A Sick Archive: Reproductive Flesh in American Modernity

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Dedication

To the dead and disavowed, may we bear ever better witness.
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My parents.

Jack.
Abstract of Dissertation

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“A Sick Archive: Reproductive Flesh in American Modernity” traces the revolutionary potentiality of the sick femme in literary and filmic narratives of failure, suffering, and confinement from pre-Civil War U.S. to the present. I use the phrase “reproductive flesh” in this project to both index female conscription to biological reproduction and to signify for the viscerally abused and politically excluded racialized bodies that fuel the political and material economy of American modernity. In conceptualizing a “sick archive,” I riff on the lived material trace denoted by “[sic],” which suggests the reproducing scribe’s textual eruption onto the page. My dissertation develops “[sic]k” reproductive flesh as an analytic for reading crip embodiments and performative practices as a dynamic archive that registers, reproduces, and critically disrupts the textual fabric of the American cultural imaginary. In my primary texts, passing, autobiographical writing practice, self-harm and domestic violence, and instances of infant morbidity are all instantiations of embodied sick speech-acts of reproductive flesh. My readings of this sick archive show how the depersonalized and commodified femme *qua* reproductive flesh exerts critical agency from within a social script that would simultaneously objectify, pathologize, and consume her. This femme practice is revolutionary in the sense that her refused subject of modernity disrupts idealized structures of white heteropatriarchal domesticity and political economies. The revolution here begins with a close reading practice of attunement that these texts invite, toward a potential unraveling of lived time and space “as we know it.”

My readings track hybrid aesthetic production and communicative acts between reproductive flesh, the world of objects and commodities, and pathologizing discourses. I argue that such hybrid methodologies subvert and circumvent hierarchical political
grammars, and gesture toward a “crip,” non-normative “something else to be.” My first two chapters read pre-Civil War and early 20th century U.S. literary texts. Later chapters include contemporary South American and African diasporic films alongside U.S. literary texts from the late 20th century. I begin my dissertation with a consideration of the political work of haunting, and the difficult questions of the stakes of witnessing and transmission, as presented in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In chapter one, “A Study in [Sic] Passing: Birthing the Spectral Object,” I read the fatally failed racial and social passing of Joe Christmas and Lily Bart in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* as a willful citational critique of the sentence of social death. My second chapter, “The Shape of Her Hand: Revolutionary Textuality and [Sic] Autobiographical Praxis” explores hybrid tactics in autobiographical writing as embryonic articulations of resistant non-normative domesticities in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Chapter three, “Diagnostic Violence and Disavowal: Cutting Reproductive Flesh in *Vita* and *Corregidora,*” tracks private, familial trauma working in concert with biopolitical medical practice. I read discursively hybrid resulting sickness and injury in the stories of Ursa in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Catarina in João Biehl’s *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* and I argue that these stories reveal a targeted political and economic eugenic violence, which these women tactically subvert through poetry and the Blues. Chapter four, “Disorganizing American Grammars: Cultural Seeing, Toxic Consumption, and Revolutionary Aesthetics” examines morbid illustrations of consumption and materializations of the toxic effects of antiblackness in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything*. I argue that both texts deploy intentionally disorienting aesthetics, and embody what I call a “toxic futurity” that articulates a not-quite-articulate horizon of hope through
visceral witnessing. I close my dissertation with an reading of “Meat Patties,” a YouTube video circulated by the Free Alabama Movement in connection with a prison labor strike. I connect the film’s aesthetic invocation of the hunger strike to potent imaginative aspiration toward a crip political practice.
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Introduction:

Concepts

Visceral Sabotage and Unarticulated Dissent

The year is 1855. The location is Cincinnati, Ohio. A fugitive slave woman hides in a shed with her children. Her owner, who has been searching for her approaches with a search party. Just before they enter, she kills her infant daughter in an act of love and resistance. This act is shocking. It feels like a rupture of the natural order of things. It is also a citation of the sentence that awaited her daughter, had she grown up enslaved: At the same time as this act is caring, it presents a critical reflection of the brutality of slavery as a rupture of the natural order of things. In the necro-political, bio-capitalist economy determined by the logic of slaveholding, the Black woman, here both as mother and as infant daughter, is the depersonalized and degendered unit of reproductive flesh. She is the fungible human body that has the capacity to bring forth more human bodies and thus support this economy. The mother’s murderous act reproduces the deadly violence of slavery, condensed into a single act that at the same time – executed by the fugitive slave mother – deprives slaveholders of “goods” and “property.” This might be understood as an act of sabotage. The end result is separation of the child and the mother – a loss that is endemic in slavery; and the mother is cast as a savage – pathologized and written off, mad. This is a deeply significant and telling story and act of resistance. And yet it is one that is quite facilely subsumed into a discourse of pathologized and devalued difference. The ripples from it are contained; the rupture in the logic of a system of oppression is covered back over, and history moves on. Or does it, really?

The above scene, from Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel, *Beloved*, is a fictionalized account
of the notorious infanticide case by fugitive slave Margaret Garner in 1856. Morrison’s novel takes the shape of a fictionalized neo-slave narrative, and is an account of the haunting of 124, the house in which Sethe and her family settle by the infant whom Sethe posthumously named Beloved. Darieck Scott, in *Extravagant Abjection*, notes that Sethe’s is a strategy for responding to the demands of the moment, and to the tremendous pressures on her existence and on her very embodiment. As such, the structure of her logic is of a piece with the harsh structures of her social word, where sociality is governed by strict racial hierarchy and property law. (1)

My dissertation is a meditation on strategies like Sethe’s. On negotiations with harm in the name of survival and critique; on the resultant apparent harm that emerges from these tactical negotiations, which are at the same time “tools for carving out a space and habitation of survival” (3). Scott develops an epistemology of black abjection in the Black literary imagination through physical sensation and violent experience. My dissertation extends Scott’s project by attending to aesthetic negotiations that make felt or visible the felt experiences of abjection within the social script. I look at narratives and aesthetic tactics that enlist experimental textuality that simultaneously reproduces toxic conditions of existence and articulates protest, reproducing violence while gesturing toward “something else to be.”

My project centers the feminine and reproductive flesh, staying with the visceral experience and material aspects of the example of Sethe’s choice, with which Scott also begins his introduction, though his book dwells on abjection in relation to black masculinity. Following Audre Lorde (1984) and Grace Kyungwon Hong’s (2015) insistences on the importance of “difference” in social justice theory and practice, my textual selection draws on a greatly heterogeneous collection of texts, exploring revolutionary feminist, visceral textuality and practice from many angles. From the slave narrative (Harriet Jacobs) to the modernist poet (Gertrude Stein); from the anthropological study of abandoned patients


(João Biehl) to the prison labor strike video (FAM), I read for practices that can help us to reorient our thinking in order to reorient the world.¹

In these texts, I attend to the way in which a continuously harmful social script is the condition of legible emergence for the gendered and racialized subject. I illustrate how negotiations of self-fashioning and survival within the social script by necessity reproduce the harmful social script as a part of their vehicle for legibility. The texts I read reveal the violence that is sutured over by the dominant historical script, and thus are a vehicle of cultural critique in their very instantiation. They generate a bodily bearing witness and testament, not unlike Hortense Spillers’s figure of marked flesh that in part shapes – is “vestibular” to – modernity. I make no claim that these are readily available or legible textual operations. Rather, they are covert and hidden in part by the necessities of survival, and in part by violence that makes agency exercised by subaltern subjects illegible in dominant discourse.

Put another way, this dissertation is also about spectral witnessing. That is to say, my texts act in ways that are not unlike the haunting as a palpable, critical force that Avery Gordon and Sharon Patricia Holland have theorized.² My texts engage intimately with death and lifelessness as a part of their aesthetic praxis. Speaking from an ontology that the Afro-pessimists term “social death,” they enlist mute objects and surfaces as modes and vehicles for the fungible subject’s speech, whether verbal or not. The femicide-infanticide re-told in Beloved reproduces in the flesh the deathly violence of the institution of slavery and replicates the loss and ruptures of intimacy that slaveholders enacts upon the enslaved. The act also

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¹ As Tobin Siebers has put it in relation to disability aesthetics, “disability aesthetics embraces a different materialism of art” (544).
² And Michael Gill and Nirmala Erevelles have drawn it into analysis of disability and race in their recent article on Elsie and Henrietta Lacks in the African American Review Summer 2017 special issue on disability and race.
easily folds back into the pathologization of blackness that supports racial capitalist slaveholding. That is to say, it does not appear to disturb the deadly logic of slavery. An unarticulated – but not silent – voice of resistance, liminal to the elocuted surface of the text, dwelling, as “[sic]” does, after a reproduced citation that has a mistake or a flaw in it.

With etymological origins as a term of agreement, “[sic]” operates paradoxically as a typographical marker of error. Intended for use within a reproduced quotation in a written text, [sic] is defined as “a parenthetical insertion used in printing quotations or reported utterances to call attention to something anomalous or erroneous in the original, or to guard against the supposition of misquotation” (Oxford English Dictionary). Like a visual glitch in the midst of the thickness of uninterrupted script on a page, [sic] is often passed over as an invisible and inaudible, tiny, window-like space in a written text. I suggest that we think of [sic] as a potentiality that points to a fundamental textual fracture or fissure. “Not a story to pass on” (Morrison). Originally deriving from the Latin root for consent, in brackets within a quoted text, “sic” is perhaps the most passive form of written dissent possible—a visual marker of an error, typo or flaw in the originally quoted text, which is not intended for pronunciation.³ I propose to read actions like Sethe’s as an instantiation of [sic] practice emergent from within a “social script” from which it is seemingly impossible to deviate.

Directed by an ambivalent dialectic of survival and critique, [sic] practice uses as its material that very deadening life script (or sentence of social death) which is dictated to the subject that is reduced to reproductive flesh, tactically performing apparent tacit consent and agreement.⁴ This dwells on the same continuum as the claim that Gayatri Spivak famously makes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” that suicide – or “morbid resistance,” as Patrick

³ In presenting a conference paper of an early version of one of my chapters, I was delighted when the moderator did not pronounce “[sic]” in my title when introducing my paper.

⁴ Apparent agreement that is in fact profound dissent and sabotage.
Anderson has put it – may be the only speech-act accessible to the subaltern, pointing to a sometimes irresolvable tension between survival and expression. This is the terrain that my dissertation explores. The actual life and death stakes of self-assertion and truth-telling.

A Note on the Politics of Critical Reproduction and Repetition

The citational action that I flag with “[sic]” is distinct in action from the work of catachresis in Judith Butler’s work on performativity. Butler’s discussion and revision of the platonic concept of the chora, or womb-space, in Bodies That Matter informs the material feminist and psychoanalytic roots of the analytic that I develop through “[sic].” Chora signifies a historically imposed, deleterious passivity par excellence, as far as the agency of women and women’s bodies goes, casting the woman and womb as the completely passive vessel. Butler invokes catachresis to subvert the gendered passivity of chora. Assuming passive citational reproduction of the original being the core function of chora, Butler arrives at the revelation of the performativity of gender, for instance, through an active verfremdung or making strange of the original, wrought by excessive repetition. Catachresis, as a resistant response to chora does not directly line up with the work of [sic]. Both [sic] and catachresis ultimately serve a common purpose of revealing and pointing to mistakes in the original, yet [sic] is less emphatic and more in keeping with the fleeting gesture that performance studies theorizes, than a defamiliarizing performativity of discourse. The fleeting gesture of [sic] does signal the materiality of discourse and in so doing de-essentializes the ideological magical totality of the social script. [Sic] preserves the ontological violence of the social script, rather than the appropriative repetition that Butler’s performativity of gender. For instance, a [sic] gender performativity would be gay men staging a die-in rather than dressing up in drag. Sic erat scriptum is the root
origin of [sic] as we encounter it now, and literally means “thus it was written.”

The Oxford English Dictionary defines catachresis as “Improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor” (emphasis added). Thus, Butler-ian catachresis is active, pertaining to willful, active misuse. In contradistinction, [sic] is defined as follows: “A parenthetical insertion used in printing quotations or reported utterances to call attention to something anomalous or erroneous in the original, or to guard against the supposition of misquotation.” [Sic] is a passive marker that stays with and serves back the trope of passivity of the chora, and sticks more to the attributed reproductive function of the platonic womb-space.

*Sic erat scriptum.* It is there, one sees it and understands what it stands for, and yet does not speak it aloud. Thus it was written, is the phrase that “sic” is shorthand for, and which codes and euphemizes critique and the practice of making the error apparent by reproducing it and making the scribe visible in their lack of exercise of editorial agency, which would be exercised yet invisible were they to correct rather than reproduce and flag the error in the citation. This points to a practice or ethics of critique and truth-telling that would prefer to risk reproducing harm, prior to or rather than correcting it. This is because the alternative – the covering over of it – perpetuates a greater violence. The whole point of the chronicling of the violent history of slavery, for instance – a situation that my discussion of Corregidora in chapter three will illustrate in all of its ambivalences – is that it is a form of respect and homage to those who were direct victims of the violence, to not erase their suffering for the sake of the reader’s comfort or the stability of the moment of the status quo (however stable the moment may actually be rather than seem).

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5 Of course in the instance of the slave the question of agency is altogether different.
This, too, is the logic, for instance, behind #MeToo, and the urgent paradox and ethical obligation that drives the trigger-warning-in-the-classroom debates. In the case of #MeToo [trending now, though started ten years ago by a Black woman named Tarana Burke], the hashtag itself serves as a trigger and as a trigger warning for survivors of sexual violence (though really, in this culture, we all are by virtue of the structural sexual violence of patriarchy). Always already triggering, the movement is important and fortifying, and vitally revolutionary. The same goes for the classroom trigger warning debate – how are students to learn if we shelter them from everything potentially traumatic? This, of course, is an exaggeration of the way in which trigger warnings are used – at best, such warnings are deployed as a part of teaching praxis that is attuned to gradations of trauma and the great variability of life experiences, psychic reactivity etc of the bodyminds in our classrooms. I mention all this because I think the heuristic of [sic] may be an instructive and helpful way to understand these debates, and that [sic] praxis and trigger warning debates can shed light on each other as we seek to forge a “woke” revolutionary praxis that is as mindful as possible of an ethical commitment to victims who have gone before and victims who are navigating the present.

Figuring Reproductive Flesh as Archive

This dissertation figures derives its conceptualization of reproductive flesh as an inscribed archive from Hortense Spillers, and further elaborates critical agency that reproductive archival flesh might be seen to exercise. “[Sic]k” reproductive flesh becomes an archive that registers, reproduces, and critically disrupts the textual fabric of the American cultural imaginary. In conceptualizing a “sick archive,” I riff on the notational “[sic],” as it suggests the reproducing scribe’s textual eruption onto the page. My readings of primary
texts cover narratives of passing, autobiography, and self-harm, and instances of infant morbidity. I argue that all of these are, variously, embodied [sic] and sick speech-acts of reproductive flesh. I argue that these compose survivalist tactics by which the abjected subject exerts her critical agency from within the social script that would simultaneously objectify, pathologize, and consume her.

In the antebellum period, the institution of slavery reproduces the material conditions of the nation’s economy. During and after Reconstruction, the material conditions that discursively and materially violently “create” depersonalized units of reproductive flesh out of Black women become a process that is increasingly sublimated into discursive and bio-political practices, whose physical effects remain harmful. I use the phrase “reproductive flesh” in this project to both index female conscription to biological reproduction and to signify for the viscerally abused and politically excluded racialized bodies that fuel the political and material economy of American modernity before the Civil war, and through the present moment. Through my readings of the [sic] archival tactics of reproductive flesh, I seek to show, first, that the subaltern can indeed speak and, second, how she indicts and destabilizes a system that seeks to erase her while relying on her resources.

I theorize an apparently passive mode of agency, that is passed over in plain sight, that masquerades as a reflection of the dominant social script whilst in fact rupturing it and subverting it, from the inside. Through the analytic of [sic], I argue and read for subversive valences in the voices of the dead – or deadened – subjects whose aspirational ends haven’t yet been realized. Where transparent political action masks other forms of political agency, attention to cryptic [sic] self-fashioning and critical practices [even – and perhaps even especially – to the extent that they may appear to be self-defeating or self-destructive] may
re.cover hitherto unseen practices of agency, recovering agentic and subversive voices, practices and experiences which might otherwise remain unseen.

In my readings, I look for surprising interactions between abjected bodies, the world of objects and commodities, and pathologizing discourses. My project tracks the social and physical repercussions of treating humans as fungible objects and agents of capital – reproductive flesh. that is, stripping them of agency and subjectivity and treating them as infrastructural reproductive “usable” flesh. In so doing, my dissertation recuperates a previously overlooked sick archive of abjection and resistance in literary and aesthetic renditions of pathologized, revolting bodies. The concept of captive Black flesh as an archival register comes to us from Hortense Spillers’s articulation of the marks of violence on the captive body as “lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures” which compose a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (67). Spillers designates a foundational “cultural vestibularity” to captive flesh and her violent encrypted inscriptions. That is to say, a culture of sanctioned violence passes through and requires this passage-chamber of flesh, whose hieroglyphic markings and “severe disjunctures, always already “indecipherable,” “come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (Ibid).6 Cultural seeing wherein the perception of skin color sutures, covers over, hides, and justifies the “severe disjunctures” and hieroglyphics of black flesh – i.e., Black experience – is antiblackness by another name. Deadened, silenced, sanitized, and commodified by cultural grammars of denial; black flesh is yet vital and alive as an inner register of anti-black violence.7

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6 The full sentence reads, “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” (emphasis added 67).
7 Or, “white supremacist cultural seeing.”
Through my readings of [sic] and sick archives in the flesh, I describe a dehiscence of the encrypted, inscribed, and sutured-over archive of captive flesh as visceral dissent. In the conceptual and the visceral ground of flesh, “dehiscence” has two divergent meanings: First, **wound dehiscence** is a surgical complication in which a wound comes apart at the site of its surgical sutures – flesh that opens up at the seams, along the fault lines of the discourses that would seek to keep it sanitized and under wraps. A wounding history that refuses its sutures – refuses silencing. The second biological meaning of dehiscence is one of generative potentiality: that of the rupture of a female’s ovarian follicle in the process of ovulation. This ambivalence of signification animates a sense of simultaneous visceral wounding and potentiality. Both a re-materialization of past injury and violence in the present body, and the release of a potential future reproduction of one’s fleshly records in a new body, dehiscence can be understood as a visceral speech-act. Disrupting the skin of the world, a diseased, animate register of profound and unthought foundational violence “speaks itself.”

With respect to Sethe’s passion-killing of Beloved, and her subsequent haunting, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, literalizes the cut and the haunting that [sic] aesthetic practice accomplishes, at best.

Avery Gordon articulates the process of haunting as elicited by a call of the unresolved symptom, brought out by a resonant context. I strive to create such a resonant

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8 The materiality and phenomenology of flesh reminds us that such terms as “optimism” and “pessimism” are beside the point. Flesh refuses allegiance to the Manichean designators of optimism and pessimism. As Moten and Sexton have both noted, the ethical rigor of pessimism is vital to optimist thought, just as Afro-pessimism is “not but nothing other than black optimism” (Sexton 37). As Moten puts it, “if pessimism allows us to discern that we are nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what derives from that study” (774).

9 When applied to “grammars,” I take dehiscence as a visual and verbal aesthetics that troubles narrative and visual integrity – making seams burst, making “[sic]” visible for what she is.

10 It’s tricky to pin down a word to name Sethe’s action, as it is layered with so much.

11 She writes, in her introduction to *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, “Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us” (xvi).
context with my dissertation. An invocation of dissatisfied spirits. The context that I foreground in the dissertation being quite simply the ongoing and overwhelming anti-black toxicity of capitalist nation-building, and the arts of resistance and truth-telling of those abjected, and those receptive to their stories. This context has very tangible, lived repercussions, and can be experienced as a dense textuality (Hammonds), as visceral tension and flinching (Fanon, Scott), death (Wilderson, Sexton), sickness (Moten). Thus the aesthetic practices of reproductive flesh (enacting a sick archive) emerge from both a relative luxury and also from an indispensable necessity (Lorde, Scott). Such reproductive flesh enacting a sick archive might also be understood as “a certain practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced” (Duggan and Muñoz 278) or, more proper to the necropolitical project of racial-capital-slavery, obliterated.

On Punctuation

Arguably, my conception of [sic] is nearly on par with punctuation in relation to the level of agency that it appears to exert. Jennifer Brody discusses punctuation in her book on punctuation in terms of feminine passivity (Brody). [Sic] dwells between punctuation and word. It is the femme-phallic chora of the written word: “a parenthetical insertion,” [sic] is both the parenthetical womb-like container and masculine insertion. The nature of her reproductive function is that she cites the erroneous original unchanged. The nature of her insertion is a yes that is a no, in brackets: it is an assertion of the scribe’s existence and of her autonomous thought.

In Scenes of Subjection, Saidiya Hartman writes of a letter that Harriet Jacobs wrote to the abolitionist Amy Post, on the subject of her experiences as she narrates them in her slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.
[Jacobs writes,] “I have striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in slavery. There are some things that I might have made plainer—Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a dear friend much easier than she could record them.” The dashes in Jacobs’s letter to Post, like the admittedly selective incidents of the narrative, obscure the materiality of violence in order to avoid the pain and humiliation necessarily a part of its retelling. If one thinks of these dashes and elisions as literal and figurative cuts in the narrative, then they display and displace the searing wounds of the violated and mute body, a body that acts out its remembrances without the symbolic endowments to articulate its history of injury. The dashes, ellipses, and circumlocutions hint at the excluded term by way of the bodies of slave women. The bodies of these women are textual enigmas to be interpreted by the reader since they are literally pregnant with the secrets of slavery.

(emphasis added 108)

In my readings, I attend to aesthetic tactics and look to “[sic]” textual performances as sites in which to begin the work that would excavate the archive of these women who “are textual enigmas to be interpreted by the reader since they are literally pregnant with the secrets of slavery.” For instance, in chapter 2, where I look at Jacobs’s narrative, I attend to her use of the gothic genre and material and object-oriented storytelling as one of the modes in which she lodges a critique of her objectification while simultaneously conveying it. The cut in the text forged by the brackets around “sic” physically marks critique.

On Time

The scope of my project dwells in two historical clusters: the first around the early twentieth century, in conversation with the shifts wrought by the abolition of slavery and modernist industrialization and mass media. The second cluster, is around the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, in conversation with transnational and diasporic cultural production as they are haunted by racialized slavery and its post-slavery economic, social, and medical sublimations. My dissertation analyzes two distinct eras of globalizing capital, examining the throughline of commodified and consumed humanity across these spatio-temporal zones. Thus, “modernity” and specifically “American Modernity” in this project
means to denote the cultural – aesthetic and intellectual – habits of mind that segregate, oppress, and discipline in the name of “liberal humanism.” This heterogeneous project, which spans texts and cultural production from Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative to Wangeci Mutu’s 2014 art film, is deliberate in its breadth, which also includes white women’s illness narratives and modernist lesbian poetry in its purview. The breadth and diversity of this project necessarily sacrifices depth of historical or disciplinary specificity. At the same time, it creates space that engenders new approaches that can be applied to reinvigorate and innovate projects that have a more delimited historical or disciplinary allegiance. My project is deliberately full of different texts that are nevertheless politically aligned because in creating a radically new approach we must move beyond traditional disciplinary and segregated, stratified categorizations and conceptualizations of time, space, and embodiment toward a common liberation agenda.

I invoke black lesbian feminist visionary thought and aesthetic/expressive practice and bring it to bear on disability readings. A “new materialism” (Tompkins) is accessible by bringing a queer-crip of color analytical approach to Marxist-feminist materialist critical practice. This dissertation project had its inception in an exploration of early twentieth-century modernist lesbian aesthetics, which, as I will posit in my discussion of Gertrude Stein in chapter two, figure a revolutionary relation to discourse. Yet, my dissertation research and thinking has taken me back to the figure of the fugitive slave mother in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and then to Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. The fundamental violence of American nationalist cultural identity that modernist lesbian cultural production reckons with runs deeper than the white femme’s relation to patriarchy, the domestic sphere, and (childbearing) reproductive imperative. This violence has a prior relation to the disavowed slave population that long served material reproductive purposes.
in the material and political economy. The “zero degree of social conceptualization” (Spillers 1987 67) or “ground zero” flesh of American modernity is that of the Black femme. She has come to frame everything that this dissertation does. As Roderick Ferguson puts it in *Aberrations in Black*, “lesbian” functions “as negation of identity politics” (125), and notes that Barbara Smith defines “lesbian” not in terms of identity, but in terms of a set of critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Rather than naming an identity, “lesbian” actually identifies a set of social relations that point to the instability of heteropatriarchy and to a possible critical emergence within that instability. 

(127)

The set of social relations, then, that grounds my dissertation is that of Black lesbian feminism as a foundational critique of white heteronormative patriarchal domesticity. The figure that grounds my thinking about artful, unarticulated resistance is the Black femme. Her (infant) ghost is manifest. Disavowed, she is the spectral agent of modernity.

On Sickness

How is this a *sick* archive? What does it mean to use this word, and how do I state this project’s relationship to my field, disability studies? My archive – first, the one that I read and second, the one that I bring into being in my dissertation – is sick. The sickened, debilitated bodies in my texts are both the inscription and the speaking text of this [sic] historical counter-narrative. The necropolitical biocapitalist economy that I am in conversation with is one that kills, sicks, maims, disables, debilitating in a cold calculus oriented toward preserving national identity and as geopolitical wealth and/as “wellness,” whiteness, heteropatriarchal domesticity ideals. Ways in which we might think this sort of relation, circulation, and mobility with disability and disability studies paradigms in mind is via cripistemology. That is to say, by a foundational shift in ways of thinking and knowing shaped by a way of interacting in radically lateral modalities – listening to rather than fixing
disability, injury, and illness; flagging rather than correcting a fatal or debilitating flaw in the social text – so, a reorientation of listening to one another and forming supportive lateral communities has revolutionary potential in itself. There is a politics of exit from the social script and necropolitical biocapitalist system to this line of thinking, resisting the impossible (and undesirable) horizon of rehabilitation while maintaining an imperative candid and mindful communication of lived suffering.

I engage deviant gender, sexuality, and race through the lens of disability. My archive is sick in the context and in the face of necropolitical biocapitalism because it is deviant, and tells of anti-normative domesticities, sexualities, and desires – anti heteropatriarchal at its core; Black and lesbian. My focused readings along the lines of race and femininity – taken as embodied, discursive, and fungible attributes and categories – make a clear contribution to disability studies. Looking at racialized femininity from a disability studies standpoint fills a specific gap in the field and places it into necessary conversation with contemporary and historical Black feminist thought.¹² In my engagement of Afro-pessimism, and my endeavor to read it with a Black feminist sensibility, I additionally engage in thinking race and disability in deeply intertwined ways. In taking an expansive view of political, aesthetic, material, and speculative economies, my dissertation participates in broadening disability studies to a global geopolitical view, into sites where naming disability is neither common practice, nor is it a desirable category to add to the existing multiple categories of debility and oppression that certain bodies occupy (Puar). Through my theoretical moves and arguments and readings, I call for a cripistemological reading and listening approach – taking the messy

¹² This builds upon the current work in developing a more robust and accountable relationship between disability and race, as we have seen in the scholarship represented in the Summer of 2017 special issue of the African American Review, as well as in work like Lezlie Frye’s, which examines the unacknowledged debts and complicities of the disability rights movement in relation to racial justice struggles in the U.S.
prose on its own terms to imagine liberation (Johnson, McRuer).

**Method and Structure**

**Interacting Commodities and Capitalist (Auto)Toxicity**

…the exchanges upon which patriarchal societies are based take place exclusively among men…commodities can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their ‘guardians.’ It is out of the question for them to go to ‘market’ on their own, enjoy their own worth among themselves, speak to each other, desire each other, free from the control of seller-buyer-consumer subjects…[and yet] this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning. (Irigaray 1995 196)

Building on Cedric Robinson’s analysis of racial capitalism, Robin D. G. Kelley elaborates,

Race and gender are not incidental or accidental features of the global capitalist order, they are constitutive. Capitalism emerged as a racial and gendered regime…The secret to capitalism’s survival is racism, and the racist and patriarchal state…Racism is fundamental for the production and reproduction of violence, and that violence is necessary for creating and maintaining capitalism.

Property ownership is required for the social reproduction of race, gender, and capitalism (Goldstein). A continuous violent enactment of “so-called primitive accumulation” – the fictional “original sin” of capitalism – is “interlinked and continuous with expanded reproduction” (Melamed, as cited in Goldstein). And the nature of this violence is that of a continuous primitive accumulation type of action on the part of capital – a violent dispossession of – and production of misery in – “surplus” bodies (Ferguson).

Women and racialized enslaved people have a long history of being treated as material components of capital – commodities on the market, exchanged by white men (primitive accumulation by another name). These same objectified and commoditized persons stand to sabotage the entire flow of production, circulation, and consumption by interacting with commodity objects and each other in ways that are unaccounted for and
unanticipated precisely because of the capitalist system’s non-acknowledgment of their potential agency. This is what I am gesturing towards in discussing my concept of flesh archives that yield a composite “[sic]k” archive of and in reproductive flesh, when I mention the “surprising interactions” between commodities and abjected persons earlier in the introduction. This “commodities among themselves” kind of resistance is a primary action that each of my chapters work through.

Practically, Sethe’s infanticide is an act of sabotage with regard to the machine of slavery, since she destroys the utility of her progeny to the perpetuation and reproduction of the institution of slavery and reproductive flesh. Cuts and interrupts the script by the [sic] death [as consent to the necropolitics of slavery] that is also a glitch in the social script – dying before one’s “time” and by one’s mother’s hand. A toxic outcome of commodities in unmediated interaction with one another. Thus, community among commodities is always already resistance, critique, and potentially leading to toxic dehiscence. Part of my thesis here is to think through spaces of resistance that are forged from “commodities having intercourse among themselves” – how is this a space of resistance and also a space of revolution and sabotage?

Put another way, we might see an insurrection of and by money where bio-capital is the currency of the subaltern – herself as currency. And this embodied currency is her access to embodied circulation. In this register, eugenics and contagion. As she mobilizes her embodied currency to circulation and consumption in and limning the public sphere, the subaltern subverts white heteropatriarchal domesticity. Simultaneously articulates and resists eugenic anxieties that are mobilized in this period.
While I draw from multiple perspectives and time periods, the analytic focus of my dissertation lies most emphatically in the first third of the 20th century – a period that follows the civil war, reconstruction, and during which the first world war takes place (1914-1918/21). With one text punctuating the moment just before abolition – Harriet Jacobs’s narrative is published in 1861 – the focus of my analysis rests with texts that reckon with the failures of liberation, with the material violences of industrial modernity, and with a retrenchment of chattel slavery mentality/racial capitalism in the Jim Crow south (and north). There is a sense of betrayal of any hopeful optimism at this juncture. Eugenic anxiety around miscegenation, metaphors of sickness and toxicity, and also cosmopolitan anxiety are all characteristic of the turn of the 20th century and its attendant sensations of crisis. The socio-economic shifts that mass culture and industrialization bring about both impact and create the mythic domestic structure with its racialized and gendered and sexed dynamics.

