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Bodies Under Empire:  
The Territory of American Feminism

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by

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The Dissertation of Janise G. Roselle is approved:

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For Lauren,  
who empowers women in their corporeal realities.  
You do what I merely write about.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bodies Under Empire:  
The Territory of American Feminism

by

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Exploring American feminist cultural productions as a space wherein the socially marked female body is used to expose and critique the oppressive rhetoric of culturally enforced female femininity, this dissertation examines art and poetry that critically and strategically uses women's corporeal bodies as violent or gruesome sites of resistance. In this kind of feminist art and literature, the physical body is sacrificed in the service of drawing attention to the violence of the rhetoric of female femininity and its connection to colonialism and notions of empire. Establishing a historical precedent for feminist cultural productions using the body as a site of resistance, this study links such projects to similar cultural phenomena in the colonial period of the Americas, analyzing each work in the context of the culturally relevant ideologies in which it was created. Thus it analyzes gender rhetoric as it relates to the colonial project during the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, as well as examining contemporary ideologies of

gender, including appetites and hunger, sexuality and sexual accessibility, domesticity, and beauty in both the colonial era and post-1900. Based on Foucault's notion of the heterotopia as an "other space" that exists outside of the cultural milieu with the purpose of reflecting and troubling social norms, I develop the term "rhetoritopia," implicating the body as a physical, political, and rhetorical "other space," a location used to communicate what systematic language and social conventions cannot: that rigid gender conventions are intrinsically linked to the violence of imperialism.

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## Chapter One

### Corporeal Sovereignty:

#### The Territory of American Feminism

The history of the Americas is a history of (literal and imaginary) limitations on the body marked female: women's bodies have been manipulated and damaged, our voices have been silenced, and our appetites (for anything, not just limited to food and sex) quelled through dominance rather than satiety. The female body has been perceived as an anomaly, a deviation from the ideal male body; its processes have been portrayed as disgusting, abject, or at the very least, best kept in secret, hidden away from civilized society. This marginalization of the female body naturally associates itself with a marginalization of the female citizen (if, indeed, she is even considered one) as a whole: perceived as physically inferior, she has often been stripped of the rights attendant to personhood. Perceived as sexual property, our bodies a component of dowry, women have struggled to institute laws to ensure women's rights, including laws protecting victims of rape and domestic violence. Perceived as mere extensions of the legal bodies of husbands and fathers, women have had to engage in long, arduous processes of resistance in order to gain the right to vote (and have yet to gain that right in some venues).<sup>1</sup> Perceived as vessels carrying future generations, women have been expected to sustain unwanted

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, within the United States, some mainstream organized religions do not allow female congregants a vote, thereby denying them the full rights of membership in their own religious community. In addition, the new voter ID laws for American minorities disproportionately affect women (along with the elderly and the young), who are less likely to have driving licenses or passports.

pregnancies and raise unwanted children (often with no help from the men likewise responsible for the pregnancies) and have fought to gain the right to terminate unwanted pregnancies (or to sustain *wanted* pregnancies in the case of eugenics-oriented birth control programs aimed at poor Latin American, Indigenous, and Black women). Women have, in short, waged a struggle for corporeal sovereignty: the right to govern one's own body.

Of course, women have consistently resisted this tyranny of the body throughout history, and most have done so through the somewhat culturally acceptable means of lobbying to influence legislation or engaging in nonviolent public protests. These formidable, onerous struggles are lauded as exemplars of proper resistance in public discourse, testaments to the strength and courage of a few noble and emotionally stable women who were strong enough to move forward and bring their entire sex along for the ride. These heroes are displayed in contrast to the women perceived as broken by the system, women who are medicalized and pitied at best, abhorred and ostracized at worst: the women who resist domination with their own bodies rather than through normative discourse.

Women who use their bodies in ways that conflict with culturally appropriate norms of femininity surface in American history and literature as horrifying examples of womanhood gone awry; their stories are often interpreted through the lenses of mental illness, damaged psyches, inferior cultures, and extreme, unfounded, and inexplicable rage. While their stories should be interpreted as deliberate, organized, feminist resistance to hegemony, they are read

psychoanalytically, as extreme and individual cases based in psychological inferiority or personal pain that cannot be generalized to others who share their experience and situation. This research examines their work as an attempt to draw attention to the inequity of gender relations (as well as the class and racial coordinates that construct gender relations and imperialist identities), not as a tragic accident of their psychology.

The women I write about are horrifying: they are insatiate, mutilating, and aggressive. They exist in the past and the present. This work begins in the nascent period of the colonization of the Americas, and it is heuristically grounded in colonization and the construction of a transnational American identity predicated on phallogocentrism and masculinity. Its aim is not to glorify the damage women do to their own bodies or the acts they adopt in an effort to flout masculinist authority; rather, it reveals a feminist ontology, a sort of genealogy that implicates (but does not justify or glamorize) the destruction of the female body.

Before I establish the theoretical grounds for my research, I must first acknowledge the complications of language attendant to an enterprise in which terms to communicate experiences of inequity in an egalitarian way are limited (a problem addressed most thoroughly by feminist critics of the phallogocentric nature of language). Terminology is a complicated issue for this sort of work because the work explores discourses of inequality; therefore, the very language I am constrained to use is infused with power differentials.

I use the terms “New World” and “new world,” though this world was only “new” to the colonizers. When I use these terms, I do so either with the intent of illustrating the point of view held by colonizers or with the intent of irony (which is possibly the same thing since I generally find the colonizers’ worldview to be ironic). My work is also hemispheric, incorporating findings from Latin American countries as well as parts of North America; thus I examine and refer to “the Americas” throughout my research. I realize that I run the risk of perceiving “the Americas” writ large, as an undifferentiated lump, but my intention is to reveal the cost and impact of the colonial venture of the early modern era, the social construction of gender in the colonial milieu, and to trace feminist responses back to the conceptual moment of American identities predicated on masculinity.

Finally, there are times when I refer to artists or writers asserting the “fact” or “reality” of the female body. This kind of language may be criticized for its propensity toward essentialism. It is, obviously, not my intention to present a singular “real” or “factual” body of “woman” to which we can attach our postmodern fantasies. Feminist performance theorist Rebecca Schneider makes reference to “the explicit body,” meaning the body made explicit and used to explicate what said body represents, to undo the layers of signification attendant to that body. Jane Blocker, another feminist performance theorist refers to “the literal body,” as distinct from “the hoped-for” body, which is also quite relevant to my work. Both of these terms are useful and instructive, so I use them as well as occasionally (perhaps truculently) referring to the “real” body.

It is my intention to allow each artist or writer to define her own “real” body, her own “factual” experience of her body through her cultural productions. We may decry the theoretical slipperiness of calling upon a “real” body or the “facts” of a body because when we do, we risk slipping into an a priori notion of the body existing prior to the social construction that renders it fraught with meaning. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that each human being experiences his or her body as real: our bodies bleed, experience pain, long for comfort. That lived experience of the body, in fact, complicates and undermines postmodern reluctance to use the term “real” because personal experiences of rape, self-mutilation, starvation, and consumption feel very *real* to the one experiencing. Thus, while I do not make claims for one “real” monolithic female body that exists prior to its social construction, I do affirm that each person experiences his or her body in a very *real* way and that the presentation of one’s own experience as a counter-narrative to hegemonic constructions of such experiences is radical, aggressive, and revolutionary. Eschewing the philosophical complexities of the term, I embrace a pragmatic feminist sensibility that seeks to validate individual women’s corporeal experiences as *real* and to allow the narrative constructed around that experience to be conveyed by the one experiencing it.

The theoretical undergirding of this work lies in second-wave feminist analyses of colonialism and Early American literature. Feminist writers often ignore what I have come to think of (and this work considers) marginalized colonial-era women’s performances and writings because they are perhaps seen as tragic or

embarrassing. This work looks at the self-mortifying nuns and cannibalistic tribeswomen of that era as protofeminists even though feminist critics of the era generally ignore them. How can we claim testimonies to erotic visions of God, self-mutilation, or barbaric acts of consumption (even cannibalism) as rebellion instead of complicit engagement with a misogynist paradigm—or even outright madness? Indeed, postmodern women’s performance art in our own day is also—often deliberately and intentionally—complicated enough in terms of representations of the body that even feminists will argue over its revolutionary value. This study posits that we should impose a claim of feminist value onto early colonial women’s cultural productions as well, though they also integrate that same complexity and complication in what I read as their acts of resistance. They might have been dismissed as complicit engagement with a misogynist or colonialist paradigm, but I perceive them as revolutionary and resistant.

This work aims to reclaim the actions of early colonial women and to contextualize them within a feminist ontology of resistance to corporeal subjugation. It aims to place these actions on a trajectory of feminist response to masculinist aims of disciplining and categorizing the female, feminized body. Rather than being seen as destructive, damaging acts upon the corporeal body expressing self-loathing or mental illness, postmodern feminist literature, theater, and performance art depicting the body in pain or excess should be perceived as merely the latest chapter in feminist resistance, art which utilizes the tool most adaptable and readily available to women: their own bodies.

Annette Kolodny, in her landmark work *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, writes about

America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. (4)

Kolodny's work highlights the letters and documents of early colonialists who conflate the land in the "New World" with that of a woman's body offering total fulfillment to the men residing within it. She offers examples of such writings, declaring that "topography and anatomy were at least analogous, with 'a Single Mountain [in the Blue Ridge range], very much resembling a Woman's breast' and a 'Ledge that stretch't away to the N.E.... [rising] in the Shape of a Maiden's Breast'" (9). Her attention to these details is a means of indicating the ways in which that metaphor can ultimately impact the experience of real women within a historical framework, as new laws and new governments were established (in the process of civilizing and conquering the land) with the result of limiting the rights of women in favor of the rights of men. The New World was perceived as a paradise of Biblical scope, but with "proofe": it was not a chimerical or metaphorical paradise of the imagination, but a *real* one. Thus, the metaphor-making lay in likening the new territories to something *not* paradise: the female body, which all too often in actual life experience does not behave in predictable (let alone paradisiacal) ways—though not for lack of hegemonically inspired aspiration, intention, or effort.



Kolodny indicates that “the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (6). Nevertheless, the problem of the intractable nature of the actual land remained: settlement included the imperative to tame the land through cultivation and “the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation” (7). Thus, the land—once perceived as both simultaneously virginal and seductive on the one hand and maternal on the other—began to spur anger among the colonists, fostering accusations of defilement and “rape” of the land (8). This conflation of protection of property with sexual assault underscores the notion of colonialism as a gendered project and highlights the position of women in the culture of the time (and extending into our own era): rejected as useless once despoiled.

Kolodny indicates that this feature of colonialism may not be unique to the Americas, but our relatively recent establishment as a nation is an asset in mining such troubling beginnings:

Other civilizations have undoubtedly gone through a similar history, but at a pace too slow or in a time too ancient to be remembered. Only in America has the entire process remained within historical memory, giving Americans the unique ability to see themselves as the willful exploiters of the very land that had once promised an escape from such necessities. With the pastoral impulse neither terminated nor yet wholly repressed, the entire process—the dream and its betrayal, and the consequent guilt and anger—in short, the knowledge of what we have done to our continent, continues even in this century... (8)

Thus, we are faced with the responsibility of examining our cultural history and the ideas undergirding our national identities (and with respect to nationalism, this project is hemispheric and considers the Americas in general, not just the United States, for the Americas as a whole were being sacked and resettled during the same era, an era, as Kolodny notes, that is contained within the scope of our national, collective memory). This sort of examination within nations that are still young promises to inform examinations of the role of gender in creating and undergirding national identity in general for other cultures much older and more trenchant, particularly those who brought their ideology of gender and nation to these lands in the nascent years of colonialism.

Kolodny critiques this initial portrayal of the land as a maternal figure, citing, for instance, a colonial writer who claims that America's "natural womb (by her plenty) maintains and preserves the... Animals that rangingly inhabit her Woods" (qtd. in Kolodny 14) as an exemplar. This kind of imagery, she believes, is the animating force behind postmodern environmentalism and that movement's rhetoric in discussing the havoc wreaked by urbanization and production. She cites protests led by environmentalists who evoke the language of "Mother Earth" and appropriate metaphors of rape (as in "the rape of the land" that is averred to in mining or development projects), considering them cultural hangovers of the ideas found in the texts of the colonial settlement period.

Presumably, an inanimate landscape (one bereft of anthropomorphizing maternal or feminine identifiers) would not be enough to inspire the umbrage and

activism of environmentalists.<sup>2</sup> Our contemporary “save the planet” ideology, replete with references to “Mother Earth,” relies on the notion of a feminine body in need of rescuing or the anxiety-provoking peril attendant to a slowly withdrawing mother figure, receding out of our reach. The rhetoric of blame and fault that attends this loss of the mother results in a shaming discourse intended to make Prodigal Sons of us all, as we return to the fold as gentle caretakers of the planet in peaceful and reciprocal relation to our aging Mother (Earth).

The inclination to perceive the feminine in one’s surroundings is an attempt to access comfort. Kolodny credits this with more than a desire for gratification; she notes that there may have been a “*need* to experience the land as a nurturing, giving, maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown” (9). To cast the landscape as feminine implied a first step in having gained power over it, “casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed” (9). If the binary, power-suffused relation of gender was imposed in this new setting, then there was at least an ideological reassurance of primacy for the male colonizer (and the corporeal women under his care).

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Kolodny’s book is a germinal text in the development of ecofeminism, an effort on the part of American feminists of the 1970s and 1980s to reclaim this likening of the feminine to the earth and to band together against environmental pollution (a movement that was not without its own ideological problems respecting essentialism and racial stereotyping about the Indigenous peoples as good stewards of the lands of the Americas).

Kolodny also traces a trajectory from this notion of the land as metaphor for the female body to the eventual denigration of Indigenous women. Specifically, she reads the marriage of Pocahontas to John Rolfe as an “objective correlative” for the ability of Europeans to possess the virgin territory of the New World (5), citing publicity tracts luring people to the Americas wherein the idea was promulgated that Indigenous women were part of the package of sexual opportunity inherent in such an Edenic physical space.

Soon thereafter, however, she notes that Indigenous women of the New World were relegated to a space of undesirability and depicted as having inferior anatomies, especially with respect to genitalia. Indigenous women of Africa, for instance, were said to have overly large clitorises, making their sexuality seem excessive, non-generative (in that it was clitoral rather than vaginal and reproductive), and uncontrollable, all in comparison to European women, whose sexuality was supposedly strictly reproductive and therefore not inclusive of clitoral stimulation. This relationship to the women of the New World, Kolodny claims, mirrors the trajectory of the imperialist love affair with the land of the New World: farming turned out to be more of a challenge than was originally thought, and hardships were realized in thwarted efforts to civilize, control, or tame the land (5).

In all, Kolodny’s work illustrates the mindset of colonialism (particularly that of North America, but certainly exhibited in the Americas in general, as subsequent chapters of this work demonstrate). She notes that this kind of conflation of the land with feminine principles (which in themselves are twisted and tortuous) was “a bold

exercise of masculine power over the feminine—a feminine, moreover, that was being experienced as at once Mother and Virgin, with all the confusions possible between the two” (22), thereby making the Americas a location in which male writers confabulated about “both personalized and transpersonalized (culturally shared) expressions of filial homage and erotic desire” (22) as a means of gaining mastery over the subject of their new home, ultimately weaving such yarns into a cultural ethos.

There are, of course, texts from the era of the Americas’ growth that do not implicate gendered relations, but later scholars, so infused with and inspired by the ideology of gender in the development of the “New World” have been happy to supplement this absence with their own fantasies. It is interesting to note here that Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 text *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* wholeheartedly adopts this misogynist ideology and language of the American landscape as a feminine space. Smith’s uncritically titled text (*Virgin Land*) perpetuates the image of New World as female lover without questioning the role of gender ideology in his analysis, noting, for instance, that Thomas Hart Benton, one of the first to conceive of the idea of a “passage to India,” which would traverse the continental United States, was “in love with the Far West” (32). Smith indicates that Benton “bedecks his mistress with jewels, fabulous cities-to-be strung upon the thread of the railway from Saint Louis to San Francisco” (32). Benton’s language itself, as cited by Smith, gives no evidence of gendering, yet Smith superimposes gendered language where it is lacking, referring to Benton as “an ecstatic lover

praising his mistress” (32), imagining and superimposing a heterosexual relationship onto Benton’s (remarkably) un-gendered description of his love for the West.

There is nothing in Smith’s text that assails the rhetoric of the “virgin land” of his title, taking the term for granted and exploring instead the symbolism of the frontier and the metaphorical despoiling of this symbol of the “virgin.” Smith’s work, however, provides an interesting catalogue of gendered language, with (for example) references to a Kentuckian song referring to “Dame Nature,” who clearly favored the colonialists in some particularly gruesome battles with the “Indians,” (132), and the “great American West” as a mother who took Europeans and their customs to “her bosom” (254). However, Smith’s text, written without any kind of postcolonial consciousness, not only does not criticize these usages, but contributes to them with Smith’s own ideas about, for instance, Benton’s “love affair” with his “mistress” the West. I refer to this largely outdated text merely because it is an example of the deeply engrained symbolism of the Americas as a virgin mother, lasting far beyond the years of early settlement, well into the last century, perpetuating a fantasy that remarkably still persists.

Anne McClintock’s work picks up where Kolodny’s left off: she expands Kolodny’s ideas about the representation of the unknown territories of the American colonies as feminine, feral, primitive, and lacking discipline to include other imperial enterprises in her landmark book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. McClintock’s work takes on the masculinist

underpinnings of nationalist fantasies in contemporary (or postcolonial) society, noting that the term “postcolonial” is rife with contradictions and carries the stain of the imperial legacy for women, for women in a postcolonial society are still extremely disenfranchised, completing the majority of labor yet lacking commensurate remuneration and owning the smallest fraction of the capitalist enterprise; to this end,

... [N]o postcolonial state anywhere has granted women and men equal access to the rights and resources of the nation state. Not only have the needs of postcolonial nations been largely identified with male conflicts, male aspirations, and male interests, but the very representation of national power has rested on prior constructions of gender power (14).

Thus, McClintock’s work establishes “woman” as a still-colonized category. From there, she moves forward from Kolodny’s ideas of the formation of a national identity predicated on the limning force of what Judith Butler (in *Bodies That Matter*) calls a “constitutive outside” (1). Butler’s work notes that masculinity is socially constructed through the presence of what is not masculine or outside of the masculine; therefore, the feminine (or any non-normative gender performance) is the constitutive outside of the masculine. It is what constitutes masculinity as the norm. Therefore, the “prior constructions of gender power” that McClintock refers to spring from a masculinist construction of national identity that relies on males aspiring to achieve their own needs; moreover, these constructions of gender power, being inimical to the project of nation-building, become ingrained in the cultural ethos and ultimately impact the women who exist under colonial (and then “postcolonial”) rule.

However, McClintock deviates in one important way from Kolodny's thinking. She claims:

The feminizing of the "virgin" land... operated as a metaphor for relations that were very often not about sexuality at all, or were only indirectly sexual. ... But seeing sexuality only as a metaphor runs the risk of eliding *gender* as a constitutive dynamic of imperial and anti-imperial power. (14)

Thus, while Kolodny's work is about the inherent dangers of metaphor (a significant concern, no doubt), McClintock's work expands these concerns beyond the literary metaphors Kolodny's work explores. McClintock recognizes the important role of gender in the colonial enterprise in general and explores this trope across a number of continents, including the Americas, India, Africa, and parts of Asia. She, like Kolodny, traces the image of the maternal Earth back to the earliest "explorers," including Columbus, whose journey by sea included a wealth of references to the Earth and the waters as a female body, "figured as marking the boundary of the cosmos and the limits of the known world, enclosing the ragged men, with their dreams of pepper and pearls, in her indefinite, oceanic body" (McClintock 22). What is important, then, is to examine the ways in which the metaphor of a binary gender system, infused with power imbalance, affects all women touched by the colonial enterprise (which is to say, virtually all women): while the experience of Third World women under colonialism is evidently negative, so is the experience of white women, as their corporeal bodies are effaced in favor of a metaphorical body that comes to represent the territory involved in conquest, and this body is notably unachievable for the corporeal woman.



McClintock cites the prevalence of white female imagery in these journeys: ships, usually emblazoned with the stylized body of a nude woman at the prow, were (and still are) christened with women's names (and referred to with feminine pronouns); sailors often fantasized about female figures populating the seas, such as sirens and mermaids (figures that could offer sexual gratification but could also lure him off course and divert him from his goal of domination); and colonists journeyed to "virgin territories." She notes that such imagery indicates that "[i]n myriad ways, women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge" (24). The implementation of female figures in these ventures was purely operational; they were tools men used to accomplish their goals or to provide comfort when they felt anxious, alone, or overwhelmed by the forces of nature. It must be clear that women were not partners in the imperial enterprise.

The correlation of the female body with the natural world during the colonial era is central to this work, as it is a bifurcated process of oppression: on the one hand, it reduces the female body to what is "natural," in other words, that which is not cultivated and is thus wild and base; on the other hand, it establishes the female as the limning force of masculinity and underscores the urgent primacy of the masculine. The colonial venture could have been accomplished in the absence of a binary gender paradigm: for instance, the colonists could have relied on the binary opposition of nature and culture. But the colonists were not necessarily men of high culture. They were commoners trying to make a new and better life for themselves.

They found in the Americas an unfamiliar land with different (and in many cases more advanced) civilizations replete with culture, including architecture, art, religion, and social hierarchies, as Charles Mann demonstrates in his book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*.

Therefore, the standard of culture was in many cases unassailable and could not be utilized for establishing European dominance. What was left to them was nature (including the binary opposition of human and animal), and nature was a force that was overwhelming and unpredictable; rather than accept the fact that they would occasionally be defeated by the forces of nature, they instead developed metaphors to intellectually conquer it so that they could ultimately gain a feeling of ideological victory, even in the face of smaller actual losses. What worked metaphorically was the notion of gender, particularly because it was a naturalizable concept that was becoming more and more essential (in the sense of being boiled down to basic qualities lacking nuance via the discourse of the Protestant Reformation).<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, Early Modern European women enjoyed many political and social liberties soon to be revoked in the wake of the religious turmoil of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation; nevertheless, there were few women included in the early ventures to the Americas, so in their absence, metaphors about them (and the fantasies engineered by that most fantastic

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<sup>3</sup> Chapters two and three contain a thorough exploration of the impact of Protestant Reformation rhetoric on conceptions of gender and power.

progenitor of ideas, deprivation) were generated prolifically. In this way, white men, generally lacking the intimate company of women, confabulated women (or women's body parts) out of sea creatures, rock outcroppings, mountains, streams, rolling landscapes, and tree trunks. Soon, these forces of nature were perceived as the obstacles they must conquer in order to win a new home and the masculine identity of settler/conqueror/explorer. From these chimera sprang a national identity predicated on man's power over nature (which was, in fact, the only woman they consistently had access to), thereby reducing "woman" to a natural category and a group to be conquered, subdued, and ontologized as America developed from a territory to a nation.

The question of sex in the colonial conquest is an important one. Many feminist scholars take a postcolonial approach to criticizing feminism as being a "white women's movement" that does not inquire into questions of race; however, in that schema, often sex is examined as a subsidiary to imperialism. In this way, a postcolonial feminist theorist might examine the impact of imperialism on a country and then criticize postcolonial theorists for not inquiring into the ways in which imperialism impacted the women of the country or culture. While this is important work, it seems to me that it takes sex as a subset of colonialism rather than examining the role of the sex binary as *an animating force in the colonial venture*.

If the entire culture or countryside targeted for takeover is perceived as a female body, and the discourse of sex inequality is being used to inspire the imperial powers, then it should be assumed that sex inequality will be relied upon in fact as

well as in metaphor once the conquest is effected. Moreover, the presence of a binary sex discourse will continue to impact women on both sides of the colonial power structure, and the ones who seemingly fall on the side of the colonial power structure will have less power than is evident, while the ones on the side oppressed by the colonial power structure will have little hope of gaining power without seeing how the bodies of their sisters on the other side have been effaced in the process of effecting a metaphor conceived in the name of this oppression.

Judith Butler's book *Bodies That Matter* addresses the significance of gender in the construction of identity. Butler illustrates the problem arising from gender ambiguity, noting that gender (as an indicator of sex) is a classificatory schema by which we understand one another's humanity. She notes that gender is a humanizing force: if a person's gender is ambiguous, his or her very humanity is ambiguous (indeed, our language doesn't even have a gender neutral singular pronoun). We contrast the ontology of "human" with "subhuman," rather than "animal" or "nonliving thing." Thus we recognize some humans as "humanly unthinkable," not as "nonhuman" (8). "Humanly unthinkable," of course, attributes agency to the "humanly unthinkable" person, meaning that she or he is actively wrong or damaged, being human enough to effect proper gendering but choosing not to. Relying on gender as a constitutive force of being in this way, the conquering imperialists who set out to pillage (or simply "settle") a new land conceive of the land as human (or more specifically, female, and therefore conquerable) through the

gender binary, attributing the new land with characteristics that will fit it into a familiar ontology of gender.

More importantly for this work is what Butler refers to as the *materialization* of sex. We are not simply assigned a sex once in our lifetimes and then trusted to maintain the regulatory functions appropriate to that designation; rather, sex is what materializes the recognizable, hegemonically defined body. It is the discourse of power, manifested corporeally (2). Thus, when characteristics of sex are metaphorically ascribed to insentient objects with the aim of subduing them, that heuristic reflects on live bodies: namely the women who inhabit corporeal, sexed bodies, which are henceforth conceived of as an objective correlative for a complex of human emotions related to female figures. This effectively reduces the female body from a corporeal reality to a rhetorical notion, a metaphor. Butler's implication that sex is materialized through repeated discourse is significant because the rhetoric of land as a female body to be conquered ultimately becomes part of the discourse of gender power, simultaneously effacing the real female body and creating an ideal norm of a "natural" female body that is unachievable for real, corporeal women. This kind of discourse effectively renders the female body a metaphor for all that is subordinate. This leaves women with a body that seems all too real in its oppressive implications and categorization but also serves as a signifier for many other things, which are not their bodies, so it is simultaneously painfully real and merely representational.

French feminists have taken on this concern of the erasure of the female body through discourse and the reclamation of their bodies through writing by examining linguistics. Linguistics-based discussions of the power of discourse to shape our experiences and to make abstract that which feels real and immediate greatly informs this research because this work undertakes the power of language to render the corporeal metaphorical: the power of language to carry experience away from us. The French feminists I address here were the first to apply the theories of linguistics to sexism, thoroughly exploring the levels of power language bears, from gendering us to naming us and silencing us. While their work has been criticized in recent years for relying on essentialist ideas and for considering only one locus of oppression (sex) rather than multiple loci of oppression (sex, gender, race, class, and sexuality, for a start), French feminism established the importance of language in shaping life experience and the importance of the power of discourse. Perhaps they did not examine the subtleties of discursive power, making sweeping claims that indict “men” for “controlling” the discourse that oppresses women, but if there is something to be said about the ways in which language only serves to take us further away from our experience of that which is “real,” then that should be only more true for those who lack power within a culture.

Hélène Cixous notes that women’s bodies are made strange to themselves through masculinist discourse that makes the female body a reflection of masculine desires. Cixous claims that a woman “must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing, which when the moment of her liberation has

come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformation in her history”(880). Cixous claims that when women take control of the narrative surrounding their bodies, they generate a kind of resistance by rewriting the discourse involving their bodies and making the female body a fact<sup>4</sup> rather than a metaphorical implication. Cixous notes that our bodies are made strange to us through alienating discourses of phallogocentric language, but that women’s writing can ameliorate this:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (880)

Here Cixous implicates the body’s confiscation via masculinist discourse and notes that this discourse makes the woman’s body strange even to herself. A body that is strange to the one occupying and animating it will naturally be appalling and in its strangeness cause discomfort; thus the source of inhibitions or self-loathing is in fact language, which distances the subject from the reality of the body. In order to free oneself of inhibitions and anxieties, one must communicate freely and openly about the experience of discursive masculinist confiscation of the body.

While Cixous’s thinking has been critiqued as essentialist and reductive in its reliance on a naturalized female body, it is useful in terms of considering the role of language and the ways in which language is so often constrained in the name of

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss the problems with Cixous’s acceptance of an a priori presence of a female body more below.

what is appropriate. In this way, the body is spoken of in euphemisms, while the land in the colonial venture is spoken of in bodily terms. The breast that should not be mentioned on a “lady’s” body is perfectly acceptable when it is a rolling mountain in the distance. The fluids the female body produces generate anxiety and horror except when they are metaphors for woodland streams, wide oceans, and roiling, turbulent rivers coursing passionately through an untamed land. Cixous’s idea of the body as a “nasty companion” is particularly relevant to this work in that it is the “nasty companion,” the “source of inhibitions” that is put forward to confront masculinist discourse. While Cixous recommends writing to overcome the “confiscated... dead figure” of the female body, the women of this work actually write (or perform) that figure into a kind of surreal life that sickens and appalls their oppressors.

Cixous claims that feminist writing can “invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (885). As has been said by many other feminists, this is a vast overstatement made by a white woman of privilege who assumes that her voice (or the voice of other women like her) can destroy the barriers that separate her from other women. Her statement does not take into consideration the complexities of imperialism and the circumstance of the erasure of the body in the name of that particular enterprise. Nevertheless, while I don’t necessarily agree with Cixous’s admonition to women to reclaim an essentialized body as a basic tenet of feminist action, her argument does effectively address the problem that I undertake: that discourse about the female



body complicates things by effacing the actual body and making that body a representation of something else. Furthermore, it parses all female bodies into types: ideal and not-ideal, while the ideal is further effaced in favor of metaphor and the not-ideal is chastened and despised for never attaining the glory of the metaphorical representation presented as its goal.

Most importantly for this work, Cixous hits on a significant idea: she avers, “But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body” (886). This short passage is rife with complexity when looked at from a poststructuralist, postcolonial perspective. There is no one group of men “giving” women their bodies in this way; discourse is, as Butler indicates, a complicated process of reiteration and gender performance. There are no individual, nefarious men who “give” women their bodies; on the contrary, masculinist discourse robs women of their bodies in a complex set of social interactions that are incomprehensible and often invisible. Nevertheless, Cixous is right to claim that we can win those bodies back through feminist resistance that makes the body a real presence and refuses linguistic erasure. In fact, I would argue that there are more texts than Cixous perceives if we are willing to cast a wider net in our definition of “text” and “writing,” for other feminist cultural productions can do the work of *l’écriture féminine* as effectively as the act of writing.

Another French feminist who takes on the role of language in the oppression of women is Luce Irigaray, who calls for an alteration in language that effects

change. In her essay “When Our Lips Speak Together,” she notes that we must resist the impulse to remove ourselves from experience through linguistic maneuvers we have inherited from masculinist hegemony and instead rely on our bodily experiences to communicate with one another as feminists:

If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again... Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They’ll vanish, and we’ll be lost. Far off, up high. Absent from ourselves: we’ll be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don’t have any. We change names as men exchange us, as they use us, use us up. It would be frivolous of us, exchanged by them, to be so changeable. (3)

Irigaray’s claim that we are reduced to “spoken machines, speaking machines” addresses the problem of being represented by phallogocentric language that simultaneously shuns speaking directly about women’s bodies and speaks of inanimate objects as women’s bodies, thereby naming women, and using women’s bodies to describe and dominate the world around them. Irigaray calls for a different kind of language, a feminist discourse, in which the words do not “pass through our bodies, above our heads.” The language of masculinist discourse violently “passes through our bodies” like swords and floats out of reach, but drawing on our literal bodies allows us to encapsulate and hold onto feminist language.

Irigaray, like Cixous, lays blame on “men,” and while it is true that men generally benefit from nonfeminist discourses of power that generate and uphold gender-based power inequities, at the same time, we must find a more complex,

poststructuralist means of inquiring into the nature of power, as Butler does. A poststructuralist approach that decenters the notion of power and disarticulates power and masculinity is perhaps the key to speaking difference. Irigaray's most often cited work "This Sex Which is Not One" relies on the notion of the female body as a closed circuit of sexual fulfillment, charging women with the admonition to stop perceiving themselves in Freudian terms of loss and the absence of a phallus and instead seeing themselves as a force that is self-regenerative, exclusive, and enclosed. Irigaray's less often cited work, "When Our Lips Speak Together" can be read as an attempt to move away from essentialist notions of the female body as an undifferentiating unit that can be reduced to one type. It seems to advocate an attempt to speak "difference," meaning that the "sameness" we are "taught to speak" is masculinist and reductive, with no regard for the differences generated by colonialist categories such as race, class, and sexuality.

"When Our Lips Speak Together," seems to attack propriety—as her other work does in its lusty reclamation of sexual independence—but with more sensitivity to the subtle differences instantiated by colonialism and an understanding that we must learn to speak differently to one another in order to be removed from masculinist discourse and reclaim our corporeal, improper selves. Her admonition to not be "changeable" or useable contains a glimmer of postcolonial ideology in its conception of the female body as a commodity and the demand for resistance against such an ideal.

This idea of the female body as “useable” relies on the notion of the female body as a social construction. Judith Butler’s work certainly indicates that the notion of a monolithic female body is outdated and lacking in sophistication and sensitivity to the myriad manifestations of embodiment women experience. But Irigaray’s work, written long before the trenchant discourse of poststructuralist feminism, seems to foreshadow this thinking: our bodies are useable, and the way they become useable is by being recognizable and predictable (“to men,” Irigaray would include). The result of being a body that is used is being “used up,” and so Irigaray encourages her readers to not be “changeable,” to not change in accordance with the norms or demands of patriarchy, and a postmodern scholar could extend this idea perhaps to be not *interchangeable*, to maintain independent identities while still working toward a shared goal of gender parity.

While all this indicates that there is an essential woman that exists outside of patriarchy, one that is taken away from actual, corporeal women through phallogocentric discourse, it also indicates that the category of “woman” is a social construction. The problem with Irigaray’s thinking lies in the presumption of something existing before the constructionist discourse, something we can get back to by speaking to one another in a language outside of male discourse. This is idealistic and likely useless on at least one level, for the question remains: What or who is the essential woman we are trying to get back to? Nevertheless, her argument does highlight the deeply entrenched social construction of the category of “woman,” and at least offers the possibility of an existence outside of masculinist

discourse that establishes the category of woman as deferential to the category of man. It does not give us the answer, but it gives us something to grapple with: language and discourse distance us from the corporeal, lived experience of a marked, female body in patriarchy.

Of course, the terms “female body,” “real body,” “the body,” “the corporeal body,” “women’s bodies,” and all of the other terms our language limits this discussion to are fraught with complications and, often in an academic setting, are offered up to the altar of poststructuralist discursive sacrifice: we become so caught up in *how* we talk about the oppression of women that we become extra careful to not say anything that would indicate an essentialist or pre-constructionist idea and we therefore do not come to any conclusion about *what* we can do to change the situation. As feminists, we must take caution in this approach of critiquing too harshly language that discusses the socially constructed body. Perhaps there is no monolithic body, and perhaps ideas that refer to “the body” at all are at the same time complicated and overly simplistic; nevertheless, women in the academy who are concerned about the lives of women must make a choice about how to position ourselves: are we academic feminists, or feminist academics?

We can bandy the question of “real” and “body” around all we want as we talk about discourse, but the woman vomiting up her lunch, the woman being sexually harassed at work, the rape survivor, the domestic violence victim, and the child bride all share one experience: their bodies feel terribly, terrifyingly *real*. The injured, starving body is not simply semiological; it is a material concern. The point I

raise here is that the personal, individual, lived-in body is experienced as a “real body,” and one that is marked as “female” or “woman” must bend to meet the norms of femininity established or pay dearly. Each woman’s bending and disciplining, of course, contributes to that discourse, and those who don’t are lost to the discourse of tragedy, failure, or insanity; therefore, women are as complicit as men in constructing the body and the discourse around it. Thus, Irigaray’s work, setting men as the villainous discourse-makers who take our bodies from us through language, falls short, but the idea of language rendering the body a mere discursive fantasy is spot on, and this is where we must find a middle ground as feminist academics (not merely academic feminists, who talk about feminism and bodies as though there were no cost to the women occupying violated bodies all over the world).

Monique Wittig’s essay “One is Not Born a Woman” indicates that women “have been ideologically rebuilt into a ‘natural group’.” Wittig, a materialist, critiques the social construction of the category of “woman” and insists, perhaps quaintly, on the “facts” of “existence” (more fraught terminology!). What is useful about Wittig’s work is the use of lesbianism as a tool used to deconstruct the category of “woman.” While this body of research does not address lesbianism explicitly, lesbianism does provide an interesting corollary to the corporeal acts of resistance covered herein; thus Wittig’s conception of the lesbian (and the cultural ramifications of this concept for the Western lesbian community) are explored at length here.

Wittig posits that “woman” is a category constructed in relation to the norm of “man” and is therefore predicated on heterosexuality. Thus, a lesbian is not a “woman” because she is outside of the heterosexual paradigm: her sexuality is neither constructed in relation to male pleasure or expectations nor as a contrast or “opposite” to male sexuality. This is an engaging, though somewhat limited, idea: engaging because it addresses the issue of sexuality but limited because it is not inclusive of other constitutive categories such as race, class, and gender expression. Having been written before the ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality were academically disarticulated, it does not include the factors of gender performance and sex, assuming that one’s sexuality is the driving force behind one’s gender performance (e.g., a lesbian will be less culturally “feminine”), whereas this is not necessarily the case.

Wittig was the inspiration for a generation of Western (primarily white) lesbian separatists who spelled lesbian with a capital L, as though it were a nationality, and indeed, they embraced a dream of a Lesbian Nation, devoid of men<sup>5</sup>. Wittig’s work is based on the ideal that lesbians will naturally incline toward a

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<sup>5</sup> I don’t intend to sound truculent or dismissive of the Lesbian Separatist Movement (also known as The Lesbian Land Movement because many groups moved to vast stretches of secluded, private property wherein all infrastructure and business is woman-generated and woman-maintained); indeed, this fierce independence and earnest sense of purpose inspired my own feminist awakening. The Separatists have bravely faced death threats and the dangers and inconveniences of complete independence, and some communities have thrived in the face of overwhelming violence and adversity for many decades. It was (and for some, continues to be) a rigorous intellectual and material experiment that has generated great ideas, great accomplishments, and great healing for many Lesbians.

gender performance that is intentionally disobliging to feminine standards, including the expectation of reproduction. Of course, as lesbianism has begun to gain cultural acceptance, the possibility of being both gender-role-conforming and lesbian has presented itself and complicated many of Wittig's ideas. Nevertheless, Wittig's concept still has value as it critiques the construction of the naturalized category of woman as opposite of man, for a lesbian, even one who chooses to have a baby and adhere to all normative feminine standards, is not the counterpart of a man on a personal level in the same way a heterosexual mother becomes the counterpart to the father.

This concept can apply to many non-normative women (say, for instance, single mothers and nuns), and this work applies the idea of the woman outside of the heterosexual paradigm as "not a woman" in situations that include women not explicitly lesbian in their identifications. For feminist thinking, what is most valuable about Wittig's work is its idea that none of us is born a woman (but it should be added that being heterosexual does not necessarily condemn one to that "naturalized" state of feminine compliance, which is to say, that docility that makes her complicit in the violence of patriarchy).

What is also useful about Wittig's argument is the idea that power accrues to women who deliberately flout norms in grandiose ways. Lesbianism is no longer a stance against patriarchy because, in mainstream culture, it's no longer seen as



tragic or psychotic, or even a failure.<sup>6</sup> What makes this social acceptance possible, many claim, is the feminine lesbians who asked nicely for their families to be respected and honored, who fought homophobia by keeping nice lawns and volunteering on the PTA. But perhaps the point is that what made the middle-class existence of those mainstream lesbians even possible were the angry Lesbian Separatists, frightening the villagers with their spectacle of womanhood gone awry: muscled dykes digging trenches on land where only women (spelled “womyn” to deliberately disallow even the root word “men”) were allowed to tread, refusing to make babies, make dinner, or make nice. When the media began to depict lovely, feminine lesbians caring for their babies, Western civilization could collectively sigh, “Well, at least they don’t dress and act like men,” a sentiment that underscores the importance of gender role adherence, even over sexuality.

