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

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

Crossings and the Boundaries of Humanity

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

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

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

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

Bodies With/In History

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

² Agamben, “Introduction,” 6.

³ Agamben, “Introduction,” 10.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dis-Membering Bodies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹² Schaefer, “Introduction,” 9.

¹³ Hartman, “Preface,” xxxiii.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶ Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 78.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Re-Membering the Body or Bodies That Remember

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

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

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

²⁵ Wilderson, “The Narcissistic Slave,” 57.

²⁶ Hartman, “Preface,” xxx–xxxi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion of Articles

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

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

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

⁵⁵ Hartman, “Preface,” xxxi.

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

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

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

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

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

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