Lisa Duggan writes about the 1890s as a turning point for American culture, national identity, and citizenship. In addition to a postwar effect on gender and labor, women gained suffrage and grew to become public figures as writers in this period. The coincidence of abolition is an important racial counterpoint that Duggan addresses. Shifting definitions of nationhood and political subjectivity consequent to material and cultural changes, and the violence that inevitably comes about at these times of shift, particularly as argued by Reddy and Duggan. First, we have the context of industrial modernization and women’s suffrage in the wake of the civil war and the abolition of slavery. The crisis of masculinity and the problem of the color line are co-articulated, and this is especially thrown into relief when we focus our readerly attention on the Black femme. The turn of the 20th century is also marked
by the emergence of mass-circulating media with news and literature, and the beginnings of mass culture associated with film and the cinema (Huyssen, Hansen). To think of early twentieth-century modernity, one must consider silent cinema and commodity culture and the advent of consumerism. It is in and through this context that I locate a “ghostly mattering” of the black femme.

As disavowed reproductive flesh, you are conceptually aligned with the effects of industrializing modernity. In my analyses, we encounter an imbrication of race, gender, and sexuality as characteristics that bring the subject to the level of circulating commodity and variously aligns her with the emergent circulation of images in mass media and cinema. Revealing or uncannily reaffirming an affinity of persons with/as objects as a site of uncanny agency that is somehow beyond the reach of and perhaps even more “castrating” to white masculinity, the haunting presence of deadened subjects circulating in society that is the vital and disavowed engine of modernity becomes unsettlingly apparent. I examine fatal toxicity on the one hand, and tactics of survival and critique that perform and seek to render viscerally visible the harm of racial capitalism and its perpetual reproduction/primitive accumulation, on the other.

My reading of 20th century American literature is transnational and third-wave feminist in the second half of the dissertation, as I reach toward and discuss diasporic and hemispheric American women’s expressive work. My readings seek to expose the pervasiveness of Racial Capitalism and Settler Colonialism and their foundational role in U.S. modernity and in the necessary creation of sick, debilitated, foreclosed (racialized, gendered) subject-positions that U.S. modernity as such requires as a foundational structuring exclusion and caste of bodies-in-reserve for the purposes of protracted and recursive “so-called primitive accumulation” (Goldstein).
In the latter half of the twentieth century, in the 1970s, we have again a continuing and looming cultural disaffection following upon the civil rights movement (mirroring and extending the one in the early 20th century following upon the abolition of slavery). Roderick Ferguson gestures to a “pathologization of difference, the displacement of those pathologies onto surplus populations” as a feature of the era from the 1960s to the 1980s (119). Ferguson cites Immanuel Wallerstein’s naming of the period from 1945-1970 as a “second apotheosis of liberalism” where a regime of normative grammar emerges reinforced rather than disturbed from liberal revolutions (over conservatism), with the example, for instance, of the Black Panther Party’s investment in heteropatriarchy as a case in point. Here nationalism and the state emerge as “appropriate” father figures in African American populations (113-123). The sense again of failed optimism and a return to the fundamental problem at hand drives black feminist writers in this period to, in addition to imaginative coalitional work, to invoke and re-narrate the lives of enslaved women. Imaginative coalitional praxis and literature by black feminists expresses both an optimism of new political formations and affinities as a response to the failures of civil rights and black nationalism to attend to foundational violences of patriarchy (Ferguson). This all works to support my stated predominant focus on the turn of the 20th century and Jim Crow as a fraught moment that even these texts return to. Notably Beloved takes us back to a period where the fugitive slave act is a central plot engine. By such a structuring I seek to refute linear progress epistemologies and argue for the resonant ghost.

13 This is the era when Harriet Jacobs’s narrative was rediscovered and the century-old allegation that it was not real but a work of complete fiction was finally debunked (Yellen).
Chapters

My first two chapters read pre-Civil War and early 20th century U.S. literary texts. Later chapters include contemporary Brazilian and African diasporic films alongside U.S. literary texts from the late 20th century. In the second half of the dissertation, I have two black feminist texts from the 1970s – Corregidora and The Bluest Eye – that I read in conversation with very recent hemispheric American and diasporic American expressive creative works [one is nested within the anthropological study Vita]… the creative reflection and critical fabulation that these novels engage in is resonant with the contemporary texts, and I seek to show how the conversation is brought forward through the century. My first and fourth chapters share a focus on commodification and circulation, and my second and third chapters interrogate the disabling/debilitating function of the domestic sphere. I find my later chapters showing a more visceral – as in fleshy, phenomenological – engagement with the tropes of my earlier chapters. I argue that this is a reflection of how discursive abstractions (of being a relational unit of reproductive flesh, for instance – currency) are pervasively and perniciously internalized or somaticized. In a way, processes of reification from the earlier part of the 20th century come to roost, later, in and as bodily sickness and suffering. All of my chapters seek to articulate a different sort of revolutionary critique or pedagogy in their aesthetic tactics.

One: Passing

Chapter one, “A Study in [Sic] Passing: Birthing the Spectral Object” posits the practice of racial and social passing as a powerful form of critique in the moment of its fatal failure. I argue that a fatally failed act of passing performs a vital rupture that haunts the circle in which the deceased was passing. My chapter examines the passing performances of
Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and Joe Christmas in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, both of which end in death. I trace the imbrication of commodity, capital, and reproductive flesh in the light-complexioned biracial subject of Joe Christmas, together with the emergent 20th century consuming and indebted subject that the white femme Lily Bart embodies. I follow Joe and Lily’s variously toxic interactions with hygienic and pharmaceutical commodities as they transition from fungible subject to dead object. I argue that Faulkner and Wharton use the emergent discourse of the cinematic – a commodifying, animating, and persistent archival medium – to foreshadow and to illustrate Lily and Joe’s spectral agency.

Passing and dying as a social critique that comes about by way of interaction with window frames and hygienic commodity objects and infants. Lily and Joe show themselves to be kin with the material substrate for industrial modernity in the process of their dying. At and after their death, there is a flash of contact and exchange that both connects them to newborn infants who appear marked to carry on their legacy. After their death, the function of the window frame as a cinema screen or film, facilitate their haunting (along with the circulation of objects).

Two: Autobiography

Chapter two, “The Shape of Her Hand: Revolutionary Textuality and [Sic] Autobiographical Praxis,” looks at self writing practice that cites and disrupts the confined spaces of the plantation, the hospital, and the home. This chapter addresses practices of non-normative domesticity and epistolary autobiography in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. I read each of the varied texts as a rhetorically-fashioned reflexive and
citational, “[sic]k,” way out of oppressive domesticities. While I take Jacobs’s narrative of abject self-fashioning and survivalist tactics as a foundational historical example as she negotiates extreme confinement, my chapter is framed by readings from Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons, as I argue that Stein’s highly experimental writing charts an innovative revolutionary epistemology that I locate in both Jacobs and Gilman’s texts.

This chapter is optimistic and examines the vital role of writing and remaking genre, discourse, and language within the [sic]k script and the sick space – it inquires into a world of existing multiple resistances and survivals that may never register in official history [and that may be perennially misconstrued and misread by official history]. This chapter explores how this also takes place in the space of interaction between confining spaces and deadening discourses and commodities. The critique here happens in the use and subversion of paradigms and expectations. Where social, psychic, and physical stigma and suffering are equal to sickness, these texts illustrate how dwelling within the space of sickness fosters a safe and life-inducing zone in which to exercise agency. I argue that Jacobs, Gilman, and Stein thus model a revolutionary disability sensibility.

Three: Diagnosis

Chapter three, “Diagnostic Violence and Disavowal: Cutting Reproductive Flesh in Corregidora and Vita,” examines the ways in which medical diagnosis and violent or strained intimate family relationships work in concert, driven by a calculus of profit and debt that is attached to the woman as a body of reproductive flesh. The chapter looks specifically at Brazilian narratives of slavery, post-slavery, and disability in Gayl Jones’s 1975 novel Corregidora about the blues singer grand-daughter of a Brazilian slave and in João Biehl’s 2005 anthropological study Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment. In both, an emergence of
sickness or disability into the public sphere prompts eugenic management, which I align with
the violent historical practice of erasure and disavowal, particularly of minoritized and
oppressed histories. These texts model a painful self-reading practice from spaces of domestic
and diagnostic abuse.

As my hemispheric America/Brazil chapter, I seek to elaborate a real and allegorical
relation between the U.S. economy’s unacknowledged debt to and exploitation of South
America and the U.S.’s disavowed debt to racialized and disabled subjects. The impacts of
the economic relationship of the U.S. and Brazil are especially palpable in *Vita*, as the social
destitution that drives families to abandon their sick and disabled is directly a consequence
of rapid uneven development in Brazil, largely orchestrated by the U.S. to their apparent
political and economic interest. The black feminist 1970s text of this chapter, *Corregidora*,
explicitly lays out a genealogical historical relationship to slavery and its immediate violences
in relation to the intimate familial structure. The medical is mobilized as a modern agent of
harm and foreclosure that replicates the intimate violences of slavery, modulated, in
*Corregidora*. Expressive culture as the blues and poetry stands as the resistance to foreclosed
kinship and reproduction, and as a vital [sic] archive that allows them to enact and forge or
heal severed social ties in both texts.

Four: Dehiscence

Chapter four, “Disorganizing American Grammars: Cultural Seeing, Toxic
Consumption, and Revolutionary Aesthetics,” examines the materialized morbid effects of
consumption of White anti-black cultural bias and ideals (“Cultural Seeing”) in Toni
Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu’s film *The End of eating
Everything*. Both authors deploy viscerally disorienting aesthetics, engendering a sensation of
minoritized subjectivity within dominant social scripts – that is, a sensation of placelessness. I argue that both texts model a revolutionary pedagogical approach by disorganizing readerly schemas: Morrison’s novel remixes language from an English-language primer from the midcentury U.S.; and Mutu’s film shows surreal bodies killing, growing, dying, and being born amid a disorienting poetic text. Both leverage viscerally impactful critiques of anti-black violence and erasure, as compounded in the biologically reproductive and racialized female body. I illustrate the emergence of reproductive flesh in both texts as a critical archival text through which Morrison and Mutu work to articulate a distinctly feminist liberation aspiration, from within highly masculinist Black empowerment movements in post-slavery U.S. and in postcolonial Africa (Kenya, in this instance).

I examine discursive and visual accruals of abjection and toxicity that adhere to the Black femme’s body. In my reading, both works deploy visual and written grammars that undo convention and structure that would hold the text together – not unlike the dehiscent coming-apart of a wound that has been stitched together. Both narratives put forward a feminist critique by foregrounding by illustrating what I call a “toxic futurity,” where any forward motion is accompanied by death.

Epilogue: Satyagraha

I conclude by considering the potential of viscerally impactful aesthetics in relation to contemporary forms of protest, such as the hunger strike. I close the dissertation with an analysis of discourse around contemporary prison labor strikes, reading a video clip put out by the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) that curiously enlists the metaphorical register of food refusal to convey their message about the labor strike in the spring of 2014. I argue that they are invoking the practice of hunger striking as a powerful a material witness to – and an
embodied critique of – the institutionalized continuation of racialized slavery. At the same time, I articulate a crip aspiration in this gesture by the FAM video.
Critical Hauntings (Not a Story to Pass On)

“This is not a story to pass on,” writes Toni Morrison at the end of her 1987 novel, Beloved. Beloved is a story about a ghostly eruption that complicates notions of temporality and suggests a somatic, embodied historical consciousness. Based on the true story of the fugitive slave mother, Margaret Garner, who killed her children rather than have them be recaptured into slavery, Beloved is a baby that has been killed, and erupts back into the family’s daily lived reality, haunting. The epilogue at the end of the novel consists of paragraphs of description broken up by single-line interjections, with paragraph breaks on either end. It reads like a prose poem with intertitles, and begins thus:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up […] Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one’s own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.

(323)

This second type of loneliness, induced in the mother by Beloved’s absence, cannot be held down or encapsulated by skin, or internally contained and embodied. It is also this loneliness that is the ghost who is Beloved. The haunting of Beloved represents an incomplete death, and carries with it the incomplete and deaths of so many from the Middle Passage to the present. It is an uncomfortable historical consciousness, a persistent disembodied sociopolitical ache.

Morrison’s epilogue repeats and modulates the phrase “this is not a story to pass on,” prompting a meditation on transmission and temporality. Beloved, the murdered infant daughter, is the ghost whose story is “not a story to pass on.” Morrison articulates an ambivalent and incomplete ending to the novel, and thus to the haunting. Written like a prose poem, the epilogue consists of paragraphs of description broken up by single-line
interjections. “It was not a story to pass on” appears twice, as the first version of the refrain, with the indeterminate object and in the past tense, “it was.”\textsuperscript{14} In the third instance it appears with immediacy, “this is not a story to pass on” precedes the final paragraph.\textsuperscript{15} The repetition of the injunction “not a story to pass on” is disorienting, showing up at the end of a novel precisely about this story, which “passes it on,” so to speak. But it prompts a deeper meditation on and warning against transmission, bringing to mind the \textit{partus sequitir ventri} of slavery, for instance, which was the motive for Beloved’s death in the first place.\textsuperscript{16} The movement from past to present tense is an indicator of the story’s movement across time in spite of its status as “not a story to pass on.” There is a palpably irresolvable tension between the ethics of transmission and non-transmission in this closing section of the novel, which speaks to some other impossibility and is also an urgent injunction to pay attention, to avoid repeating the traumas and violence of history. The urgency of bearing witness and maintaining kinship and the urgency of ending pain.

In the introduction to \textit{Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination}, Avery Gordon writes,

\begin{quote}
Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way in which […] we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.
\end{quote}

(xvi)

That is to say, understood as social and political agents, ghosts point out the flaws of the system from the outside, and interfere with them. Notably, Gordon calls these “\textit{incomplete} forms of containment and repression” (Ibid, emphasis added). This qualification is hopeful

\textsuperscript{14} In between descriptions of Beloved and of the people who encountered her in the process forgetting her.
\textsuperscript{15} Which describes the mundane manifestations of Beloved’s present-day modes of non-embodied haunting Morrison ends the novel with the name of the ghost, “Beloved,” standing alone, its own word-sentence-paragraph.
\textsuperscript{16} That is to say, the matrilineal transmission of the condition of slavery, regardless of paternity.
as it describes oppression as not only flawed but incomplete. It is not only incomplete for the now-spectral subject who has passed out of the social fabric through death: Gordon’s point is that the discursive porousness by which specters and ghosts may appear to their living collectivities might better call attention to the incompleteness of the forms of containment and repression. It is the presence of the specter which makes the incomplete nature of the oppression more apparent to the living subjects. Such spectral agency is a mode of sociohistorical critique which acts similarly to Beloved’s above-described second type of loneliness: it disorients, disrupts, persists. It conveys a sense of lack that is peculiar to subaltern grieving.

Haunted by the affective impact and spectral agency of Beloved, this chapter examines stories of critical death and haunting in Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905), set in high-society New York of the turn of the century, and William Faulkner’s Light in August (1932), set in rural 1930’s Mississippi, at the height of Prohibition and Jim Crow segregation. In these novels, I examine the stories and deaths of Lily Bart and Joe Christmas, who both die as eventual consequences of failed socio-economic and racial passing. I use “critical death” to refer to Lily and Joe’s deaths because I interpret their deaths as deliberate acts of critique, invoking the suicide as subaltern speech and agency from Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” From this, I outline what I call a necropolitical biocapitalist economy: that is to say, a political economy that reduces subaltern bodies and lives to units of exchange, where subaltern bodies must speak in kind, in order to articulate resistance and critique. I argue that not only is their death a critical act, but Joe and Lily’s deaths happen in such a way that their haunting is potent and inescapable. I take up stories of tragically failed passing to explore socio-political haunting because these stories are in a sense always already ghost stories. Passing is fundamentally connected to a motive of and desire for mobility and
survival, yet requires loneliness and disavowed kin and history. It requires stories and personal histories not to be passed on, so to speak, which has interesting implications when one considers an inextricability of tragically failed passing and the transmission of a message haunting sociopolitical critique. An uncomfortable historical consciousness, a persistent haunting disembodied sociopolitical ache.

[Sic] Passing and Biocapitalist Necropolitics

In relation to the title of my dissertation, “A Sick Archive: Reproductive Flesh in American Modernity,” I discuss these stories of tragically and willfully failed passing as “[sic] passing.” [Sic] passing is a particular type of passing which is only truly consummated in its failure: Reproducing the flaw in the original while also flagging that it is a flaw, with the marker “[sic]”; a bracketed window of space in the text, with a single “sic” meaning “yes” or “thus” or “thus it was written,” while simultaneously signifying that it was incorrect, is itself a flawed reproduction. In writing and punctuation, [sic] is an ethical marker that one uses to show that the original has a flaw while performing and reproducing the flaw.17 [Sic] is a performance of passivity at the same time as it is a performance of that which is wrong in the original; it contains and projects the ideological flaw. With etymological origins as a term of agreement, “[sic]” is a graphemic marker of error within a reproduced quotation in a written text, defined as “a parenthetical insertion used in printing quotations or reported utterances to call attention to something anomalous or erroneous in the original, or to guard against the supposition of misquotation” (OED). Like a visual glitch in the midst of the thick script, [sic] is an often passed over as invisible and inaudible window-like space, in a text or script, through which excess, agency, irony and critique may move.

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17 Also “law” as in predetermined script.
In [sic] passing, the flaw in the system that would render a poor single woman or a black man socially non-viable becomes most evident when and a subject's passing act consummates itself in its own toxicity, and she fails, fatally, becoming a specter. Her failure is the failure of the original, and therein is her persistent critique and haunting. In the final analysis, while passing is expedient and perhaps the only way to stay physically alive for each respective character, it is ultimately worth more to the passing subject to keep her passing to the level of passive citation, [sic], than completely assimilating herself to the citation. That is to say, when push comes to shove, even if the consequence is death, the subaltern passing subject emerges not as an “assimilee,” but as a rupture in the social fabric and social script; a traumatic loss and haunting toxic contamination and spectral agent of modernity/anxiety. We might consider the fleeting breath of the in-text bracket or window of [sic] that creates space in the reductive social script through which the excessive subject may pass.

In the long and developing advent of visual and mass media (1900-1935) and commodity culture concomitant with early twentieth century racial and gendered contamination anxieties arising out of the U.S.'s cultural identity paradigm shifts due to industrialization and adjuvant political reconfigurations. The feminine legibility and validity in a rudimentary Marxist political economy begins (and ends) with biological (re)production of laboring bodies. She is the classic embodied “bio” substrate of the production-exchange-consumption cycle of commodities and capital. The feminine (and feminized, in slavery) role in the political economy as one who reproduces potential laboring subjects starts with her potential to produce an infant. The [sic] characterization of passing is a feminine attribute in a feminist project though not in fact gender-essentialist. Rather, it is a matter of “reproductive flesh” which is just as (un)gendered as it is racialized (Spillers 1987). Un-enfranchised racial and gendered subjects are objectified, the cultural anxiety stirred up by
the material effects of industrial capital is projected upon these subjects, and this anxiety is used in turn as terms by which to contain women and people of color. Fueled by an anxiety of contamination, the conflation of threatening new technologies and the slippery indeterminacy of the not-quite-legitimate civic subject of the femme and the black slips into a concern for socio-political hygiene. Lily and Joe’s characters respond, respectively, by performing the fear of contamination in their stories via [sic] (failed) passing.

My exploration of passing as a socio-politically critical mode in *The House of Mirth* and *Light in August* is bound up both with (a) industrializing modernity, commodity culture and the emergence of photography/film/mass media\(^{18}\) and (b) the commodified and commodifiable reproductive flesh that women, Black people, and infants signify.\(^{19}\) *The House of Mirth* as a title might be understood to indicate a show-house or a theatre, and “to become light in August” is a colloquial Mississippian expression that refers to horses and cattle giving birth in August. Both novels introduce Lily and Joe as a or via a captivating spectacle: *The House of Mirth* opens with Lily standing at Grand Central Station, waiting for a train – which in all likelihood refers to the Lumière brothers’ 1895 “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat” – and *Light in August* introduces Joe Christmas through the spectacular scene of a crowd gathered to watch a burning house. Significantly, windows play a persistent symbolic role in both stories, and I consider these as primarily an allusion to a filmic screen, though also to a storefront. Portals to or for [sic] commodification.\(^{20}\) They are also the architectural analog to

\(^{18}\) Kara Keeling, in *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, reflects on Deleuze and Debord’s discussions of film as having “an internalized relation to money” (17). “…money is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place […] in this respect one might argue that the movement-image corresponds to Guy DeBord’s ‘spectacle.’” DeBord claims that ‘the spectacle is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities’ (18).

\(^{19}\) Notably, in *The Witch’s Flight*, Kara Keeling flags the co-emergence of film and the problem of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century as the “problem of the color line.”

\(^{20}\) It is a framing and presentation of these sic chic subject-commodities, much like the storefront windows function in *Imitation of Life* and *The Bluest Eye.*
the brackets that frame “sic,” affording space for potential critique (without requiring critical distance).

Both Lily and Joe are also orphans and are described as rootless, and thus more easily available for abstraction and commodification, as well as connection to commodified infantile units of reproductive flesh: Lily “had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another” (417), and Joe is described similarly: “there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home” (31). In The House of Mirth, the infant of a woman that Lily had helped in the past appears in the narrative as Lily is dying, as though one of the vessels for Lily’s perpetuity. Similarly, in Light in August, at the moment of Joe’s death, the young Lena Grove gives birth to her son in Joe’s bed with Joe’s grandparents present in a confusing convergence.

Finally, [sic] passing has a significant aspect of toxicity and intoxication, as the fatally failed act of mimesis materializes these anxieties into a single, dead body. [Sic] passing’s toxicity can be construed as the implosion of capitalism as commodities/commodified subjects interact with each other. In my analysis of Lily and Joe’s narratives of failed passing I attend to toxic relationships of exchange with commodities and as commodities. I argue that their critical deaths are a virtuosic performance of social death, in an instance in which “the product is inseparable from the act of producing” (Virno 53).21 That is to say, to perform a critique of such an economy, the subject (Lily, Joe) necessarily dies, concretizing abjection, objectification, and non-viability.

Roderick Ferguson writes of a necessary disidentification with historical materialism

for queer of color critique, pointing to the commodity form as one which causes anxiety for Marx and Marxism (7). Ferguson notes also that “as formations that transgress capitalist political economies, surplus populations become the locations for possible critiques of state and capital,” thus capable of potential “ruptural – i.e., critical – possibilities” (17). As they are exiting from the system by dying, my readings will show how Lily and Joe are simultaneously assimilating into a citational performance of the anxiety of the commodity form as annihilative of subjecthood, and also thereby materializing the dehumanizing lived experience of being excess or surplus of a system. At the same time as they express a utopic drive for exit from the system, these consummate performances exert a critical agency that imperils the integrity of the system, like a toxic agent, or a virus. Thus, while Lily and Joe’s deaths are to varying degrees a result of the toxicity of the system on the excessive subject herself, their deaths also stand to exert a toxic feedback loop onto the system.

These toxic interactions and feedback loops in Lily and Joe occur both with infants and with commodities that are connected to gender and social hygiene. Infants represent the unit of reproducible labor, and reproductive flesh. Where Sethe sabotages the machine of slavery by killing her infant daughter, Lily and Joe’s stories stage the infant as an agent in their deaths, and a life that carries on their ghosts. Lily undergoes a toxic interaction with chloral, associated with femininity and gendered anxiety or nervous sleeplessness.22 Joe, on the other hand, has toxic associations with toothpaste, an agent of social and oral hygiene. In their interactions with these medicinal and hygienic agents, Joe and Lily critically indict social anxieties around racialized and gendered sickness and hygiene.23

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22 Not to mention an association with high femme overdoses, such as in Marylin Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith’s deaths.

23 The curious and challenging specificity of passing in *House of Mirth* and *Light in August* is that both Lily Bart and Joe Christmas are raised in the contexts that they ultimately fall out of. Lily is raised wealthy and Joe is raised white. Variously, they are “dispossessed” yet continue to pass within their prior context. This is an ambivalent and important note in terms of the acts/circumstances of passing in this chapter. This brings their
The House of Mirth: Lily Bart

Lily Bart, in Wharton’s The House of Mirth, performs what one might call a “[sic]” mode of critical and defecting-defective social performance: A performance of social passing, and apparent assimilation, a “[sic]” social performance veers away from complete assimilation, and is only consummated as a critical mode when the performance fails. The previously passing subject passes through a bracket of opportunity to exit the system in such a way that she exposes its inadequacy. The apparent passivity of the acquiescent performance becomes revealed as an agentic escape, and causes a toxically charged critical rupture in the fabric of the political economy.

Beautiful yet from a financially ruined family, Lily circulates for a time in high society New York, performing a quest for marriage, which would secure her viability/status. She ultimately fails, winding up dispossessed and impoverished in a working-class boarding-house and inadvertently committing suicide with an overdose of sleeping medication. Lily is an orphan at has been one for eleven years already at the outset of the novel. She is presented as always-already rootless and spectral, and seems to arise spontaneously out of her context. At first, she appears to be part and parcel of the social machine, and then of the urban cityscape at the end. I argue that from this beginning, Lily fades out of high society assimilation and merges with the infrastructural meshwork of New York Society, the city, its

passing perhaps closer in line with the slice of disability studies pertaining to mental health, and in particular “womens’ issues” of nervous anxiety, depression, chronic pain/illness, and even to cancer in the later chapters, as these can lead to a déclassé status, socio-politico-economically, and many are compelled to pass, and continue to do so in their public (and even private) lives. There is a different “coming-out” at stake here. My entry into disability studies is by way of feminism and mental illness. Crip Theory’s careful attention to the double-edged work of certain concepts such as “flexibility” in the work force, rehabilitation and compliance and the paradoxical ideology of “choice,” sets a critical foundation for a methodology that is attuned to ambivalence and an interest in repurposing of the “refuse space” (126) of modernity and modernization via the spectral femme.
social tapestry, its industrial and ultimately medicinal/toxic modernity.

The novel opens with an image of Lily standing, with a “desultory air” in Grand Central Station, in the midst of the afternoon rush: “She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution” (4). Assuming the citational impression of passivity (she wears the air of irresolution, and Selden [her spectator] allows that it could be masking “a very definite purpose”) and also a sort of fixity that connects her more with the spatial infrastructure than with the bodies and people moving through it, the nature of her ending is foreshadowed. She is alive yet, but always—already spectral and/or becoming part of the material infrastructure rather than the fluid, fetishized social fabric. In a not entirely unproblematic yet fascinatingly critical passage, Selden observes and meditates on Lily’s appearance:

He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must have, in some mysterious way, been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?

(5-6)

With her face described here as a fine layer of porcelain (“glaze of beauty and fastidiousness”) concealing a great deal of “vulgar clay,” Lily Bart is an excessive subject, an emblematic figure for a “useless” surplus population of the female and the poor in turn-of-the-century New York City. The pleasure in her nearness and admiration of her beauty that leads Selden into this strange meditation is jarred by the notion that her shape was “futile.” “Circumstance,” in this case, refers to her material dispossession and her calculated and deliberate social passing, of which Selden is aware, and to which he is attuned.24 He notes

24 And about which she is open with him, bemoaning her lack of freedom as of a class of “poor, miserable, marriageable girls” (8).
later, “She was so evidently a victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the
links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (8). The thrust of
Selden’s early description and introduction of Lily is refracted in a later passage: “Inherited
tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she
was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock
she had been fashioned to adorn and delight” (394). Over the course of her trajectory of
fall from grace, Lily becomes increasingly apparent as a part of this undifferentiated mass of
surplus women.

Lily is a commodity, in every sense of the word. Even to the extent of playing in
tableaux vivants later in the novel. Arguably more a product of culture and capital than of
“human,” Lily, we come to learn, was orphaned soon after her father was ruined. Mr. Bart
died almost immediately, and Mrs. died in bitterness not long after. It is as though the
humans attached to her ontology were incidental to the capital attached thereto. Even her
social debut, prefatory to her ruin, is described in terms of capital—it is concomitant with “a
heavy thundercloud of bills” (38).

After her parents’ death, Lily is taken in by Julia Peniston, a somewhat moneyed aunt
with very conservative ideas, and lived with her support on New York high society’s fringes,
circulated and made friends with the best, all on the promise of and in a desperate mission to

25 Ironically, Lily is explicitly described as having “no real intimacy with nature” earlier on, as she is a synthetic,
artificial, specifically and peculiarly modern-industrial-high-society production.
26 Here, capital is naturalized in a way that is characteristic of the period in which Wharton writes, and I’m not
sure whether to leverage this to say that capital is naturalized to lily as a result of this language, since I am
enjoying relying on the one time Wharton wrote that lily didn’t connect much with nature… The shock of the
ruin that comes the following year has the distinct color of a primary traumatic event in Lily’s life, which she
relived from time to time over the course of the decade or so that she survived her parents:
The light of the debut still lingered on the horizon, but the cloud had thickened; and suddenly it
broke. The suddenness added to the horror; and there were still times when Lily relived with painful
vividness every detail of the day on which the blow fell. (38-39)
She discovers the family is ruined while asking her father if they might not have fresh flowers delivered to the
house daily, and is greeted with his manic laughter.
capitalize on her beauty by marrying well, so that she might retain the comfort that she was once raised in. Before she died, Lily’s ruined mother leaves her with the vehement injunction “you’ll get it all back – you’ll get it all back, with your face” (36). In her socio-historical context, Lily’s beauty is her means of circulation and ultimately of exchange. With the ostensible goal of marrying into wealth Lily passes in the upper crust of New York turn-of-the-century society. In a complicated series of exchanges, she seeks to sustain her simulated-solvent class status. Ultimately her material debt catches up with her and becomes social toxicity and/as she falls from grace, and the material reality of her situation is exposed.

Lily came close to succeeding the hand of the young and wealthy Percy Gryce, but she resists and sabotages such a social success in favor of her freedom, even if ultimately in death. When her attempt with Gryce fails, aware that she may not have the stomach for marrying, while also aware of her debts, Lily chooses to ask her best friend’s husband (Gus Trenor) to invest a sum of her money for a return. This relationship, initially unbeknownst to her, implicates her affections and body as collateral to the outright payments that Trenor proceeds to make to her under guise of lucky investing. Lily is driven to overuse chloral due to an anxious sleeplessness that escalates, as she grows more apparently useless to society during this fall.