Wittig’s work refuses “woman, the myth” and insists on the category of “women,” meaning that there is an unattainable standard established (the myth) but that women (the category of oppressed individuals working together) can work together to flout that ontology of oppression and disavow the desire to attain the immortal level of femininity. I find Wittig’s lesbians relevant because the women this study concerns itself with are more aligned with the lesbian separatists than the mainstream family lesbians. The women of this study do not ask for social

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, this conversation is still present, but the current Republican criticisms about women’s bodies, birth control, and homosexuality are seen as marginal and those participating in the conversation are seen as a radical fringe that has lost touch with the mainstream; indeed, these conversations are viewed as theater of the macabre more than valid political discourse.

acceptance but attack the ideology of “woman, the myth” through direct action, making the body un-mythological (or, in other words, *real*: a body that bleeds, expresses fluids, experiences pain, and succumbs to fulfilling its own appetites). This insistence on the category of “women” (as a plural not a singular phenomenon) brings all women into alignment based on a shared experience: not a shared experience of an identical body necessarily, and not necessarily an experience that is shared exactly in all respects, but a shared experience of occupying a body whose corporeality is subsumed within the conversation about it, a body that somehow is not precisely *hers*.

Chandra Mohanty’s work presents an opportunity to move away from essentialist notions of “woman” while still maintaining a vision of collaborative feminism. Mohanty, a postcolonial feminist, recommends we work toward creating “imagined communities,” an idea she developed from the work of Benedict Anderson. She writes about the limitations of language when discussing third world feminism that crosses racial, class, and historical barriers:

The very notion of addressing what are often internally conflictual histories of third world women’s feminisms under a single rubric... may seem ludicrous—especially since the very meaning of the term *feminism* is continually contested. For, it can be argued, there are no simple ways of representing these diverse struggles and histories. Just as it is difficult to speak of a singular entity called “Western feminism,” it is difficult to generalize about “third world feminisms.” ...I am suggesting then, an “imagined community” of third world oppositional struggles. “Imagined” not because it is not “real” but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and “community” because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a deep commitment [to the alliance]. (4)

Mohanty uses the idea of “imagined communities” as a means of linking Third World women because it suggests “political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance” (4). Therefore, women can see themselves in alliance with one another based on their own action and desire for change rather than on ascribed categories. Moreover, she notes that “women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities” (4). This is an example of what I mean when I use the term “feminist academic” in contrast to “academic feminist.” Mohanty moves beyond materialist assumptions of the solidity of language used by materialist feminists who insist on addressing the material effects of patriarchy on women’s lives and slip into essentialist notions, yet she also refuses to become entrenched in deconstructionist discourse to the point of rendering irrelevant the entire conversation about the oppression of women (which we know to be real and problematic though we cannot always wrangle our way around the language needed to discuss it).

Mohanty acknowledges the presence and possibility of essentialism and the complexity of collaboration between communities fraught with historical complexity, yet she does not accept, *prima facie*, the facts of oppression wrought by colonialism as ineluctably damaging to the possibility of future collaboration. Rather, she presents something hopeful: an imagined community of feminist activists who choose to align with one another based on a shared vision, to which each individual contributes. This makes it possible for women of “divergent histories and social locations” (4) to work together based on a political opposition to

“pervasive [and] systemic” domination. Rather than being ahistorically or biologically cast as naturalized “sisters” in the struggle against patriarchy, feminists can be agents of their own decision to join an ideologically feminist imagined community focused on particularized political interests, and each individual can generate resistance in her own way within the framework of the community to which she belongs.

This idea is particularly relevant to my work, for the women in this survey occupy vastly divergent positions relative to power, especially within their own historical contexts. Obviously, women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries experienced power differently than women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the Americas (to say nothing of the power differentials present among different women living during the same time periods). The twentieth century saw women gain the right to vote, for instance, a right of citizenship not extended to women (or any colonized people) of the early colonial period of the Americas; however, issues of class, race, sexuality, and history continue to plague women’s movements, ideologically pitting them against one another in terms of their access to privilege. Thus, the idea of imagined communities is useful to me, for if Mohanty can imagine communities comprised of women of different Third World backgrounds, can we not imagine communities comprised of women from even more diverse backgrounds who share ideological goals? Can we imagine such communities transgressing the boundaries of time as well, perhaps envisioning transhistorical imagined communities?

The feminist cultural productions I cite herein do attest to this ideal of the transhistorical imagined community of women who occupy a body culturally marked as female<sup>7</sup> by making the body a site of resistance and speaking to a cross-cultural and transhistorical experience of female corporeality; in other words, rape, hunger, and violence against women are cross-cultural, transhistorical experiences. We can (and should) unite around these political issues without dividing ourselves into competing, hegemonic categories that only serve to instantiate and cooperate with the prevailing ideology and do nothing to put an end to rape and unsatisfied hungers and violence against women. This does not mean that we cannot or should not examine the ways in which acts of violence differentially impact women who occupy different positions in different spectrums of power; to say the least, such an examination should prove useful, for it promises to reveal the ways in which women are pitted one against the other in an effort to dismantle such imagined communities, efforts that strive to maintain women's communities as truly imaginary rather than threateningly real.

Mohanty's idea of imagined communities of feminism is, in a sense, a virtual community: there is not necessarily a physical community center where feminists meet and exchange ideas for resistance, but an intellectual space in which ideology is shared while physical spaces can be occupied for protests, resistance or

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<sup>7</sup> "A body culturally marked as almost female or not quite female enough" could be added to this statement, referring to that category of persons who perhaps by being intersex, or perhaps by not conforming to gender stereotypes, sound the alarm of non-recognition that obligates the observer to seek or demand immediate discipline unto conformity with the norm.

community planning. In a parallel sense, the feminist cultural productions concerned herein work toward generating a rhetorical space of resistance, and rhetorical spaces are not generally physical but are comprised of discourse and are likewise virtual. Nevertheless, elaborating on Steven Axelrod's use of the term "*heterotopia*" (which I explain more thoroughly below), I liken this rhetorical space of postmodern feminist resistance to Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia from his essay "Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias."

Foucault writes, "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (1). He indicates that the twentieth century concerns itself with relations and proximity and the promise of containment that the comforting notion of physical space has to offer. He cites innovations in thinking that brought us to this point in the mid-twentieth century (where, generally, the second half of my dissertation begins with the work of mid-century poets and feminist performance artists and playwrights).

It can be argued that the innovations Foucault cites (starting with Galileo's ideas about the relative positions of the sun and the planets in the universe) have become only more complex and have served to further obfuscate our notions of emplacement, as we exist in an increasingly globalized world, in which "space" is almost always virtual as we shop, socialize, and have sex online. The modernist concern with space, according to Foucault, has generated a need for heterotopias, spaces that can withstand these bizarre and discomfiting juxtapositions. This notion

of an “other space,” as Foucault referred to the heterotopia, is relevant to feminist discourse of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as that discourse has taken on rhetorical concerns of juxtaposition and binarism; therefore, Foucault’s heterotopia serves as a controlling context for the second half of this dissertation.

Foucault’s heterotopia is a physical (not a rhetorical or imagined) space of containment and juxtaposition. He refers to the “space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us” (3). Thus, the heterotopia reflects “real life” but can also deconstruct it or address the complexities that cultures find necessary to abreact (to use a Kristevan term). The heterotopia contains that which our culture cannot integrate, the idiosyncratic elements of our culture that threaten to expose the façades of wholeness and integrity we maintain. Examples of such sites are boarding schools—where young men are sent to contain their burgeoning sexuality away from home—or brothels, prisons, or asylums: locations that contain social conundrums that we as a culture cannot face or contain without threat of compromising the integrity of the cultural values and our sense of normativity.

This concept of a cultural space that is both within and outside of the culture is very important to feminist thinking because the oppression of women is ubiquitous and creates a diasporic sensibility among women even though women are in close proximity to one another. Women’s lived experiences of violence and subjugation occur with alarming regularity in their everyday lives, yet they do not

share these experiences with other women, though they encounter other women with the same kind of regularity as they encounter oppression. For example, two women may experience domestic violence at home yet never share their experiences with one another even though they may share volunteer, work, or parenting responsibilities with each other. The silence surrounding violence against women is a norm of femininity that effects a cruel separation that serves to undergird masculinist norms and to maintain hegemonic power structures. Thus, I posit that in feminist cultural productions that use the body as a site of resistance, the body in question within that cultural production becomes a kind of heterotopia. Foucault notes that heterotopias have the “curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (3). The female body in a state of resistance to rhetorical and physical violence against women thus removes itself from the paradigm of gender normativity, yet remains recognizable within the gender paradigm, thus “designating, mirroring, and reflecting” that violent inequality in an effort to “suspect, neutralize,” or “invert” that “set of relations.”

Foucault is clear that the heterotopia is a physical space, not a rhetorical one. Steven Axelrod has ingeniously applied the concept of the heterotopia to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop in his essay “Heterotropic Desire in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Pink Dog.’” He establishes that “poetry... is a site of illumination—an other space of difficult access, order, purification, surprise and pleasure,” and urges us to consider the concept of a “virtual” heterotopia, a blend of textual utopianism—which he



notes is *not* political—and heterotopia—that which occupies “an other space of difficult access.” For Axelrod, this kind of poetry that takes on complex and difficult political projects involving a concept of “other” occupies a space that is neither heterotopia nor utopia (yet has elements of both); in a deft rhetorical maneuver, he terms this space in Bishop’s work a *heterotropia*.

The works in this project are concerned with both spaces: the rhetorical space of the poem or art, *and* the physical space of the body: the works of art are themselves *heterotropias*—as Axelrod terms them—spaces “of illumination” where we can find revelatory information about gender relations in our culture. Moreover, I posit that the bodies within are actually *heterotropias* because American nationalist identity is predicated on a notion of the *place* of the New World as female, a fundamental conflation between the physical space of one’s geographic surroundings and a physical body. If American geography is conflated with the feminine body, then that body, qua physical location, becomes a space, and feminist cultural productions conceive of the body as a space to reflect and critique the complex set of gender relations, or in Foucault’s words, these bodies “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (3).

Nevertheless, Foucault’s six principles of the heterotopia (or Axelrod’s heterotropia) apply to feminist cultural productions. The first principle of the heterotopia is that every culture produces one. Feminism aims to disrupt the diasporic propensity of masculinist hegemony by creating an awareness of women’s

culture. Foucault concerns himself with crisis heterotopias and deviant heterotopias. In the case of feminist cultural productions using women's bodies as a site of resistance, the body repudiates gender norms and becomes a site that is noncompliant with expectations for proper femininity: in this way, it is both in crisis and deviant. His second principle is that the heterotopia can change depending on the context of the culture, and this can be seen through the broad range of work presented here, from the colonial period of the Americas to postmodern American works: these works are related in that they confront hierarchies of religion, but the resistance is historically specific, taking on issues ranging from cannibalism to eating disorders.

Foucault's third principle is that heterotopias can juxtapose several real spaces; his primary example of this sort of heterotopia is theater, and this work is grounded in performance theories that address both the performance of gender and the actual performances of the texts in question. The fourth principle is that heterotopias are related to questions of time, and he gives as examples fairgrounds (ephemeral in nature, yet occupying a physical space for a discrete period of time), museums, libraries, and cemeteries. This also can be applied to the heterotopia of the body because the point of much of the work is to indicate the ephemeral nature of the body, as in the work of Hannah Wilke, a feminist performance artist who documents the slow destruction of the physical body at the hands of age, disease, and nature.

Foucault's fifth principal of the heterotopia is that that they "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (6). This idea is ironic with respect to women's bodies, particularly in relation to Irigaray's thinking. She warns us against being "enveloped in proper skins, but not our own" and exults in the "enclosed" system of female sexuality that does not rely on the "one," the phallus to penetrate. Foucault gives the example of a bed and breakfast in which a lodger thinks he or she has seen the entire house but in fact has only been allowed into part of it as a guest, and Irigaray's body is like that bed and breakfast, where the penetrating guest feels that he has entered and experienced all there is to see but does not perceive that there is also a factor of isolation. The heterotopic bodies in these texts reveal that there is something impenetrable about women's bodies and also seem to warn against the danger of penetrating them. Foucault's sixth principle is that heterotopias "have a function in relation to all the space that remains... their role is to create a space that is other, another real space... not of illusion, but of compensation" (7). Thus these bodies do the work of relating to other bodies and making sense of (or, more specifically, pointing out the nonsense of) bodies that seem to be complying with gender norms; in fact, it could be argued that they wear the damage externally that we all endure internally from this inequitable distribution of power.

Therefore, feminist cultural productions are heterotopias that contain a heterotopia, the body-space that reflects the inequitable gender relations on which American identity is built. These heterotopias, the bodies themselves, can be seen as

a sort of “last colony,” a space that is rhetorically separated from other spaces like it (as in the diasporic effect on women’s shared experience going unshared and undiscussed), but they depend upon the heterotopia, the rhetorical space in which these concerns are explored and juxtaposed, so Mohanty’s imagined community is a vital possibility. There, in the heterotopia, the reality of violence and oppression is spoken and performed, and feminist art and literature creates a heterotopia of the body, highlighting its role as “last colony,” and critiquing our dependency on norms of femininity as the fulcrum on which nationalist identity balances.

Thus these works are *heterotopic* in the sense of being a physical location of a body (“an other space,” as Foucault terms it), which seems to present a sort of horrifying simulacrum of the feminine, but they are also *heterotropic* in the sense of being textual “other spaces” in which complex binaries are sorted out. This uncanny combination of space and argumentation generate a form of cultural production unique to feminism that I term the *rhetoritopia*. Rhetoritopias are rhetorical “other spaces” of argument and persuasion, wherein the literal body becomes a site of persuasion within a persuasive text, and the one body is “sacrificed” via the discourse of the cultural production as a means of effecting social change and deconstructing rhetorics of femininity and masculinity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is vitally important to note that the bodies in the texts I study are culturally-identified as “women” or “female bodies,” but that, given the fraught nature of these binaristic terms, any human *body* could take part in a feminist cultural production and generate a rhetoritopian discourse since it only requires that the body is used to critique notions of “other” and rhetorics of gender and sex normativity (c.f. the performance art of Bob Flanagan).

The very real experience of belonging to a disenfranchised community plays out in pragmatic (rather than simply intellectual or conceptual) ways, particularly in terms of national identities predicated on masculinity, as is the case with the American national identity. Lauren Berlant writes about the American national fantasy of utopia, examining the ways in which the ideal of the American citizen is predicated on an idealized, abstract body. The more abstract a body is, she claims, the more it fits with the ideal of citizenship. Berlant indicates that whiteness and maleness (along with the state of property ownership) are cultural, undefined, abstractions taken for granted as a given state of power and control, whereas that which deviates from these categorizations becomes remarkable, specific and therefore a deviation from the ideal. Berlant uses the example of the Statue of Liberty as an example of the ways in which the utopian ideal fails. The Statue is supposed to be a symbol of American equality, but is still represented by a gendered (woman's) body, which is passively available as a screen onto which we project nationalist fantasy. Berlant's Statue of Liberty is a modern corollary to the feminized landscape of the early colonialists: not a bare canvas awaiting interpretation, but an already sexed body awaiting the opportunity to nurture and shelter American masculine identity.

Berlant takes on the notion of American citizenship as a socially constructed category. She notes that the term "citizen" is "both an inclusive and exclusionary noun, naming by negation juridically contested racial, gendered, and class identities" (9). Thus the meaning of the term "citizen" is variable depending on the historical,

social, or cultural moment. She further notes that the designation of “citizen” has traditionally adhered to the masculine, however, and that “maleness” is a given circumstance attending citizenship. She notes that the concept of citizenship is not an a priori circumstance connected to American identity, for African Americans did not always have the right to citizenship. The enfranchisement of African American men was an integral moment in the narrative of American citizenship, revealing its unstable status as a central tenet of our American identity.

Thus there is no transcendental American notion of a universal citizen because we are always constructing that identity, and it is ever changing. We might consider the debate around same sex marriage as a relevant, more current, example of Berlant’s theory, as advocates claim that marriage is a right of citizenship, thereby forcing the definition of “citizenship” to evolve once again and come to include rights of citizenship guaranteed by the Constitution, including the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This can also be applied in the conversation about immigrants’ rights and draconian immigration laws such as those currently being enforced in the state of Arizona. We are seeing the evolution of the concept of citizenship unfold within our time, as citizenship, through repeated discourse, becomes perceived as something that is earned and deserved as a result of hard work and good behavior. This notion of “earning” a position as an American citizen is significant because it requires a person to make an abstraction of one’s own personal identity and be subsumed under a greater identity of the national symbolic order and to partake in the national fantasy, which is inclusive of a utopian ideal.

The “earning” is not so much about exerting effort that is tendered toward an ultimate greater good for society; rather, it is about effacing one’s difference and learning to blend in. It is an earning that accrues loss, not gain, quite the opposite of what we normally consider “earning” to be.

The problem with this national fantasy and with the relinquishment of personal identity as a means of participating in the national symbolic order is that it is essentially masculinist and that it effaces distinction and difference in the interest of a united body of people who manifest “The American Identity.” This is problematic because a monolithic American identity consistently rubs against the reality of bodies and habits that are not abstract but are “real,” factors that make the body seem excessive or threaten the utopian ideal with their insistence on individual expression rather than silence around these matters. Feminism is just such a sticking point, for it forces questions of reproductive rights, sexuality, and violence into the public discourse, presenting “special cases” for juridical consideration that specifically implicate bodies. Immigrants and queers present a similar problem, as their “excessive” bodies—marked by colonial history, race, gender, and sexuality—come into the limelight demanding equal treatment under the law of the land.

Robyn Wiegman writes about the problem of over-studying “difference” and “other-ness.” She stresses the importance of moving beyond identity politics, noting that focusing on identity reifies the power and domination feminists attempt to thwart because it relies on stereotypes and images that are created through the

process of subordination. This is in line with Mohanty's idea, which condemns ahistorical notions of "the inherent resistance and resilience of third world peoples" (5), meaning that by examining a community qua community, we rely on stereotypes, even if they are "positive" stereotypes meant to vindicate the group in question. Wiegman notes that some bodies are seen as universal because they are male, propertied, and white, whereas other bodies are seen as particular because they are marked in some way due to race, sex, gender, or class. This, she notes, is what modern concepts of citizenship rest upon: the particularity of the Other's body.

This particularity of the Other's body is precisely what the work of feminists who posit the body as a site of resistance to hegemonic norms responds to. The examples given above (of queers, immigrants, and African Americans seeking legal recognition) are examples of hard fought battles that rationally question the Constitution and have wrought immense and far-reaching change in our culture. Nonetheless, questions of a juridical nature (such as equality under the law) are not of great interest to this study, for feminists who use the body as a site of resistance in the generation of cultural productions are not taking the well-traveled path of mainstream, legislatively-approved resistance. On the contrary, these texts do not (in the immediate sense) seek legal remedies; instead, they embrace a sort of vigilante justice that is punitive and horrifies the offender. They repudiate the notion of a hand held out for a dose of equal treatment; indeed, one gets the impression that they would as likely repudiate hands extended in friendship. These feminists (and protofeminists of the colonial period) seek vengeance, not legal



recognition and rather than rely on generating this discourse of discontent in the hyper-rational realm of legislation, where their pleas are rationalized away, they instead occupy the rhetoritopia, a space outside of the juridical spaces of Constitutional law, where the ironies of the application of laws and the rendering of the body as a rhetorical space are made apparent, suspected, and critiqued.

Nevertheless, Weigman and Berlant's ideas are highly relevant to this work. In cultural productions by feminists who use the body as a site of resistance, the particularity of the Other's body is writ large. The body as depicted herein is stranger, more grotesque, even more offensive than what it is constructed to be in hegemonic discourse, a caricature of the myth; more troubling than just an idea of a body—or a metaphorical *representation* of a body—these bodies are troublingly real, immediate, and confrontational. This reconfiguration of the body as a site of horror removes said body from the realm of hegemonic discourse, in keeping with Irigaray's notion that "it would be frivolous of us, exchanged by them, to be so changeable." Feminist cultural productions depicting the female body are a means of addressing the particularity of the female body as Other (as diverging from the norm, the male form of the body): they take the claims made about the female body as being an abnormal version of the male body, and rather than make an attempt to conform (to be "changeable" in accordance with a desire to achieve discipline and normalcy), they change in the opposite, unpredicted direction, accentuating the non-normativity of the body, flaunting it in an effort to horrify or disgust the observer and to flout the demand for complicity and conformity. They embrace and recreate

themselves as hyperembodied in response to the hyperembodiment of the hegemonic discourse, effectively realizing the nightmare of misogyny and reflecting it back to the viewer and inverting the set of relations it aims to criticize.

This, of course, ultimately draws attention to the question of performance. Judith Butler has done much to nuance our thinking about gender as a performance rather than a series of acts inherently connected to our sex; the notion that gender is an unconscious, repetitive performance is now widely accepted in academic circles. But there is another, more literal level of performance at play: cultural productions are actual performances. Performance art is explicitly performative, but literature is also a kind of performance in that it is an artistic production made for public consumption. Considering both gender theory and performance theory in conjunction, then, these texts are *performances of performances*. One could say that any text depicting a gendered person (which is to say virtually any text) is a performance of a performance, but the cultural productions of feminists (and, as I claim, profeminists) address gender role stereotypes that they are critiquing and refusing to participate in; they draw attention to the performative quality of gender. Therefore, unlike mainstream cultural productions, which are *conscious performances* (the created text) of *unconscious performances* (the assumed and uncritical gender performance), feminist cultural productions are *conscious performances of conscious performances* and therefore rely on the rhetoritopia as another space in which these conscious performances of conscious performances can take place as a means of persuasion and neutralization of power inequities.

In order to understand the rhetoritopia, it is important to consider the cultural meanings of the performance spaces in which rhetoritopias are created, for feminist cultural productions that use the body as a site of resistance may look like other kinds of cultural productions but have the specific aim of negating masculinist discourse and exposing the violence attendant to rhetorics of femininity. Richard Schechner, a performance theorist, problematizes the culturally accepted distinction between ritual and performance, which claims that a performance is mere theater while a ritual enacts a change. Schechner's life's work is to complicate this notion of the two as distinct, noting that there is a fine line between ritual and theater. He calls this the "efficacy-entertainment braid." He notes that rituals are supposed to be efficacious, but they could not be efficacious if they were not also entertaining because the audience would lose interest. On the other hand, a "purely" entertaining theatrical performance can effect change in a theatergoer and at the very least instantiates and reifies culture (particularly with respect to questions of social power). Schechner's work indicates that theater is a kind of ritual and vice versa. This means that a "cultural" performance can impact the individual viewer, who then impacts the culture, perhaps placing new demands on religion to generate rituals that speak to the needs of the public. Thus there is no clear line by which we can unravel or even disarticulate the two interrelated phenomena.

Schechner's ideas are particularly relevant to feminist rhetoritopias. Religious performances are theatrical in an effort to garner the interest of the viewing public, yet religious zealots promulgate the notion that religious

ceremonies are purely efficacious—intent on bringing salvation to lost souls, for instance, or uniting families in religiously sanctioned ways through baptism or marriage. Many feminist cultural productions confront the social role of religion and expose it as a cultural force rather than a spiritual one. In the rhetoritopia, they indicate the ways in which such ceremonies actually reify gender roles and instantiate power, particularly power that relates to sex, sexuality, and gender. Thus, feminist cultural productions are efficacious *conscious performances of conscious performances*, addressing sex, gender, and sexuality in difficult, aggressive, and complex ways.

One level of complexity that dogs feminist cultural productions seems to be the question of performance and seeming complicity within feminist performances and feminist texts that depict the female body. For instance, Orlan, the performance artist, engages in cosmetic surgery as a form of protest, yet cosmetic surgery seems to be the apotheosis of feminine compliance with stringent, unattainable beauty standards. The nuns of the sixteenth century, whom I see as proto-feminists, depict themselves in sexual ways, possibly to tease and arouse their Father Confessors. Sylvia Plath sometimes writes the female speaker in her poems as highly, even masochistically domestic. Sometimes it seems that the performances of these feminists only serve to instantiate the very thing feminists struggle against.

This is why there is often conflict as to what constitutes resistance in the feminist community, and I would argue, why the community is often portrayed as antagonistic to change among feminists who see themselves as more progressive

than others. A great undercurrent of anxiety about complicity and misinterpretation runs through the feminist community. This is easily understandable: the message is so important, and so many lives literally depend upon the precision of the clear communication of it. The fear relates to miscommunication: we dread sending the message that we embrace or enjoy masochism and violence. Nevertheless, drawing attention to the violence enacted on female bodies is important and relevant, and grotesque, difficult, aggressive artistic works involving the body draw attention to the epidemic of violence against women and open a venue for dialogue about such issues. Thus, the rhetoritopia relies on mirroring that violence as a means of negating and declaiming it.

Michelle Raheja's article "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*" introduces the concept of "visual sovereignty," which refers to the desire of Indigenous subjects of ethnography "to confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of... dominance and stereotype" (1160). The thrust of Raheja's work is to privilege Indigenous participation in (Western) knowledge production as well as to explore spaces of purely Indigenous knowledge production. This study takes on concerns related to Indigenous communities as well as questions of colonialism, a primary factor in Raheja's work of examining "dominance and stereotype," but

theoretically, it can also address the question of the spectacle of women's bodies, always observed.

Feminist cultural productions that use the body as a site of resistance are confrontational, accosting the spectator with all the fearsomeness that attends to the female body, including the blood, the breast milk, and the appetite that makes it fat or yearns for power. Hegemonic assumptions about the female body are based in fear and ignorance and thus are absurd, as absurd and as widespread and mythologized as the assumptions about Indigenous communities or any community that is marginalized and therefore not perceived as worthy of being known and understood. The work of these feminists is sometimes disturbing to other feminists because it seems to be, as Raheja notes, "flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of... dominance and stereotype," yet their work aims to point out the absurdity of such structures and to make a conscious performance of their conscious performance.

In essence, this work aims to create a link between seemingly disparate eras and locations by establishing a historical precedent for aggressive and difficult work with the female body as a creative response to rhetorical, ideological, and even physical violence against women—violence used to discipline women into culturally sanctioned ideals of femininity. Therefore, while the first half of this study deals with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Americas, the second half addresses the ways in which these same kinds of physical and sexual resistance emerge in twentieth and twenty-first century North American and Latin American

cultural productions through the work of feminist poets, playwrights, and performance artists.

In all, the intention of this work is to examine ways in which feminists aim, through rhetoritarian productions, to disrupt and subvert rhetorics of femininity that imprison them through silence, maternal imperatives, beauty, nurturance, and docility. It is an examination of work that is difficult to envisage, yet is extremely visual and evocative, and therefore also difficult to turn away from. Its intention is to take firm hold of its viewer/reader, to demand a steady (though flinching) gaze, and to instill a sense of horror, shame, and repugnance at one's own complicity in the complex imbrication of power that results from colonialism. But more importantly, this work demands a recognition of one's own position, one's own performance, and one's own power to chip away at the shackles of our fear and *do something more* than talk about it.

## Chapter Two

### Missing Mama in the New (M)Otherland:

#### Jean de Léry's Quest for the Ideal (Tupi) Mother in *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*

"This creature delights so much in her nakedness...if they had not been compelled by great strokes of the whip to dress themselves, they would choose to bear the heat and burning of the sun, even the continual skinning of their arms and shoulders... rather than to endure... clothes" (Jean de Léry, 66).

In the mid-sixteenth century, a young French missionary, Jean de Léry traveled to Brazil to Christianize the "savages" and was captured by a cannibal tribe in full revolt against the imperialist powers of Europe. Nearly twenty years later, after having safely returned home, he wrote a travel narrative detailing his experiences in The New World and recounting the harrowing trial of his capture. However, his captivity narrative serves as more than a proto-ethnographic study of the Tupinamba people he resided with. It should also be studied as a means of probing the depths of the phallogocentric psychology of imperialist expansion and the latent sexual tensions that lie beneath the surface of colonial dominance.

Anne McClintock claims that many early travel narratives actually reveal "male anxiety, infantilization, and longing for the female body," and ultimately cast the New World as "a porno-tropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). Léry's text, like others written by "explorers," conquistadors, and missionaries in The New World (which had many names at the time, depending on



the imperialist country trying to colonize it), reveals a deep longing for a pornographic tropical fantasia and a desire to return to a simpler, infantile state of being. Léry's work in particular depicts a phallogentric nirvana, where Native women's bodies intermingle imaginatively with the landscape, fashioning a chimerical, need-gratification composite that coalesces the Native "Other" into a Freudian image of the ideal Mother, and simultaneously taps into an infantile sexuality that masquerades as a sort of prelapsarian, Edenic innocence. Nevertheless, Léry's attempts to dragoon his Other into being his Mother results in disappointment, for the Native women resisted such fantasizing and projection and refused to comply with delusional notions aimed at their sexual subjugation.

In 1556, the young Huguenot, Jean de Léry traveled to South America as a part of a conflicted group, led by Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, of Calvinists and Catholics motivated to Christianize the Native inhabitants of what is now known as Brazil (Whatley xvi). To a modern reader, this seems like an unlikely coalition (and the coalition did experience a great deal of ideological conflict); indeed, the purpose of the venture was obscure from the beginning, even to the participants. Villegagnon had received funding from both the French government (inclined to favor Catholics) and Huguenot sympathizers to effect his vision of missionary activity in the New World; therefore, he recruited missionaries from both camps as a political move. His followers believed that Villegagnon indicated that his goal was to create a space of religious freedom in the New World; however, once there, his Calvinist followers did not experience religious freedom and felt that they were made to work as

indentured servants, finding that Villegagnon was a “papist” who had led them there under false pretences.<sup>9</sup> Léry, feeling the pain of Villegagnon’s discriminatory actions, soon defected from the missionary encampment and set forth on his own, only to be captured by a tribe of Natives unsympathetic to European incursions to their land.

Léry’s journey took place at a time when Europeans engaged in widespread exploration and missionary work (as well as exploitative colonial activity) in the so-called New World. Because so much of the world was mysterious to Europeans and because of the psychological need to perceive an “Other” as a means of limning the boundaries of the (normative) self, the greater part of “discovery” (a process ancillary to the work of cultural and religious conversion) was guesswork. Consequently, the shadowy corners of explorers’ and missionaries’ surviving accounts (and indeed, sometimes entire documents) are illuminated by either their own wild imaginings or Eurocentric interpretations of what they did observe.

Léry lived for a brief time (about ten months) with the Tupinamba tribe of Brazil as a result of being captured by the tribe; he was held prisoner for this period of time and believed that their intention was to stone him to death, dismember him, cook his flesh, and devour it in a ritual. His forecasting of that obviously unrealized

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<sup>9</sup> There is some speculation that Villegagnon, who had been in dialogue with Calvin, had asked Calvin to send him missionaries, but Villegagnon later averred that it was a misunderstanding. Much of this is complicated by the complexities of the Catholic and Huguenot relations of the sixteenth century and obfuscated by hundreds of years of intervening religious drama that are too vast and intricate to sort out in this work. Suffice it to say that in no account does Villegagnon emerge as entirely honest and forthcoming or entirely compassionate and fair dealing. Mostly, he seems to have been motivated by the promise of heroism in the colonial venture (including the goal of Christianizing the Natives).

event probably influenced his interpretations of their behaviors and cultural mores and, subsequently, his recounting of those days in his captivity narrative; nevertheless, the text is still useful in terms of an examination of European colonial interest beyond the forcible seizure of land and expansion of wealth. It is also informative in terms of European delusions of the Native “Other”; it reveals a Eurocentric masculinist desire for a mother figure in the New World; and it depicts the ways in which Native women resisted such fantasizing and projection on the part of foreign masculine observers by refusing to conform to the chimerical notions that would subjugate them to an inferior sexuality.

In the scant year Léry spent with the Tupinamba people, I would argue, he somewhat fell in love with the Tupinambas. Of course, this “falling in love” that I refer to is based on fantasy and Freudian cathexis. Freud argued that the id is incapable of distinguishing between reality and a mental image and that the mind will create an image that will fit with the id’s desire for fulfillment; to this end, we cathect our desires onto the landscape of our world and imagine fulfillment of our desires. This wish fulfillment is, of course, based on what we know and what we yearn for; therefore, Léry’s “love” of the Tupinamba people was based on both his desire for familiarity and his desire for something better than what was familiar to him, and it was certainly based on a Eurocentric perspective of lovability and wish-fulfillment.

Eric Lott explores the kind of love that Léry felt for the Tupinamba in his book *Love and Theft*. Lott describes minstrelsy in America as a simultaneous

experience of both attraction and aversion to the Other and a desire to own the Other, symbolically accomplished by adopting perceived behaviors and actions of that Other. In Léry's case, he both wishes to distance himself from the Other and to occupy what he sees as an Edenic life experience. He claims that the Tupi "do not in any way drink of those murky, pestilential springs, from which flow so many streams of mistrust, avarice, litigation, and squabbles, of envy and ambition... nothing of all that torments them, much less dominates or obsesses them" (57). His expressed admiration for the Tupi borders on a kind of love, as he comes to eventually compare and contrast them favorably with his own kinsmen and kinswomen and profess a preference for Tupi society over that of his homeland.

His surviving narrative of that experience, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* (1578), romanticizes the Tupi way of life and rationalizes what must have seemed to Léry's counterparts the most savage of activities, cannibalism. Like other Europeans of his time who found themselves in the strange circumstances of what they considered another world, Léry strove not only to make sense of his experience among the tribe he dwelled with, but also to make sense of his own personal experience as a naïve European missionary making his way in an ever-widening world.

It is relevant to note that the sixteenth century was a time of ideological upheaval in Europe. With the publication of Martin Luther's "Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" in 1517, Protestants and Catholics were fully engaged in the throes of religious wars that lasted for over 130 years, which

coincided with the time of Léry's mission to Brazil and the publication of his account. Indeed, Léry himself had survived the Siege of Sancerre, during which the Catholic forces of the king had surrounded the village and denied entry of goods, which, incidentally resulted in some of the population resorting to survival cannibalism. Léry even wrote a book about that event; thus we can assume that the cost of converting the Natives was no small thing to Léry and the specter of cannibalism was indeed very real for him. Léry's voyage to Brazil, undertaken by an ostensibly cooperative network of Catholics and Protestants, had political motivations. It could be argued that Léry was not simply invested in the promulgation of Christianity in general but was more specifically engaged in an effort to institute Protestantism in this remote outpost of the world as the battle raged on at home.

It is important to examine Léry's Eurocentric, masculinist bias in his account of his American experience, for while he finds ways to contextualize the behaviors and values of the Tupi men, it is the women of the Tupinamba village that stymie him and refuse to fit within a framework of European femininity. While Léry makes an effort to understand the women around him in the Tupinamba village in Eurocentric terms, at the same time he also critiques the construct of European femininity by juxtaposing European "ladies" to the more "natural" Tupinamba women, as I explore later. He positions the Native women in antagonistic opposition to their European counterparts, whom he likewise reviles in a demonstration of misogynist disgust; he marginalizes the Tupi women, focusing instead on the Tupi

men he comes to love<sup>10</sup>; and he fetishizes the Tupi mother. Nevertheless, when the Tupinamba women insist on displaying their “unfeminine” appetites for human flesh in anthropophagic rituals, Léry turns away in horror and disgust, for he faces a complex psychological challenge to reconcile such unladylike behaviors with *his* cathected fantasy of the women who populate and represent *his* imagined New World. Léry writes his travel narrative from the position of a privileged observer: he critiques the cultural values and behaviors of the Tupinamba from the perspective of a European, “civilized,” and lettered male who assumes the correctness of his worldview, which includes a sense that men are the norm from which women deviate. The Indigenous women of Brazil effortlessly dismantle Léry’s assumptions by making his position as an observer a supremely uncomfortable one.

Feminist theorists such as Annette Kolodny and Anne McClintock have long examined the ways in which European male “explorers” of the New World approached their perambulations with a distinctly gendered perspective, often perceiving the land itself as feminine, a perception with widely diverging implications, depending on the storyteller. Annette Kolodny’s germinal text, *The Lay of the Land* (1975), interrogates such masculinist perceptions in early accounts of the New World with specific attention to the ways in which men characterize the land in feminine ways. Her book explores

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<sup>10</sup> Again, his love for the Tupi men is complicated by racist fantasy, but it is also complicated by a homoerotic component that accompanies his slaving analysis of the Tupinamba men, as I later explore.

America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. (4)

Kolodny argues that, in addition to natural resources and cheap labor, early explorers were searching for “home,” which can also be read as the Lacanian Real, that is, the maternal place of connection, contentment, and wholeness prior to language acquisition and infantile differentiation from the mother. Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real is outlined in his essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the ‘I’ as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” The idea is that once infant subjects enter into linguistic capabilities, they are forever severed from a state of true nature and true fulfillment, which come from not perceiving oneself as a separate entity with needs and a responsibility to meet them, but simply existing in alternating states of need and satisfaction of need. Lacan theorizes that we are all striving to return to the Real because it is our only experience of wholeness. If the New World were “home,” then traveling there should have been a return to a place of safety and security: that imagined space where every physical need could be gratified. This, arguably, is what the early European interlopers sought: a place of quiet repose and a return to a simpler life. But such seeking has implications beyond the pragmatic desire for easily acquired wealth; such seeking should also be examined from a psychoanalytic perspective, for the roots of desire run much deeper than the germ of industry and ambition.

Anne McClintock extends Kolodny's theory by claiming that even more is at stake in the perception of land as woman/mother because, residing happily in the lands being "discovered," were actual Native women who were, to their detriment, essentialized as mother, other, virgin (meaning sexually available), and physical territory. In her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, McClintock notes that, while journeying, Columbus composed a missive saying that the world was not spherical, as was once assumed, but was in fact, "shaped like a woman's breast, with a protuberance upon its summit in the unmistakable shape of a nipple – toward which he was slowly sailing" (21). McClintock sees this as evidence not of the bravery and conquering spirit of a heroic explorer, but as an example of "male anxiety, infantilization, and longing for the female body," which ultimately cast the New World as "a porno-tropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). The naïve missionary Léry, distant from what is recognizable in his place of birth, clearly seeks the familiar in his landscape, and particularly in the people around him. His text is an effort to normalize the foreign world of Brazil by likening what he sees there to his own experience in France; however, in the process, much of Léry's tormented, infantile psyche is exposed in his reactions to the Tupinamba culture, particularly with respect to gender relations.

Léry's first account of the Brazilian natives is a descriptive narration of their nudity. His text goes into minute detail about the Tupi rejection of European



clothing and their nakedness. As a missionary traveling to this new land (which, in Kolodny and McClintock's estimation is a return to paradise and the state of being completely coddled), Léry's framework for the narrative of nudity in paradise was clearly biblical. He sees the Tupis' rejection of clothing as an indisputable sign of their unfallen state of antediluvian innocence. He is not at all threatened by this public nudity, as he desexualizes Tupi relations with one another. He provides a nearly full-page description detailing his first, far-off glimpse of the naked "savages," which is followed by a full chapter-length description in Chapter VIII: "Of the Natural Qualities, Strength, Stature, Nudity, Disposition, and Ornamentation of the Body of the Brazilian Savages, Both Men and Women, Who Live in America and Whom I Frequented for About a Year." Even the title of the chapter belies his Edenic perspective on their nudity with the term "natural qualities" and the implication of beauty and perfection (with the term "nudity" cleverly and discreetly stashed away in the middle).

While the title of the chapter claims to detail both "men and women," the poor missionary proclaims himself bound by propriety and therefore unable to go into the kind of detail that might do the women justice. Instead, he focuses (queerly) on his description of the men; for eight long and gloriously detailed pages, his readers are regaled with the specifics of the Tupinamba man's personal habits, from hair plucking and styling, to jewelry, to tattoos, to penises wrapped in weeds.

Sometimes the descriptions are rounded off with a flourish of sarcasm<sup>11</sup>, but what most marks Léry's descriptions of men are his use of similes to compare them to European men. Their hairstyles are "like the tonsure of a monk; behind in the style of our forefathers... they have it trimmed on the neck" (57)<sup>12</sup>, and they wear "cotton threads... twisted around their necks, as we do over here with gold chains" (59). By contextualizing the habits of his objects of passion, Léry does more than describe them through the use of simile for his readers; he makes sense of their habits. He humanizes them by assuring his reader—and himself – that the Tupinamba are not so different, not so savage as one might think.

