹ as Refusal

Christian colonial hierarchies not only interfere with the Sacred but impede “mutual embodiment” between humans, nonhuman animals, and other beings.[173] In chapter seven of her text *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander refuses Cartesian worldviews in asserting that intimacy in the context of community or communion is vital to resituating the lives of the dead (dead humans and nonhumans alike). Alexander initially uses the concept of “Mojuba,” which transforms àṣẹ from the spiritual to the material, intertwined, to reject these Cartesian worldviews. Alexander then

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[169] *Ibid*: 13.

[170] Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 35.

[171] Wynter, “Unsettling,” 282.

[172] Wynter, “Unsettling,” 267.

[173] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press): 301.

writes that Mojuba embodies an "expansive memory" that refuses "to be housed" or encased "in the physicality of the body.[174] In this chapter, and the conclusion of this paper, intimacy functions as a vehicle for àṣẹ, life force, grief, and memory to commune. Just as the material and the spiritual are intertwined, so are grief and memory.

Expanding beyond the body, Alexander describes how memory and àṣẹ live within the natural world: "Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder (...) *otanes,* stones."[175] Water as a nonhuman ally, "soaks" and "enlivens all things," and in the process embodies the Sacred.[176] The ocean, specifically, plays a vital role in holding memory as a site of intense and expansive grief. Here, Alexander refers to a literal crossing of bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, but also an ontological crossing between spirit and flesh, between the human and the nonhuman. Grief, too, accompanied this crossing. Though "Sacred energies," housed in memory, survived the crossing, Alexander argues that embodied beings nudged these energies into a state of "sentience."[177]

Alexander notes that "the dead do not like to be forgotten."[178] Can dead human life be distinguished from nonhuman lives deemed to be void of life? If not, then the grief to which Alexander refers provides a reservoir of remembrance for both humans and nonhumans. Taking Alexander's claims seriously, it becomes important to recognize the Sea as an absorbent force, exhibited by its capacity to act as a container for grief, both fixed and flowing. Not only do "the dead (...) not like to be forgotten," but, as said earlier, "sentience *soaks* all things."[179]

The multiplicity of the "avatars of the same Sacred force" is a manifestation of àṣẹ."[180] The communion between the Sacred and "the material" provides ample ontological space for the breath of life or àṣẹ to both inhabit embodied beings and reintroduce these beings to themselves."[181] Communion, whether via grief, memory, remembrance, or joy, functions as a mirror. The intimacy of the mirrored self features a bringing of the self into close "proximity with the domain of Spirit."[182] Again, one encounters an intertwining of the spiritual and material.

According to Alexander, the Crossing (of bodies/flesh and the spiritual/material) defined the body as both the "repository of sin" and the "mediator

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[174] *Ibid*: 288.

[175] *Ibid*: 289.

[176] *Ibid*: 290.

[177] *Ibid*: 292.

[178] *Ibid*: 289.

[179] *Ibid*: 290 (emphasis added).

[180] *Ibid*: 292.

[181] *Ibid*: 293.

[182] *Ibid*: 295.

between the world of the living and the dead.”[183] Here, Wynter’s description of the Spirit/Flesh divide, specifically her claims regarding spirit as symbolic life and flesh as symbolic death, becomes important. What are the implications of the body (and the Black body more specifically) as the link between the living and the dead, yet also as the repository of Original sin? For Alexander, the Sacred lies at the intersection of African spiritual practices, spiritual epistemologies, and memory.[184] The transition from the secular to the Sacred allows for positioning “the personal as spiritual.”[185] The intimacy that is required to merge the textured material of the personal to the “disembodied consciousness of the Divine” does not indicate privacy but an intimacy that is social in nature.[186] In the context of the mirrored self this intimacy, by way of communion, simultaneously mirrors one and all, the part and the whole, disrupting the limits of linear space and time

Like Wynter and Chen, Alexander identifies “the challenge that derives from the hierarchies that are insinuated within our knowledge-making projects” (Alexander, 296). For example, what is deemed as “tradition is made subordinate to and unintelligible within, that which is modern.”[187] Here, the Sacred is rendered as tradition, “understood as an extreme alterity,” which “is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern.”[188] These origins make it so that “African-based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos.”[189] In contrast, àṣẹ, both precedes and succeeds the modern. It has no need for “elsewhere” because it is intrinsic to all. It *must* be everywhere.

Àṣẹ, in its manifestation as power or authority, allows agency to be granted to beings, whether animate or inanimate, by way of a source of communal intimacy. Because àṣẹ is defined as the power to get something done, it is akin to the concept of agency and allows nonhuman animals and objects to “do” *and* “be done to.” So, what *of* the mantis, the moth, and the lemon? Why does it matter that in dominant epistemologies they matter less than in subordinated ones? What occurs when we honor nonhuman life? Upholding right relationship between humans and the (un)natural world saves the lives of many, both beings whose lives are recognized as life and beings whose lives are not. Under the regime of Christian colonialism, it is difficult to maintain right relationship but not impossible. In fact, it becomes that much more meaningful and important to, in the face of hierarchy and oppression, hold ceremony, to hold ourselves, and those we love. And in the process, we detach from all that fails to recognize the vital force within us.

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[183] *Ibid*: 293.

[184] *Ibid*: 293

[185] *Ibid*: 295.

[186] *Ibid.*

[187] *Ibid*: 296.

[188] *Ibid.*

[189] *Ibid.*

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Hija de la Chingada: Visibility and Erasure of La Malinche in Contemporary Mexican Discourse

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Introduction

The story of *La Malinche* has pervaded Mexican nationalist discourse for the dichotomous relationship that has simultaneously mystified and demonized her. The woman behind the story is Malintzín, an Indigenous Aztec woman who had contact with the first Spanish settlers in what is known today as the Yucatán Peninsula. Discussions regarding her absence in the struggle against the Spanish settlers have, in turn, villainized her story. Contrastingly, Chicana feminist scholars have attempted to reclaim *La Malinche's* narrative by providing a historical alternative to the story, one which views her as a victim of the Spanish stronghold and patriarchy replicated by colonialism.

The present paper aims to construct the historical figure of *La Malinche* within a postcolonialist framework. Utilizing Malintzín’s story as a case study illustrates the deeper colonial structures that have created the figure of *La Malinche* as a dishonorable and treacherous woman. Although the various nuances of her story will be discussed, my overarching question intends to answer in what ways the metaphor of *La Malinche* has been utilized as a form of abstraction to both uplift and oppress the Mexican woman who is either “traditional” or “sexually treacherous.” Scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa have addressed *La Malinche's* positionality within contemporary Mexican and Mexican-American society, questioning the replication of the traditional/treacherous binary. However, I expand on this scholarship by observing this case study from a postcolonial lens, particularly by conceptualizing language as an object of weaponization, bridging, and Catholic conversion.

Furthermore, *La Malinche’s* narrative will be constructed under Dr. Sankaran Krishna's theories of "willful amnesia" in international relations (IR). Under this theory, Krishna posits that strategies of abstraction and deferred redemption are weaponized to minimize the effects of colonialism in the past, present, and future of IR. Instead of placing more emphasis on the structural effects of colonialism, *La Malinche* is blamed for the downfall of pre-Hispanic civilization and subsequent settler-colonized relationships.

The framing of my research paper will firstly be supported by a historical background of *La Malinche* and the complexities of her relationship with the Spanish Crown. Next, I aim to begin answering my research question through analyzing how abstraction and similar methods of "willful amnesia" fit into the context of Spanish colonization. This will then be followed by a discussion of how *La Malinche's* story has been weaponized to provide a blanket-statement explanation of Indigenous communities' downfall. Finally, *La Malinche's* story will be translated into a contemporary context: the pervasive nature of gendered violence in Mexico. Recognizing the connection between a harmful narrative of women deemed as *La Malinche* and the rising rate of *feminicides* illustrates the importance of deconstructing the aforementioned binary.

Background and Clarification of Terms

La Malinche

It must firstly be noted that this paper's use of *La Malinche* and Malintzín is not interchangeable. *La Malinche* refers to the abstract narrative that mystifies and demonizes the actual person named Malintzín. Not separating the semantics perpetuates the oneness of the terms, thus furthering the erasure of the person. In addition, Chicana scholar Cordelia Candelaria highlights the importance of detaching the Spanish conquest from *La Malinche's* narrative, despite the events contributing to what is now the permanent reality in Mexico.[190] Nonetheless, the *conquista* consisted of a "destruction of a way of life, (...) the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Native peoples; and the subjugation and enslavement of the survivors."[191] Despite this paper's acknowledgement of colonialism's detrimental effects, centering the *conquista* to Malintzín's story detracts from the contemporary structural effects caused thereafter.[192]

Although there are not many first-hand sources of Malintzín, most of them being written by the Spanish, historians have weaved together various sources to construct an idea of who she was. Candelaria writes that Malintzín lived in a time of political contention regarding the Aztec ruler, Moctezuma, who exercised tyrannical order over the region that is now known as Mexico City and neighboring regions.[193] Moctezuma's rule (1502–1520) caused political rupture amongst the Natives, which later proved to be a point of weakness against the Spanish colonizers. By the time Hernán Cortés arrived, the Aztec Empire was already beginning to decline. Candelaria emphasizes this attribute, since Malintzín has been used as a scapegoat for the successful Spanish conquering of the Natives.

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[190] Cordelia Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 2 (1980): 1.

[191] *Ibid*: 3.

[192] The conquest is widely known in Spanish as *la conquista.*

[193] Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," 3.

Malintzín formed part of a noble family situated in present-day Yucatán, Mexico. Her status as a chief's daughter presented her with opportunities for education. However, her father's death and mother remarrying caused a shift in her family dynamic. Her mother sold Malintzín into slavery to keep her inheritance and even held a false funeral to explain her daughter’s disappearance.[194] Malintzín was sent to the ruling tribes in Tabasco, where she practiced various Indigenous languages and later Castilian Spanish when Cortés arrived in 1519.[195]

When Hernán Cortés arrived in the Yucatán Peninsula, he was given twenty young women to serve as domestic laborers, one of those being Malintzín. Due to her educated background and polyglot abilities, Malintzín quickly distinguished herself from the other subjugated women. Cortés began to use her abilities to survey the land and populations he aimed to conquer, thus bridging the gap between the Spanish Crown and the settler-state formed by Cortés. Malintzín thus served as a sort of cultural diplomat for Hernán Cortés, by translating for the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples of the region for over ten years. Historical accounts also specify that Malintzín warned Cortés of Indigenous plots against him and ultimately gave birth to Cortés’ son.[196]

Her objectification and bestowal has caused her to be a symbol of subjugation before the Spanish and Native men. The subsequent Spanish conquest and mixing of the races furthered damage toward women’s image. The mixture of races, also known as *mestizaje,* was elemental in continuing the subordination of Indigenous women as it made the offspring envy their Spanish father and despise their Indian mother.[197] The image of *La Malinche* has been molded to fit a number of *mestizo* narratives, due to her relationship with the colonial Spanish power. On one hand, she is seen as a traitor to her people, while on the other, she may represent resilience by adapting to the Spanish colonization processes.

Willful Amnesia and Abstraction

As mentioned previously, the theories constructed by postcolonialist scholar Dr. Sankaran Krishna will be utilized to understand *La Malinche’s* narrative in a presence and absence framework. Krishna firstly argues that the IR discipline is based on a willful amnesia on questions of race; furthermore, it weaponizes the strategies of abstraction and deferred redemption to maintain its ideological coherence.[198] Focusing more so on the strategy of abstraction, it is defined as the choice to “theory build” rather than rationalizing the effects of land, violence, and

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[194] *Ibid.*

[195] *Ibid.*

[196] “The Figure of La Malinche in Chicana Literature: Between Betrayal and Redemption,” *Scottish Centre for Global History*, 2021.

[197] Harvard International Review, "Machismo, Femicides, and Child’s Play: Gender Violence in Mexico," 2020.

[198] Sankaran Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26, no. 4 (October 2001): 401–424.

slavery. Oftentimes, the desire to include these in the study of IR results in a referral to other humanities disciplines such as anthropology or history.[199] Abstraction has been weaponized by renowned scholars, such as Martin Heidegger or Michel Foucault, to conceal the nuances of knowledge production. In other words, the double-edged sword of knowledge production consists of exposing hidden truths as well as concealing and "unknowing" the deep-rooted layers of larger concepts.[200]

Krishna applies the strategy of abstraction to the Spanish colonization of the Americas, specifically how the Spanish utilized the cleansing of Indigenous languages to promote Christianity and justify the sacking of resources and people.[201] Not only was Castilian employed to consolidate the Spanish Crown, but it was further used to fragment the already-established political systems of Indigenous civilizations.[202] This aspect of abstraction can extend to lingual formation that has spread the history of *La Malinche* as a traitor, rather than a survivor of Spanish colonialism. Furthermore, Krishna attempts to ameliorate the problem of willful amnesia by referring to Edward Said's method of contrapuntality. Said posits that, "by looking at different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of (...) intertwined and overlapping histories [one can] try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility."[203] The mere consideration of *La Malinche's* duality could be considered as a contrapuntal analysis, given the vast scholarship that has villainized her actions.[204] However, this paper goes further in considering the colonial implications behind the framing of *La Malinche's* narrative.

Feminicides

Finally, the clarification of feminicides must be noted. Although widely known as femicides, this paper opts to use the term feminicides. The latter refers to the killing (or homicide) of women, whereas a feminicide includes the element of hatred toward women and the subsequent impunity of men on a cultural, judicial, and law enforcement level. The Mexican National Citizen Observatory for Feminicides (OCNF) clarifies that feminicides are motivated by the perpetrators' sexist beliefs. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of feminicides results from the state's permissiveness of the culture of violence against women.[205] Human rights organizations and other experts attribute violence against women as a truncation of systemic violence from organized crime and the drug trade, unemployment,

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[199] Krishna, "Race, Amnesia, and Education," 2.

[200] *Ibid*: 3.

[201] *Ibid*: 12.

[202] *Ibid*: 14.

[203] *Ibid*: 4.

[204] *Ibid*: 1.

[205] Alma Delia Buendía Rodríguez, "Encerrada Pero Libre: El Modelo de Atención de La Violencia Contra Las Mujeres En El Estado de México," *Revista de Estudios de Género, La Ventana* 6, no. 48, 2018.

women in the labor market, and a lack of judicial impunity.[206] Overall, from 1990 to 2020, reports demonstrate that there have been 60,509 women dead at the hands of feminicide.[207] In 2022, 1,015 per 100,000 women died as a result of feminicide.[208] In other words, over sixty women were victims of feminicide for every month of 2022.[209] The pervasiveness of this issue has called for a number of protests and social media campaigns, namely the *Ni Una Menos* (not one more death) movement.[210] Despite legislative concessions, the normalization of feminicides continues to blame women for their deaths.[211] Although *La Malinche’s* narrative cannot be construed as the sole contributor to the culture of feminicides that is present in Mexico today, it can entertain the idea that a traditional/ treacherous binary furthers violence against women who do not fit in it.

Discussion

La Malinche’s story and the threat of feminicides in Mexico are not directly nor explicitly related; however, the lens of Krishna's abstraction theory allows us to understand the culture of female subjugation in pre-Hispanic and present-day times. Weaving the historical and contemporary offers a different perspective on scholarship that has villainized Malintzín. Language–Indigenous or colonial–is the central object of abstraction. I argue that language has been used as an object of bridging, weaponization, and Catholic conversion *for* Malintzín as a traditional woman and *against* her for betraying her compatriots. Furthermore, Krishna's theory of abstraction allows us to see how Malintzín is both revealed and concealed, thus trapping her in an absence and presence framework. Abstraction has allowed for a funneled version of Malintzín to exist within the settler-colonized narrative, disregarding the dual implications of being sold into slavery and being confronted with the leader of the colonial mission.