Lily is rhetorically framed as a commodity from the start, and is implicitly social detritus, socially dead unless she follows through and succeeds in securing a marriage. Thus, [sic] passing yields a radical hypostatization of her social death as real death, and involves a self-commoditizing transformation in the process. Framed as an ornamental commodity-object [and as a unit of exchange] from the beginning, this “fall” of Lily’s is in effect a paradoxical actualization of herself as commodity object; a [sic] performance of fetishization which, in its turn, serves as a radical defetishizing of the social machine. Lily’s passing
ultimately fails because she fatalistically resists following through and fully assimilating into high society by way of a solvent, advantageous marriage. Rather than risk being fixed as an uncritical social citation by way of such an arrangement, Lily borrows money in a last attempt to remain “in circulation” among the elite class, as her debts and expenses are becoming untenable. Lily is ultimately disgraced by a chain of social faux-pas resulting from this relationship.\textsuperscript{27}

During this period, Lily distances herself from her friends, and participates in a slightly lower social circle (the Fishers), where she agrees to play in their friend Morpeth’s \textit{tableaux vivants}. This is a symbolic performance in terms of Lily’s commodification; and she is also later criticized for her behavior as “auctioning herself off.” I argue that this is indeed her most explicit connection to the “mass media market” that is just starting to emerge. When Selden approaches her after this performance, Lily is described as having a “moment of self-intoxication” (176) which is a curiously reflexive moment especially in light of her eventual death from intoxication. Lily is contemplating herself as part of a picture, and the intercourse between the two Lilys is intoxicating on two levels: one, she is a commodity at the rise of commodity culture, with its own gravitational and intoxicating pulls, and then she is a toxic foreign agent passing in the upper crust of New York Society. Here toxicity, or intoxication, by contamination does not by definition bear a negative affect, but may also function as a zone of covert desire and pleasure. After all, Lily is rather beautiful and seductive to all. The ambivalence present in the anxiety of contamination and the covert pleasure of intoxication again is not quite dissociable from the nascent moving image and paranoid associations of

\textsuperscript{27} This constitutes her first step in the direction of reflexive self-fetishization, as she uses her face and pleasant company as currency in exchange for and as collateral against the money loaned to her by Gus Trenor.
early cinema with decadence and degradation of authenticity.\textsuperscript{28}

Indeed, after this show, Lily is tricked by Gus Trenor into coming over by his willful neglect to convey the message from his wife (Judith, Lily’s erstwhile best friend) that she was not going to be there. Narrowly escaping outright sexual molestation, Lily is witnessed leaving the Trenors’ home at a late hour and word of her looseness and illicit relationship with Gus Trenor is the beginning of her downfall.

Lily makes a few last-ditch attempts at various ways of remaining in “circulation”—during this time, Lily is well aware of her social descent: “Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung” (361). Finally, Lily tries her hand working in a millinery, with an aspirational fantasy of trimming hats beautifully and eventually opening up her own green and white shop. Her anxiety and sleeplessness, combined with lack of training, affect her ability to work efficiently. After having been fired from her single attempt at a manual-labor job, not involving her beauty and charm as currency – incidentally, decorating hats at a millinery is still dealing with objects that adorn and decorate and frame the face – Lily comes into a full sense of her excessive and surplus social status. Her temporary co-workers discussed her former friends and the hats that they were preparing for them. She is a part of the great mass of concealed artifice in the contrived nature of her former social circle. Lily’s now even less purposeful existence heightens her awareness of the socio-industrial machinery of daily life:

Her week of idleness had brought home to her with exaggerated force these small aggravations of the boarding-house world, and she yearned for that other luxurious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed that one scene flows into another without perceptible agency. (394)

Wharton arguably here shows Lily’s consciousness waking to a defetishized view of luxury.

\textsuperscript{28} Later, Miriam Hansen would theorize a connection between the blank gaze of the screen with the blank gaze of the prostitute.
Lily’s efforts to remain in circulation even as it became more and more evidently futile were motivated by her sense that she would be otherwise an object completely in excess/refuse of the system for which it was designed. She describes the situation on a final visit to Selden:

I have tried hard—but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap—and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish heap! (404)

Indeed, Lily has by that point come to live in tenement housing, living from one chloral-induced sleep to the next. Anxiety comes to destroy her. There is no apparent outlet for this particularly fine and delicate “subaltern”, as we come to see as the story evolves: she cannot speak but in death.

Lily’s former employer had had a prescription for chloral, an opiate used for anxiety and sleep, and Lily creates a copy for herself, as her anxiety and sleeplessness, which began with the episode with Gus Trenor, worsens. Lily’s increased sleeplessness, which begins to hit a problematic level with her fall from social grace as she is discovered leaving her best friend’s husband’s home alone at night, because she is terrified by the sense that “everything stands by the bed and stares” (213). 29 Lily apprehends herself as an isolated spectacle, a commoditized femme on display, to be observed in a dark room, by an indiscernible and unnerving audience. 30 This sleeplessness increases as she climbs down the social ladder, working in concert in her transition toward infrastructure as opposed to society.

The early moving image and spectatorship, gives us a helpful way to understand

29 By referring to a tinge of degeneracy I am thinking of Miriam Hansen’s treatment of early cinema (Hansen).
30 Of note, while she is playing the social game with a degree of promise, society is figured as “turning its illuminated face to Lily” (63) in its implied approval when she appears to have landed a wealthy suitor. This illuminated face now returns in an uncanny and subversive citation-appropriation by the face of Lily, when Lily is completing her transition to death-commodity-critical-remainder.
Lily’s transformation as well as her mode of haunting. She is transformed ultimately from one of the top living “faces” of society to the haunting and tinged-degenerate electrified face of the protostarlet, prepared for mass consumption. Completing her transition to death-commodity-critical remainder, Lily begins to literally transform into an electric face, such as might be projected on a screen: Her sleeplessness only increases, and she begins to experience a mechanical kind of aliveness which supplants sleep: Exhausted, yet “as soon as she had lain down every nerve started once more into separate wakefulness. It was as though a great blaze of electric light had been turned on in her head” (421). Lily’s nerves become electric, and an electro-machinic mode of being begins to take precedence, as, in reaction, “her mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light” (Ibid.). Her mind edges away and “shrinks from” this phenomenon and experience, becoming a contracted black hole, compared to the eye contracting “in a blaze of light.” Thought as a defining aspect of human subjectivity becomes contracted as Lily’s performance approaches its peak. More body, more electric, more close to commodity-death.

To counteract her sleeplessness, Lily engages in a fatal inter-commodity relationship with chloral, a chemical compound used as sleeping medication but which can have unpredictable actions upon the system above a certain dose-threshold. An interactive surplus-toxicity takes place here as the toxin assists Lily in her transition and transformation. Part of her insomnia is a fear of haunting dreams which the chloral helps to ward off, in addition to helping her sleep. With Lily’s use of chloral to help her sleep, not only is her mind shrinking away, but she is obliterating her dreams, her unconscious mind, as a part of her consummately performed translation via and into [sic] commodity. That is, to properly become a dream as a haunting, fully-commodified protostarlet as an utopic “end”, Lily must
also, as a subject, be divested of dreams: “In the sleep which the phial procured she sank [...] into depths of dreamless annihilation from which she woke each morning with an obliterated past” (385). This ahistoricity results from the interaction between Lily and the chloral, which insinuates itself into her cells and mind in a toxic animacy (Chen). Later in this same passage, she reflects on the “wasted effort” of her work at the millinery, aligning more closely the alienation of labor as also the alienation of history. To this end, Lily, “stranded in a great waste of disoccupation,” is described as having “lost the sense of time” (395). The effect of the chloral is one of [inadvertent] self-fetishization, following a sinister protocol of historical hygiene and cleansing; dreamless and without a discernible past. She is ready to ironically become – not simply perform – the being of the surplus commodity.

As Lily drifts into her final sleep which will carry her through the [sic] bracket to her end, her [sic] passivity reaches a climactic peak: she feels “the soft approach of passiveness, as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness,” and “gradually the sense of complete subjugation came over her” (422). A“mechanical” reproduction of herself through death allows for her transformation into a haunting proto-starlet. At this moment of Lily’s transition, she hallucinates embracing an infant, the child of a woman whom Lily had helped in donating some of her borrowed money to philanthropic ends: “Nettie Struther’s child was lying on her arm: she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder” and she accommodates herself to its little body to better cradle it as she finally drifts off” (Ibid.). This toxic and fatal engagement with the commodity-chloral in tandem with the infant is a significant fulcrum, and convergence of commodified signifiers of surplus populations. When Lily meets the infant, a few scenes earlier, Nettie Struther, its mother, fatalistically projects, “Wouldn’t it be too lovely for anything if she could grow up to be just like you?”
This statement, expressed out of naïve admiration for Lily as she had appeared in her previous phase of life, while passing, strikes a jarring note. Lily is the destitute femme, and the female infant she hallucinates as she is dying is the future potential replication of Lily as she dies or as she lived; either the beautiful femme who passes, or the destitute female, or both.

In Lily’s quiet death scene, she succumbs to a fatal overdose of chloral, overwrought and destitute. Lily’s ultimate exit from the political economy, which she has always existed in excess of, is figured symbolically by her would-be lover Lawrence Selden’s remarking upon the drawn shade of her window of the dingy tenement room in the slum where she lived at the time of her death, which bore a vibrant pot of pansies on the sill. Selden immediately associates the pansies with Lily, and presumes that window to be her/s (424). When Selden remarks upon Lily’s window on the morning of her death, we are given the synecdoche of the drawn shade for the closed eyes of Lily’s corpse, and the more-vibrant-than-life flowers in front of the blank screen of the drawn windowshade as something which contains and projects “her essence,” according to Selden’s perception. It is as though Lily has escaped through and shattered the shop-window which kept her in the social script, has passed through the film projection screen, and emerged transformed on the other side. Inside her room, “on the bed, with motionless hands and calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart” greeted Selden (426). Even her corpse now is separated from her, and is a semblance among many repeatable, haunting, proliferating semblances. Lily has at this point reterritorialized into the paradigm of the mass media imagery of Lily as a photographic and

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31 In holding the infant, Lily first thrills “with a sense of warmth and returning life”: “At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself” (emphasis added, 413). At this uncanny moment of weakening toxicity by the commodity-agent of the infant, Nettie interrupts Lily’s sensations by saying, “Wouldn’t it be too lovely for anything if she could grow up to be just like you?” (Ibid).
This story, in a sense, *does not* pass on, and remains encrypted in *House of Mirth*, as the word to be exchanged between star-crossed lovers Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart. The reader waits for the word, which would have potentially resolved things between Lily and Selden, only to watch it pass silently between them: “in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (431), never having the opportunity to know what it is. The word passes in silence. Rather more like a flickering image, or, afterimage, barely registered or accessible to the consciousness of the reader-cum-viewer. That is to say, it in itself is an embedded commentary on the death and silence associated with the emergent mass culture of the image and film – as film is silent, still, at the time of Wharton’s writing.

“This is not a story to pass on.” Returning to my address of the haunting nature of the closing lines of Morrison’s *Beloved*, there are several ways in which the *denouement* of *House of Mirth* responds to this ambivalent injunction. This can be arrived at by way of a consideration of exchange and circulation – which becomes more evidently apparent in *Light in August* – since it is ultimately not only Lily’s face and body that serve as currency over the course of the novel, but her interaction with a chemical compound, and an infant, and her own quiet vaporization and diffusion into the city and its infrastructure that we are left with.

How does Lily haunt, then, would be the natural question that follows. The small sum that Mrs. Peniston leaves to Lily, in place of her estate [that Lily was originally set to inherit], is exactly equal to the amount that Lily has come to understand that she owes to Gus Trenor, as his “investments” were but socio-erotically binding and damning gifts of his own money. Lily receives this sum on the eve of her death, and she dies having left a check addressed to Trenor on her desk. This money will go back to him and return into circulation, touching innumerable others. This money is also connected to the infant as Lily’s donation
from the funds helped the infant’s mother. Haunting in the form of vibrant pansies, money returned, and infants cursed, Lily herself is also at once a window, a social orifice, and a concrete corporeal remainder.

In *Beloved*, the infant was murdered and returns as a palpable ghost, for a time. In *House of Mirth* and *Light in August*, the adult who is social refuse is murdered/gives herself up to death, but not without first making some sort of discursive and molecular contact with a newly born infant, to carry the legacy of suffering, maybe, or maybe this could be a potentially redemptive narrative. The tropes of the biocapitalist circulation as well as the window-screen figure that engages more directly with mass media circulation and the early moving image, are admittedly subtle hints available to a close reader of *House of Mirth* attuned to these cultural agents. These become altogether evident to the close reader of *Light in August*, which takes place and is written a few decades later, by an author who himself is more directly aware of and engaged in the evolution of cinema.

*Light in August: Joe Christmas*

William Faulkner’s 1932 novel *Light in August* gives us the story of Joe Christmas in conversation with the story of Lena Grove, a young pregnant unmarried woman who passes as married (to a white man) while Joe passes as a white man. In the interwar Jim Crow south, the “beard” of the white man is the one sure guarantor of mobility, safety, and respect. Both perform a virtuosic social and spatial mobility. Lena’s story serves as a literal and figurative – and ultimately biological – frame-narrative for Joe’s. The contingent interpenetration of the spaces and shapes of movement that Lena and Joe occupy culminates in the symbolic overlay of his story onto Lena’s infant shortly after he is born.

Lena Grove’s story of traveling in search of her child’s father brackets the narrative
of Joe Christmas, who is apparently (this is never irrefutably proven) a very light-skinned black man who passes for most of his life, but is deeply traumatized, and also an orphan as a result of his bigoted grandfather having killed both of his parents upon the suspicion that the father was black. Christmas is revealed by his bootlegging business partner – who also happens to be the father of Lena’s child – to be mixed (therefore, black) as the sheriff was searching for a perpetrator in the event of the suicide and burning house of the white woman that Joe was in a relationship with, Joanna Burden. Christmas is blamed for her murder, and for the burning down of her house, and is a fugitive who finally turns himself in out of exhaustion. Just as Christmas is about to be executed, Lena’s child is born, and Christmas’s grandmother, who has discovered Christmas’s whereabouts on the eve of his execution and is a bit senile, visits Lena and her newborn son and re-lives the birth of Joe, to the point of thinking that Lena is her dead daughter, and that the infant is her grandson.

In the way that Lena serves as the bracket to the story of Joe Christmas’s fatally failed passing narrative – she is the bracket to his sic in “[sic],” she is the packaging that legitimates and allows Faulkner to relate the story that performs such a deep and nuanced indictment and critique of racism in the south. The effectiveness of this packaging is reflected even in the paratext on the back cover of the latest re-printed edition, where readers are told that Light in August is “a novel about hopeful perseverance in the face of mortality, [that] features guileless, dauntless Lena Grove […] and Joe Christmas, a desperate, enigmatic drifter consumed by his mixed ancestry.” Notably, Christmas’s name appears last in a list of characters in this blurb. Such a reading perpetuates a marginalization and invalidation of Joe Christmas’s story that Faulkner portrays and critiques. At the same time,

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32 Joe is orphaned because of his bigoted grandfathers’s murder of both of his parents upon suspicion of Joe’s father’s mixed heritage.
Faulkner packages Joe’s story by that of Lena’s because the frame of the white woman is palatable and approachable, enabling the tragic story of Joe Christmas to gain more broad circulation than it otherwise might have. My reading seeks to recuperate the deep critical work that Faulkner sets in motion with the novel’s portrayal of Christmas’s life. Thus, is it important to recognize that rather than serving as the primary protagonist, Lena is the always-already spectral frame that interacts with a deeper story of national crisis via the white patriarchal family-orientation to which both an unfettered, mobile unmarried woman and black man are imagined as threats in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Duggan).

As I read it, Lena is the metonymic wandering womb that frames Joe’s cruel life story of racist abuse, trauma and murder. The delusional discourse around her infant, and the contingent connection to Joe with the father of Lena’s child as his bootlegging business partner, enacts a Deleuzian “becoming light in august” event, which extends Joe Christmas’s sic chic passing in the vehicle of her newborn infant, i.e. an enfleshment of biocapitalist currency. Here, and in House of Mirth, newborn infants function as part and parcel of sic chic’s becoming spectral, as sort of a symbolic ball of flesh that again functions not only as currency but as mode of symbolic exchange granting mobility: The newborn is a toxic-commodity-agent mediating agent between life and death, giving the ability to become spectral and move into death at the same time as she lives on and haunts through a significant discursive contact with the infant.

I argue that, particularly in Light in August, bio-capital is the currency of the subaltern. Embodied currency in order to access embodied circulation, where the line inevitably and nevertheless between subject and object; citizen and commodity, remains necessarily nebulous. Furthermore, both Lena and Joe are orphans, and therefore fertile sites as characters for the overlay of biocapitalist significations. The metaphor of the egg has
particular expansiveness in *Light in August*, beginning with “egg-money” that is the only money that women have a claim to, which was given to Lena by another woman to help her along on her pilgrimage early in the novel, and then, closer to the close, Joe’s expression of his precarity, saying that he was tired of “of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs” (337). The death of Joe Christmas is punctuated by a brutal castration, which is significant in terms of revealing and critiquing a necropolitical biocapitalist economy, speaking for instance to eugenics of race and forced sterilization: Joe Christmas’s biocapitalist “currency” of reproductive flesh is *removed* as a part of the consummation of his [sic] passing; ie his death.

The first page of the novel reveals to us that Lena is both on the move and an orphan – a ready sic chic allegory for capital: in motion, with no accountable ontology.\(^33\) *Light in August* opens and closes with the figure of the surprisingly – and stuplimest – mobile femme in Lena Grove, “getting around” (Ngai). Not only is Lena constantly “passing through,” she passes as a respectable married woman, and she serves as the narrative frame for a core tragic story about Joe Christmas’s failed and fraught interracial passing. Lena’s pregnancy initiates the action of the novel, propels her out of the window in her sixth month, to sneak out and hit the road, in ostensible pursuit of her child’s father, Lucas Burch, who had skipped town upon hearing of her pregnancy several months earlier.\(^34\) Lena mobilizes her visibly pregnant body to sustain her laconically discursive act of passing as a ‘respectable woman’ who has allegedly ‘been sent for’ by her baby’s father, whom she sometimes refers to as a husband. She obtains free rides from a variety of men on her way.

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\(^33\) This is a bit different than the opening of *House of Mirth* with Lily more static and backgrounded, blending into her industrial city context, though her above-cited “desultory air” implies a potentiality of motion and mobility.

\(^34\) Joe has a relationship with windows as well – he uses a window as his exit from the McEachern’s; and as a way in and out of Joanna’s home
The wife of one of these men sees through Lena’s story and knows she has been abandoned. She is enraged and gives Lena all of her “egg money” – which is the only actual cash-capital that a woman has as her exclusive right at that period. Incidentally, one might argue that “egg”-money is precisely the bio-capitalistic agency that Lena has been availing herself of all along the journey: That of her advanced pregnancy, as she treats the infant in her womb as her only egg-money. This pregnancy wouldn’t exist without her relationship with Lucas Burch—the capital comes about as a result of interaction with the man.\(^\text{35}\) She gains access to the road, and to the rides, which ultimately seem to be their own circular teleology: what Lena ultimately appears to enjoy, if anything at all, is being in motion, with no clear end to the ongoing road trip in sight.

Above all, Lena functions as a diegetic vehicle connected to the filmic medium, which has its own connotations of reproducibility and perpetuity that are more properly haunting and uncanny. Lena Grove is context and road and filmic background. Lena has made her exit towards freedom of motion through a window. The metaphor of the window for the movies and the movie screen has a dialogic relationship with Lena’s pregnancy in terms of the “reproduction” aspect of the moving image.\(^\text{36}\) Lena is the quintessential unresponsive chora for the story of this painful birthdeath false rebirth of a nation in the postbellum south. She serves as the brackets to Joe’s “sic.” Her narrative and peripatetic tale opens and closes the novel, within which we find a peripatetic tale a different sort with the story of Joe Christmas. Passive, impenetrable, and unemotive, Lena Grove tethers the story of Joe Christmas’s tragic life to a space and place and also to a sense of a certain validation

\(^{35}\) With a discursive and biological “sanctioning” of her social realness by a man – “I am being sent for”/visible pregnancy – both communicate the touch-ownership of her body by a man.

\(^{36}\) In all likelihood Faulkner intends for reproduction and film to have some sort of alignment even by the popular illustrations on covers of *Light in August* emphasizing light and photographic imagery.
of false hope. The never-ending loop of movement connects to the notion of Lena as the filmic substrate to the central story of Joe Christmas’s life and death. As both commodity and currency, the pregnant Lena Grove exhibits a kinship with capital and the commodity form, in the degree to which she is portrayed as stupefied and torpid. Described as having an air of “peaceful astonishment,” (12) she delivers and maintains a calm and neutral demeanor, a sort of always-already dead hope that speaks itself as a hollow form. Lena frames the story with a deadpan affect, machinic and film-like. From this initial and overarching packaging and bracket around Joe by a white woman’s body and/or womb, my reading traces a multiplicity of “white wombs” that punctuate Joe’s story as it is narrated and he experiences it.

Joe Christmas’s – whose initials, J.C. equally denote the martyred Jesus Christ and the violent regime of Jim Crow – violent and tragic story is not a story to pass on, and yet this is a story that does nothing but pass on. Joe Christmas’s life story is one that is never not framed, packaged, presented with a discursive and even biological envelope. This is the status and experience of blackness in the Jim Crow south and, really also here and now.

Just as Lena is the enframing subject, I will argue Joe Christmas to be not only the enframed subject, but in fact ultimately a performance of constant enframed-ness, yielding a subject without content beyond [sic]kness. His connections to commodity items, along with his out-of-body experiences, and retching/vomiting work in conjunction with a repeated and recursive birthing of Joe Christmas by white wombs, down to his own skin, in the final analysis. His blackness as repeatedly enveloped by and birthed by white wombs gives his character a unique leverage upon the cultural anxiety of contamination, and the notion of the toxic agent, which it would seem that Faulkner is thus situating (appropriately so, in terms of the racist conceptions of what blackness is, which play out in the novel) ontologically within
whiteness (and, ultimately, bigotry).

Joe’s role relating to commodified object-agents of toxicity is especially implicated in the biocapitalist or flesh-capital system (heritage of slavery). In a brilliant response to the anxiety of racial contamination as a mode of toxicity, Faulkner’s narrative shows Joe to be “birthed” by multiple white wombs, at each critical turn of events in his life. Thus, like Lena’s use of the “touch of the man” as a beard that gives her mobility, in Joe’s case, the touch of the white woman gives him his mobility as well as the ultimate mobility of death.

Joe appears as the commodified inanimate already-ghost. Christmas’s first appearance in the novel is as a spectacle of smoke: both a commodified spectacle and a ghost, Joe Christmas first appears as a spectacular column of yellow smoke. As Lena arrives into Jefferson, Joanna Burden’s house is burning, and Joe Christmas will be implicated in the crime of her death and the conflagration of her house. We first encounter Christmas’s physical person when he presents himself for a job at the mill in Jefferson, on the following page. Byron Bunch describes Joe’s face in terms of his flesh being “a level dead parchment color” (34), and Faulkner emphasizes, “Not the skin: the flesh itself, as though the skull had been molded in a still and deadly regularity and then baked in a fierce oven” (34-5). His flesh is like paper, and therefore a site available for the mark of discourse. He appears, further, to be a dead, ossified subject: a doll. Further, Joe is described again by Bunch in terms of his smoking and the smoke from his cigarette interacts with and veils his face: “the cigarette in one side of his mouth and the smoke sneering across his face” (35). Later, as he is wandering at night, after Joanna Burden’s suicide, and Joe is illuminated bare-chested by a passing car’s lights, Faulkner writes that “he watched his body grow white out of the darkness like a Kodak print emerging from the liquid” (108). This ties Joe’s racialized body to the photographic film. In the final chase scene, Joe is identifiable at a distance by the light
glancing off of the nickel plated gun that his grandmother gave to him when she visited him in jail. Again, the touch of a white woman, but also here the metonymic association of black masculinity with violence and guns.

Christmas’s life is told in flashbacks, and punctuated by traumatic and violent and out of body experiences, which dovetail with the above-referenced “white-womb-birthing” experiences, where he (as light-skinned) might as well be his own white womb to his black identity (and to which the final castration scene draws certain connections). In the middle of Joe’s first traumatic out-of-body experience as a child, which we are given as a flashback right before the scene Joanna Burden’s death, Faulkner writes, “he was too young yet to escape from the world of women for that brief respite before he escaped back into it to remain until the hour of his death” (121). This recollection comes to Christmas at a key moment in the novel, where he is wandering, with a razor, contemplating what he perceives to be an obligation to possibly kill Joanna Burden, his lover. Appropriately, an extended reflective meditation on his first trauma, and his first quasi-sexual experience comes to mind, preceded by the lines “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders” (119). The agency of memory here, of belief, is greater than that of “knowing” or “recollecting” speaks to the experience of memory as an irrational haunting, perhaps foreshadowing the way in which Christmas operates as and soon becomes a specter himself.

This first out-of-body experience commodity-connected trauma occurs when Joe was sneaking toothpaste from the orphanage dietitian’s room – apparently an illicit pleasure of his that he enjoyed and had been partaking in for a year before he was discovered accidentally. The description preceding this scene sets Christmas up as a quiet specter already: “he was like a shadow, small even for five years, sober and quiet as a shadow.
Another in the corridor could not have said just when and where he vanished, into what door, what room” (119-120). When he arrives at the washstand and obtains the tube of paste, there is an animate and racialized fleshiness to the toothpaste, as Faulkner describes Joe “watching the pink worm coil smooth and cool and slow onto his parchmentcolored finger” (120). It is pink, like a worm, and is intended to whiten (teeth). It is here an allegory for whiteness as parasitic (worm) and, ultimately, for Christmas’s internalized racism, with which he has a complicated relationship, at once identifying with and desiring and internalizing it, and then viscerally being unable to truly assume that ideological enframing, and violently rejecting it. Again, in the above description, Christmas’s skin is “parchmentlike.” Notably, the dietitian is described, herself, as “smooth, pink-and-white… making his mouth think of something sweet and sticky to eat, and also pinkcolored and surreptitious” (120). The connection between the paste and the dietitian’s body gives the scene a flavor of a first interracial sexual experience, mediated by a commodity relating to hygiene. Therefore the specter of contamination via miscegenation is also in the mix. As Joe is watching the toothpaste, he hears footsteps, and to avoid being discovered, “still silent as a shadow on his bare feet he crossed the room and slipped beneath a cloth curtain which screened off one corner of the room,” still holding the tube and the pink worm in his hand (120). In hiding, he continues to consume the toothpaste: “by taste and not seeing he contemplated the cool invisible worm as it coiled onto his finger and smeared sharp, automatonlike and sweet, into his mouth” (121). Again, per the description, the toothpaste seems very much like a toxic animacy, coiling like a worm, and smearing “sharp, automatonlike,” with the reference to automation limning the cultural anxiety of modernization. The excessive consumption of toothpaste makes Joew sick, and even before he vomits, he is outside himself/beside himself: “He seemed to be turned in upon himself,
watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of paste into his mouth
which his stomach did not want” (120). The repetition of “himself” here has a heightened
effect of making the very concept of his subjectivity (“himself”) a strange effect of verbal
description and visual observation. The narration of the episode continues with Joe
Christmas increasingly hollowed-out and his sense of self or agency becoming evacuated:

Sure enough, it refused to go down. […] At once the paste which he had already
swallowed lifted inside him, trying to get back out. It was no longer sweet. In the rife,
womansmelling obscurity behind the curtain he squatted, pinkfoamed, listening to
his insides, waiting with astonished fatalism for what was about to happen to him.
Then it happened. He said to himself with complete and passive surrender: ‘Well,
here I am.’

When the curtain fled back he did not look up. When hands dragged him
violently out of his vomit he did not resist. (122)

The toothpaste has agency, lifting itself, as also does the curtain, as do the hands that drag
him out as his retching leads to his discovery. On the other hand, Christmas is “waiting with
astonished fatalism,” he does not resist, and in “complete and passive surrender,” he says the
words which are later echoed when he has finished with running from the law and is ready
to face death, “Well, here I am.” It is significant that the object of his illicit desire here is
toothpaste, a commodity denoting hygiene and whiteness that is also advertised in terms of
romantic intimacy. He takes too much of it in and his body rejects it wholly, becoming sick.
Per the verbiage of the advertisements of the time, toothpaste was meant to both _whiten_
teeth and _remove film_ from teeth. Both intended to bleach, and to remove a skin-like layer.37

Ultimately, Christmas reacts with a visceral refusal of the agent of social hygiene and
whiteness: it is this that is toxic, for him. This first out of body experience of Christmas’s,
with the toothpaste, represents another “birthing” by a white womb – the dietitian’s – as this
incident leads to a transition into a different phase of his life. Suspicions about Christmas’s

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37 In addition to serving as a potential reference to the filmic media.
racial purity become grounds for the nutritionist to kick him out in order to save herself from being discovered in her illicit affair.

Joe’s second out-of-body experience occurs at seventeen, when, hoping to elope with a young (white), he instead ends up being birthed along by this experience into yet another phase – his life on the road. Her friends beat him up, and his passive receptivity to violence shows Joe as passive spectacle:

“There was nothing in his eyes at all, no pain, no surprise. But apparently he could not move; he just lay there with a profoundly contemplative expression […] Lying peaceful and still Joe watched the stranger lean down and lift his head from the floor and strike him again in the face” (122).

Following this experience, Joe is on the road, one that “ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long” (224). He first passes, then lives in black communities in the north, and ultimately returns to the south, where he then takes up residence with the father of Lena’s infant, Lucas Burch, who has changed his name to Joe Brown.

When living in Jefferson with Burch/Brown, Joe begins a sexual and quasi-romantic relationship with Joanna Burden, the white woman who owns the land on which Brown and Christmas’s cabin is. When the possibility of Joanna’s being pregnant arises, the couple appears to have arrived at a suicide pact.38 “Then there’s just one other thing to do,” said Joanna to Joe, and he echoed, “There’s just one other thing to do” (281). Joe comes in with his razor, prepared to kill her. Instead she shoots herself, leaving another bullet in the revolver for him, but Joe never uses it. Instead, he flees after likely slitting her throat with

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38 There is a shift/rupture when there is some confusion as to whether Joanna Burden is pregnant. Eventually it seems that she has stopped menstruating because she hit menopause, or that she has some other female illness or cancer. It is ultimately still an unanswered question, just like the never-quite-answered question of Joe’s racial origin.
the razor, based on the sheriff’s account of the crime scene. Rather than ‘passing’ a baby, Joanna ‘passes away’ as/after a bullet ‘passed’ into her. The fatal shot, which Christmas watches her execute as a cinematic shadow-play on the wall of the room: “He was watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away” (283), and of which he is ultimately convicted of performing, sends a small piece of metal into her body, which kills her. This scene/event is then the transition into the next brief phase of Joe’s life, as a true fugitive, this time. This new phase is where Joe is a fugitive in the truest sense of the word, fleeing from the sheriff’s search party and dogs. The search party includes his former business partner Burch/Brown, who has ratted him out and expects a thousand-dollar reward for his retrieval.