Possibly he exerts so much energy on making light of the Tupis' personal habits and humanizing his subjects because he wants to establish that they are

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, in noting the lip piercings of the Tupi men, he describes the slit in the lip wherein a stone is worn and notes that sometimes they take the stone out and stick their tongues through the holes. He avers, "I leave you to judge whether it is pleasant to see them do that, and whether that deforms them or not" (58). He also notes that they wear a band of ostrich feathers that stick outward from their waist, and claims that it looks as if "they were carrying a chicken coop attached to their buttocks" (61). He notes that at times, they cover themselves with a kind of gum and dust their bodies with minced down feathers, and says, "[W]hen you have made him artificially hairy and with this fuzzy down, you can imagine what a fine fellow he is" (64). Quite possibly Léry uses this sarcasm strategically, as a means of thwarting such readings as mine, which interpret an underlying sexual component to his exegesis. He has a thorough-going obsession with the bodily comportment and display of the naked Tupinamba men, from their penetrating tongues, to their asses, to their fuzz-covered, naked, virile, perfect bodies.

<sup>12</sup> In keeping with the ideas expressed earlier, it is furthermore possible that his comparison of their hairstyles to a monk's tonsure is a means of placing them in a homosocial setting of purely male occupancy without the pressure of female attentions or obligations to reproduction and marriage. On the other hand, the comparison to a monk could also be a deliberate and sarcastic alignment of the Savages with the Catholics (the European savages, in Léry's worldview).

capable of being baptized; his efforts to portray them as commensurable with European men could rhetorically position them to his readers as ready for Christianization. On the other hand, he may have found that he inexplicably identifies with the Tupi men or that he simply finds himself drawn to their “natural” way of life or their “virile” bodies. In a deeply rhetorical maneuver, he establishes evidence of the humanity of the “savage” early in the text, well before he recounts the Tupinambas’ engagement in ritualistic cannibalism.

This attempt at humanizing the Tupinamba can be seen as Léry’s effort to normalize his affection for them (in spite of their egregious flesh-eating behaviors), both for his reader and for himself. While he establishes a fetishistic adoration of the male Tupinambas’ physical prowess and unapologetic homosociality, he also privileges the female Tupinambas as superior to European “ladies” and mothers. The early establishment of the commensurability of male Tupi fashion choices (and later on, gender performances) with Europeans’ legitimizes his preferences for this “savage” society. The very real and terrifying account of anthropophagy might be tempered by their otherwise very human peccadilloes.

When Léry thinks of a Tupinamba, it is clear that the image in his mind is a masculine one. Eve Sedgwick’s groundbreaking work, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* establishes male homosocial desire as a significant cultural mainstay in patriarchal thought. Sedgwick establishes “desire” as a “structure” rather than an emotional state (2), thereby ontologically linking it to Freud’s theory of libido, an energetic exchange that constructs social interaction on

the basis of unrecognized – or at the very least unacknowledged – drives. Sedgwick considers the particularly *sexual* nature of the desire structure to be a question that fuels the discussion at hand, sexual interactions being somewhat difficult to quantify objectively.

Indeed, the question of the nature of Léry's desire can be actively and consistently questioned throughout his narrative as he finds himself so compelled by the Tupinamba men and so driven to describe their beautiful physical presences. Is Léry's fixation simply (albeit latently) sexual, or is it more complexly structural, a sort of male desire for the company of other men as a means of establishing what Sedgwick refers to as "men's interests"? Sedgwick claims that among women, there is a continuum between feminist work and lesbianism that is somewhat seamless (3). She refers to the idea of "women-promoting-the-interests-of-women" and "women-loving-women" as somehow congruent social actions existing along the same continuum, predicated somewhat significantly on the social construction of women as passive objects of sexual desire: women work for one another's benefit out of love *and* out of a structurally recognized desire. On the other hand, she notes, when men work for one another's benefit (as in creating legislation that aims to limit economic or social benefits or freedoms for women while securing power for men), there is a disjuncture between men-promoting-the-interests-of-men and men-loving-men.

Nevertheless, Sedgwick posits that the kinds of homosocial bonds among men who promote the interests of men constitute a kind of love for one another, but

more importantly, a love for male privilege and power and a structural desire to maintain that power. The hermeneutic of power itself, in Sedgwick's construction, can be libidinous (attractive in a structurally and possibly sexual way), thereby creating an opportunity for the (perhaps not so divergent) homosocial and homosexual desires to alight closely next to one another and work congruently toward the goal of power consolidation; however, if the two were to perhaps overlap, then the socially-constructed discontinuity between men and women would disappear, meaning the distinction between *desire to work for similar aims* and *desire to be physically and sexually intimate* would somehow dissipate as it seems to do in epistemologies of women's work and desire.

Such a dissipation of the distinction between "loving" and "promoting the interests of" men triggers homophobia because of a cultural epistemology of women as passive sexual recipients and objects and also because of the indefatigable line of signifiers between sex and women. Sedgwick argues that sex "means" many things and there are many "meanings" associated with sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual behaviors, all of which fuel homophobic responses when there is a break in the chain of signifiers (7). The distinction between sexual object and subject relies on this ontological chain, which is necessarily long and tortuous in its intended purpose of maintaining a distinction based on gender; therefore, the chain consists of obvious signifiers (such as biological sex), but also more complex signifiers which are related to physiology only inasmuch as each can ontologically relate to the element before it, such as gender, gender performance, and elements of gender

performance like speech, dress, and one's role in the family (and by extension, the culture).

Thus, because Léry focuses on the strength and virility of the Tupi men and ignores their female counterparts (for, in his account, their physiological attributes become shadow-puppets cast by the movements of the male figures, apparent only as a result of the European cultural "light" Léry casts on them in his exegesis), his affection can be seen as homosocial bonding, a means of "seeing" only the men. If, on the other hand, he "sees" the women too clearly or in too much detail, or if, moreover, he humanizes them to the extent that he does the Tupi man, he jeopardizes his masculinity and forfeits his part in consolidating the power of European masculinity. Obviously, Léry also runs the risk of "seeing" the Tupi women too clearly in that he is a Christian man observing naked women, so he should *at least* pretend not to have noticed or been attracted to their nudity lest he be accused of lechery; in fact, such a faux pas would result in a kind of double jeopardy for poor Léry since he might be accused of noticing/leering at not just women, but women who are both *naked* and *savage*. He, too, is caught up in this chain of signifiers that includes nudity, gender, and sex, and he walks a fine line in his attempt to explain these naked people to sixteenth century European readers.

Thus Léry likens the Tupinamba men to European men in an effort to both make them Christianize-able and to instantiate his masculinity and Christian values; what then can he do with the Tupi woman? If, as in Sedgwick's framework, male power is consolidated through men working for the interests of men, and the work

of a Christian missionary is to consolidate the ultimate male power (a Father God), Léry is confronted with a conundrum: what to do with the women? If he likens them to European men, he creates a serious discontinuity in terms of disrupting the accepted patriarchal power structure. Nonetheless, he cannot liken them to European women, who are already functioning as a constitutive negative defining presence for European men.

Sedgwick outlines the means by which the construct of “lady” plays out vis a vis race and class through the novel *Gone With the Wind*. She notes that:

Belle Watling, the Atlanta prostitute, is a woman not in relation to her own role of “lady,” which is exiguous, but only negatively, in a compensatory and at the same time parodic relation to Melanie’s and Scarlett’s. And as for Mammy, her mind and life, in this view, are totally in thrall to the ideal of the “lady,” but in a relation that excludes herself entirely; she is the template, the support, the enforcement, of Scarlett’s “lady” role, to the degree that her personal femaleness loses any meaning whatever that is not in relation to Scarlett’s role. (9)

Sedgwick establishes that there are limits to the concept of “lady” (and I explore this concept further in my exegesis of Léry’s examination of Tupi women), and she establishes the caricatures of non-ladies in this text as Margaret Mitchell’s attempt to clearly limn Melanie’s “lady-ness.” This “othering” Sedgwick explores in her discussion of race and gender performance obviously works as well, if not more clearly, for sex, gender performance, and power. The “lady” has more social power than the other females flanking her; how would anyone know that she had that power if those other females were not there to perform their lack of power? Sixteenth-century men were similarly positioned in terms of power relations as

displayed through sex and gender performance. Although the Protestant Reformation had ceded access to God for anyone and railed against the notion of intermediaries, women, as “the weaker sex” were still seen as vessels of corruption and served as the “template, the support, the enforcement” of masculinity.

Indeed, European art of the early colonial period demonstrates this desire to know the margins of masculinity. Anne McClintock interrogates the ca. 1575 work of Jan van der Straet entitled *America* as a means of visually portraying the anxieties of masculinity and liminality that surfaced with colonial expansion. McClintock argues that this picture belies the concern over implosion: that without geographical limits imposed, the world became a wide-open unknown space in which the European became miniscule in relation to the rhetorical widening of the globe.

I have already noted that McClintock points out that the writings of Léry’s contemporaries made references to the world as a female body and the explorer became a sort of infant crawling over it, seeking nourishment and protection. In *America*, McClintock notes, Amerigo Vespucci stands before a naked woman (America as a female body) lying in a hammock in a tropical scene (25-27). While the foreground is certainly idyllic, the background contains a scene of horror: two women roast a human leg over an open flame. America is a land of unknown dangers (read: cultures), an unpredictable motherland that in one instance may offer its body readily to any seeker or in a parallel situation, may devour him handily.



It is not a coincidence to McClintock that every player in van der Straet's drawing is female, with the exception of Vespucci himself. This imagery, she posits, belies "a contradictory fear of engulfment" (27) in its sexual implications and notes that the depicted scene "is about a crisis in male imperial identity" (27) and that anxieties about cannibalism were "[confessions of a] dread that the unknown might literally rise up and devour the intruder whole" (27). Thus, the kind of misogyny and anxiety Léry displays is not an individual folly but a cultural perspective that Léry merely shares with other Europeans, and this cultural perspective about the female body was only complicated by the widening reach of the "world" as they knew it.

It is, therefore, when Léry turns to describing the Tupinamba women that his own, (as McClintock would have it) Columbus-like inexorable sail toward the fantasized giant nipple of The New World becomes evident. In comparison to the eight pages he spends in describing the Tupinamba men, he spends a mere two pages in description of the women. The women seem to be an afterthought: a nuance or divergence in excess of the normative man. Again, Léry attempts to make sense of what he encounters, but here is where the blinders of his learned misogyny truly encumber him. It becomes clear that he cannot even make sense of European women (perhaps a first step in understanding the women of another culture), so he deploys the Native women in opposition to them. Rather than mark the ways in which their personal habits are like those of the women of France (as he does with the men of the two different nations), he deploys idyllic images of Native women in

an aggressive move to make a point that the women of Europe are licentious and, indeed, more “savage” than the “savages” he writes about:

While there is ample cause to judge that, beyond the immodesty of it, seeing these women naked would serve as a predictable enticement to concupiscence; yet, to report what was commonly perceived at the time, this crude nakedness in such a woman is much less alluring than one might expect. And I maintain that the elaborate attire, paint, wigs, curled hair, great ruffs, farthingales, robes upon robes, and all the infinity of trifles with which the women and girls over here disguise themselves and of which they never have enough, are beyond comparison the cause of more ills than the ordinary nakedness of the savage women – whose natural beauty is by no means inferior to that of the others. If decorum allowed me to say more, I make bold to say that I could resolve all the objections to the contrary and I would give reasons so evident that no one could deny them. Without going into it further, I defer concerning the little that I have said about this to those who have made the voyage to the land of Brazil, and who, like me, have seen both their women and ours. (67)

How can a Calvinist, a person most knowledgeable about original sin, make sense of the outright refusal of women (even when they are whipped, as they were by order of Villegagnon, the leader of Léry’s expedition) to cover their shame? In fact, their assumed lack of proper shame renders them, in a typological sense, metaphorical prelapsarian Eves, who are even more powerful than the original Eve as evidenced by their refusal to submit to the Christian God’s demands to cover one’s “shame.” Léry perhaps saw these women as evidence of an extant Garden of Eden, a parallel universe where shame was not yet a concern. He does not comment on his opinion of Villegagnon’s choice to whip the Native women; therefore, it is difficult to pin down his feelings or interpretation of the Tupi women. His feelings toward European women, nevertheless, are quite readily evident as his narrative

quickly degrades them into desperate, unnatural failures at the true art of womanhood.

Léry denies any arousal he might have experienced upon seeing the women (and if he were less plagued by “decorum,” he might give more specific denials); instead, he makes vague references intended to titillate the reader, who will presumably never have the opportunity to see a fully naked woman roaming about in public. The great pains he takes to communicate his reticence to discuss the details of female nudity to his reader indicate that he *was* looking and that he *does* know precisely *in what way* the women are beautiful; in fact, this passage may be read as the response of a man who is feigning an adult sexual interest in women but is in actuality a little boy peeking through his mother’s keyhole, too embarrassed to name the parts he saw when giggling about his experience with his pals. This method of communicating by negation (he cannot tell his reader the details that would prove his point, so they must rely on the absence of explanation for an explanation) mirrors another negation: that of the comparison he makes between the Tupi and European women. He does not make outright claims about his sexual experiences with either women, but what he does *not* say fills a tremendous rhetorical void. His own narrative implies that he looked at women on both continents anthropologically (at least). At some moments, his account rather implies a sexual relationship with a Tupi woman, but it stops short of this disclosure either because it did not actually happen or because it would compromise his reputation

as a man of faith on a mission to convert pagans to a godlier lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> He does, incidentally, indict some “Norman interpreters” who had chosen to live among the Tupinamba and “polluted themselves with all sorts of lewd and base behavior among the women and girls,” including fathering a child (128).

Léry cannot condemn this nakedness since he has deployed it as a mechanism to shame European women, so his narrative lacks someone to take the blame for original sin (which is a necessity, even in this topsy-turvy Eden of Brazil); therefore, he casts about for an Eve, and finds many on another continent: Europe. In this way, he is able to establish fault with the European woman, who is unable to fulfill the competing demands of sexual availability and a prudent sense of shame. The Tupinamba women do not exist in his schema for their own sake; unlike the Tupi men, who are really just human (and readily Christianized) after all, the women serve a purpose, and it is not to enlighten the reader about the habits of the Tupinamba woman, but to enlighten his readers about the lascivious, unfeminine habits of the *European* woman.

Léry’s characterization of the Brazilian woman is not limited to her innocent, Edenic nudity. For him, she represents the total woman. The Tupi are perfect wives

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<sup>13</sup> If his resistance to disclose the details of his knowing the “reasons so evident that no one could deny them” is read (or taken at face value) as a confession or admission that Léry never actually had sexual relations with a Tupi woman, it can also be interpreted as evidence of homoerotic desire. He goes into great detail about the physical beauty of the Tupi man, yet he clearly reviles women as a distraction: unclean, and corrupting. While I have chosen to interpret this resistance as an indication of infantilism, it can also be read as a political move on his part to disguise his homoerotic desire and thwart such an interpretation on the part of an interested reader.

and measure up well against European ladies. Compared to the Tupi wife, the French wife, “was ordained of God to be man’s helpmeet and delight, [but] is instead like a familiar demon in his house” (153). Once married, Tupi wives are never adulterous – on pain of death (153); however, they are polygamous (or as Léry sees it, many wives service one husband), and Léry imagines that Europeans could never handle such an arrangement due to fundamental faults of European women as contrasted with Tupinamba women. As far as the idea of a European man taking more than one wife, Léry avers that it would be “[b]etter to send a man to the galleys than to put him in the midst of such a tumult and uproar as undoubtedly there would be” (152).

There are many homosocial implications in this presentation of marital life. On the one hand, Léry seems to shun the company of women in favor of men. Women are an evil force in a house, which would be, presumably, perfectly heavenly in their absence, and European women are a profound burden to disappointed, beleaguered men, whom God promised to give a happy servant and helpmeet. While Léry assumes that men are better off without them, at the same time he makes a claim about the viability of polygamy in Brazil, therefore not foreclosing the possibility of such an arrangement being workable if the women are docile enough. (Interestingly enough, what is notably missing in Léry’s analysis is an understanding of the Tupi woman’s homosocial sphere, which includes a community of wives with whom to share the burdens of childcare, work, and marriage. He can only conceive of what the implications would be for a husband.)

Adult relations notwithstanding, it is the minute and revelatory detail of Tupi motherhood that most engages Léry's imagination. Kolody notes that "at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (6). Kolodny notes that much early imagery of the land was figured as maternal, but Léry's maternal space moves beyond geographical; it is also a corporeal reality, manifested in the perfect Tupi woman. Inasmuch as they are women, they are mothers. He spends as much textual space on the birth and care of infants (two pages) as he does in describing the physical appearance of the women. He is most interested in the Tupi woman's ability to produce endlessly while never exhibiting her own needs:

The mother stays in bed only a day or two [after giving birth], and then takes her baby, suspended from her neck in a cotton scarf made for the purpose, and goes off to the garden or to her other tasks. This is not to disparage the customs of the ladies over here, who, on account of our bad air, stay in bed for two or three weeks, and are for the most part so delicate that, although they have no illness that would prevent them from nurturing their infants as the American women do, as soon as they are delivered of them they are inhuman enough to send them away; so that if the children do not die without their mothers' knowing anything about it, in any case they must be partly grown and old enough to provide some pastime before their mothers will endure their presence. Now if some dainty ladies here who think I do them wrong in comparing them to these savage women, whose rural fashioning (they will say) has nothing to do with their own tender and delicate bodies, I am content, so as to sweeten this bitter pill, to send them to school to the brute beasts, which, even down to the smallest birds, will teach them this lesson: that it is up to each species to take care – indeed, to be at pains – to raise its progeny itself. (154-5)

Léry's description renders the Tupi woman as prelapsarian Eve. She is not yet tempted into sin and has no sense of shame about her body, and she does not experience Eve's postlapsarian condition of "suffering" childbirth and reproduction, which come after the Fall. The women are able to give birth and be back at work after only a matter of days, which indicates that childbirth takes less of a toll on their bodies than a common cold might. So while Léry does refer to the physical reality of childbirth (the physically painful curse of Eve), the Tupinamba woman's childbirth experience seems almost as painless as the magical and effortless appearance of new creatures in the Garden of Eden at the hand of a gentle and benevolent God.

His approval of the Tupinamba version of motherhood reveals that he cannot express respect for the Tupi mother without somehow denigrating the European (and, by extension, his own) mother, who is no better than the "brute beasts." His attempt to acknowledge the potential frailty of European women (wherein he displays his sarcasm: "This is not to disparage..." after which he certainly does disparage them) is immediately undercut by a reference to their cruelty before the sentence ends. He refers to bad air and calls them "so delicate," but five words do not elapse before his tone changes and he claims that they have no illness at all. What's more, he finishes by calling European mothers inhuman! This description further points to Léry's inability to interpret (or perhaps even see) a culture in which mothering centers on the collective work of women who support each other and seem to share domestic work with other wives. In contrast, his contemporary European women existed within a system that offered little support for a new

mother and few opportunities for division of labor. Léry's European women could either work ("garden") or care for their children, but there was little flexibility for these two types of labor to overlap. Furthermore, he does not take into consideration the sixteenth century stigma associated with breastfeeding for the upper class woman, whose body loses something more than milk (something more socially significant, namely, her status as a dignified and pure lady) in the sullyng act of breastfeeding.

The Tupi woman, in contrast, is long-suffering and silent. We hear nothing of her emotional bond to the child, and we see nothing more than her actions and Léry's assumption of what the child must experience, which is boundless love and an endless supply of resources: labor, breastmilk, energy. We can assume that this silent Tupi mother Léry describes (in contrast to his research on Tupi warriors, there is no extant interview with a mother in Léry's text) is simply the source of everything one needs to survive. Here again, it is relevant to view Léry's book through the lens of Kolodny's work, which indicates that the letters composed by Pilgrims depicted the land itself as maternal: there are references to nature's "womb" and "her" ability to provide a "super abounding plenty" for "her children," the colonists (14-15). Léry accomplishes an even greater feat than finding a metaphorical mother in the lands of the New World; he finds a tribe of corporeal mothers skilled in selfless giving, their bodies the site of consumption via the production of breastmilk and endless labor.



Interestingly enough, in all of Léry's time living among the Tupinamba, he never has occasion to see the women menstruate (presumably, a difficult act to hide among people who are fabled to wear no clothing), and he feels a need to disclose the fact that he did not observe it:

[D]uring the space of about a year that we lived in that country and spent time in their company, we never saw in the women any signs of their monthly flux. I am of the opinion that they divert that flow, and have another way of purging themselves than that of the women over here.... Physicians or others more learned than I in such matters may reply, "How can you reconcile this with what you said earlier, that when they are married they are very fertile, seeing that when women cease to have their monthly flow they cannot conceive?" If one asserts that these things are contradictory, I reply that my intention is neither to resolve this question, nor to say any more about it. (157)

Here is another example of Léry's habit of communicating by negation. Not only does he write about something he did not see as proof of its occurrence, but also his refusal to discuss it indicates a second level of negation: the act of refusing to talk about the mystery of what he reports serves as a means of underscoring its truth. Surely, he did look at these women, and surely, he has some idea of how they handled their "flux." If he truly did not observe it at the time, he must not have had much interest in how the women were managing their daily lives, again indicating a biased interest in the goings-on of the male social circle and a complete lack of authority as to their actual existences and, therefore the existences of their children. As adamant as Léry is in his disavowal of the Tupinamba women's naturally occurring cycles, he is perhaps more (childishly) stubborn in his refusal to examine the matter, which he clearly finds too horrifying to explore.

Feminist theorist Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject is an apt means of understanding Léry's horror from a psychoanalytic perspective. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which we abreact (reject) or are horrified by, specifically bodily waste. One reason we abreact something is because the rejection serves as a means of defining ourselves. We know what we are – we recognize ourselves as an independent "I" – because we recognize what is expelled from our realm (our bodily space) as other, as abject. In addition, Kristeva posits that as infants, we abreact the mother when we differentiate and begin to develop language, and this is what "fashions the human being" (13). In developing awareness of our own bodies and our own selves, we reject the self that we once thought we were only a part of (the mother) in favor of a whole self (us); nevertheless, we never lose our sense of anxiety about permeability or non-wholeness; therefore, we are always abreacting the not-I as a means of defining the I. To this end, before we can see ourselves like others, we must see ourselves as distinct and separate from others.

Léry's experience with menstrual blood works beautifully as an example of the abject because, in addition to being a monthly reminder (for Léry's audience) of Eve's original sin, it is also what is expelled from the body; more specifically, it is expelled from the body of the woman, who, in the role of Mother (who must menstruate in order to become Mother), is herself abreacted (made abject) by her child (and this includes both real or imagined mother-child relationships, but more on imagined mother-child relationships later). The menstruation of the European woman makes her triply abject: first, she is associated with abject materials; then

she is abreacted, othered, in relation to the Tupinamba woman; and finally, she is abreacted as the (substandard) mother, only to be replaced by a Tupinamba woman. The perfect Tupi mother would never be so base as to menstruate. It is Léry's abject European woman who has the indecency to menstruate, to not find some other way to "divert that flow and have another way of purging [herself]."

Here it is relevant to consider the role of performance in Léry's account of women as properly feminine or even human. In Judith Butler's germinal work *Gender Trouble*, Butler avers:

"[P]ersons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.... Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (22-3)

To this end, she claims that not properly engaging in a recognizable and acceptable gender role jeopardizes one's standing as a discursively recognized human; thus a need to constantly perform and replicate one's gender is generated so that one is able to maintain one's position. Nevertheless, the performance of perfect femininity (as conceived by Léry and Léry's readership) is impossible in that it requires both an embrace of and a negation of the physical realities of womanhood. While menstruation and childbirth are critical components of making a human physically identifiable as female, they are also horrifying and disgusting to Léry. He imagines that the Tupi women manage to perform femininity in a way that conceals their physiology, thereby making their performance superior to the European

performance of femininity. This ability to do away with the nasty symptoms of sex while performing gender splendidly (as a mother) privileges the Tupinamba woman as a *better woman*, a woman heretofore considered “savage” who now serves to limn the boundaries of the European woman’s identity and call the veracity of her feminine performance into question. In a rhetorical sleight of hand, Léry employs the sub-human “savage” as an exemplar that renders the women of his own culture – his readership – as unfathomably animalistic.

The perfect Tupi Mother is always creating, always abundant, and always servicing her children (in other words, always performing); nevertheless, Léry knows that a woman cannot be simultaneously pregnant (the embodiment of motherhood) and menstruating. He also admits that menstruation is a necessary pre-condition of a woman’s ability to be fertile. He deals with this inconsistency by sharing an anecdote about twelve year-old girls being ritually inscribed in puberty rites. Their mothers make long incisions on the girls, who then bleed profusely and stand stoically bearing the pain (156-7). Léry does not wonder what the ritual means, nor does he feel any compassion for the children being cut; instead, he makes a naïve assumption that a woman goes from being premenstrual (a child) to being parous (a mother) instantly in the course of this ritual; he makes sense of the ritual by assuming that it somehow is responsible for “divert[ing] their flow.” Is this tribal rite of bodily inscription therefore more expedient and to be recommended to the women of Europe whose “flows” surely impede many of their conjugal and domestic responsibilities? The childlike Léry sums up his argument with a refusal to

look further into the situation at hand. Seeing is believing, he seems to say, and not seeing is even better.

For the most part, Léry eradicates what he cannot make sense of in his text, or he recontextualizes it in a way that will make sense or serve as a lesson to the Tupi women's European counterparts. His reading of most situations is interestingly gendered, is quite often didactic for his European readers, and is remarkably typical as a colonial text in its deployment of tropes depicting a feminized land and people. Léry's contemporary European newcomers abhorred and fetishized the idea of cannibalism, and their concerns about falling prey to ritualistic consumption surfaced frequently in their writings. What makes Léry different from, for instance, Hans Staaden, a German explorer from Hesse, who ventured to the Americas around the same time period as Léry, and who also felt he came close to being eaten by savages in the New World, is that Léry is intent on interpreting the meaning behind such rituals and imposing Native ceremonies onto European meanings in order to help his reader – and himself, perhaps – understand the Native culture and use it as a means of cultural education and growth for his own community. Not surprisingly, since he early on establishes an interest in gender relations in Europe and Brazil, Léry's understanding of Tupi anthropophagy is particularly revealing as a deeply gendered cultural exegesis.

Frank Lestringant writes about Léry's travelogue in his book *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne*. He notes that Léry is able to make sense of Tupinamba cannibalism because it is done as a

means of revenge: they eat members of other tribes because the other tribes have eaten members of their tribe (69). It is both a means of revenge and a means of reincorporating lost members: as a part of the anthropophagic ritual, the victim claims that he has eaten the kin of the people about to kill and eat him (Léry 123).

Lestringant posits that Léry makes sense of Tupinamba cannibalism in three ways. First, Léry makes an allegory of cannibalism in reference to the “usurers,” who metaphorically “[eat] everyone alive – widows, orphans, and other poor people, whose throats it would be better to cut once and for all, than to make them linger in misery” (132). Second, Léry compares Tupinamba cannibalism to the acts of actual cannibalism occurring during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre when besieged townspeople ate the dead bodies of their neighbors in order to survive or ate the hearts of their enemies for vengeance. Because these latter situations exist outside the bounds of normal social relations, Léry makes sense of Tupi cannibalism by contrasting the cannibalistic events in France with the ordered, methodical, ritualized, regulated, and vengeance-based cannibalism that is a part of the social fabric of the Tupinamba culture. Lestringant claims that by making these analogies to metaphorical cannibalism and cannibalism that occurs in chaotic situations such as mass riots and starvation, Léry makes the anthropophagy of the Tupinamba understandable (69). This makes sense, as Léry was certainly haunted by the literal threat of cannibalism, both in his life at home and in the immediate danger among the Tupinamba in Brazil; moreover, as I argue in Chapter Three, the meaning and interpretation of the Eucharist were primary discussions in Europe at the time Léry

traveled to the New World, and Léry even referred to the Catholic exegesis of the Eucharist as cannibalistic in his own writings (41).

While Léry may work to make sense of the acts of anthropophagy he witnesses abroad, there remains an element of the ritual he cannot assimilate: the role of what he considers “old” women. Up to the moment of the slaying, women are invisible in the account. It is only after the prisoner is dead that women emerge in Léry’s account:

Now as soon as the prisoner has been thus slain, if he had a wife... she will perform some slight mourning beside the body ... and [after she has] shed a few feigned tears over her dead husband, she will, if she can, be the first to eat of him. Then the other women, and chiefly the old ones (who, more covetous of eating human flesh than the young ones, incessantly importune all those who have prisoners to dispatch them quickly), come forward with hot water that they have ready, and scald and rub the dead body to remove its outer skin, and blanch it...Now after all the pieces of the body, including the guts, have been thoroughly cleaned, they are immediately put on the *boucans*. While it all cooks according to their style, the old women (who, as I have said, have an amazing appetite for human flesh) are all assembled beside it to receive the fat that drips off along the posts of the big, high wooden grills, and exhort the men to do what it takes to provide them always with such meat. Licking their fingers, they say, ‘Yguatou’: that is, ‘It is good.’... Not, however (as far as one can judge) that [the Tupinamba people] regard this as nourishment; for although all of them confess human flesh to be wonderfully good and delicate, nonetheless it is more out of vengeance than for the taste (except for what I have said specifically concerning the old women, who find it such a delicacy). (126-7)

Léry does not refer much to women’s roles in the ceremony other than that they will prepare the prisoner for cooking and that the old women have enormous appetites for human flesh. While it is clear that all of the women do the labor of preparing the body for consumption, Léry’s focus is “chiefly the old ones.” He seems to dismiss the wife’s “feigned” sadness in a sentence or two, but he insists on coming

back to the lascivious old women slaving at the posts of the *boucans*. Three times he mentions them in this account, and, interestingly enough, each time he does so, there is some parenthetical expression accompanying it containing an obsessive reference about their extraordinary appetites: “more covetous of eating human flesh,” “have an amazing appetite for human flesh,” “find it such a delicacy.” Why is Léry so focused on the excessiveness of the appetites of these old women?

Frank Lestringant points out that Léry was an avid supporter of witch hunting after he returned from Brazil, and he claimed that the women on both continents were possessed by the same devil (70). Léry’s old women are depicted as witches in a European folk tale, clamoring for the flesh of young, nubile bodies. In fact, Lestringant points out, Léry was “haunted by cannibalism throughout his life, and the theme haunts his writings” (74). Léry wrote about a case of anthropophagy in France during the time of the Siege of Sancerre, when people were starving to death. In his rendering, a married couple eats their dead daughter because an old woman tempted them to do so. Léry blames the old woman and likens the tale to another, similar story he knows about an old woman who was condemned as a witch for doing the same thing during the Hundred Years War (74-5). Léry supported the charge of witchcraft for both of these women.

Lestringant wonders at Léry’s distinction between the anthropophagy of Brazil and the anthropophagy of Sancerre. He proposes that it is a matter of the role women play. Lestringant claims that Léry sanctions the cannibalism of Brazil because there, “the economy of vengeance cannibalism seemed to be essentially



masculine... Women had only walk-on parts” (77), whereas in Sancerre women instigated the act. He indicates that the cannibalism of Brazil is “raised... to the symbolic level” (78), while the cannibalism of Sancerre, in the hands of women, troubles Léry because it is a product of “the flesh and purely animal appetites” (78). This is an interesting and engaging point in that Léry does seem to be quite concerned about the appetitive specter of cannibalism and women’s relationship to it. I would posit, however, that, in addition to examining societal roles of women, it is also important to examine the role Léry plays as a colonial male with a phallogocentric perspective encountering a female other. For this, a return to McClintock’s thinking is useful.

McClintock claims that depictions of flesh-eating women reveal “male anxiety and paranoia” and a “recurrent doubling in male imperial discourse. This may be seen as the simultaneous dread of catastrophic boundary *loss* (implosion), associated with fears of impotence and infantilization and attended by an *excess* of boundary order and fantasies of unlimited power” (26). When Léry sees the Brazilian women, he sees a perfect mother, whose body conflates with this new homeland, and cathects his fantasy of infantilization onto them; of course, if he is an infant, then there is no boundary between him and this (m)other(land), and this renders him impotent. In a state of impotence, how will he defend himself against further incorporation? His wish is to have a mother that he can finally conquer, who will remain always what he fantasizes about, a source of abundance and plenty, but

what he is faced with is the converse side of the producing mother: the consuming mother.

It is important to remember here that the women Léry perceives in the earlier part of his account as mother material are, quite simply, not. The women he extols as perfect mothers are women of childbearing age, which is his age. They are his peers, potential sexual partners, not mothers of full-grown men. It is the women who actually *could* be Léry's mother that cause him such distress because, unlike the perfect, always pregnant, always nursing, always laboring mothers – so closely watched by Léry that he can even recount the manner in which they wipe the feces from their babies' "behinds" (with a small stick) (155) – these aged mothers are *not always producing, but are in fact consuming*. It is this appetite that horrifies him.

While Lestringant sees Léry's horror as a response to European women's participation in anthropophagy and a disregard for the "walk on roles" of Brazilian women, there is in fact textual evidence for his obsessive concern for the Brazilian crones' appetites. These consuming women horrify him. Like the European witches he readily condemned, these women are post-parous (beyond childbearing age) and therefore extraneous to the reproductive economy. Because they have nothing to contribute in terms of sexuality or reproduction, their appetites are excessive: they take without giving, and they consume without producing. Léry wants to be the only one to consume; therefore, it is the cannibalism committed by men that makes sense while the cannibalism enacted by women remains inscrutable and offensive.

Moreover, Léry's resistance to ascribing normal human emotions of grief and loss to these mothers, who have likely lost many children during intertribal and anti-imperialist battles, is indicative of his desire to maintain them in a sham performative state, shedding "feigned tears" and "slight mourning" rather than engaging in recognizable and understandable efforts to incorporate (on a literal and emotional level) their loss. In a cannibalistic economy in which people eat members of enemy tribes in an effort to gain the enemy's strength and personal essence, eating someone who has ingested (or incorporated) a loved one allows the consumer to regain access to the lost loved one, even if it's only in a secondary way.

Here again the question of performance surfaces. The ritualistic enactment of hunger for flesh might be read as a significant cultural performance and indeed, possibly even the most authentic performance of femininity, for who more than a mother hungers for lost children?

In Kolodny's paradigm, in which explorers see the New World as virgin territory (11), the conflation of the virgin-mother trope generates "incestuous violation" (15): she references the letters of early explorers, in which they complain of "raped and ravaged maternal landscapes" (18). McClintock takes issue with the notion of "virgin territory" as well: "Within patriarchal narratives, to be virgin is to be empty of desire and void of sexual agency" (30). The slaving old women licking their fingers at the poles of the *boucans* are anything but void of agency. As McClintock notes, colonial narratives often "implicitly represent female sexuality as cannibalistic" (27). McClintock's and Kolodny's theories must be wedded in order to

gain an understanding of Léry's crisis. He wants a virginal (read: empty of desire) mother, more than a metaphorical one to be found in the land, a corporeal woman who has no appetites of her own, who is forever productive in the service of her child (the phallogocentric interloper). Initially, the women seem to fit within his paradigm, but ultimately the chimera collapses under the performed weight of the appetites of these real mothers.

Kolodny indicates that many pilgrims wrote letters back to Europe in which they took issue with the smothering maternal landscape of the Americas because of the slothfulness that ensued in "her" inhabitants; in other words, their fellow immigrants were not carrying their share of the burden to make paradise bear fruit (15). She notes, "Clearly, where the land is most overpoweringly maternal... regression will be complete," (17) and therefore the explorers will find that they have no reason to do anything for themselves, but can simply rely solely on the land (the mother) to care for them. So Léry finds the mother he has been traveling toward, the perfect woman, only to find that, once he regresses completely, she will turn into a devouring hag. As McClintock wisely puts it, "In this way, the augural scene of discovery becomes a scene of ambivalence, suspended between an imperial megalomania, with its fantasy of unstoppable rapine – and a contradictory fear of engulfment, with its fantasy of dismemberment and emasculation... [I]t is ... a crisis in male imperial identity" and a fantasy of "dismemberment and emasculation" (26-7). For proper European ladies, all appetites (for food, for sex, for freedom, for power) are verboten and perceived as voracity or concupiscence. The carnivoracity

of Brazilian women ultimately becomes consolidated in accounts of the New World. Eating (human flesh) becomes conflated with sex and social power and it is that power that so unmans Léry. The cannibal spectacle is merely a gesture that unfurls his deeper anxieties about gender, the power of the maternal, and the place of Civilized Man in a rapidly widening and fragmenting world.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly enough, in the edition of *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* to which I refer in this chapter, the section depicting the involvement of Tupi women in the slaying and consumption of the prisoner is accompanied by an illustration of the scene Léry describes. In the picture, men stand around a bound prisoner, carrying weapons and shouting at him. In the lower left corner of the frame, a woman sits on her knees, her arms folded across her breasts, her head bent slightly, while a man lies in her lap, seemingly unconscious (124). No action such as this is explained in Léry's text. What role does this woman fulfill, sitting on the ground, and what man could possibly fall asleep in her lap in the throes of such violence and carnage? The executioner stands in front of this odd pair, wielding the weapon over his head, poised to strike the prisoner dead. Is this picture the ultimate fulfillment of Léry's fantasy? Is it he, lying unconscious in her warm and nubile lap, in a ceremony that is not plagued by unassimilable old women with passionate appetites? In the face of a dreadful reality, does he conjure a Tupi woman who

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<sup>14</sup> It is ironic that the goal of missionaries and explorers of the New World was a goal of unification, a goal of bringing all the people of the world into one embrace in the service of a Christian god and a European economy in need of novelties to trade, yet the experience of these wide-eyed innocents consistently reflects a sense of fragmentation, difference, and anxiety, particularly anxiety about being devoured.

models the appropriate shame, covering her milky breasts and sheltering her regressed man from the scene of dismemberment and emasculation? (His genitalia remain hidden from view behind his bent knee.) Is it possible that the Tupi resist a typological reading that can be understood in Léry's familiar Biblical ideology of Paradise? Or are they his Adam and Eve, the only attendants to the party with enough sense to cover their shame? Are they his Mary and Jesus, the selfless, passionless Virgin Mother cradling her child and the progenitor of the species of missionaries come to civilize the savages? Or, after his ten-month stay (gestation?) with the Tupinambas, does petit Jean fantasize that he has finally come home to his Motherland?

## Chapter Three

### Anthropographic Apostates, *Menchfresser-Leuthen*, and the Looming

#### Specter of the Eucharist:

#### Cannibalistic Rites as Protofeminist Performative Aggression in Hans Staden's

#### *True History*

In 1557, Hans Staden, a common gunner working as a mercenary for the Portuguese colonial interests in Brazil, published his story of captivity with the cannibalistic Tupinamba tribe of Brazil, which occurred around 1549. His story includes an account of being prepared as a sacrifice for a cannibalistic rite as well as a detailed gruesome account of a terrifying cannibalistic ritual he observed, a ritual in which the women of the tribe took significant leadership roles. He titled his account *Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landtschafft der wilden, nacketen, grimmigen, Menschfresser Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelege*<sup>15</sup>. Staden's title serves to propagate a certain understanding of the Tupinamba people that paved the way for future colonial and missionary endeavors in the region: an understanding of the Tupinamba as animalistic and godless, in addition to being inverted in terms of proper Early Modern gender relations. His focus on gender relations and the role of women in the cannibalistic rite is intriguing as it is a key to

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<sup>15</sup> The most widely read English translation of Staden's book is by Neil Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier, and their translation of the title is *The True History and Description of a Country Populated by a Wild, Naked, and Savage Man-munching People, Situated in the New World, America*. More on this translation later.

understanding –primarily – Staden’s worldview, which was greatly predicated on gender relations and the ways in which gender relations shaped understandings of religiosity, godliness, and humanism (as opposed to animalism); moreover, the text can be used to gain insight into the performance enacted by the Tupinamba (particularly the women) within the ritual, including their ability to fine-tune the ritual for an intended audience thereby enacting a proto-feminist stance that bolstered their sense of culture and identity.

Staden’s text addresses gender role ideology in Tupinamba culture; it also illustrates his discomfort with the power women seem to garner in ritual practices. I argue here that Staden’s experience is both a byproduct of Reformation thinking and a byproduct of careful research into European proclivities on the part of Tupi women; furthermore, I argue that these women were deeply aware of European cultural values, if not the nuances of the paradigmatic shifts afoot in the Protestant Reformation. To that end, the Tupi women altered their ritual performances as a means of engaging Staden’s interest and making their culture legible to him. In order to gain a full understanding of the intent behind the Tupinamba women’s ritual performances, it is important to first examine the interpretation of their performance found in Staden’s text (and this takes some decoding, as the text has been translated from Reformation-era German to twenty-first century English, which implies both connotative and denotative shifts in meaning).