Bridging, Weaponizing, and Converting

Indigenous languages faced the same dilemma as Malintzín: assimilation or annihilation. Language, either Indigenous or Castilian, was at the centerpiece of the colonization process. Furthermore, it allowed Malintzín to both thrive and perish under the colonial stronghold. Krishna draws on scholar Walter Mignolo to explain how an alphabetized language facilitates the acquisition of lands, calculation of

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[206] Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional de Feminicidio, “Informe Implementación Del Tipo Penal de Feminicidio En México: Desafíos Para Acreditar Las Razones de Género 2014-2017,” *OCNF*, 2018.

[207] ONU Mujeres, "Violencia Feminicida En México: Aproximaciones y Tendencias," *Entidad de las Naciones Unidas para la Igualdad de Género y el Empoderamiento de las Mujeres*, 2020.

[208] Observatorio de Igualdad de Género de América y el Caribe, “Feminicidio,” 2021.

[209] El Financiero, “Feminicidios en México: Junio es el mes más violento de 2022 para las mujeres,” 2022.

[210] Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, “Ni Una Menos, Not One Less: Femicides and Gender-Based Violence in Mexico and Northern Central America,” *Wilson Center*, 2021.

[211] Lorena Becerra, *Prevalece Visión Misógina,* Survey Report, *Periódico Reforma*, 2022.

debt, and further subjugation of Natives.[212] Based on my observations, I argue that language can be materialized, namely by conceptualizing it as an object: a bridge, weapon, and a Catholic cross. Malintzín was able to use language to her advantage, however, the Spanish were the ultimate benefactors of the erasure of Indigenous languages and the establishment of Castilian.

There are several nuances that can be associated with the weaponization of language. Due to the violent nature of Malintzín's subjugation, first by her slave owners and later by Cortés, she was forced to use her advanced intelligence to survive. As such, her polyglot abilities were used as a military strategy against Moctezuma's empire, further partitioning loyalties for Moctezuma. Language, with Malintzín as the medium, was aimed back at Natives. This was a step towards alphabetization and gradual eradication of Indigenous languages. Furthermore, Mignolo asserts that language was able to simultaneously consolidate an imaginary Spanish Crown in the Americas and fragment the existing political structures.[213]

The stretch of this strategic dis-memberment process extends further than the immediate contact with the Spanish.[214] One of the most known narratives of Mexican culture and its histories, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, is written by famed Mexican poet Octavio Paz. Essentially, Paz writes about Mexican culture from a postcolonial perspective. In it, Paz describes the meaning of the word *chingar.* A versatile word in Mexican lingo, *chingar* is used in many contexts and intonations.[215] Overall, *chingar* implies the use of force enacted on another, whether it be ripping something open, breaking, or wounding.[216] *Chingar* also has sexual connotations, giving it a "masculine, active, [and] cruel" meaning.[217] Its raunchy nature adds an element of taboo, even though it is sometimes used loosely among men or in casual settings.[218] One of its uses, *hijo de la Chingada,* may translate to son of a whore; thereby *Chingada* refers to the "Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived."[219] Paz then connects *Chingada* with Malintzín, who he argues became a figure representing Native women who were violated by the Spanish. He adds, "[a]nd as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him, the Mexican people have not forgiven *La Malinche* for her betrayal."[220] *Chingar* in any

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[212] Krishna, "Race, Amnesia, and Education," 13.

[213] *Ibid*: 14.

[214] Dis-memberment refers to scholar Sabelo Gatsheni's theory in which colonized peoples humanity, history, and lands are taken apart, or dis-membered, by colonial forces

[215] *Chingón* (macho); *chingoncito* (deceptive); *chingadera* (rash behavior); *vete a la chingada* (to swear someone off).

[216] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude; The Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre* (New York: Grove Press 1985): 77.

[217] *Ibid*.

[218] *Ibid.*

[219] *Ibid*: 79.

[220] *Ibid*: 86.

contemporary context is ultimately weaponized against Malintzín, who takes the fall for the colonization of her people. More dangerously, the narrative of *La Malinche* is generalized, almost as a cautionary tale for women to not fall into. Furthermore, the usage of the word against women serves as an example of the treacherous/traditional binary posed earlier.

Secondly, language is used as a bridge that allows Malintzín to cross between the Indigenous and colonial realms. Although Malintzín is not biologically *mestiza,* she still does the labor of linguistically and culturally translating between both realms. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa would conceptualize this endeavor as a metaphorical borderland that is “not restricted to physical spaces [and] includes the psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands.”[221] As the only one being able to access either realm, Malintzín is also the only inhabitant within this borderland. The other perspective of language as a bridge perceives Malintzín as the link between the “old” and “new” worlds, thus opening her world to foreign influence. Paz sees this opening, both in the 16th and 20th centuries, as contrary to the way things should be: “*¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!* [expresses] our desire to live closed off from the outside world and, above all, from the past.”[222] This perspective not only echoes the desire to revert to pre-Hispanic contact but also to abandon Malintzín in the process.

The final use of language in the colonization process is through Catholic conversion. As mentioned previously, Spaniards systematically cleansed Indigenous languages to further establish themselves in the territory. However, they also learned the Native language to facilitate conversion into Catholicism.[223] The clearest use of the Catholic cross to “purify” and “sanctify” was to dilute the Natives’ paganism to figures that were accessible to them. This figure comes in the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe, although she was known by the Natives as the maternal Aztec goddess *Tonantsi. Tonantsi* represented a benevolent feminine figure in Aztec culture, however, catholicization transformed her into a more palatable symbol.[224] The purified image of the Virgin of Guadalupe thus replaced *Tonantsi* and offered natives protection and maternal affection. The Roman Catholic Church later named her as Mexico’s patron saint, and her emblematic visual attributes continue to be used in popular culture.[225]

The purification of *Tonantsi* implies a villainization of *La Malinche. La Malinche's* narrative as treacherous is juxtaposed with the projection of the Virgin as a traditional woman. The Virgin is everything *La Malinche* is not: *La Malinche*

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[221] E. Aigner-Varoz, “Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldua’s Borderlands/La Frontera,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 25 (2000).

[222] Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* 86.

[223] Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 12.

[224] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 1st ed.* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 27.

[225] *Ibid.*

betrayed her people and opened her world to colonization, while the Virgin protects and consoles her children.[226] Catholic conversion also deemed all Indigenous deities as works of the devil, further exterminating Natives' morale.[227] The *Malinche*/Virgin binary serves as an example of the colonial discourse permeating in the patriarchal conception of women as either traditional or treacherous. Returning to Krishna's theories, the conceptualization of language as a colonial object serves as a contrapuntal analysis to mainstream discourses.

Presence and Absence Framework

La Malinche is present and very much alive in Chicanx discourse that aims to revise and remember Malintzín differently than traditional historians have. Anzaldúa has formed *La Malinche* within the constructs of *mestizaje* to explain that "metaphor has the power to restructure the collective unconscious through both linguistic and visual means."[228] This is reminiscent of Krishna's strategies of abstraction as nationalistic narratives have shaped *La Malinche's* narrative by placing her in a treacherous or traditional binary. Although Anzaldúa is referring to Chicanx culture, she posits that males have established the metaphors upon which cultures are built.[229] Anzaldúa conceptualizes the Chicana woman within the patriarchal framework that splits her into the figures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the myth of the Weeping Woman, and *La Malinche.*[230] Contrastingly, Chicana literature has posited that Malintzín, "deliberately chose to be a survivor (...) [who] cast her lot with the Spaniards to ensure survival of a race."[231] This is despite historical accounts estimating that Malintzín was only fourteen when she was acquired by Cortés as a mistress and translator.[232] The drawback of Chicanx literature thus gives *too* much autonomy to Malintzín, instead of accepting her victimhood as a result of the patriarchal colonial structure. Nonetheless, it offers a subaltern perspective that departs from the treacherous or traditional binary.

Arguably, the absence framework is more damaging than the autonomous Malintzín constructed by Chicanx literature. The actual person (Malintzín) is absent from *La Malinche's* discourse, despite the prescriptions assigned to her. Paz's voice in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* echoes a 20th-century patriarchal lens that reduces Malintzín to nothing: "she loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she *is* Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the

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[226] Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* 85.

[227] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera,* 28.

[228] Aigner, "Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness," 7.

[229] *Ibid*: 3.

[230] *Ibid*: 3; "The 'Weeping Woman,' who wanders through the streets late at night, weeping and crying out for her lost children."

[231] Elizabeth Rodriguez Kessler, "'She's the Dreamwork Inside Someone Else's Skull': La Malinche and the Battles Waged for Her Autonomy," *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 2005.

[232] *Ibid*: 10.

feminine condition.”[233] In fact, Paz equates *La Malinche,* not Malintzín, to one who has been *Chingada.* In other words, Paz erases her personhood to someone that has accepted passive sexual violation. Paz describes Malintzín as a mistress who “gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador” and was disposed of when she was not of use anymore.[234]

Paz’s derogatory interpretation of *La Malinche* reflects Mexican discourse of the Native woman. Paz was an influential figure in Mexican and international spheres and was awarded numerous accolades, including the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature. His perception of Malintzín as passive, submissive, and a traitor against her own people fosters and perpetuates the negative connotations associated with *La Malinche.* Paz erased her identity even when the only significant historical remnants of her were recorded by the Spanish. Arguably, Paz’s award-winning work contains elements of what Krishna is advocating through Said's contrapuntal analysis. Krishna writes, “one has to restage contrapuntally, the encounters between the West and the rest, (...) that produced the originary alienation that inaugurated the modern (post-Columbian) world and necessitated the discipline of IR to suture it.”[235] Although Paz's work could be considered contrapuntal, he manages to erase and belittle one of the main figures of Mexican nationalist discourse. Paz’s work lacks the further consideration of *La Malinche* as a multifaceted figure, even though her identity has been distorted by colonial forces. Chicanx scholar Elizabeth Kessler asserts that Paz’s hegemonic and misogynistic interpretation is consistent with Mexican culture that reprimands women from deviating from traditional gender roles.[236] The presence and absence framework within Mexican/Chicanx discourse thus presents *La Malinche* as a malleable figure. In whichever circumstance, Malintzín can be erased and made visible. This juxtaposition presents a dilemma that can only be ameliorated by recognizing Malintzín as a person possessing multiple identities while *La Malinche* can live within the sphere of open interpretation.

Relevance to Feminicides

As stated previously, my aim is not to attribute *La Malinche’s* narrative to the reason behind present-day feminicides in Mexico. However, *La Malinche’s* story fits within the culture of blame towards women who fall outside of the traditional and subservient narrative. The binary of *La Malinche* and the Virgin of Guadalupe can be paralleled to the current rhetoric that places the blame on women for their deaths. For example, *La Malinche* is believed to be at fault for the fall of pre-Hispanic civilization. In a similar manner, women who fall outside of the non-

[233] Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* 86.

[234] *Ibid.*

[235] Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 4.

[236] Kessler, “‘She’s the Dreamwork,’” 8.

traditional perception by "[finding] themselves in risky situations" or who get drunk are "looking for trouble."[237] Instead of holding the governmental structure accountable for its impunity, Mexican women are left with a false sense of autonomy.

Concretion, rather than abstraction, counteracts the mainstream approach taken by the IR discipline in erasing "themes such as theft of land, racism, slavery, and colonialism."[238] The extrapolation of *La Malinche's* story to feminicides provides a strategy of concretion because of its sociological consideration of violence. Without accounting for the historical context of victim-blaming in Mexico, assertions by scholars such as Octavio Paz would continue to reduce *La Malinche* and "similar" women to nothingness.[239] As such, weaponizing sexist language towards non-traditional women only continues the cycle of feminicides. However, language has dual implications. Language can also serve as the catalyst for sparking conversation and igniting change, as long as the language shifts from blame to understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the central claim that *La Malinche* has been utilized as a form of abstraction to both uplift and oppress her and other non-traditional women. Extending claims from scholar Sankaran Krishna allowed me to observe the duality of Malintzín and *La Malinche* through a postcolonialist lens. This came in the form of analyzing the nuances of language when applied to different contexts, namely the weaponization, bridging, and Catholic conversion of Natives. In addition, I was able to uncover how strategies of abstraction have erased Malintzín from the narrative of *La Malinche.* Such strategies have only allowed for *La Malinche* to exist in the confines of the patriarchal and colonial lens, instead of viewing her as a victim of slavery and colonialism.

Putting the writing of Octavio Paz and Gloria Anzaldúa in conversation with one another revealed an asymmetrical discourse about *La Malinche,* despite the former being highly regarded in Mexican culture. Paz simultaneously introduced *La Malinche* within a presence and absence framework. Ironically, however, Malintzín is presented as a symbol of betrayal as a result of her passivity. On the other hand, Anzaldúa connects Malintzín as a person who inhabits the colonial and Indigenous in-between. Analyzing the nuances of both authors helps explain the implications of presence and erasure.

The narrative of *La Malinche* left unchecked presents serious problems to the culture of victim-blaming present in the feminicide discourse. More specifically, the normalized nature of offensive words such as *chingar* and its connection to *La Malinche* represents a larger problem within the language that discusses traditional

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[237] Becerra, *Prevalece Visión Misógina.*

[238] Krishna, "Race, Amnesia, and Education," 7.

[239] Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* 86.

and non-traditional women. *La Malinche* also forms part of the IR discourse since her narrative has been formed by Spanish, Mexican, and Indigenous spheres. In addition, the aforementioned strategies of concretion allow for the conceptualization of other female figures impacted by colonialism.

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Malintzin: La Mujer Americana

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I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing (...) I will overcome the tradition of silence.[240]

Malintzin is a notoriously hated Indigenous feminine historical figure who embodies the phallocentric acts of violence the White cisheteropatriarchy imposes on American women and femmes of color through masculinist social constructions of gender and race. When addressing these issues, one must recognize the White cisheteropatriarchy as a violent system of power that marks cisgender, heterosexual men, masculinity, and Whiteness as superior identities within an intersectional hierarchy of race, sexuality, and gender.[241] Throughout my essay, I use the word "American" as an overarching term to address the largely present Indigenous population within *The Americas (*the total landmass of North and South America*)* and all women and femmes of color who reside within this space. Through Malintzin's story, we recognize the interpretation of womanhood as a dehumanized identity that society freely abuses, exploits, polices, and silences, thereby showcasing gendered issues as a cultural concern rooted in misogynistic and anti-Indigenous settler colonial principles.[242] Colonization's femmephobic agenda is one of the oldest withstanding frameworks that continue to play powerful societal roles instigating gendered violence against American women and femmes of color.[243] Thus, Man's[244] settler colonial patriarchal ideologies villainize

[240] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "'How to Tame a Wild Tongue' (1987)" in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women'S Rhetoric(s)*, eds. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001): 357–365.

[241] Masculinist: an aware model of conditioned desire to dominate women, or those with feminine identities, by sexually objectifying them for the sake of male gratification and pleasure of domination, excluding the femme from their male homosocial bonding, harassing women to enforce the reorganization of social order and to maintain male superiority.

[242] Settler Colonialism: a system of oppression based on racism and white supremacy that enacts genocide, colonialism, displacement, theft, and exploitation of people, their lands, and resources (oftentimes from Indigenous people) and replacing it with a new settler population.

[243] Femmephobia: the devaluing, hatred, and fear of anything associated with femininity.

[244] Man: The capital "M" highlights people who identify as men and embody systemic violences against those around him, especially against femmes and women. This distinction helps differentiate Man from men who do not subscribe to socioculturally conditioned "male ethics."

Malintzin for marrying a Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, and, thereafter, rendering her an effective agent catering to the projects of her conquest and that of *The Americas*. However, feminist and intersectional philosophies, aided by Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, invite investigation for humanizing Malintzin's life as an enslaved Indigenous woman by explaining how her experiences epitomize that of women and femmes of color in the 21st-century *Americas*.