Meanwhile, Joe performs as a [sic] black man who is white in appearance, yet who has wholly internalized both his blackness (toxic, to the Jim Crow South cultural perspective) and the toxic racist values of the Jim Crow south. Joe Christmas is a black man performing a whiteface bigotry and racism. How does a white-skinned black man go about performing whiteface bigotry and racism, if not by performing the very acts of violence (and allowing himself to be accused of the ones he has not in fact performed) [sic] that represent the worst stereotypes of black men? In the final raid that Christmas does on the black church. He is perceived as white by the parishioners, therefore the raid is not only [sic] performative of the phantasmatic depraved and violent black man, but critically performative of the actual depraved violence of the white man, as a [sic] “black man” [sic] passing as “white.” Notably, after Joe has apparently killed several black parishioners, there is a retching scene.39 Christmas cannot stomach this performance, this behavior, I would argue here. In a much

39 Let’s not forget the trauma Christmas had to endure regarding religion at the hands of Mr. McEachern: Making this episode symptomatic of his traumatic experiences with and internalizations of religion and racism.
more violent and tragic and real way, this scene is a throwback to the toothpaste-consuming sex-spectator scene, where Christmas’s body rejects the agent of whiteness at the expense of his safety hiding quietly behind the curtain. The bottom line is that Joe can’t be white. It makes him sick. It makes him throw up. It’s ultimately preferable to Christmas to be black, whatever the most dire consequences may be, which are ultimately his final hunt scene followed by gunshot wounds and brutal castration at the gleeful hands of a deluded ex-confederate fighter (323). He is eventually captured after he ends up hitching a ride into the town of his birth. His grandfather, Doc Hines, calls him out, and then both his grandmother and grandfather follow him to Jefferson.

Meanwhile Lena is in Christmas’s former cabin, possibly even on his cot, about to birth her baby of whom Burch/Brown is the father. Somehow Joe Christmas’s grandparents end up with Lena at the cabin, while Byron Bunch has pitched a tent nearby. Christmas’s grandmother, Mrs. Hines, delusionally relives and actively revises the scene of Christmas’s birth—recreating a birth scenario where her daughter Milly (Lena, here) does not die, and where her husband, Doc Hines, does not make off to a mysterious unknown location with the orphaned infant. She calls Lena’s baby (who remains in fact nameless, because she vacuously relates that she hasn’t thought of a name for him yet) Joe or Joey, and confuses Lena into thinking that Mrs. Hines thinks that Joe Christmas is the father of the child. There is a curious passage—Lena’s most verbal moment of the novel—when she relates the scene with Mrs. Hines to the Reverend Hightower, saying that she wants to avoid that sort of confusion. Notably, Lena interprets the grandmother’s actions as assuming Joe Christmas to be the father, not the actual child, so it adds a spectral inheritance to the child, though entirely contingent and also haptic, via the grandmother’s embrace. Here, an abstraction that takes place in Joe’s deluded grandmother’s mind makes of Lena’s physical womb a womb
for Joe Christmas, adding valence to the narrative womb-frame role that she and her story already play in the novel.⁴⁰

This womb-function of Lena’s birthing of her baby as somehow a surrogate for Joe Christmas and his life (which is about to be extinguished by Percy Grimm) is reinforced as also a biocapitalist transaction when Lucas Burch/Joe Brown is induced to come and see Lena and their baby. Byron Bunch, seeking to do good on his offer to help Lena find Burch/Brown, asks the sheriff to bring Brown to see Lena and the baby before the trial. The Sheriff complies in part because he rightly presumes that Lucas Burch/Joe Brown will hit the road again, thus allowing the sheriff to not have to pay out the bounty on Joe Christmas’s head. The deputy brings Lucas Burch/Joe Brown to the cabin on the false grounds that the reward is in there. Sure enough, Burch/Brown flees out the back door of the cabin after a brief exchange with Lena. Brown’s ultimate farcical “reward,” substituting the thousand-dollar bounty, is his own baby. This falls into line with the trans-temporal delusional connection that Mrs. Hines creates between Christmas and the infant: Where the bounty stood as a payment of capital for the life of Christmas, the infant serves as a commodity exchange item for the life of Joe Christmas, ultimately, as far as Burch/Brown is concerned.

In line with the character parallelism between Christmas and Brown that extends beyond their shared quarters and business partnership, Christmas makes a jailbreak that is synchronous with Brown’s own flight. Readers led to understand that Mrs. Hines not only enables a jailbreak by Christmas but gives him a “heavy nickelplated revolver,” leading

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⁴⁰ Joe Christmas’s death follows closely on the heels of the birth of Lena’s son. — this is different from traditional notions of reincarnation, which require the death of a person before the child is born for them to be in them—but spectral cryptic sic chic haunting is of a less direct nature of transmission, and requires a haptic-discursive contingency for transmission and haunting, which requires the sic chic and the infant to be both alive for the reciprocal toxicity to take place.
Christmas to his next transition of his final fugitive chase, and at least partially shields him from the public spectacle of death which would have otherwise awaited him.

At the conclusion of the ensuing hunt, performed by a band of local holdover confederatists led by Percy Grimm, Christmas is discovered and ultimately murdered in Reverend Hightower’s house. When the other men notice what Grimm is doing, leaning over the body after he has shot Christmas, “one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit” (464). This transference of Christmas’s symptom of retching is the first hint that he is in the process of completing a transition to spectrality, infiltrating himself as the ghostly image and presence that will haunt these men forever, as a later passage makes clear. A white man throwing up, just as Christmas did on the two occasions when he viscerally realized that he did not want to actually pass completely, and internalize whiteness as such; when he rejected his whiteness. Christmas, on the other hand, is performing utter passivity as during prior incidents of violence perpetrated against him: “He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness” (464). So we have the rejection of white bigotry simultaneous with the passive acceptance thereof in dialectical tension in this scene. This final scene of Christmas’s life here is his own white-skinned body’s birthing the ghost of itself out of its own loins, via Grimm’s brutal castration of Christmas – the material-enfleshed agent and representation of his place within a biocapitalist system of circulation:

For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.

(464-465)

41 The sheriff says “it is out of our hands now,” washing his hands of the situation and turning a blind eye to the murder.
Moving thus out of material biocapitalist circulation, and into a spectrality, which Faulkner here makes quite clear to be a permanent haunting of the traumatic imprintation into their memories of the way that Christmas passes/away:

They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. (465)

This “of itself” repeated, reiterates an autonomous agency to the traumatic haunting that Christmas’s death leaves behind that is passive: “musing, quiet, steadfast […] not particularly threatful […] serene” yet persistent: “not fading […] triumphant.”

**Conclusion: Defect (v.)**

In conclusion, both *The House of Mirth* and *Light in August* seem to narrate/advocate a certain freedom that comes in dying, though dying in a way that persists by haunting associated with visual media. To pass is toxic. Implicating their lives, Lily Bart and Joe Christmas bring the producing subject into the performative node of virtuosity that Virno theorizes in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. That is to say, where Joe Christmas assumes whiteness and bigotry in the black church, and where Lily becomes the flower, the chloral, her beneficiary’s daughter, and the money that she borrowed, which is put back into circulation – these are all virtuosic performances that are also a fatal citation of what is conceived to emblematize black masculinity and white femininity.

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42 Were this a Toni Morrison novel, it would end here. And I think that it would be most effective, respectful, appropriate, and impactful that way. However, given the narrative frame of Lena Grove’s story that Faulkner has deployed from the beginning, which is also representative of the diegetic technique of many films from this period with otherwise potentially strong political messages, we have the perfunctory zoom-out to the diegetic frame. Which we see, for instance, in the 1934 John Stahl film version of *Imitation of Life*, where after the extremely moving scene of Delilah’s funeral we are jarred into the racist reality of life by the return to the narratives of Bea et al without any indication of bereavement.
By thus delivering themselves over – performing an assimilation to the commodity-form simultaneous to their exit from the system – in their final, fatal performances the producing subject, the product, and the act of producing are joined together in a gesture of flight. I call these products, transformations, and remainders “commodity,” loosely, meaning signify a product that is either consumed or exchanged, with a certain value placed upon it. In thus fusing subject to productive action to commodity-product in death, Lily and Joe’s radically corporealized, fatal virtuosic performances opportunistically prey upon the Marxist anxiety of a loss of subjecthood in the production of commodities (Ferguson 7). Lily and Joe’s dependency on and interaction with toxic/hygienic substances – inasmuch as they themselves were objectified surplus subjects – is a precursor to the implosion of capitalist thought and value systems that their ultimate self-commodification-death performs, since the scene then becomes one of commodities and commodified subjects interacting with each other, without mediation.

At the conclusion of his introduction to Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Sylvère Lotringer writes, “A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of capital…” (18). Both autonomous from and derivative of “capital,” this specter “of capital” is the defecting subject who exerts her own agency while also performing a citational critique leveraged at the system laboring under and for capital. I propose a figuration of the “specter of capital” consisting of excessive subjects who die both willfully and as an indirect casualty of the political economy which excludes them. In particular, subjects who transform themselves into subversive citations of capital by performing self-commoditization. This self-commoditization in turn performs an uncanny labor which critiques and reveals the injustices and flaws of the system. I propose that we take a utopic view of the “specter of
capital” which performs a critical labor exemplary of a lived *tertium datur* after life: Taking the option that is not given, or that which might seem always just out of reach – on the horizon, as the “end” of one’s desire for self-possession or freedom.

43 The “third possibility” that is not given (*tertium non datur*) – a utopic exit from a Manichean dialectic.
Chapter Two: The Shape of Her Hand: Revolutionary Textuality and [Sic] Autobiographical Praxis

“\[Freedom is\]... to be born again, in a different place with regard to law and sociality, and the ability to self-name and self-own. (Spillers 2017)

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. (Jacobs 259)

The Speaking Tertium Datur

Near the beginning of his famous essay “Structures of Feeling,” critiquing the inadequacy of the terms of social historical analysis (“fixed forms”) to the lived dynamism of present and emergent cultural formations, the British cultural theorist Raymond Williams writes, “Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their surviving records are against it. But the living will not be reduced, at least in the first person; living third persons may be different.” (Williams 129) This seemingly offhand comment about “living third persons” strikes me, though he never comes back to it. What is a “living third person” if not the “excluded middle,” the “tertium non datur” of civil society?44 That is to say, women and people of color and non-first-world nations; the subject position “that is not given,” the viability of one’s life and person that is not self-evident or given; the reason that the black

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44 Luce Irigaray writes of the third person or term, a “he” or “she” excluded from the conversation between an “I” and a “you”, and defined from without, to be a primary social death and also primary oedipal ontological scene for the subject in language. That is to say, while the third person [“s/he”] “is nothing and nobody,” this grammatical position is also “the possibility of identification and of permutation of […] the only terms that effect communication” [“I”/“you”], as speaker and addressee. This possibility, and the attunement to it, is where I call upon the femme who is subject of description, prescription and proscription to a queer [sic] practice of critical inquiry in a practice of self writing (Irigaray 2002).
lives matter movement is important.

I concluded the preceding chapter with a proposal that we conceive of the critical work of haunting that the characters in my analysis perform as a “lived tertium datur.” That is to say, a utopic enactment of the excluded middle – the socially and politically foreclosed category of being. In relation to the post-civil war and early 20th century American public sphere (“American Modernity”) the tertium non datur being, as my dissertation elaborates, “reproductive flesh.” That is to say, a dual lineage first defined by the utter fungibility and flesh of enslaved Black people in service of the reproduction of the necessary conditions for the perpetuation of capital/growth, and second by the female body as it is aligned with the domestic sphere more broadly speaking – reproductive flesh in a biological sense, and one that is also legally treated as property and as yet without a vote.

Drawing inspiration from Williams’s questions and challenges in “Structures of Feeling,” particularly with regard to the notion of “surviving records” and “living third persons,” this chapter engages with the speculative, spectral, utopic non-space that the “surviving records” of “living third persons” might be understood to populate. That is to say, the paradoxical space of survival of non-dead third persons, and the paradoxical being of a written record of a category of person foreclosed from the realm of speech and thus from publically recognized subjectivity (Foucault, Spivak). The case study for this chapter will be autobiographical writing emerging from the domestic sphere. Reading Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the “Objects” section of Gertrude Stein’s 1914 poetry collection, Tender Buttons, I argue that these women write in a way that both challenges and channels the muteness of objecthood variously attributed to them. Jacobs, Gilman, and Stein enact themselves into “surviving records” of “living third persons” speaking as and through
crevices of the domestic: garrets, furniture, wallpaper, and crockery.

The domestic sphere as an originary site for “the world of letters” occupies a uniquely liminal space in the architecture of public, private, and intimate spheres in relation to the humanized writing subject as agent of popular opinion, as laid out by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*. Habermas offers that the world of letters offers a throughway from the intimate private sphere to the public sphere. Hence, “the representation of the interests of the privatized domain of a market economy was interpreted with the aid of ideas grown in the soil of intimate sphere of the conjugal family,” which was conceived as “humanity’s genuine site” (51-52). Habermas is of course speaking of writing produced by civically extant persons, that is to say, persons whose autonomy is based on the ownership of property, and not persons whose primary existence is as objects of property (i.e. women, slaves). Thus, autobiographical writing emergent from the intimate domestic sphere but written by slaves and women between the civil and first world wars in the U.S., then, constitutes an especially paradoxical textuality where the tertium datur happens to be both subject and object of discourse. This articulates a liminal zone in relation both to subject, property, who and what is “humanity,” and genre, that the accepted “fixed forms” of social analysis are indeed ill-equipped to contain. This is why I qualify these writings as revolutionary. They are revolutionary acts of self assertion by “non selves” that articulate also a therapeutic social emplacement and new genre of belonging. Not surprisingly, each of the texts I analyze is unorthodox and disruptive to the conventions of the genre that the text approximates. These texts and women are reaching, in every sense, toward “something else to be.”

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45 Roderick Ferguson titles a chapter in *Aberrations in Black* after the line in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* about Sula and Nel’s friendship as something that allowed them to envision “something else to be” in their world. This chapter theorizes coalitional revolutionary praxis that imagines new connections and genres.
To guide this chapter’s inquiry, I frame my thinking with three epigraphs. The first, from Williams:

The actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence. not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange.

(emphasis mine 131)

Williams describes an undefined “embryonic phase” of thinking and feeling that is both social and material, and, perhaps more importantly, asserts its defiance of a mythicized silence. At the same time, as “embryonic,” Williams describes the generic style of articulation of minoritarian cultural formations – such as those I read here – as just below the surface of readily legible acts of communication – a “fully articulated and defined exchange.” Not yet fully legible, and categorically not silent, subaltern autobiographical texts such as Jacobs’s, Gilman’s, and Stein’s necessarily confound generic conventions in order to speak themselves into being. and My second epigraph, from “Shades of Intimacy,” a recent public talk given by Hortense Spillers, is a meditation on what freedom is for a Black woman, as: “to be born again, in a different place with regard to law and sociality, and the ability to self-name and self-own.” I understand Spillers’s “born again” as a metaphorical birth, but my reading seeks to dwell on the phenomenological commonalities – felt, sensed, enclosed, carried, kinship-making states and spaces that allow the subject to access a new relation to law and sociality. A metaphorical re-birth that requires gestation and confinement within a womb-like space or crypt – physical, felt, social, discursive. The womb (metaphorical or not) in these instances is both a space of refuge and a space of pain and proximity to death. The embryonic gestational state leading up to rebirth outside of existing legal and social confines, must exist in the ongoing present, in what one might call the crevices of public (legal, social) discourse.

What might an embryonic phase of communication articulating material and social
exchange – which might go on to constitute a new form of social collectivity – look like?

What does it take to achieve the freedom that Spillers articulates: to be born again, in a
different place with regard to law and sociality, and the ability to self-name and self-own?

Looking to my primary texts as I reach for an answer. For my third epigraph, I pull the
famous line from Harriet Jacobs’s text: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the
usual way, with marriage.” This line reorients me to the question of civic personhood in
relation to the public sphere. In defiance of marriage, which would conscribe even an
ostensibly free black woman to the status of object of property, Jacobs turns away from the
conjugal family and prioritize the right to self naming and self ownership. Her statement self
consciously leverages a reflexive critique of nineteenth century melodramatic literary
conventions, brings the focus away from gendered embodiment, and turns a critical eye
toward the positional relation of her writing between intimate, private, and public spheres.46

[Sic] Autobiographical Praxis: Writing Living Third Persons

With etymological origins as a term of agreement, “[sic]” is a graphemic marker of
error within a reproduced quotation in a written text, defined as “a parenthetical insertion
used in printing quotations or reported utterances to call attention to something anomalous
or erroneous in the original, or to guard against the supposition of misquotation” (OED).

Notably, this notation is intended as a mute textual object that is not intended to be spoken
when read aloud, though it registers obviously in the printed text. Here I think of [sic] as a

46 She does note that she longs to have a home of her own for her children—this is not a turning away from
the space of the intimate domestic sphere altogether – this space is not an ontological given for the enslaved
and past slavery subject. This undoubtedly complicates my discussion, and brings to mind Wilderson’s “ruse of
analogy.” My work does not fall into the ruse of analogy however, as I do not ignore or erase the particularity
of Jacobs’s experience, while finding it fruitful to discuss her text in conjunction with Gilman and Stein’s as a
part of the literary architecture that emerges when we search for signs of the disavowed reproductive flesh of
American modernity.
textual fracture or fissure, a quiet opening in discourse that says “yes, it was thus, [sic], and that was wrong, and it is still thus and still wrong and I am trying it on, to learn to speak.”

Through the bracket of “[sic]” the circumscribed deadened subject stands a chance at being a surviving archive. Understood in this way, [sic] is an analytic which intends to shed light on the agency of the subordinated as expressed by practices of apparent acquiescence. [Sic] autobiographical praxis is a resistant archival impulse, that creates a pause, and visually marking and penetrating a familiar text; leaving a trace of “something else to be.”

[Sic] writing subjects transform themselves into subversive citations of capital by performing apparent consent with deadening and sickening self-commoditization, which in turn critiques and reveals the injustices and flaws of the system. Jacobs performs such [sic] (and sickening) acts in her autobiographical text as moments of self preservation and self-assertion by willfully becoming pregnant, by enclosing herself in a garret for seven years, and additionally by telling her story in the regimented genre of slave narrative, shaped to the ends of white abolitionist audiences and intentions above her own, which involved having white women weigh in and verify and validate her work. Charlotte Perkins Gilman parrots self-deprecating self-commentary in her text, plays the passive femme, and enters into a lived performance/assumption of madness in and as her text. Gertrude Stein, whose text stands out in the three as the least directly autobiographical and most experimental, offers a radical reinvention of language and writing that frames my readings of Jacobs and Gilman. Stein performs a radical lesbian becoming-object in both form and content leveraging [sic] critique.

**The Shape of Her Hand**

In the first chapter of *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, “Her
Shape and His Hand,” Avery Gordon describes Patricia Williams and others searching for traces of their enslaved female forebears as engaged in a dance with omission. Quoting Williams on the subject of searching for her grandmother, “I see her shape and his hand in the vast networkings of our society, and in the evils and oversights that plague our lives and laws” (qtd in Gordon 6). Gordon writes, “finding the shape described her absence describes perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all these forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time” (6). As the texts I read exercise an autobiographical self-fashioning in writing; rather than searching for “her shape and his hand,” I hope to offer a way in which we might also discover and consider “the shape of her hand” in some of the historical archives.

The physiological act of writing in one’s own hand (in longhand, as, indeed, Jacobs, Gilman and Stein did), asserts themselves in the interstices of the master’s words. The otherwise erased and inaccessible, confined, raced, gendered, pathologized writing(or doing) hand begins to become visible. The [sic] autobiographist is speaking herself in and through an archive of deadened life and violence, filling the seemingly empty space in the archives that Gordon is describing, with herself. In the crevices of the searchable historical archives, in the material crevices of domestic space, and in the discursive crevices of domesticity. This writing subject thus also articulates a crip gestation, as the womb-like space is ultimately fashioned from toxic discourses of domination and taxonomy, and has variously harmful and disabling effects.

Further, I locate speculative and utopic instantiations of self-naming and self-owning in these exorbitant writings. Each text performs a breakage of genre and language via [sic] reproductive textuality that I argue affords them access to “something else to be.” Beyond being a reproduction of the deadening original, harmfully dictated to them in the dominant
established social script, the writing of these autobiographies disrupts and unsettles genre with the [sic] dissent and the attention such a graphemic mark draws to the reproductive flesh that labors at reproducing. This handwritten and epistolary self, in each case, is addressed to the public sphere at large though coming from within the crevices of the private dispossessed, sexually abused and pathologized.

Thinking with Roderick Ferguson’s discussion of “something else to be” as a post-identitarian lesbian social justice ethic, my chapter takes Gertrude Stein’s experimental language poetry as a revolutionary intersectional lesbian aesthetic ethic. As Ferguson puts it – the lesbian is not so much an essentialized identity category as a categorical challenge to white heteropatriarchal regimes of domesticity, which I have flagged as a site ripe for paradox when we encounter a slave and a woman’s autobiographical writing. As Irigaray has put it (quoted in Jenny Sharpe in relation to female homosexuality, as Sharpe puts it) “when the goods get together, there is nothing to take to market” (39/192) thus effectively sabotaging a system predicated on one’s subordinate fungibility and conformity to a category of abjected personhood. I observe in Stein’s writing an appropriation of and integration with ordinary mundane domestic items, furniture, and shapes: a carafe, a piece of coffee, a substance in a cushion, an umbrella, a box… Through this poetic ode to a lesbian domestic sphere that Stein and Alice B Toklas establish, occasioning the writing of Tender Buttons, I theorize a [sic] autobiographical revolutionary textuality. Extrapolated to analysis of Jacobs and Gilman’s texts I look to read “the shape of her hand” alternately making a fist and reaching with penetrating fingers and perverting the already perverse domesticities they inhabit (slavery, medical institutionalization) through queer and paradoxically self-validating humanizing interactivity with discourses of violence and the material attributes of their spaces of confinement.
By way of a revolutionary intersectional lesbian ethic Socially-dead subjects fashion agency and communicate themselves in part through interaction with material objects. The [materially composite] shape of her hand – the genre that she writes in – is her own new synthetic creation that is in gestational time and space – and that is liminal in relation to legibility in a way that one might understand minoritarian cultural formation and the utopic non-space of surviving records of living third persons. They limn and disrupt genres of autobiography, mixing them with the genre of the slave narrative, sentimental fiction, gothic fiction, avant garde poetry, and homemaking handbook. Her speech works intimately with her very particular material and discursive geographies and architectures of power and oppression, through and within which she dwells – one’s own body and sexual objectification, a garret in one’s grandmother’s house, pathologizing discourse and confinement, wallpaper and a wallpaper pattern.

**Race, Gender, Sex, and the Excluded Agents of Nascent 20th Century American Identity**

This chapter explores the exorbitant writing styles of three women’s (Jacobs, Gilman, Stein) autobiographical texts across genres, time periods, and life experiences, in order to better consider how we might begin to answer these urgent questions and challenges posed by Williams and Spillers (in my epigraphs). The texts in this chapter bookend the civil war and the turn of the 20th century: Jacobs publishes on the eve of the civil war, and it is following Reconstruction’s upheaval and social justice fights and national anxiety and amended (re)entrenchment of oppressive practices in myriad ways, most notably via Jim Crow, that Gilman and Stein write their texts. As notably indexed by W. E. B. Du Bois, Eve Sedgwick, and Siobahn Sommerville, and others, the 20th century is marked by a struggle around national identity that is aggressively consolidated around heteropatriarchy
and whiteness. Close to the beginning of the 20th century W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” Near the end of the 20th C, Eve Sedgwick contends that the defining problem of the 20th century has been one of homosexual masculinity (Sedgwick). These oft-cited claims, which bracket the nascent century in question in the texts of Jacobs, Gilman, and Stein, are both correct, and yet I would add/argue that most specifically, it is the femme-gendered and sexualized black subject around which the problems of the 20th century – or, rather, upon which the identity of 20th century Americanness is scaffolded – thus she is the abjected, excluded, erased. The problem of the color line, male homosexual panic, and historiographic exclusions, aporias and silences alongside “new, institutionalized taxonomic discourses – medical legal, literary, psychological” converge and diverge into a social architecture of foreclosed existence, which my readings seek to repair (Sedgwick 2). Effectively, my historical textual inquiry moves from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and from the fugitive slave mother to the expatriate lesbian artist.

Why consider Jacobs together with Gilman and Stein when they are separated by the dehumanizing institution of chattel slavery and about a half a century? To be clear, there is a vast difference of lived experience between Jacobs and these later white female writers of relative privilege. With chattel slavery, the Ante-bellum American dream and paragon of white patriarchal domesticity hinged upon the person-as-commodity. After Reconstruction, it hinges upon the voiceless person materially and symbolically tethered to the commodity realm. The commodified and commodity-tethered person is emblematized by racial, gendered, and pathological markers: haunted by the black femme domestic slave; presumed to be passive, simple, perverse. American national identity requires that she be contained and constrained (excluded) so as not to disrupt a hermetic perception of normative white
American domesticity (Ferguson). Jacobs, Gilman, and Stein’s texts converge along the lines of gender, pathology, sexuality, and perverse domesticity on a gradient that exists very much because of the former (yet present-prescient-tense-ghost) formative figure of the domestic female slave (Snorton). These three texts bookend a period of potentiality and optimism with regard to social justice for blacks and women, with a felt sense of domestic and sexual oppression, confinement, and classification according to lived embodiment.

The time of publication of Jacobs’s narrative (1861) is immediately followed by the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction (1863-1877), the Compromise and Jim Crow. The period between the 1860s and the early 20th century is characterized by great upheaval and virulent divisiveness under the guise of union victory and the celebration of the end of legal slavery. In the period that follows Reconstruction is a re-entrenchment of enforced inequality and oppression (1890s). As Lisa Duggan reminds us, “1890s US Nationality was organized around a master discourse of national race as whiteness – a whiteness that worked to join the regions torn asunder during the Civil War to unite both to the recently closed frontier” (14). The lie of “separate but equal” and the way in which the color line – as well as sexuality, sickness of the strain of the femme in particular – were constructed and constrained in the service of white patriarchal heteronormative domesticity, which felt compelled to reinforce itself, having been thrown into relief as a fragile institution.

My chapter analyzes the [sic] resistance to oppressive and violent perverse domesticities by fashioning autobiographical writing as and through a lesbian-informed perverse domesticity. The term “lesbian” being anachronistic to my texts, and not present as a practice in Jacobs and Gilman reinforces my point, elaborated from Ferguson, of using “lesbian” as an anti- and post-identitarian challenge to white heteropatriarchal domesticity.
On the Being of a Box: Gertrude Stein’s Reinvention of Language as Critical Dissent

Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* stands out among my three selected texts for several reasons, and I use her position of privileged exile, living as a U.S. expatriate in Paris at the turn of the 20th century, part of a thriving artistic community, and her position as the latest-published text of the three, as giving her work a degree of critical distance that allows us to look back on Jacobs and Gilman with a greater attunement and sensitivity to their revolutionary textualities. Privileged and mobile – she has had access to elite higher education, mobility, and not only has permission to write, but has a professional reputation and livelihood as a writer (in spite of a great deal of condescending reviews of her work) – Stein is nevertheless multiply marked marginal as a Jewish lesbian. Antisemitic eugenic discourse and homosexual pathologization were an established presence in the public sphere at the time of her writing (Ordover). The everlastingess of oppression that we will see both Jacobs and Gilman express is also present in Stein – that there is an ineluctability to abject femme domesticity from which she, from her space of privilege, fashions a queer and crip utopic affective space. Notably, the work also masquerades as a potential [sic] perversion of a domestic handbook, or a how-to of proper domestic femininity. That is to say, a countertext masquerading as a pedagogical paratext of contemporary “social forms.”

My reading of Stein’s work offers that she sheds a shrewd lens on the violence and objectification of minorities at the time of (and leading up to the time of) her writing. The lens that Stein offers also generates an analytic schema or “affective map” or “structure of feeling” that orients the readings that I train on the textual becomings articulated by Jacobs and Gilman. The pain of objectification is apparent in her work, and a defiant resistance to mute objecthood materializes in her material negotiation with the elements of writerly discourse beyond genre – on the level of syntax, sound, repetition, constant dis- and re-
orientation. She models a revolutionary critical textuality, woven out of her intimate experiences both in a lesbian domestic sphere and as a pathologized Jewish lesbian, objectified in the public sphere. Namely, *Tender Buttons* is a series of poems that Stein publishes on the occasion of her life partner Alice B. Toklas moving in with her in 1914. On the one hand also a playful erotic expression by way of domestic objects and aspects, the “Objects” section of *Tender Buttons* describes and articulates a sensitive awareness to the discourses of classification and taxonomy and domesticity. In addition, Stein’s poetic capsules show how language might be otherwise broken apart to intervene into utopic self-fashioning while at the same time yielding an incisive analysis of the violences of classificatory discourse – “systems to pointing.”

The text also defiantly celebrates a queer femme domestic union by way of meditations on domestic objects and containers. I approach each poem in the series as a small capsule that also charts an autobiographical encryption that archives lesbian domesticity and eros at a time when it was not something that had a place in the cultural-historical archive except as pathology and deviance. My readings here and in the conclusion to the chapter will look at a poem entitled “A Box” and another, entitled “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.” The containers described, and then the container of broken syntax that Stein effects stylistically fashions a space within which such feelings and critiques might be articulated in relative safety – inaccessible high modernist style combined with simple everyday words repeated and reorganized in a potentially neurodiverse, crip textuality. Her cripqueer rupturing of grammar throws open new potential arrangements, kinships, selves, and meanings at every syntactical turn.

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47 *Tender Buttons* is divided into three sections: Objects, Food, and Rooms.
48 “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass” has the line “a system to pointing” in it, which I analyze in the conclusion of this chapter.
Nestled among poems that derive a sensual eros from mundane domestic objects, such as the substance in a cushion, mobilizing through them an articulation of lesbian being, this poem and several others that describe a container (Box, Carafe), offer a space of crip and critical reflection in the text. These are her bracketed space of [sic] critique. This is not to say that there aren’t erotic and sensual ways to read these poems as well (pain is after all a part of romantic love), there is a certainly such a layer available for analysis, but my reading puts it to the side for the time being, in favor of exploring the less-often analyzed critical register of *Tender Buttons*.

A BOX.