Furthermore, in order to understand Staden’s text, it is imperative to understand Staden’s worldview; to do that, one must fully explore the prevailing



ideology of the time. All of this is to say that while this chapter may not spend time on each page in obviously copious reflection of gender or the corporeal body, it does so indirectly through the dismantling of the imbrication of Early Modern European religious ideology, colonial expansion, and Humanism in order to reveal a complex coalescence of forces culminating in gender inequity and anxiety about the female appetite and the vulnerable male body. All of this is best understood through a thorough analysis of Early Modern European history, linguistics, theology, and twenty-first century performance theory.

But first, a brief summary: Staden's *True History* is the presumably true account of his capture by the Tupinamba tribe in Brazil during his time as a mercenary gunner working for the Portuguese military, avowed enemies of the Tupinamba people. The Portuguese were working diligently at the time to colonize all of Brazil via force and persuasion in the form of religious proselytizing. Staden is taken captive, consigned to live among the women for ten months, and integrated as a member of the tribe in preparation for being ritualistically slain and eaten. The intent of the ritual was to transform the prisoner into a member of the tribe before consuming him. Frank Lestringant sees this kind of ritual cannibalism as a means of reintegrating members previously lost through the same method at the hands of enemy tribes. Staden's book interests me because of his portrayal of Tupinamba women's culture. He lives among the women as a kind of pseudo-woman or pseudo-child, working alongside them and observing their practices, and finds himself particularly horrified by their aggressive actions; in fact, he is arguably more

horrified by their part in the cannibal rituals than he is by the part of the Tupi men. Therefore, his text can be read as an indictment of non-normative femininity as much as a harrowing travel narrative, but most importantly for my work, evidence of proto-feminist aggression against enforced normativity and femininity is apparent in his account of the women's actions.

It is imperative to first understand Staden's intent in publishing his text in order to properly contextualize the actions of the Tupi enumerated therein, for Staden's text has been studied widely as a quintessential example of contemporary European contact narratives – be it captivity narrative or artless travel narrative of the New World – of the early modern era.<sup>16</sup> These texts were in wide circulation at the time, as interest in the New World was high. Interest in this New World, however, was more than simple curiosity. These early accounts were also a means of generating discourse about what constituted refined or progressed, Christian, nay *proper human* behavior, so cannibalism was a primary concern for these writers. While anthropophagy may have been a perfect foil in Reformation Europe for many social conundrums because it could unite seemingly disparate communities (Protestant and Catholic) against a common enemy/other, it was used to further divide these same communities through unflattering comparisons between

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<sup>16</sup> Staden's work is one of many published at that time in Europe, including the letters of Nicolas Durand Villegagnon (the leader of an expedition in 1555 of French Huguenots and Protestant missionaries attempting to flee Catholic persecution in Europe); *Singularities of France Antarctique* (1557), an account of cannibalistic Brazilian tribes by Villegagnon's contemporary and supporter, André Thévet; and Jean de Léry's *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* (1578).

Europeans and the Natives, a technique clearly employed by some explorers of the time.<sup>17</sup>

Early Modern narratives describing journeys to the New World were primarily propagandistic as opposed to what readers of our era would consider scientific or ethnographic (though the writers often disclaimed any intentional sensationalism). André Thévet's text (see footnote 16), for instance, has been widely discredited for its sensationalism and hysteria; it was written primarily for entertainment. In a market ripe for such stories but not without competition, Staden's evocative title was, therefore, a marketing strategy. His title indicates an attempt to sell a perception of Tupi culture that would pique the interest of his Reformation-era European readers. To this end, any comprehensive analysis of this work should begin with the title, *Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landschafft der wilden, nacketen, grimmigen, Menschfresser Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelege*, translated thus in the most commonly-used English language edition, published by Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier: *The True History and Description of a Country Populated by a Wild, Naked, and Savage Munching People, Situated in the New World, America*. This title served as the primary marketing force to Staden's contemporaries, and Whitehead and

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<sup>17</sup> Jean de Léry ends his ethnographic account of his captivity in Brazil with a wider application of cannibalism as a metaphor for, among other social ills, usury and political tyranny in Early Modern Europe, in fact claiming that the cannibals of South America were more noble than those metaphorical cannibals of Europe because they cannibalized with cultural and spiritual meaning rather than out of personal gain.

Harbsmeier's translation should be taken at face value; however, the two titles do not match up in terms of clearly communicating Staden's intent. To wit: there are significant problems with this English translation that must be surmounted if an English reader is to fully grasp the intention behind Staden's text.

Before any thorough examination of Staden's *Warhaftige* can be accomplished, the descriptive and lengthy title must first be carefully examined in its native German for a complete understanding of Staden's perspective in conveying his experience with the Tupi and the implications of such a title for Staden's contemporary readers. Words like *wilden* and *nacketen* gain an English-speaking scholar's recognition immediately as cognates to our words *wild* and *naked*. *Grimmigen* is somewhat discernible in its likeness to *grim*, which we associate with death and fearsomeness; indeed, it translates most readily as *ferocious* not *savage*, as it is translated in the English version of the text. *Mensch* is somewhat common knowledge, thanks to American popular culture's occasional integration of Yiddish, but in German, the meaning is somewhat different, meaning only *man* (or in a more modern sense with an awareness to gender, *person*).

However, after reading this list of somewhat recognizable cognates comes the term *fresser*. Whitehead and Harbsmeier translate *menschfresser* as *man-munching*, an odd choice. The German infinitive verb *essen* translates to the English equivalent of *to eat*, as people sitting down civilly at table so often do. The choice of *munching*, however, is inadequate in that Germans have a relatively exact translation for the innocuous act of English munching: *mamfen*. *Essen* is the German

infinitive meaning *to dine* (as polite, civilized adults), and *mamfen* is the German infinitive meaning *to munch* (an informal term used colloquially); *fressen*, then remains curiously translated. *Fressen*, unlike *to dine* or *to munch* – these civilized terms we toss around casually in reference to the shared joyous experience of eating – means to tear apart or to eat gluttonously or viciously, as an animal; it might better be translated as *gobble* or *guzzle*.

Here, a scholar should consider both Staden's intention in writing his book and his experience leading to his act of authorship. Diana Taylor notes in her landmark book *The Archive and The Repertoire*: "Performances may not... give us access and insight into another culture, but they certainly tell us a great deal about our desire for access, and reflect the politics of our interpretations" (6). Staden witnessed the performance of ritual anthropophagy while he was in Brazil, and wrote his account of the performance he witnessed. Since then, Staden's account has been widely read and studied, first as ethnography, and later as an insight into Early Modern German culture. It has provided a means of understanding European colonial perspectives of the time.

If, however, the rituals themselves are reexamined as texts – performed, living texts that are, admittedly, filtered through a sixteenth-century Western gaze, but remain nonetheless the limited extent of evidence we have about Tupi life – and are viewed through a lens of current performance theory (that is, understood as a performance for an audience, more specifically, an outsider), we can gain a richer analysis of not only Tupi and European cultures but also of the process of

transculturation, defined by Diana Taylor as “the transformative process undergone by all societies as they come in contact with and acquire foreign cultural material, whether willingly or unwillingly.” Taylor further notes, “Transculturation has been going on forever. But the cross-cultural discussion remains as strained as ever” (10). Therefore, Staden’s text must be read as two texts: Staden’s account of transculturation and the Tupis’ account of transculturation, as conveyed to Staden.<sup>18</sup> (This examination of transculturation will be explored fully later, but it bears mentioning here as well.) It can be assumed that vast portions of the Tupis’ account were effaced via Staden’s anxieties and cultural biases (not to mention subtle nuances forever lost to Staden’s lack of education, personal bias, and other individualized peccadilloes), but to truly engage in a thorough study of transculturation, both texts must be fully ransacked in the interrogation, and, to begin, we must gain clear insight into the meaning of Staden’s title in its original German.

To translate *menschfresser Leuthen* as *man-munching people* is a puzzling choice in that the English-speaking scholar who does not look beyond the translated

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is important to note here that there is also possibly a third text at hand, which is the text of our own current cultural epistemology and need for access to other cultures as a means of generating a successful ontology of our own. In other words, it could be argued that a deep-seated need to confirm the predominance of our own cultural paradigms is what leads us to examine Staden’s examination of Tupinamba culture. To wit: my readers’ postmodern sensibility, predicated on multiculturalism and cultural relativism – with a considerable investment in postcolonial thought and praxis – may indeed be worthy of examination as well (though it would be beyond the scope of this essay). Indeed, my performance of Staden’s inability to understand the Tupi may shore up a postmodern reader’s sense of cultural superiority at Staden’s expense.

title remains in the dark about the full implications of Staden's title. An English-speaking reader will understand that the text is about cannibalism, but this translation elides the significant horror the original implies. Perhaps the editors intended to offset the innocuous nature of *munching* with the insertion of *savage* where *grimmigen* (meaning furious) was. Perhaps the intention was that *savage* should convey what *fressen* cannot to the English-speaking reader, and that *grimmigen* is irrelevant. It is an interesting assumption about the twenty-first century reader that we associate the term *savage* with cannibalism (for clearly that was not the understanding of the term in the Early Modern Era, as I discuss below); that *man-munching* somehow conveys a nonchalance about the act of consuming human flesh; and that Staden's interpretation of the fury and hostility of the Tupinamba is lost in half a century of transculturation – cultural transformation and change as a result of intercultural interaction. But, as Diana Taylor avers, "the cross-cultural discussion remains as strained as ever." (And perhaps, in this case, one might add that the more cultures to cross, and the longer the centuries of discussion draw on, the more strained the discussion, in fact, becomes.)

Nevertheless, it is the question of the use of *fressen* and *grimmigen* that this discussion inquires into most vociferously, for Staden uses these terms as a marketing tool, a means of doing more than conveying his experience: these words sell his experience to his readership, and with the sale of his book, they sell an image of the Tupinamba and lay the groundwork for a future understanding of a people henceforth dubbed angry and animalistic. Susan Karant-Nunn's book *The*

*Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* underscores the profound effort Reformation thinkers (both religious and secular) made to propagate the “attitude that all that was animal must be ‘harnessed,’ and human beings [were] compelled to separate themselves more fully from the exterior, lower world of nature” (37). Karant-Nunn further implicates a deep concern for containment and moderation of the body as central tenets to Reformation thinking (42).

This need to separate the human body (through containment and control) from the animal world is clearly a result of Renaissance thinking and the emergence of Humanism as a philosophical perspective; nevertheless, the rhetorical imbrication of Humanist and Reformation values harbored a shadowy subtext of differentiation and establishment of hierarchies and was ultimately not immune to manipulation for social or personal gain. According to historian Lewis Spitz, sixteenth century Germany had a fairly broad reading public, so Luther’s doctrine presupposes an educated populace that could engage the holy text independently (without the help of clerical interpreters) in order to gain a greater relationship to God (92). Hans Staden’s decision to refer to the Tupinamba style of eating as *fressen* rather than *essen* is an example of clever wordplay deployed to a knowing reading public eager to consume an image of Other People that would shore up their sense of German humanity and superiority.



With respect to the question of the term *savage* (which, incidentally, does not occur in the original German title but only in its English translation<sup>19</sup>), it is true that in early colonial literature the term *savage* eventually evolved to describe an easily angered unchristian people characterized by animalistic and vicious appetites, but even at the point, twenty-five years later, at which Jean de Léry wrote of his journey to the New World in 1578,<sup>20</sup> *savage* retained a different connotation, meaning “primitive.” As Janet Whatley, editor and translator of Léry’s book proposes, “[in French], the primary connotation [of *sauvage*] is not one of cruelty or ferocity: wildflowers are ‘fleurs sauvages’... The word most often means simply ‘living in a state of nature’” (232). I acknowledge here that this sense of existing in a natural state has its own limitations and problems in terms of connotations of backwardness, a state of retarded evolution, or the assumption of an aspiration to be more like the culture of the writer; however, I insist that the term as it was used in the Early Modern era did not have the connotation of viciousness or volatility, hence, Staden’s need for this laborious string of adjectives (adjectives which Whitehead and Harbsmeier coalesced in the twentieth century connotation of the term *savage*, thus rendering the others unnecessary).

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<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, one could make a Latinate translation of *wilden* as *savage*, even though it most commonly means *wild*. There is no direct English-German translation for our modern word *savages* as meaning *wild people*; nevertheless, Staden’s use of *fressen* seems to more effectively do what *savage* is intended to do here.

<sup>20</sup> Jean de Léry was a young Huguenot, who traveled to South America as a part of Villeagagnon’s group of Calvinists and Catholics who were motivated to Christianize the Native inhabitants of what is now known as Brazil in 1556. His account, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, was published in 1578.

Indeed, even Michel de Montaigne refers to the inhabitants of Brazil as “savage” only in the sense that agrees with Whatley’s translation: “These nations then seem to me... to be not much remote from their original simplicity,” thereby laying the groundwork for Rousseau’s idea of man in a natural, neutral state of simplicity and incorruptibility. Indeed, the English translation of Staden’s text refers to “savage heathens” (53), terms which over time began to be considered largely redundant. The cultural rhetoric of Staden’s time did not integrate “heathen” as part of the term “savage.” “Savage” and “heathen” may indeed have fallen on separate continuums, with “heathen” carrying more of the burdensome connotation of ungodliness and danger than “savage” did. One could, after all, become a praying or pious savage, leaving one’s heathenish inclinations behind; nevertheless, the praying savage would still be considered naïve and backward.

These were the connotations of the “savage” in the Early Modern Era, when these accounts were written; therefore, we cannot rely, as Whitehead and Harbsmeier do in their translation, on the term “savage” to express a connotation of cannibalism associated with the Indigenous people of Brazil any more than Early Modern writers did. Rather, we must focus on the terminology traded at the time to fully understand the terror associated with a *menschfresser Leuthen*, who were capable of capturing a European man and bringing him to the brink of being literally consumed.

Staden does not simply refer to the Tupi people as *Menschfresser Leuthen*; he develops a crescendo of adjectives characterizing the horror: *wilden, nacketen*,

*grimmigen*. They are clearly lawless, being wild and naked (outside of God's laws), and they are angry, but there is no explanation for their fury. (In fact, they seem to be born into a state of hostile ferocity; certainly there is no consideration of a justified fury based on ever-expanding European colonial presence, forced attempts at conversion to Christianity, or the actual loss of tribal lands.) Furthermore, he does not refer to *menschesser Leuthen*, which would be people civilly eating other people. Nor does he write about *menschmampfer Leuthen*, as in people snacking or munching on other people, which is the direct (and arguably misleading) translation of Whitehead and Harbsmeier's English language title, which has an almost comic implication in its reference to "munching." It's *menschfresser Leuthen*, as in monstrous or animalistic beings gorging on other people's flesh. Moreover, the reference is to eating *mensch* (human), not to eating *das Fleisch* or *die Haut* (flesh or skin). The implication is that they are eating people, not the corporeal parts people are reduced to, but *man* in the ideological, Humanist sense.

To understand this choice of words in a language fraught with mellifluous and meaningful synonyms is to gain a better understanding of Hans Staden's world. While the ultimate goal here is to understand the Tupis' performances, the first step in the process is to understand the cultural influences that informed the writing of Staden's story, Staden's purpose in writing this book, and how the Tupinambas' performance was lost in Staden's own fear and cultural anxieties. Staden's agenda, as evidenced by his sensational title, precluded an unbiased or even balanced study

of the Tupinamba people<sup>21</sup>; therefore, many scholars have either disregarded the work or examined it purely in relation to contemporary concerns about the existence of a world outside of the social, political and religious boundaries of early modern Europe. It is important, then, to look beyond Staden's sensationalist aims and examine the recorded actions of the Tupi (those which are corroborated in the texts mentioned above); moreover, it is important to interrogate this text in reference to the primary discursive shift of the era.

In order to gain a sense of Staden's world – mid-sixteenth century Germany – it is important to consider the great raging debate of the Protestant Reformation. I consider the role of the Protestant Reformation in Staden's work primarily because he was *not* on a religious mission to the Americas. Staden was a common mercenary, a gunner for the Portuguese armed forces attempting to make a living; he did not have a loftier goal of bringing religious enlightenment to the poor heathens of the New World, nor did he necessarily have a stake in the Portuguese colonial enterprise there. Nevertheless, religious sentiment infuses his work and clearly informed his perspective. Therefore, considering the Protestant Reformation when examining Staden's work is relevant precisely *because* Staden was not a religious reformer; nonetheless, he was a product of his time, and his work is a byproduct of cultural thinking predicated on religious debates of the Early Modern Era.

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<sup>21</sup> And, of course, it could be argued that it is impossible for a postcolonial, postmodern scholar like me to provide an unbiased or even balanced examination of Staden's work, so consumed are we with undoing the ugliness of colonialism and exposing the cultural violence of accounts like Staden's; therefore, my work gives Staden a rhetorical roughing-up not unlike the one his work gave the Tupinamba.

More relevant than strictly political changes of the time,<sup>22</sup> the Reformation changed even common people's daily lives on a fundamental basis and informed their thinking about life, difference, and religion.<sup>23</sup> Staden was born in 1525, a mere eight years after Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* to the church door. Staden's journey to the Americas took place in 1549, and his book was published in 1557, just two years after the Council of Trent (the Catholic response to Protestant discourse about the meaning of the Eucharist), which declared that "by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation" ("Transubstantiation"). The Council of Trent further indicated that anyone who denied the miracle of transubstantiation would be declared anathema.

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<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to imply that the Reformation had no political implications; I do intend to indicate that the Reformation had wider, socially discursive aims that affected cultural life, and I concede that social discourse absolutely informs political discourse as well as political action, including the development of colonial and imperial interests. Nevertheless, the focus of my work is the cultural impact of religious discourse.

<sup>23</sup> It could be argued that the changes of the Reformation affected Protestants more than Catholics, but Protestants were merely Catholics in transition at that point, and so the conversation permeated all facets of society to some extent, and it can be assumed that even committed Catholics were drawn into these debates if only for the purpose of defending the status quo.

Because Reformation-era theology and philosophy are complex due to the tumultuous nature of the contemporary social milieu, it is important to take a moment to fully explore the nuances of Lutheran epistemology as well as Luther's epistemological progeny. The Reformation is said to have begun, as I mention above with Luther's *Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. This text indicted the Catholic Church for financial corruption, whereby parishioners were encouraged to make financial donations to the Church as a means of purchasing "indulgences," essentially forgiveness of their sins and a shorter penance in Purgatory. The *Theses* were eventually distributed widely (which was not Luther's initial intention; it was a result of the power of the press), and he quickly gained celebrity standing. When Luther gave a sermon, the church pews filled with people, and subtle shifts in the ideology of Christianity began to come about (Spitz 88-89), generating other writings that developed and responded to his work.

The 1520s brought innovators who began extensive discussions about the meaning of the Eucharist. Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* does not specifically address the question of transubstantiation; his later works, however, begin to inquire into the literal interpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Luther himself never thoroughly rejected the doctrine; rather, he came to a nuanced understanding he considered *consubstantiation*, a middle ground between the wafer and wine *being* the body and blood of Christ and *being symbols of* the body and blood of Christ. Nevertheless, the question of Christ's presence in the Holy Mass beset the people of

Early Modern Europe and was the subject of wide speculation and philosophical postulation.

As preeminent scholar of the Reformation, Susan Karant-Nunn points out: “[T]he theoretical interpretation of the manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist was the single most knotty problem, more than any other factor preventing the unification of major Reformers and thus of the Reformation movement” (121). What eventually became apparent within a decade of Luther’s debut as a celebrity thinker was a need for a unified religious ideology as a means of fostering political stability. To this end, Luther and many other religious figures of the time, including Zwingli and Melancthon, convened in 1529 to form the Marburg Confession, where they worked to come to a common exegesis of the Biblical meaning of the Eucharist (Spitz 161). The Marburg Confession, a paltry compromise on all points of view, did little to quiet the interest of the people, however, and the debate continued with divisive effects.

By 1549, there was still enough dissent about the presence of the physical Christ in The Holy Sacrament that another convention was necessary. This time, the three biggest names in Reformation theology (clearly representing three different conceptions of the Eucharist) were present: Luther (who believed in consubstantiation), Zwingli (who believed that Christ was “away in heaven” and the bread and wine of the Eucharist were simply symbolic), and Calvin (who held that the presence of Christ was real in the Eucharist) (Spitz 219). They developed the *Consensus Tigurinus* or Zurich Agreement, in which Zwingli made the most

compromise, raising the ire of many radical Protestants, who wholly objected to the notion of reenacting the sacrifice of Christ.

These radical Protestants, incidentally, were Luther's ontological offspring, inspired by Luther's writings, which intended merely to replace the sumptuous and sensual experience of the Holy Catholic Mass with something less physically stimulating: less incense, candles, art, and unintelligible, mysterious Latin. Luther's writings also intended to evoke interest in the subtle nuances of consubstantiation, the idea that because Christ is spirit, he could be both symbolically present in the Eucharist and in heaven, but, being omnipotent, God would certainly not be magically evoked by a priest's clandestine utterance of Latin prayers. Many radical Protestants rejected the subtlety of Luther's exegesis in favor of a symbolic and more rational understanding of the Mass that rejected altogether the physical or spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist and moved for a symbolic remembrance of Christ (as opposed to participation in a sacrificial means to eternal heavenly salvation) via participation in the Mass.

I render this lengthy exposition on Early Modern European grappling with the concept of transubstantiation for the obvious reason that the specter of the Eucharist looms not only in Staden's unconscious, but is also immediately present in his experience of anthropophagic ritual, the consumption of actual flesh. Moreover, the Tupi ritual of anthropophagy is a kind of transubstantiation in that the "victim" is, in a sense, "reborn" as a member of the capturing tribe in a ten-month long ritual



integrating him into the life of his enemy tribe and casting him into a liminal identity state between his tribe of birth and his tribe of assimilation.

In addition to the concerns about the magical means by which the wafer and wine turned into the body and blood of Christ, another significant element of the debate surrounding the meaning of the Mass in Europe was the concern of participating in uncivilized, subhuman, cannibalistic behavior. This is realized explicitly in the work of Staden's contemporary and fellow captivity narrator, Jean de Léry, who notes that the Catholics "wanted not only to eat the flesh of Jesus Christ grossly rather than spiritually, but what was worse, like the savages ... they wanted to chew and swallow it raw" (qtd. in Whitehead and Harbsmeier 159). If Staden left a land in ideological turmoil over the meaning and comportment of religious ritual, this turmoil was incredibly present for him in the New World, particularly when seemingly faced with an enactment of the very thing being rhetorically bandied about at home. It must have been somewhat uncanny for him to step outside of his idea of civilization and see the manifestation of the rhetorical anxieties of home (uncanny, albeit inevitable, inasmuch as we take our cultural framework with us whenever we travel). To this end, the weight of Staden's concern with ritual anthropophagy cannot be overestimated in measuring the anxieties he expresses in his book.

The site of all of this European Christian debate, of course, was the scripture itself, *The Holy Bible*. The debate engaged Christ's words, "This is my body." Luther held that, in line with the Catholic Church, this should be interpreted to mean more

than “This symbolizes my body,” but that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist.

Karant-Nunn notes that even though Luther understood the Eucharistic presence of Christ’s body to be the means to forgiveness of sins and salvation, he deviated from the Catholic Church in his insistence on the primacy of text over ritual:

[T]he heart of the sacrament lay in the Word of God – and here [Luther] means the words of Jesus as he distributed bread and wine to his disciples... “It is highly necessary,” he wrote, “that in the sacrament one leads the people to the Word and accustoms them to give much more regard to the Word than to the sacrament.” This attention to the Word would result in true honor of the Eucharist, in contrast to the outward sham of “bowing, bending, kneeling, and adoration.” ... Without the assurance of the Word, Christians would be left with bread and wine as simple signs. (115)

Luther felt strongly about generating a subtle connection between high Catholic ritual and rational, literate engagement with the philosophical questions of free will, spirit, and humanism that *The Bible* engages. The element of scripture – the written text – as the source of all understanding is central to an examination of the role Reformation mentality plays in the construction of Staden’s text.

First, it is important to recognize that Staden published his book one hundred years after the printing of the Gutenberg Bible, the first widely disseminated text, and, incidentally, a German innovation. In the intervening century, the written text became a harbinger of civilization and the ultimate vehicle in the transmission of knowledge in Reformation- era Europe; indeed, the printed word is what made the Protestant Reformation in its doctrine of *Sola Scripturae* (the sole reliance on Scripture over human intermediaries) possible to a large extent: suddenly the word of God was accessible to a mostly literate public, thereby

obviating the need for an expositor. In fact, as Karant-Nunn points out, so intent were the Reformers on the importance of scripture and doctrine over image and ritual, that during this period, church paintings of the coronation of Mary were taken down and replaced with paintings of words that were thought to adequately summarize the messages of the Old and New Testaments (123). Anything that appealed to the senses (incense, music, paintings, statues) was rigorously purged and replaced with the word of God.

Diana Taylor's text, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, works to bridge the lacuna between written and performed texts, particularly with respect to cultures that rely (or once relied) on performed texts rather than written texts as a means of disseminating and perpetuating culture. Taylor's work takes on the tension between the written "archive" and the performed "repertoire" as modes of cultural transmission and artistic expression. The "archive" tends to be culturally privileged as it is committed to paper and perceived as permanent and foundational, whereas the "repertoire" is that which is performed and is often (incorrectly) read as a response to the archive: the repertoire can, in fact, work in response to or in blissful ignorance of the archive (but the archive can never completely and thoroughly represent the repertoire, as the latter is always in flux and in a state of momentary response to the cultural milieu). Hegemonic accounts of cultural repertoires, however, generally read reportorial performances in relation to a known and culturally accepted (if not culturally worshipped) archive, but Taylor insists that this is a mistake, a perception that the repertoire is, for example, a nascent form of a

more established and culturally informed archive, waiting for or striving toward maturity.

Taylor examines the bias of the literate colonial newcomers to the Americas thus: “When the friars arrived in the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries... they claimed that the indigenous peoples’ past – and the ‘lives they lived’ – had disappeared because they had no writing” (16). This interpretation of “disappearance” indicates a bias toward the written word and perhaps an inability to perceive performance as a substantial cultural document or even as evidence of a legible existence. Here is evidence of a profound Eurocentric perspective. The Protestant newcomers mirror Taylor’s example of the friars, but their perspective is perhaps even more burdened by the significance of written text. In the relationship between Protestant travelers and Indigenous peoples, the shadow of the Gutenberg Bible, the ur-text, looms in the background, desirous of validating replication and mirroring, while the Reformers lie in the foreground of this shadow, demanding an end to ritual and theatrical performance and a strict adherence to the written word: *Sola Scripturae*, only that which is written can be relied upon.

Taylor moves further, however, in her analysis of the relevance of the written text, implicating the cultural significance of performance as a primary mode of cultural sustenance, linking the bodily enactments of the Early Colonial Era to a postmodern digital age: “Embodied expression has participated and will probably continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting” (16). Taylor’s analysis indicates that we (postmodern

Westerners) have reached a point in our own transmission of cultural values that integrates both embodied performances and written language, but perceives that the body (even in virtual/digital spaces that circumvent corporeality) transcends the written and will always be central to the “transmission of social knowledge.” Because the Tupi culture was not a written culture, its transmission of ethos, experience, art, history, conflict, emotion – in short culture – was performative. There were no written texts to observe or examine, but as Taylor notes, embodied expression transcends writing (but is not recognizable to the European visitor who fetishizes the written word). Thus, the accounts of Tupinamba ritual performances should be mined for their meaning about culture – beyond the meaning of violation of the European social more of cannibalism.

Another relevant consideration at this theoretical juncture is the work of Lauren Berlant, who considers the role of corporeality in citizenship. Her work relates primarily to the construction of American citizenship (as established in the Constitution) via discourse, negation, and legislation. Even though Hans Staden wrote long before the establishment of the American nation as we know it, and he was a citizen of Germany, Berlant’s work is relevant because Staden’s text relies on similar tropes of difference and negation to distinguish the Tupinamba from the German citizen, and it is relevant because even though Staden did not refer to an American Constitution, his work does exhibit the imprint of other written discourses that are aimed at establishing proper “citizenship” (or proper Christianity or proper civility), namely, Luther’s copious writings on the subject of

religious conduct, the Marburg Confession, the edict of the Council of Trent, and even The Gutenberg Bible.

Here I develop an argument based on theories of American citizenship, which may seem anachronistic or otherwise misguided given the nature of this examination, which does not deal with American citizenship, being that it takes place before the modern conceptual understandings of *America* and *American citizen* were extant, let alone culturally significant. However, the elements of Lauren Berlant's and Robyn Weigman's theories of American citizenship that I integrate here are fluid enough to be applicable to other eras and other continents, for the principles of citizenship that Berlant and Weigman theorize are principles of citizenship in all Western societies, being predicated on belongingness and otherness, a sense of insider and outsider statuses that are limned, specifically, by the presence of corporeal markers rendered seemingly invisible in the national discourse, but which become incredibly visible when exposed through comparison to the foundational ideals of the culture. In fact, I would posit that Berlant's and Weigman's thinking could be enhanced by an examination of the exclusive and negating nature of Reformation-era rhetoric.

In her landmark work, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Berlant explores the necessity of abstracting oneself in order to become a citizen. The ideal citizen, Berlant claims, is not corporeally remarkable. She uses the example of the American citizen as detailed in the Constitution, which states, "All men are created equal," and notes that this

designation of “all men” automatically makes American women’s anatomies specific and problematic in consideration of their citizenship. Berlant notes that it is imperative to be artificial or nonspecific in order to fit in with designations of “normativity.” Those who are too specific (not within the mainstream conception of the ideal citizen) are scrutinized for their specificity. The interlocutor seems to wonder what is different, and whether this difference matters to considerations of citizenship and belonging.

Berlant’s abstraction of the body relates specifically to Early Modern Germany, Staden’s homeland. Susan Karant-Nunn indicates that the marriage ceremony, in particular changed greatly during the Protestant Reformation. She notes that there was a subtle shift in the importance of the marriage ceremony itself along with an attendant reading and repetition of Scriptural discourse in the ceremony, thereby indicating “the perceived need to confine and channel sexuality” (35): in other words, the marriage ceremony became nothing short of an effort to gain governmental and juridical acquiescence through spiritual means based on an established archive, the Bible. She summarizes the ever-solidifying church-state relationship thus: “A religion is far more than the sum total of its official definitions of orthodoxy” (35). Thus, the body (the element performing ritual) is replaced by a reiteration of Scriptural doctrine, in which the body becomes a site of discourse rather than a corporeal presence in the religious ceremony.

Berlant’s interest in the body is noteworthy in light of Staden’s description of the Tupinamba as *nacketen* (naked), a truly un-Christian and strange habit, which

made the Tupi (for Staden) hyperembodied. Rather than complying with the civilized behavior of a German citizen (whether Protestant or Catholic), these “savages” were naked, so their bodies were significant for Staden, who had probably been raised to see the body as something to be hidden, something private. Karant-Nunn indicates that the lion’s share of the admonitions read to the bride and groom during the marriage service (at Martin Luther’s behest) was directed at bridling the young wife’s concupiscence (16). Karant-Nunn further conveys that Luther’s advice included the notion that brides’ bodies were to be entirely covered because Rebecca wore a veil (27). In a world so concerned about female sexuality, Berlant’s idea of hyperembodiment seems particularly relevant for the female members of the Early Modern European body politic, whose sexuality was fully cloaked while they were verbally chastised for their lasciviousness on this happiest day of their lives.

Furthermore, as Karant-Nunn points out, many Protestant scholars of the time, in writing about wedding rites, were suspicious of the ritualistic aspects of the events, such as the dances, the ceremonial accompaniment of the bride and groom to the nuptial bed, the blessing of the bed, and the feasting. She indicates that these bodily enactments became more vigorously scrutinized and curtailed under the law, and as the sixteenth century wore on, were replaced by ceremonies held in the church (preferably during Sunday service, when no one could drink afterward), and marked by increasingly longer readings from the Bible (or sermons written by Protestant clerics), along with admonitions to the participants (women in particular) to be chaste, modest, and noble (31). Karant-Nunn’s work, moreover,



exemplifies the shift from ritual enactment to archival iterations, as Diana Taylor's theory of the value of the archive over the repertoire would indicate.

Robin Weigman corroborates Lauren Berlant's thinking regarding citizenship. Weigman claims that some bodies are seen as universal (male, propertied, white) while others are seen as particular (racially marked, female, or poor), and this distinction is what privilege and modern citizenship rest upon. This universalism is protected and subtended by the particularity of the others' bodies and is all based upon the visual: what we see is how we decide if the Other is a citizen. In *Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Berlant defines " 'citizen' [as] both an inclusive and exclusionary noun, naming by negation juridically contested racial, gendered, and class identities" (9). Berlant's claim is that the meaning of the term "citizen" may change depending on the specific historical, social, or cultural climate (although she is quick to point out that the signifier "male" has traditionally adhered to this understanding of citizen). American citizenship is not, according to Berlant, derived from the Enlightenment, but from legislative processes related to those who were initially excluded from the original language and intent of the Constitution. For Berlant, the concept of "citizen" is something defined by law (through legislative processes that enact rights and privileges after careful consideration); in other words, there is no transcendental, universal citizen; the citizen is created through discourse.

Berlant uses the example of African American citizens, who are excluded in considerations of the "ideal citizen" due to their surplus corporeality (blackness),

whereas whiteness allows the bearer to achieve abstraction because a white person can make himself (or even herself) generic in terms of racial designation. Thus, Berlant claims, a white person is a “white icon,” whereas a black person is a “white hieroglyph,” meaning that a white person represents an actual person who is iconic in his or her status as white and privileged, while a black person is a symbol, not of blackness, but of whiteness because blackness makes whiteness readable. It is a symbol by which a dominant reader can understand himself or herself. The presence of a racialized other essentially becomes a means of limning the identity of a privileged observer.

I extend Berlant’s example of the African American to the Tupi, as the Tupinamba people seem to fill a similar depersonalized role of hieroglyph in Staden’s text. Staden takes notice that “they call themselves by the names of wild animals,” (120), and claims that he once confronted the leader, Konyan Bebe, when Konyan Bebe generously offered to share his basket of human flesh, telling him, “A senseless animal hardly ever eats its fellow; should one human eat another?” to which Konyan Bebe responded, “I am a jaguar; it tastes well” (91). The strange proclivities of the Tupinamba – their nudity, their wildness, their identification with the animal world (*nacketen, wilden, fressen*) – serve here as a means of limning the boundaries of humanity and identifying what it is to be a European, a Protestant Christian, and a human, three inextricable identities in Staden’s worldview and a useful marketing tool in the selling of his book to a population desperately intent on defining themselves against an Other.

Staden makes the effort to market the Tupinamba as animals, yet one adjective notably absent from Staden's long title is *tierisch*, which means animalistic. The term *menschfresser Leuthen* compensates for its absence with its animalistic connotations, as mentioned earlier. In fulfillment of his promise of animalistic behavior, Staden explores the cannibalistic rite as part and parcel of Tupinamba (read: savage or subhuman) behavior. The Tupi rite interestingly complements the debate around transubstantiation, a momentous conflict in Reformation Europe at the time Staden traveled to the New World. Jean de Léry, a Protestant missionary, writes his account of traveling in company with the "papist" (as Léry refers to him) Villegagnon and criticizes Villegagnon's prayers, which provide evidence of Catholic thought. Léry claims:

[S]till, they were not content with what the ministers had taught and proved by the Word of God, that the bread and wine were not really changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord, which also was not contained within them... [W]hen they were shown by other passages that these words and expressions are figures – that is, that Scripture is accustomed to calling the signs of the Sacraments by the names of the things they signified – ... nonetheless they remained obstinate; to the point that, without knowing how it might be done, nevertheless, they wanted only to eat the flesh of Jesus Christ grossly rather than spiritually, but what was worse, like the savages... they wanted to chew and swallow it raw. (41)

Thus, the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the New World, in conjunction with the Tupinamba anthropophagy, generated a unique opportunity to replicate the drama and disagreement of the Reformation. The treacherous Villegagnon, who purported to be a Reformed Catholic wanting to establish a space of religious freedom in the New World and work together to convert the Indigenous

pagans to Christianity, turned out to be a “papist” in disguise, and Léry’s text indicates that no one is to be trusted, for there are cannibals everywhere. Whitehead and Harbsmeier argue in their Introduction that unlike Léry’s work, Staden’s narrative is not colored by the great debate of his time. They note:

Certainly for Staden the cannibal sign is at best ambiguous, since the intellectual connection between Tupi cannibalism and Christian thought is not one of threatening homology, as it is for Léry, Montaigne, or Thevet, but one of analogy with other tests of faith. In this sense the humanity of the Tupi world emerges in Staden’s text through comparison with the treacherous French, and his identification with other intended sacrificees, or with the just revenge that is visited upon them, that is despite, not because of, the practice of cannibalism. (XXXVIII)

I would argue that the very fact that Staden presents his experience as one rigorous test of faith after another is evidence that he is indeed influenced by Reformation culture, a culture in which every Christian (whether of the Protestant or Catholic persuasion) experienced their faith as being tested and were compelled to prove their mettle to their God. Whitehead and Harbsmeier’s evidence of their claim that Staden, unlike Léry, is not influenced by Reformation rhetoric is that Staden contrasts the Tupinamba with his own enemy, “the treacherous French,” but, as I established in chapter two of this study, Léry likewise compares the Tupis to his own people, the French, both favorably and unfavorably.

Moreover, Whitehead and Harbsmeier note that Léry’s understanding of cannibalism becomes a metaphor by the end of his text: he extends the notion of cannibalism to usurers and political tyrants, yet Staden’s text does not gesture toward a broader condemnation of humanity. This is possibly as factor related to

the fact that Staden did not have a seminary education informing his perspectives, as the religious authors did. Rather, he was a simple (but educated) German soldier, responding to pervasive cultural ideology that dehumanizes the Other. He had enough education to be literate in both the traditional and the cultural sense of the word; therefore, he was a product of a biased contemporary culture that espoused the idea that Catholics, because of reliance on ritualism rather than scriptural evidence, were pagan-like and unevolved, subhuman. Such ideology (founded in anxieties about transubstantiation) created a social framework that readily positioned Staden to judge the Tupinambas' anthropophagy in a wider (albeit European) cultural context.

When considering Staden's ideological perspective, Berlant's discussion of textual interpretations used to determine citizenship dovetails nicely with Taylor's desire to bridge the archive and the repertoire. Taylor designates the archive as the written, hegemonic text to which the repertoire (performance, in a general sense) responds or supersedes. If Berlant's Constitution (or Staden's Gutenberg Bible) is Taylor's archive, and the brown-skinned *wilden, nacketen, grimmigen* Tupis' performances are the repertoire, then the Tupis become white hieroglyphs deployed in Staden's text as a means of understanding himself and the people of his own culture. Furthermore, if the archive/Constitution (Berlant's American Constitution here being replaced with the Gutenberg Bible and Luther's oeuvre)/*True History* of Hans Staden is the hegemonic text, then the repertoire/Tupi cannibalistic ritual/Eucharist is in violation of *Sola Scripturae* and commonly

accepted (written) means of transmitting culture: it does not rely on the written text to access truth. Thus, the Tupinamba are hyperembodied (*wilden* and *nacketen*) and this hyperembodiment positions them as *different*, uncivilized, ritualistic, and backward: an interesting characterization given the abiding concerns of Reformation Europe.

By the time Staden came to Brazil, the Tupinamba had experienced a long and strained relationship with Europeans, including missionaries, traders, explorers, and adventurers. Amerigo Vespucci had first arrived at the beginning of the century, and his letters home detailing cannibals and Amazon women (Whitehead and Harbsmeier XXIV) started a cascade of curious and reform-minded visitors as well as social outcasts looking for a fresh start in a new place. At the time Staden was there, the French and the Portuguese were both making concerted efforts to colonize this part of the world and claim the fruit of the land – and the people – for the benefit of their national interests.