With respect to those silenced and persecuted, it is necessary to acknowledge the cruel irony of spotlighting an underrepresented voice in academic spaces built upon stolen land. In retouching and analyzing Malintzin's archival existence, we must expose the institutional, historical violence towards Indigenous people and their total exclusion from the classroom and the histories taught within them. As she is a woman with many names, I have decided to use her honorific name, Malintzin, as a stance against the curated misogynistic anti-Indigenous colonial narratives used to perpetuate bigoted White cisheteropatriarchal structures of gender, race, and history. I seek to reintroduce Malintzin without doing further violence unto her, Indigenous communities, or the feminine identity by bringing her story into the masculinist White supremacist and exclusive structure of academia. As I draw from Adriana Cavarero's concept of stealing[245] and Saidiya Hartman's "Critical Fabulation," these methodologies grant an opportunity to work through the complicated task of reviving histories to reclaim new narratives in the archive and humanize the dehumanized.[246] To institutionalize Indigenous history or to use it for the benefit of the academy is to perpetuate marginalization and violence; instead, the goal is to ensure that Malintzin is accurately represented and respected within the archive, to make visible the historical exploitation and demonization of Indigenous women, and to highlight the urgent need for the retribution of Indigenous communities.

As a feminine entity and political force, Malintzin unveils masculinist and ongoing patterns of regulating women and femmes' autonomy within the confines of Manhood. The imposed sociocultural and legislative curation of gendered social codes enforce misogynistic and abusive principles that promote the normative art of silencing and erasing women and femmes of color—a corrupt practice we must challenge and eradicate. Butler and de Beauvoir's feminist scholarship on gendered

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[245] Stealing: "My strategy (...) consists of stealing figures from the phallogocentric imaginary and relocating them in anomalous ways so they are made to react differently, thus changing their significance. More simply, I could say that I work on stereotypes, seeking to decontextualize and reposition them in a game of resignification through unscrupulous and irreverent decodifications"; Adriana Cavarero and Elisabetta Bertolino, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero," *Differences* 19, no. 1 (May 1, 2008): 128–167.

[246] Critical Fabulation: the combining of historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative to fill in the blanks left in the historical record; Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no.2 (June 1, 2008), 11; Cavarero and Bertolino. "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference," 134.

otherness, coupled with my radical philosophy on racial and gender inclusivity, conceptualizes society's misogynistic social hierarchies that prevent the self-determined femme from existing in *The Americas*.[247] Malintzin does not represent a traitor; instead, she represents the patriarchal bargain within *The Americas*: a woman of color intimidated into collaborating with her abusers to attain a promised illusion of agency.[248] While it is inarguable that Malintzin partook in the success of the Spanish conquest, it is necessary to recognize that, as an enslaved Indigenous woman, she lacked the freedom to make her own choices. Malintzin's story parallels how women and femmes of color in *The Americas* develop a limited agency against the deafening White cisheteropatriarchal societies insidiously fixated on unapologetically silencing the shared experience of Malintzin: *La Mujer Americana*.[249]

In the early 16th century, Malintzin was born to an Aztec *cacique (*a chief of an Indigenous population in Mexico and the West Indies*)*, thus granting her access to education—an asset she employed as an enslaved guide and interpreter for the Spanish. After her father's death, Malintzin's mother sold her, at age ten, into Xicalango's slavery system, where the traders then sold her to the peoples of Potoncha'n. The child was then trafficked, repossessed, and married to Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador who sexually abused and exploited Malintzin and other Indigenous bodies. After purchasing twenty Indigenous women, including our controversial female protagonist, Hernán Cortés confronted a language barrier when encountering Moctezuma, the ninth Aztec emperor of Mexico. Malintzin had initially spoken a variant of Nahuatl, and during her slave trade, she learned the Maya language of Tabasco; thus, her skills reified her social identity from slave to an embodiment of colonial opportunity for the Spanish under the exploitative male ethics of conquest. Promptly, Malintzin became Cortés's sole interpreter and soon learned Spanish furthering her social capital by aiding the communication between the Indigenous peoples and conquistadores. Cortés and his male phallocentric entitlement interpreted Malintzin's skills—a trilingual Indigenous woman—as a dehumanized, opportunistic gain that he could exploit as his weapon of war against the Indigenous. Cortés then promised her "more than freedom" if she vowed to be his faithful *lengua (*tongue or language carrier, translator*)* and *farute (*negotiator or messenger*).*[250] As a woman enslaved at age ten, the perception of freedom was a concept Malintzin could not recognize beyond abstract thought; therefore, the offered freedom was an illusion designed to manipulate her corrupted sense of

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[247] Cordelia Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 2 (1980).

[248] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender &Amp; Society* 2, no. 3 (September 1988): 274–290.

[249] *La Mujer Americana*: In Spanish it means "The American Woman"; not only a label, but a shared experience lived by American women and femmes of color when engaging with immoral Manhood in a White cisheteropatriarchal society.

[250] Gloria Arjona, [LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes], "La Malinche: Not a Traitor, but a Survivor with Gloria Arjona PhD, Audiovisual Storyteller | 6/8/22," Video, *YouTube*, June 9, 2022, 32:20-32:30.

self-determination into helping preserve the masculinist agenda of conquest. As Cortés's human compass, interpreter, and negotiator, she became a scapegoat for Mexican and Chicanx cultural imaginaries by allegedly enabling the successful Spanish conquest of the Aztecs.[251]

An awareness of Malintzin's history, aligned with Judith Butler's definition of the social construction, consequence, and performance of gender, legitimizes Malintzin's identity as a feminist emblematic figure trying to regain selfhood within an exploitative White cisheteropartiarchal society. Butler notes that "[f]eminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context"; therein, imploring that we must use feminist theory to practice being unsettled by the amplified voice of knowledge production in an amoral masculinist White history.[252] If we contextualize individual acts within their socio-historical context as separate and focus only on individual agency, as if it existed in a vacuum and could be assessed as such, then we deprive ourselves of realizing that the individual and the social-historical are mutually constitutive. By utilizing Butler's definition of feminist theory, and its underpinning claims of relationality, Malintzin's narrative becomes a foundational piece of history in which scholars may cultivate new perspectives on her livelihood, ones that do not villainize her decisions or promote femmephobic, anti-Indigenous rhetoric. Butler clarifies that "gender identity is an accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo (...) Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."[253] Ergo, one must understand that the predominantly recognized "science and philosophy" of gender within *The Americas* have built a bigoted White cisheteropatriarchal structure that delineates gender as a fixed biological and innate quality that people must uphold to qualify as human. However, the illusion of gender, and its restrictions, grow from the coerced reiteration of culturally interwoven femmephobia used as a fear-mongering tactic against those who might stray from a masculinist, detached sociocultural interpretation of "humanness." Butler states that gender is not something people can do as individuals, rather it is a reaction to the set norms cultural powers reinforce making gender a *thing* people interact with to actualize their "gender"; I believe that gender holds a more powerful identity than the consequence of society. In addition to Butler's ideology, I would add that gender is a spiritual, psychological, experiential, and experimental identity

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[251] Arjona, "La Malinche," 5:00- 48:00.

[252] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 522.

[253] Butler, "Performative Acts," 520 and 522.

nourished, felt, decoded, and self-defined per the individual. Nevertheless, insidious dominating cultural powers (e.g., politics, legislation, religion, communities, culture) arbitrarily police and impose these natural elements performed subconsciously and consciously. Therefore, gender is a diachronic metaphysical identity, an erotic form of expression materialized through intentionally dehumanizing political frameworks deciding who is worthy of life and voice; a materialization that gives Man, in this case, Hernán Cortés, the entitlement to strip the life and voice of Malintzin.[254]

Moreover, Butler claims that living "in a culture in which the false universal of 'man' has for the most part been presumed as coextensive with humanness itself, feminist theory has sought with success to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women."[255] Hence, the White cisheteropatriarchy promotes anti-woman rhetoric acclimating femmes into the social reorganization where Male homosocial bonding and its "raw male-supremacist eroticism" denotes Man as an entitled person definitively correct by nature; meanwhile, justifying the denigration of the Brown feminine entity as flawed and wrong for not being a White Man.[256] These active methods of power preservation are masculinist and, therefore, flawed and violent. The relationship between Malintzin and Cortés, or colonization and the Indigenous, is the oppressive consequence of a violent hierarchy that condemns the feminine identity to the bottom of the masculinist social order that praises that of Man. Unlike feminist principles that encourage the curious human nature of questioning and challenging institutional and social works to promote pivoting from fixed mindsets that limit one's openness to progressive change, masculinist social orders thrive in uninterrogated spaces while remaining blind to the violence of Man's entitlement. Malintzin, as an Indigenous feminine entity, began at a disadvantage in which Man perceived her presence as something that he must conquer and exploit. And by using feminist theory to bring "female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women," we must reinterpret Malintzin as an Indigenous woman forced to survive within the confines of racism and sexism.[257] As co-creators of social realities, analyzing Malintzin's survival methods not as traitorous but as reactions to a restricted agency within a vulnerable position of being the socialized "Other" is feminist in nature.

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[254] John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (New York: Plume, 1990).

[255] Butler, "Performative Acts," 523.

[256] Homosocial: relating to social interactions between members of the same sex, typically men; usually a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity; Hammarén, Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson, "Homosociality," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2014); Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man,* 21.

[257] Butler, "Performative Acts," 523.

Simone de Beauvoir articulates the sociocultural masculinist view on womanhood by explaining that,

> "A man's body has a meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man." And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called "the sex," meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.[258]

By existing within a racialized and gendered society that reduces women and femmes of color as separate, different, and nothing without their male counterparts, social norms alienate the "Other" from humanness. To be human is to have gender, and to have gender is to subscribe to discriminatory keys of social order. Cisheteropatriarchal settler colonial theory perpetuates the existence of American women and femmes of color as sexualized, othered, and essentialized bodies available for the benefit of White supremacy and male domination. The patriarchy views these identities as subordinates with no existence without relation to Man. Throughout Malinztin's captivity under Cortés, she was laboriously exploited for her linguistic and diplomatic skills, objectified, and sexually abused for militant social movements. Her experience as an Indigenous woman explains the consequences of attaching expectations to gender, which creates cultural rifts making "men" and "women" entities on opposite ends of humanness. Ergo, behaviors become categorical assessments where active patriarchal societies curate distinct terms of what the behaviors are, how they work, and who must adhere to these required identities through an illusion of difference. And with the formerly addressed imposed philosophy that views women as wrong and Man as right, it teaches Man that masculinist codes of conduct and their instilled repertoire of behaviors grant them entitled privileges to demand, often women, for what they want—similar to the foundations of the violently exploitative relationship between Cortés and Malintzin.[259] Malintzin's story speaks on how women's existence is integral to Manhood, precisely mirroring the dynamic and importance enslaved people held in relation to their masters.[260] Cisheteropatriarchal settler colonial foundations narrowed Indigenous women's importance to pleasure and productivity; their exploitative views created the conditions for women' sexual abuse as a means of transaction, exploitation, and weapons of war. Their presence

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[258] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex, 1st ed, Vol. 3* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012): 26.

[259] Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man*, 12.

[260] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 112.

is penalized, perpetually and habitually, for not being a White Man. Though it is important to note that the same social punishment induced by White masculinist codes also lead to violence against Indigenous men, though it takes different forms, has different stakes, and takes on different meanings in historical memory. Nevertheless, women and femmes of color still stand at the vanguard of cultural revolutions curating social growth within society, yet they bear the burdens of the exact change they seek through the systemic forces that intentionally uphold the Brown feminine identity as inferior to the White Man.

Without a feminist framework, Mexican and Chicanx national imaginaries, primarily those who identify as Man, view Malintzin as a traitor who helped the Spanish conquer the Aztecs.[261] However, this assumption completely disregards Malintzin’s disadvantaged life chances and counterintuitively utilizes misogynistic anti-Indigenous logic to discern the life of an Indigenous woman.[262] In Octavio Paz’s essay “The Sons of La Malinche,” he writes: “As a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.”[263] He then mentions “the contemptuous adjective *malinchista* recently put into circulation by the newspapers to denounce all those who have been corrupted by foreign influences.”[264] The derogatory term, derived from her name, illustrates the demonization of her character as someone traitorous. Man’s entitlement and the persistent need for Whitening history are reasons for why Malintzin is remembered as a traitor in contrast to Cortes's legacy as a "great" conqueror. However, approaching Malintzin with a feminist lens when reviewing the historical, political, cultural, sexual, religious, and psychological connotations, we recognize that Malintzin was not a traitor, but a betrayed enslaved person forced to use her linguistic skills and womanhood to survive in an uneven and hierarchical distribution of life chances. Patriarchal views on Malintzin depict how misogynistic value systems normalize blaming women for their decisions while disregarding the systemic involvement of a White cisheteropatriarchy in its methods of coercing women’s decision-making. De Beauvoir quotes Montaigne as saying, “it is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other”; thus, one echoes oppressive principles that intentionally accuse and isolate women to avoid humanizing and sympathizing with the feminine identity.[265] Rather than perceiving Malintzin’s actions as traitorous, a feminist outlook helps discern her decisions as an agential action toward self-determination against a dehumanized identity made to serve the White cisheteropatriarchy. Nevertheless, when surviving against Man,

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[261] Octavio Paz, “The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico.” *Internet Archive* (1959). https://ia802907.us.archive.org/32/items/labyrinthofsolit0000pazo/labyrinthofsolit0000pazo.pdf.

[262] Life chances: a theory in sociology which refers to the opportunities each individual has to improve their quality of life.

[263] Paz, “The Labyrinth of Solitude,” 86.

[264] *Ibid*.

[265] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 31

women and femmes of color are criticized by those who have manipulated the hostile project of knowledge production that is not just anti-woman but anti-human. The male-dominated efforts to silence *La Mujer Americana* is a systemic and conditioned ethic denigrating American feminine identities into a fixed, dehumanizing secondary status.

As indicated through the works of Butler, de Beauvoir, and other feminist dialogue, Malintzin's involvement was not malicious; instead, she is a vilified historical figure in need of a humanizing recontextualization. Malintzin represents the 21st-century experience of womanhood—a demonized identity whose existence challenges masculinist sociocultural curations of gender, history, and knowledge production that forces the feminine identity as second to Man. Furthermore, hyper-fixating on her personal motivations as the sole relevant piece of information when allocating blame is a distraction to the larger social context of masculinist violence. With the careful integration of feminist theory, Malintzin challenges the misogynistic anti-Indigenous narrative by reconfiguring the phallocentric Mexican psyche and its identity while simultaneously nurturing the wounded nature of the feminine entity in opposition to the adverse effects of patriarchal, manipulative control, and censorship. Feminine, Brown, and Black bodies historically reside within an immoral intersection of oppression—a forged position manipulated by masculinist philosophies of White supremacy and male dominance. As inheritors of the most harmful effects of bigotry through ongoing gendered and racial acts of aggression, femmes of color become susceptible to the violent realities of hate crimes against themselves and their communities. Ergo, I denounce the anonymous body and seek to humanize the livelihood and experiences of Malintzin and her daughters! The insidious convergence of discrimination within a power-hungry political system dismissive of humanitarian issues renders femmes of color victims to an epidemic of brutality and injustice. Malintzin could hardly be a traitor to the Mexican nation when no such country existed, yet the humanity that *did* exist was stolen and violated. The pathos of Malintzin's existence as a policed, exploited, and sexualized identity is indisputable and epitomizes the historical nature between Spanish conquerors and Indigenous women—today's Man and *La Mujer Americana*.

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Skin Stories and Family Feelings: The Contradictions of Skin Picking in Mother and Daughter

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Introduction

Sitting together in the quaint counseling center of my junior college, a friend's offhand comment made a curious breakthrough in my therapeutic journey. Troubled by persistent anxiety and low mood, I had been trying for several weeks to seek out psychiatric treatment. I felt that an official diagnosis might give me more clarity about what I was experiencing and how to handle it. My counselor, however, was reluctant to give me a diagnostic test, unconvinced that I needed help beyond our regular sessions. My friend, who had accompanied me for emotional support that day, changed her mind in a matter of seconds.

"Oh, Kat *always* scratches her head until it bleeds!"