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

“Box” enacts a subject and object of “Box,” a simple container with vast implications.⁴⁹ From the outset, this poem speaks to a mistrust in kindness in a string of causal-sequential clauses. “Out of” a classification of a person as a certain “kind” of person, treated perhaps with a disingenuous social veneer of “kindness” by persons who classify you into a “kind,” into a “box,” which is thus inevitably followed by “rudeness,” or a perceived-felt sense of disprespect and injury on the social level (rudeness is also bad manners) discursively embodied in “rapid same question” – an attitude of research or inquiry that does not in fact afford space for the subject’s autonomous agency and answer. Following, there is a sense of surveillance that emerges in this poem, by way of likely medicalizing/pathologizing (research, selection, order, “a pin”) – and thereby taxonomically confining, owning, and

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⁴⁹ In Stein’s own words, from a second poem in the series bearing the same title, “A large box is handily made of what is necessary to replace any substance… the plainer it is made the more reason there is for some outward recognition that there is a result.”
restricting movement and agency – a fungible version of the speaking subject (merged with/presented as a box). This, and its harm, becomes especially apparent in “painful cattle,” which also clearly indexes the suffering of chattel slavery. I would further suggest that “a white way of being round” references circulation (“being round” denoting a circulatory motion, or, being sent around) of said fungible subject in a white-supremacist and heteropatriarchal dominated political economy and public sphere, with “a fine substance” standing in for human flesh and subjectivity. In Stein’s queering of syntactical order, it becomes unclear whether the curious/violent one is the speaker (in a strangely sinister self-congratulatory way), or if the speaker is commenting on being an object of interest and classification and feeling an affect of “painful cattle,” which may be a self-conscious nod to one’s own white complicity in slavery that Stein articulates, simultaneously, in a poem that comments on a common sense of abjection and classification.

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

“and is it disappointing, it is not, it is rudimentary” articulates an affect of crisis ordinariness (Berlant) to the violence of classificatory taxonomic oppression; relentlessness in harmful oppressive and confining practices are unsurprising to the extent that disappointment is neither apt nor necessary: “to be analysed” is simply “so rudimentary” and mundane. The closing clause, “it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again” reiterates the circularity of injury and inquiry, again, with no emergency as a discursive goal “a green point not to red,” but rather there is “a green point,” which returns us to the metaphor of the fungible subject circulating in capital, as green can denote “greenbacks” which was the then-recently new (and now established) color on the back of (also recently then-new) paper
What hits most immediately from Stein’s writing is a fragmentation of language and syntax: a challenge to reconsider our normative linguistic epistemology, if you will, with a tendency toward rhythmic repetition that supercedes the lucid meaning or message – it is about sound and sensation, feeling, form, constraint, and an effort to break out of a language that confines, all while using the very language that confines, to do so. Thus, Stein’s relay between accessible language and inaccessible or non-normative style, and the temporal chronicity and everlastingness that the repetitive and circular language praxis Stein fashions a [sic] space of self-expression and cultural critique that contrives to fashion a dynamic sense of an animate object out of the confined state of objectified subjecthood, offering “something else to be” from within unrelenting systems and discourses of oppression.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Inhabiting-Embodying Perverse Domesticity Toward Liberation*

In the era of anti-slavery activism leading up to abolition and the civil war, as Harriet Jacobs, a fugitive slave mother, is writing, an atmosphere of urgency around unveiling the psychic and physical realities of slavery compels and frames her writing style and its public orientation; “captive to abolitionist intentions,” as James Olney has put it (65). Nevertheless, Jacobs’s narrative stands out among slave narratives of her time by virtue of her stylistic references to sentimental and romantic literary genres and tropes (Burnham 65), as well as in her very real story of risk, ingenuity, and suffering that her narrative recounts; compelled by her life inside of and her drive to escape from chattel slavery.

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50 The U.S. began to issue paper money in 1861 to help finance the civil war. This is when money began to take on the color value of green in discourse, as “greenbacks” because the green ink used on the back of the paper currency (which was initially an anti-counterfeiting measure). Not only this, but as a Jew, Stein is hyper aware of the relationship between classification and money, as Jews were stereotyped as usurious.
Thus, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative, is both closest to autobiography of all three texts, and is the most constrained to a specific and teleological genre inasmuch as it is a slave narrative, vetted and vouched for by a white woman abolitionist. James Olney writes that slave autobiography written to mobilize abolitionists demands certain unique stylistic conventions from the author that separate the text from a typical autobiographical mode of memory and recollection – in order to avoid suspicions of inaccurate recollection, these narratives are constrained to an episodic structure that seeks to avoid the sense of relying on memory, but rather relying on some sort of verified facsimile of reality. From within the interstices of this genre that is episodic in structure by necessity – as subjective memory in a slave narrative needs to be uniquely represented as operating with a certain fabricated clarity detached from narrative, emplotment, and all the other trimmings of the psychology of memory and writing (Olney) – Jacobs fashions a [sic] space and voice and self. I argue that she artfully troubles the constraints of the slave narrative genre – which I suppose is meant to go to great lengths to humanize the speaker, rather than perform critical [sic] objecthood as Jacobs does – through a [sic] reflexive and critical alignment with the objective realm that is in fact perhaps paradoxically more humanizing according to Saidiya Hartman’s “striking contradiction,” “wherein objectification is coupled with black humanity/personhood” (McKittrick xiv). First, Jacobs demonstrates her contradictory status as subject object of property in her discussion of sexuality and the erotically-determined nature of her confinement and oppression, which leads her to reflexively mobilize her own reproductive flesh as sexual and fungible object. Second, through her physical and writerly discursive encryption and articulation with the domestic space and objects of her grandmother’s house in her years of hiding.
Jacobs sets the tone when she refers to herself and other enslaved persons as “god-breathing machines” at the outset of the narrative, in the emphatic end to her first chapter: “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend” (9). When she tells the story of how the money her grandmother had been saving up to purchase her freedom was appropriated without a second thought, when her mistress “borrowed it.” Jacobs notes that her grandmother’s defrauded money was used to purchase family heirloom candelabra that would be handed down from generation to generation (13). This story, as she tells it, comes to align her grandmother’s freedom with the family heirloom, which was (instead) kept in her mistress’s family, and handed down from generation to generation. As an object auxiliary to the family as a domestic female slave, rape and sexual possession was the terrifying specter that constrained her day-to-day life from puberty. Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent shows how bodily compromise and constriction that mime captivity and sexual exploitation at the core of US slavery operate as [sic] self-ownership and/as the striking contradiction at the same time as they generate a reflexive archival witness in her own reproductive flesh. In practice, her autonomous movement as enslaved was already extremely restricted.51 Through her citational praxis, the terms of Jacobs’s/Brent’s freedom were erotically determined, as sexual abuse was her greatest terror and, and a sexual liaison became her calculated ticket out of her predicament. With regard to her relationship with the father of her children, the white neighbor Mr. Sand, “Revenge, and calculations of interest” remained strong motivators as she strove to distance herself from the likelihood of her master making her his concubine

51 Jacobs/Brent names the body as a location of struggle. Throughout the narrative, skin, hair, arms, legs, feet, eyes, hands muscles, corporeal sexual differences --- these physical attributes, of Jacobs/Brent, her family, and her lovers, contribute to the possibilities and limitations of space.” (McKittrick xxvii)
Thus, Jacobs hits upon the most powerful citational act that she can perform in the face of her relentless torment at the hands of her owner who desires to make her his concubine. Jacobs enacts a [sic] transaction with her body and womb as reproductive flesh as a calculated and ultimately quite elaborate moral equation that would ultimately galvanize her eventual freedom. I suggest that this move is more a reflexive negotiation between her “human” and “object” parts of herself, a queer lesbian auto-erotic transaction where “goods get together” so that “there is nothing to take to market,” so to speak. The process of pregnancy and birth is painful and dangerous, disabling at least temporarily, yet it is an absolutely vital part of Brent/Jacobs’s ability to access her goal of freedom.

Later, Brent/Jacobs was compelled to retreat into a tiny 9x7x3 garret in her grandmother’s house, and dwell confined in what Katherine McKittrick describes as “the disabling confines of a different slave space, what she [Jacobs/Brent] describes as her ‘loophole of retreat’” (McKittrick xviii). She remained confined in hiding for seven years as it was the safest option for her, and a way for her to also remain close to her children and seek to ensure their safety and freedom to the best of her ability. In the garret, she fashions a fugitive gestational zone that is a material crevice of power. Jacobs’s/Brent’s text and lived experience perform a material and discursive self-encryption, embedding herself in the crevices of power so as move toward self-ownership in relative safety – and reach the public

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52 Jacobs’s pseuonymous narrative was long dismissed as fiction in part due to the treatment of both her sexual vulnerability and her sexual agency in her account. Jacobs made it clear that her narrative should foreground her identity as a slave mother (Jacobs xxi). To tell her story, she laid bare the sexual abuse, stalking, and hunting of her person that she had to endure from her owner and his family.

53 Sharpe also cites from Irigaray, “to play with mimesis is thus for a woman to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (76/62)

54 She describes brushes with death (and wishes for death) on her own account and on those of her children. One of her pregnancies leaves her sick and she nearly dies; her son nearly dies at one point; and on separate occasions she wishes for her own or her children’s death as deliverance.
sphere from within the recesses of sanctioned domestic abuse.\textsuperscript{55} From this loophole in the intricate crevices of the “perverse domesticity” (Hartman 103) of slavery, I read a gothic “lesbian” perversion of domesticity that charts her liberation, creating “something else to be” for herself.\textsuperscript{56}

While confined to the garret, Jacobs/Brent carves a hole through which she animates the space as the optic of the house: inhabiting the role of the speculator and spectator as she negotiates transactions surrounding her own and her childrens’s sale and future freedom. Haunting the house and the plantation, \textit{while present and living}. From that space, Jacobs perverts the domestic space by merging with it and animating it, mobilizing and capacititating a striking contradiction of the commodity that speaks in an uncanny fashion. Indeed, from this crevice, Jacobs/Brent initiates her presence in public discourse, writing letters and posting them or having them posted on her behalf from different parts of the country in order to throw her master Dr. Flint off of her scent. While she “manipulates the sale of her children to their father, arranges for her daughter to be taken north, tricks her master into believing that she has left the South, and quite literally directs a performance in which Dr. Flint plays the fool while she watches, unseen” (Yellin).

It is her focal point; her war-room; and, as Burnham notes, appears exactly mid-way through the text, as though a crevice within the space of the discourse of the slave narrative. It is, also, as McKittrick points out, a disabling space, whose very real repercussions are permanently embedded in Jacobs’s embodiment for the rest of her life – a surviving crip record of her time as a living third person (objectified, enslaved) in her body. She subsequently gives voice to the mute objects of the house as a subversive [sic] strategy to

\textsuperscript{55} Again, McKittrick, “While she is in the garret, Brent undermines the patriarchal logic of visualization by erasing herself from the immediate landscape and \textit{knowing} what she terms ‘a different story’” (43).

\textsuperscript{56} Apparently Jacobs dates her emancipation from the time of her concealment in the garret (Sharpe 126, 166).
perpetuate her impression of absence, hiding, encrypted in the materiality of her
grandmother’s house on/adjacent to the plantation. On different occasions, Jacobs/Brent
hides in and interacts with her allies through a closet, a barrel, a hole in the wall, a low
window. She is thought to be a ghost, or simply a voice, at other times.

Jenny Sharpe cautions, “when invoked in an uncritical manner, slave women’s
agency can all too easily be articulated through notions of free will, self-autonomy, and self-
making in appropriate for addressing the coerciveness of slavery” (xix). In my reading of
Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent’s sexual relations with and pregnancy through Mr. Sand, and her
long and arduous period of confinement in her grandmother’s garret, I observe steps that
painfully and incrementally help her out-pervert the perverse domesticity of slavery. First
miming the “crime of white adultery” through a performance of “unfaithful would-be sex
slave/concubine” of Dr. Flint’s. Second, miming slavery’s harsh brutality in her
confinement, and the disregard she is forced to enact upon her body and embodied and
psychic needs. I participate in a reading that attributes will and agency, but not “free will” –
rather, a constrained and mimetic will that works tactically (in the crevices of power)
(Sharpe) and as a citation – using one’s body as the bracket for [sic], and confining one’s
body to the brackets of [sic]. That is to say, not (yet) exiting the social script. Out of this,
Jacobs is leaving a mark in the archive, irrevocably creating a surviving record of herself as a
living third person, and forging “something else to be” in defiance of the white patriarchal
convention of “a story that ends in marriage” while still articulating a desire for an intimate
private sphere of her own, not yet attained at the conclusion of the narrative. Whereas I will
argue that Charlotte Perkins Gilman has the privilege of choosing to be anti-rehabilitative in

57 At this point her grandmother is free, which gives the house a liminal space in relation to the law, which I
will consider in a future version of the chapter.
her stance towards sickness/madness, finding liberation through madness, Jacobs does not have access to a choice, but tactically\(^{58}\) appropriates confinement to liberatory ends. A hyperbolic [sic] autobiographical performance shows her contradictory humanness as liminally legible – as “a kind of thinking and feeling which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange,” as Williams has put it.

**Becoming Paper, a Mad Liberation Story: [Sic] Archival Eros in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” is a fictionalized gothic autobiographical account of Gilman’s own experience of being subjected to the “rest cure” for her depression. Conveyed via journal entries, the story is one of an unnamed female protagonist who has recently given birth, being institutionalized and subjected to a month of rest in isolation from social stimulus, and especially ordered not to write or allow for flights of fancy. Her doctor is also her husband. Thus, she is described as occupying a perverted intimate domestic sphere in the sense that it is medicalized and it becomes apparent as the story progresses that she may have been deceived into thinking this was a “holiday house” but is in fact an institution. Her journal entry writing is contained to the intimate domestic sphere, but as we progress it becomes like more of a reflexive medical surveillance and record keeping. The rest cure itself is a curious instantiation of an incursion of the public medical sphere into the intimate private sphere of the bed of repose. Notably, here, Gilman has the privilege of diagnosis (whether it be “correct”) and “treatment” whereas Jacobs doesn’t have the fully human access to sickness in the same way: Jacobs’s

\(^{58}\) Invoking De Certeau, Sharpe points out that “Tactics do not work through self empowerment so much as they shift power from the dominating class to the dominated” (xxi).
confinement is predicated on a totalizing secrecy of her whereabouts, not merely her behavior, as it is with Gilman. Nevertheless, Gilman’s story takes the form of journal entries written on the sly addressed to a “you” in the second person, and in the case of Jacobs’s text, it was mainly written at night and in secret. Both aim for and achieve a certain encrypted archival self-actualization.

In Gilman’s fictionalized account, this furtive writing becomes an explicitly illicit pleasure – one that the narrator reports to be exhausting to her – as she spends herself writing. This exhausting and secretive labor is erotic in character and implies an erotic affair – with an elaborate archival, citational [sic] performance of madness. The room in which she is enclosed has yellow wall-paper, which has an elaborate design upon it. She is tormented by the wall-paper’s pattern, and gradually turns to it with an attitude of inquiry, determined to figure out its logic or pattern. Over the course of the month, she discovers that there is a woman trapped behind the wall-paper’s pattern, and identifies with her; finally creeping about the circumference of the room, with no longer a desire or intention to leave, acting as though she were one and the same with the woman behind the paper. Gilman’s character thus merges with the space that confines her, merges with her diagnosis, and with the materiality of her own writing to the degree where her writing and the garret of confinement become aligned as paper with writing on it – the pattern on the wall-paper. Here, the layered significations and instantiations of paper become both the object with which the protagonist is aligning herself and becoming, and the crevice in the discourse of power. Paper – wallpaper and diagnostic and prescriptive and proscriptive discourse compose a perverse domestic sphere for Gilman’s character, and she merges erotically with the paper that determines the bounds of her existence, performing a coalitional and revolutionary lesbian ethos that radically perverts the presumptive white heteropatriarchal domestic sphere.
The story’s progression from (1) quiet revolt to (2) studious fascination to (3) pleasurable merging-identification is frequently read to present a worsening of her illness and a descent into madness, with the tale being taken as a cautionary warning against the ills of the rest cure. I propose that we consider the protagonist’s transformations with regard to her affective and identificatory relations with the room and the paper. Her passionate engagement is a [sic] self-encryption, or reflexive taxonomy as a mode of inquiry, within the constraints of the rest cure, the room, the paper. Her critical space of agency is her performative window of [sic] citation of such sickness: a mad “something else to be.”

The narrator’s initial quiet revolt is in fact an ambivalent silence to us, the readers. The revolt appears in the form of the very premise of existence for the text, the journal entries, as they are written against the rules and permissions that regulate her life in the first place. The narrator’s exhaustion from writing comes to convey that a part of herself might be in fact being translated onto the paper, and prefigures the later merging of self with paper. In terms of stealth and secretive relations with paper-- as the story progresses, she is not only needing to be sly about the paper which she writes on (her journal), but she comes to be stealing time to observe the paper on the walls in the garret room. Thus, she is stealing time to write, and stealing time to read, or attempt to decipher the pre/nonverbal yet highly significant and violent inscriptions on the paper covering the walls, in her second phase of studious fascination.

The wallpaper, as she turns her attention to it, and comments on it, becomes easy to understand as the scrawl of the web of discourse that confines her beyond her comprehension. “It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in
unheard of contradictions” (emphasis added, 168), just like an illogical, sociopathic, yet persistent tyrant; it is an incomprehensible and deeply flawed, incomplete discourse that encloses her. “I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness,” (Ibid) adds the narrator. This, in step with Jacobs’s condition at the hands of her former master, expresses abuse with no end point, experienced by the abject reproductive-flesh body.

As violent and neverending as the taxonomic and controlling discourse to which Gilman’s protagonist is subjected, she makes a creative leap in her study of and merging with the discourse: coming to recognize in it her contours as a sense of self is paradoxically pleasuring--calming: “I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper. / It dwells in my mind so!” (172), and later: “Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch” (177). The space afforded to her by having an object of inquiry and analysis – which the readers eventually discover to be a reflexive inquiry and self-objectification, as she identifies and performs as the woman behind the paper – leads to a self-affirming performance of critique through the window of agency afforded to her by [sic] self-encryption in her assumptive assimilation to madness.

Thus she is playing the “I” and the “you”, and putting herself deliberately and explicitly as the Tertium Datur as a third-term “her/she”, who is spoken about and spoken for, as the story progresses, in the respective communicatory acts of writing and reading. There is a becoming-paper relationship as and of the tertium datur. As she is writing, turning to “dead paper”- she is also turning into the “dead paper” in its many valences and layers around her – most concretely metaphorically palpable one being the physical visible and visually confounding yellow wallpaper in her garret of confinement at the top of the “house” [surrounded with bars and chains, really it’s meant to evoke a sort of a prison or asylum cell].
There is a writerly relation between the protagonist and her journal, and a readerly between her and the intricate patterns on the wall paper covering the walls of the room in which she is enclosed. As she become paper: writer, reader, and medium, her person gradually merges and morphs into a surviving perpetual archive of a living third person as she takes the tertium non datur of madness, and becomes it. Again, here I read a gothic “lesbian” perversion of domesticity that charts her liberation, creating “something else to be” for herself.

In the end, as the narrator willfully and wholly identifies with the room. She doesn’t want to leave the archival yellow paper for the green outdoors: “It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! / I don’t want to go outside. I won’t …/ For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow” (182). Here again I take green to relate to the market sphere, and yellow to relate to the archival creation in which she is a participant. Thus, the protagonist’s merging with the paper and woman behind the paper is indeed a queer lesbian auto-erotic transaction where “goods get together” so that “there is nothing to take to market.” Further, she is marking the wall: she is creeping around the room and implicating her physical mark into the paper, a “smooch” on the wall that goes around the circumference of the room, which, it is worth noting, she had noted in her initial descriptive observation of the wall paper. She loses and finds herself in there – inserts herself as a [sic]k smooch and utterance: it empowers her, because she is writing history that other similarly abjected women might one day read and learn from. This speaks to the narrator’s identification of a community by way of her self-objectification. I mean to say this archival erotic drive is necessarily relational, an enabling site of community-formation. It is akin to the work of diagnostic labels that enable a person to come to understand herself in community as opposed to suffering in isolation. In a different way

59 While also hallucinating a multiplicity of such women as the one behind the wall-paper of her garret room.
from Jacobs/Brent, Gilman’s narrator finds crip access, that is to say, acquiring/performing madness/disability is a vital component of her ability to realize her goal of freedom. Her [sic]kness is politicized, radicalized, liberated.

**Feeling a Self: Toward an Interdependent Crip Ethos**

In “Feeling Down Feeling Brown,” Jose Muñoz writes, “How might subalterns feel each other? Toward this end, modified theories of object relations can potentially translate into productive ways in which to consider relationality within a larger social sphere” (677). He also quotes Hortense Spiller, from “All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” “I am suggesting that an aspect of the emancipatory project hinges on what would appear to be a simple self-attention, except that reaching the articulation requires a process, that of making one’s subjectness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness” (400/678). Taking these suggestions and articulated potentialities of subaltern community and relationality into consideration, I want to return to Roderick Ferguson’s discussion of “lesbian” as counterhegemonic praxis above and beyond identity politics. Could these texts (above analyzed) be a part of a cryptic, unlikely call to revolution, articulated by affinities of and by difference from within (or above) the master’s house, bedroom, kitchen. A call for revolutionary close reading so as to access a lesbian praxis capacious to contain the works of Stein, Jacobs and Gilman.

In lieu of concluding, I will look at another poem from Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.”
A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

Calling the carafe a blind glass displaces the immediate understanding of the carafe as a vessel, a container for conveying, sharing, dispensing liquids, above all else. Looking past this passive function, Stein instead turns our attention to the material surface of the object (blind glass being a play on mute object, which is also an expectation of the female gender).

“Glass,” aside from the material that constitutes the carafe, can also mean a monocle or glasses, a looking-glass (a mirror), or, in the scientific register, a microscope lens. The comment that the glass is “blind” foregrounds the material objectivity of the glass itself; on the other hand, (ableism aside) the association of “blind” with “glass” challenges the validity of any observational discernment the viewer may venture to make. “A spectacle” following glass and followed by “and nothing strange” moves in a completely different direction; one that expresses the sensation of being looked at or perceived as a spectacle.

Rather than being ableist as “blind” might suggest, the thrust of the poem is ultimately one that underscores and iterates and insists on difference. A resistant difference, defiant of regimes of classification and organization of persons into types and groups. “Spectacle,” “system to pointing,” “kind,” “cousin,” “not resembling” describe surveillance and ordering of difference. Above all, the poem offers a pedagogical exposition of how to describe the singular carafe in as many ways as possible. “All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling” seeks to reinforce singularity and not the generalized “different” other, whose difference, by the way, “is spreading.”

At the end of the day, this is a poem about saying the same thing in as many
different ways as possible; a meditation on difference and a joyous reclamation of difference.
The poem performs a hopeful and complexly intertwined constellation that is intimately reliant on an engagement with language and words relating amongst themselves in an unorthodox, disorganized, nonlinear and categorically anti-patriarchal style. Becoming more material than abstract language in Stein’s writing, the poetry performs what the unmediated interaction of commodities might look like, without a patriarchal agent.
Following this brief but dynamic constellation, of ordinariness that is not ordinary, we find that “the difference is spreading” an unsettling contagion. At the same time, there is a sonic and semantic kinship among the words in the poem, and “carafe” sounds like “care of.” Ultimately, we can view this short piece as a performance of affinity among words as well as a sort of container for care or desire that she may be seeking to convey.
Interlude: Toward an Articulation of the Magnetic, Contrapuntal Chronotopes of Disappointment and Critique that Orient my Thinking

The 1940s, 1970s, and The Present: Looking Back at the Great Depression and Jim Crow After 1968; World War II and Decolonization, and the Developing “Global South”

The first two chapters made a strong case for the urgent and violent consolidation of national identity schemas and white heteropatriarchal domesticity as an emblematic engine and telos. These chapters dealt with the impacts of industrializing modernity, the emergence of mass culture, photography, cinema; the aftermath of the civil war and abolition; looking to racial and sexual fault lines of identity as determining sickness and objecthood. An economically driven frantic disavowal, suppression and erasure of Black life as a backlash to the economic blow that abolition enacted upon the nation. An economic blow (and a blow to Southern white heteropatriarchal domesticity) that will continue to unfold in its consequences with the Great Migration and over the course of the long 20th century. An aggressive policing of the ideological and economic function of the home and the reproductive flesh at the core of the home space, intensified by the disavowal of and reckoning with the exit of Black flesh from the core of the domestic economy.

Given that Faulkner’s *Light in August* was published in 1932 and set essentially contemporaneously, my dissertation arguably does not effect much of a temporal leap as I move to the later chapters, given that Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* are both set in the 1940s and are also strongly saturated by a reckoning with Jim Crow. However, the novels that I analyze in chapters 3 and 4 that are set in the 1940s were both written in the 1970s (1975 and 1970, respectively), and I read them alongside, respectively, a sociological text about Brazil and an art film by a Kenyan-born artist, both produced in the contemporary moment (the early 21st century). This is a deliberate move that both opens my
dissertation outward in a global sense, and brings it into contemporary conversations that examine race, gender, and disability across scholarly and artistic genres, rearticulating the visual and phenomenological stakes that my first two chapters engaged in relation to emergent filmic media (ch 1) and the physical act of writing from a space of confinement (ch 2).
Chapter Three: Diagnostic Violence and Disavowal: Cutting Reproductive Flesh in *Vita* and *Corregidora*

*Archive, v.*
*Trans. To place or store in an archive;*  
... to transfer to a store containing infrequently used files,  
or to a lower level in the hierarchy of memories...  
*(OED)*

Dead alive  
Dead outside  
Alive inside  
*(Biehl 321)*

Introduction

Gayl Jones writes *Corregidora* in 1975. The narrative time of *Corregidora* beings in late 1940s in Lexington, Kentucky, though flashbacks go several generations back, and the end two decades later. The “Corregidora women” have migrated to the Jim Crow south from Brazil. *Corregidora* is a feminist intervention into and critique of both the Black Arts Movement and to the Civil Rights Movement, as Jones writes in 1975, in the wake of both movements, compelled to look back and possibly invent a feminist precursor speaking to different strands of black art and black life. With regard to the medical intervention that I discuss, it is also an indictment of and (still covert, [sic]) truth-telling of the eugenic violence and disavowal in play. The novel takes place after the second world war, at a time when arguably the anxious drive to reinforce and shore up white heteropatriarchal domesticity contributed to such eugenic medical interventions, after the troubling of gender roles due to women entering the work force (not to mention also the drafting of black men as a tacit acknowledgment of their equal capacity as subjects, when needed to serve their country, then taken away upon their return). To write about this in 1975 also speaks to an urgency of

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60 From Book I of Catarina’s Dictionary.
witnessing given the palpable incompleteness of the arts and political movements of the 60s and early 70s, in parallel to the felt incompleteness of emancipation in the early 20th century, in my earlier chapters.

I pair this novel with João Biehl’s ethnographic study that takes place in the late 20th and early 21st century in Brazil, which is experiencing a similar kind of depression, socially and economically, after a period of rapid development and assumption of debt. The need for able-bodied productive households drives families and medical practice to debris-ify and dispose of those who are faltering. The more explicit economic calculus articulated in Biehl’s study helps to shed light on the economic calculus in play in Jones’s novel. I additionally take the development Brazil as a nation of the “global south” and the harm its poor inflict on one another as a manifestation of the harm that it inflicts on them in the wake of its struggle to integrate into global economic competency in Biehl’s study. I also take this phenomenon as a lens through which to consider the domestic violence and struggles in play in Corregidora – where the families and intimate struggles are expressing a deeper and greater harm done to the community by the state.

Self-writing and survival in chapter two set a stage for chapter three’s inquiry into creative and aesthetic modes of transmission and genealogical futurity. The texts that I read in the preceding chapter are set in a context of a small, enclosed domestic space. They also show non-normative feminine domestic arrangements to be somehow necessary and generative to the space of self-writing. Sickness plays a role as a direct relation to the state of domestic confinement, and a defining mode through which the writers access the space of the autobiographical. Chapter two articulates a first step toward life out of the suicide of the first chapter, a precarious gestation of life in an enclosed space.

Chapter three engages with what futurity the subject might have access to, or
might have to create her own language or songs to create. The chapter’s initial discussion inquires into the social and economic compositions that would foreclose futurity for racialized and gendered subjects. I describe diagnostic isolation and discursive disavowal as two forces that are deployed to perpetuate dispossession and foreclose a generative futurity to subjects marked by difference. I query how to sense, communicate, and fashion an interpersonal and public self in a liberatory and affirmative way. Along the way, I seek to theorize a “crip sociality” along the fault lines of what I refer to as “reproductive illness.” I understand reproductive illness to be a composite text where the sphere of intimate family relations intersects with diagnostic regimes of classification toward a eugenic goal. I begin to define crip sociality by describing an engagement with the public sphere that depends upon and happens through apparent pathology (also manifesting as domestic violence/self-harm).

I perceive the family to be a liminal space that interacts across public and private spaces and spheres. The texts in this chapter take place in what I understand to be an interactive public sphere, as opposed to the chapter two’s enclosed, and survival-oriented practice of autobiographical writing. The anxiety of the chapter’s narrative arc is about eros, sexuality, intimacy, family, and generational transmission/reproduction/futurity. This anxiety emerges as a result of the work of diagnostic forces that conspire to cleave, isolate, and pathologize the subject. I locate a reparative outcome in the texts that I analyse in creative aesthetic transmission, or what might be understood as queer kinship/reproduction. The figure of the diagnostic cut in this chapter foreshadows the dehiscence of the fourth chapter.

In the way that it tends to cleave a subject from context, diagnostic practice shares in common with a practice of historical amnesia/disavowal that cultures mobilize to establish power and control over marginalized populations. In the context of hemispheric America, I contend that medical diagnosis instantiates a profit-driven dispossession and clinical isolation
of a person that reflects directly upon a historical collusion of the institution of slavery and medicine (racial capitalism and capitalist medicine). The conjoint and co-constitutive ontology of medical practice and slavery in the U.S. begins with the simultaneous practices of racialized pathologization of Black people, and of medical experimentation on enslaved Blacks (Roberts, Washington). A disavowed paradox of dehumanization dwells in this convergence, as pathologization serves as a tool of distancing the slave from the category of the human on the one hand, whilst the practice of medical experimentation on enslaved people assumes a tacit givenness of the Black as human, on the other.

I look at the nuclear reproductive family unit as the primary site of violence by way of reading a targeting and cutting of the female reproductive body’s literal and reproductive flesh through practices of diagnosis and disavowal in Gayl Jones’s 1975 novel, *Corregidora*, and João Biehl’s 2016 ethnographic account, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, both of which are set in part or entirely in Brazil. In my readings of *Corregidora* and *Vita*, I track the violent work of historical disavowal and opportunistic medical diagnosis in relation to the ontologically feminized pathology of hysteria in the literally somatic (uterine) and in the psychiatric sense. In my readings of *Corregidora* and *Vita*, I argue that disavowal and diagnosis work in concert with one another, and act in and through nuclear family dynamics to foreclose biological reproductive capacity in the instances of Jones’s protagonist Ursa and Biehl’s primary subject Catarina. My readings will make it clear that diagnosis and disavowal here also express a distinct eugenic cultural anxiety with regard to race and disability. I will further illustrate a calculus of profit and burden in play in relation to the economic role of reproductive flesh. I introduce the concept of reproductive illness as a sick archive, where

61 Grace Kyungwon Hong uses the phrase “reproductive respectability” to describe neoliberal orientations toward blackness which disavow the necropolitical or eugenic cultural violences that attend to racial blackness (Hong).
the family as a simultaneous site and agent of harm and suffering is a reflective archive of forcibly forgotten histories and contexts of violence. Finally, I advocate for a cripistemological reading and aesthetic attunement by which family harm (reproductive illness) is encountered – and produced – as a cultural text, yielding access to a hidden archive.