Therefore, by the time Staden encountered the Tupinamba, they were well accustomed to outsiders. In fact, Staden's work contains evidence of the Tupis' broad understanding of Europeans. They did not care for the Portuguese, who were making efforts to colonize the area, but they were fond of the French and traded with them. Staden notes:

They well knew that the French were as much the enemies of the Portuguese as they were, since the French came every year in their ships, and brought them knives, axes, mirrors, combs, and scissors. In exchange, they [the savages] gave them brazil wood, cotton, and other goods, such as feathers and pepper... Therefore, they were their good friends. The Portuguese had

not done so. For in past years, the Portuguese had come to this country, and in the area where [the Portuguese] were still living, they had made friends with [my captors'] enemies.... [T]hey told me that ...the Portuguese had... attacked and bound them, and carried them away to give them to their enemies, who had killed and eaten them. [The Portuguese] had shot several of them with their cannons... they had also frequently arrived with their enemies and waged war to capture them. (59)

This excerpt illustrates a subtle understanding of the political machinations of the European colonial efforts in Brazil at that time. The Tupi were not necessarily heavily invested in a relationship with the French for ideological reasons, but for practical reasons: they were able to obtain weapons and other goods from the French and they were also able to employ the proverbial wartime adage: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Staden, a German mercenary working as a gunner for the Portuguese, first attempts to explain his presence in Brazil to the Tupinambas by claiming that he is German, a friend of the French, and then, when that does not work, he foolishly tries to pass as French, but with little luck. The Tupis refer to him as "a Portuguese" and ascribe many of his personal habits and behaviors to evidence of his being Portuguese. When Staden expresses anxiety because this misrecognition will result in his eventual death, dismemberment, and consumption, the Tupi say, "He is a real Portuguese. Now he screams, he is afraid of death" (61). The fact that they consider him Portuguese is evidence of a subtle understanding of his role as a mercenary. He is fighting for Portuguese interests and is on the Portuguese payroll. To the Tupis, who acculturated new slaves into their tribes on a regular basis, he is living as a member of the Portuguese tribe; therefore, he has become Portuguese.

Staden's choice to materially and ideologically align himself with the Portuguese belies his efforts to maintain a sense of German identity, and indeed, he seems to lose a sense of national identity altogether at some points, casting about for any European identity that will appease his captors. Nevertheless, the Tupinamba recognize him for what he is (a true mercenary) and deliberately misinterpellate him, forcing him to occupy the identity of the country that sponsors him. This is evidence that they know exactly how the colonial venture works and how it created intercultural tensions in Early Modern Europe; in fact, the Tupinamba work the situation cleverly. Staden thinks they are foolishly mistaken in his identity; rather, they simplify his identity by making him acknowledge that he is subject to the King of Portugal, the King he takes orders from and on whose bread he subsists, and this makes him, by default, Portuguese. Staden is somewhat aware of the sham of his presence as well. He is never quite sure if he will be saved, for what investment do the Portuguese have in risking their lives to save a hired gun? He is not a fellow-countryman, after all. The solitary French man who passes through the Tupi village turns his back on Staden altogether. Staden wants to claim a pan-European identity but is not allowed to because after fifty years of what I like to consider proto-ethnographic research, the Tupinamba see Europe clearly as diverse countries with distinct political pursuits.

This ability to understand and even manipulate competing colonial interests illustrates political acumen and thorough research on the part of the Tupinamba. It also illustrates their interest and skill in proto-ethnographic observation. After a



half a century of interaction with Europeans, the Tupinamba were well acquainted with the cultural proclivities and, I would argue, anxieties of their visitors; thus they were able to make generalizations and exploit the colonial situation to their benefit. To this end, we should assume that they were aware of being objects of observation and scrutiny themselves, as well as objects of exploitation. They would have known from their interactions with the missionaries that their ritual practices were the subject of inordinate interest and controversy. Indeed, in Staden's story, they are forever answering his inquiries (and Eurocentric/Christocentric critiques) about the purpose of their ceremonies and ceremonial objects.

Coming from Reformation-era Europe, Staden is able to recognize the ritualized aspects of daily life among the Tupinamba. Luther's primary aim was to re-appropriate religious activity so that it was the work of the laity rather than simply the work of the clergy and so that it would become a part of life and even political governance rather than something separate; therefore, Staden could relate to the daily enactment of ritualistic behavior. Sociologist Erving Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* explores the ways in which daily life is a kind of ceremony or performance; he claims that we all enact our roles to the best of our ability and those performances change when an outsider draws near. Since Staden was familiar with the ritualization of daily life, coming from a religious tradition that tried to integrate religiosity into every aspect of life, he should have recognized Tupi life as being highly ritualistic and performative. He might have even recognized that the ceremonial aspects of daily life were exercised on him (their prisoner) with a

specific goal in mind: the goal of rebirthing him as a member of the tribe and ultimately consuming him as a means of reintegrating a lost member (more on this *raison d'être* for tribal anthropophagy later). However, Staden was not a willing participant in the rituals (neither the daily rituals of social interaction nor the consummate ritual of anthropophagy); he attempted to maintain his position as only an audience in spite of the repeated efforts of the Tupinamba to make him take a participatory role. I argue that the Tupi recognized his unwillingness to occupy his role appropriately and worked to properly socialize him by carefully tailoring their performances for him, their intimately known audience.

Nearly one hundred years ago, sociologist Emile Durkheim posited that rituals (including religious ceremonies) could also be considered performances because they create and sustain “social solidarity.” He acknowledged that while religious rituals may serve to transmit religious ideas, the rituals themselves are not simply abstractions or ideas but are in fact performances that reenact known patterns of behavior and thus embody ideas rather than simply expressing them. He perceived these ceremonies as a kind of thought in action or thought *as* action. Ceremonies were a means of transmitting a truth to all participants in the ritual, thereby blurring the line between audience and ritual participant, making the participants an audience and by extension, making the audience into participants. Richard Malekin confirms this: “As often noted theatre and ritual overlap in that much ritual has an element of theatrical display and participants (including the audience or public) can be moved by ritual at least beyond their everyday frame of

reference, in intellect, emotion and feeling-attitude. Like theatre, much, though not all, ritual is a social activity” (46).

In the 1960s, Richard Schechner developed a theory of ritual and performance based on Durkheim’s thinking; he continues to develop his theory of “efficacy vs. entertainment,”<sup>24</sup> which asks what the purpose of the performance is. For Schechner, the basic opposition is not between ritual and theater but between efficacy (if the enactment is meant to change something) and entertainment (if it is purely for the purpose of aesthetics). Schechner avers:

Whether one calls a specific performance “ritual” or “theater” depends mostly on context and function. A performance is called theater or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances. If the performance’s purpose is to effect transformations – to be efficacious – then... the performance is a ritual... No performance is pure efficacy or entertainment. The matter is complicated because one can look at specific performances from several vantages; changing perspectives changes classification (130).

Schechner’s point is that the meaning of the enactment differs for different participants and audience members; furthermore, it blurs the line between theater and ritual. While the Tupinamba may have been performing what Schechner calls an “actual” (a performative action that enacts a change or is efficacious), Staden witnessed it as theater because he did not believe in the efficacy of the ritual. Therefore, his Eurocentric perspective changed the classification of the event (and not just his perception of the event, but the event itself, for it cannot be a ritual, it

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<sup>24</sup> Schechner first referred to the “efficacy-entertainment dyad” in the 1960s, but most recently (2003) conceptualized the dyad as a “braid.” He considers how performance has taken on the seemingly opposite purposes of ritual and entertainment throughout history in the essay I cite here.

cannot be efficacious, if one of the primary parties – audience or performer – does not agree to its efficacy). To Staden, the ritual was entertainment; however, to the Tupinamba people, it was intended to be efficacious. The Tupinamba initially refused to accept Staden’s chosen occupation of the role of “audience” and continued to work to socialize him into his proper role as *participant* in the ritual (and by “ritual,” I include the daily oblations they exercised on him in the interest of transforming him—such as shaving his hair and making him dance and work as a member of the community—as well as the intended final execution).

For both Protestants and Catholics of the sixteenth century, The Holy Mass was efficacious. While there may have been divergence on the meaning of the Mass and Christ’s presence in the Mass, there was a virtual consensus about its role in partakers’ salvation. Later, after much speculation and greater splintering among the Christian population of Europe, the Mass lost a sense of efficacy for some Christians and was no longer practiced in some churches. Schechner details the distinction between efficacy and entertainment when he cites the performances of the Mudmen of Papua New Guinea, whose ritualistic dance, originally performed to inspire fear in those observing, now only incites amusement and entertainment. This ritual has moved from being efficacious to being entertaining, and this shift relies solely on the interpretation of the audience. During Staden’s time, the great dispute about the Eucharist and the debate about its meaning threatened to move it from an efficacious to an entertaining event.

Staden, as self-proclaimed audience (and not participant) in the Tupi rituals, threatens to shift the meaning of the ritual from efficacy to entertainment. The importance of Staden's role as audience or participant in this argument bears further exploration because the notion of efficacy vs. entertainment is key to understanding how it was that the Tupi fine-tuned their performance to include Staden. Victor Turner alludes to "life crisis rituals," which he considers as performances that "portray and symbolically resolve archetypal conflicts in abstraction" so that the culture is "better equipped to deal with them concretely" (11).

Therefore, Turner makes the argument that rituals are performances for other members of the culture, a means of bringing all members into conscious and logical (as opposed to spiritual) consensus about the subject as a springboard for moving forward as a group. This is certainly true of the Tupi ritual, which was a process of intimidation, of maintaining strength and tribal pride, and, ultimately, of grieving. Ranjini Obeyesekere nuances Turner's ideas in her work on Sri Lankan rituals. She alludes to Schechner's ideas about the ways in which throughout history, ritual and theater performances can take on relative importance. Unlike Schechner, however, Obeyesekere claims that performances can be *simultaneously* efficacious and entertaining, rather than switching back and forth in Schechner's "braid" paradigm, whereby an event can be considered efficacious, yet over time it can lose cultural meaning and be considered purely entertainment. Schechner's ideas rely on a lapse of time to change from efficacy to entertainment while Obeyesekere's theory

is that no time needs to pass to create such a change, as it can be simultaneously efficacious and entertaining.

Obeyesekere refers to the Sanni Yakuma, a Sri Lankan folk Buddhist exorcism ritual. She indicates that “ritual” seems to refer to a participatory role while “theater” seems to indicate observation, but she parses the concepts of “observation” and “participation” to expose the myriad kinds of participation and degrees of participation that can be possible. Because observation and participation are not pure states, “visitors” and “onlookers” can become spectators, and likewise, audience can become ritual participants. Thus she claims, “Any performance can call forth [efficacy] or [entertainment] or varying combinations of these two categories” (130). This concept deviates from Schechner’s idea, in which an entire custom of performance transforms from efficacy to entertainment, and possibly back again with the tacit agreement of all participants and observers.

To this end, she talks about exorcistic rituals which have complex “liminal” performances – those performances that seem to be between two states of transformation or reversal – and that the liminal performances can be both efficacious and entertaining. The liminal performer is the one being exorcised in Obeyesekere’s figuration; likewise, in the case of the Tupi anthropophagic ritual, it is the victim/sacrificee. While it seems that these performances are the most liminal in the sense that the person is undergoing a transformation (from possessed to free or, in the case of the Tupi, from enemy tribal member to consumed ancestor found and reintegrated), these rituals have “categories for both participant and spectator, for

whom the significance and meaning of the performance must necessarily be different” (Obeyesekere 130). However, the concept of liminality can extend to apply to the role assumed by all present for the ritual. In an exorcistic ritual, for instance, a spectator there for entertainment may become a participant, praying for the release of the demon; likewise, a heretofore credulous participant might undergo a momentary change in faith and become a mere spectator, stepping back from the action and watching dispassionately.

The liminal phase, according to Turner, “provides a stage... for unique structures of experience... in milieus detached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ... gender reversals, ... and many other phenomena and processes” (11). In the case of the Tupi anthropophagic ritual, the most obvious liminal phase is occupied by the victim, who is no longer the enemy and not yet the ancestor about to be consumed and reintegrated into the tribe; however, many other participants occupy liminal states throughout the ritual: the chief (Staden’s “Konyan Bebe”) is an animal when devouring flesh and gains the name of another warrior when he kills someone and eats him. Thus, he is not only Konyan Bebe but is occupying a monstrous space of ambiguity, neither fully human nor fully his own person. However, the theatrics of the ritual itself (the music and dancing for instance) are designed to inspire participation and integration into the trancelike space occupied by the participants; therefore, the performance draws the audience out of complacent spectatorship and hopefully into a space of participation.

Therefore, it is possible that the Tupinamba actually fine-tuned and personalized their ritualistic performances for the benefit of their observant victims and would-be proto-ethnographers. The ritual itself should be considered to extend beyond the moment or even entire evening of the actual sacrificial killing. Because it takes time (roughly ten months) to prepare and transform the victim to a new identity as a member of the tribe<sup>25</sup>, the entire duration of the captive's stay is ritualized and ceremonial as he is integrated into the tribe.

Staden indicates how his capture begins with a ritual performance, which he is required to participate in. He is compelled to shout to the women in the village as he approaches, "I, your food, am coming!" in their language (54); the women lead him in a ritual dance while they sing a traditional song reserved only for those they are going to eat (54); and the women of the village ritually beat him, saying, "With this blow, I take revenge on you for my friend, the one who was killed by those, among whom you have been" (54). After the song has finished and he has been presented to the king, the women take him away again, according to custom, and shave his face, including his eyebrows and beard. Staden at first resists having his beard shaven, but ultimately, it is shaven off, with scissors traded with the French

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the process begins with the captive's facial hair being shaven off and he is consigned to spend his days among the women of the tribe, as a child. Over the next ten months (which, as I note elsewhere is roughly equivalent to human gestation), he can be perceived to "grow up" as a member of the tribe, gaining a wife and a new identity as a member of the tribe. As a result of this rebirth, when he is consumed, the tribe is actually reintegrating their own lost members of the tribe who have been eaten by the enemy tribe, and the chief adds another name to his own list of names, ritualistically growing his community by reclaiming those who have been captured and integrating them on a symbolic level.



(56). After he is shaven, rattling beads are tied around his ankles and he is fitted with a bird tail. The women sing another song to which he is required to dance in time, making noises with the rattle anklets (57-8). The active participation of the women in this ritual performance is the crux of this work and will be discussed in depth momentarily.

Thus, the ritual is a performance that is cooperative and holds meaning for both the captive and the captor. If it held no meaning for the captive, then the captive would not play such a vital role in the ritual. In fact, the captive must be a willing participant in one long ritual beginning at the moment of capture and ending with the ceremonial slaying. In the intervening months, the captive is well fed and his sexual needs are carefully tended, making his a mostly peaceful ending. While Staden was probably not aware of the ceremonial significance of what occurred in the months between the prisoner's capture and slaying, the time spent was most likely relevant for the other participants. At the end of the nine or ten-month period (interestingly mirroring the human gestational period), after he presumably reaches a level of sexual and nutritional satiety, the highly ritualistic activity (meaning religious activity that is noticeable to Staden) resumes.

Much of the final Tupinamba anthropophagic ritual is interactive, with the “victim”<sup>26</sup> playing a vital role in the performance including recitation of specific lines. Staden outlines the dialogue: “Then the one, who is going to kill him... says [to the captive]: Well, here I am. I will kill you, since your friends have also killed and eaten many of my friends. He answers: When I am dead, I will still have many friends, who are certainly going to avenge me” (132).

Thus, both participants in the ritual have a role, and both are responsible for accurate enactment of the ritual roles. It is not unlike the recitation of The Apostles’ Creed or other responsive readings that serve as statements of faith in Christian liturgies. A curious reader wonders whether, if the Tupinamba had chosen to bring Staden along to the end of the ritual, if, indeed the moment of the ceremonial killing had come, what would have happened when Staden refused to speak his part of the speech-act in the ceremony?

I refer to this action as a speech-act deliberately because there is a relevant parallel between Tupi ritual and Christian ritual. In the case of transubstantiation, when the Catholic priest says, “Take and eat; this is my body (or blood), which is for

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<sup>26</sup> I use quotation marks around the term “victim” here because I intend to draw attention to the notion that the participant in the ritual is less a victim than a participant. He fills an important role in both communities by being ritually consumed by his opposing tribe; his job may be undesirable, but it is necessary if there is to be remembrance and acknowledgement of the lineage. (I call the job of the sacrificial victim “undesirable” although it should be noted that, in a subsistence economy, surrounded by wild animals, venomous insects and snakes, and colonialist interlopers, one cannot expect to have much of a life expectancy, and spending the lion’s share of one’s final year of life as the fatted calf is, at the very least, materially comfortable if not actually a desirable and noble death).

you; do in remembrance of me,” the wafer (or wine) ritualistically turn into the actual body and blood of Christ; likewise, when the sacrificial victim in the Tupi ritual says, “I will still have many friends, who are certainly going to avenge me,” he positions himself in a lineage of his tribe, those who have been eaten, and those who will eat. Moreover, in the ten months that he remains in custody, he is ritualistically integrated into the tribe, with a wife, sex, celebrations, and perhaps even the conception of a child. This nine or ten month gestation period is a period of rebirth, when he becomes a replacement of a lost member of the tribe, a representational member that has been consumed by the enemy tribe. The “victim” has an important and relevant role in the ritual killing. While Staden claims that the Tupi let him go because they came to consider him a prophet and a seer, it is possible that they also realized that his disbelief in the ritual (or his inability to comprehend the transubstantial nature of the ritual work, or simply his reluctance to participate in it) made him a misfit for the fulfillment of the ritual purpose and compromised the efficacy of the ritual itself.

The crucial role of the victim in the ritual sacrifice shows that the ritual is tailored to speak to a specific audience, that it is, indeed, a performance, and that the performers and audience are interchangeable. High ritual was growing increasingly out of fashion in Reformation-era Germany, and Staden most likely had been privy to the debate. Susan Karant-Nunn notes that Reformation ideology had a singular aim that “all that was animal must be ‘harnessed,’ and human beings [were] compelled to separate themselves more fully from the exterior, lower world of

nature” (37). This thinking, of course, was paired with the marginalization of Catholic ritualism and magical mythologies. With Reformation theology clearly at the fore of Staden’s mind, this Eucharistic specter of the anthropophagic ritual must have been alarming and disconcerting, yet it may also have reminded him of his own education to eschew high ritual as animalistic discourse.

As I mentioned earlier, with half a century of colonial interventions and aggressions in their realm of experience, the Tupinamba certainly had a better sense of Europe than Staden may have imagined they did. Travel narratives seem to focus largely on the writer’s “discovery” of a “strange” culture and details of the natives’ proclivities with little awareness as to the Indigenous people’s thinking about Europeans and little acknowledgment of Indigenous people’s own anthropological musings about where their traded pair of scissors came from or who made them. Certainly, the Tupinamba considered these elements and came to learn something of the French and the Portuguese before making decisions about engaging in commerce or political negotiations with them.

Michelle Raheja’s article “Reading Nanook’s Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*” explores Raheja’s concept of “visual sovereignty.” In the article, she claims that even before European contact, Indigenous nations “theorized about the concept of sovereignty in order to discursively distinguish themselves from the other human, spirit, animal, and inanimate communities surrounding them through performance, songs, stories, dreams, and visual texts” (1164). This pre-colonial thinking about ways of creating

discursive distinctions serves to underscore the point that the Tupinamba were aware of the culture of the European by perhaps noticing – inasmuch as Staden noticed – the habits of personal attire, grooming, and religion (for all encounter narratives include evidence of the writer attempting to offer exegeses on the Christian faith to the benighted “savages”) of their interlocutor. Thus, we can assume that the Tupi were able to draw some extrapolations about the writer’s culture based on Staden’s predecessors’ (and his own) inquiries into their culture in addition to what piqued his interest about the particularities of their daily life. Moreover, we can imagine that the Tupis responded to what they knew about Staden’s culture and that they may even have tailored and altered the ritual to accommodate an outsider participant.

Raheja’s theoretical term “visual sovereignty” refers to the desire of Indigenous subjects of ethnography “to confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of... dominance and stereotype” (1160). The thrust of Raheja’s work is to privilege Indigenous participation in (Western) knowledge production as well as to explore spaces of purely Indigenous knowledge production. It is important to examine Staden’s narrative through a lens of visual sovereignty, to think about his work in terms of Tupinamba knowledge production and to respect their role as able ethnographers. After half a century of interaction with the warring “tribes” of Europe, the Tupinamba had enough of a sense of the political

machinations of these outsiders to be able to accurately judge and exploit the political and commercial resources to their benefit. To do this, they had to come to understand the culture as well.

One concern that would certainly have arisen for Staden was the prominent role women took in the anthropophagic ceremony, and this point is central to my work. The sheer joy with which the women enacted their roles may speak to the effort to tailor and personalize their performance for Staden. Sixteenth-century European Protestantism had somewhat deracinated ritualistic practice in Germany, and the toning down of the ceremonial spectacle required fewer ceremonial participants; consequently, whatever liturgical activity women had once engaged in (as nuns, perhaps) became moot in the Reformed church. If we accept that the Tupis' goal was to socialize their captive into a participant role in their ritual, they may have performed with Staden's peculiar anxieties in mind, and cleverly used gender roles to that end. But first it is important to understand more about Staden's worldview and the gender ideology of Reformation Europe; therefore, one more foray into Reformation ideology is crucial.

In theory (in Luther's theory, in fact), the Reformation provided legion opportunities for women's liberation, particularly through Luther's re-conceptualization of celibacy. Prior to the Reformation, marriage was viewed as the next-best option to celibacy in its aim of managing sexuality; however, Martin Luther posited that God was in favor of marriage, as proven by His design at the time of Creation. As Susan Karant-Nunn claims:

Feminist scholars... tended to conclude that Luther, consonant with other forces at work in his day, did help in bringing about change, but that the nature of innovation was not invariably of the elevating, liberating sort that the Reformer himself seems to have believed. (7)

She notes that Luther was a product of his time and that he espoused many of the beliefs of the century as influenced by Humanist thought, but that more significantly, he was profoundly influenced by the clerical culture in which he had been trained.

She continues:

During the sixteenth century, women's economic and legal standing deteriorated, and local courts carried out an unprecedentedly rigorous oversight over the domestic and private – that is, over women's – sphere. This evolution cannot be laid at Luther's feet, although, it must be added, he was a man of his age. (7)

The rite of marriage seemingly did away with the widely held concept of the sully nature of sex and the need for celibacy; nonetheless, it also divested women of the few opportunities for education and independence that convent life previously offered, resulting in the erosion of economic and legal personhood. Indeed, it complemented the European notion of coverture (most popular in England), the complete erasure of women's civic life, with their total juridical and ecclesiastical existence being subsumed under the more comprehensive rights of their husbands.

Considering Staden's experience, the Tupi practice of polygamy was a far cry from celibacy. For a country just getting used to the notion of marriage as a divine institution and sexual intercourse being something sacred and ordained by God, Staden's encounter with a polygamous band of men "doing things" (122) with

several different women must have been somewhat overwhelming. Unlike his counterpart, Léry, who goes into great detail about the emotional and social complexities of plural marriage, Staden mentions it in passing, but also, unlike Léry, he makes reference to the act of sex (however obliquely, calling it “doing things”), thereby demonstrating his awareness of and perhaps fascination with their sexual encounters.

Nevertheless, back in Germany, Luther’s notion of *Sola Scripturae* might have been another means through which women could gain social footing since the idea behind it is that humans need no intermediaries to God; accordingly, the scripture is enough to gain access to the divine. The elevation of the marriage ceremony, however, obscured that opportunity by placing the man as the head of religious affairs and his wife as his “loyal helpmeet.” In doing away with the patrilineal hierarchy of the Catholic Church – a series of Fathers, each deferring to the man ranking higher in the church structure and ultimately ending with the Holy Father, the Pope – each woman got her own patriarchal intermediary and thereby gained immediate feedback on God’s will within the confines of her own home. Thus, *Sola Scripturae*, originally intended to do away with intermediaries, inadvertently made God more inaccessible to women through its complementary doctrine of the sanctity of marriage and the foreclosure of religious roles for women.

More far-reaching than being subject to their husbands’ spiritual exegeses, however, was the notion that Reformation-era European women were, in fact, perceived as extensions of their husbands’ physical bodies. Karant-Nunn cites



language of the Protestant marriage covenant that indicates this concept. After a recap of the story of Genesis, in which woman is made from man's rib, the minister would turn to the couple and say:

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh.... Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is also the head of the Church... but just as the church is subject to Christ, so must women be to their husbands in everything.... In the same way, men also are bound to love their wives, as they love their own bodies. In loving his wife a man loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body; on the contrary, he provides and cares for it. (14)

This notion of women's bodies being part and parcel of their husbands' bodies is relevant in consideration of the language of colonial expansion of the time, in which the land is referred to in feminine terms and there is a perceived need for management of its resources. Through an examination of primary documents including letters, Annette Kolodny's germinal text, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* establishes a gendering of the land as a means of putting a new and unsettling experience of colonial expansion into manageable terms. Kolodny notes that these texts demonstrate a conflation of the unexplored land with mother, virgin, and female imagery. With the masculine explorer positioned in a dyadic relationship to the feminine land, the imagery of the land – and therefore the experience itself – becomes more manageable, familiar, and assimilable. First, explorers wrote promotional tracts that encouraged other countrymen to join them in the new land, and the language reflected a nostalgic coming home to “virginal land” and “mother earth,” but later, as the colonial project

continued, concerns began to crop up around “raping” of the land and taking advantage of the fruits of the new world.

So what is Hans Staden to think when, upon being captured by a cannibalistic tribe, he is handed over to a group of obstreperous harridans who refer to him as their food, force him to dress up and dance in feathers and rattles, and shave him bald? Staden notices a lot about gender relations among the Tupinamba. He notices, for instance, that, “There are no particular midwives there. When a woman is in labor, the nearest person, whether man or woman, runs to help her” (121). Therefore, men are as likely to service women as other women are. He notices, also, that women are somewhat in charge of the captive while he is a member of the tribe (a move that may be intended to infantilize the captive, and contribute to his rebirth as a lost member of that tribe). He observes that women are “soothsayers.” (Although, when he asks for clarification as to why a woman soothsayer says a spirit wants to know when Staden will be killed and eaten, she elides his question and merely tells him that she wasn’t curious; it was the spirit speaking.) (126). It doesn’t escape Staden’s notice that women get first dibs on the cooked flesh; women get to carry the first four pieces of the cut up body around the village shouting and shrieking; it is a woman who “shrieks with joy” and brings the club used to brain the prisoner (132); and women are the ones to stick a piece of wood into the dead man’s “arse to prevent a discharge” (137).

This must have seemed like a lot of political, religious, and even sexual (in that uncomfortable image of necrophilic sodomy) power for women to someone

coming from the gender paradigm Karant-Nunn depicts. Another contributing factor that underscores Staden's Reformation-era anxieties is that Southwest Germany is where the European witch-hunts were most aggressive, and mostly targeted women. The witch-hunts started nearly a century before, and slowly accelerated until the period between 1561 and 1670, which manifested as the peak years of the witch-hunts, when women were primarily targeted for witchcraft in Germany; therefore, the decade before, the 1550s, served as a sort of ramping up to this gender-based anxiety. Fear of powerful women outside of the domestic realm, even possibly eating the flesh of other people, was rampant among Germans at this time and would soon develop into a kind of gender-specific hysteria.

All of these anxieties are apparent in Staden's work, yet one stands out as most significant: the question of childbirth and midwifery. The fact that this most important work was not specialized offers an important glimpse into Tupi sexual politics. Seeing the female pudendum was not taboo; the kind of care a new mother and baby needed was not considered gender-exclusive (a man was expected to be as competent as a woman to provide it); and the support of new life was the work of all members. This indicates a deep investment in tribal vitality and the support and nurturance of both new life and new life-givers. While I am not arguing that Tupinamba ethos was entirely gender-blind (indeed, there is not enough extant evidence to either prove or disprove such a claim), it is evident from the rich roles women played in important rituals and the attentive care they received during childbirth from any member who happened to be near enough to provide them with

care, that women played a vital role in the political, spiritual, and economic life of their community. Staden's Eurocentric attempt to reduce their cultural relevance is thwarted by their perspicacity and fierce competence. As deeply spiritual soothsayers and prophets (not simply apostates who vehemently rejected the word of the Christian God as delivered by His devotees); as able ethnographers (not *wilden, nacketen* "savages"); as committed anthropophagists intent on maintaining the strength of their tribe (not *menschfresser Leuthen*); and as skilled performers engaged in a display of visual sovereignty aimed at socializing their audience into a space of ritual participation, these women deployed a type of proto-feminist aggression through a finely-tuned performance based on thorough research of sociological data they collected and knowledge they hungrily consumed.

## Chapter Four

### Writing Sexual Sovereignty and Punitive Porn:

#### The *Vidas* of Colonial Mexican Nuns as Protofeminist Resistance

“If you do know that *here is one hand*, we’ll grant you all the rest....From its *seeming* to me—or to everyone—to be so, it doesn’t follow that it *is* so. What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it.” –Ludwig Wittgenstein

“I could not possibly tell of the great and good things I recognize in my soul arising from the severity and harshness with which I have always abused my body.... And at times I am all in pieces.” – Sor Maria de San Jose

From the late fifteenth until the mid-eighteenth centuries, nuns in New Spain wrote *vidas*, the stories of their own lives, some of which are lost to history, and some of which have been preserved; nevertheless, these works are largely undervalued as literary manifestos envisioning a different life for women than what was afforded during their lifetimes.<sup>27</sup> The *vidas* had the ostensible purpose of glorifying God and bringing attention to Christian sacrifice, written as a means of communicating God’s grace, proving their dedication to Christianity, and inspiring piety and awe of God in readers, though many were also a creative outlet for intelligent women with talent for prose or poetry. *Vidas* were often written at the behest of suspicious superiors, who, under the rhetorical influence and watchful eye

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<sup>27</sup> There is, of course, one prominent example of a beautifully composed *vida* written in the seventeenth century by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, which has gained notoriety in academic circles in the last two decades and has even spilled out into popular culture somewhat, inspiring novels and movies based on Sor Juana’s life; however, her work is perceived as an exception rather than a quintessential representation of the *vida* genre.

of the Inquisition, were wary of heterodoxy and false mysticism. Some nuns were forced to write their *vidas* as a type of extended confession, as retribution for sin, or a punitive sort of proof that they were legitimate occupants of their social position as nuns. Most authors of *vidas* proclaim within their work itself that they experience suffering (even physical pain) associated with writing, claiming that their work lies elsewhere and they are thus taken away from the work the Lord has set for them, and they express anxiety about being fraudulent writers; indeed, one can perceive an almost palpable hand-wringing within the texts—enough to inspire compassion in any sensitive reader. Nevertheless, these texts offer something more than simple professions of faith, something which does not require much mining: there are undeniable currents of hostility, resistance, and even sexual release in the *vidas*, wherein writing nuns seize the opportunity to undermine women’s oppression through the culturally accepted means of glorifying God.<sup>28</sup>

The primary readers of *vidas* were Father Confessors and other church officials in charge of maintaining piety in the fold, so it is important to consider Church authorities as the primary reading audience and the works themselves as written for that audience, and to keep matters of Church hierarchy and Early Modern Catholic gender ideology in mind. Women of this period were generally not

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<sup>28</sup> Because few of these works are available in modern publication, my work relies heavily on two sources: one is a survey of *vidas* collected and translated by Arenal and Schlau, entitled *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*, and the other is *A Wild Country Out in the Garden: The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun*, which is a translation of the entire oeuvre of one nun, Sor Maria de San Jose, who lived from 1656-1719 in what is now Mexico.

authorized to write; indeed, most were illiterate. Even those who were not illiterate were discouraged from writing, an intellectual pursuit perceived as befitting only men. Moreover, religious information was seen as best interpreted and imparted through male students of scripture rather than through females' purported firsthand experiences. According to Arenal and Schlau, "Especially after the Council of Trent, the prose of women in the convent was always an act of defiance although it purported to be an act of obedience. Women wrote from a position of perceived strength and avowed weakness" (16). The Catholic Church's edicts, in an effort to reestablish ecclesiastic control over the Church and its dominion (as will be discussed later), effected great alterations to convent life, one of which was to spur the nuns to greater (albeit more covert) resistance through writing *vidas*.

For instance, nuns wishing to write would report to their Father Confessor that the Lord had appeared in a vision, commanding them to write. The Father Confessors, invested in avoiding God's anger for disobedience, were then left with no option but to command the nuns to write; thus the writing was accomplished with official approbation. For instance, Sor Maria de San Jose, who lived from 1656-1719, and joined the convent at nearly thirty years old, after a long life of self-denial at her family home, consistently avers throughout her *vida* that she was forced to write. Sor Maria often claims, as do other writing nuns, that she cannot even read or write and that God, therefore is doing the writing for her (18, 92). (She also contradicts this in her own *vida*, however, noting that when she was young, her mother taught her to write and read and took special care of her (28).)

This rhetorical device of positing themselves as essentially illiterate amanuenses, used by many Mexican nuns of the period, craftily shifts liability away from the writer of the *vida* to God, which absolves her of responsibility and also provides her with the legitimizing stamp of being chosen to be God's messenger. Sor Maria even notes in her *vida* that God alters the text without her knowledge so that when she comes back to write again, she is surprised to find that it has been changed (37). Many Father Confessors, responsible for the Inquisition-defined purity of their cloisters, required their nuns to write their *vidas* as a means of monitoring their activities and mining the sources of their devotion, guarding the single-minded vision of the cloistered life against heterodoxy. Thus, *vidas* not only communicated religious piety to readers; they also served as a type of disciplinary device for nuns: watchful Father Confessors scrutinized their content, perusing carefully, searching for signs of impiety or vanity.

Sor Maria often notes that "they" are making her write and validates her efforts by noting that God approves of it (27). This "they" she refers to is probably her Father Confessor, who ordered her to write for up to twenty-three hours a day. When her Mother Superior complained, he forbade her to write and read altogether, underscoring my claim that writing was used as a form of discipline in the convents. Maria's own work states that she often experiences extreme physical pain upon writing (75), adding to the sense of writing as punishment, though her expression of physical pain resulting from writing could really be a factor of wanting to give her



reader the sense that the task was unpleasant and therefore not heretical so that she could carry on with the writing.

What's more, the nuns often refer cryptically to things they have left out of the text, effectively leaving the reader out of their process. Sor Maria's *vida* often notes that more things happened in her visions or mystical experiences than she writes about in the text but that she either does not have the time or the language acquisition to write it (136-7, 147-8). This technique positions the writer as a helpless minion of God and leaves the reader in a disempowered position of ignorance yet unable to blame or take action against the writer lest he should anger God or reveal his own lack of enlightenment. Thus, nuns' *vidas* were a means of gaining control over imperious supervisors by using God as a tool to effect a realignment of the power imbalance attendant to convent life.

Such scrutiny on behalf of the Church authorities was necessitated by cultural changes afoot as a result of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Renaissance criticism of the Catholic Church spawned a need for a closer surveillance of those associated with the Church on the part of Church authorities, a burden which often fell on the Father Confessors charged with judiciously guarding the faith against secularism. By the time Martin Luther issued his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, criticizing the Catholic Church for corruption and moral laxity, convents and monasteries had fallen into a kind of secular existence, operating as large, self-sustaining cities, replete with social classes and a host of other mortal trappings—including parties, a penchant for fashion, romance, and drinking. Outside the walls

of parochial life, there were efforts to create similar opportunities for social networking with other Catholics through the establishment of confraternities (or guilds) during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Confraternities were formed on the basis of locality or occupation as voluntary clubs dedicated to devotion to a saint who represented certain ideals or values. They were a means of belonging to a group of people with shared values (as nuns and monks were) while still operating within the “real” world (outside the cloister) and attending to the responsibilities of work and family. Confraternities demanded membership fees and oaths of loyalty and worked to improve social welfare (e.g. burial of the dead or care of orphans and criminals) and to enhance the cultural milieu they lived in through performances and carnivals. When Luther assailed the Catholic Church, he impugned confraternities, noting that they relied heavily on the concept of Purgatory and held extended prayer sessions for souls waiting to be released into Heaven. Luther saw these prayer sessions, followed by guild-sponsored feasts, as opportunities for drunkenness and gluttony (Mullett 112). The convents were likewise subsumed into his criticism as social groups straying from their religious intent.

Over time, the Catholic Church began to take Luther’s criticism of their religious institutions as being mere “feasting associations” (Mullett 112) seriously and perceived a need to gain greater control of both confraternities and religious cloisters (including monasteries and convents). As Luther’s ideas caught on, the church began to find itself under fire and at risk of losing authority if changes were

not brought about to appease the hoi polloi, who had found themselves drawn in by Luther's criticisms. Leopold von Ranke posits that the transformation of the Catholic Church during the sixteenth century occurred because it was "essentially triggered into a hostile and defensive reaction by the Protestant Reformation" (qtd. in Mullett 119) to contain and quash religious dissent.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of the social and political changes circulating, the Catholic Church launched a Counter-Reformation beginning with the Council of Trent, which insisted on the Church taking definitive action by cracking down on both confraternities and convents, restoring the Roman papacy's primacy in the Church and all its dominion, emphasizing the papacy's liturgical and devotional leadership of the Church, and ordering the papacy to be more committed to observance of the Church's rules (Mullett 77). This set of edicts included the establishment of The Roman Inquisition and the issuance of the *Index of Prohibited Books*. Moreover, the Council of Trent sought more control and regulation of convent life, averring, "how great a splendor and usefulness accrues to the Church of God from monasteries properly regulated" (qtd. in Mullett *The Catholic Reformation* 68). All of these steps undertaken by the Catholic Church impacted the lives of nuns in convents, effectively constricting their worlds, but ironically providing an outlet through the structure of religious writing. As secular books came under attack through the administration of the *Index of*

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<sup>29</sup> Historian Michael Mullett perceives a more subtle push and pull between Catholics and Protestants, in which both made significant changes and neither was railroaded into making decisions; either way, changes were afoot, and the Protestant Reformation was the initiating factor.

*Prohibited Books*, a niche opened for a literary genre of religious writing, which flourished.

The Roman Inquisition was a separate endeavor from The Spanish Inquisition (which eventually extended to include Inquisitions in Spain's territories, including Mexico), starting at different times and having distinct aims. While the Roman Inquisition primarily targeted heresy within the Catholic Church in Europe (though it eventually extended to roughing up Protestants) and established laws aimed at maintaining papal authority, The Spanish Inquisition, a governmental entity and an outcropping of political ambition and colonialism, targeted the Moors and Jews through the ostensible aim of eradicating Islamism and Crypto-Judaism (Judaism practiced in secret). Jews and Moors were strongly encouraged to convert to Catholicism, with the promise of higher social standing, prestige, and business connections. *Conversos* (those who converted) were watched closely for any signs of relapse into Crypto-Judaism; they were most likely to be targeted for heresy. Therefore, the Spanish Inquisition concerned itself primarily with policing religious adherence and maintaining stringent guidelines for those of the Catholic faith as a means of marginalizing minority ethnic groups.

The Mexican Inquisition, operating strictly in the New World, was an outcropping of the Spanish Inquisition, but it took on a distinctly New World tone, with a blend of features from various parts of the Old World. The few *Conversos*, *Marranos*, or *Moriscos* (converted Muslims) who ended up in the New World presented little concern in contrast with the Indians needing to be Christianized and

new Catholic institutions needing to be established as a foothold for colonial interests; therefore, though the Spanish Inquisition was The Mexican Inquisition's progenitor, it did not necessarily persecute the same population. In fact, The Mexican Inquisition was a rather disorganized affair in contrast to the Spanish, targeting widely divergent populations and offenses. Due to poor record keeping, the number of victims of The Mexican Inquisition remains unknown, though public executions did take place, and the Inquisition itself was in place for about 250 years with varying degrees of efficacy and fervor.

According to a Bancroft Library Survey of Mexican Inquisition Documents, the timbre of the accusations was a characteristic New World marriage: a composite event blending elements from both the Roman and the Spanish Inquisition. The accusations included both religious infractions and crimes that compromised the colonial venture, particularly those that supported autochthonous religious ceremonies. So, while there were some convictions for practicing Judaism, there were also accusations of Lutheranism, witchcraft, superstitions, heresy, "not believing in the Holy Virgin," sexual solicitation (including solicitations in the confessional), bigamy, homosexuality, and other sexual perversions<sup>30</sup>, superstition, revelations, and false visions. It is the latter charges which most inform this

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<sup>30</sup> My personal favorite is the case of Toribio Bastarrachea, with a trial record of 128 pages, for officiating in the marriage of two dogs, a case which demonstrates a peculiar interest in the sexual proclivities of the Church's flock, a concern unique to The New World, where the autochthonous populations did not necessarily share European perceptions of chastity, and Church Fathers were particularly ardent in governing and mediating desire and its expressions.

research, as the collective oeuvre of nuns' writing involves explicitly sexual imagery, revelations, and mystical visions. The nuns, in writing their *vidas* against the current of The Mexican Inquisition, often defiantly embrace the crimes they could be persecuted for and implicate the Lord's approbation for doing so.