My counselor turned towards me sharply, and coincidentally caught me in the act.

"Is that true, Kat?"

"Um... yes?" I answered sheepishly, lowering my hand to my side.

"Why didn't you say so sooner? I'll get you that test then."

That this *physical* habit was apparently a smoking gun in the diagnosis of my *mental* illnesses was confounding to me. However, upon further research, I have realized that my compulsive picking is apparently a psychiatric problem. I started picking my scalp when I was 11 years old, and continue to do so now despite repeated attempts to stop. I mostly pick when I am bored or stressed, which is often. Almost unwittingly, I find my fingers reaching into my hair, roaming around my scalp and finding bumps, dry skin, or scabs to scratch off. During especially intense periods of stress, I sometimes collect these "bits" of organic debris and keep them in a pile next to me. I remember forming such piles during my secondary school debate sessions, in the middle of my GCE A-Level exams and even now, on the corner of my laptop while I write essays. It is difficult to explain why I do this, but I do remember how I picked up the habit: from watching my mother, Pinky, do the same. I conducted an ethnographic interview with her to learn about her experience of skin picking.

At 54 years old, Pinky is undeniably beautiful. In public, we are regularly mistaken as sisters, because she easily appears 20 years younger than her real age.

Pinky's "arrival story" with regards to scalp picking is different from mine. For her, this behavior only started well into adulthood, in 2008. Rather than a generalized phenomenon like mine, her picking was localized to a single spot: a "picker's nodule" on the top of her head that "wouldn't go away," as the damage from her picking would cause the skin to grow back thicker and more itchy. After a few years, she went to a dermatologist to address the issue, who treated the nodule using cryotherapy, and her picking ceased. However, while she claimed to have kicked the habit, it seemed to me that it may simply manifest in different forms: we spent a portion of our interview discussing a pimple on her thigh which had been irritating her, precisely because she would pick at it, and it would come back. Albeit to a less distressing degree, skin picking remains an issue that Pinky is preoccupied with.

It is perhaps helpful to give a brief medical overview of this behavior. Skin picking disorder, otherwise known as dermatillomania, is marked by "recurrent and excessive picking, scratching or rubbing of normal skin" that leads to significant emotional and social distress.[266] Alternatively, as in my case, compulsive skin picking may be a symptom of other conditions such as ADHD, rather than a disorder in and of itself. Nonetheless, given the recent inclusion of dermatillomania in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), compulsive skin-picking is defined as a psychiatric condition.[267] These simplistic definitions, however, do not cohere with Pinky's experience. She has never felt that her picking is a disorder: rather, she described it simply as a "bad habit" that has little bearing on her mental wellbeing. The question of whether either of us "actually" have dermatillomania is irrelevant to my analysis. What is more interesting is this: How could our picking be understood, and addressed, through such different terms? How does skin picking simultaneously link and separate my body from my mother's?

In this essay, I seek to disrupt the notion of compulsive skin picking as a straightforward medical fact. Instead, I suggest that skin picking is a "[technique] of the body" that has been transmitted intergenerationally from my mother to me.[268] Yet, simultaneously, it is a "stigma symbol" which "[discredits]" the individual in some way.[269] As a result of this stigma, skin picking becomes pathologized and rendered as a site of medical intervention. Yet, even the notion of "medical intervention" is more pluralistic than one might assume. I was fascinated by how differently my mother and I treated our skin picking: Pinky went to a dermatologist, and I went to a psychiatrist. This difference, I argue, reveals that skin picking is *polyvalent.* Borrowing from literary theory, I use the notion of

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[266] Matthew J. Paylo and Allison A. Zins, "Excoriation disorder: A new diagnosis in the DSM-5," *ACA Center for Counseling, Policy and Research Practice Briefs* (June 2015): 18.

[267] Paylo and Zins, "Excoriation disorder," 18.

[268] Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 75.

[269] Erving Goffman, *Stigma Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963): 3.

polyvalence to demonstrate that the same technique can hold *different meanings* in *different bodies*, as a result of the unique "physio-psycho-social assemblages" that the action manifests from in each individual.[270] These meanings invite different *kinds* of medical intervention, influenced by our individual beliefs about the body in general and about our own bodies. Our bodies as medical objects thus come to be managed and produced through situated knowledge, practices, and socialities.

I theorize our skin picking this way to resist the dominant belief in medicine, and in psychiatry in particular, that all disorders are rooted in individual biology.[271] Many critiques of this ideology have already been launched in academia, for it erases the "social systemic causation" behind these widespread experiences of illness, distress, and dysfunction.[272] While these critiques are often theoretical, pointing to the role of broader social systems such as capitalism, my intervention attends specifically to the *body*.[273] Writing against the neat binary between mind and body, I seek to understand mental illness as *a fundamentally embodied experience*, and thus mediated by the ideologies and socialities entailed in the body. The individual experience of health and illness always exists in relation to others, and other bodies. My family is no different.

While my focus lies in the embodiments of mental illness, the social context in which my family is situated is nonetheless noteworthy. Pinky is a single mother and the primary caregiver for myself and my younger, 18 year old sibling. Both myself and my sibling identify as disabled, as we both have ADHD and my sibling is also Autistic. We are also an upper middle class immigrant family, having moved from the Philippines (where we are originally from) to Hong Kong in 2000 and finally to Singapore in 2005 as a result of my mother's corporate job. As a single, immigrant mother of two mentally ill children, Pinky has had to navigate unfamiliar healthcare and education systems for most of our time in Singapore. I, too, have played my own part in this: being 7 years older than my sibling, I was often advocating for their diagnoses and treatment when Pinky was either resistant to or simply clueless about the Singaporean mental healthcare system. Our family's experience of illness and care is thus intertwined with our particular social position and resources. I am interested, primarily, in how these systems and identities are enacted in, on, and through our bodies. Based on my interview with my mother, as well as reflections on my own experience, it became startlingly clear: the stories of our skin are far from simple.

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[270] Mauss, "Techniques," 85.

[271] Jill A. Fisher, "Coming Soon to a Physician Near You: Medical Neoliberalism and Pharmaceutical Clinical Trials," *Harvard Health Policy Rev.* 8, no. 1 (2007): 65.

[272] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2009): 21.

[273] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 19.

Skin Picking as a Technique of the Body

The way that I pick my scalp is not random; it follows unarticulated rules and strategies that I have developed over the years. For example, I use a circular, rubbing motion when I am scouting for something to pick at, and then move to picking with a single fingernail when I have found my target. I can tell which angle I need to pick from in order to remove the feature, and whether I need to switch hands to facilitate this. It brings me satisfaction to use these methods to uproot particularly stubborn "bits," as though I were solving a puzzle. Noticing this unintentional yet methodical approach has led me to understand my scalp picking as a bodily technique, as opposed to an exclusively psychiatric phenomenon.

According to Mauss, techniques of the body are actions which are "*effective* and *traditional.*"[274] In the case of me and my mother, skin picking is a behavior which meets these criteria. Mauss suggests that "tradition" is what allows for the "transmission" of techniques, thus distinguishing the inherently social bodily technique from an idiosyncratic action.[275] Essential to this transmission is that it is a "prestigious imitation:" techniques are learned by individuals from those who have "authority" over them, which legitimizes the given action.[276] While Mauss appears to rely on a cultural definition of tradition, drawing on examples from different ethnicities and nationalities, I suggest that tradition *also* manifests within the smaller scale unit of the family. Skin picking, then, is traditional in that it has been *intergenerationally* transmitted from Pinky to me. When I reflect on the origins of my scalp picking, it is directly tied to witnessing Pinky adopt the same habit. Rather than being an "oral transmission," this constituted a *visual* transmission.[277] Seeing my mother, who had authority over me as my sole parental figure, engage in this behavior gave me the bodily vocabulary to do the same. Combing my memory for moments of transmission, I realized that I "borrow the series of movements" I witnessed in my mother: the picking methods that I described are ones that I saw her perform when I was a child, though we never explicitly acknowledged them.[278] I continue to practice them because they are *effective* in creating the relief and satisfaction that I crave when I pick.

The question of transmission led me to wonder how Pinky started picking, which I had never known before I asked her in our interview. I was surprised to learn that Pinky also understood her behavior as "multigenerational." Though my grandmother never picked her skin, she did transmit certain beliefs about the body which primed Pinky to pick up the habit later on in life. Pinky described her mother as "fastidious" and "vain," often nitpicking both her own appearance and her

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[274] Mauss, "Techniques," 75.

[275] *Ibid.*

[276] *Ibid*: 73.

[277] *Ibid*: 75.

[278] *Ibid*: 73.

children's. When Pinky was a child, these comments were usually made about her skin or her weight, and accompanied with interventions such as dermatological appointments or dieting. This normalized an approach to her own body as a "technical object" which had to rid *itself* of perceived flaws.[279] In her own words, Pinky learned that "there was always something wrong with one's appearance." Echoes of this belief were evident when Pinky described her picking as an attempt to rid of physical features which she felt were not "perfect." This reveals how one's self-perception, and the ways they act on it, is entangled in "a social context that gives meaning to the senses beyond the individual."[280] Pinky's bodily technique is inextricable from the context of her upbringing. In this way, it is possible to take an expansive approach to Mauss' notion of transmission. From her mother, Pinky internalized beliefs about her body which formed the necessary "physio-psycho-social assemblage" that made this bodily technique possible.[281] Her skin picking, through visual transmission, was then passed to me.

Pinky's, and her mother's, preoccupation with physical appearance further reveals the *gendered* quality of this transmission in our family. I noticed, for example, that Pinky's brothers do not display the same kind of bodily techniques that Pinky does. Pinky's compulsion to pick can, in some ways, be understood as a compulsion *to beautify*, a compulsion that is demanded of women in particular. Given that beauty is a "sign that circulates among women and assigns value to female bodies as an effect of that circulation," the techniques and practices associated with beautification likewise come into circulation.[282] The prerogative to perfect one's body, passed on from Pinky's mother to her, both arises from and perpetuates this circuit. Jarrín suggests that beauty thus produces a "contagious form of gender difference," in which women and those raised as women become more susceptible.[283] This contagiousness is part of what has made the transmission of certain techniques possible in my family, particularly along gendered lines. I do not want to suggest that skin picking is *always* a gendered phenomenon, as people of all genders engage with this behavior. However, for Pinky, the gendered logics of beauty are bound to the beliefs and the practices she holds. Thus, in our family, skin picking can be understood as a technique of the body, rendering it a distinctly social, rather than purely medical, phenomenon.

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[279] *Ibid*: 75.

[280] Alvaro E. Jarrín, *The Biopolitics of Beauty: Cosmetic Citizenship and Affective Capital in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017): 12.

[281] Mauss, "Techniques," 85.

[282] Jarrín, *Biopolitics of Beauty,* 89.

[283] *Ibid*.

The Socialities of Stigma

The story of my scalp picking would not be complete without acknowledging that it quickly became a source of tension in my relationship with Pinky, despite being a habit that we shared. What distinguishes skin picking from other bodily techniques is that it carries profound "stigma," and with it complex feelings of shame.[284] An individual's attributes acquire stigma when they are "incongruous with our stereotype of what [they] should be," thus becoming a "deeply discrediting" part of them.[285] The stigma attached to skin picking was clear in the ways that Pinky described both mine and her own behavior. On multiple occasions, she described it as a "bad habit" that was "not normal," using language that echoed Goffman's own writing.

Yet the question of what exactly was *discrediting* about our skin picking was not so straightforward. In some senses, skin picking can be seen as a purely physical stigma, a certain "[abomination] of the body."[286] Pinky reflected the concern that my scalp picking would cause me to lose hair and develop a bald spot, which would be especially unsightly in a young woman. Beyond its effects, the mere act of picking, to her, simply "doesn't look nice." Her preoccupation with appearance reveals the force of perception "as a social interface."[287] Through this interface, it is possible to "imagine the body as emerging from the world it interacts with."[288] In this way, *looking* abnormal not only marks but *produces* an individual as abnormal. In other senses, however, skin picking can also be seen as a "[blemish] of individual character," in that it *visibilizes* an otherwise 'invisible' mental condition.[289] After all, to the trained eye of my counselor, it was my scalp picking which signalled my need for a clinical diagnosis, and thus my identity as a mentally ill person. Thus, in several ways, our skin picking marks both me and Pinky as somehow "not normal."

With stigma, "shame becomes a central possibility."[290] Shame, however, is not simply an effect of stigma but rather a reinforcement mechanism of stigma as well—upon feeling shame, the belief that a certain attribute is stigmatized becomes stronger. In my family, this shame was not only experienced individually but interpersonally through the "regulation and surveillance" of each other's bodies.[291] Pinky went to great lengths throughout my childhood to get me to stop picking,

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[284] Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

[285] *Ibid*.

[286] *Ibid*: 4.

[287] Jarrín, *Biopolitics of Beauty,* 11.

[288] *Ibid*.

[289] Goffman, *Stigma*, 4.

[290] *Ibid*: 7.

[291] Karen K. Kroeger, "AIDS Rumors, Imaginary Enemies, and the Body Politic in Indonesia," *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 2 (May 2003): 244.

albeit unsuccessfully. Whenever she saw me picking, she always told me to stop regardless of where we were or what we were doing—this type of interruption even happened during our interview, as I was asking Pinky a question. Beyond verbal reminders, she also devised physical means to disincentivize me from the habit. I have a vivid memory of Pinky giving me a beanie as a child, telling me to wear it so that I would not be tempted to scratch. I donned this hat dutifully for many days but to no avail. My grandmother reflected similar sentiments: she very recently interrupted my picking with the admonition that it made me "look like a monkey." These disciplinary measures reinforced the fact that my scalp picking was undesirable and shameful. This belief, in turn, reinforced my feelings of anxiety and embarrassment around my picking, which were heightened by the fact that I found it impossible to simply stop.

However, I also noticed that Pinky's interventions were bound up with her feelings about her own picking. Of my scalp picking, Pinky insightfully said "I notice because I know." This observation highlights that the surveillance of my body is made possible by her surveillance of her own body and the familiarity of the feelings that skin picking causes. Pinky admitted that she feels somewhat "frustrated" when she sees me pick and "surprised" that I have not yet stopped. This frustration was mirrored in the way she spoke about her own body, whether it was the picker's nodule from years before or the pimple on her thigh that had just appeared. The ways she saw my body are thus just as much a reflection of how she saw her own body. The fluidity of these feelings and how they linked our distinct bodies reveal our family as having our own, microcosmic "body politic," forged through kinship.[292] The stigma, and shame, associated with our skin picking became a "[threat]" to not only our own but also *our family's* appearance as normal.[293] Under such duress, the boundaries between our individual bodies "become blurred," allowing shame about one's own body to become refracted in other bodies as well.[294] Through the logics of the body politic, shame moves interpersonally between myself and Pinky, reinforcing the stigma attached to our skin picking.

It is this stigma which is central to the construction of skin picking as a problem which requires medical intervention. According to the DSM-5, "feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame" are in fact a diagnostic requirement in determining whether or not an individual has dermatillomania.[295] The very perception of skin picking as a stigmatized behavior, and the feelings associated with this stigma, is thus an essential component in rendering skin picking *as a mental disorder* to begin with. In other words, the stigma attached to the behavior

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[292] *Ibid.*

[293] *Ibid.*

[294] *Ibid.*

[295] Paylo and Zins, "Excoriation disorder," 18.

and the attributes which make this behavior stigmatizing are mutually reinforcing. This complicates the aloof clinicism with which medicine treats the phenomenon of diagnosis. The presence, and circulation, of stigma reveals that diagnosis is *not only* a mere description or pronouncement of medical fact. Diagnosis often profoundly influences the individual's experience of illness, sometimes even on a visceral, and physiological, level.