The Question of Brazil: Hemispheric America and Black Feminism

Brazil  
Africa  
Germany  
Used clothing  
Dead desire  
Fainted pleasure  
Blood-sucker  
Lifeless  
(Biehl 326)  

The texts in this chapter delineate a writerly relationship between the South American nation of Brazil and the continental U.S.—with Vita, the author comes from Brazil, but is writing and researching as an anthropologist at Princeton University – thus the knowledge-production and circulation is within the U.S. The analytic discussion of the text also clearly implicates U.S. cultural forces at play in the debilitated and harmful care system in Brazil at the time of research and writing. In Corregidora, the narrator is a descendent of Brazilian-owned (and bred) enslaved women of African descent. The narration takes place in the southern United States as we are led to understand that her foremothers fled South America to the U.S. after slavery was abolished in Brazil.

Brazil is an opportune site to explore the violence of disavowal and diagnosis. For

62 From Book II of Catarina’s Dictionary.
instance, Brazil, a “developing” nation in whose politics the U.S. has had a heavy – and disavowed – hand. I would like to further suggest a crip view of the notion of “developing” nations as a pathologizing discourse not unlike a mental illness or cognitive disability diagnosis. That is to say, just as with racialized and gendered persons, the second-world nation of Brazil is subject to pathologizing, diagnostic discourses that enable the U.S. to step in and control resources and political outcomes.⁶³

The publication dates of both Corregidora and Vita – the 1970s and the contemporary moment – are significant historic moments for woman of color feminisms. In the 1970s, black lesbian feminist organizations began to coalesce, and in the contemporary moment, coalitional feminism is being redefined in the public eye with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the descriptive of “new Jim Crow.” As Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong put it in their 2011 edited volume on woman of color feminist praxis, Strange Affinities, Black feminism is distinguished by an attunement to difference as a coalitional agent, and is especially cognizant of the importance of a global and transnational view of multiple vectors of oppression and equally varied epistemologies and aesthetics of survival and resistance (Ferguson and Hong). This chapter’s engagement with Brazil moves my dissertation outside of an analysis that is constrained to national borders. My reading is sensitive to a broader geopolitics that is indeed connected to U.S. politics, but that also has its own particularities and valences.

The rhetoric “developing” nations brings with it the artificial casting of “less modern” nations into a past temporality. A critical attunement to oppressively deployed temporal classifications and/or disorderly temporalities would be an approach characteristic

⁶³ Furthermore, it happens to be the last place where slavery was abolished, adding to the element of shame an economic engagement with Brazil might entail.
to both a Black lesbian and a crip aesthetic and political orientation (Ferguson and Hong, McRuer 2018). *Corregidora* tells the story of slavery’s subject and kinship-shattering practices in fragmented and refracted hallucinatory meanderings; *Vita*, by ethnography, reveals how the neoliberal aspirations and race towards economic growth as a nation reproduces these cuts and shatterings and exclusions of the nation’s colonial and slaveholding beginnings.

Brazil is an exceptional example of the violences of rapid industrialization followed by rapid neoliberalization (legible as a “reproductive illness” supported/coerced by the U.S. government), and the economic inequalities and the immiseration of the poor are stark and vast (Parker, Amar, Biehl). Reading the political relationship between the U.S. and Brazil along the lines of eros and kinship, and through the tropes of family harm and “reproductive illness,” one might argue that the countries are sibling-like and share the trouble of neoliberal imperialism, and a “family history” of slavery. Jones’s novel reproduces these ontological intimate woundings (as experienced across both nations) as a defiant, persistent archive in the living present. Biehl’s study gives us insight into one possible contemporary legacy of such an originary violent history.

My readings posit Brazil as a historical informant into American Modernity, and, specifically, into the composition of a sick archive of reproductive flesh that buttresses modernity and modernization/development. Legible as a chronotope in itself, Brazil is the relic of Portuguese imperialism, an ontological violent colonialist and slave-trading agent and time that has been subsumed into Anglo-European imperialism. It is also a country with much harsher practices with regard to slave women, and that in the present day yields a performance of neoliberalism by turning attention to human vulnerability (trafficking etc) and thereby exploiting the most vulnerable even farther, paradoxically (Amar, Biehl).
In 1888, Brazil was the last nation in the Western world to abolish slavery. A full 40% of captive Africans in the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas were brought to Brazil. Notably, Portugal can be said to have initiated African slavery in the 17th century, so the fact that it is a former Portuguese colony that is the last holdout of slavery is not perhaps accidental. This also makes Jones’s choice of Brazil significant for a study of the brutal legacies of slavery. How bad can a place have been that former slaves from there take refuge in the Jim Crow American south? Conversely, Biehl’s analysis indicts the U.S. economic exploitation and limitation of S. America as part of how the conditions came to be so bad for people such as those in his study.

**Summaries of Texts**

The two primary texts that this chapter engages are, as stated, Gayl Jones’s 1975 novel, *Corregidora*, and João Biehl’s 2016 anthropological account, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. *Corregidora* tells the story of Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer in Lexington, Kentucky. Ursa is the grand-daughter and great grand-daughter of enslaved women belonging to the Brazilian slave-owner referred to in the novel as “old man Corregidora,” who had fathered both Ursa’s grandmother and her mother. Her story is set in the late 1940’s, close to where her great-grandmother had settled as a fugitive slave, and where Ursa’s grandmother and mother eventually joined her. At the beginning of the novel, Ursa is hospitalized after a violent altercation with her husband, Mutt, and returns home having had a non-consensual hysterectomy. The novel narrates her trauma and recuperation, and her psychic reckoning with her inability to “make generations,” all while haunted by past generations of “Corregidora women.” As Ursa’s Great- Gram told her when she was five years old, all of the records from the plantation were burnt upon abolition.
Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them.

I argue that the intimacy pattern in Ursa’s relationship with Mutt – as well as her mother’s relationship with Ursa’s father, Martin – composes a “reproductive illness” as a [sic] and sick archive of the impact of the sexual slavery and incest that was the experience of the Corregidora women while enslaved in Brazil. The relationships are violent, haunted by the spectre of the fungible woman and the market, and sexual pleasure and reproductive agency are variously withheld. The women themselves are haunted by the disavowal of their past experiences (all records were burned up upon abolition), and embody an animate and constant testimony.

Vita begins from the anti-utopic camp (Vita) of socially dispossessed, variously impaired and ill, and frequently mentally ill individuals. Camps like Vita are a phenomenon that anthropologist João Biehl investigates by way of a deep engagement with the life account and story of a woman resident of Vita named Catarina, whom he connects with. Such zones of social abandonment, as Biehl calls them, have been cropping up on the outskirts of cities in Brazil, essentially as a consequence of neoliberal economic reforms following upon a period of rapid industrialization, which left the nation in a state of deep economic inequality, and inability to fulfil public health needs (Biehl, Amar, Parker). Catarina suffers from an undiagnosed (inherited, genetic) degenerative neuromuscular condition, Machado-Joseph disease (MJD), that gradually renders her non-able-bodied. As a result of the prospective burden that a non-able bodied mother and wife and would-be blue collar worker, Catarina’s family has contrived to rid themselves of her. She has been misdiagnosed as mentally unsound, and has been cut off from her family, and overmedicated into
At Biehl’s encouragement, Catarina keeps a journal in which she writes autobiographical poetry that she calls her “Dictionary” because she needs to write down the words that compose her continually disavowed truth and history. Such as is apparent in this excerpt, her criminal pathologization depends upon the financial indebtedness of her country, and her primary symptom is “Rheumatism.”

I shall not pay a debt I didn’t incur
I don’t deserve to suffer for a crime I didn’t commit
Rheumatism
(Biehl 327)\textsuperscript{64}

Through an engagement with her writing and through interviews, Biehl is able to piece together and reconstitute the severed social ties, discovering and locating her family members. In addition, advocating for adequate medical testing for Catarina, Biehl is able to arrive at an accurate diagnosis of her condition. None of this changes her ultimate fate, as the family cannot find the capacity to re-assimilate her. Biehl’s account nevertheless helps to shed light on the social and economic conditions that contribute to and create such abandonment.

**Diagnosis: Eugenic Disavowal**

\textit{Our voice makes contact with the infirmity and becomes imperceptible}
(Biehl 349)

I argue that a collusion between racial capitalism and capitalist (for-profit) medicine emerges in both texts, manifesting itself as eugenic isolation that is an outcome of diagnostic practice, and the practices (abuses) that become permitted under the umbrella of certain diagnoses, specifically diagnoses relating to women who are “mad,” disabled, or, simply,

\textsuperscript{64} from Book III of The Dictionary
racially Black. One might argue that Biehl’s text is a part of a cultural (subcultural) turn to women of color feminist cultural critique as it looks at a devastating story of (ultimately) gender-based abuse and abandonment. In Corregidora, the Corregidora women are abused for their profitability as “raw material” and in Vita, Catarina is disposed of and rendered into “raw material” or bare flesh relegated to a zone of social abandonment – dispossessed from her already precarious status – because of her being and becoming as a socio-economic burden. Ultimately, Catarina’s disability status may have allowed the family to profit off of her via disability pensions, and her biological samples (blood) ultimately became a service to science and to her family’s treatment and to the greater population affected by their genetic illness of MJD. The goal being to consume and erase the vital reproductive flesh at the core of the domestic sphere, once her symptoms of harm make contact with the public sphere in a way that erupts into visibility – here visibility is specifically/primarily in the purview of the medical gaze. Catarina copes with her state of abandonment and erasure by creating an emergency dictionary, as she calls it, which consists of a collection of notebooks in which she writes poetry cataloguing and reflecting her experiences and her story, although no one in her immediate sphere of sociality validates any of it until the sympathetic anthropological researcher comes along in the person of João Biehl.

The case with the Corregidora women is slightly different because the erasure is at once constant, incremental, cumulative, and recursive. The primary violent erasure of their experiences is with the abolition of slavery in Brazil, all the records were burnt to make it seem as though it had never happened. Resisting this erasure, the matrilineal imperative among the Corregidora women is to repeat the story orally to subsequent generations, and also to keep a photo of old man Corregidora “to remember what evil looks like,” in a perversion of sentimental family memorabilia by carrying around the photograph of an
Literature in medical sociology paints a picture of a medicalizing, diagnosis-oriented epistemology in the healthcare professions. Diagnosis, as a social construction for the management of disease, emerges as a vital node for a sociological understanding of medicine and demands our critical attention (Brown 1995). While a diagnosis (when accurate, or approximately) can provide legitimation to suffering and access to institutional support, it is also a powerful agent of objectification, classification, and control. Symptoms, behaviours, or conditions that may or may not be biological in nature are organized into disorders and syndromes and classified into diagnoses that then come to shape identity categories (Conrad, Horwitz). The medical, legal, and otherwise institutional deployment of the discourse of diagnosis also structures a system of authority and agency where the “diagnosed” “patient” experiences the dispossession of themselves, beginning with being spoken about in the third person and frequently having their personhood reduced to their diagnosis (Irigaray, Jutel). This becomes most contentious in the territory of so-called mental health disorders, not least because psychiatric diagnoses are linked to stigmatized identity categories. A historicized view of psychiatric diagnosis, with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as its authoritative and mediating text, shows that “mental illness is frequently used as a residual, or ‘wastebasket,’ category” for contested illnesses or as a container for perceived social deviance or threat (Jutel 137). Consequently, mental illness diagnoses of individual patients hold a unique potential for elucidating public configurations of power and harm. They also trouble the already-fictive line between public and private spheres.

With this in mind, so-called mental illness can be conceived as inextricable from its root of hysteria – a tool of social control and subjugation that is discursively connected to the site of and capacity for biological reproduction. The uterus is also a vessel for
reproducing bodies/workers/citizens and thus is a site of private/public transition and contention. Thus, concretely biological reproductive illnesses, connecting mental illness to the etymological root of hysteria (in the organ of the uterus), might usefully be understood *not as* a private disorder but as a public archive of social subjection and control and the traumas that accompany it. Specifically, the traumas to reproductive flesh as such. This chapter seeks to forge a connection to practices of racist and ableist eugenic sterilization as an invasive medical intervention that is indissociable from the practice of mental illness diagnoses as a tool of social control. That is to say, it is a materialization of the original impulse under such oppressive diagnostic practices.

Diagnosis is a practice of classification that, along the medical model, serves to isolate the individual as a singular biomedical entity divorced from context, history, and futurity. It is a dispossession that is convenient, profitable, and that permits maximum control. Historical disavowal is a violent practice that deprives individuals of genealogical connections. A biomedicalized model of diagnosis excludes a socio-political etiology for present suffering, ignoring structural socio-economic orientations and affective traumas of racism and sexism that might produce pain and suffering and vulnerability (Geary).

Thus, I am interested in somaticized trauma, hysteria, and the problem of female reproductive sexuality *in relation to* politicized acts of forgetting, remembering. Or, to turn to one of the opening epigraphs, creating a materialized archive of that which has been relegated to the unseen and unused: as the verb-form of “archive” – there is a politics of information that is *kept* but that is *out of sight* – “lower in the hierarchy of memories,” as in the record of public shameful histories burnt up and subsequently privately remembered in
the oral register and in the traumatized bodies, in *Corregidora*. In *Vita* the analogue to this would be the opportunistic erasure of the *actual* illness afflicting Catarina – and its replacement with a more socially and medically “convenient” diagnosis of psychosis – was in fact kept out of sight in her blood and in disavowed family memory and in Catarina’s dismissed somatic knowledges. Sickness, approached as Biehl approaches Catarina’s, and as manifested in Ursa’s unnecessary hysterectomy can also be a vital historiographic archive where none other is available.

The word “diagnosis” comes from the Greek “dia” to separate, and “gnosis”, to know. To know via separation – an epistemology of separation, a medical imposition upon social ties and kinship that separates and recreates new socio-bio-medical subjects. A mode of control and a tool for classifying deviant or sick others, diagnosis is fundamentally a way to control and contain difference. It can also very easily be fraudulently deployed with malicious intent, a violence and a violation. Of course, there is a therapeutic aspect to it that is not to be underestimated. Diagnosis can also of course be an enabling ticket to access for treatment that might greatly alleviate or cure conditions, and/or save one’s life… as, used therapeutically, it is accompanied by a host of treatments and research and medical care practices. Diagnosis, when accurate and appropriate, can provide a community of co-sufferers and offer greatly helpful insights into one’s patterns of illness.

I am primarily concerned with the former, harmful, use of the blade of diagnosis in relation to women of color and women without means or privilege. As a tool for cutting reproductive flesh, diagnosis is deployed to control, contain, hide, abandon populations that

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65 Interestingly, the link from oneself to the maternal grandmother is in fact a biological one, where as the connection becomes less immediate once one is the great-granddaughter.
66 She would refer to her physical degenerative sickness in her “dictionary” as something in her blood – indicating an unspoken family knowledge of her condition, or her own intuitive deduction.
67 In the case of Ursa, the unavailable history would also be the sickness of racism-driven eugenics.
are perceived as a burden upon “the world” or society as they are not perceived as eugenically contributing to “growth.” The above is especially true with regard to women and people of color: a diagnosis of mental illness is opportunistically used to deligitimize their social existence. \(^{68}\) The legacy of hysteria as an essentializing pathologization of femininity with a long history is obvious. It is from this material essentializing origin of hysteria that I extrapolate Reproductive Illness rather than Mental Illness as a category in my reading. Reproductive Illness reflects a convergence of capitalism, slavery, and medicine as colluding in the praxes of diagnosis and disavowal, resulting in a violence that cuts to the core of the reproductive family unit – the woman’s reproductive flesh.

**Theorizing Reproductive Illness**

A feature red flag indicative of domestic violence and abusive intimate partner behaviors is a methodical social isolation of the victimized partner. I suggest a consideration of diagnosis as a form of Domestic Violence. Social gaslighting, is another shared characteristic whereby women or people of color have legitimate grievances dismissed as incoherencies because of an ontological pathologization of racial blackness and femininity, here mental illness diagnoses in particular operate as tools of social control.

Instances, irruptions, or patterns of self-harm or domestic violence or neglect might, further, be figured as a fissure within the fissure that mental illness effects in diagnostic regimes of understanding: thus, not so much as a red-flag symptom of morbid individual pathology but a sign of an extant external and discursive violence that has caused the individual to be in doubt of their self as socially viable; or the social symptom of trauma for

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\(^{68}\) In people of color mental illness or “unfitness” is used to reinforce a social status of subjugation, as lucidly elaborated in Jonathan Metzl’s *Protest Psychosis.*
one or both actors in a dysfunctionally abusive family or intimate partner dynamic. Taken as a zone of social mediation and public archive, mental illness diagnosis emerges as a space where spheres of knowledge and power touch each other, simultaneously acting as a threatening fissure in the integrity of regimes of medicalizing knowledge and power.

In this capacity, I consider the diagnostic category of Mental Illness as an act of domestic violence, and symptom, itself, of the critical and violent shortcomings of diagnostic practice. “Reproductive Illness,” in my analysis, supercedes the category of “Mental Illness,” bringing into relief an originary etymological connection between hysteria and a sickness of the uterus – that is, a sickness of reproductive flesh, and the flesh that is ground zero for the ideological category of the family. Affinities with contagion, social contamination anxieties, and anxieties around heritability all work in concert in translating mental illness to reproductive illness, taking to account the material practices of eugenic sterilization.

This messy opening invites and requires a “crip” epistemology: an orientation of experiential attentiveness to disability or illness, forging “different ways of knowing-in-relation” with regard to a “sick” subject’s experience (McRuer, Johnson and McRuer 142). A “cripistemological” orientation invites us to encounter the fissure of mental illness: witnessing the space of the disorganized symptom, the pain, on its own terms. A cripistemology of so-called mental illness diagnosed subjects would listen to, rather than sanitize, their complicated and socially contextualized prose, or what I have chosen to call “reproductive illness” as a sick archive (Johnson and McRuer). My reading hopes to articulate a creative participatory readership of aesthetic “crip sociality” that is an aesthetic and creative alternative kinship modality emergent from a cripistemological attunement to the sick archive that is laid out in Corregidora and Vita.69

69 I take intimate partner violence and family harm as further crystallizations/manifestations of the work that
In these texts, I will argue that reproductive illness functions as a social, political, historical, and proleptic archive. In particular, in the context of the dissertation, these later 20th century texts that contain/describe mad/sick/crip femmes perform internalized, introjected, and somaticized (and transmitted) injuries that bear the inscription of violent modernity – I argue that these texts also perform post-traumatic working-through, where creative expression fills the space of kinship-formation and genealogical transmission that diagnostic and surgical methods have sought to eradicate. In the face of a wrong, cutting diagnosis of “unfitness,” these texts offer alternative, queer kinship creations as a mode of survival and, critically, communication (historical aliveness, archive).

Public/Family Trauma

In the world I am not even woman
(Biehl 345)70

In Corregidora and Vita, I consider the nuclear family unit as both a lived and an ideological threshold between the individual and the public sphere. I don’t acknowledge any real existence of a private sphere as insular from the public except when it is ideologically convenient to conceive of one. Thus, the family is rather an interface, a zone of interaction, but in no way separate or outside of the public sphere. Scholars of race, sexuality, and disability71 argue that the sphere of intimate kinships and relationships is not in fact private in many instances – originally a work place for African Americans, a non-space of institutionalization for many disabled people, and a place of ideological control for racial and

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70 from Book XVII of The Dictionary
71 These include Zora Neale Hurston, Beth Richie, Thavolia Glymph, and Michael Gill, among others.
sexual purity, a site of production and preservation of “American-ness.” The family unit is a political and affective entity and kinship network that is idealized, controlled, and sanitized by the state – it is an affective fulcrum and vector of trauma and harm. It is also a sanctioned space for the abuse and disposal of people; a zone of transformation and protection, or exploitation and rupture, where the family and kinship structure allows violence to be perpetrated by the state under the auspices of “care,” or “passion.” That is to say, the family becomes a sanctioned agent of harm and abandonment inasmuch as it occupies an ideological zone symbolic of privacy and symbolic of caretaking. In this way, it is also an intensified zone of historical harm, where traumatic and violent moments that might be erased from the dominant historical narrative are preserved. In turn, the management of the effects of this harm, when too onerous for the family, turns to the public sphere, forging a trauma-driven interdependency between the family and the medical sphere.

Such (genetically) inherited pain and suffering constitute a visceral archive. I suggest that symptoms delineate a communicative archive and critique of violence against the integrity of the subject as a citizen and as a whole, desiring person. Intimate social ties and the right to familial ties of one’s choosing – reproductive rights in the broad sense – should be conceived of as fundamental to a citizen-subject. The nation-forming and sustaining institution of chattel slavery is defined by the deprivation of this fundamental need and right, and sutures the dispossessed slave as a critical contributor to the domestic sphere of white America, as an economic asset and provider of unpaid vital domestic reproductive labor in every sense. Thus I argue that the violent betrayal of/by the intimate partner, the shattering of the home structure, of family ties and love is as originary to the U.S. construction of the ideological and ideal zone of the family, sustaining a fetishization of primitive accumulation; the monetization of race and sexuality. That is to say that I am theorizing a public aspect to
domestic violence as a mimicry of historical violence and as a rupture that opens a window to public violence by way of—for instance—medical intervention or prison.

**Intimately Invasive Diagnosis and Disavowal: Cutting up Families**

I argue that the past, present and future intimate reproductive relationships in *Vita* and *Corregidora* are “infected,” in the blood, with sickness—one is physically debilitating (Machado Joseph Syndrome), one psychically and emotionally (the stories of incestuous sexual violence and lineage from the slave master). In both texts I am proposing that a sick, traumatized subject who has been medically or contractually robbed of biological kinship and reproductive capacity (Ursa and Catarina, in their respective settings) is jointly produced by family, social, and medical forces. The creative selves for these characters which emerge as “crip sociality” and public aesthetic engagement are significantly constituted by Intimately Invasive Diagnosis that I align with Domestic Violence and Kinship Rupture.

The world of medical intervention—in both *Corregidora* and *Vita*, illustrates ways in which the familial-ideological concept of care sanctions actions of harm in both medical intervention and in the family unit. Different types of domestic violence are in fact at the core of both of these texts, and I argue that, each time, they afford the window of opportunity for intimately invasive diagnosis and rupture through the medical “care” institution-practice. In *Corregidora*, it is in the hospitalization that ensues after Mutt drunkenly beats Ursa that she is sterilized. In *Vita* it is the betrayal and violence with which Catarina’s marriage is fraught that culminates in her former husband’s continual institutionalization of Catarina, until she ends up at *Vita*. First family, then “medicine,” in the name of/under the auspices of care, does harm, and deprives Ursa and Catarina of their reproductive rights.

We are shown the violence of medicine and of slavery and their traumatic legacies in
*Corregidora* and *Vita*. Each of these tells a story of lusophone feminine pain and madness, though *Corregidora* is the only one to explicitly address the legacy of slavery and focus on former afro-brazilian slave women. There is a discursive trauma and rememory happening in *Vita* as well. *Vita* goes right into the wound of violent capitalist human devaluation and shows the damaging impact of neoliberalism as a continued after-effect of toxic capitalist effects on kinship.

Power in the form of the medical sphere appears as an intimately invasive diagnosis (a knowing by/as separation/parsing/classification – “dia-gnosis”). In *Corregidora* we will see that the intimately invasive diagnosis that cuts off the reproductive line and (here, symbolically) displaces and *makes to fail* the re/productive body of the Black woman in the Jim Crow mid-century American South has to do directly with a post-slavery anxiety of reproductive control over Black bodies (Roberts, Washington). That is to say, Black bodies were routinely sterilized, often without their knowledge or consent, opportunistically, whenever they came into the sphere of gynaecological medical intervention (after birth, for instance. In Ursa’s case, after a miscarriage). The trauma of slavery and rape and incest in *Corregidora* impacts the past, present, and future intimate familial reproductive relationships (intimate partner violence and beatings). These work in concert with a critical medical intervention that forecloses Ursa’s capacity to reproduce biologically: she is medically involuntarily sterilized in a trauma that is deep and thoroughgoing in the narrative. Yet Ursa finds a way to transmit her history in her blues singing, and even more fully so after her violent and traumatic biological sterilization. In *Vita*, such an incursion is driven by economic scarcity and the subsequent need to displace the failed (noticeably sickened and degeneratively disabled) re/productive body of the woman. Her beginning early signs of MJD are the symptom that results in paradoxical misdiagnosis as mental illness which leads
Always-Already Public: the Culmination and Transcendence of Public Intimate Violations in Corregidora

In the case of Ursa Corregidora, a descendent of slaves and their masters, the notion and structure of family is always-already dispossessed, always-already invaded by capital. Her great-grandmother was her master’s (who was both Ursa’s great grandfather and grandfather) “little gold piece.” She was a concubine and he sold her sexual services to others for his profit. Chattel slavery made the intimate sphere always already ruptured, dispossessed, cut, violent, and quite public and economically quantified. As the public sphere always-already implicates the circulation of capital, in a domestic sphere predicated upon chattel slavery, the public sphere is in fact central in this sense.

In Corregidora, Gayl Jones describes a traumatic afterlife of domestic sexual slavery and incest for “the corregidora women” and presents an intimate crip sociality in their compulsion to repeat and constant witnessing. As borne in Ursa’s Great-Gram’s injunction to “leave evidence,” there is an obligation to public visibility. In the history of the Corregidora women and their sexual history: thoroughgoing somatic-emotional trauma around the intimate family unit, around the intimate act of intercourse. Through three generations, we have a reproduction of antagonistic domesticities – the spectre of the fungible woman, psychotic possessiveness, and somatic-emotional dissociation/numbness/lack of sensation.

Ursa was raised in a strictly matrilineal household: Great Gram, Gram, her mother, and herself. They were stuck in a cycle of post traumatic hallucinatory repetition. Great Gram and Gram were Corregidora’s women, and he incestuously fathered Ursa’s mother, with Gram. Ursa’s mother effectively repeated their history in her brief and unhappy
marriage with Martin, Ursa’s father. By her account, they only had intercourse once, and she conceived, and they never did again, which ultimately shamed, hurt and enraged Martin to the point that he beat her so badly so that when she walked home others would think that she was a prostitute, which begs the question as to whether Ursa’s mother failed to exit from her legacy by politicizing her single act of sex into a completely utilitarian act of “producing generations.” Ursa had already seemed to move into a different direction, as she took up blues singing rather than telling her family story to an offspring and staying in the same isolationist all female house – she sought a broader audience, and to share her stories and histories with a greater community.

In her marriage, the spectre of prostitution emerged again in Mutt’s jealous anxiety about her performances and the men who watch her. The traumatic anxiety of the inseparability of the public sphere and the domestic/intimate partnership is again repeated in Mutt’s jealous anxiety around Ursa’s work as a blues singer. He felt it threatened their relationship as she was singing her stories for public consumption – a form of intimacy that generates profit. He punishes her by withholding sex in private, particularly when she wants it, and yet he makes a great display of their sexual relationship when they attend a dance (public). The marked violent irruption happens on the back stairs, which Ursa took between her place of work and their shared home (a public space). This is the motive for his violence that sent her to the hospital and induced a miscarriage.

Notably, Mutt’s drunken assault on Ursa occurred in a liminal public space—on her walk the remarkably short distance between her work at the club and the home that she and Mutt shared at the time. The violence perpetrated against Ursa by her then-husband Mutt, that serves as the window of opportunity for the intimately invasive diagnosis of a
“medically necessary emergency hysterectomy.” Her confinement to a hospital immediately after the violent incident brings Ursa’s story firmly into the postslavery structures of violence and control – in the hospital, she is dispossessed of her womb, and curses equally at hospital workers and nurses and Mutt, in a thoroughgoing rage that draws on the pain of previous generations, as her physical ability to reproduce was quite literally excised from her body.

The initial incident with Mutt occurred outside of her place of work as a blues singer -- the attack was public, the visceral cutting (excision) of her reproductive flesh was in the medical institution of the hospital. So it is a collusion between the intimate partner and the medical institution that her reproductive flesh, her imperative of biological futurity, was torn from her. She emerges from the hospital visit following the incident with Mutt, sterile and barren, in a period and region where coercive and/or non-consensual sterilization of African American women was trending. She reportedly miscarried a four week pregnancy after her fall. The medical motivation for a hysterectomy seems extreme and suspicious. It is not something that we can separate from the practice of coercive sterilization of people of color, and with disabilities.

Ursa’s entry into modernity is marked by singing and sterilizing and domestic violence – what it means to be a black woman in the post slavery America/s. She fashions an alternate selfhood and future that is based upon aurality and somatic orality. The news of her barrenness is particularly traumatic for Ursa because her foremothers always insisted that she must birth children (“the importance is to have generations”) in order to carry on the oral history of the truth of the abuses that they had suffered at the hands of “old man Corregidora” during slavery times --- remembering by oral transmission harm and evil that otherwise would exclusively live in their psyches and bodies.

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72 Here, we are reminded of the term “Mississippi Appendectomy.”
Orality is Ursa’s medium of social exchange and recognition. The harm that she does not abandon in her relationship with Mutt is a perceived form of self-harm or incomprehensible self-sabotage [why battered women stay, repeat the cycle, etc] – this agent and vector of harm that is her marriage with Mutt also serves as the animate archival text of Reproductive Illness. At the end of the novel, Ursa’s act of fellatio on Mutt limns the sadomasochistic in a near re-enactment of Great Gram’s act of betrayal against Old Man Corregidora, in a scene that suggests an exorcism as Ursa uses her orality in her reproductive illness.

**Specters of Family Harm: Dispossession and Genealogical Cripistemology in *Vita***

Dollars
Real
Brazil is bankrupted
I am not to be blamed
Without a future
(Biehl 336)\(^73\)

Heir
Treasure
Fortune
Sole Daughter
Sole Son
Future
Catieki
Cakina
Catakina
To get the secret
Credit card
(Biehl 342-343)\(^74\)

João Biehl, in his ethnographic study of “Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment,”

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\(^73\) From Book XI of The Dictionary. Here Catarina makes a quite lucid assessment of her situation and of the origin of Vita in the bankruptcy of the nation.

\(^74\) From Book XVI of The Dictionary. Here, Catarina shows a morphology by which she alters the spelling of her name, to create more room for breath with the open K (as opposed to closed R). The short excerpt narrates a haunting circuit of debt and inheritance in the movement from “heir” to “credit card.”
shows the moving pieces of medical-pharmaceutical intervention and mediation by way of
the family unit as an agent of and for state abandonment in the life and death of Catarina at
Vita. This narrative begins with research into off-the-map/off-the-radar “zones of social
abandonment” where bodies and people have been effectively “zoned out” of a struggling
neoliberalized medical care system. Places like Vita are a sort of medico-social anti-social
anti-utopic concentration camp-like space: it provides the abandoned with a concrete space
in which to be and exist as abandoned.