Authors of *vidas* regularly claimed holy authority through mystical experiences that put them in direct contact with the Holy Trinity and Mary, putting their superiors in the unenviable position of determining the truthfulness of these accounts of spiritual communion. These claims to holy authority constituted a kind of hostile defiance against the conventional channels of the Church, in which the word of God is passed down through male mouthpieces, beginning with the Pope and ending with Father Confessors. Moreover, often the accounts of mystics were infused with sexual imagery that would be unacceptable to describe if it involved humans rather than divine entities. Arenal and Schlau note that the Council of Trent demanded an "indirectness in references to sex, and the requirement of total confession," (11). This would have effectively broadened the nuns' options for communicating heretofore forbidden ideas and feelings. Male clerics were expected to renounce the desires of the flesh and to perform confession as a means of retribution for their desires. Rather than eradicating sexuality and denying their desires as their male superiors were commanded to do, and as they did when they lived "among the world" (outside the cloister), nuns "created, interpreted, and translated sex into religious discourse" (Arenal and Schlau 11).

Thus nuns' relationship to sexuality and power took a different trajectory than that of their male counterparts, for the notion of entering a convent as a "Bride of Christ" had a much different connotation than a monk's commitment to a life of fleshly self-abnegation. To this end, many *vidas* are rife with sexual imagery that often comes across as a direct and hostile affront to official doctrines (and their enforcers) aimed at the repression of female sexuality; at the very least, they are blatant releases of sexual desire. Thus, the *vidas* took on the task of undermining women's sexual oppression through the ostensibly accepted means of writing poetry, music, and prose in praise of God, Christ, and Mary.

For example, Madre Maria Magdalena Lorravaquio Munoz (1576-1636)<sup>31</sup> alludes to having a sexual relationship with Christ: "And as my soul sojourned there with ardent desires to love God, there appeared to me a figure of Jesus Christ, standing upright, His most blessed body naked and full of wounds... and looking at him with the eyes of my soul, I heard a voice that said: "This is my bedchamber"" (qtd. in Arenal and Schlau 378). Madre Maria Magdalena's admission of "ardent desires" positions her as a desiring subject rather than a neutral, blank slate. Her choice to present herself as such and then to follow the image with Christ revealing himself to her unclothed and inviting her into his bedchamber is undeniably a sexual allusion. Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, who compiled and translated the work of Sor Maria de San Jose (1656-1719), note that Sor Maria's anatomical

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<sup>31</sup> When possible, I include the dates of the nuns' lives after their names in parentheses because they are almost all named Maria, and the dates are helpful in distinguishing one from another.

references are often strange or at least vague and unclear, so they are difficult to translate precisely. I argue that this is a deliberate act found in many *vidas*. This kind of elision of precise language is both a factor of a time period and religion that eschewed direct references to the sinful, unclean body and an effective smokescreen for readers intent on accusing the writer of heresy. Vagueness would have offered the benefit of presenting a counter-argument of misinterpretation on the part of a salacious reader.

Sor Maria de San Jose (1656-1719) also relies heavily on sexual imagery throughout her *vida*. She refers to herself as attractive and references her luxurious hair and her “plump” body frequently (noting that she was not too fat nor too thin but had a perfect body), giving the reader an appealing visual image of her, which would seem to be counterproductive to her work of writing a religious tract. She recounts a vision she had when she was only a child wherein the baby Jesus appeared to her and gave her a wedding ring, thereby introducing a conflated father/baby/lover paradigm that both destabilizes the notion of God as a monolithic entity and also characterizes God as all-encompassing and all-providing for her needs, which clearly include sexual needs. Later, when she resides in the cloister, she recounts something akin to sexual intercourse with Jesus:

One day when I was at my prayers, I saw Our Lord crucified, quite close to me, and I saw how He took out the nails, lowering Himself from the cross, and then came towards me. The cross stayed standing upright and He came to where I was, and He entered inside me and embraced my soul with a very fond and close embrace, and He said to me, “You see, this is the embrace of a husband and of a father to strengthen you and comfort you so that you can sustain the trials that await you” ... And just so, with cross and all, He entered



inside me and embraced me, leaving me crucified by this embrace... and I said, "Lord and Father of my soul, here I am. You may do whatever You will with me. You already know, Lord, that nothing pleases me but to suffer..." (91)

This euphemism-riddled ecstatic experience is remarkable in its provocative prose. Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, editors of Sor Maria's collected writings, note that *abrazar* and *abrasar* are homonyms in Mexican Spanish, the former meaning "to embrace," and the latter meaning "to kindle, to inflame with passion"; thus, "Maria's phrase, "me abraso" conveys not only "He embraced me" but simultaneously, "He inflamed me with passion" (100). Nuns often spelled phonetically, so it is up to the reader to determine the meaning of ambiguous words, yet either meaning leaves little ambiguity as to the relationship Maria claims to have with Christ in this instance.

Beyond Myers's and Powell's linguistic interpretation, however, there are significant psychosexual, unconscious undercurrents in this passage. Christ's entering inside of her and embracing her strongly suggests sexual intercourse, and the psychoanalytic elements of the rest of the vision back up such a reading: the cross/phallus remains upright/erect, and she concedes to His advances, noting that He may do whatever he chooses with her. She seems to acknowledge that this kind of sexual experience is not generally met with approval: her words to Him indicate that it causes her to suffer, but she must do her duty to her "Husband," as he refers to himself in the vision, and she admits (through a clever sidestep, using God as her voice) that these acts of intercourse with God bring her comfort and joy when she is

facing trials (such as the scrutiny of her Father Confessor or anyone who might impugn her work and experiences as inauthentic). This is a clever way of subverting the Catholic Church-issued doctrines demanding full confession: they fully confess, but they do so shamelessly.

In accounts of other visions, Sor Maria mentions that her Father Confessor orders her to lie down after Matins because she doesn't sleep well, being tormented always by visions and demons, yet when she does, "the Lord bestows His largesse as if I were attending to Him very properly" (107). She notes that when she lies awake at night with these visions, the experiences are "not night for my soul but the clearest and most brightly shining day" (107). In fact, she admits to happily staying up all night praying. Thus, her Father Confessor's order to lie down in an attempt to stave off visions is subverted: she experiences the Lord's "largesse" when she lies down and God likes it when she lies waiting for him to come. Denying her the right to stay up all night praying or having mystical, sexual visions only results in God rewarding her with more sex for "attending to Him very properly." Seemingly, God finds her so irresistible that she does not need to tread the common path (prayerfulness) to gain His approval, but must just lie down in order to be rewarded for her devotion.

In fact, God loves her so much, he appears to her one day when she has been crying and suspends her above the floor for hours and tells her while she hangs there, "My Maria, you have now reached the nakedness a soul should have to be united with Me. There is nothing in this life that... separates you from being united

with Me. You are entirely beautiful to me, from head to feet. There is not one thing in you that displeases me. I take my enjoyment and delight in you, My beloved and My bride” (134). This statement, beginning with her nakedness and ending with a reference to her beauty and her role as his bride, is most effectively perceived as sexual. Nevertheless, it could also be read as an uncanny metaphor for her vulnerability and God’s grace, and I would argue that had the Inquisition called her up on a trial for heresy and false visions, Maria, might have argued that she was only making metaphorical references and not partaking in a carnal experience. Nevertheless, here her sexual desire (and her carnal pleasure) blooms from the page, and her Father Confessor can only find himself in a double bind: the cost of wrongly labeling her visions as heretical is too high, and the final authority too powerful to take a chance on. (On the other hand, he may have found himself titillated by the writings, placing him in further jeopardy: who is the pervert in this equation?)

Maria also makes references to “holding the Lord” in her mouth and “receiving the Lord” in her mouth during Holy Communion, an act which leads to ecstatic passions (107, 169). In scenes evocative of oral sex, she sometimes even finds her mouth filled with an overwhelming “sweetness greater than honey” (199). The choice of thick and sticky honey as a referent is particularly striking in her vision of “holding His Majesty” in her mouth, which in itself is a strange way to conceive of taking Holy Communion as it creates a disproportionate timeframe. In real time, the event of taking Communion does not last long, but her elaborate

visions associated with the oral communion with God make the elongated moment rife with minute details.

Her orality also surfaces in visions of kissing and sucking on Christ's actual body. One day Jesus comes to her to ask her to help Him bear his suffering at seeing so many offenses committed against Him in the world. In particular, there is an unmarried couple in a nearby town having premarital sex, and this deeply bothers Him. Maria claims, "I felt and saw how His Majesty began joining and uniting with me, in such a way that I came to place my lips on those of my Lord. Here I don't know how it is I did not scream aloud..." (134-5). Thereafter, whenever this couple engages in intercourse, God comes to Maria, and they reenact this scene as a means of compensating and negating the offense the unmarried couple commits; for the duration of the kiss, Maria is overwhelmed with passion and "suffering" (135).

Maria lays claim to an experience involving the necessity of her holding her arms out at her sides in the shape of the cross during a highly oral interaction with Christ: "I approached the Lord and put my lips and my mouth on the wound in His side, and holding myself in this way I stayed in the shape of the cross, hanging from the wound in His Majesty's side" (77). She writes about sucking on Christ's stigmata and kissing his body frequently and claims to experience passion whenever she does so, and the intense orality of her experience strongly alludes to sexual desire, for it always includes an orienting description of the rest of her body (hanging in the air, pinioned like a cross, nailed to the bed or floor) that posits the experience as being fully corporeal, not simply oral. In this particular vision, her pose in the shape of the

cross positions her as coeval with Christ in their suffering and sacrifice, making her a befitting bride.

Maria's orality extends beyond the purely sexual into disturbing imagery as well. She notes that one night,

I found myself at the feet of a crucified Christ that is in the choir opposite where I was. At this, I felt as though my lips were placed on the wound upon His Majesty's right foot, and I saw the fresh blood flowing from it in great abundance, and in the mouthfuls I swallowed I felt it as warm as if it were coming from a living body. At this, His Majesty said to me: "My child, drink and taste the sweetness of my blood, which I have poured out at the cost of great bitterness and sorrow." (155)

Here again, Maria is having an oral relationship with Christ, this time with her mouth on his stigmata; however, rather than simply kissing the wounds or sucking on them, she actually drinks Christ's blood, an act that is ecclesiastically approved through the rhetoric of the Eucharist. In the event that Maria had been brought to a tribunal, she could have relied on the ideology of the Eucharist as a *raison d'être* for writing such a thing or for having such a vision; in fact, she could have said that she was so dedicated to the theology of the Eucharist that she didn't need the metaphorical stand-in of sweet, delicious, intoxicating wine to partake in the Lord's Supper. The point here is that her sexualized presentation of the sadomasochistic consumption of blood was a means of chafing against Catholic doctrine and highlighting her seemingly masochistic role as a servile nun while simultaneously narrating herself as a bloodthirsty succubus.

This kind of grotesque imagery, a hallmark of the Mexican *vida* genre, is one feature that makes the *vidas* a form of literary resistance. They are difficult to read,

being both scintillating in their sexual undertones and rife with disturbing imagery, so it is important to recall here that the intended audience (Father Confessors) was forced, as a part of their work responsibilities to read them; thus it complicates and alters the power paradigm. On the one hand, it makes the work of a superior so cognitively dissonant (inasmuch as it leads him into erotic ideation he has ritualistically foresworn as a part of his promise to God) as to be a breach of his duty. On the other hand, the material is so unpleasant and gory as to be nauseating. The accounts come across as brutally punishing.

Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* examines the psychoanalytic elements attendant to differentiation. Unlike Freud, who claimed that experiences of alienation are embodied and turned into neuroses, or Lacan, who claimed that speech is an attempt to ameliorate the unsettling experience of uncanniness, Kristeva claims that there is an attempt to introject (or incorporate) the abject into oneself, which is what throws us into a panic when abjection is encountered outside of our bodies. She notes that we psychically exclude or repudiate the Other while at the same time recognizing that this Other, in fact, bears components of ourselves, and so we maintain a "secure differentiation between subject and object," while at the same time we establish a "defensive position," that reifies our notion of "I and Other" or "Inside and Outside" (7).

She indicates that the abject is "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4). We recognize the abject as a part of our own life experience and are simultaneously drawn to it

and horrified by it because it is the part of us that is not socially appropriate. This means, essentially, that we seek ways to limn our own subjectivity through the sense that we internally maintain and conceal our own abject aspects from others and seek evidence of the abject on the bodies or experiences of others we consider unlike us. Kristeva names rotten food, feces, blood, and nail parings among her examples of abject materials, but also notes, "It is... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

For Kristeva, this is all relative to the original loss of the mother; however, it is also applicable to the colonial project of the early modern era. The horrifying physical examples she gives (those parts of our bodies that we shun, flush, or hide) are merely metonyms for the body as a whole, and the body that is unable or refuses to contain these elements is a social outcast and therefore marginalized. For Kristeva (as for all psychoanalysts), the loss of the primal connection to the mother is the source of all grief, and sadness over any later loss in life can be traced back to this prelinguistic moment of sorrow and deprivation. Thus, the female body becomes a site of abjection through discourses of menstrual blood, breast milk, and the unknown terrain of the unobservable vaginal canal. It is simultaneously perceived as excessive, unruly, and contaminated on the one hand, and a source of nourishment, sustenance, comfort, and bliss on the other. This kind of cognitive dissonance in terms of representation would have presented a more pronounced

conflict for nuns, whose bodies were further circumscribed through Church discourse: their bodies were hidden beneath flowing robes designed to reveal no womanly curves, no signs of their sexuality or fertility (e.g. breasts, menstrual blood). Moreover, they were commanded to master their sexual desires, and never bore children, so their natural body processes (e.g., sexual desire, menstruation) were indeed excessive, being useless reminders of their shunned corporeality.

Therefore, an uninitiated reader would assume that the *vidas* would elide verbal illustrations that depicted bodily experiences such as sex, yet, as the evidence above demonstrates, they did not; moreover, one might assume that the texts would likewise avoid depicting the nuns' bodies in any state, but particularly in states of abject horror. Again, the credulous reader would be wrong, and intriguingly, the imagery of sexuality and gore are often paired in a kind of remonstrance against the voyeuristic reader for his surveillance of the nuns' lives: looking has a cost, and it is steep, for the coupling of sexuality with brutal imagery of self-mortification could only have the effect of punishing a reader who gained any sense of titillation at the first glance into these interior feminine worlds.

Sor Maria details her childhood in her *vida*, initially alluding to her own beauty; she then establishes that her mother and her sisters are very beautiful, thus encouraging the reader to infer that she is beautiful by genetic association. She refers to her long, flowing, gorgeous hair, claims that her body is perfectly proportioned, and notes that she has never associated with men (14). Though she begins by establishing her beauty and purity as a virgin, she promptly turns the



tables and likens herself to an animal: she refers to her toenails as “claws” (21), making her body animalistic and drawing an uncanny association for her reader, who is left with a vision of a curvaceous, young virgin with flowing hair and... claws on her feet?

Furthermore, Maria presents her body in degraded states and in positions that can be interpreted as sexually receptive. She details for her eager audience a vision of her nubile body in such a state as a young teenager at home before she joined the convent:

I decided to make a hut of wooden planks propped against a tree... [It was] so snug that I could not fit inside unless I knelt down, and in order to get in though the door I had to bend double or go in on my knees... The first thing I did was to take off my clothes and remove the underlinen and dress I had worn until then. I made a shirt, or a sort of tunic of coarse cotton cloth, and over this tunic I put some woolen panels, and on top of it all a thick flannel skirt, very rough and heavy; all so snug that I did not fit in it very comfortably, because I have always been a bit plump—not too much, but pleasantly so...” (21)

Here she is on all fours and climbing along to squeeze herself into a tiny space unfit for human occupation. But from this image, she leaps to another, of her undressing, including removal of her underclothes. For a moment, the reader may be drawn in by the imagery of young Maria on her hands and knees juxtaposed with a depiction of her nudity, but the moment is fleeting, for it is followed with a description of clothing that portends mortification and deliberate bodily discomfort in its fit and its material. Then the reader is once again diverted from the uncomfortable imagery of the clothing to the idea of her “pleasantly plump” body,

effecting a sort of roller-coaster experience of being whipped to and fro between desire and angst.

Moreover, in Maria's account of her youth, she indicates that she refused to sleep on a mattress because she was devoted to self-mortification:

[I] made my bed on a wooden stand... It was just one foot wide, and as it was not fastened to the stand, it was at risk of falling down if I should move in any way. My bedclothes were a blanket that was so short I couldn't stretch out without uncovering my feet. For the... pillow, I had a piece of beam. And I had a trick I used so that I wouldn't move out of place while I was sleeping, which was that I would gather the bedclothes down around the nails of my feet [claws] with a very strong sash, and I would pull it as tight as possible so that even using a great deal of force the clothes could not come untied. I wrapped the other end tightly around my waist over a haircloth I had put there. There I was, all wrapped up like a ball of yarn, with my knees pressing into my chest and unable to stir or make any movement at all. (21-2)

Here she depicts herself in a state of extreme bondage unto the point of compromising her safety. Her feet and body are bound so tightly that she is unable to move. This positions her as vulnerable in both her inability to defend herself and also in her unconscious state. The fact that this happens in her "bed" also generates sexual connotations. She depicts herself in a fetal position and lets the reader know that she was very tightly bound so that she could not move, thereby appealing to the sadistic viewer who might find an interest in a nubile, helpless young girl lying bound in her bed at night. Nevertheless, she indicates that it was she who bound herself as tightly as she could so that she could not stretch out and relax. This is a reflection of her own level of control of the sadomasochistic fantasy: the voyeur can see her exercising this level of control over herself, but he cannot partake in the

fantasy of control, and this serves as a reminder of his position as an object rather than a subject with control, giving her ultimate subjectivity in her maneuverings.

Maria's *vida* does not stop with the mere hint of sadomasochism through fantasies of bondage, however. It seems to trace a narrative arc moving from sexual fantasies of bondage and discipline to extreme abjection. It slips quickly past sadomasochist fantasies of violence on the body into the result of violence: the body in its most abject state. Within pages of the description above, in which her enticing body is bound and vulnerable, she moves into descriptions of extreme sacrificial deprivation and degradation. Noting that she was such a vile sinner that she was not worthy of eating bread, she would pilfer rotten tortillas that were allocated for the dogs on the hacienda where she lived (24). The account of this action establishes her as a woeful sinner (which only stirs the imagination of a curious reader since she has recounted no sinful acts yet has repeatedly indicated that her sins were only in intent or ideation and not in act); moreover, the image of a beautiful young girl choking down moldy tortillas intended for semi-wild dogs effectively turns the reader's stomach. Thus, this one narrative accomplishes dual tasks: her reader knows that she is fantastically lascivious, which should turn him on, but then he is struck with horror at the very image that moments ago animated his lust; thus she gains control over his desires, conflating his desire and his revulsion.

As if this image is not nauseating enough, Maria's *vida* takes it further into the realm of absolute horror. She notes that when her father died (before she lived in the convent), he left her two cilices, which he had worn on his arms for penance,

but she “did not find them suitable” for her limbs and so wore them around her waist (24); thus, they provided a tighter fit than cilices are meant to. She wove new ones from horsehair and recounts her penance thus:

I would put these on my arms and thighs in the morning as soon as I got up, so tight that my hands turned livid and almost black... The one I put around my waist... from the first day that I put it on, I never again took off. What I did was little by little to pull the cords that tied it tighter and tighter, and so as time passed it dug itself into my flesh. There were a great many vermin, which they call lice, produced by the horsehair... I suffered greatly and was heartily troubled by these bad folk. I would feel them crawling like ants in the wounds that had opened at my waist, for they were almost feeding on the very bones of my ribs. In the morning, the pus would lie in puddles on the floor where I slept from the seeping of my wounds. (25)

The image of her “livid” hands, turned black from blood restriction is alarming, but the lice crawling around under her skin takes horror to a new level of extreme. This is more than simply a desire to be holy; it is a desire to arouse in her reader a sense of disgust coupled with erotic confusion as a result of the explicit presence of her body in the narrative. She goes on to say that after she grew “weary of the bad smell of the wounds that had formed at [her] waist” (25), she tried to take it off, but could not do so without the help of two of her little sisters, and when they untied it, it fell to pieces because it had disintegrated into her flesh. She writes of her regret at losing the cilice and not being able to make use of it for her penance anymore, and she notes that she had to wait awhile for the wounds to heal on her waist before she began to wear the cilice again, which she did “constantly, every day” (25). This obsession with extreme penance is not unusual: the *vidas* of Mexico consistently describe in gruesome detail acts of penitence and self-mortification,

including vivid descriptions of the tools used to effect self-punishments and the resulting wounds.

This disgusting imagery does exactly what Kristeva notes we all fear: it conflates inside and outside. The lice “feeding on the very bones” of Maria’s body, the pus dripping into a puddle beneath her as she sleeps, the smell of her own flesh putrefying is disgusting and overwhelming. But it also contains subversive possibilities. It takes the female body, objectified and sexualized, and makes it repugnant, but what’s more, it does so in a culturally sanctioned way, by taking the act of penance (demanded of devout women religious) to an extreme end. The *vida* dares to imagine the female body in an extreme state of discipline and obedience, to illustrate to the Church authorities the ultimate result of their projected fantasy of the docile, receptive, obedient female body, and it is not the body of a beautiful, passive, nurturing mother figure or lover, but a horrific near-corpse, rotting in the putrefaction of its own acquiescence.

Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (1695-1756) likewise employed abject imagery in her *vida*. Maria Anna’s most intriguing use of the abject, while less gruesome than Maria de San Jose’s, is nonetheless a clever assault on the masculinist paradigm of Catholicism. Maria Anna uses less gore and more ambiguity, an element sure to provoke anxiety in her male reader. Kristeva notes that “abjection is above all ambiguity” (9), making certain that we don’t simply consider gore when we think of the abject, for it is also that which does not fit into neat social categories. Judith Butler considers the abject in this way as well, noting

that the abject is the “unlivable” or “uninhabitable” zone of social life, wherein someone who does not fit into one of the predetermined realms offered by a system predicated on a binary notion of sex and gender is rendered a social misfit (3). Butler claims that subjects are “constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside” (3). In this way, masculinity (indeed, maleness) is constituted by knowledge of femaleness or femininity and the understanding that the presence of femininity or female sexual characteristics constitutes something other than maleness, which therefore defines maleness and masculinity as the absence of femaleness and femininity. Any presence of femaleness or femininity in a man is, therefore, abject in that it disturbs the binary status quo.

Maria Anna wrote many treatises on breast milk entitled *Devotion in Honor of the Purest Milk with Which the Child Jesus Was Nourished* and *Sea of Grace Which the Highest Passed on to Most Holy Mary, Mother of the Word Incarnate in the Most Pure Milk of her Virginal Breasts*. In her *vida*, she describes the holy powers associated with Mary’s breast milk, which she claims is magically generated from Mary’s own transformed menstrual blood. According to Maria Anna, Mary’s job was “not only to conceive the Son of God within her virginal nuptial chamber, vesting him with her most pure flesh, that the true God might be true Man, but also to possess the very purest milk, entirely spotless and virginal, to nourish the Creator and Sustainer... the God-made-Man with her own blood, changed into pure white milk...” (392).

If, as Kristeva notes, bodily fluids outside of the body are considered abject and horrifying, and if, as Butler notes, that which is feminine or female is abject because it serves as a constitutive outside to masculinity and maleness, then breast milk and menstrual blood would be the apotheosis of abjection in their inherent association with the female body. Thus Maria Anna effectively obfuscates the holiness of Christ and Mary, both by according them human attributes and by associating them with abject bodily fluids such as breast milk and menstrual blood. Moreover, she claims that if anyone wants to truly achieve a holy state, one should drink the breast milk of Mary: “[H]er breasts are better than wine... because in order to take milk from the breast one must be a little child; and anyone who desires this milk, though he be old, let him become a child to approach the breasts of Mary Most Holy, and receive mystically the nourishment found in the milk of such a mother” (393).

Maria Anna effectively elevates the abject material that indicates the mark of “woman” in her culture to holy sustenance that anyone should be grateful to ingest and in fact presents such an act as the truest path to absolution and mystical enlightenment. Her testimonies to the power of Mary’s milk are a product of her mystical experiences, so anyone who dares to challenge the veracity of Maria Anna’s claims runs the risk of losing the opportunity for spiritual enlightenment; therefore, any reader seriously committed to practicing the Catholic faith in earnest would, upon reading the *vida* find himself clamoring for breast milk rather than shunning it as base and material.

Arenal and Schlau's book, a survey of *vidas*, provides evidence that the presence of blood, breast milk, and gore in the *vidas* of New Spain made them distinguishable from those of other Latin American countries; the authors aver that this distinction is due to the powerful presence and resistance of the Indigenous cultures in Mexico and the violence of the conquest. It is evident that Mexican Catholicism to this day bears the marks of autochthonous pre-Columbian Mexican culture, being more highly ritualized and occult than that practiced in Europe or the United States. If this is the case 500 years after the introduction of Catholicism to the area, these conditions must have been only more present during the Conquest, when the Church was in negotiations with (or waging bloody genocide against) Indigenous populations in an effort to integrate the new regime.

By the sixteenth century, convents were well established and populated by Criollas (second generation Mexicans of Spanish descent) in Mexico. Criollas harbored a sense of resentment toward Spaniards for their power and control; while they did not formally ally or identify with the Indigenous populations of Mexico, they also did not identify with the Spanish power center, often referring to Spaniards in derogatory terms, such as "Gachupín." Nevertheless, Arenal and Schlau posit that "the war of conquest, forced labor, and slavery of the Indians" generated a collective unconscious that infused the art and literature of the time with violent, gruesome imagery.

Thus, most Mexican Catholics of the sixteenth and seventeenth century—the nuns of this study—occupied a liminal space: neither Indigenous slaves nor Spanish



masters in their social lives, neither pre- nor post-Columbian in their religious ones. Moreover, as Anne McClintock notes in her work *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, these Criollas would have occupied an “ambiguous” position with respect to their gender:

Barred from the corridors of formal power, [colonial women] experienced the privileges and social contradictions of imperialism very differently from colonial men... [C]olonial women made none of the direct economic or military decisions of empire and very few reaped its vast profits. Marital laws, property laws, land laws, and the intractable violence of male decree bound them in gendered patterns of disadvantage and frustration... [W]hite men... made and enforced laws and policies in their own interests.... As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized... (6)

In this way, these Criolla nuns occupied an indeterminate (or one might dare say *abject*) social space. Nuns, attached only to a male with rhetorical power (Jesus Christ) and unattached to any male with material power, ever more bitterly experienced this disenfranchisement to which McClintock refers. Having abdicated worldly and familial relationships upon entering the cloister, they were disconnected from the world of men who made decisions about the colonial venture, and therefore had no influence as marriage partners, daughters, or mothers; hence, these women occupied a simply ideological role in the process of colonizing, in that they were agents of God’s command, which the Franciscans understood to be an edict to Catholicize the New World. What’s more, the New World occupied a space of indeterminacy, wherein the customs of the Old World were sometimes shunted aside as necessity arose. Often, in rural areas, convents operated independently of

male oversight, as there were too few Fathers to oversee the operations, creating the necessity of shared Father Confessors between convents.

Thus, Criolla nuns were ironically free to forge their own paths. Bereft of political power in the colonies yet operating under little supervision, Mexican nuns were (unsurprisingly, perhaps) prone to mystical experiences, wherein God, Jesus, and the Holy Virgin issued orders directly, rather than channeling through recognized male intermediaries. Church authorities could not quite figure out how to manage the proliferation of mysticism in New Spain, particularly when women experienced it: mysticism was more commonly reported in the New World than in Europe, and it was somewhat culturally accepted if Church authorities could validate it (though the efforts to do so often included instances of extraordinary violence against the mystics).

A religious group that often garnered the attention of the Inquisition was *los alumbrados*, which loosely translated means “the illuminated ones.” These were individuals who sought mystical communication with God through altered states. Mystics residing in convents had to be careful that their ecstatic experiences did not too closely resemble those of the *alumbrados*, so the *vidas* acted as a sort of insurance policy against that, as they were able to embed their mystical experiences in a narrative rife with claims of devotion to the Church hierarchy and methodology. During the late Middle Ages in Spain, female mystics were honored and valued, but this unique spirituality experienced largely by women was watched closely: women’s visions were either validated by or interrogated by the men in charge of

maintaining ecclesiastical power. Arenal and Schlau note that by the start of the sixteenth century, the idea of “direct communication with God” was likely to be perceived as heresy, but the women religious of New Spain considered it a “lost tradition” originating with Saint Teresa of Avila and thus embraced it and worked to emulate her.

In fact, Saint Teresa became a powerful icon for the nuns of New Spain, who admired her independence and rebellion. She gained notoriety as a reformer of convent life during the sixteenth century by advocating for more rigid enforcement of rules and publicly despising the secular direction the Carmelite order had taken. She was also a mystic, which earned her the opprobrium of the Church Fathers. Nevertheless, her earnest endeavors and widespread success as a prolific writer and the founder of fourteen convents earned her an irreproachable reputation, which the nuns of New Spain, adherents to the “Teresian reform,” readily called upon as justification of their mystical experiences (Arenal and Schlau 8-10). Thus, they called upon a sanctioned, feminine historical tradition of mysticism that validated their own authority and power to directly communicate with God, even though doing so could have cost them their lives.

Sor Maria de San Jose’s *vidas* were closely monitored for signs of heterodoxy because she was quite prone to mystic visions. Her priests often told her that her visions were a product of the devil visiting her disguised as God, and other nuns and family members beat her in an effort to make her stop having visions (36). She documents running aground of Franciscan priests who viewed her asceticism as

suicidal and dangerous behavior (49). She claims being regularly visited by demons, who attack her and leave her “half dead, and nearly breathing [her] last from the torments and martyrdoms inflicted...” (68-9). Her Mother Superior, charged with determining the veracity of such visions, reacted violently: “She took me out by dragging me across the floor, and whipping me with a belt, and if... she could not do it for lack of strength, she would call one or two of the Sisters so that they could do it for her. This was at the order of our blessed Prelate and my Confessor” (69). This reference to “our blessed Prelate and my Confessor” should be read as a sarcastic, ironic nod to the oppressive violence these men ordered to be perpetrated on the women of the cloister, for Maria notes throughout that she didn’t care a bit whether she was mercilessly beaten because Christ’s visitations comforted her in this dark night of the soul.

Nevertheless, Maria’s visions did not abate, nor did her determination in authenticating them through her writing. She notes that one of the demons who visited her regularly

... busied himself in squeezing my whole body with instruments that it would take too long to describe here... When I was about to explode, it was not through some part of my body that had been wounded in such a way that anyone else could see, because it was through one of the two passages, so that I had to make use of my hands to help myself, putting back in its place what the enemies had caused to spill out of me. By what I felt and saw, according to what I touched with my own hands, it was my own guts that they made spill out of me with the torments they inflicted on me. (69)

In the original Spanish, the word *reventar* is used for what Myers and Powell translate as “explode” (100), a term which they note can mean either a literal or a

metaphorical sense of explosion—or even orgasm, so Maria’s vision is true whether or not it is real: she is being tormented and is about to crack under the pressure of surveillance and abuse. This passage of her *vida* is emblematic of her work. It positions her as a steadfast, earnest believer who refuses to keep silent. It represents her body in either a miserable, abject state, or an ecstatic one, even while drawing attention to her physicality through references to the wound seeping out from her interior through “one of the two passages,” which would indicate that her vagina is producing the seepage.

It reiterates the physical reality of the visions that others perceive as merely figments of her imagination by claiming that she touched her “guts” with her “own hands.” This reference to her “guts” can either be read as a wound inflicted by a demon (in which case the reader has no recourse to challenge her), or the vaginal fluid released upon orgasm (and if a representative of the Inquisition should claim that this is what she intended, she would have recourse to be righteously offended at such a perverse interpretation of a record of a visitation by a demon sent by Christ himself to challenge her to greater piety). Moreover, Maria has the sense of being plagued by someone physically present, and the demons may be a literary representation of insensitive and abusive Father Confessors, Mother Superiors, Sisters, and priests.

Maria often notes in other entries over the course of years that her guts are spilling out of her and that she must hold herself together with her hands. This imagery is nearly cinematic in the way it uses sexual tension like a horror film: the

spectator can envisage the woman holding herself, but the masturbatory fantasy is disrupted by the presence of gore seeping from the body of the object of the gaze. I say “masturbatory fantasy” though she seems to be writing about masturbation rather explicitly: the demon has entered her, and she experiences a feeling of “explosion” and a sense of her “guts” (vaginal lubrication) spilling forth from “one of the two passages,” on her body, seemingly her vagina. The “demon” inciting her to this behavior is quite possibly the demon of her own sexual psyche—that repressed part of her imagination that manifests itself in moments of intense desire.

Madre María Marcela Capuchine (1759-18—) writes of her visions in her *vida* as well, though in her work, the Virgin Mary is extolled and Her femaleness is perceived as her most important attribute:

...and I saw the Word in the womb of our Lady as in a very lovely little cave most beautifully adorned, but I could not spy whether what embellished it so were flowers or precious stones; it was most beautiful, but there is nothing created to compare with it. The Child I saw no bigger than an almond; but completely perfect and charming beyond all measure... and in a little corner of the cave, I saw my own soul all timid like a little dove. (408)

Madre María Marcela’s vision goes beyond extolling the Holy Virgin as the Mother of God and extols the virgin’s female anatomy. The “lovely little cave most beautifully adorned,” coupled with images of flowers and “precious stones” is a precursor of modern lesbian-feminist representations of vulvas, the folds of the labia like petals and the clitoris the glittering jewel awaiting discovery (or Baby Jesus, no bigger than an almond is the clitoris). Moreover, Jesus is reduced to the size of an almond and must share the space of Mary’s interior anatomy with Madre

María Marcela. The effect of this rhetoric is to liken María (indeed all women) to the Holy Virgin in that they share anatomy. Moreover, it establishes a proto-lesbian-feminist lineage on which any woman born of a woman is powerful because she can trace herself back to Mary.

The effect of the visions was that they established the strength and power of the nuns and circumvented the power of the Church hierarchy. The nuns were able to communicate directly with God, Mary, and Christ, through ecstatic experiences rife with either sublime beauty or powerful images of violence, which makes sense: why wait for watered-down versions of the Word rendered meager and flavorless in the journey from Rome when they could experience the drama and glory of God personally? Maria de San Jose consistently established herself as an authority (of course, flanked with verbiage that constitutes a humbling disavowal of her power and authority) by noting that in a vision, Jesus removed his heart and put it inside of her chest, making her ribs stand out because there was not enough room for a heart as big as Christ's in her human body (86), and that Jesus, in a reversal of Eucharist imagery, came to her in a vision and ate her heart (151). She frequently notes that God comes to her to discuss "high and lofty matters" which she cannot even put into words to explain to her Father Confessor (96).

In the event that their readers claim that the women are making things up, the nuns always have a trump card and are unafraid to play it: they claim that they were chosen to suffer this way through ecstatic visions and mysticism and that those who do not experience visions are actually the lucky ones for not having been

chosen by God. To argue with such a line of thinking would be ludicrous. The texts dare the reader to ask why would someone make up something so painful and disturbing, and they dare the devout Father Confessors and judges of the Inquisition to ask themselves if they could handle such a mission from God. Moreover, should they doubt the veracity of these claims, what might the result be? What penalty lies in the hereafter for the Doubting Thomas?

The visions of the mystics of New Spain were distinctive in that they were rife with violence and gore (hence, the presence of such detail in the *vidas* of the Mexican sisters). It is likely, given the atrocious history of the colonial conquest—involving the gruesome decimation of the Indigenous population, the inherent brutality of the Catholic mission system, and the significance of blood in Pre-Columbian religions of the region—that the wounds of colonialism are what most inform the visions and the texts, which, as noted earlier, are likewise infused with grim depictions of violence and barbarity. Descriptions of medical treatment are unnerving in their harshness and border on cruelty. Records of the era demonstrate that Mother Superiors regularly disciplined their Novices through whipping, and such discipline was meted out for the purpose of teaching as well, not just for venial or criminal infractions, seizures, fits, and visions. Moreover, nuns were often sadistic and cruel to one another, describing scenes of shocking savagery a modern reader would expect to find in accounts of prison life. If the stain of colonialism and the barbarous mission system is the determining factor for the development of a culture infused with violent imagery, then, I would argue, it also lurks evidently within the



pages in which women write their resistance, a shadow presence informing their rage and testifying to their traumas. They may not speak directly of the conquest or the imprint of aggression in their convent culture, but the violence of conquest undergirds the *vida* genre, and the women respond to it corporeally.

Indeed, colonialism played an enormous role in convent life as a whole. Convent life in Mexico in some ways paralleled that of convent life in Europe, but it also bore features that distinguished it as a New World phenomenon. It seems evident that convent life in general was a type of feminist act: in the convent women could move about freely and have their own quarters, and they could likewise be free of the demands of family life (indeed, perhaps this is what Luther so opposed in the establishment). Even in countries where women's property-owning capabilities were limited, in the convent, physical property belonged to God and the sisters. They also became well versed in business administration in the convent, thereby gaining some measure of independence.

Convents of New Spain served educational, political, social, and religious roles. They were businesses, and the women who ran them had to be able entrepreneurs if the convent were to survive. Sisters lobbied for political causes that affected these businesses, and they trained girls of all races in employments fitting to their social classes. The convents were by no means democratic organizations aimed at eradicating social injustices; rather, they were mere reflections of the social hierarchy of New Spain, replete with race and class privileges. Indians could not become full nuns unless they joined one of the very few Native-only convents.

Nevertheless, Indigenous women did reside in the convents alongside the Criollas, sometimes as students, often serving as handmaids or housekeepers.

Arenal and Schlau make a claim for a sort of feminist utopia: “[T]he proximity in which these women lived, without men, must have changed the dynamics of communication among the classes. All women saw themselves as servants of the Lord.... [A]ll... shared the quest for spiritual perfection” (339). While such a claim of feminist egalitarianism seems unwarrantedly idealistic, it should also be noted that the nuns cloistered within the convents did not create the rules determining the racial segregation and hierarchies, for matters relating to hierarchy were determined by that most hierarchal institution they were all maneuvering within: the Catholic Church. Therefore, we cannot make assumptions about the nature of the living arrangements or relationships between the Criollas and the Indians in the convents.

It is, however, possible that the lines between races and classes in New Spain, as in the American South during slavery, were blurrier than they might seem at first glance. Facing distinct challenges that required collaboration, the convents of New Spain did not adhere to the same formalities as they did in Europe. Because the system was not terrifically entrenched with tradition and the passage of time, women had more access to their superiors, thereby making the hierarchy less formal, so Arenal and Schlau’s assessment that the dynamics of the class system were altered—which is borne out by textual evidence within the *vidas*—is possibly a systemic feature and not simply idiosyncratic of the few *vidas* surveyed here; that is

to say, though not all nuns wrote *vidas*, it is possible to extrapolate from the ones who did that race and class were handled differently within the cloister than outside. This complicates the analysis of colonialism in this study, as the Criolla nuns, while assuming some privileges of racial superiority, cannot fit neatly into the category of colonizer or colonized. In this liminal space, they experience the effects of colonial rule much the same way their Indigenous counterparts do, living in the same physical spaces, undertaking the same religious and economic practices, engaging in the same spiritual experiences, and beholden to the same misogynous system of power.

Thus, Arenal and Schlau's claim that "[t]he women of the cloisters were products of a society engaged in colonizing half the world and attempting to rid itself of cultural and religious diversity" (17), only serves to underscore what I see as the nuns' liminality: seemingly powerful colonizers are in fact silenced minions of an empire. The perspective offered in my work differs from Arenal and Schlau's work in that it perceives the nuns as *both* products of colonialism *and* perpetrators of it, but they did not bear much power to perpetrate any kind of inequality; in fact, as my survey shows, it could be said that they were quite beaten down by the system, such that they were willing to turn on one another when presented with the opportunity to perpetrate violence against a Sister (not to mention the violence done unto themselves in the name of proving their piety and devotion).

In fact, the colonizer-colonized paradigm is inadequately nuanced with respect to the question of gender. The empire of New Spain, intent on homogenizing

culture and religion, was also directly responsible for interfering with the nuns' direct and present relationships with God via ubiquitous and pervasive Church doctrine. Moreover, the aim of the Spanish crown was to use the convents as a tool of imperial dynastic consolidation, thereby making the nuns at best pawns in the colonial scheme, at worst silenced prisoners locked away from the outside world, and the possibility that the Sisters' work was a response to this sort of appropriation should be considered. From Arenal and Schlauf's perspective, "Convents—women's communities, women's spaces—helped the larger community to consolidate and institutionalize Mexico's passage from a conquered...territory to a colony with established social, economic, and political institutions" (339).