Another component in the diagnosis of dermatillomania is the element of compulsion. This speaks to the unique troubles of skin picking as a stigmatized *bodily technique.* Individuals often "cannot get rid of" their techniques, as they are actions which are learned and deeply ingrained.[296] The force of the technique persists in spite of stigma, which further entrenches feelings of helplessness and embarrassment. Pinky similarly noted that she believes skin picking "becomes a problem when you can't stop" doing it yourself. In this emotional and bodily landscape, medical intervention thus emerges as a necessity to "correct" the stigma, as the individual cannot correct it themselves.[297] This is why both Pinky and I eventually sought out treatment for our skin picking. Thus, through stigma and shame, skin picking is pathologized and becomes a site of medical intervention.

A Derma or A Psych? The Polyvalence of Picking

Over the course of our interview, however, I began to notice that the language Pinky and I used to describe and understand our skin picking—even as a medical phenomenon—was markedly different. What I thought would be a straightforward discussion of mental illness and its symptomatic presentations quickly became complicated, because Pinky does not think of herself as afflicted with any kind of mental disorder. Rather, in her own words, skin picking is a "bad habit." These differences, and the material implications that they had in the ways Pinky and I sought out medical intervention, speak to the *polyvalence* of skin picking as a bodily technique. I use this term to illustrate how the same action, and the same bodily features, hold different meanings in different bodies. Skin picking clearly *means* something different to Pinky than it does to me, and this mediates how we invite and negotiate medical interventions. Through polyvalence, "what we think of as a single object may appear to be more than one" because our perceptions of our bodies are fundamentally colored by our own practices, beliefs, and histories.[298] Furthermore, I use this observation to write against the idea of medicine "as if it were a whole," and the phenomenon of medical intervention as a uniform or monolithic process.[299] Rather, different strands of medicine construct our bodies as medical objects in different ways, offering different solutions to "the

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[296] Mauss, "Techniques," 71.

[297] Goffman, *Stigma,* 10.

[298] Annemarie Mol *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002): vii.

[299] Mol, *The Body Multiple*, viii.

same" problem and producing different forms of bodily knowledge and social identities as a result. The choices to engage with specific types of medical treatments over others are likewise informed by bodily context. In my family, these interpretive tensions and nuances can be summed up neatly in a single question: who should treat my skin picking, a dermatologist or a psychiatrist?

For Pinky, dermatology was the answer. Her skin picking is motivated not by the sensation of picking but rather the urge to rid her body of a feature that she considers "not correct or perfect." To her, it was *the feature* that was the root cause of her skin picking, because it gave her the "nagging desire to pick [at] it." Without the feature, the behavior would, in her mind, simply go away. From this perspective, Pinky's skin picking can be understood as a kind of grooming technique, intended to rectify the body's imperfections. The appropriate response, then, was to seek out a dermatologist, who could remove the offending feature. This also conveniently avoided the stigma associated with mental illness and psychiatry: Pinky reflected that mental health was "not even a thing" that people talked about when she was growing up. On the other hand, the perfection and beautification made possible through medical intervention, such as dermatological procedures, is "naturalized" in women, hence rendering dermatology a more sensible and intuitive choice for Pinky.[300]

Pinky's choice, to turn to dermatology, is rooted in her body's personal history. Jarrín notes that "perceptions of beauty latch on to bodily features laden with sensory memories," which was true of Pinky's experience.[301] She told me that her skin picking reminded her of the acne that she attempted to manage as a teen, which she also saw a dermatologist for. The sensations of grooming and treating her body created an affective association between past and present, orienting her to engage in the same medical interventions that she did as a child. These *feel* familiar to her body. Furthermore, her choices and experiences arise from a specific and socially constructed belief about what constitutes the "normal" body. Pinky was raised to imagine the normal body as one that "should be close to perfection." Perceived imperfections, then, are afflictions to the body that must be corrected because they are "not naturally there," and are thus not normal. In Pinky, skin picking is rendered as a cosmetic problem, rather than a psychological problem. Dermatology then allows her to restore her body to a state of perceived normalcy, and in turn correct her skin picking.

For me, however, psychiatry has been the path forward. Hearing Pinky's appraisal was shocking to me because it could not depart further from how I understand *my* scalp picking. Unlike Pinky, I am not preoccupied with correcting bodily features that I perceive as flaws: I tend to pick regardless of whether there is *something obvious* to pick, and often create features to pick through the scarring that my picking causes. It is the sensation of picking, and the relief and satisfaction

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[300] Jarrín, *Biopolitics of Beauty,* 88.

[301] *Ibid*: 82.

it brings me, that matters much more to me than how my body looks. In this way, I understand my scalp picking as a self-soothing technique which helps me manage boredom and stress. The prominence of these emotional aspects of my picking has led me, and those around me, to understand this as a psychological phenomenon. Solutions which were purely physical, like when a General Practitioner dismissively told me to "just cut [my] nails shorter," seemed ineffective to me. Psychiatry, thus, became the appropriate kind of medical intervention in my body. While I have not completely stopped, therapy and psychoactive medication have made my picking more manageable and less distressing.

My inclination towards psychiatry, likewise, is informed by my own unique context. Pinky specifically "tried not to" raise me with the same beliefs that her mother imparted to her. I tend not to obsess over and correct my apparent flaws, choosing instead to see them as a natural part of my body. Instead, my sensory memories are dominated by the struggle to make sense of my mind and mood. My body is inscribed with sensations from my teenage years, of lying in bed for days at a time or chewing through the sleeve of my cardigan during a panic attack. Feelings, after all, are a profoundly embodied experience. Coupled with the language and politics of an era more accepting of mental illness than Pinky's, I am more equipped and more willing to engage with skin picking as a psychological problem. This engagement with psychiatry thus renders me as an individual with mental illness, in a way that Pinky is not.

Skin picking is therefore not a stable or straightforward medical fact, despite the definitions of the DSM-5. In my family, it is a polyvalent phenomenon, mediated through different ideologies, different medical practices, and different bodies. This not only positions but also produces the body in different ways. The "single object" that is a bump on the scalp takes on so many different meanings.[302] To Pinky, it is an unnatural imperfection that must be eradicated. To the dermatologist that she consults, it is a "picker's nodule." To me, it is a "bit" to be collected and a means to self-soothe. To my psychiatrist, it is a physical and emotional trigger for my compulsive tendencies. These discrepancies are no longer as contradictory to me as I had initially felt. Instead, I have come to appreciate that they are a consequence of the fact that our bodies, and bodily practices, are always situated.

Conclusion

When I first sat Pinky down for an interview, I did not fully appreciate how different our shared habits could be. In fact, the phenomenon of skin picking in my family is paradoxical in its complexity. How does a "technique of the body" remain transmissible when its performance is stigmatized and not unequivocally successful?[303] How is stigma reinforced and resignified by the very measures we take to evade it? In what ways do we simultaneously resist and invite different

[302] Mol, *The Body Multiple*, vii.

[303] Mauss, "Techniques," 75.

kinds of intervention for a problem that is sometimes medical and sometimes not? These are the questions that come to my mind as I remember the many times that Pinky and I would sit at the dining table and argue about our picking, both with our fingers firmly scratching away at our heads. Sometimes, the sheer irony of this scene would occur to us, and the frustrated criticisms would give way to shared laughter.

The stakes of these paradoxes become more pressing when we recognize how medicine, and medical interventions, *erases* them. Despite their very best intentions, it never once seemed to me that Pinky’s dermatologist or my counselor were interested in seeing our skin picking as anything more than a medical condition. It is their job, after all, to reduce our skin picking to a conceivable and diagnosable problem that medicine can solve. Recognizing the polyvalence of the body, and the plurality of illness as an embodied experience, pushes back against this prevailing logic. The body—*our bodies*—cannot be reduced to medical facts alone. To do so perpetuates simplistic and often dangerous beliefs about the individual patient as a bounded, biological entity. Medicine, both as a dominant ideology and as a collection of varied practices, must seek to understand the body in context and in connection with other bodies.

Rather than attempting to resolve them, the tensions that I address serve as a reminder that the body is often so much messier in practice than in theory. Frameworks such as technique, stigma and polyvalence explain how skin picking has been simultaneously circulated *and* corrected within my family, but only approximately. In many ways, that Pinky and I continue to pick simply does not make sense. Our bodies, however, *make sense* in other ways, brimming as they are with different memories, ideologies, and practices. They are simultaneously individual and social, medical subjects and medical objects, and, most crucially, healthy and sick. These seeming contradictions are part and parcel of what it is like to live in and as our bodies, and Pinky and I have developed our own unique ways of navigating them. We attempt to care for ourselves and for each other, without ever truly knowing the line between “bad habit” and “medical disorder.” In some ways, this line simply does not matter. The stories of our skin picking are not coherent, and they have never needed to be.

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Mommy, Me, and We: Why Black Mothers Have Turned to Doulas

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Introduction

I want to begin this paper by questioning what medicine is and our relations to it. But first, I want to center myself within this narrative. My relationship with medicine has been a journey and something that I hope to rediscover as I write this paper. I didn't grow up going to the doctor often besides the annual visits and shots I needed in order to attend school. I've never had a primary care physician with whom I have had a relationship and have never been taught to value these sorts of relationships with any kind of health practitioner. It was only when I reached the age of eighteen and needed birth control that I began to care about who was going to be my OB/GYN. Yet, even then, I do not count this choice as my own but rather my mother's. I do not regret the decision of visiting my OB/GYN, who is a Black woman, because something there makes me feel safe. Maybe it's the fact that she's a woman because never in a million years would I go to a male OB/GYN. Or maybe it's the fact that she looks like me, and she looks *at* me and *with* me. We share something that is intimate. Although the two of us are very different people with our own unique experiences in life, we are still connected by being Black women.

I feel seen because of that.

So now what does this say about my relationship with medicine? I value being seen and heard as most would. By opposition, Western medicine does not value this same level of intimacy but rather speed and profit. I want to utilize another story from my own life to discuss the issues with the current medical system and prove my latter point. This summer I went to a five-minute doctor's appointment. Five minutes. I was battling a treacherous dry cough that would not quit despite the numerous allergy pills I swallowed to try and relieve it. I let the doctor know my situation, constantly repeating myself to let him know that the strongest OTC allergy medicine I was using was not helping. I tell you that my words meant nothing to him because I walked out with a prescription for a stronger allergy medicine. To no surprise, that medicine did nothing to help me. This is what I mean when I say that our current medical system values how fast they see you and how much money they can gain from the visit. Time and again, I hope that the next visit to the doctor will be better. That they won't make me feel

small, that they will hear me, that I'll walk out feeling confident in my doctors knowing that they care about me. So again, my relationship with medicine is rocky.

I turn to the "right way" to do medicine by going to socially reputable practitioners who are supposed to be the knowers of theoretically-backed knowledge. I do this right. I buy the medicine they tell me to and listen to what they have to say. But sometimes, I don't do the right thing. I don't go to the doctor, but I still go to the store to buy medicine or I go to my mom. She tells me to fix a runny nose by lathering VapoRub on my chest and in my nose and if it becomes worse, down my throat. In case you haven't done this, I'll tell you right now that the menthol taste at the back of your throat is something very short of the comfort bubblegum-flavored medicine provides. But it works. She makes me pots of liquid death tea full of lemons, oranges, grapefruits, ginger, turmeric, and lord knows what else she puts in there. Sounds delicious, right? Ironically, this drink is sometimes the only thing that makes me feel remotely better.

This is what the Western world casts aside as alternative medicine... now are these remedies backed by science and research? Not always. But they are backed by anecdotal stories passed down from my great-grandmother to my grandmother to my mom and now to my sister and I. Society discredits these hereditary narratives despite them being tried and true. In this paper, I will investigate the power of reclaiming and returning to these natural forms of healing for the Black community as an act of resistance.

Black mothers are dying at unprecedented rates, a reality too stark to face. However, I now don't have a choice. Here, in this moment and in this paper, I begin to come to terms with the reality that I may be enfolded within that sentence—that phrase, *Black mothers are dying*. I say that I now have no choice but to come to terms with this reality because my sister is due to have her baby at the end of this week. The excitement that came with my sister announcing her soon-to-be baby was bountiful and filled with what could come. My sister as a mother was a memory I was excited to witness, but it was my sister as a coffin plate that I could not bear to face.

A jarring fear began to fester on the back burner of my mind. By writing this, I move this fear to the forefront. I have long struggled with deciding whether or not I want to have kids. Besides the overall responsibility that comes with raising a child, I worry about myself. I worry about whether or not I will see the light of day to see and raise my child—if my child's only memory will be a coffin plate with my name. My heart aches at the idea that they will live a life where they don't know the sound of my voice—a life where they learn about me not from the lips of my mouth that would've spoken soft iloveyous but from phones, pictures, stories and others who repeat ohyouareyourmotherschild,

shewatchesoveryoueverysecond,

shewouldhavelovedumorethanuknow.

I write these phrases without spaces because the pain they carry does not leave room for slowness that allows for true comprehension. Because maybe if we

say it faster and faster, our brain will get so confused that it won't understand what's happening—that it won't feel the pain and struggle of our reality. For so long, I separated myself from this reality by framing it as an idea, as something more theoretical, abstract, something that surely would not happen to me. But now, it is not an idea, but it is more real—in fact, more real than it has ever been. I thought about my sister dying because some shitty doctor couldn't bear to unclog his White supremacist ears to just see her. The familiar repetition of noitllbeokay shewillbeokay itwonthappentoher became much too overplayed. So to face my fear, I write. I write to find how we can liberate ourselves and deconstruct this reality to construct and reinvent something where this is an idea that never becomes a truth. Because of this, I argue that Black mothers are turning to natural birthing practices as an act of resistance.

Mistrust and Medicine

The Black community and medicine have always been on a very rocky footing. Experiments such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study are prime examples of this mistrust. For those of you that do not know, the study titled, "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male," worked to research the effects of syphilis on untreated males.[304] The issue with this research was the lack of informed consent because participants, mostly rural illiterate sharecroppers, were not told about the purpose of the research, its consequences, or given the option to quit the study once penicillin, the treatment for syphilis, was developed.[305] These are clear ethical violations to those who participated in the study being that researchers valued their personal motivations more than the safety of their Black participants. This study shows the lack of value placed on Black bodies and how the relationship between medicine and the Black community has historically been fraught.

I want to start this off by using the words of Dr. Vanessa Northington Gamble, a historian of American medicine, in order to frame this conversation. She says that the problem with conversations regarding the Black community's mistrust and medicine is that mistrust " becomes like this inherent trait of African Americans," when instead the scope of the conversation should be "focusing on a health care system that does not have trustworthiness."[306] By redirecting focus to how the broader healthcare system is untrustworthy, she believes it will encourage the medical care system to change as an institution.

Right now, I want to share experiences that members of the Black community have had in healthcare spaces to emphasize why there is mistrust. Alie

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[304] Tuskegee University, "About the USPHS Syphilis Study," T*uskegee.edu (*2019), https://www.tuskegee.edu/about-us/centers-of-excellence/bioethics-center/about-the-usphs-syphilis-study.

[305] Tuskegee University, "About the USPHS Syphilis," 1.

[306] Yamiche Alcindor, Rachel Wellford, Bria Lloyd, and Lizz Bolaji, "With a History of Abuse in American Medicine, Black Patients Struggle for Equal Access," *PBS NewsHou*r (February 24, 2021), https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/with-a-history-of-abuse-in-american-medicine-black-patients-struggle-for-equal-access.

Streeter shared her story with PBS about how she went to the doctor when she began to faint regularly. However, while there, she says that her first doctor disregarded everything that she said and chose to focus on testing her for tertiary syphilis. At the time, Streeter was 22: this assumption means that she would have been sexually active at 12 in order for this diagnosis to make sense. Streeter explains this to the doctor, but she does not believe Streeter and refuses to look at any other options. So, Streeter says, "I just stopped going to the doctor and I dealt with not knowing what was wrong with me."[307] It was only when she was suspected of having a stroke that they finally realized that she had complex migraines.