Caretakers and figures of authority are often barely knowledgeable and occasionally
minimally certified to care for such populations. Often recovered addicts or AIDS patients,
the are also often there either to keep themselves off of the streets or to access medications
(arbitrarily prescribed, and often expired). With the person of Catarina, whom Biehl engages
and speaks with on recurring visits to Vita, Biehl begins to trace a single-informant
ethnography of how it is that one ends up in a place such as this – how this exorbitant social
zone emerges and is sustained.

In such a context, “care” is deployed in a very sinister manner. In collusion with
medical institutions fabricating a mental illness diagnosis for the family member in question,
Biehl diagnoses “social psychosis” as the dissonant context that creates the circumstances
that convey Catarina to Vita. As Biehl concludes near the end of his study,

Her presumed madness was intimately related to changing political and labor regimes
as well as to pharmaceutical forms of knowledge and care that were embedded in
nets of relatedness, intimacies, and betrayals. Social psychosis thus encompasses the
manner in which diagnosis and treatment of various mental and affective
disturbances fluctuate in concert with political and economic forces and the dying of
social ties.
(emphasis added, 315-316)

The “dying of social ties” is particularly significant to both Catarina and Ursa’s stories, and is
truly the primary violence that their creative work resists, forging futurity.
Catarina suffers from a rare genetic disease (Machado-Joseph disease [MJD]) that causes degenerative pain and mobility issues, worsened by environmental triggers and accelerated by medical and emotional neglect. Catarina’s physical illness is a genetic inherited body-memory that goes back to the island region in Portugal that her ancestors migrated (colonized) from. The symptoms from this illness, however, led the family and medical powers that be to diagnose and treat her as though she were a psychiatric patient. Quite literally, a variation of post-partum psychosis was invented in collaborative praxis between Catarina and her family, over the course of repeated institutionalizations over the course of which her social and familial ties were being methodically eroded, as she was being overmedicated into sedation and stupor and compliance. She became divorced, and somehow her infant daughter was adopted by a wealthy family without her consent. In between the lines of the story of the adoption, the daughter may well be being used to pay off a debt or a favor of some sort.

Her sickness and suffering are significantly and ultimately fatally compounded with and by intimately violent economic and (mis)diagnostic forces. Once she begins to show symptoms, her husband begins to abuse and cheat on her, and the family seems to collude all together, gaslighting and coercing Catarina into a diagnosis of mental illness and unfitness to mother which led to a non-consensual coerced surrendering of her new born daughter for adoption by a wealthy couple that employed a relative of Catarina’s. In a deeply impoverished sub-economy of destitute urban workers struggling to survive in conjunction with an impoverished medical system struggling to survive and retain legitimacy… the violence perpetrated against Catarina is exile from the family and from society at large by betrayal and opportunistic misdiagnosis. She is zoned out into a “zone of social abandonment” as Biehl describes it.
Catarina’s symptoms are physical and wholly separate from mental illness, and they are themselves the clue to the unravelling of her life and story. And yet, her mental illness diagnosis and years of abuse and abandonment (alongside the existing stress and early onset triggers for MJD) created a hostile social environment for her life, and the poverty, deprivation (emotional, sensory, sensual, nutritional), and overmedication that work in concert with her abandonment create a visual and sensory scaffolding around her body and her existing disability in order to bolster the prejudicial approaches of those who would dispose of her in the first place – “look, how indigent, how bewildered, frustrated… of course she’s Other, she smells,” etc. [daughter visit moment when misbehaving example]

In a sinister collusion of family and medical abuse due to financial strain in a setting where Catarina cannot be defined or accounted for as anything other than an excessive burden. The flailing infrastructure of a national medical system that sought to [neoliberally] show itself as “more human and humane” leading to lack of actual medical oversight and diagnosis, and, a rather rampant free rein situation of socially constructed and fabulated psychiatric illness that then determines Catarina’s fate. Thinly-veiled disposal of sick family members through a machine of medical abandonment creates a site of unimaginable abjection and neglect.\(^\text{75}\) We come to understand that Catarina’s social status and position as a blue collar, poor woman and mother creates layers of vulnerability that contribute to her arrival at the terminus of such social abandonment.

The two-sided blade of diagnosis is quite striking in Catarina’s instance: when it is deemed expedient, Catarina was diagnosed and treated and disposed of as a “psychotic.” With a great deal of time and energy, João recuperates a diagnosis for Catarina’s actual

\(^{75}\) Notably Biehl’s published account is accompanied by photographs, as though to attest to the incredible conditions here.
illness, quite different from psychosis; enacting a reverse hysteria on her case – or rather, revealing her social and familial context to be themselves performing a social psychosis--, though too late for her life to be recuperated. One diagnosis, that of mental illness, gives her family and the community license to abandon her, while the other one brings with it a clinic, treatments, and a disability pension.

The fact that Catarina’s “illness” was in fact purely physical and a pervasive family illness is quite remarkable, and the concession, after years of treating her as a psychotic, that she is in fact perfectly lucid, is tragically uneventful in the plot of her life story, as she has already been relegated to the zone of abandonment, and any change of the new status quo would be a logistical and affective cost deemed too great by the administrators at Vita and her family.

Catarina, in her Dictionary, summarizes her circumstances towards the end of her life as such:

Genetic clinic
Novo Hamburgo
Caridade Hospital
Catieki
Catakina
To throw all the blood away
Mentally ill
Mental health
There is no money
(344-345)76

**Crip Transformations of Reproductive Illness: Creating Different Futurities**

In my readings of both texts, I argue that Ursa and Catarina generate creative testimony to resist the goal of the intimately invasive diagnosis that dispossesses their subjectivities, deadening their social ties and their social or biological potential for futurity.

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76 From Book XVII of The Dictionary.
Singing the blues and writing poetry seem to be in both instances erotic and life-giving compulsions and outlets for Ursa and Catarina. In the case of Ursa, singing the blues is quite literally her livelihood. In the case of Catarina, her poetry became a vital crypt that found an attentive cripistemological witness in Biehl. Having encountered her as essentially a nobody – no papers, no money, nothing to tie her to civic and social life aside from her own testimony, which was of course written off by way of the pathologization of her as crazy, not to mention the cognitive side effects of the routine rounds of sedation that she was subjected to. Through the clues that her writing points to and describes, Biehl was able to piece together her story and, ultimately, her correct diagnosis.

Ursa is raised with the responsibility of bearing a child (moreover, a sdaughter) and passing on her oral history as her duty. Her deprivation of the possibility of biological reproduction compels her to move out of a hermetic cycle of traumatic repetition and she directly engages the public sphere, composing and singing songs. In singing the blues, Ursa is fashioning a different oral crip sociality from that which she inherited – she shares stories with the community through song, and she does not injure Mutt during the fellatio scene. In the novel’s final scene, Ursa stops just short of re-enacting her Great Gram’s transgression and act of ultimate resistance against old man Corregidora, opting not to bite. The scene ends in a painful coupling and exchange of fluids (swallowing, crying) – desire and hurt and a somatic re-enactment of the scene of perilous agency and anger exerted by her great grandmother – a necessarily interpersonal visitation – a nonreproductive reproduction of sexual violence. Arguably, Ursa uses her orality to transcend her inherited patterns.

In her ongoing writing of a long poem that she calls her Dictionary, Catarina records for herself and for João her truth and history which had been occluded from audience before he came, as she was deemed “psychotic” and her ramblings “nonsense.” The writing
is her bearing witness to something that João ultimately legitimates and verifies through research and diagnosis, and, first and foremost, by taking her words seriously and seeking to piece together a history grounded in reality from Catarina’s words. In this way, *Vita* is also an account of interpersonal recollection from a state of social death and abjection and an exercise in crip social aesthetics of urgency and pain; emergency words that call for attention and inhabitation. Cripistemology here listens to Catarina’s physical symptom and also to her dictionary: it *suspends* the deeply entrenched diagnosis of psychosis\(^\text{77}\) that Catarina bears by the time João encounters her in order to seek the truth behind her story.

Crip sociality is another name for pathological socialities that publicise private injury and pain, and articulate the pain of reproductive injustice. A social self is a coalitional politics born out of cripistemological ways of relating and researching in the process of seeking one’s way out of a psychically harmful socio-political context that does not acknowledge you. Broadly speaking, remaining committed to a reading of a person’s minority and stigmatized subject status promises to help move us out from the dominant approach of diagnosis-reliant epistemology in managing suffering and psychic pain. A cripistemology of families that harm here makes it imperative to view destructive symptoms as a reaction and reflection.

I decide over my child
I don’t want to take it to death
(Biehl 348)\(^\text{78}\)

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\(^{77}\) Or, description, if not diagnosis.

\(^{78}\) From Book XVIII of *The Dictionary*. 
Chapter Four: Disorganizing American Grammars: Cultural Seeing, Toxic Consumption,
and Revolutionary Aesthetics

…picking and plucking her way between the tire rims
and the sunflowers, between the Coke bottles
and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty
of the world—which is what she herself was.
(Morrison 1970 205)

Introduction

My final chapter looks at Toni Morrison’s 1970 *The Bluest Eye*, a novel set in 1941
about an abject dark skinned black girl’s psychic undoing, with Wangechi Mutu’s 2013 *The
End of eating Everything*, an apocalyptic-afrofuturist short art film that confounds temporality
and appearance. Both texts, I will argue, rupture expectations of genre and representation,
and, in articulating a new grammar gesturing toward “something else to be,” produce an
aesthetic climate that engenders visceral disorientation in the reader or spectator. I argue
that the disorienting aesthetic practice has the potential to engender what Roderick Ferguson
and Grace Hong have called “strange affinities” in what I argue is a revolutionary (Black
Lesbian Feminist) aesthetic of visceral pedagogy.

*The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, on the heels of post-civil rights struggle Black
empowerment and the Black is Beautiful movement, looks backward to tell a story from the
period preceding these movements to draw attention to the ongoing presence and violence
of internalized antiblackness, drawing to heightened visibility the black girl as the most
abjected embodiment. Lorain, Ohio – near Cleveland, which was a major destination for the
Great Migration – as the setting for the story casts Pecola and her community a diasporic

79 The decapitalization of “eating” is intentional as distinct from the other words in the title is intentional, and
appears as such in all of the artist’s materials on the piece.
80 Mutu expresses a desire for viewers to “smell” that something is “terribly wrong” in the world that she
conveys. Morrison notes in her 1993 foreword to the novel, “there can’t be anyone, I am sure, who doesn’t
know what it feels like to be disliked” (i).
community of recent migrants within the always already diasporic African American population. Pecola’s subjective disintegration in the novel is spurred by media propagation of white beauty ideals, domestic violence, and community violence directed at her on account of her dark complexion. The End of eating Everything is a short 8-minute art film that plays on a loop on an art gallery wall, portraying a toxic and unsettling figure with the face of a Black woman. The figure is surreal and vastly oversized, layered with lesion-like paint and machine and body parts on the surface of her massive mass of a body. Reaching a bursting breaking point of rageful violent consumption of her animal companions, Mutu’s “Creature” implodes and disappears, physically undone.  

Wangechi Mutu, the artist behind The End of eating Everything is a diasporic (postcolonial) Kenyan(-American) woman living in the U.S. In 1941, the year in which The Bluest Eye is set, there is, in colonial Kenya, the beginning a critical period of shift and change: Following the second world war, in which many African men fought on behalf of the colonizing nation (Britain, in the case of Kenya), struggles for independence and self-determination ensued, initiating a thoroughgoing decolonization, as the men, weaponized for the ends of the colonial power, returned to their home countries. Thus, I forge a connection between these texts as having a gravitational connection to a “feminist wanting-more” from a period of greater empowerment – intervening in the feminist register into masculinist Black empowerment/liberation.

My analysis looks to Morrison and Mutu’s texts to rearticulate, through a black lesbian feminist lens, the cinematic epistemologies and figure of Black flesh circulating in Afro-pessimist discourse. Through an analysis of Pecola and Creature, I take up the figure of Black flesh as foundational depersonalized and degendered abject Blackness, with a

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81 The figure does not have a name, but in an interview, Mutu refers to her as “Creature”, which I use here for simplicity/shorthand.
difference: My readings excavate reproductive, cinematically enframed/circulated Black flesh as modernity’s most potent critical archive, because the reproductive flesh of the Black femme is the foundational ground zero of American modernity. Not merely a handy metaphorical figure, flesh is a lived and real archival materialization of the violence of antiblackness – in a lived sick and crip register: The daily lived health impacts of antiblackness in stress and poverty conditions and exposure compose a biopoliticized “making available for injury” and for vulnerability to disease (Geary, Puar). Thus, reproductive flesh as a term here expands to mean the lived experiences of ongoing, self-reproducing debilitating impacts of cultural violence and erasure, at the same time as it also relies upon the figure of a biologically reproductive gendered body in a biocapitalist economy.

My readings attend to the portrayal of modes and acts of toxic consumption that perform the ontological violence of antiblackness in both texts. Further, toxic ecological implications are present and available in the ways that both protagonists are co-signified with earth and land. The ground zero “earth mother” significations here are inescapable, underscoring the foundational locus of antiblackness to a destructive toxic modernity. As expressive vessels for the pain and hope of their postslavery and postcolonial migrant social origins, both Pecola and Creature are mobilized toward an expansive metaphorical capacity in their respective texts. Morisson’s Pecola is analogized to the land, as her friends Frieda and Claudia have planted marigold seeds in hopes of magically protecting her baby, and neither the infant nor the marigolds survived/grew in the novel. At the end of the novel, Pecola is portrayed as one with the hybrid landscape of grass and flowers, trash, and the railroad. She is wandering, and described as making birdlike gestures. On the other hand, Mutu’s Creature appears like a land mass in and of herself, floating and wandering in a destroyed atmosphere, with the history of industrialization and pollution and abjectification
of blackness all layered onto her body.

Both texts use a disorienting aesthetic praxis with regard to medium and grammars of genre, which I argue produces a phenomenology of minoritized placelessness in dominant discourse. Morrison and Mutu, I argue, purposefully (re)produce sustained unease (disease) in the reader or viewer, as a revolutionary, viscerally pedagogical aesthetic praxis. In conversation with Afro-pessimist discourse, this chapter reads an unpalatable “afterlife of slavery,” which forms the toxic futurity that I see the texts articulating.

**Toward a Feminist Reframing of Afro-pessimist Ontologies**

Flesh and the cinema are two gravitational centres for Afro-pessimist discourse. Afro-pessimism views racial blackness as outside of the paradigm of humanism: The violence of anti-blackness is understood to be ontological to western philosophy and to the liberal human subject. Outside of the category of the human, the body is reduced to fungible or dead, depersonalized and degendered flesh. In Afro-pessimist discourse, “flesh” is a contested conceptual site for thinking through the repercussions of cultural and visceral violence: Black flesh is a zone of suffering (Hartman); an assemblage of resistance and alternate world-making (Weheliye); a designation of accumulation and death (Wilderson); and it is a resonance of mystical capaciousness (Moten).

With two texts of and about wandering fugitive migrant bodies, this chapter limns the trope of fungible circulation and reproduced images from chapter 1. Where in chapter 1 my readings took into consideration an emergent mass culture and cinematic epistemology,

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82 Powerfully, I would add, Flesh reminds us that such terms as “optimism” and “pessimism” are beside the point: Flesh refuses allegiance to the Manichean designators of optimism and pessimism. As Fred Moten and Jared Sexton have noted on separate occasions, the ethical rigor of pessimism is vital to optimist thought, just as Afro-pessimism is “not but nothing other than black optimism” (Sexton 37). As Moten puts it, “if pessimism allows us to discern that we are nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what derives from that study” (774).
this chapter takes into account cinematic epistemologies that structure and are produced by late capitalism. Film and cinematic epistemologies are probably as ubiquitous in Afro-pessimist discourse as is the turn to the site of flesh (Wilderson, Fanon, Keeling, Sexton, & a subtext in Hartman’s *Scenes as spectacle*). Salient to analyses of race in the United States, film as a mass consumed media product emerged at the turn of the 20th century, the same time as W. E. B. Du Bois asserted the problem of the 20th century to be the problem of the color line. As Kara Keeling notes in *The Witch’s Flight*, the cinema came about at the turn of the century, when Du Bois was proleptically diagnosing the century’s “problem of the color line.” Indeed, we have the emergence of fungible images of people on the big screen at the time that the nation is grappling how to integrate freed slaves. Keeling’s discussion, further, notes the cinema’s internalized relation to capital in its fetishization of the image of and for consumption (via her readings of Debord and Deleuze). Keeling (via Deleuze) describes cinema as “the organ for perfecting” a “new reality” (3), and an agent producing and reinforcing “common sense.”

Cinematic perception is actually an ideological precision tool fashioning “twentieth century reality” (11). A cinematic epistemology, as I conceive it, is a mode of thinking and perception that is structured by a sequence of images. This process of suture and subjectifying (Foucault/Althusser) interpellation by way of cinematic sequencing guides the notion of a 20th century cinematic epistemology that shapes and reinforces cultural hierarchies, including racist and sexist and homophobic cultural consciousness that I am

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83 A critical aspect of the relation of film to ideology is the material and psychological event of “suture.” This term derives from psychoanalytic notions of the subject that emerges in language, from the description of the material shift between shots in (for example) the shot/reverse shot sequence, establishing perspective, point of view, subject position, and from the literal “cut” of material film that lies at the origin of the shot sequence – a cut and suture serve to establish an ideological subject formation that is founded upon certain exclusions: what is outside of the frame of the camera, and what is excised from the film in the process of shot sequencing (Silverman).
thinking through (DuBois, Keeling, Mulvey, Silverman, Deleuze, Hall) in articulating a project that engages 20th century American White Heteropatriachal cultural orientation/White Supremacist Cultural Seeing.

The [Sic] Archival Body

...a dialogical doubling ... when and where body art repeats the immiserating conditions or routinized scenarios confronted daily by black people, the effect of that repetition is to undermine the mechanics through which such domination is reproduced and dare us to imagine and to act otherwise. (Nyong’o 26-29)

At the end of The Bluest Eye, Morrison writes, of Pecola after the death of her baby – who would have been both sibling and progeny, confounding generational temporality – and the complete shunning she was faced with in her community:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind.

We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. […] we avoided Pecola Breedlove—forever.

[…] Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between the Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. (204-205)

84 The figure of an embodied archival register in the flesh comes to us in Hortense Spillers’s discussion of the marks of violence on the captive body in “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe…” : “lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures” become “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (67). Spillers designates a foundational “cultural vestibularity” to this fleshy archive and its violent encryptions. That is to say, a culture of sanctioned violence passes through and requires this passage-chamber of “undecipherable markings” — of culturally devalued and disavowed flesh, “whose severe disjunctures come to hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (67).
Thus, at the end of the novel, Pecola is at once the beauty- and life-giving earth mother and flightless bird who is erased, ignored, and dumped-upon as a scapegoat-debilitated person who has become in herself a capacity and capacitor of antiblackness. That is to say, the container and surface onto and into which the community directed “all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed,” a surface and container for them to clean themselves upon, an action which sustained the community’s sensation of wholesomeness, as Morrison puts it. This final scene of desolation conveys a landscape of waste, toxicity, beauty, and injured hope. An archive of the harm and injury that the community sustains and directs onto the person of Pecola as a [sic] living embodied and enfleshed archive of toxic antiblackness. The avoidance of Pecola that the friends express and enact is in contrast to her ongoing presence. Their “forgetting” of her does not remove her being. This concluding image from *The Bluest Eye* finds a visual parallel in the visual centerpiece of Wangechi Mutu’s Creature in *The End of Eating Everything*.

![Still of “Creature” in The End of Eating Everything.](image)

Figure 1: Still of “Creature” in *The End of Eating Everything*.  

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85 All images pertaining to my discussion of *The End of eating Everything* are stills provided by Wangechi Mutu, excerpted from "The End of eating Everything", 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Gladstone Gallery.
Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything*, an 8-minute short art film shows a monstrous female figure (Creature) who might be likened to a massive wandering, diseased world-womb, layered with paint and body and machine parts, exuding noxious fumes (Figure 1). Equally a figure of beauty and waste, Creature is at once terrifying and seductive. Her surface and shape and size variously manifest an animate archive of the effects and accumulated waste that are testament to the continuing after-lives of slavery, colonial violence, and global industrial and post-industrial capital. On her flesh is the indelible excrement of the extreme violences of antiblackness in the history of the present, then and now (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Close-up of still in Figure 1.](image)

On her skin’s surface are uncannily moving arms, spinning wheels, and what appear to be marks of disease and infection on her surface (Figure 2). These are accumulated adhesions of the impact of cultural seeing of skin color, on and as the creature’s body; black flesh as

*Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. (c) 2013 Wangechi Mutu and Wangechi Mutu Studio.*
unthought history materialized.

Creature is an enormous, stop-animated and Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) produced appearance of a living female-headed fleshy mass that moves in an amoeba-like fashion, and is mottled with a “gristle” of pockmarks. In the moving image, populating and bringing to uncanny life the surface of her dense lump of body-mass, wheels squeak and spin slowly and freely, undead black arms protrude and wave slowly in a torpor, several blow-holes exude smoke, and cilia-like pubic hairs adorn her edges, anemone-like and pulsating. A mass of accumulated and her heterogeneously constituted flesh, her shape is suggestive of an island or a landscape contaminated by industrial waste and chemical burns and oil spills. The creature also fashions herself as a fleshy mass allegorical of a ship from the middle passage into this dystopic afrofuturistic mothership. At once a fleshy synchronous palimpsest exhibiting the violences of “cultural seeing” and a [sic] resistant rearticulation of cultural seeing, playing on a repeated loop in a darkened corner of a museum gallery space, the creature is a deracinated cinematic organ of memory that relentlessly draws viewers in and assaults them with her archive – a black hole in a white wall, a haunting time capsule, synchronous, and on repeat.

Both Pecola and Creature, as portrayed in these passages and images are a [sic] archive of antiblackness, materialized and re-presented. Also both “wandering wombs,” as pathologized reproductive flesh, they map onto the semiotic rubric of hysteria. Both are also portrayed in a pathologizing manner and distanced from humanness: Pecola is described as bird-like and her gestural motions are suggestive of autistic peoples’s gestures. Creature’s body is distanced from the human shape aside from her head – it is an articulation of Pecola’s inability to fly in her lack of limbs with which to move herself (yet, she propels herself through space nevertheless with body contractions and expansions, and expelling
Both Pecola and Creature materialize the violence of cultural seeing. Both texts show the filth of antiblackness as it accrues onto and adheres to fleshy surfaces: the violences of cultural seeing, materialized. By such materialization, by making the violence palpable and visible, *The Bluest Eye* and *The End of eating Everything* destabilize the ground of and challenge the antiblack logics of cultural seeing. Antiblack logics of cultural seeing rely on invisibility: the violence of antiblackness is “hidden to cultural seeing by skin color,” as Spillers puts it. By aesthetically materializing the violent effects of antiblackness – making its embodied archive visible – it is harder to completely deny antiblackness. Its effects are rendered visible, continuous, on repeat, a [sic] archive of violence. As Tavia N’yongo puts it, in a discussion of physically demanding and degrading performance art, such as that of William Pope L.,

> when and where body art repeats the immiserating conditions or routinized scenarios confronted daily by black people, the effect of that repetition is to undermine the mechanics through which such domination is reproduced and dare us to imagine and to act otherwise.

(26-29)

**Toxic Consumption and [Sic] Climactic Visuals**

The [sic] dialogic doubling of anti-black violence that the reproductive flesh that Pecola and Creature emblematizes in the preceding section is narrated and composed (articulated) as “coming into being” through toxic consumption of whiteness/antiblackness. In *The Bluest Eye*, this consumption occurs within the narrative as both a psychic absorption and consumption of images that reinforce antiblackness, and through actual drinking and

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86 Images in this section and throughout are stills provided by Wangechi Mutu, excerpted from “The End of eating Everything”, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Gladstone Gallery. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. (c) 2013 Wangechi Mutu and Wangechi Mutu Studio.
eating on Pecola’s part. In *The End of eating Everything*, conspicuously named, we are led to understand that Creature has been “eating everything” up to this point, which has led to her unsettling and monstrous corporeal embodiment. On her part, the result of all of this internalized antiblackness is that her own mass of black flesh becomes toxic and violent, consuming the birds – her only companions in the piece – eating them violently out of the sky. The scene of such violently toxic (deadly) (deadened) black flesh composes a [sic] epitome that I discuss as a pornotropic image – as a climactic money-shot of all of this consumed anti-blackness such that it becomes you.

*The Bluest Eye* narrates a psychic absorption of overbearing Whiteness standards in relation to beauty through commodity and media consumption in the black community of the depression and post-depression era in Lorain, Ohio. Morison portrays the Breedlove family (Pecola’s family) paradoxically named Breedlove as they are compelled to self-loathing, convinced they are ugly. Additionally, text from the “Dick and Jane” English-language primer widely used up through the time that Morison was writing the novel, frames each chapter with text that is meant to describe and prescribe white heteropatriarchal ideals and domestic arrangements, serving instead to throw into sharper relief the dystopia that lies between the lines of White idyllic Life. Physically and in the narrative, Pecola, who wishes to have blue eyes (her panacea for her painful life), symbolically consumes white ideals of beauty by drinking excessive amounts of milk out of a glass bearing the face of Shirley Temple, and experiencing multiple (9) orgasms (metaphorical) eating candies whose wrappers bear the face of a blond haired blue eyed “Mary Jane.” Through commodity objects and foods, thus, Pecola repeatedly consumes whiteness, in a wish to feel loved and

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87 Notably, Pecola is named for a character “Peola” in the film *Imitation of Life*, which is mentioned in the novel. Peola is a character who passes for white. Pecola, with the added “c” for “colored” is thus named as a commentary on film consumption by Morison.
valued, “beautiful.”

The toxicity of the consumption of and of Pecola’s aspiration for white eyes becomes evident in the scene where she goes to visit the local pedophile and seer/witch doctor dubbed “Soaphead Church.” To grant Pecola her wish, Soaphead Church instructs her to feed a poisoned piece of meat to his landlady’s dog, telling her that if the dog reacts strangely after consuming the meat, her wish would be granted. Here, the packet of “dark, sticky meat” (175) sprinkled with poison, delivered to the dog by the unwitting young pregnant dark-skinned black girl, articulates and deals the fatally toxic blow of internalized anti-blackness. Soaphead watches the scene from his window, and we get the distinct impression that this is meant to be a perversely pornotropic climactic moment for him as he is finally rid of the dog that has been disgusting him all of these years, and also he is watching a young girl, in the process:

At the window he stood watching her, his eyebrows pulled together into waves of compassion, his tongue fondling the worn gold in his upper jaw. He saw the girl bending down to the sleeping dog, who at her touch, opened one liquid eye, matted in the corners with what looked like green glue she reached out and touched the dog’s head, stroking him gently. She placed the meat on the floor of the porch, near his nose. The odor roused him; he lifted his head, and got up to smell it better. He ate it in three or four gulps. The girl stroked his head again, and the dog looked up at her with soft triangle eyes. Suddenly he coughed, the cough of a phlegmy old man—and got to his feet. The girl jumped. The dog gagged, his mouth chomping the air, and promptly fell down. He tried to raise himself, could not, tried again and half-fell down the steps. Choking, stumbling, he moved like a broken toy around the yard. The girl's mouth was open, a little petal of tongue showing. She made a wild, pointless gesture with one hand and then covered her mouth with both hands. She was trying not to vomit. The dog fell again a spasm jerking his body. Then he was quiet. The girl's hands covering her mouth, she backed away a few feet, then turned, ran out of the yard and down the walk.

(175-176)

While this is not a scene of actual rape, it is certainly a traumatic violation in the sense that Pecola did not know that she was being used as a pawn to kill the dog, and Soaphead Church watched the scene unfold with climactic (for his subdued personality at any rate)
satisfaction from the window.\footnote{88} This \textit{petite-mort} in the narrative is also an actual death – that of the dog. With the agent of death ultimately being the internalized antiblackness that drove Pecola to Soaphead in the first place. Following this turning point, Pecola is described as wandering by the railroad tracks picking up trash and talking to herself – figured as a reflection in the mirror. This too shows her as a casualty of toxic antiblackess, psychically undone (Morrison writes, “the damage done was total”), walking among debris, herself figured as debris.\footnote{89}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Close-up of rear of “Creature” from the still in Figure 1.}
\end{figure}

In \textit{The End of eating Everything}, Creature herself is also both agent and casualty of internalized antiblackness, which has been in “everything” that she has been “eating” from

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The fact that Pecola is fighting nausea throughout this scene connects to the visceral rejection and revulsion from internalizing whiteness as we saw with Joe Christmas in chapter 1, though it also doubly signifies for Pecola’s early pregnancy.
\item In \textit{Crip Times} Robert McRuer gives an etymology of debris that connects it to breakage, being broken, coming apart, which is useful for my chapter in the next section on dehiscehce.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
culture, presumably. She violently consumes the black birds who are her only companions in a performance that channels and articulates the violence directed at her and her community as she violently cannibalizes black flesh as figured by a flock of black birds. As she is doing this, the visual representation that the film offers of her body serves as a filmic climactic petite-mort pornotrope of racist capitalist white supremacy. Her body comes into fuller and fuller view as she is eating the birds and the screen comes to contain eventually her full body (initially it was just her bust). Viewers see that she is a sick and disturbing pornographic money-shot not least because propelled forward by a massive pussy that may also be an anus at her rear that expands and contracts while expelling smoke, or gas. A farting black hole with a concentration of pubic-hair-like cilia waving around its perimeter (Figure 3). I argue that both texts show (1) a morbid consumption of toxic discourse, (2) a disorganization of grammars in a revolutionary aesthetic pedagogy, and (3) a sick reproduction of it into what I call a toxic birthing. 

On Black Holes

Black holes are invisible for all intents and purposes, but are detectable in two ways. First, the event horizon is where debris from “eaten” stars lingers in the visual field, like crumbs around a plate. Second, the deformed orbit of neighboring stars that the gravitational field creates. In my discussion in this chapter, the “event horizon” may be compared to the preceding section on toxic consumption, and the deformed orbit may be compared to my next section on disorienting grammars.

Invisible and yet incredibly dense, the black hole is a tropological figure which lends

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90 At work in both texts, in addition to disorientation, is a play on refusal: visceral aversion as an aesthetic tactic. These texts not only express and document suffering and violence, but show the complex convolutions and [sic] inversions that such violence engenders. They both embody the sick archive in their Beauty and Waste.
itself toward representing a generative aspiration of a cultural or aesthetic space or state searching for a logic of articulation exorbitant to dominant discourse. The black hole appears in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* as a juncture of axes of signification and subjectification – that is, at the fulcrum of an effecting of a legible communication, and forming a socio-politically recognizable “self.” Translating this juncture to the visual register, Deleuze and Guattari speak about a “white wall/black hole” system evocative of what they call “faciality,” where the face is an agent of recognition, visibility, and fungibility, with the black hole as its expressive loci.