This rosy vision of the role of the convents as unifying nationalist force lacks nuance in that the space of the convent was extremely complicated: it was simultaneously a separatist-feminist community; a violent, misogynous dystopia; and a space of imperialist appropriation inasmuch as the Crown used the convents to "consolidate and institutionalize" new Spain. Thus, the nuns may have perpetuated colonialist aims and reified the structure of New Spain within their cloistered spaces, but their lack of power within the colonial paradigm as unpropertied, unmarried women complicates their role in the colonialist transformation of New Spain. Moreover, perceiving the convents as a unifying force under imperialist regime change is a retrograde action from a postcolonial perspective; we should express horror at the extermination the convents helped effect.

Criolla nuns of the colonial period coped with the indeterminacy of their situation by carving a niche for themselves that distinguished and distanced them from their colonial fathers; additionally, this rhetorical distancing also established the groundwork for a Mexican nationalist identity that would eventually represent and unify the cultural diversity inherent to Mexico and lead the country into its independence hundreds of years later. Not surprisingly, the Criollas' path, trod only by women, was a somewhat feminist one, relying on the iconography of the Virgin Mary and La Virgen de Guadalupe as guiding principles. Marian worship was a far greater phenomenon in Mexico than in Europe or other Catholicized parts of the New World. Such a focus was ideal, for Mary is a venerated figure in the Church, so Church Fathers could not disparage her worship; on the other hand, she also offers a multitude of possibilities as a female role model for women religious in her independent asexuality, power, and special relationship with God.

Mary made an appearance shortly after the conquest in an autochthonous form at a place where Tonantzin, the mother of the Aztec gods, was worshipped, so it was a natural transition and an easy sell to the Church authorities that this place was Mary's chosen land (Arenal and Schlau 341). It could be assumed that convents focusing more on Marian worship were validated and garnered acceptance from the Church Fathers, who must have been stymied by her influence and presence in New Spain. Of course, in their view, the promulgation of Mary's appearance or connection to Mexico would have validated Spanish presence and the purpose of the conquest: it was all of a piece with God's great plan for conversion and Christianization.

Indeed, Sor Maria Anna, who wrote about Mary's breast milk, had this to say of

Mary:

[S]he is said to be Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, Queen and Lady of all creation; elected, chosen, and created...[from the beginning, before the world existed], who issued from the mouth of the Most High, as the first-born daughter of all creatures, winning primacy over the angels and over all mankind... [She is a] doorway and entrance to the knowledge of God, and a door by which to go to God himself, as the chosen Mother of the Eternal Word. (392)

Anyone marginally familiar with New Testament Bible passages knows the opening salvo of the creation of the universe according to John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." From this "Word," the language idea out of which God is created, God creates himself and the rest of the known world. Maria Anna's passage exalts Mary but comes just short of equating her with God, by claiming that Mary was there from the time before the world existed, which is when there was only God (or only the "Word," to be specific, which would indicate that God created Mary when he created himself). Maria Anna also avers that knowledge of Mary is the only way to knowledge of God and she is the Mother of the Eternal Word, a notion in direct conflict with Church ideology, which establishes God as the Eternal Word via John's exegesis.

Though the Church may have considered the presence and power of Mary in New Spain to be a boon to the colonial enterprise, the women of the cloister were only too happy to reclaim her as a role model, a mother, and a personal friend in times of need, and in the end, the knife the colonialists wielded cut both ways. The Marian-centered system had unforeseen consequences: according to Arenal and

Schlau, “It nationalized religious worship and linked it to the mother goddess of the Aztecs..., savior of a people. This identification with Mary confirmed, for nuns who wrote, the vitality, intelligence, and authority of women” (341). The symbolism of Mary, which from the beginning of the conquest, was a tool the Church authority had hoped to exploit in order to gain the subservience of the people, ultimately empowered the women of the convents, animated the imaginations of the common people, and eventually inspired a political revolution. Of course, the ultimate influence of the conservative image of Mary as the consummate mother has had long-term negative effects on women (including heterosexual women of the time outside the convents), but for women of the colonial-era cloister (who were not expected to embody the impossible virgin mother oxymoron), Mary had a different connotation.

But all of that came much later, of course. The women of the convents, the Criollas writing their *vidas*, were responding to a global intellectual sea change that had started nearly two centuries earlier. Michael Mullett, scholar of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, perceives that Christopher Columbus was representative of “explorers” of the colonial period in general in that he was “inspired by an apocalyptic Crusading vision associated with the Franciscan Order” (142) that depicted the wealth of the New World being gathered and dedicated to “rebuilding... the Temple in Jerusalem as a prelude to the Last Judgment and the end of the world” (Mullett 142). Columbus, who is most often depicted as a sailor, an explorer, or a discoverer, was also, it seems, a megalomaniac: he “declared himself to be a

messianic figure” linked spiritually (and fatefully) to Spain’s Kings, whom he perceived as “messianic monarchs with a global and eschatological task of converting all races to Catholic Christianity” (Mullett 143). The importance of Catholicism in this equation cannot be underestimated, for though it was the guiding principle of the colonists, the nuns found ways to subvert it and use it for their own aims of profeminist resistance as well.

Anne McClintock, a postcolonial scholar, also holds Columbus’s feet to the fire, recalling Columbus’s nautical journals, which indicated that the globe was not round but shaped like a woman’s breast, with a “protuberance” at the top that resembled a nipple. McClintock claims that this kind of vision has psychoanalytic implications, positioning the male explorer as a “tiny, lost infant, yearning for the Edenic nipple,” which is indicative of masculine “anxiety, infantilization, and longing for the female body” rather than a strong command of the world he has set off to conquer (22). However, it also positions the female as the familiar body, that which can enclose him and keep him safe in an all-providing corporeality that is associated with fulfillment and need gratification (22). Even though Columbus’s journey occurred centuries earlier than these *vidas* were written, it underscores the colonial mindset that conflates the natural Earth with the female body, a conflation that had (and continues to have) real-world implications for women living in the colonies and an issue that continues to plague the Catholic Church, which continues to seek ways to dominate and control women’s unpredictable, ungovernable bodies.



Annette Kolodny's text *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor As Experience and History in American Life and Letters* explores the colonial trope of feminizing of the landscape: Kolodny notes that the early colonial writers of eastern North America wrote about the land as a female body perceived in primarily sexual terms, claiming to be "ravisht with the... pleasant land" (4), and calling the New World a "*Paradise with all her Virgin Beauties*" (4). She further notes that promotional materials sent back to Europe to entice newcomers described the land as having "valleyes and plaines streaming with sweete Springs, like veynes in a naturall bodie" (4). Both McClintock and Kolodny argue that this ideology of the land as a waiting, receptive, generous, and attendant female body (either as mother or as lover) had profound effects on the actual women living in the colonies.

McClintock and Kolodny deal primarily with what is now India, Africa, and the Northeast United States, but evidence also exists in the literature of New Spain of this colonial tendency to conflate the land of the New World and the women inhabiting it. During the colonial period of Mexico, a promotional tract called *Parayso Occidental (Western Paradise)*, which compiled Criollas' oral and written testimonies, was sold in Spain to attract more colonists. The frontispiece showed only the land, not the women living in it, and it depicted Mexico as being a cornucopia of natural wealth and the female inhabitants as innocent, virginal angels (Arenal and Schlau 338). Thus, in the promotional tracts of Mexico during the colonial era, the land was similarly portrayed as having a purifying effect that could

purge one of sinful tendencies and virtually disembody women, replacing her with the conquered territory, thereby putting an end to mortal, bodily desires.

*Parayso Occidental* is the apotheosis of female disembodiment. The female authors of the text disappear, replaced by an illustration of the land, which is, in turn, endowed with feminine qualities associated with sexuality, nurturance, and flowing abundance. This type of simultaneous erasure and introjection of the female body is, according to feminist theorist Helene Cixous, a normal occurrence under patriarchy that can only be adequately countered with writing: "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her... Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (880). Cixous sees the erasure of the female body through language and discourse as a problem stemming from women not telling their own stories. She sees this erasure as a kind of violent death, leaving behind a corpse we are alienated from, causing us to feel a sense of inhibition about and loathing for our own bodies. The *vidas*, then, in all their gore would have encouraged Cixous; indeed, Cixous's rallying cry, "Write your self. Your body must be heard" (880), is realized in the *vidas*, where the silenced bodies of women—abused, oppressed, and shunned—come alive on the pages, depicting the female body in its most abject and horrible states, reclaiming the images of pristine, virginal territories and replacing them with images of blood, pus, sweat, and all of the rage and suffering that attends such bodily effluence. Cixous's argument is that the female body is relegated to an ideological realm through discourse that stylizes or idealizes us, rendering the female body an idea or a

metaphor, but that women's writing can correct this by making the body *real* again; the nuns do this by representing it in its more literal, lived state, replete with corporeal effluence.

Monique Wittig, like Butler, claims that the category "woman" is created as a negative rhetorical space intended to limn the category "man" and that this kind of binary opposition is predicated on a heterosexual identity. Wittig extrapolates from this rhetoric of negation to claim that lesbians are not, therefore, women, because "woman" is an inherently social category dependent on heterosexual identity. One might deduce, then, that the category "woman" is an empty category and is nothing more than a role enactment, rather than an identity or a personhood and that women's corporeal existence is effaced via discourse about femaleness and femininity. We could argue that the category of "woman," being thus empty and devoid of positive definition, is merely a rhetorical category rather than an actual identity or corporeal reality.

Taking Cixous's thinking about the effacement of the female body through masculinist discourse and coupling it with Wittig's theory of the category "woman" as a predetermining factor for the purposes of defining heterosexual masculinity, we ought then to consider the possibility that the non-heterosexual woman is best situated to rewrite the female body. This category of the "non-heterosexual woman" could obviously include the nun, who, similar to the lesbian, is outside of

heterosexual relationships<sup>32</sup> and does not have access to the culturally established and supported power, privilege, and deprivations attendant to such a relationship. Might Wittig's theory of lesbianism existing outside of social discourses predicated on heterosexuality also apply to the nun, who is likewise not a woman, as conceived within the binary, heteronormative system and therefore able to speak the corporeality of the woman into being?

Ludwig Wittgenstein's last (posthumously) published work, *On Certainty*, responded to G.E. Moore's "here is a hand" argument against epistemological skepticism. Moore claimed that if one recognized and could name his or her own hand, then that evidence should serve as proof of the external world. Wittgenstein explored the limits of knowledge and certainty by questioning Moore's claim, acknowledging that if a person (a *man*, specifically) *knows* that his hand is his hand, then he can know much about the world; however, Wittgenstein claimed, what we think we know is merely what we have been taught to accept as true and that we have no actual certainty of these things we have merely agreed upon.

Indeed, Rush Rees, author of *Wittgenstein's On Certainty: There—Like Our Life*, asserts that Wittgenstein made the claim that knowing, based on measurement and naming, depend simply on the institutions doing the measuring and naming, and that the foundations on which such institutions operate are inflexible (12). Wittgenstein claims that there is more cause to doubt than not to, as we accept as

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<sup>32</sup> I extend the definition of "heterosexual relationship" beyond the sexual here, obviously, perceiving it also as a social relationship sanctioned by government and culture.

certainties much of what we are told is true without ever questioning. Wittgenstein revisits the question of knowing one's own body parts throughout his entire work; indeed, he notes much later (in premise 414): "But on the other hand: how do I *know* that it is my hand? Do I even here know exactly what it means to say it is my hand? - When I say 'how do I know?' I do not mean that I have the least *doubt* of it. What we have here is a foundation for all my action. But it seems to me that it is wrongly expressed by the words "I know."

This question of knowing, of being certain of something so basic as the parts of one's body must have seemed an obvious place of philosophical inquiry for Moore and Wittgenstein, for when we are most uncertain, we can often count on knowing at least our own corporeality. That is, of course, unless our corporeal reality is actually rendered somewhat slippery through hegemonic discourse. If the inclination to establish ontology on the premise of the body is philosophically slippery for men whose bodies are not conflated with land, rivers, oceans, lakes, streams, and mountains, what then is it like for women, whose bodies are metaphorical representations of new worlds, whose bodies are the source of both nubile passion and maternal nurturance? Wittgenstein claims that we only *think* we can know some things based on our knowledge of our own bodies. He supposes that we all think we know our own hands. But if the subject does not know that she "has here [her] own hand," she already knows that she does not know anything: she could have her own hand, but it may also be just the representation of the leaf of a tree as yet undescribed in travel narratives of the new world.

A woman under colonial rule can never be certain that *here is her hand* because it is not, discursively speaking, *her* hand but a social construct that is reduced to sexual availability, the symbol of masculine pleasure; it has been discursively absconded with, and so it no longer belongs to her unless she is able to remove it from the fantastic, representational realm by making it discursively unrecognizable. Likewise, in keeping with Wittig's thinking, if the woman in question is not a woman in accordance with the ideological representations of her, then a man cannot be certain that his body is what he thinks it is because there is no reliable constitutive outside category of "woman"; the rhetorical construction of the category *woman* is likewise suspect and untrustworthy. If, in response to imperialist efforts to conflate the female body with the land and territory of the New World and to conquer the feminized landscape, the Sisters intervened at the first stage and made the female body unrecognizable (or at least unfeminine in their horrifying spectacle) through abjection, then they successfully responded to the colonial mission through feminist discourse; once their bodies were no longer conflated with a natural ideal, they were free to pursue their own interest in power and were free to align themselves with the power of Christ, the Holy Virgin, and God. This is evidence of women reclaiming their bodies as corporeal identities and using the process of abjection to gain power over their voyeuristic superiors.

Reconfiguring the female body as a physical, real entity also reconfigures the feminine body politic because women are perceived as corporeal rather than discursive entities. The *vida* genre makes the female body seem horrifying, which is

not what the voyeuristic male reader seeks as a means of validating his authority over his new homeland. Moreover, it reestablishes the female body's reality and the real presence of angry women whose horrifying bodies will not simply go away in docile silence.

It is refreshing to look at the nuns' self-mortification as body projects designed to subvert a colonizing gaze. Michelle Raheja writes of the concept of "visual sovereignty," actions taken by Indigenous people with the aim of maintaining their own sense of privacy and power. Raheja's article "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*" cites what are perceived as naïve Native responses to ethnographers as deliberate acts of subversion, which preserve a space of privacy and primacy for the subject being observed. If the subject feeds into the ethnographer's stereotype of being innocent and pure of Western influences, then the ethnographer feels a sense of success at having his or her assumptions validated, but, Raheja argues, this is not selling out: the Native subject maintains his or her own space and privacy, and effectively shuts the voyeur out of the culture, thereby keeping the nosy Westerner out of the heuristic loop. The *vidas* enact the same subversive possibility for visual sovereignty: while they initially pander to the image of "womanhood" in terms of being sexually appealing and available, they ultimately trick the viewer, who has been drawn in by the clever descriptions and feigned devotion to the hierarchy of the church. Nevertheless, it's too late because the reader is already drawn in and

cannot turn away when the depiction turns into horror, which the reader attempts to abreact, being reminded too much of the maternal body's nauseating effluences.

The nuns of this study have more than a mere desire to be holy. Theirs is a desire to reconstruct the realm of sexual objectification that robs a woman of her body. What is most interesting about the body projects of these nuns is that they incorporate the abject as a part of themselves so that they are not linguistically separate from it; in fact, they become the thing that their voyeuristic Father Confessors should want to reject and abreact in order to maintain their sense of themselves as holy men. Demanding to know the deepest secrets of these women carries its own punishment. This rhetorical sleight of hand changes the terms of the colonizing gaze because it makes their rebellions clear on the site of their bodies, which are not languidly awaiting colonization or appropriation via sexual fantasies. They are the antithesis of the image conjured for the female body, even the female body of a nun. Indeed, they redefine themselves through making their bodies a site of horror and pain. Unlike Wittgenstein and Moore's man who looks at his hand for proof of the external world, they must first establish that the hand is a hand and that it belongs to them. The most effective way of doing so is to make it *their* hand: a hand that is not gentle, nurturing, or available for male pleasure but is bleeding, engorged, and blackened from blood constriction resulting from a rebelliously over-tightened cilice. Their hands engrave their bodies with wounds that ultimately crawl with vermin infesting not just their skin, but the very imaginations of the readers who demand total confession. Then, they can say, "I have here a hand," and from



there they might say, “I have here a womb, and it is not unlike the womb you, dear reader, grew in, surrounded by the effluvia of a gravid uterus, connected to—yet at the mercy of—the consuming mother you have come to fear.” And then, in accordance with Wittgenstein, they may be granted “all the rest,” having effectively established a discursive space for themselves outside of the heteronormative, masculinist paradigm of the colonial venture.

## Chapter Five

### (Re)Writing the History of the Last Colony:

#### Corporeal Representations of the Female Body in American Feminist Poetry

“We got the afternoon / You got this room for two / One thing I’ve left to do / Discover me / Discovering You.” –John Mayer, “Your Body is a Wonderland”

This epigraph comes from a 2002 John Mayer song that is ostensibly about a man’s singular devotion to his female lover’s body, but a closer look at the lyrics (and the lyricist) proves to be problematic. Mayer’s song should arouse our postcolonial concerns about imperialist sensibilities that resonate with the rhetoric of settlement: the body is a “wonderland,” but more specifically, the woman’s body in question is a land, a very recent claim based on a very old fantasy of the female body as an inert territory awaiting discovery. If these lyrics bring to mind the writings of early “explorers” and “pilgrims” to the Americas, who filled their journals with fantastical references to the “virgin” territories of the “New World,” thereby conflating women’s bodies with land, this should come as no surprise, for the colonial venture itself is a gendered project, predicated on a kind of masculinist fantasy of violating an uncharted (read: virgin) territory.

What is most telling about Mayer’s song is that the one thing he has “left to do” is to “discover” himself while discovering the subject of the song. Anne McClintock’s book, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, examines the casting of the Americas as a female body and more importantly as a “porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic

lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (22). McClintock further notes,

Knowledge of the unknown world was mapped as a metaphysics of gender violence—not as the expanded recognition of cultural difference—and was validated by the new Enlightenment logic of private property and possessive individualism. In these fantasies, the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration, then reassembled and deployed in the interests of massive imperial power. (23)

This kind of rhetorical mapping of the world was informed by a conflation of the female body with an impassive, insensate territory in need of mastering.

McClintock argues that the land is sexually available and accessible to male explorers, but more importantly, it is deployed in the service of garnering more power for the explorers. Thus, “discovery” is not about discovering new places but about the discovery of one’s own power in those places, and exploration is only about seeking more power and the knowledge of one’s own boundaries. It is ultimately a means of avoiding one’s own fear of inconsequentiality by mounting power and privilege in a new place and reinventing power and privilege in a place where one’s own lack of privilege is not readily apparent since it is outside of the social milieu in which one has been struggling.

This heuristic of the territory as conquerable female is absolutely applicable to Mayer’s song since the speaker explores the “wonderland” of the body as a new territory wherein he can learn more about his prowess and control. In the lyrics of this love song, there is no discussion of the woman’s desires or agency; indeed, her part is to “frustrate” the speaker, and her only desire is to “want love,” which the

speaker promises to give in the form of exploring her body. Thus, the metaphorical conflation of the female body with conquerable territory continues to be a dominant cultural trope.

This discussion of colonialism and power may seem like a far reach for the lyrics of a simple love song, but when the love song is paired with the claims made by the singer himself in an interview, the complex imbrication of sex, race, and power becomes apparent. When asked if “Black women throw themselves at [him],” Mayer remarks, “I don’t think I open myself to it. My dick is sort of like a white supremacist. I’ve got a Benetton heart and a fuckin’ David Duke cock” (qtd. in Plaid). The layers of meaning in this statement could consume several sheaves of academic discourse each on the neo-liberal, late capitalist commodity-ideology of Benetton, the invocation of David Duke in a conversation about sex, and the possibility of John Mayer’s genitalia occupying a (racist) political ideology. My reader will forgive me for foregoing this discussion in favor of my point, which is that early colonial discourse that conflates the white female body with a conquerable territory is more than simply extant in our literature and cultural imaginary: it is a powerful force undergirding our desires and motivations and informing our literary tropes. Moreover, the presence of such lyrics in popular love songs (read: music played on mainstream –“white”—radio stations and not widely scorned as misogynist, as hip hop and rap have been) indicates the relevance and importance of feminist poetry that uses the body as a site of resistance. Feminist poetry refuses the trope of the

body as a “wonderland” and portrays literal female bodies as a means of resistance to hegemonic norms of the ideal female body.

Michel Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias” posits, “Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites” (2). Foucault further notes, “The space in which we live... is... in itself, a heterogeneous space... We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (2). Foucault establishes that there are spaces in our culture that are informed by social relations; thus there are spaces of work and of leisure, of public activity and private activities, yet there are times when we require what he calls “other spaces,” and those sites are “in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (2). Thus the “other spaces” are physical locations wherein situations too complex for social integration are lived out: prisons, boarding schools, insane asylums, and brothels. Many of these spaces contain non-normative sexuality or gender performance and allow these “deviations” to be played out while still modeling the norms and expectations of the mainstream culture. Therefore, these spaces are a place in which the other “real” spaces of culture can be “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). In this way, the undesirable activity can be contained but can also be expressed; in addition, the heterotopia has the

potential to subvert oppressive cultural norms by providing a means of examining our systems of relation, power, and censoring.

Foucault clearly establishes his heterotopias as “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society,” though he attributes these real places with a potential for effecting change. Steven Axelrod’s essay “Heterotropic Desire in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Pink Dog’” elaborates on Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia, developing Axelrod’s concept of the *heterotopia*. Axelrod notes that Elizabeth “Bishop’s texts employ various strategies for complicating or contesting” (62) the division between the domestic and the strange in Cold War discourse. He notes that in Bishop’s oeuvre, “Some of her poems evoked public issues, some encoded private experiences, and others seemed to do both at once” (62), and that she was able “to construct spaces ambiguously public and private, domestic and cosmopolitan, familiar and exotic, rooted and rootless” (62). Through her poetry Bishop “both joined the conversation of Cold War ‘containment culture’ and maintained a critical distance from it... Bishop seemed to slip effortlessly into and outside of containment structures” (62) by composing poems that evoked imagery of both Brazil and Florida with her native Nova Scotia and New England, juxtaposing two vastly divergent geographical locations as a means of scrutinizing ideas of containment and conformity and using the different spaces as “counter-sites” to one another and allegories for Cold War American social mores (64).

Axelrod posits Bishop’s use of poetry as her “ultimate heterotopia. Poetry, after all, is a site of illumination—an other space” in which a poet can express

“order, purification, surprise, and pleasure” (73). But Axelrod is careful to note that since poetry is not a physical location but a rhetorical one, that “we should not think of Bishop’s discursive world as a literal heterotopia but as a virtual one” with an investment in scrutinizing political issues (73). Thus, he “would prefer to term her textual world neither a heterotopia nor a utopia but a *heterotropia*—“another world” of figuration...” (73) because of its “complexly reciprocal and even quirky relationship” (74) to the actualities of the repressive containment culture of Cold War America.

Bishop’s work is largely about location or the bodies of animals (allegorically depicting the bodies of people), but her work does not usually provide graphic depictions of the female body. While she does, at moments (as in “Shampoo” and “Four Poems,” for instance) deal with the female body in resistant and innovative ways, a later generation of poets does so more persistently and elaborately (possibly as a result of a rhetorical opening Bishop’s work created). But I see Bishop’s work as heterotropic in that it creates “another space” that is largely figurative. My research focuses on the work of feminist poets who depict the literal (in opposition to the ideal) female body as a means of persuading the reader that the norms of femininity are violent and degrading. Moreover, my work aims to establish an epistemological trajectory connecting women’s cultural productions of the early colonial period of the Americas with modern and postmodern feminist cultural productions in the Americas as a means of generating a feminist ontology in which women’s bodies are sites of resistance. In earlier chapters, I referred to the work of

Annette Kolodny, who, through archival research, established that early explorers to the Americas perceived the land in feminine terms and sought to conquer the insentient, feminized territory, hoping to experience total need gratification from this new “motherland” of milk and honey. This establishment of the land as a territory for male exploration, an empty space onto which male fantasy can be projected, set a precedent for women to use their actual, corporeal bodies to resist that ideology by refusing to manifest ideal bodies of the mother/lover/empty space waiting to be colonized and instead manifesting literal bodies that flouted rhetorics of femininity.

To return to Foucault and Axelrod’s use of space then, I posit that American feminist poetry uses the female body as a heterotopia, an “other space” (a physical space, as Foucault specified) that is neither central to power (masculine) nor peripheral to it (feminine). Through the use of imagery and language, the body is rendered an unreadable space in terms of gender normativity, so it is “other.” This heterotopia, however, exists within Axelrod’s *heterotopia*, the abstract “other world” of the text; thus I like to think of feminist poetry as creating a *rhetoritopia*: the physical body transformed into a rhetorical (persuasive) space in an act of resistance.

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 to a middle class family in New England. The 1940s and 1950s in the United States was a time of profound gender role enforcement, when young women were expected to marry a nice boy, and college education for women was a means of making them more interesting dinner



companions rather than competition in the workforce. Indeed, as Steven Axelrod notes in his thorough examination of Plath's influences, when she graduated from Smith, the commencement speaker, Adlai Stevenson, "assigned Plath her place in patriarchal culture" by exhorting the graduates to embrace domestic duties as a means of helping the nation out of its "crisis" (34-5), thus highlighting the ways in which gender normativity is deployed as a means of undergirding nationalism. *The Unabridged Journals Of Sylvia Plath*, released in 2000, underscore this gender paradigm, to which Plath had a conflicted and complex relationship. It is Plath's simultaneous embracing and rejecting of the gender paradigm that infuses her poetry with tension and immense feminist power and also what makes it possible for her to use the female body symbolically to critique the paradigm she inhabits.

On the one hand, Plath was eager to date and gain the approval of her male suitors. The *Journals* are filled with chatty accounts of dates: "Emile. There it is; his name. And what can I say? I can say he called for me at nine Saturday night... I can say we went on a double date dancing" (13) as well as charming, ersatz self-analysis: "Now I am surely becoming an incurable romantic" (51). The endnotes to the *Journals* include notes referencing the people named, and most men are people Plath dated during the early 1950s. She was extremely popular and social as a young woman and was eager to fall in love and envisioned herself married: "oddly enough, myron is the first and only boy so far I would say 'yes' to if marriage were brought up! I don't think I ever really considered Bob and only considered dick and perry, although at one time I despaired of meeting any boys excelling them, and so felt

obliged to walk off with either one or the other" (172). Once married, she revels in the domestic arts, such as cooking:

Yesterday I read through the vegetable section of my Rombauer, mouth watering, to cull all the sautéed dishes: we have chiefly potatoes, eggs, tomatoes, and onions, from which, during the summer, I hope to pull enough variety to keep Ted from roaring protest. How I love to cook... [I] long for the time when I can cook with modern range, icebox, and a variety of food" (248-9).

Thus, Plath's personal writing demonstrates a deep affinity for the artistic aspects of domesticity and romance. Nevertheless, it also demonstrates a keen awareness and resentment of gender relations from a young age, thus establishing a complicated relationship to domesticity. A journal entry from 1950, when she worked for a summer as a mother's helper, recounts this ambivalence:

Then I think, remembering the family of beautiful children that lie asleep upstairs, "Isn't it better to give in to the pleasant cycles of reproduction, the easy, comforting presence of a man around the house?" ... But then I do a flipover and reach out in my mind to E., seeing a baseball game, maybe, perhaps watching television, or roaring with careless laughter at some dirty joke with the boys, beer cans lying about green and shiny gold, and ash trays. I spiral back to me, sitting here, swimming, drowning, sick with longing. I have too much conscience injected in me to break customs without disastrous effects; I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled. The whole thing sickens me. (20)

There is an unsuppressed current of resentment running through the text of her journals in which she both adores the "boys" she dates and envies their freedom and vast opportunities. Moreover, there is a keen awareness of the power dynamic infusing heterosexual relationships and the constant threat of physical violence women abide. An early experience working in a strawberry field before college

results in a boy forcing her to kiss him after trapping her in a shed, filling her with a sense of shame and a sense that all of her fellow workers knew and blamed her (11).

Later, once at college, she dates voraciously, and recounts those dates in her journals. After a blind date with a war veteran, she recounts his attempt at date rape and her ensuing anger:

He is damn strong. His arms and hands are pushing you down. You roll in the pine needles. You are scared. You think: This is one time your innocence won't help you; you're done... But then you're on top... 'I hate you. Damn you. Just because you're a boy. Just because you're never worried about having babies!' ... And you hate him because he has deprived you of... walks and aloneness. And you hate him because he is a boy (42-43).

Her anger is intermixed with a desire to have sex as well in this encounter, and she does date the man again; however, her desire does not diminish the fact that Plath was keenly aware of her position in a patriarchal culture and her awareness that his attempt to force her to have sex was an unacceptable violation. She does not disavow her own desire in the account: "You pull away, disgusted, yet not disgusted" (43), yet her desire does not temper her anger at him trying to establish the terms of their relationship. She wants the power in the relationship to be shared, and she is angry that men have the power to ruin life experiences (walks and aloneness) by their exertion of power. She knows that heterosexuality limits her options: "I am at odds. I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate. And yet, it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to that idea" (54).

Her desire to be a man is linked intimately to her lack of power as a woman.

In a long passage on the gendered topic of “lust,” she writes:

But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man? Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity. Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars—to be a part of a scene, anonymous [sic], listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. (77)

Plath establishes a very proto-third-wave-feminist desire to have equal access to sexual passion. This is well ahead of her time; indeed, the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s (beginning with Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*) and 1970s did not talk publicly about sexual pleasure much, as they were trying so hard to achieve equity and to distance themselves from being overly sexualized. Separate, mainstream movements of sexual liberation took place in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were not primarily attached to women’s agency as desiring sexual subjects.<sup>33</sup> Plath connotes the physical body (penis and scrotum/ breasts and ovaries) as a means of physically rooting the problem and demonstrating the nonsense of extrapolating gender roles from the corporeal body. Moreover, she makes the body a rhetorical site on which the validity of gender roles can be contested, by asking her

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<sup>33</sup> When I say “mainstream,” I refer to those ideologies not encompassing queer sexualities but to those enforcing heteronormative sexualities.

opening question of why women should be consigned to being “custodians” of others’ feelings and physical needs.

In college, she also composed a stream-of-consciousness entry about the loss of childhood idealism, comprised of a list, which includes “to go to college fraternity parties where a boy buries his face in your neck or tries to rape you if he isn’t satisfied with burying his fingers in the flesh of your breast” (35). The long list builds itself to include, much later,

to yearn for an organism of the opposite sex to comprehend and heighten your thoughts and instincts, and to realize that most American males worship woman as a sex machine with rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina, as a painted doll who shouldn’t have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking a steak dinner and comforting him in bed after a hard 9-5 day at a routine business job. (36)

This assessment of American manhood comes from a seasoned expert, a person who studiously and ethnographically researched men by dating (interviewing/researching) a sizeable study of them. They are more than the accounts of a woman angry with her boyfriend; these writings are her findings from years of field research. I cite these excerpts from Plath’s journals as a means of establishing her deep awareness of the gendered social space she occupied and her conflicted relationship to it. While on the one hand, she deeply desired romance and a peaceful domestic life, on the other, she deeply resented not having the kind of social mobility and freedom men enjoy. More specifically, I cite these examples from her personal journals to establish the fact of her ethnographic understanding of

gender and to thwart other readings that her poetry was simply an angry, petulant response to her father or Ted Hughes, a common reading of her poem “Daddy.”

Generally speaking, thanks to many feminist scholars, we are moving away from reading Plath’s work as simply autobiographical, but the vestiges of this thinking still inhere in some recent criticism of her work. Donald E. Morse, for instance, writes of “Daddy”: “For Plath, the death of her father when she was eight—rather than ten as she claims in “Daddy”—and most immediately, the loss of her husband by separation become joined in the poem” (84). The assumption that Plath is writing a poem simply about her own father (rather than an allegorical “father figure”) in “Daddy” persists in this claim, bordering on an accusation of a lie (“rather than ten as she claims in ‘Daddy’” – how dare she misrepresent?). Morse further calls on the work of Seamus Heaney, who insisted on diminishing Plath’s importance as a writer and emphasized her work as merely a personal account; Morse claims she is guilty of “appropriating other people’s sorrow as her own” in her invocation of the Holocaust and thereby loses readers’ sympathy.

Because I find the questions surrounding “Daddy” (Does it represent artful poetry? Is it about her own father? Is it about Hughes?) overwrought and tiresome, I am not going to delve into a close reading of that poem<sup>34</sup>; rather I mention it only in its capacity to still stir the imagination of critics who are invested in a belief that

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<sup>34</sup> Besides, Steven Axelrod’s comprehensive study of Plath’s influences, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, establishes that Plath herself did not consider the poem autobiographical but a “constructed fiction” (51). Jacquelyn Rose’s book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is another excellent example of feminist analysis that sees Plath’s work as centering on fantasy rather than mimesis.

women's experience is "real" and thus cannot be performed. As Jane Blocker notes of critics of women artists, "[T]he female [is] not seen to be performing at all" (113). Rebecca Schneider confirms this, noting that Marcel Duchamp sometimes signed his Readymades with a woman's name, but "while Duchamp could cross between artist and woman... it was something different for *women*, those bearing the literal markings of woman in their physical bodies, to cross as artists" (29). These ideas, taken from feminist performance art theory, are readily applied to literary criticism, wherein Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz," for instance, is revered as tropically and prosodically sound and not at all a tragic statement on Roethke's inability to get over his father's alcoholism. Thus Plath's work can draw on her own Daddy as well as the Daddy of her children and still create an allegory for her life as a woman in a patriarchal culture. As I will establish shortly, some of her poems depict the female body as a rhetoritopia in which the cultural trappings of femininity are physically stripped away; in this poem, the female body is less explicitly present, but that does not mean that her experience isn't used in what Axelrod would consider the heterotropic space of the poem: that liminal space in which a female adopts the voice of masculine rage, thereby abnegating her femininity.

Georgiana Banita writes about the cultural representation of Sylvia Plath and the ease with which fans (even today) over-identify with her, writing the poetry equivalent of fan-fiction on websites, poring over photographs of the long-dead poet, and visiting her homes and colleges. Banita argues that the photographic images of Sylvia Plath show her has a "cheerful, self-accepting, matter-of-fact

person, patently different from the posed pensiveness” (46) other authors projected, and claims that “Unlike the pictures reprinted on some of Ted Hughes’s books, Plath is virtually never seen practicing her craft, but rather in free-time and motherly activities of stock postures, such as her honeymoon pictures alongside Hughes” (47).

This certifies my earlier claim that Plath had a complicated relationship to domesticity, and it also highlights the nature of the ideology of public ownership of women’s lives, bodies, and identities. Plath’s suicide has become public property, borrowed from others who feel misunderstood or maligned, and rather than perceiving her poetry as a performance, it is considered a window into Plath herself, who simply serves as a mirror for the hack poet looking for validation of his feelings, a new space into which he can extend his emotional landscape and “borrow” the language, meaning, and metaphor established therein<sup>35</sup>. I would posit that Plath embraced this discrepancy between her publicity photos and her work because this juxtaposition reflected her ambivalent feelings about romance and domesticity. Moreover, the stark contrast between the images of Plath as a domestic angel, doting mother, and charming socialite, and the written text of her dark, harrowing poetry belied hegemonic notions of woman as a traceable and knowable territory.

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<sup>35</sup> Most of the fan poems Banita cites are written by men, who feel that they can identify with Plath against some external “indefinite, conspiratorial they” that doesn’t understand Plath and the writer (49). There are also plenty of popular songs written by men about Plath to add to this catalogue.



Axelrod notes that Plath's high school literary education focused on the male canon, effectively teaching her "that language, whether scientific or figurative, belonged to men" (*Sylvia* 33) but that she adopted a technique he refers to as "*feminization*: a turning of male texts against themselves, an abduction of their language for the antithetical purpose of female inscription" (*Sylvia* 71). Axelrod gives as an example of Plath's feminization the poem "Lady Lazarus," in which she turns the Biblical character of Lazarus into a woman. Axelrod's implication that Plath's intent behind "Lady Lazarus" is to disrupt gender hegemony is spot on, and I would add to that by saying that Plath uses aggressive, graphic depictions of the speaker's body to both "feminize" the trope of Lazarus and to "defeminize" the female speaker of the poem, making the body of the speaker a site on which the rhetorics of gender are cast as onto a screen for the scrutiny of an uncomfortable audience.

First, the title evokes gender normativity and nicely performs "feminization," using the term "lady" rather than "female" or "woman" or even "Mrs.," which would imply an existence of Mr. Lazarus. Plath's choice of "Lady Lazarus" effectively erases Lazarus's story and replaces it with a feminized version of rising from the dead while at the same time playing on the role of the "lady" in a patriarchal culture; nevertheless, the reader soon finds that Lady Lazarus is no lady at all. She is an aggressive, angry woman ready to use her body to exorcise her fury.

Plath's "Lady Lazarus" makes reference to the personal experience of her suicide attempt, but this personal experience, again, is extrapolated from the

personal to the political. Donald Morse compares Plath's use of death as a trope negatively to Roethke's in his essay, claiming that Roethke embraced death—"all sensual love's but dancing on a grave"—and "celebrat[ed] mortality"(85), but Morse does not consider that in the American cultural imaginary, women are always metaphorically dying to make way for men's living. In the process of colonizing the Americas, the land was perceived as feminine, a passive body-territory on which men could find new life by mapping, knowing and conquering it. Of course Roethke had a more "celebratory" approach to death than Plath; as a man, he had spent his life living while as a woman, she had spent hers disappearing/dying. For Lady Lazarus to rise from the dead (without the help of a savior, notably), she does so as a means of resisting this lifelong effacement.

In the biblical story, Jesus tells the onlookers to "take off the grave clothes" from Lazarus's body, whose face and hands are wrapped. Lady Lazarus's face, a "featureless, fine Jew linen. / Peel off the napkin" (Plath 244) refers to this part of the fable, but also reverses or feminizes it by inscribing it with a protofeminist agenda: Lady Lazarus intends to "terrify" with her imagery of decay:

the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
The sour breath... Soon, soon the flesh  
the grave cave ate will be  
At home on me  
And I a smiling woman. (244)

This aggressive twist on the story of Lazarus is a use of the body as a rhetoritopia: the body is no longer recognizably feminine with its eye pits and teeth meant for consuming "men like air" (247); moreover, the speaker intends to use the body to

“terrify” her “enemy,” the viewer, and the terror she instills pleases her, makes her smile. In telling the story from the perspective of Lazarus, the speaker gains more agency than the Lazarus of the well-worn fable, but more importantly, the more powerful Lazarus is a woman. Lazarus simply walks out of the tomb in the biblical tale; he never speaks. When Lady Lazarus finally comes fully to life in Plath’s poem, she is a woman with the full power to reclaim her broken body.

The speaker mockingly derides those who decry suicide as a piteous waste of a life, saying, “What a trash / to annihilate each decade” (245), but the destruction of the physical body is central to the aim of recreating it as rhetoritopia: in order to make the point that women are physically erased and equated with that which is insentient or that their bodies are literally equated with “trash,” it is necessary to actually kill the corporeal body and show that it rises again as a different sort of body, one that is unrecognizable as feminine and therefore unmappable. Such a death is laughable, for one cannot kill that which is already rhetorically dead. Plath also implicates the ways in which our culture, “the peanut-crunching crowd” (245), is passively complicit with this effacement of women by making women’s bodies a spectacle, something to see and explore: the crowd “shoves in to see” (245). What they have come to see, however, is distinctly gendered: it is a “big strip tease” (245), language that clearly evokes the gendered power of commodity sexuality, in which women strip naked and men watch, fulfilling a scopophilic desire to visually consume and understand through seeing while not bearing any reciprocal responsibility.

But rather than seeing the pornographized body parts the audience presumably came for when they attend a striptease show, they instead are introduced to her pedestrian body:

Gentlemen, ladies  
These are my hands  
my knees.  
I may be skin and bone,  
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (245)

Here the female body is reduced to grotesque metonym, skin and bone, reminiscent of starvation (evoking ideas of the circumscribed nature of women's appetites and dieting in our culture as well as fears of women consuming too much, as established in the earlier chapters of this work on the Tupinamba tribe of Brazil)<sup>36</sup>, but the "audience" of the poem (and by extension the reader as well) is also reminded that the speaker is the "same, identical woman," not a fantasy or a fantastic landscape onto which our chimera of femininity should be projected.