I share this story to highlight the lack of value that the Black voice holds in this space. Our feelings and thoughts are invalidated. I don't have the words to know why our voices are invalidated, so I turn to the words of Northington Gamble to help me. She says, "there is a long history of Black bodies being seen as different within the medical sphere, that Black bodies are inferior."[308] Our voice, concerning our body, holds no value because we are seen as less than others. Being seen this way turns the sound of our voice down to mute. It is this silence that darkens the room and closes the door to any chance of feeling heard again until it is damn near too late.

These ideas remind me of the work of Audre Lorde which speaks about the barrier to change. She writes, "but it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation."[309] I see this intertwined in the stories I read about Black bodies and medicine. Because our bodies are seen as different, we lose our humanity, our likeness, and our connection to the White body. Our race as a point of difference stems from colonial White supremacist ideology. Being viewed as people in need of guidance meant that we were inferior and we were seen as so.[310]

Lorde writes how we have been trained to approach differences in three ways, one of which applies here: we destroy difference if we see it as subordinate.[311] Here that difference is race.[312] This inferiority leads to destruction. As our bodies are constructed as commodities, a vessel for nothing other than work, testing, and experimenting, the value of our voice begins to decline. And in that truth lies a science based on false ideas about the way our bodies operate. Our Black

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[307] Alcindor, Wellford, Lloyd, and Bolaji, "With a History of Abuse," 1.

[308] *Ibid.*

[309] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Feminist Theory: A Reader, 4th ed.*, eds. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010): 289.

[310] We were still treated because they ignored the idea that we too, like them, had an epistemology and culture of our own.

[311] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class," 289.

[312] Additionally, gender acts as a point of difference as well.

uncivilized bodies and tongue operate so differently that when we speak, there is no noise, when we speak about the pain in our chest, there is no noise, when our time of death is announced after the cry of our baby, thereisnonoise.

But what if our differences were something of value? If we were to acknowledge these differences as something other than a tool for division, for categorization, then maybe there would be a health care system that wasn't based on biased research interpreted to reinforce ideas that Black bodies are inferior. Maybe this would be a cataclysmic series of events that would create a trustworthy healthcare system for the Black community. A healthcare system where w e m a k e n o i s e is impossible to ignore.

Transitioning to Natural Birthing Methods

Now that I have spoken about the power of utilizing voice in connection to systems that do not value our bodies, I want to show how this impacted the transition to natural healing methods. A report released by the National Partnership for Women and Families "found that community births—which it defines as births at home or community birthing centers—increased by 20 percent from 2019–2020, with upticks across racial and ethnic lines," with Non-Hispanic Black women using birthing alternatives 30 percent more.[313] Lateshia Beachum utilizes this report to highlight how "more are turning to options where they feel seen, heard, and cared for by people who look like them and want to see them and their babies live."[314] I utilize this quote to highlight the value of being seen and being heard by people who look like you. You feel safe there. You are neither looked through as you are almost invisible nor are you looked at as different. You are seen. Being seen is something very different from being looked at. When you are seen, your voice matters because being seen leads to being heard. When you are looked at, you are one-dimensional, painless, different, and passive, so therefore there is no need to listen. You talk, but your words have no meaning.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention finds that "Black women are three times more likely to die of a pregnancy-related cause than White women" which stems from factors such as "structural racism and implicit bias."[315] This statistic is enough for me—and I'm sure many others—to fear having a child. I am nowhere near having a child, but a key factor in my fear is being at a hospital where I feel like the doctors will not care for me like they do for their other patients. This should not be a thought any mother should be having especially during a period of tumultuous change. My sister is due to have her baby at the end of this month, and she has chosen to have her child at a birthing center; this puts me at ease because

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[313] Lateshia Beachum, "More Black People Sought Births Outside Hospitals in 2020, Report Finds," *Washington Post* (April 28, 2022), http://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/04/28/black-people-birthing-centers-2020/.

[314] *Ibid*: 1.

[315] *Ibid*.

she has chosen a team that she trusts to help her through this process. Let me say that again. She has c h o s e n. And because of this choice, she WILL be seen. I say will because it is a truth. I will hear stories of my sister's joy and support in her birthing team. I take my pain and rework it into my optimism, so I will repeat that she WILL until the end of time. In this moment that I type these words, I am coming to terms with my fear because my web ties to my sister have encouraged me to follow in her footsteps. If I ever choose to have a child, I will follow in the steps of my sister and other women who have done the same to liberate myself from American medical systems that delegitimize my pain. Here once again, I explain the power of anecdotal stories and community that create my perceptions towards birthing centers. If these centers are where I feel heard and seen, then this is where I will be. By being at a birthing center, my sister liberates herself and resists as she constructs a new environment through which she can feel advocated.
She will be seen. We will be heard.

Mistrust, Medicine, and Community

I want to touch on the additional ways that mistrust within the healthcare system can begin. I want to speak about communication and the power of anecdotes when we construct our perceptions. From the words of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, she writes, "we perceive the version of our reality that our culture communicates."[316] So not only do our own personal experiences shape the way we see this system, but it is the stories of others that play a vital role in constructing these narratives. I have constructed narratives about the way I am supposed to operate within the world. But here, when I say world, I mean the White community where I was raised, radically altering the way I carried myself. Here the voices of others were the White people who endlessly praised my mother for "raising me so well" because I was one of the good ones. I tried in school. I was respectful. By being one of the good ones, I was welcomed into their community. All my friends were White, so I was attuned to the culture they created for me. I bought Chacos, I let them compliment how pretty my hair was, I tried to buy all the things they had.

It was only during my first year of college that I began to have Black friends. My friend group was one fully of women of color. My culture began to value self-reflection. I started to reflect on the ways that I had lost myself at the cost of fitting in. My ankle, gripped by the White hand, dragged me further and further down into their world. I never opened my eyes up above to see the Black hand reaching below to bring me to the breaking of the water and the sea, to breathe in a salty inhale of fresh ocean air. It was not until I met them that I was able to take a breath of fresh air. It was in these waves that I shifted between finding myself, and being authentic, vulnerable, and empathetic. These women stayed with me as I relearned who I was. The intimacy and vulnerability of sharing our joys, fears, and discomforts was a

[316] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness" in *Feminist Theory: A Reader, 4th ed.*, eds. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010): 371.

juncture. In this juncture, their words helped to create me into the woman I am. Their strength encouraged me to persevere when I had felt alone. Stories of their pain became mine too. The stories of others who had shared the same experiences as me or those around me became a pain of mine too.

If you do not understand, here's an example. Every young Black girl grows up to question if they are beautiful. When I spoke to the girls who had grown up in White-dominated spaces that struggled to see themselves as beautiful—because the only girls that got attention were the girls with straight blonde hair, freckled faces, and blue eyes—I felt that pain because I experienced the same conflict. So now when I hear about others who have been through the same, I know their pain and feel their pain because I know the pains of myself and the others before them who yearned for that same love and validation.

I talk about this to show that the people who we connect with innately impacts our reality. The culture we create with them connects us and encourages us to become more empathetic to others who have been through the same. This shared reality is only constructed by speaking up, out, and with others. Dr. Gamble speaks about how “trauma has been passed down by family stories and family histories.”[317] It is not only the history of studies such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study but stories that “might be how their grandmother was treated in the hospital, how their aunt was treated by a physician.”[318] This idea of generational trauma through anecdotal stories is something very important to talk about when we speak about mistrust and medicine.

These stories are intimate and extremely powerful. When we have strong connections with our community, we unravel and intertwine ourselves with those around us. We string parts of ourselves together much like a spider strings a web. When we web ourselves, our experiences become shared. It is not one web but *our* web that sways when the wind blows. But this wind, no matter how strong, does not destroy our web but only makes it more resilient to the harder, tougher, and stronger winds to come. Our connections to our community are what make these stories more powerful. When we hear stories from our community, they hit closer to home quite literally because they are impacting those with whom we share a mental and emotional home. These ideas of the importance of community and creating webs of connection are inspired by the work of bell hooks who emphasizes the importance of communal intimacy.

hooks writes about sisterhood uncovering the power of sharing, writing that “women are enriched when we bond with one another.”[319] When we hear about a brother, a mother, a friend treated unfairly by the medical system, we begin to distance ourselves from these same institutions. But through sharing these stories, it acts as resistance to these same systems that have harmed us. hooks further

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[317] Beachum, “More Black People Sought,” 1.

[318] Alcindor, Wellford, Lloyd, and Bolaji, “With a History of Abuse,” 1.

[319] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 1984): 44.

explains the importance of community building in regards to the feminist movement, but it is applicable in this context as well. She writes, "one of the major issues of the Women's Movement has been to eliminate women's weakness and replace it with confidence."[320] Here our weakness, although not a fault of our own, is our high maternal mortality rates, yet by choosing natural birthing methods where our voices are heard, we become more confident. We are able to protect those in our community to ensure that they are safer, that they made a better choice than we did.

Communing in the Black community is an act of resistance. I say this as a critique of America's focus on individualism that inevitably leads to loneliness and encourages pyramidal power structures where one person alone ends up having the final say. In Black spaces, I see something different.[321] There is always shared support in advocating for each other because we know the space we hold in society. We know to have each other's backs. Although this may be a surface-level connection, it is a deconstruction of the competition and scarcity mentality that America's capitalistic model continues. By choosing natural birthing methods, we get to select the community that we want to aid us in the birthing process. We speak to our support networks, our fathers, cousins, sisters, brothers, friends along with our doulas, midwives, and doctors. Instead of utilizing our power to ignore the voices of others and to tackle having a child alone, we all work together to create plans that value the needs of the mother while hearing input from all parties. We all work together to make meals for the family after the child is born. We coordinate schedules so there is always family in the house to shed light and love and to help with the newborn baby. We change Mommy&Me to Mommy&WE.

Why We Choose Duolas

Throughout this paper, I have written to you about mistrust and medicine, how our voices are silenced, and the power of community. Here is where my paper begins to culminate to combine all of these foundational principles to show why we use doulas. This part of my paper will be more research dense as I explain why Black mothers, an identity I do not embody, have made this choice.

A doula is "a trained professional who provides support to moms before, during, and after childbirth."[322] There is an increasing trend of Black mothers using doulas and even a nonprofit organization in Oregon called Black Parent Initiative "that matches Black women with Black doulas in hopes of improving their odds

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[320] *Ibid*: 88.

[321] I also want to note that the Black community is still subject to patriarchal constructions of power where the "man of the house" ends up being the final say so, however, this is not the focus of my paper so I will not continue to delve into that.

[322] Katie Kindelan, "Black Women Turn to Doulas as Maternal Mortality Crisis Deepens," *Good Morning America* (2022), https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/wellness/story/black-women-turn-doulas-maternal-mortality-crisis-deepens-76896108.

during pregnancy and delivery."[323] I utilize this quote to show how the support of doulas is a necessity. The Black maternal mortality rate is a crisis. Having a doula does not eliminate this crisis, but it does help to address it. Tracie Collins, CEO of the National Black Doulas Association, says, "Black women hire doulas because they want to make sure that they live (...) It's not a status quo for us."[324] We choose doulas to survive. We create a team that helps us beat the odds stacked against us.

Think about how important a doula is for a first-time mother who is unfamiliar with the experience of having a child. Embarking on a journey where you are unfamiliar with the twists and turns ahead is terrifying. Because of the greatness of the unknown, you are forced to rely on the medical system and the people said to help you. You do as you are told, and you trust their words, their course of action, and let them do what doctors do. The fear never subsides, but when we have a doula we now have a supportive friend who is "an extra layer of support where [Black mothers are] able to ask more questions about their birthing experience and explore all measures to ensure a healthy outcome."[325] We are able to feel some sense of tranquility. I think of a doula as a really good best friend. One of those best friends where just being around them grounds you. They are a breath of fresh air. That feeling of spilling out what's been overflowing in your mind and having them help to wipe it up is beautiful. Even if they do not solve the problem, them being there to help is the most powerful thing they can do. We choose doulas because they hear us.

We choose doulas because they support us.

We choose doulas because they help us

Live.

An Ideal World

Some may argue that within this paper I propose choosing a doula as an accessible option when indeed it is not, but here is where I address these concerns. In an ideal world, having a doula would be accessible for everyone, but that is simply not the case. Doulas are expensive and "can cost upwards of $1,000 per birth" so access to doulas is not equal even despite attempts to have doulas funded by more insurance plans.[326] Comparatively, having a child at a hospital with health insurance is on average $2,854, yet without insurance, the average cost is $18,865, with vaginal delivery averaging $14,768 and Cesarean averaging $26,280.[327] You and I have both learned about the importance of doulas for Black mothers, yet this

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[323] *Ibid*: 1.

[324] *Ibid*.

[325] *Ibid*.

[326] *Ibid*.

[327] Elizabeth Rivelli, "How Much Does It Cost to Have a Baby? 2023 Averages – Forbes Advisor," *www.forbes.com* (2023), https://www.forbes.com/advisor/health-insurance/average-childbirth-cost/#:~:text=How%20Much%20Should%20You%20Expect.

ends up being a luxury and privilege that divides the community. In an ideal world, mothers would have the option to choose doulas for no cost. This would make it more equitable as there would be greater access to utilizing Black doulas that make Black mothers feel supported. It would be unrealistic to say that having a doula will solve the maternal mortality crisis, but it will certainly work to address it. As doulas become more popular, I can only hope that birthing centers become more popular and more affordable. As the Black community continues to prioritize and advocate for Black mothers, programs that work to increase the number of Black doulas and match them with Black mothers will increase. As we congregate together and share, we continue to resist American models of medicine. We work together, so that is never just Mommy and Me but instead we make sure that it will always be

Mommy and We.

Postface

I want to write a brief postface to say thank you to my sister for being a guide and inspiration for this paper, whether she knows it or not. I could not have written this paper without the help of my peers and professors who guided me along the way and taught me how to find myself within my writing. Finally, I would like to thank the editors of this journal for allowing me to have this piece be my first—and hopefully not last—published work and for providing me with guidance to create the paper that stands before you today. Thank you. I cannot wait for the day that I get to meet my nephew and witness the beauty of love and liberation.

What a beautiful thing it is to be alive. But what a beautiful thing that I get to be a part of

Mommy

Me

&

We

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Development of Southern Interracial Marriage and Divorce: Why Our Children are Code-Switching

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She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking.[328]

Introduction

For the sake of this paper, and out of respect, I refer to my father as Frank and my mother as Esme. I love them both and appreciate their efforts as parents, but this paper is necessary as a means to understanding my childhood. I write from an outside perspective, looking in on my family and the ways in which our experience shapes a new understanding of interracial code-switching.

Esme is White, with a Southern American and Jordanian background, possessing eyes commonly mistaken for the ocean with their persistence and unwavering beauty. So it would be no surprise that she married Frank, a beautiful Black man who grew up ten feet away from the ocean. Their love cascaded over seas of cheating and lies until the shore drew back revealing the inevitable: divorce. They raised three beautiful children, while he did his best to be in the life of his other son, with his first other woman. These children grew up in a home of differing tells, ticks, and tools that allowed them to travel back and forth across spaces. They didn't know why the respect they gave their father looked so different than the respect they gave their mother. It wasn't because he was angry and irrational and her more calm and stable—it was because he was Black and she was White. While this may seem to be a controversial statement, it's true—at least of my own lived experience. The divorce is not what drew these differences between them and the children, it's what highlighted them. The systems in which my father grew up in were not the same societal holdbacks that my mother had to face. In this paper, I dive into Southern interracial marriages, and more particularly of divorce. I discuss how their children have learned to code-switch amongst their own family, even and especially while in the same conversation. I pull the blinds back from the fear of the conversation to explain this: interracial children of divorce are more empathetic and kind as a result of a confusing upbringing.

[328] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 82.

Family History

I am focusing on the aspect of code-switching amongst mixed-race children. The specific mixed-race children I am dissecting are of Frank and Esme's children. The paper will hold the specificity of a case study with the emotion of a biography. I will shift from a third-person point of view, to a first-person point of view, and back again. It is crucial for a better understanding of what their children have gone through, are going through, and what they will continue to go through. By explaining the history of Frank and Esme, there is a perspective shift of the range of emotions that transfer into a child's interactions with their parents. The natural developments that occur as a result pour into multiple aspects of how they grow up and find their voice.