As a conceptual vehicle and a visceral reality, flesh exerts a dense gravitational pull for thinking black subjectivity (in Afro-pessimist discourse) by virtue of its ambivalence as a site of annihilation and potentiality; not unlike a black hole. To quote Moten, blackness effects an “irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space” (739). In her essay, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” (1994), Evelynn Hammonds evokes the trope of the black hole to reframe logics and politics of visibility. Citing Michele Wallace’s earlier work with the black hole trope and black feminism, Hammonds concedes that the black hole is perceived “as a void, an empty place in space” – invisible to the outside observer. Her attention to the inside of the black hole, “not empty; it is a dense and full place in space,” seeks to move beyond a deleterious politics of silence (138). The black hole is an intensity of dense sensation compounded by presumed invisibility, and the problem becomes a readerly challenge: the questions for Hammonds become, “how do you deduce the presence of a black hole?” and “what is it like inside of a black hole?” Hammonds’s reinscription of “black hole” as “black (w)hole” articulates a labile switchpoint of the homophones “hole” and “whole” – indicating the divergent implications when the black hole’s substance is perceived from without, as opposed to felt from within.
Found at the epicenter of most galaxies observed, black holes are considered foundational to the structure and texture of our cosmic world. As an informational National Geographic article from puts it, black holes “help determine the fabric of the universe” (2013) While historically positioned as an invisible, forgotten void, black flesh is actually dense and full, and central to the socio-political fabric. Foundational and unthought, black flesh operates as a black hole in the terrain and fabric of thought – a terrifying structural necessity.

**Disorganizing Grammars: Pedagogical**

The abjected minority, diasporic, migrant subject in the social text is expressed in the unfolding of *The Bluest Eye* and *The End of Eating Everything* through a deforming of language and genre, creating in the attentive reader a defamiliarizing sensation of text. Most pointedly, Mutu and Morrison engage in a deformation of White social text – for Morrison, this manifests in every chapter through a framing with remixed language from the white heteropatriarchal domesticity-idealizing and -reinforcing English language primer “Dick and Jane” text. In Mutu, the film, produced exclusively for gallery circulation, unfolds as a “black hole” in a white wall of the elite art world gallery space (Deleuze and Guattari). Mutu also mixes media and genre, poetry and film, deliberately creating a temporally disorienting visual image (computer generated images, old fashioned stop-motion animation, and collage)-defamiliarize and challenge imposed iconographies and orientations (black woman: showing injury, showing harm, defiant mobility). In each narrative, I argue that embodied visceral communication supercedes the verbal, arriving at an aesthetic that conveys the violence of “cultural seeing.” This elaborates my work in chapter 2, theorizing a revolutionary lesbian aesthetic textual praxis as one that is not quite “an articulated exchange” – that is to say not
quite a legible verbal communication but rather one that engages proprioception and theorizes a subaltern phenomenology.

_The Bluest Eye_ and _The End of eating Everything_ repeat and perform the effects of quotidian racism through linguistic experimentation and in the embodied lives that the narratives articulate. Both _The Bluest Eye_ and _The End of eating Everything_ are framed and structured by a disorienting engagement with white supremacist cultural seeing, which, I argue engenders a “phenomenology of minoritized placelessness in the social text” in the novel and the film, and in the attentive spectator or reader. In _The Bluest Eye_, Morrison primarily muddles form with her sinister running-together of idyllic scenes described in the Dick and Jane primer, framing each section of the novel, a move which she suggests in her 1994 preface, was to help her readers put the pieces together.\(^91\) In _The End of eating Everything_, we get an aporetic poetic framing of the film – the poem itself unsettles grammars of thought, scrambles temporality by evoking silent cinema, and gravitates around an invoked “it” that turns out to be paradoxically and terrifyingly embodied in Creature. Unsettling regimes of representation, Morrison and Mutu are engaged in creating something new in these texts – not quite accessible but altogether simple – a new grammar. Disorganizing and combining genre and medium and disordering reader/audience expectations in a way that I argue viscerally and phenomenologically implicates the reader and thus creates an effective opening for revolutionary pedagogy to occur.

In _The Bluest Eye_, Toni Morrison decontextualizes the text from the Dick and Jane primer, and first places it all typed out in a paragraph on the first page of the book, neither aligned right or left; center-justified, filling up the entire space between the margins:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the

\(^{91}\) This includes a poetic disordering of a primer, as I argue Gertrude Stein has done in _Tender Buttons_ in chapter 2.
family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? […]

(1)

it begins, and proceeds to run through the language of the primer, all laid out on the page.

Jane is very blonde and very blue-eyed, the paragon ideal wholesome, happy American girl-child. On the second page of the book, Morrison replicates the text twice, first with all the punctuation and capitalization removed, and then again with no spaces in between the words. A string of sentences from page one, becomes a single indecipherable, disorienting word on page two:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasaredooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherrfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappysejaneshehasaredresshewantstoplaywhowilloplaywithjaneseethecatgoesmeowmeowcomemandplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplayseemothermotherisverynicemotherwillyouplaywi

(2)

This text, which appears benign, innocent, and even pleasant in its original setting of an illustrated language primer, takes on distinctly sinister and disorienting characteristics when encountered in the form and context that Morrison places it. The script becomes violent, traumatic. [sections describing related parts of Pecola’s life begin again with excerpted text from the primer, this time in all caps, preceding the chapter, and words like happy drop of at “h” and pretty at “p” and so on…]:

HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWH
ITIEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETT
ITYITISVERYPRETTPRETTYPRETTYYP

(33)

for instance precedes the section describing the Breedloves’s house, laid out like an epigraph on the page. There is a section about a cat, about her mother Pauline, her father Cholly, the dog that she kills, and finally the “friend who will play” with her at the end is none other
than her mirror image that she has conversations with after she has gone mad. With the letters that have run together, and dropping off before a word is complete, language is more concrete and material, much like with Gertrude Stein’s aesthetic praxis in *Tender Buttons*, defamiliarizing language and syntax; denaturalizing it. Here, Morrison is denaturalizing this foundational pedagogical text and showing its violence, and the incommensurability of the descriptions with Pecola’s life. Antiblack cultural seeing is revealed for what it is: a violent and traumatic falsehood. The disorganizing reorientation that Morrison performs creates sick space for the dark archival matter to seep through from between the letters, materializing in Pecola’s painful and anything-but-idyllic story.

*The End of eating Everything*, intended for a more elite audience, is a limited edition (6 copies) of a film commissioned by the Nasher gallery of art at Duke University for Mutu’s first traveling solo retrospective show. A much more complex and difficult poetic text composed of intertitles, preceding the spectator’s full encounter with the Creature, and tells us the following:

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I never meant to leave
I needed to escape
And now it’s so far
Who knows where?
It’s been like this for a very long time…
It follows me, and I them
Hungry, alone and together.
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In it, grammatical certainty is muddled by statements that double back on themselves, enacting this sense of captivity inside of black flesh and a struggle to both show black flesh, and to escape. The message is difficult to decipher, not accommodating to the grammar of sense. The lines contain internal tensions and contradictions within themselves, and in relation to one another. We get a sense of captivity, agency, fugitivity, ongoingness. Whiteness is not named, it is ineluctably incorporated and drives the violent and destructive
consumption of the birds.

Figure 4: Still of Creature’s face interacting with the birds.

As the film fades in, the title appears, hanging in a post-apocalyptic, rust-colored sky, with a fine flecky snow of ashes floating in the air, ambient with industrial sounds and shrieks. A flock of birds comes into view, passing through and shattering the title, which falls out of the frame with a loud sound of breaking glass: a title of refusal, shattered. The birds take over the screen, with the ruddy and smoky clouded background and a constant flurry of ash animating the air. Out of the right side of the screen, the creature’s face comes into view slowly as the camera pans out a little bit. She glides toward the birds, her attention and gaze focused on them. Viewers then encounter her medusa-like dreadlocks. She and the birds are engaged in a tense but almost tender dance as they advance around her face and draw back again while she is still, watching, sniffing (Figure 4). It is here that the poem, sketching an indeterminate and ominous “it,” unfolds as a series of intertitles at the bottom of the screen. The intertitles are arc rust-colored, as though written in dried blood. In a serif font – a typeface ordinarily reserved for print, these written words are evocative of an archival effect, unfolding beneath the creature’s bust.

In the first two lines,
I never meant to leave
I needed to escape

an uncertain departure and a need to leave are expressed; an indeterminate and distant
location is the object of the following two lines; a vague sense of protracted time is set forth
in the subsequent line; and a terrifying confusion of voice, object, and agent of escape are
sketched in the closing couplet.

It follows me, and I them
Hungry, alone and together.

Throughout, the lines turn in upon themselves, and the contingent materiality of the words,
and ultimately of the creature’s flesh, supersede known rules of grammar, logic, and
meaning. A black-hole-like effect on sense in this poem frames and haunts the visual of
dehiscent black flesh in The End of eating Everything. Throughout the poem, and culminating
especially at the end, shifting pronouns of subject and object “I,” “It,” “me,” “them,” create
a constellation of vectors that scaffold a “different geometry” of thinking self. A nebulous
sense of subjectivity and intersubjectivity expresses the disorientation of unthought
constitutive historical violence. And while the creature is ostensibly seeking to flee an
invalidating “It,” we ultimately come to understand is a part of the creature: her flesh, her
nearest approximation of self.

Considered together, the opening pair of lines

I never meant to leave
I needed to escape

convey a departure and escape that is both necessary and uncertain. “I never meant to leave”
expresses a disavowal of agency and a dispossession of intention, if indeed the departure or
escape has been accomplished: While the line speaks from the first person “I” – a deictic of
agency – it is immediately followed by “never meant to,” negating the sense of agency and
actionability that the first-person-singular speaking subject might normally accrue. “I
needed” in the next line again expresses a compromised “I”: not the certain, empowered, enlightenment-liberal speaking subject, this “I” both lacks agency and is expressing a state of neediness. The lines in this opening couplet are in the past tense and passive voice, and we are not given grammatical certitude of the actual completion of a flight from someone, something, or somewhere.\footnote{On the other hand, this opening couplet contains an ironic gesture toward the nineteenth-century slave narrative genre, which was often framed by a validating statement from a white abolitionist “sponsor” who would aver the truthfulness of the account of the escaped slave, who then would proceed to narrate the ills of the institution, and their successful escape therefrom. In an ironic and corrective turn on the conventions of this genre, “I never meant to leave / I needed to escape” frames the narrative in her own voice, and conveys an account of longed-for escape that is ambiguously and tenuously achieved, if at all. Just as with the shattering glass of the title that proclaimed successful refusal and potential change by “the end of eating everything,” the fugitive grammar of the opening lines here destabilizes the hope of – and marks the contours of – an uncertain escape, all while functioning as a portal for the fugitive subject to speak on her own behalf.} 

In the second couplet,

And now it’s so far
Who knows where?

hints of certitude and hope are doubled back upon and thrown into question as the lines unfold: “And now it’s so far” communicates a potential hope that the creature might in the present time, “now,” find herself far away from that which she needed to escape. At the same time, the vagueness and unlocatability of “it” and “far” of the second clause, “it’s so far,” turns back to compromise the potential conclusive certitude of “and now.” We get the sense that “it” is a placeholder for the undesirable and yet not known (to us, the audience) agent of the creature’s need to escape. Yet, the location of “it” in relation to the creature’s speaking “I” is not clear. “Who knows where,” a vacuous rhetorical question, arrives in place of any elaboration on the determinacy of the subject “it,” or the location of “far.” “Who knows where?” augments the indeterminacy of “far,” emphasizing the creature’s incertitude of both the time elapsed nor her distance (or proximity) in relation to the object of her flight. In itself, “who knows where?” defuses the certitude of knowledge that “knows” might
otherwise suggest by surrounding it with “who” and “where,” forming a question that sucks its own knowledge into itself: a black hole of unanswered questions and pronouns without referent. This second line stages a skeptical dialogue, further undermining any potential determinacy or hopefulness. Further, this couplet is an internal dialogue speaking from the compromised “I”-subject of the poem’s opening couplet. As a result, the second-person address is significantly absent as a category of the subject in the poem: there is only the compromised “I” followed by the much farther-removed, indeterminate, and object-like third-person subject “it,” and then the even more indeterminate third-person hole-like article “who.” In the slippage of the subject from “I” to “it/who” between the two couplets, the lack of the second person heightens a sense of isolation and illegibility. The “third person” is the case of the disfranchised subject, with no agentic political voice.

The “it” is ominous and unlocatable and yet “so far.” “Far” here also carries a possible implication of violent excess: whereas “it’s so far” stands for the hope of a possible flight or escape from the harmful agent of the creature’s objectification; a predatory “it” that is now “so far” is haunted by the notion of something that has “gone too far”: an excess of violence that’s gone on for too long. “It” thus simultaneously indicates a fantasy of hoped-for escape from an abusive state of depersonalization, disfranchisement, and death. “It” is also here the grammatically the dead object, the personless subject, the disfranchised subject.

The line that follows,

it’s been like this for a very long time…

with the appearance of the punctuation mark of the ellipsis, accrues to this reading of “far” temporal, spatial, and political affects. The ellipsis here is also the deformation of an orbit: The dehiscent speech-act of the register of unthought violence materializes the continuing orbit of an archive of violence and discourse around black flesh: continuing and
returning and limning the dense core, its orbit deformed by the gravitational force of that which is not possible to think nor to fully erase.

The time elapsed is indeterminate, though it is given breadth of expansion into the past and the future as “a very long time…” Here, the pronoun “it” correspondingly expands into a broad, general indeterminacy, absorbing into itself the foregoing, more potentially localizable “it.” “Now it’s” no longer holds a time or place that can be approximated, beyond the vast generality of the ellipsis. The ellipsis indicates indeterminate future continuation: “etcetera,” or “and so on and so forth” are implicit in its trail, but not articulated. The ellipsis both suggests and covers over words that might otherwise articulate unthought and ongoing histories. It would seem that “it” now stands for a condition of captivity – an abusive other/ing to be fled – that has persisted, with the graphemic ellipsis here operating as an agent of elision of occlusion simultaneous with its indication of repetition and continuation. “It” as the object of flight or departure – that which is being fled from – becomes more monstrous in its indeterminacy.93

The climactic moment of the textual unfolding manifests itself in the lines that close the poem, and open out onto Creature’s grotesque enactment and exhibition of black flesh in her feasting on the birds and in the appearance of her grotesque body:

   It follows me, and I them
   Hungry, alone and together.

Here, we might envision a transposition implicit: “it” jarringly jumps to encompass a broader generality in its very localization and materialization as the creature, herself. In the symmetrical clauses of “It follows me, and I them,” “it” becomes identified with “I” just as “me”

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93 This occluded repetition is in large part the reason and the state of the increase in suffering that “emancipated flesh” experiences in Hartman’s account, since it is a continuing suffering that is deeply denied, a state of “everyday mundane horrors” that Christina Sharpe’s phrase “post-slavery” describes.
becomes associated with “them.” “Hungry, alone and together” articulates an affective constellation of a fugitive nervous system that is without a ground of self that can be separated from the violences directed against this self: “It” is inscribed in the hieroglyphics that constitute her flesh, a constitutive and inescapable monster. The failed escape, and the non-manifest leaving – all of the disorientation of sense in the preceding lines comes to a head: she is being pursued by the amorphous and indeterminate agent of her need to escape, and this object of flight is attached to her, is her flesh. The hunted being is, in herself, the hunter-hunt/ed.

Once it is revealed as creature, the words end, and the eating and birthing begin in a visceral communicative mode. Creature violently eats birds out of the post-apocalyptic sky in which she is floating, and seemingly ruptures towards the end, giving “birth” to a mass of live floating disembodied heads in an idyllic sky.

**Conclusion: Dehiscent Futures**

Creature disappears in a cloud of smoke or gas, and the view fades into a placid blue sky with clouds, and small, disembodied, tadpole-like heads gradually come to fill the screen, whooshing slowly into the frame in a quiet torpor (Figure 5). It would appear that the creature had both imploded and multiplied, or given birth. Each of these heads has a face identical to that of the creature, and is propelled by a tadpole-like tail, in place of the mass

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94 Jared Sexton describes the condition of captivity as “a nervous system always in pursuit of the fugitive movement it cannot afford to lose and cannot live without, if it is to go in existing in and as a mode of capturing” (9-10).

95 The occluded history between the lines materializes a haunting pursuit in the flesh, ineluctable because attached and constitutive. Notwithstanding the terrifying dystopic element, it is notable that where the first two lines are spoken in the first-person-singular “I” that is the grammar, paragon, and pillar of western thought and enlightenment humanism; the last word, “together,” seems to speak to a different order and social grammar. This suggestive hope is yet again destabilized as the creature utters a scream that electrifies her whole shape, and abruptly begins to feed on the birds out of the sky.
of coiling locs that animated the former creature’s head.

As the image of the floating heads becomes more focused, bits of electro-blood suspended below the neck of each head make it apparent that this is a sea of heads that are not just without bodies – they appear to have possibly been forcibly severed from their flesh. In addition, they are all inaudibly speaking: lips moving, though viewers cannot hear what they’re saying (Figure 6).

As both a destructive coming-apart and a generative opening-up, “dehiscence” in the conceptual and the visceral ground of flesh has two divergent meanings: The biological
meaning of dehiscence is one of generative potentiality: that of the rupture of a female’s ovarian follicle in the process of ovulation. Wound dehiscence is a surgical complication in which a wound comes apart at the site of its surgical sutures – flesh that opens up at the seams, along the fault lines of the discourses that would seek to keep it sanitized and under wraps: a wounding history that refuses its sutures – refuses silencing. This ambivalence of signification animates a sense of wounded flesh, and, simultaneously, of pregnant flesh: a fleshy register of violence as the wound that refuses to heal, and also a rupture of generative potentiality in the reproductive cellular kernel of flesh. Additionally, dehiscence would mean a divergent multiplicity of pathways and directions of discourse.

Morrison’s Pecola has a stillbirth and survives, and Mutu’s Creature implodes and ambivalently births a swarm of talking heads without bodies. I consider these two outcomes both hybrid survival and death as a gesture toward a toxic, animate futurity latent in the dehiscent [sic] k grammatical space that the femme bodies in these texts ultimately occupy. I argue that these instances of foreclosed mothering make visible violent histories of American slavery. Neither mothering nor being mothered are permitted for the reproductive flesh of American modernity.

Just as with Mutu’s floating heads, we encounter a message that appears not to be transmissible, at least by words that are easily discerned. Pecola, at the end of The Bluest Eye appears nonverbal or at least not comprehensible. Figures and faces whose voices are inaudible compel a focus on flesh as a dehiscent zone of visceral protest, critique, and communication that defies both reasonable sense and the linear temporality of history.96

96 We should pause and consider whether these communicative endeavors are “failed” or just requiring cripistemological orientation. In the foreword to a later edition of The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison reflects: “It didn’t work: many readers remain touched but not moved” (Morrison, foreword xii). Similarly, Gayatri Spivak reflects, in a later version of “Can the Subaltern Speak, “Bhubaneswari attempted to ‘speak’ by turning her body into a text of woman/writing … her attempt had failed” (Spivak 35).

we don’t know what it is, we don’t eat it, we can’t eat it.97

I thought, “What else do I have to do to prove my humanity”? […] What else do I have to do, just because I’m a black person, to prove to you that I deserve to have a good experience on campus? That’s when I started to think about the action of the hunger strike. (Miller)

Self-starvation reveals death to be at the core of what it means to forge subjectivity in the context of a specific political world. (Anderson 3)

Figure 7: Hands of Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun with meat patties.98

As I close my dissertation, “A Sick Archive: Reproductive Flesh in American Modernity,” I turn to a final text for analysis. This text is a short, cell-phone video entitled “Meat Patties” recorded (more than likely illicitly) from inside of a correctional facility in Alabama, and uploaded to YouTube in December of 2013 by the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) (Figure 7). FAM is an Alabama-based activist collective dedicated to supporting the rights of prisoners. Emphasizing peaceful protest and advocating for human rights and

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97 Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun fka Melvin Ray, “Meat Patties,” YouTube 2014
98 All images are screenshots taken by the author.
habitable conditions, FAM works to dismantle the slave empire of United States prisons from within, primarily by means of labor strikes and by using the internet to publicize unlivable prison conditions (Hedges). The four-minute clip, entitled “Meat Patties,” shows spokesperson, prisoner, and organizer Melvin Ray, who is still incarcerated and now goes by the name of Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun, documenting and describing in gross detail the poorly-cooked meat patties of questionable substance that they are given as food, and expected to eat. The clip is meant to produce proof of dehumanizing conditions and serve as a vehicle for grievances as the collective is organizing and publicizing a prison labor strike.

This example is not a work of literature or art, yet, in keeping with the broader commitment of my dissertation to reach and excavate lived subaltern archives, “Meat Patties” is very much an archival missive from a space of extreme confinement, diagnosis, and depersonalization (here I take “criminal” to be a diagnostic category), in which the author is recording their experience and seeking to convey it to a broader community or public sphere. “Meat Patties” employs aesthetic tactics such as those I have outlined in my chapters thus far. Ra-Sun/Ray’s interaction with a “mute object” that I argue dominant discourse aligns him with generates a composite textual being through which the pathologized, commodified, fungible person creates space for a communication of critique, and enters into circulation.99 Further, I argue that the subtext of hunger strike that haunts the video gestures toward a crip imaginary as part of the revolutionary aesthetic work of the piece.

99 The woman as an embodied figure is absent from this text and epilogue, as is queerness as a practice. However, in keeping with the primary goal of black lesbian feminist work that I keep returning to throughout, the question of identity politics is to the side of the greater question of a commitment to dismantling violent anti-black regimes as sanctified and idealized in the white heteronormative patriarchal household. That said, the post-slavery, enfranchised and (potentially) wage-earning Black man is precisely such a threat to I racially pure, insular white domestic conjugal sphere. This is precisely why these men are profiled and disproportionally incarcerated and disenfranchised. This is part of what the disavowed preservation of America’s Slave Empire ongoing in the prison industrial complex, quite simply, is.
“Meat Patties” was widely disseminated in April of 2014 by a Salon.com article with the byline of breaking news about the prison labor strikes in Alabama (Eidelson). This documentation is intended to mobilize awareness of prison conditions, otherwise suppressed and whitewashed by mainstream media, and also to combat the discursive dehumanization of the prisoners themselves. In a December 2014 interview, Ra-Sun/Ray explains, “I knew that I had to document our grievances and produce proof for the public of why we were protesting. I was not going to allow [the Alabama Department of Corrections] to control the narrative in the media about our legitimate complaints” (Parker). And while, towards the tail end of the clip, Ra-Sun/Ray does list grievances and demands, the focus of this video is overwhelmingly and fascinatingly on the meat patties. As these grotesque instantiations of toxic and revolting flesh are the main event and focus of discussion, viewers are given an experiential encounter with black flesh as an archival and communicative entity that is animate, a mass of diseased, processed flesh as antagonistic protagonist, not unlike in Wangechi Mutu’s Creature in The End of eating Everything.\footnote{Ray does close out the recording with by opening outward briefly form the meat patties as exemplary of the human rights violations and overcrowded conditions in the prisons, and asking for opportunities for education and rehabilitation, though his voice remains difficult to hear.}

The sound part of the YouTube recording of “Meat Patties” is at a very low volume, and difficult to make out. It requires a great deal of focused listening, rewinding and replaying of the clip, and attention to make out Ra-Sun/Ray’s voice as he speaks. The low volume of the audio combined with the camera’s visual frame being trained on the meat patties rather than the faces or bodies of the prisoners, the meat patties are effectively a proxy mouthpiece for Ray and his co-prisoners, their grievances, and their revolt. These meat patties are the evidentiary proof of abject and dehumanizing conditions not least \textit{because} they uncannily illustrate the visceral abjection of the prisoners, including the one speaking in
the video: pathologized and depersonalized flesh, a [sic] and sick and toxic archive of fungible flesh.\textsuperscript{101}

Taking apart and exposing undercooked and rotting flesh for the camera, Ra-Sun/Ray expresses horror, alienation, epistemological disorientation, and refusal when confronted with this visceral representation of toxic antiblackness: “we don’t know what it is, we don’t eat it, we can’t eat it.” With eight patties laid out on the table (Figure 9), he selects one, about which the frame of view tightens until the patty takes up the frame, and begins to perform this fleshy analysis (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{102}

\textbf{Figure 8: Meat patties laid out on the table.}

\textbf{Figure 9: Close-up of meat patty.}

\textsuperscript{101} In “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” Frank Wilderson III describes black bodies as “marked for accumulation and death.

\textsuperscript{102} Analysis, Or, more properly, \textit{fysis}, per Moten’s discussion of the term (from Fanon) in “Blackness and Nothingness” (757-775).
The patty is mottled and discolored, including green and pink and brown on the meat, as well as some charred parts. Ra-Sun/Ray’s hands pick up another patty, which is in fact two patties stuck together – “a double-patty” – and he pulls the mass of processed meat apart to show an alarmingly raw and pink fleshy interior. Laying this meat open, he proceeds to slowly and deliberately excavate mysterious pieces of gristle from inside the patty that may be gravel, plastic, and/or bone or cartilage, his hands digging through half-cooked flesh. This is a tactile penetration and analysis, an intimacy and a violation.
The disturbing and pornotropic opening-up of the meat patty into two sides of raw flesh is multiplied in the video as Ra-Sun/Ray repeats this scenario with several more patties, which grow grotesquely larger as the camera approaches. This pulling open of the meat patty is pornotropic in the sense that the climactic visual grammar here evokes the pornographic money shot, and also referencing Hortense Spillers’s use of the word, and Alexander Weheliye’s discussion of pornotroping as an eroticization of the violence in black flesh (Spillers 1987, Weheliye 2014). After Ra-Sun/Ray is through with the patties, he carefully stacks all of them neatly into a dustpan that is being held waiting by another attendant inmate, whose brown hand and forearm are all that the camera otherwise captures. Thus stacked in a dustpan, following Ra-Sun/Ray’s penetrative analysis, it becomes uncomfortably palpable that the meat patties are not only a mouthpiece for this particular video missive of protest, or merely an archive of grievances: they are body doubles for Ray and his co-inmates, and they have just staged for their audience their own rejection and disposal.\footnote{A semiotic shift that conflates and consummates the comparison that Wilderson evokes of cattle and slave-subjects as meat marked for “accumulation and death” (2013).}
as refused flesh, refused, are a visceral metaphoric – metonymic, even – for the
dehumanization and functional enslavement of the inmates. The meat patties’ accumulation
into an undifferentiated mass that has been indifferently preserved, inconsistently cooked,
fed back to itself, and then discarded as hazardous waste is both the inmates’ flesh it is the
food that does not sustain them, and might in fact kill them.104

Ray’s mumbled “…bust this one open,” as he goes to open up a set of double
patties, enacts a turning inside out of the (vestibular and violently inscribed) cultural text and
the violence of antiblackness: Ray’s gesture and words in turning the meat patties inside out
stands in for the way in which the recording itself enacts an “inside out,” where prison, as a
hidden slave empire, is a deep interior of the social script that is being [sic] reproduced,
opened, to show its sickness, rawness, pervasiveness. The flesh is inscribed with the history
of the present, making visible “the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned
outside” (Spillers 67). Here, one might see the refused and revolting meat as a concrete
rendering of the thoroughgoing violence done to the inmates’ own physical and political
flesh.

**Imagining Hunger, Imagining Crip: Something Else to Be**

In both Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything* and FAM’s “Meat Patties,” we
encounter the barely audible or inaudible talking head – in the spawned heads of Creature at
the end of Mutu’s film, an in the difficult-to-hear talking head of Melvin Ray/Bennu
Hannibal Ra-Sun. My reading argues that this not quite audible speech act asks us to turn
our attention and listen in an expansive, cripistemological way, to the modalities and

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104 The patty is in effect a dangerous predator: poisonous and diseased. At one point in the recording, Ray jokes
to an off-screen co-inmate, “you eat one of these, you might not have five minutes to live.”
aesthetic tactics through which the film or text may yet communicate.

In the elaborately and viscerally performed refusal of and disposal of food that is understood to be toxic and life endangering in the first place, FAM’s labor strike is figured also, suggestively, as a hunger strike. In fact, haunting my both discussions of Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything* and FAM’s “Meat Patties” video is the actual disability-inducing and health and life-imperiling political protest practice of the hunger strike. Is an imagining of a crip horizon a part of the revolutionary aesthetic maneuvers that these filmic texts perform? How is the hunger strike as an aspirational horizon also something that can capacitate and engender a public performance of humanization in these protest films that portray Black flesh, a depersonalized life characterized by ontological social death?

University of Missouri student Jonathan Butler, who went on a hunger strike in November of 2015, articulated his strike to a reporter as way to prove his humanity:

“"I thought, ‘What else do I have to do to prove my humanity?’” Butler told The Washington Post. “What else do I have to do, just because I’m a black person, to prove to you that I deserve to have a good experience on campus? That’s when I started to think about the action of the hunger strike.”

(Miller)

In his book *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance*, Patrick Anderson articulates how the spectacular hunger strike is in effect a morbid performance of subjectivation that gives the hunger striker a unique kind of agency. “The meaning of self-starvation, and the force of its effects rests on the rearticulation of what is conventionally the object of bodily violence as both subject and object” (10). Paradoxically, the splitting of the person into subject and object acting upon one another might serve enliven the otherwise socially dead subject by spectacularly drawing attention to their humanity in making their proximity to death visibly imminent (especially as the body wastes). Fusing the subject and object of violent enactment into a single body. The “sustained performance of violence by
and upon the body” enacted by the hunger strike both restages and reverses the powers, according to Anderson, and “results in a production of subjectivity that both reproduces and refuses the power of the state” (Ibid). Thus, the hunger strike paradoxically brings home the liveness of flesh, and animates the capacity for sabotage, at the very least; humanity, at best.

The protest hunger strike can also be understood as a [sic] archive of reproductive flesh in American modernity: To starve oneself as a gesture of protest is to perform the work of slow death wrought by social violence against your flesh. The hunger strike reproduces the perilous and deadening effects of the quotidian horrors that constitute and perpetuate the “position of the unthought” of Black flesh. Hunger strikers become quickly visibly debilitated, needing to wear warm clothing and blankets, face masks, and even use wheelchairs, as their strength and immunity are depleted. The embodied and intentionally literal, fleshy reproduction of suffering and deprivation compels us to look at and see a non-sanitized, non-overcome history of the present that needs to be acknowledged and thought, such as the chronotope of the Prison Industrial Complex (or Hidden Slave Empire, by another name).

Suggesting hunger strike while enacting a labor strike is a really fascinating invocation of a more directly crip resistance, as the labor strike implies the able body, to begin with, which is capable of labor, regardless of how debilitated and socially-dead the body may be. I argue that it paradoxically enables critique. Just like Lily Bart, Joe Christmas, Harriet Jacobs, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gertrude Stein, Ursa Corregidora, Caterina, Pecola Breedlove, and Creature, unarticulated visceral revolt, revolution, protest enacted and suggested by the FAM protest missive, representative of a much, much larger community in struggle, invites, instructs in a crip attunement in order to arrive, collectively, at something new.


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