Despite the fact that Frank and Esme were married for 16 years, the concept of their marriage was still fairly new. The Supreme Court case, Loving v. Virginia legalized interracial marriage in 1967, only 3 years before Frank was born. Only barely in his lifetime was the option for his marriage allowed. It is not to be skewed that this court decision affected Frank and Esme's perception of love, or that they were rebellious people. It is to be understood that the nuance of the conversation we are about to have is new. It hasn't been truly studied because the children of—legal—interracial couples are still fairly young. They still have very new and very real experiences that are likely not to be understood for a few generations. Additionally, Frank and Esme were both the first to marry interracially in their families. Therefore, their children were not only passing between confusing spaces in their households but at all times amongst family and friends. They had to learn for themselves how to cross back and forth from what they learned from their parents and what they had to learn for themselves. Pulling from their family history allowed for a better chance to understand where they came from and a chance to know where they are going.

Frank and Esme's childhoods must also be understood if we are to continue our conversation. While tedious, it is vital. We would not be able to understand how their children behave if we don't understand why and how they behave first and foremost. We will start with Esme. Esme's understanding of family started before her own even began. Her devout Christian mother met her Muslim, soccer-playing father at the University of Michigan, where they hit it off and started to make plans for marriage, children, and a future. Shortly after their marriage, and their road trip across America for a honeymoon, they moved to Jordan—his homeland. They had two beautiful girls, Esme and her sister. In Jordan, they could've been perceived to have it all: money, maids, and leisure. But there was something missing—joy. Esme's mother wasn't happy. She wasn't able to practice her religion that had gotten her through so much, and she couldn't support herself in the way she could in America. For these reasons, and many more, she divorced him and moved herself and the girls back to the States. The relevancy in this resides in the fact that this was one of four of Esme's mother's divorces. All of these marriages

were for various reasons, some more traumatizing than others. Nonetheless, Esme dealt with a lifetime of a longing for a father that was in another country. She often described to her children how lucky they were to have a father at home because she spent countless nights looking to the sky and the stars hoping that her father was looking at them too. Having parents of different religions and ethnicities were likely to have shaped Esme in positive ways, for she became more understanding of others unlike her.

Unlike Esme, Frank did not have divorced parents—but by circumstance only, because they should have been. Frank's parents have a seventh and eighth grade education respectively. When they met, his mother was eighteen, already had a child, and had another on the way. Their marriage was one of necessity. It was a chance for redemption for the bastard children already circulating. They have five children together, Frank being the youngest and the only boy. Overall, Frank’s father has around twenty-five illegitimate children with countless women. It could be more, but it's definitely not less. Frank’s childhood was barraged with coming out stories of baby mothers, and new half siblings. So, it should be a shock to no one that the environment he grew up in shaped his perception of what it meant to have a family and honor a marriage. The relevancy in this lies in the way that his parents did not have a divorce. But, because he grew up believing that it was a man’s God-given right to do as he pleases, he thought he could do the same. As his children were predestined for an already difficult life being interracial, his decisions of how to treat his family allowed for the concept of code-switching and its practice to grow dramatically and exponentially.

When Frank and Esme met and began to date, Frank decided that one just wasn’t enough. If you’re asking one what, I mean one child. He got both Esme and another woman pregnant at the same time. Two children, born only three weeks apart. This is not to slander Frank for his decisions or paint him to be the bad guy—it is to show that he is a victim of circumstance and his actions are of a generational cycle that plague those who do not make the effort to break it. Frank was active in the life of his and Esme’s daughter, thankfully. Four years later, the young daughter grew older and, with another child on the way, Esme sanctioned an ultimatum. She said, “Either marry me, or we’re leaving.” They married. It led to a marriage tormented by lack of opportunity, many challenges, and scandals covered in order to protect reputations.

The history is there to show that divorce runs rampant in my family. Even though Frank’s parents were not divorced, they should have been. Frank and Esme’s marriage therefore are a culmination of the things that happened before them. As a reader, I expect you to recognize this and remember that children do the best they can with what they are given. To be able to come out of circumstances joyous, kind, and community oriented is to show strength and humility.

Definitions

In my personal experience, code-switching is one of the immediate developments that stems from having interracial parents. Code-switching can be described as "the practice of changing between languages when you are speaking."[329] I speak much more specifically of interracial children between children of one Black parent and one White parent. I will point out a few important definitions. I say Black because to say African-American is to imply that one parent is physically from the country of Africa. Additionally, I have a Westernized lens because that is what I know. I speak of my personal experience, and through my own use of story-telling, so it would not be correct for me to attempt to speak from another lens while I try to prove something of my lived experience. Additionally, this may not apply to multiple points of views or experiences. I understand there will be aspects that are missing that could be added with the addition of differing variations of ethnicities. There is a chance for constant updates, reminders, and additional information that can be added at any time.

Learning to Code-Switch

Frank and Esme are on a road trip and while Frank is driving, Esme has the radio controls. He requests Run DMC, and she puts on Dixie Chicks to follow. Neither know each other's song, but their children know and learn both. Although they may not realize it, the children are already learning elements of how to code-switch between parents. So often with code-switching you don't even realize you're doing it. You think you're just listening to music. You think you're just being yourself. You don't realize that being yourself is actually a multitude of people and personalities inside of you that is creating this one person who can carry themselves across borders and conversations. Because you don't grow up listening to one kind of music, you learn what is put in front of you. While Esme is listening to 90's country, Frank is blasting 80's hip-hop. You're insatiable in the car—knowing every song. I use music as an example to put it very simply at first. I will delve into a bit more nuance later, so I want it to be understood how code-switching can be done in even the simplest of ways.

Continuing on in another example, one of the major aspects that separated Esme and Frank was their use of everyday language. While Frank held a very central Southern tone and attitude in his day to day life, Esme's language was centered on her international upbringing. It was expected by Frank that there was a "Yes Sir" that followed any direction, command, or comment. If not, it was as though you were purposefully being disrespectful. In Esme's case, if you were trying to be especially respectful or maybe even funny she would receive a "Yes Ma'am," but it was not always necessary. This very simple example is one of the ways how their language and location divide was highlighted to their kids. Even though the children are not learning how to speak different languages, they are

[329] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): s.v. "Code-Switching."

learning how to change their tone, inflection, and diction as a result of who they are speaking to. It's as if they were learning two different dialects within the same language without meaning to.

Gloria Anzaldúa did a lot of work describing the "Mestiza Consciousness," and while her work centered greatly around having multiple ethnicities and having true language barriers, it is still extremely applicable to the scenario here of Frank and Esme's children. She describes how "[t]he ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness."[330]

I grew up constantly and consistently confused. When I was five years old I had convinced myself that my grandmother and I both had pink skin. Realistically, I was Brown and she was White, but I was so confused as to why I didn't match anyone else in the world around me that I had to make up a scenario where I fit in. I thrived in my make believe place where I was pink and no one could reach me. I didn't have to try to fit in other people's boxes because no one could even see mine. It was beautiful, but more than anything it was comfortable. I was invincible. Months after I had decided I was pink, I had a yearly doctor's appointment. I paraded in, still secluded in my safe space. I got weighed, measured, and prodded until it was time to wait for the doctor. All dressed up in my oversized hospital gown, I hopped on the patient table ready for the doctor to tell me I could go back home. Suddenly, I looked over to the mirror directly to the right of the patient table and noticed my true skin color for the first time. My eyes enlarged, my skin recoiled —I felt sick and uneasy. I screamed out, asking for my pink skin back, my safety, my comfort. A multitude of bricks hit me. Somehow, with no knowledge of the world, I knew that I was no longer safe. I knew that the life ahead of me was one I wasn't prepared for. My beautiful, comfortable pink skin diminished—leaving me vulnerable.

There has not been a day since where I have not been plagued with what Anzaldúa describes as "psychic restlessness."[331] I spend my days convincing myself that my Brown, not pink, skin is beautiful. At times, I don't know who I am. Because I don't always know what I make of myself, it's somewhat easier to turn to others and let them decide for me. It seems as though because others cannot place me nicely and neatly into a box, they think they are afforded an opinion about my every move. They try to decide who I date, what music I listen to, what food I eat, where I shop, how I spend my free time..everything is up for grabs according to the world around me. I have been pulled into a million directions while begging to be released back into my pink skin. I have screamed and fought for my place to exist directly in the middle of the two worlds that seem to both want me, and yet want nothing to do with me at all.

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[330] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 78

[331] *Ibid.*

Despite the fact that I didn't always feel welcome, I have friends of all races, ethnicities, and differences. I was able to connect with others because I had learned so many different tools having parents that were not similar. I could pick out pieces of a conversation that were relevant to something I knew and ensure that I had created a connection with someone. I have watched my siblings do the same thing. They can connect with anyone, at any time. When you have mixed-race parents, you learn how to do this conversationally at any point. Even if they don't know what the other is talking about, you have the ability to pick apart parts of the conversation that are relevant to you. It creates a safety net in your home and out in the world. You are never left wondering if you aren't enough because you fit perfectly situated in the middle. Anzaldúa writes, "She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else."[332] The plural personality she discusses is one I know much about. I feel a constant split down the middle in terms of how I interact and move around in the world. I don't have the option of adhering to one specific part of myself and not clinging on for dear life to the other parts. I can't choose which parts of me to protect from the world. I am, as she describes, nothing rejected and nothing abandoned. Because so many parts of myself don't fit well in a box, I do have to sustain contradictions. I can listen to Shania Twain and Tupac. I can ebb and flow into spaces despite the fact that it might make others uncomfortable. Most importantly, I create a life where I cross linguistic borders, where I make my presence one of joy, one of connection, and one of community.

Code-Switching After Divorce

I never speak of Frank and Esme's difference in linguistic choices to be of a negative connotation. I choose to view the situation for what it is: circumstance. It was not anyone's active decision that they were raised differently, or that the way that they were raised affects the way they raised their children. Fortunately, Frank and Esme divorced. Their children were freed from the shackles of their unhappy marriage. Unfortunately, this meant that their "safe space," where their language choices were not guarded, was taken away. Now, they were right back to every other environment: school, work, friendships, where they had to filter themselves and become versions of themselves that were able to translate across borders. When I discuss borders, truthfully, I mean the metaphorical ones. They are the lines that are drawn between different groups of people. Despite the fact that segregation legally ended only 58 years ago with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, people still tend to naturally segregate themselves. (For additional reference, Frank is only 52). It is not to have a reflection on civil rights; all I'm saying is that people group themselves together based on like-minded or similar attributes whether this be race, gender, or sexuality. When you grow up in a non-segregated home, where

[332] *Ibid*: 79

generally divided races are together, you envision that to be what the outside world is like as well. When that little slice of heaven is destroyed, it is a rude awakening into the future that awaits. Now, not only are you having to code-switch among strangers, you continuously have to do it with your parents.

It can be difficult because you've never done it before. You have never had to make the active decision at a specific time that you're going to change yourself. Every other week you find yourself dropped off at the next parent's house, and you turn on the language choices you have associated with them. You recognize that the filters need to be changed, cleaned, and transferred. At some point, you come to terms with the filters and you befriend them. You take the situation as it was handed to you and decide to turn it into something positive.
Anzaldúa presents a few points of relevancy here. She says,

> She can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence (...) that focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separate pieces merely come together (...) the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of it's severed part (...) a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, it's energy comes from a continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.[333]

As I've said, and as Gloria Anzaldúa points out, there comes a point when you, as the middle, come face to face with your differences. For example, growing up, I knew the differences in how my parents perceived the police. It was evident in our conversations, our interactions, and our intentions when coming into contact with them. I knew that my father had every right to fear the police, and I knew my mother had every right to fear them because of us and because of him. Yet, not because of herself. Her skin color was not a threat whereas ours was.

To break down Anzaldúa's work even further, she talks about an ambivalence (the state of having mixed feelings) and how one is jarred out of it by an intense, painful, and emotional moment.[334] My ambivalence that was destroyed came about due to a painful and emotional event that was created as a result of finally understanding the differences that had affected me my whole life. During my parents divorce, emotions were heightened and anger ran inextricably rampant. One night, Frank decided Esme was cheating on him. The irony, if you recall his first son, with his first other woman. He threw open the doors to their bedroom, screamed at her, and decided that the solution was to take her phone.

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[333] *Ibid*: 80

[334] *Ibid.*

Besides, by virtue of the patriarchy, if that was her method of cheating, it was obviously his right to take whatever action he deemed necessary. He was the man of the house. Within seconds, their argument blew up—dragging the kids into it. Their son, their gentle, loving, considerate son, was between them. He was crying, tears streaming down his face while he begged them to stop. Their dog, who would never typically hurt someone, got so riled up by the fighting and the pushing that she lunged at whoever wasn't her master—which was Esme. The sudden bite led Esme into further justified fear. At that point, Frank left, leaving behind his family while holding onto the property he so desperately decided it was his.

This moment is where code-switching was necessary and vital for calming the situation. Esme called the police on Frank. He had taken her property, and she felt unsafe in her own home. She knew that if she didn't call for protection, she was left unarmed and unsafe. I knew that calling the police on my dad meant he was not safe, but it would make my mom feel safer. I knew that him getting caught would likely lead to an arrest and due to recent police brutality—that scared me more than my mothers desperation. I called him, begged him to come home, and to not leave his family. I begged him not to step out anymore than he already had, even though I didn't feel safe either. This is why code-switching is relevant and important. No matter what I was feeling I knew that when I was talking to my mom, I had to tell her she made the right decision. But when I talked to my dad, I had to remind him he wasn't safe either. Choices about how I was going to speak to both, and at times —neither—helped me to see that I was forever going to be stuck in the middle. I was stuck because of my skin color. I was stuck because of my parents' failed marriage. I was stuck because of circumstances. I had to use language to adapt that day more than I ever had before.

My own mestiza consciousness was born that day. At 19, I finally found my voice. It wasn't one that I got to spend my days developing. I didn't get to journal and meditate on who I was and how I wanted to be perceived in the world. I had a moment, and a split second decision, to decide what I was going to stand for and how I was going to do it. I settled into my place of being in the middle, and I successfully transferred my language back and forth, back and forth. I was operating out of fear, out of desire, but most importantly—out of love. I had to base each interaction on love. No matter what I was feeling for Frank, I had to remind myself that the love I had for him transcended the current obstacle. That is my third element that Anzaldúa so eloquently explained. The third element I lean into for my mestiza consciousness is love. Even though I knew what the circumstance was and the fact that I had the full autonomy to take a side, I had, instead, an overwhelming chance of love for both parents. I could use my code-switching ability in order to make the situation a safer space for myself and my family.

Anzaldúa wrote, and I repeat it again because I believe it to be such a pivotal and important part of the development of understanding, "a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes

from a continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm."[335]

The continual creative motion I believe her to be discussing is the thing that I perceive to be code-switching. It is constantly and consistently painful to feel as though you don't have a voice because you are playing into everyone else's. But, even though you might know who you are—you are breaking down the barriers of societal expectations. You don't fit nice and neat into a box, and therefore you create a space that is more welcoming. You are able to connect with all people regardless of difference. And when you have these more traumatizing, emotional experiences, you also understand the nuance of pain. You turn that into joy. You choose joy. You see how people can be so mean, and so you must decide to be the light when most are darkness.

Anzaldúa furthermore writes, "I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings."[336] For this, I use Frank and Esme's youngest daughter as an example. Rainey came out of the womb a burst of light. She spreads joy to anything she touches—she is always dancing, always smiling and continuously jubilant. Of course, with such high high's there are low low's. For Rainey, when she experiences sadness, she feels it in every particle of her being. She cries with her whole body; it's as if every emotion is magnified to its fullest extent. To combat these feelings, to mellow them, she dances. She dances BIG and she dances LOUD. She dances with every fiber of her being, because without an outlet the feelings would just be too much to bear.

I believe that this is a result of being the final culmination of Frank and Esme's marriage. She got the last stroke of love, the final push for illicit happiness. It dove into her being, into her creation, and therefore she entered this world ready and willing to spread love. It was as if her life plan was decided before she even touched the Earth. For Rainey, code-switching isn't necessary. She seems to actively choose to speak to everyone the same. She does not censor herself. I mean, she has no time in between her dance routines. She pushes other people's feelings to the side as she kneads, unites, and joins the lightness and darkness of others. It is her uninterrupted form of giving new meaning to the world. Because of how deeply she feels, she knows the nuance in which meanness can spread into pain—and so she chooses honesty as a form of kindness. Rainey once described dance as her therapy. It is brilliant and powerful that a child may know what it means to heal.

Rainey was born with her Mestiza Consciousness. No one had to explain to her how to be herself. She was not provided with a traumatic and emotionally

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[335] *Ibid.*

[336] *Ibid*: 81

jarring event that would affect her. As another point of reference, the night of the police incident—she had pink eye in both eyes, a cold, and a dosage of sleep medicine. It was as if there were angels watching and protecting, ensuring her base of love was to be protected. She is simply able to bring the best aspects of her circumstance forward and allow the chance to surround herself with those that love and appreciate her. She was able to find dance which could show the world all the words she could not say. Her refusal to code-switch showcases the Mestiza Consciousness that lives within all interracial children and their ability to create love out of any dark situation.

Feminist Issue

As I live and breathe as a feminist author, I believe this to be a feminist experience. Feminists battle for their whole lives for the chance to be seen, heard, and equal. Maria Lugones, feminist philosopher, and Elizabeth V. Spelman, philosopher, wrote: "When we are in your world many times you remake us in your own image, although sometimes you clearly and explicitly acknowledge that we are not wholly there in our being with you. When we are in your world and learn its ways."[337] I explained how, as an interracial child, your sense of self is confusing. You are pulled in different directions by parents, peers, and events. All the while you are shape shifting and fitting yourself into spaces that attempt to confine you. You code-switch as a mechanism of protection. For fear of being other-ed you learn how to converse with any and everyone. This is similar to the ways in which women have congealed themselves to fit in a patriarchal society. We have been tasked with the roles of mother, wife, and sister. We have accepted these roles and played our part properly in order to ensure that we can keep our status. We want to be accepted as women, proper women, and not be challenged insofar as to have our title as woman revoked.

As Lugones and Spelman highlight, there is an ability to have one's image remade without being fully accepted in systems that create the image in the first place. Women, like interracial children, are given an image they are expected to recreate. For an interracial child, this may look like whichever parent or friend they are around at any given moment. For women, this may be the image that has to be created any time they step into a new role. The same woman she is at work may not be the same woman she is at home, may not be the same woman she is alone. For this, I present a unique example. The first child I mentioned, with the first other woman, turned out to be a spectacular, distinctive person. They experience the world through many perspectives as an interracial child, an adopted person, and a recipient of Aspergers. When we were still children, he would occasionally come over and spend time with us, more so that he could spend time with Frank or as he

[337] Elizabeth V. Spelman and María Lugones, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for the 'Woman's Voice'" in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 4th ed., eds. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2013): 573–575.

called him Mr. Dad. Frank being a component of a patriarchal, hegemonic society that has accepted him for everything he is—got angry because my brother wore nail polish on his toes when he came to our home. It did not fit into his standards of what a “man” should be, and so he thought it his right to make demands. It was, “take it off, wear socks, or leave.” Because my brother knew who he was and was comfortable in his skin, he did not want to take it off. His adoptive parents loved him and accepted him for who he was. There was no need to remove any part of himself that made him happy. The next demand, “wear socks” was not applicable either. The aspergers made it so his sensory issues were very real, and socks were something he could not handle. It is no fault of his own—nor should it have been an expectation that he remove himself from an integral part of himself in order to please someone else's expectations of him. As a result, he left.

My brother chose his Mestiza Consciousness at that point. His emotionally jarring event left him vulnerable and at a time where he had to make a distinct decision. And he *did*.

Women have these emotionally charged, incoherent experiences everyday. Every time we are cat-called we are subjected to being only a body. When we are raped we are denied our personhood. When we are left alone with our children, when we are left alone without children, when we are left alone—we crave this ability to code-switch and to make the best we can of any situation. We strive for the opportunity to create love out of darkness, and present light to a dimming world.

Conclusion

All in all, I have poured my heart out to you. I have struggled with the vulnerability aspect of this paper. I thought this would be easy—I thought I could tell my story simply and quickly. But, it was difficult. I never knew when to start and when to finish. I didn’t know how to get across what I wanted to say. But, I wanted to write this because I wanted other people like me to know that they are not alone. I wanted to show that my experience is one worth sharing and one worth reading about.

The vulnerability that I have expressed is a direct result of the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Her ability to put into words what I feel is extraordinary. She greatly influenced my choice for my topic and the way that I approached my explanations. Additionally, I wanted you as a reader to see that even if a circumstance is not explicit, there are constant underlying meanings. Even those who may seem strong are battling internal battles. From Frank, to Esme, to Rainey, and to myself—we all have carried the weight of what our lives have looked like. We are impacted by choices that were made before we were even born. We adapt as people because we have to. I hope you take away code-switching as a lesson. I hope you understand that it is protection, and it is love. By forming one’s greatest insecurity into a strength, you prove that the impossible is possible. You prove to yourself that you are more kind, compassionate, and caring than you’ll ever know.

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Sex in the Bible: A Poetic Female Retelling

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I'm not supposed to be here.
I'm the midrash mansplained by rabbis who
contradict their own writing—and so they made me,
A Demon
It's kind of badass when you think about it. At least it's better than being a
slave girl who gets raped girl who gets
cut up, thrown away with no name girl.[338]
I was not supposed to be in your narrative; but, because of a mistake, they went
back to first base and pitched a prequel that makes Genesis look like a sad sequel
and so, I'm alive.
and still, I'm alive.
Since He, for some reason, made woman twice[339]
Eve doesn't get to give you advice
as the first female embodiment of vice.
I'm the one who stole the show before it even began
and have been watching you whores and widows and witches and womb-wasted wenches
from my box seat, throwing popcorn at the stage with every fragile turn of a page.
Because this story doesn't belong to us;
and neither do our thoughts, and neither do our bodies.
As the malevolent maiden stuck within the margins of midrash,
I don't like the way this story looks on paper.
That's why they forced me in while writing me out; I was too loud
whenever I took pity on the victims of rape culture
The slave girls, Zilpah and Bilhah. I pitied Hagar
she had to sleep with a man
who was eighty-six years old, and I[340]

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[338] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). (Judges 19:29).

[339] "And God created man in His image… male and female He created them" (Gen:1:27); "And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman…from man was she taken." *Ibid.* (Gen. 2:22-23).

[340] *Ibid.* (Gen. 16: 16)

twenty two, I think
no one thought to write down my birthday
but in a dream, a bird told me I'd hardly seen twenty suns
when Sarai handed me over
I thought I would die.
I screamed the whole time. Each time, every time
I wanted to die, and so I asked God Why—
In the end, they threw me out
but then He Promised me and my Ishmael the world
for carrying on Abram's line.[341]
But I don't give a damn about Him;
He never gave a damn about me.
I am but the first storybound
slavegirl used as a surrogate sans consent;
Take the sororal competition between Rachel and
Leah, the one without beauty, the one without love,
God opened her womb[342]
And yet I'm still unloved.
I had to pay my sister in mandrakes just to take my husband—our husband— to bed.
I remember the first time,[343]
I walked down the hallway past prayers and empty tables
the Feast gone, the Fruit, Eaten.
Daddy shoved me in a room before I could think lights out//knives out
I didn't know until he breathed Rachel in my ear
and I realized the wrong that was happening
because this wasn't the first time Daddy shoved me into a stranger's bed
I used to block it out, the smell like rotting meat
I stopped praying for a while, stopped feeling
But with Jacob, he kissed my
chest and told me he Loved me in private for so long
and getting swallowed up in all that Love, even when it doesn't belong to you
he couldn't tell the difference between us under the dark sky and red wine—
I didn't know what to think or feel, awakened by a strange fever, held by the grip of Guilt
//I'm sorry//I'm not sorry//I'm sorry//
The next day he awoke beside me—a sight for sore eyes
worked seven more years just to

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[341] "Hagar bore a son to Abram." *Ibid.* (Gen. 16:15)

[342] *Ibid.* (Gen.29:31)

[343] *Ibid.* (Gen. 30:14-16)

fuck my sister, who's still bitter that Daddy shoved *me* in that room when I[344]
wasn't even ready in the first place.
Not that it mattered; he wouldn't've asked me if I wanted to anyways[345]
no one would. But I'm a mother. I should be glad and thank God. I'm a mother with a family.[346]
What's a family without love?

Everything, dear sister.
I am no one until I've made someone
even if they aren't truly mine
I feel guilty, I do, I think about
the girls I send to consort with him under my name, I imagine them lying[347]
stiff beneath his body, wrinkled and sweaty
he's getting old, you know
but if not me, then maybe God can fulfill them[348]
And you don't think I'm pissed with Dad too? I loved him once, both of them,
but that was before we were treated like cattle—and now,
Now, I am known for a trait that only fades with time,
I'll lose my hold on the desire I once kindled so easily in my youth
and he'll turn his favor to the one who gave him children, a family, a legacy[349]
What's love without a family?

Why's sex always got to do with marriage and babies?
Maybe it has nothing to do with that at all;
just ask Delilah, she reinvented

knowing someone in the Biblical sense, if you know what I mean$$$ If you read my story and
didn't know how to interpret it, just take it as is, baby, because that's how it was, baby, alright?
¡¡BDSM!! My story ain't poetry, don't you dare make me into no allegory+++Don't make no

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[344] *Ibid.* (Gen. 29:27-28)

[345] Sandie Gravett, "Reading 'Rape' in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 3 (2004): 279-299.

[346] Yafeh-Deigh discusses the ancient Israeli belief of "a woman's deep-seated desire is to be blessed with children" and the association of womanhood with motherhood. Alice Yafeh-Deigh, "Children, Motherhood, and the Social Death of Childless Women: The Social and Theological Construction of Infertility in the Hebrew Bible and in Cameroon," *Biblical Interpretation* 28, 5 (2020): 612.

[347] "Consort with her (...) through her I too may have children." Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*. (Gen. 30:3)

[348] Yafeh-Deigh describes reproduction as a blessing necessary for God to bestow upon a woman. Yafeh-Deigh, "Children, Motherhood, and the Social Death of Childless Women."

[349] *Ibid:* 61.

metaphor out of it@Samson's k¡nky as hell and just begged me to t¡e him down; so I did%[350]
When he was looking, I used rope, and when he wasn't###
How could I know anyone was looking? Please don't
please don't assume I was using I couldn't've known
The only reason I went, I—
I shouldn't say it out loud they might overhear and I'm afraid
You can't say no to a King[351]
and and I know that
everyone knows this or at least it's generally understand
and yet some people still find me promiscuous
but it wasn't really a choice it was an order, a command[352]
and if I didn't go, something worse might've happened
and so when he looked over, I pretended to be pleased, utterly enamored
afraid of what might happen otherwise
and then the baby came creeping inside and
I had to tell him as soon as I knew before he accused me of being a harlot[353]
But then something bad did happen—
When he couldn't convince Uriah to come[354]
He sent him back to the
and now he's because of me.
And now I don't there's no one else I whose baby
there's no way out other than through.
I'm scared of the man who calls me Queen.
He strokes my hair at night with a calloused hand,
I stare at the ceiling, wishing the damned baby had died instead of him
died while still inside
instead of tasting life just to abandon me too[355]

They wished they were dead; but that would be too merciful.
Instead, He forces them to bed, turns their bodies into lead until their sheets run red
but when she will not wed, His wet wishes waste away like wine in womanly wombs
And he Defiles her.
God, the male colonizer
Whipping Widows like Beasts, but when Zion herself speaks:

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[350] Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible.* (Judges 16:7-17)

[351] Gravett questions definitions of rape in the Biblical context where women are possessions of male households, suggesting that a woman's body is never own to give away. Gravett, "Reading 'Rape.'"

[352] Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*. (2 Sam 11:4)

[353] *Ibid*. (2 Sam 11:5)

[354] *Ibid*. (2 Sam 11:9)

[355] *Ibid*. (2 Sam 12:18)

Mercy, have mercy, have
You are my Lord, you are my Ruler, my Conqueror my God my[356]
Please I beg you Stop
I know the wrong I have committed, I'm sorry, I'm sorry
Have mercy, please please
You're choking me you're
and I can't breathe my neck—*whiplash*—your hands[357]
You're hurting me, it hurts
*Stairs*one two**crack***one two three****
You're right You, you're right I was unfaithful I repent, have mercy have
*Sizzle*Iron*like Fire into my bones*[358]
Mercy please my clothes nothing more to burn
I'm sorry I fell into Temptation[359]
Just don't let them see. Please, just don't, don't[360]
not my daughters, not Judah she's[361]
sleeping. i was sleeping when he told me to
get out of bed, get out of bed, pjs on, get out of bed and on your knees, and it hurt and i saw mommy crying and i dont know why she lets the bad man stay in her bed[362]
i cant crawl into her bed anymore when i have bad dreams
and he hurts me when i spill his drink because the mug is too heavy to carry and
i wish he would stop the games, i dont like the games
ready or not here i come
but i dont want to play anymore because whenever he finds israel
I told him to get his hands off of me. Get his filthy hands off of me because I am not his daughter
I am nothing to him, he's not even my Father
He told me I was a whore for dressing like this
I guess it was time to pay. I guess it was time to

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[356] In regard to the feminized cities, God is the male abuser (father, husband, love). Rachel F. Magdalene, "Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses and the Ultimate Tests of Terror: A Study of the Language of Divine Sexual Abuse in the Prophetic Corpus" in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 326-352.

[357] "Lashed tight by His hand; Imposed upon my neck." Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*. (Lam 1:14)

[358] "He sent a fire/Down into my bones." *Ibid*. (Lam 1:14)

[359] Daughter Zion represents the other God(s) with whom the Israelittes were whoring.

[360] God abuses female characters through stripping and public embarrassment. Magdalene, "A Study of the Language of Divine Sexual Abuse."

[361] Floyd discusses how the female personification of cities could be interpreted in different roles related to God, including wife and daughter. Michael H. Floyd, "Welcome Back, Daughter of Zion!" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2008): 484-504.

[362] "The Lord has trodden/Fair Maiden Judah./For these things do I weep." Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*. (Lam 1:15-16)

Get your fucking hands off of me or I Judah, get up. Stop shaking your head, come on,
come on, *Mom*
I don't care what Mom says, we're leaving
Get the fuck off of me—*Mom!*
Don't you dare touch me, don't you fucking

We've ruined her, haven't we?[363]
Defiling her stories for entertainment and
God-forsaken lessons on "morality"
These stories exhaust me; they make me sad
And I know what you're thinking: I'm not even supposed to be here.
I'm the midrash mansplained by rabbis who contradict their own writing
I am writing myself out.
I am writing myself out of the narrative they forced me into
because I do not like the shape of its leather-bound spine,
or the contorted positions they put me in,
stretching me out until I'm so thin I'm see-through
In their world, I'm an unwomanly woman, the truth essence of absence
for their definition of the word does not include what I am;
So I must explain what I am not:
I am not expendable.
I am not unintelligible
I am not a dandelion, nor a demon
I am not cattle for feeding or fucking or breeding,
I am not an animal born for slaughter.
I am not a body for Adam's taking and remaking
I am not a mother just because you want me to be a mother.
I am not a woman by your definition—
Because I have a body. I have a mind. I have a future.
& I have a name.
I am a Woman.
I am Lilith.

[363] "And cry: 'We've ruined her!'" *Ibid.* (Lam 2:16)

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