The idea of the commodification of sex plays out further when Lady Lazarus demands payment for the fulfillment of scopic pleasure:

There is a charge  
  
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart—  
It really goes.

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<sup>36</sup> And also, perhaps, Holocaust victims, as Axelrod avers in his essay on Sylvia Plath's torture imagery (cited earlier), in an effort to place the rhetoric of domesticity within the rhetoric of genocide.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (246)

Here, the body is immanent and has feminine qualities but is not exactly feminine and is therefore subversive. Lady Lazarus's body is feminine, for it is on display for a charge (as a sex worker's might be), but the body to be seen is not what the viewer expects. Indeed, she offers only a glimpse of her scars, presumably a result of patriarchal mapping/marking of her body to conform with gender norms. Moreover Lady Lazarus offers the audience the opportunity to hear her heartbeat, the heart being associated with feminine roles of emotion, but it should be clear by now that the porno-desirous audience has no interest in her feelings or the emotional labor of being "relegated to the position of custodian of emotions" (to quote Plath's early journals). Indeed, Plath uses Lady Lazarus's body to thwart men's desires for fulfillment of the pleasure of looking and surveying the territory of the female body, giving exactly the opposite of what is desired: a bit of blood or a piece of hair is a gory trophy to take home from a conquest, and even that trophy loses its value when freely given.

Plath further makes the female body a site of horror with the image of Lady Lazarus's skin being covered in worms that had to be picked off "like sticky pearls" (245). This juxtaposition of the socialite's ladylike pearls substituted with flesh-eating worms subverts paradigms of femininity and also subverts notions that align women's bodies with the earth. If the woman's body is part of the earth, then it is

compostable and fodder for worms. By the time the poem ends, the body has transformed into a rhetoritopia in the burning embers of a fire: “You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—...” (247). The body is momentarily absent, shifting and eluding masculine touch (the “poke” is a clever play on words) until “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.” This final image of horror, of a woman – flesh eaten by worms, eye sockets emptied, hair pulled out in bits and sold to onlookers, body burned—rising up with vengeance and hunger is a final play on the fears of men that women are not, after all, a conquerable territory but are instead actively oral and hungry. (Moreover, this graphic, horrific, and Biblical depiction of the female body in a state of angry decay places Plath’s work on the trajectory of feminist discourse established with the earlier images created in the nuns’ discourse from the sixteenth century, cited in earlier chapters of this dissertation.)

Axelrod notes, “Plath’s compulsive orality appears throughout her discourse in the linked figures of *mouthing* and *eating*” (*Sylvia* 5). While Axelrod connects this obsession with orality with her “earliest experience of parental nurturance” (*Sylvia* 5), I would connect that link beyond the psychoanalytical to the social: indeed, she probably was deprived of parental nurturance, as girls in patriarchy so often are, in that their consumption is strictly circumscribed and appetites (for food at first, but later translating into appetites for attention, power, and ultimately sex—as evidenced in Plath’s journals) are always monitored for being too active. Thus, Lady Lazarus embodies the appetitive woman, both horrifying in her physicality and

frightening in her propensity to violently and hungrily consume her spectators/aggressors.

“Cut” is another of Plath’s poems that uses the female body as rhetoritopia, making the female body within the domestic sphere a gruesome site. The poem’s speaker is chopping onions, and accidentally cuts the tip of her thumb, but rather than speak of the pain or care for the wound, the speaker instead revels in the vision of her own blood coursing from her body. The poem begins “What a thrill—/ my thumb instead of an onion” (Plath 235), initially disrupting any ideas of pain or suffering associated with the cut. On the contrary, the speaker is thrilled to have cut herself, desperate for a “thrill.” (On the other hand, the term “thrill” can be interpreted in its older sense, as Poe used it, meaning the sudden onset of pain, in which case Plath plays off both meanings of the word.) This absolutely speaks to Plath’s ambivalent feelings about domesticity: on the one hand, she was excited to cook for her husband (as noted earlier) and tend to babies in the domestic realm, but on the other, she noted in a letter to her mother toward the end of her life, after Ted had left her, that she was “Writing like mad.... Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (qtd. in Axelrod *Sylvia* 52). This note from her journal, when compared to the poem, should not be read simply biographically, as if she had this experience and felt a need to share it; rather, it should be seen as a protofeminist move to disrupt rhetorics of femininity that posit women as blissfully at peace in the domestic sphere.

Moreover, "Cut" introduces blood to the domestic sphere of peace and tranquility, making it a site of violence. Julia Kristeva's essay "On Abjection" deals with the abject, that which we reject as a means of defining ourselves. Kristeva's work is about containment of that which can be perceived as contaminating or sullyng. Blood is an ideal example of a contaminant we consider abject. Blood, though it is life-giving and absolutely necessary to our survival, must remain contained within the body; when it leaks away from its container, we recoil in horror, for the inside has met the outside. Plath plays on this anxiety of inside/outside by depicting blood in the kitchen during meal preparation, heightening the fear of a re-incorporation of the blood of someone else, the epitome of the abject.

The tone of the poem is mocking and light, yet the subject matter is not:

The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of hinge  
of skin,  
a flap like a hat,  
dead white.  
Then that red plush. (235)

The image of the hat both decreases the readers' anxiety by likening it to something trivial and pedestrian and at the same time heightens our anxiety by highlighting the speaker's nonchalance about the event. Her physical pain and the integrity of her corporeal body means nothing to her, and this is alarming to the reader, whose image of the domestic woman, preparing dinner for her family is being disrupted. Indeed, she seems completely detached from her corporeality, calling her thumb a



“Little pilgrim” and claiming that the “Indian’s axed your scalp” (235). This reference to the conflicted relationship of colonialism is important because it highlights her female body as identified with colonial, patriarchal power (“dead white”). If the body has been overtaken by a colonialist imaginary, then it no longer belongs to her; thus she feels no pain. The “red plush” of blood that surges forth, however, is what lies beneath the imagined body; it is the literal body, the body that bleeds and experiences pain. The cutting open of the body so that the abject flows forth removes it from the imaginary realm: the spectator is not interested in a literal body but only in the imagined one that is conquerable and docile; thus this laughing specter of a bleeding woman disrupts notions of femininity.

Steven Axelrod’s essay on Plath’s use of torture is relevant in that Plath refers to instances of political violence as a means of exploring gender-based violence:

Perhaps Plath’s classic text of self-injury is “Cut,” in which the dyad of victim/victimizer appears in one subject. The speaker adumbrates a history of political violence in references to Pilgrims, Indians, Redcoats, saboteurs, Kamikazes, Klansmen, and Soviets, which are then associated with images of the self as a war survivor (“trepanned veteran”), a prostitute or runaway (“dirty girl”) and an object of mutilation (“thumb stump”). (73)

Axelrod posits Plath’s ruminations on torture as a means of understanding the social milieu in which she lived. Her use of Holocaust and American race imagery is a means of generating an allegory for women’s struggle against the violence inhering in rhetorics of femininity, seeing herself as a survivor of a war that has consequences for her as a woman with ambivalent feelings about fitting into a masculinist culture. Her poems, as Axelrod avers, “crucially connect the

representation of torture to that of domesticity” (“Plath” 67) and complicate her role as victim by victimizing her reader with the scene of blood in the kitchen.

Images of the desolating nature of domestic life in the 1960s also surface in the poem:

...I am ill.  
I have taken a pill to kill  
The thin  
Papery feeling. (235)

The presence of “Mommy’s little helpers,” first introduced in the 1950s to help women cope with their feelings of alienation in the suffocating confines of their homes, is no less ubiquitous now, in a postmodern era that continues to make demands on women to efface their literal bodies and enact the hoped-for, ideal body of the all-giving, all-nurturing mother figure, even with the help of Ambien, Prozac, and Abilify. The numbing effects of tranquilizing pills to calm nerves would certainly be offset by the thrill of a cut thumb, something *real* to experience corporeally. The poem ends on a somewhat subdued note:

...and when  
The balled  
Pulp of your heart  
Confronts its small  
Mill of silence  
How you jump—  
Trepanned veteran,  
dirty girl,  
thumb stump (236).

The blood having been absorbed by gauze, she is left to ponder the “balled pulp of her heart,” the contents of which she has released onto the scene and to

consider the “mill of silence” femininity demands as she fulfills her domestic obligations, but though subdued, she maintains her transfigured, monstrous body. She is now a veteran of the war on women, and having transformed her body into a rhetoritopia, a site that manifests the violence of domesticity, she embraces her identity as unladylike: a “thumb stump” that is just a fragment of the ideal woman.

The result of this kind of poetry in which women’s bodies are transformed into a site of horror is that the reader, faced with his or her complicity in the gender paradigm, is made to feel uncomfortable. Axelrod implies that this amounts to a kind of torture:

Plath not only depicted scenes of torture, she also regularly tortured her readers with these graphic scenes of sadism, thereby awakening them to the complexities of torture. The poems confront readers with torture’s ambiguous powers of repulsion and gratification in our fantasy life and with the pointless, painful, and often fatal recurrence of it in our political life. In scenes of gruesome violence, Plath forces readers to collaborate with her in fantasizing about a dimension of experience most would prefer to suppress. (“Plath” 73)

Therefore, Plath’s work can be seen as a kind of reversal of power, in which the domestic housewife upends the power paradigm by making her body the site of discomfort rather than comfort and nurturance. The depiction of her own torture in turn tortures the reader, who turns away in horror from the graphic image of the feminine body in pain.

Plath’s mother, ever complicit in normalizing her daughter into the gender paradigm must have chastised her daughter to stop writing such alarming work. As Axelrod notes, “In one memorable letter, Plath wrote: ‘Don’t talk to me about the

world needing cheerful stuff! What the person out of Belsen—physical or psychological—wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the *worst*, just what it was like” (*Sylvia* 89). This refusal to participate in gender normativity by playing nicely is exactly the point: the rhetoritopian body, since it defies gender categories and is locatable only within its own skin (and the space around it, should it happen to bleed), can draw on culturally worshipped and sanctified instances of torture such as the Holocaust and draw connections between kinds of torture, kinds of inequality. The literal body, broken free of the bonds of the ideal, is free to travel rhetorically to make its point because it no longer belongs in the space into which it was conditioned.

Axelrod notes that there is much speculation that Plath’s suicide was not intended to be successful. According to other biographers, she took the action when she was expecting a visitor, and she had left the phone number of her physician in clear view. Axelrod also implies that because she was married to Hughes, he was responsible for editing her writings, which he did ardently. Leaving her texts under Hughes’s control, Axelrod avers, may have been a final performance of her voicelessness in patriarchy (*Sylvia* 20), and I would add to that the image of her head in an oven, where, once and for all, domesticity “choked” her unto lifelessness as she literalized the body of the domestic ideal. Plath’s death, whether accidental or not, was certainly performative when considered in the context of her conflicted feelings about domesticity. She embraced it though it turned out to be deadly.

Sylvia Plath took her life in 1963, days before the release of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*. Had she lived, Plath may have read it and found that her "problem that has no name," as Friedan referred to the dull misery of domestic life, was a shared experience. As it were, Friedan's book cracked open the hard nut of women's quietly seething anger, and in that same year, Adrienne Rich published her third (though first explicitly feminist) book of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. The title poem addresses the problem of domesticity, of intelligent women consigned to the dull confines of family life:

Your mind now, moldering like wedding cake,  
heavy with useless experience, rich  
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,  
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge  
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

The use of matrimonial imagery (wedding cake) to explicate the apostrophized subject's atrophying experience under the weight of the "richness" of married life parallels the concern of Plath's white womanhood, effaced in service to the ideal woman. The subject's life is slipping away from her while she lives out the fantasy of American womanhood. Later, the housewife engages in self-injury:

Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,  
a match burn to her thumbnail,  
or held her hand above the kettle's snout  
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,  
since nothing hurts her anymore, except  
each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

These lines speak to the same pain as Plath encountered and, significantly, use the same technique of making the body a rhetoritopia by depicting physical

injury in the domestic sphere, destroying the ideal body of the all-nurturing, all-feeding earth-body Mother. The denial of physical pain, as well, is present—as in Plath’s work; the speaker seems to mock the idea of torture or physical pain, as if to indicate that the existential pain ensuing from domesticity and feminine silence pales in comparison to these minor skin injuries, or that the physical injury is merely a manifestation of the rhetorical injuries of domestic life, an outwardly visible inscription of internal pain.

Interestingly, however, Rich divorced in mid-1970, and her subsequent publication, *Diving Into the Wreck* demonstrates a shift in the deployment of the female body. Now a self-identified lesbian whose mind is fully engaged in political considerations of the time, Rich produced a new kind of poetry portraying the queer body, a body now culturally perceived as *literal* and therefore unperformable. This later work depicts speakers with a different relationship to their corporeality, one less conflicted, but no less aggressive. Self-harm is all but absent in *Diving Into the Wreck*, for the body, removed from the realm of patriarchal domesticity, is now outside the gender paradigm and can reclaim the trope of the earth-body. Thus, the androgynous speaker of “The Stranger” walks (“like a man, like a woman”) down a street, “feeling the shudder of caves beneath asphalt,” experiencing the life of the earth as aligned with his/her own anger. When the speaker enters a room, he/she can

...hear them talking a dead language  
if they ask me my identity  
what can I say but

I am the androgyne  
I am the living mind you fail to describe  
in your dead language. (*Diving* 19)

Gone is the self-injuring, bitterly angry housewife; she has been replaced by an ungendered character, who refuses to be named by hegemonic discourse. Moreover, this speaker aligns with the earth, making the earth-body genderless as well. The caves that shudder beneath the earth and the rivers that run above ground are paths walked by an individual who cannot be described because he/she has transcended language and discourse through a revocation of gender identification. More significantly, not only are we deprived of sexing/naming the speaker, who was once easily coded as female, we similarly cannot name the earth, also once so easily coded in our gendered parlance.

Piotr Gwiazda writes, “The 1980s mark an important change in Rich’s poetry from the predominantly feminist focus of the previous decade to a sustained interest in the paradoxes of American history” (165-6), noting that this later work has a “national rather than feminist scope” (167). The deliberate separation of feminism from a critique of nationalism is precisely what marginalizes feminism as being narrow in its concerns and attenuates nationalism by refusing to acknowledge that it is a distinctly gendered paradigm. Rich perceived this deep connection between the critique of masculinism and the critique of nationalism, and offered her queer, female body as a screen onto which these critiques could be cast.

Audre Lorde, yet another queer poet, wrote well into the mid- and late twentieth century, but as a Black woman, her figuration of the rhetoritopia is

significantly different. I make the argument in my introduction that in the American colonial imaginary, the land is figured as an ideal woman and the bodies of European (colonial) women are thus conflated with the land. This leaves the question of the colonized woman (also referred to as Third World women and women of color). As I argue in the first half of this study, the correlation of the land with the European female body dualistically affected both race and gender; white (colonial) women's literal bodies were effaced as they were metaphorized as territory while brown (colonized) women's bodies were made more explicit (less ideal). Thus brown women's appetites (in the cannibal rite specifically) were upheld as the standard to avoid, the example that should inspire white women to pare down their appetites, to withdraw inward. Thus, while the work of white feminist writers (like Plath) make the body a rhetoritopia, a space that confronts the ideal, women of color have a different set of considerations to undertake in their portrayals of the corporeal. Converse to white feminist representations of the body, Lorde's work makes the Black woman's body a rhetoritopia by *likening* it to the land (which has been conceived of in terms of rhetorics of white femininity), yet it has the added task of representing the queer female body as well.

Lorde's poem "Woman" casts the female body as a landscape, but unlike the masculinist conception of the female body in popular culture, which envisions the landscape of the female body as a space in which men can discover themselves or their own power, Lorde's poem envisions the earth-body as racially marked ("ebony opal") and her speaker occupies a reciprocal relationship to the earth-body: "where



I plant crops / in your body / an endless harvest” (297). The speaker is invested in the female earth-body’s pleasure and invests a tender kind of custodianship of it, carefully tending the landscape of this racially and sexually coded body until the earth-body erupts in an orgasm: “and your night comes down upon me / like a nurturing rain” (297). The active and climactic female orgasm is not consuming or threatening, but a “rain” that will, in turn, “nurture” the crops the speaker has planted, making the female earth-body a representation of female activity, sentience, and pleasure, a far cry from the senseless territory of male exploration and self-discovery in masculinist representations.

“Love Poem” envisions the speaker as powerful earth-body as well:

Make sky flow honey out of my hips  
rigid as mountains  
spread over a valley  
carved out by the mouth of rain (127).

This imagery is that of woman-as-earth-body being created by a woman. The “mouth” of rain carving her hips, if seen as a reference to cunnilingus, gives power to the woman who lovingly creates the landscape, with her mouth, both as a carving tool and as an agent of speech. The poem begins “Speak earth and bless me with what is richest” (127). There is no comma before the word “earth,” so the lover is “speaking earth,” saying the words that breathe life into the landscape of the body through the carving mouth of the lover. The rest of the poem details a passionate orgasm in which both parties quicken into a rebirth originated through the re-visioning of the body-as-landscape trope, rendering the speaker “a child” who can

“swing out over the earth / over and over / again” (127). This image of freedom and joy—a child on a swing—is one of a re-creation of the body, making the body itself new, reconfigured outside of the masculinist, ideal woman’s body.

As Margaret Kissam Morris notes, “Audre Lorde likes to refer to herself as black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet, and warrior” (168). Morris’s essay explores the complex ways in which Lorde bridged those identities and extended her work as a poet into her work as a feminist activist (warrior). Her poetry extended into her essays about political organizing, which voiced hope for women working together across lines of hegemonic construction, particularly race and sexuality. In her essay “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power,” she claims, “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women... confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic” (54). Lorde’s poetry aims to use lesbianism as a trope to reclaim women’s sexuality from the realm of the ideal. Feminist work, then eschews the ideal body in favor of the erotic, which represents the literal body of powerful passion and appetites.

Azfar Hussain places the work of Native American poet Joy Harjo on par with that of Audre Lorde because like Lorde, Harjo conceives of poetry as praxis and sees her work as a means of social change (33-34). Harjo is uniquely placed within the hermeneutic of feminist resistance to the trope of the feminine Earth-body because she is of Native American descent, and her colonial history is deeply implicated in the violent construction of the American nationalist identity. Randi Cull’s essay, “Aboriginal Mothering Under the State’s Gaze,” addresses the ways in which colonial

governments perceive Indigenous mothers as unfit and deviant, citing the Indian boarding schools of North America, “The Sixties Scoop” (a government move to relocate Indigenous Canadian children to foster care beginning in the 1960s and persisting to this day with 30-70 percent of children in the foster care system of Canada being Indigenous) (145), and forced sterilization of Indigenous women. This pattern of marginalization of Indigenous motherhood in favor of European motherhood is a tangible manifestation of the complicated imaginary relationship between the New World as a feminine Mother-Earth-body and the actual mothers populating the land. The Earth-body, as an ideal European mother with mountainous breasts had to exist in concert with the actual, lived bodies of Indigenous mothers in the early colonial Americas. When the relationship to the land proved to be complicated, the Indigenous people populating the land served as scapegoats, the barrier to complete domination of the territory. This notion of Indigenous people as interfering with colonialists’ desired relationship to the land/Mother persists today in perceptions of Indigenous women as prone to overpopulating the planet and being lax mothers.

Harjo’s poetry addresses the patriarchal, colonial conflation of the land and the female body; she seeks to disentangle the ideal from the literal body and articulate a sense of rage on behalf of a feminized landscape. “The Land is a Poem” characterizes the land as language rather than as a body. While Cixous and Irigaray have developed theories about how discourse and language about women’s bodies only serve to rob women of a sense of corporeal sovereignty, Harjo gives the power

of language to nature, decentering the idea of language as a human privilege at all. The ungendered Earth speaks its own poetry in this work, yet it also is indifferent to the writings of people (one might say “men,” considering the phallogocentric nature of language and the establishment of language as belonging to men, as Axelrod establishes via Plath’s experience). The poem ends, “Even then, does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind, and sky?” (58) Thus, our metaphors cannot describe the land; our language is powerless.

“Returning From the Enemy” addresses more explicitly the conflation of Native bodies and the land. In Part 5 of the poem, the speaker claims, “*When entering another country do not claim ownership... / I am asking you to leave the country of my body, my mind, if you have anything other than honorable intentions,*” (155). These lines recall the moment of colonization, the first italicized as if to demonstrate that they are written laws, quoted from an established source, and the second not italicized, returning the reader to the speaker’s perspective and voice. The speaker, identified as a woman, perceives colonization as a kind of rape (“honorable intentions” referring to how a man might treat a woman he is courting). Moreover, there is an understanding of the all-pervasive nature of colonialism, that there are ramifications for individuals living under colonial rule, and thus the country becomes conflated with the body of the colonized individual. Significantly, this individual is gendered feminine since the one apostrophized is questioned about “honorable intentions.”

Harjo's poetry directly confronts the image of the Earth as an all-nurturing Mother-Body; "Fire" perceives of the Earth as a Cixousian source of feminine self-containment: "A woman can't survive / by her own breath" (25) the poem begins. It establishes the female persona's idea that sexuality is dependent on a kind of communion with the world around her:

she must flow  
with the elusive  
bodies  
of night winds  
who will take her  
into herself... (25)

Unlike the masculinist poetry of colonialism, the forces of nature are not overpowering, nor are they maternal or nurturing or a source of need-gratification; rather, nature is a means by which the persona can access a kind of impenetrable self-contained sexuality independent of men, as Irigaray prescribed in her essay "This Sex Which is Not One." Yet this piece does not condescend to essentialist notions of femininity or womanhood. It does not naturalize women's sexuality but claims, "look at me / i am not a separate woman" (25). The sexual relationship established here is a means of connecting to other women and connecting to something greater than herself, which is her independent sexuality.

"New Orleans" is an indictment of Hernando de Soto's legacy on the Indigenous people of the American South. The poem shifts perspective, moving from a first person human speaker, who sees the ghost of de Soto wandering around New Orleans, to an enraged land, the Mother of the colonial imaginary, filled with fury.

“Blood is the undercurrent” of the Mississippi River (44), and the speaker’s “spirit comes here to drink” (44). This image of a bloodthirsty, angry woman is paired with a later image of “shops that sell mammy dolls / holding white babies” (45), the dark, literal female body transformed into a nurturing servant-mother to the infantilized white colonizer. The juxtaposition of these images of the brown, nurturing mother, the brown blood-drinking woman, and the “veins” of the Earth coursing with actual blood rather than milk and honey effectively undermine colonialist fantasies of an all-providing landscape of fantasy fulfillment.

Finally, Harjo’s work undermines the docile, Indian princess mythos of colonialism, portraying angry, dangerous Indigenous women, seething with anger, entertaining thoughts of killing rages. “I Am A Dangerous Woman” recounts a woman going through an airport security checkpoint, passing through a metal detector. When asked to remove her belt, she does it “so easy” (17) that she senses the male, uniformed TSA attendants (representing power and border containment) look her way. She wonders if her sexuality is “the deadly weapon / that has the machine singing” (17), understanding that a brown woman in control of her own sexuality is a threat to colonialist patriarchy. But she knows that the greater threat is her anger: “the weapon is not visible” (17) because “They can’t hear the clicking / of the gun inside my head” (17).

“Conversations Between Here and Home” traces domestic and interpersonal violence to government bureaucracy and poverty, positing Indigenous women as the ones with the most at stake. The poem ends reflectively:

Angry women are building  
houses of stones.  
They are grinding the mortar  
between straw-thin teeth  
and broken families. (11)

The first two lines make brilliant use of traditional accentual-syllabic verse within a free-verse poem. Both lines begin with trochees (angry and houses), the first with a double trochee (angry women) – or a trochee-dactyl (or possibly even pyrrhic substitution if one should count “are” with the two first words: “angry women are”) followed by another trochee, building. The prosodic effect of these lines gives the sense of a drumbeat, a ritual in which the heretofore-quiescent rage of the women in question begins to build. This embrace of barely perceptible yet seething anger with the officials in charge of policing the borders, enforcing laws, and containing the nation is almost an adoption of masculinity; these are no Pocahontases out to rescue the colonizer.

For this last section, rather than choose a traditional poet, I am making an unconventional choice of a musician, Ani DiFranco, a self-styled “Little Folksinger,” who is actually a socialist feminist poet-songwriter, who began performing in 1990 when she was twenty years old. Some of her lyrics address the sexism inherent to the music industry that tried to sign her to their labels, which she refused to do. Instead, she created her own label, *Righteous Babe Records*, so that she has sole possession of and owns the rights to her own materials. Her 1995 song “The Million You Never Made” is a taunting commentary on her unwillingness to sell out by becoming a commodity “girl” singer. She sings:

and I wouldn't work for you  
no matter what you paid  
I may not be able  
to change the whole fucking world  
but I can be the million  
that you never made

DiFranco makes an issue of her personal decision to not buy into the trappings of fame, but her story is not simply autobiographical. The issue of self-representation is not just a matter of economics or business sense within her oeuvre; rather, it is about the right of women to represent themselves in terms of personal agency and identity.

I am choosing DiFranco rather than a canonical poet for a couple of reasons: one is that I began this chapter with misogynist song lyrics, the “poetry” of the masses, so I want to offer a counterpart to the mass production of lyric misogyny. There has been much discussion in the last decades about the viability of poetry as a genre that speaks to the average person outside of academia. Possibly in response to this, DiFranco often intersperses her musical selections on CDs with “spoken word” selections, for she is, inherently, a poet. Likewise, Joy Harjo records her poetry as music on CDs, often changing lines, which constructs a dialogue between poetic and musical lyric. I would argue that this inclusion of poetry is good for mainstream thinking about the power of poetry and its viability for communicating something greater about the human experience. Moreover, many contemporary songs make reference to Plath, Sexton, and Erica Jong, perhaps indicating that anti-colonial queer feminism may, in some way, present a hope of closing the aperture between



poetic and musical lyric. My second reason for choosing a folksinger to end this chapter is that I am careful to make the distinction between “academic feminists” (those who simply think about feminism) and “feminist academics” (those who actually engage in acts of feminism); thus this seems like a reasonable choice, to choose a feminist who is so committed to her message that she promulgates it within a more populist genre such as folk music (which she admittedly has a very liberal definition of).

The music to which DiFranco sets her lyrics is often folksy and upbeat, decidedly catchy and engaging, belying the dark message of her words. What is remarkable about her music is her aggressive, feminist attitude amid a very postfeminist listening audience. By the 1990s, feminism as an ideology had begun to wane; many thought that the feminists of the second wave had remedied gender inequalities and that it was time to make peace with men. DiFranco’s first CD, which was self-titled, established her diametric opposition to these claims with an aggressive representation of the female body, making specific references to it as a means of fending off a potential suitor in the song “Out of Habit”:

my cunt is built  
like a wound that won’t heal  
now you don’t have to ask  
because you know how i feel...  
i don’t want to play for you anymore

In her music “playing” and “performing” often have double meanings, indicating both playing her guitar and playing the part of a nice girl. She refers to herself as a “girl” consciously, as a means of undermining the sexist representation

of women's bodies as eternally childlike and virginal. Moreover, she reclaims the patriarchal ideology that names female genitalia as lack or loss, calling it a "wound that won't heal," thereby desexualizing it and making it less appealing in the masculinist imagination.

In her 1992 CD, *Not a Pretty Girl*, the song "Not a Pretty Girl" addresses the complexity of occupying a female, feminist body. Her knowledge of and references to feminists as angry women demonstrate that she is astute about how feminist cultural productions have worked to undermine hegemonic notions of the female body as utopian ideal and the response this has garnered from the mainstream about women's anger:

I am not an angry girl  
but it seems like  
i've got everyone fooled  
every time i say something  
they find hard to hear  
they chalk it up to my anger  
never to their own fear  
imagine you're a girl  
just trying to finally come clean  
knowing full well they'd prefer  
you were dirty  
and smiling  
i'm sorry  
but i am not a maiden fair  
and i am not a kitten  
stuck up a tree somewhere

The chorus begins with a disavowal of her anger and the deliberate and insistent misreading of her attempts to communicate her feelings; moreover it plays upon the masculinist fear of feminine rage, the kind that Plath preyed upon with

“Lady Lazarus,” and the kind the Tupinamba women counted on in their performances of insatiate womanhood for their European visitors. Her efforts to “come clean” are met with disregard because the masculinist gaze prefers the pornographized, ideal body of the “dirty girl,” the girl that is reduced to the insentient landscape on which he can discover himself rather than awaken her desires or fulfill her needs. Incidentally, her reference to herself as a “dirty girl” is reminiscent of Plath’s dirty girl, who is also a “thumb stump.” Finally, she rejects the ideal of femininity as the fair maiden or helpless kitten, often found in literary references, and her voice crescendos into an angry, animalistic growl.

“Out of Range” from the CD with the same name, released in 1994, posits the domestic sphere as one of danger, invoking the ways in which sexuality and violence fuse in strict adherence to gender roles: “boys get locked up in some prison / girls get locked up in some house.” She refers to the plaster on the walls over her shared bed crumbling because her man has punched a hole in the wall, noting that she keeps trying to “draw the line,” but that the line “ends up running / down the middle of me / every time.” She tells him that she is leaving him, not because she is tired of being beaten, but because she is tired of the gender dynamic:

i was locked  
into being my mother’s daughter  
i was just eating bread and water  
thinking nothing ever changes.

Again, it is important to note that the speaker’s choice to leave is not simply about a personal experience of trauma; indeed, there is little recollection of the

trauma or violence in the relationship. (Perhaps as in the work of Rich and Plath, the physical pain is irrelevant while the existential pain of living out the rhetoric of gender is excruciating.) Rather, the speaker later says, “half the world don’t even know / what they coulda had.” Her leaving is not a personal victory, just as the violence she encounters is not simply interpersonal violence.

In DiFranco’s work, the one female body musters the strength of all women and is figured as a complex rhetoritopia, simultaneously embracing violent representations of the female body and feminist rage and rejecting hegemonic designations of that body. Moreover, DiFranco’s music also takes on issues of nationalist ideology and racism, the ways in which Black men, for instance, are perceived as criminals and white women’s purity serves as a counterpoint to that performance of dangerous hypermasculinity (“Tis” and “To the Teeth”). DiFranco’s music also implicates other women in her indictment of masculinist complicity, noting in “Face Up and Sing” that women thank her for saying things they are too cowardly to say, and retorting angrily, “the thanks i get / is to take all the shit for you.” Postmodern feminist concerns have addressed the question of gender as a paradigm and the second-wave feminist propensity to blame men for the problem of gender inequality. DiFranco’s music speaks to these concerns, implicating nationalism, racism, and masculinism as contributing factors to violence against women, yet not neglecting the rhetorics of femininity addressed in the work of earlier poets like Plath, Rich and Lorde, as a strong undercurrent that still informs our cultural narrative.

One might consider that the heterotropic spaces created by feminist poets of the twentieth and twenty-first century have their rhetorical foundations in the *vidas* of Mexican nuns this dissertation examined in Chapter Four: reclaiming language as a feminine tool of liberation and drawing from personal experiences, they indict the forces that oppress them. In fact, the complex and nuanced use of the discourses of race, colonialism, gender, sexuality, and religion found in the *vidas* suggests what I call a profound “proto-postcolonial feminism,” which considers the complex interconnection of these rhetorical hegemonic forces. Five hundred years of colonial influence buried such ideology so that when the “second wave”<sup>37</sup> of feminist poets surfaced and recognized their rage, Plath’s poetry addressed male power with little thought to issues of race, class, and colonialism except as metaphors for the suffering of women like her. The poetry of Lorde, Rich, and Harjo—and the music and poetry of DiFranco—move beyond the reductive notion of men as the enemy, implicating far more complex ideologies of race, gender, masculinity, femininity, heteronormativity, and silence. In reading their works against that of the Criolla nuns of early modern Mexico and contemporary pop music, it becomes apparent that the oppression of women is an outcropping of colonial narratives. The “wonderland” of the white female body and the literalization of the brown female body render the territory of female corporeality a metaphorical “last colony.”

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<sup>37</sup> I put this in scare quotes since the feminism of early colonial women is not counted in the first, second and third-wave schemas.

## Chapter Six

### Spectacles of Theatrical Violence:

#### Feminist Playwrights Mirroring 500 Years of Masculinist Discourse in Two Acts

Pedro Almodovar's 2002 comedy-drama *Talk to Her* details the story of Benigno, a nurse at an extended care facility, where he has been the primary caretaker of a comatose young woman (Alicia) for four years. Throughout the film, Benigno is characterized as, well, benign: harmless, gentle, and sensitive, quite probably even a virgin. He chats about pedestrian subjects to the unconscious Alicia (as though she can understand him) and advises other family members of comatose patients to do the same: *Habla con ella*. (Talk to her.) He advises, "A woman's brain is a mystery, and in this state more so. You have to pay attention to women, talk to them. Be thoughtful occasionally. Caress them." As Benigno's story develops, we learn that his mother was a controlling, overbearing nag and that he was her sole caretaker until the end of her life, painting her nails and fixing her hair each day. This portrait of his mother makes him more sympathetic and allows the viewer to understand how it is that he has come to such intimate knowledge of women.

As the movie unfolds in a series of flashbacks, however, Benigno's character engages in some disturbing acts, such as having stalked Alicia before she was his paralyzed patient; obsessively massaging her inner thighs when he is performing her rehabilitation exercises; and telling her father that he is gay so that he can be her primary nurse. However, these actions are played off as curiosities, quirks

attributable to Benigno's shy nature or social awkwardness. A viewer feels sorry for him when we learn through a flashback that Alicia responds negatively to his following her, for we have seen how tenderly he ministers unto her needs when she is comatose; in addition, one considers it an overreaction when she stops taking dance lessons near his house because she is alarmed by what she deems his obsessive behavior. He seems so hapless, so confused and harmless.

Benigno has never gotten out much because of his mother's demands, but when Alicia becomes his patient, he begins to do the things Alicia liked to do, such as attending theater and silent films, claiming that the last four years of his life have been the most fulfilling, living out her life in this way. One night he attends a silent film called *Amante Menguante* (*The Shrinking Lover*) and then returns to care for Alicia at the hospital and tells her about the movie. Scenes from the film-within-the-film are intercut with the scene of Benigno telling Alicia about *Amante Menguante* while he massages her completely nude body. The film is about Alfredo, a slightly overweight man (Benigno compares himself to the character) whose wife, Amparo, is a scientist working on a weight loss formula in her laboratory. Alfredo quaffs an entire beaker-full of the smoking draught and proceeds to shrink day by day, finally returning to live with his awful mother to spare his wife the feelings of guilt she experiences, but Amparo fetches him back and takes him to a hotel where she falls asleep while he ecstatically roams all over her body—her breasts resembling mountains—finally cavorting over her torso until he reaches her pubic area and enters it like a cave while Amparo experiences an orgasm in her sleep. Benigno tells

Alicia that Alfredo stays inside Amparo forever, and the scene cuts to a lava lamp, flowing and tumbling in slow motion in the hospital room.

Almodovar's commentary on the movie is revealing: he notes that the mother is "the monster" in the film-within-the-film, and that Amparo shows up to save Alfredo from the monster/mother. Regarding the shrinking lover scene, he avers, "And I think all lovers have dreamt sometime of walking about the body of the person... hiking on the body of the person they love as if it were some natural landscape. Here are all the elements, even the flowers in the sheets belong to nature. These are real hills [her breasts]." When Alfredo comes to the opening of Amparo's vagina, Almodovar comments:

Here everyone laughs as well, and I feel moved. And here he discovers the most important thing [the vaginal opening]. This is a landscape, even the mirror in the background looks like a star... but it's just the moon. He's choosing his destiny. And his destiny is to fulfill a cycle that starts and ends in the same place, the place that has to do with pleasure and birth. It's a destiny that is joined, naturally, by death. It's a destiny that is chosen by this little man with great heart and huge desire.

As it turns out, our roaming hero Benigno rapes Alicia that night as he tells her about the movie, impregnating her, and Benigno is sent to prison, though he still seems sympathetic and quite puzzled as to how his behavior caused a problem. He remains more attentive to his charge's needs than the men around him, who do not comb their lovers' hair or paint their nails or care for their skin the way Benigno cares for Alicia and attends to her beauty. Benigno goes to prison as the only one who ever *talked to her* while the other men continue to be silent and withholding, and so a viewer finds it difficult to despise him. It is played off as a complex love



story and a dark comedy. Yet this is clearly beyond a complex character portrayal: this is a man who is not based in reality, who lives in fantasy, but our cultural imaginary of the female landscape is so deeply ingrained that his imaginary *is* ours.<sup>38</sup> The audience laughs, according to Almodovar, when we see Alfredo standing at the entrance to Amparo's vagina; there is an implicit acceptance of the idea that we have all "dreamt sometime of walking about the body of the person...[we] love as if it was some natural landscape." But the assumed viewer is a male, as the female body is the landscape in question, with its natural breast/hills and vagina/cave. Even the "moon"/mirror in the background is part of a feminine landscape and should not be mistaken for a burning, active star. Nevertheless, both Benigno and Alfredo have terrible, controlling, devouring mothers, whom they long to escape, and whose "caves" they once resided in. It's comedic only to a viewer who espouses the same view, but when the fantasy is analyzed (which does not require much work here), the trope of woman-as-land/land-as-woman is revealed to be nothing more than a rape fantasy (one born of Spain's colonialist history predicated on envisioning the "New World" as a virgin territory to be exploited).

In her landmark essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey positions the role of the woman as exhibitionist: "[W]omen are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*"

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<sup>38</sup> Uncannily, this scene presents a moment when the mainstream, heteronormative cultural imaginary momentarily aligns with that of Almodovar, a gay man, thereby establishing a unity of gay and heterosexual male fantasy.

(62), while men, on the other hand, “cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification... As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like... so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look” (63). Mulvey positions men as looking and women as looked at; male viewers either look at women, or they look at *how* the men in the film, in turn, look at the female characters. In this film, women are either insentient landscapes to be ventured across and penetrated or devouring mothers to be evaded.

Mulvey explores this concept more, positing that men look because women lack a penis, for “[u]ltimately, the meaning of a woman is sexual difference” (64). Looking, then, always reintroduces castration anxiety, which can only be diverted by either “investigating woman, demystifying her mystery” (64), and punishing her or by “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.” The notion of investigating the mystery by making it into a reassuring fetish is spot on for Almodovar’s movie, which replaces the devouring hag from whose vagina one emerged with a supple body ripe for exploration. (And this is an apt metaphor also for colonialism since the desire to escape “the old country” –mother—is characterized by a repudiation of that place and a pastoral characterization of the new land as a virginal country ready to embrace its new “child/lover”).

Mulvey’s “fetishistic scopophilia” is an act that “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (64). The first act

depends on voyeurism, itself a manifestation of sadism, which entails a narrative of a power struggle to subdue the unruly object; fetishistic scopophilia “is focused on the look alone” and does not rely on a narrative to resolve it. Benigno the filmgoer is a voyeur’s voyeur; we watch him watch the unconscious Alicia, and we watch him watch Alfredo cavort across the landscape of Amparo, which becomes demystified, laughable, with its enormous, obviously unrealistic vagina (which is clearly made of rubber, while Almodovar chose to use real breasts for the filming). The site of consumption, fear, and loathing is rendered comical and gives the audience a good laugh as the protagonist bravely dives into it in a final release of ecstasy before he dies blissfully, successfully occupying the territory he has surveyed and conquered.

Michel Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias” posits that the great concern of the twentieth century was space, or what he termed “emplacement.” He notes that we have become deeply concerned with cultural spaces because our very notion of space is destabilized by science: “a thing’s place was no longer anything but a point in its movement” (2). He notes that in the twentieth century, our concept of place was “defined by relations of proximity between points or elements” (2) and that we became concerned with having enough space and the “form of relations among sites” (2). To this end, we delineate spaces according to the purposes for their existence: “private space and public space, ... family space and social space, ... cultural space and useful space, ... the space of leisure and that of work” (2). This notion of spaces serving complementary functions indicates that there is a complementarity, a duality to our cultural needs and that the spaces we occupy

therefore reflect them. However, Foucault notes, there are situations that arise that do not fit neatly within the binary categories we like to ascribe to life (such as work and leisure).

With this in mind, Foucault notes that within every culture, there are what he terms “other spaces,” spaces of containment for events or situations that do not fit neatly into our categories due to their “heterogeneous” nature. These “other spaces” seem to be liminal locations that exist “in relation with all the other sites” but work in a different way, by highlighting the incongruity of the notion of discrete spaces and by allowing us to experience a kind of criticism of the homogeneity of the binary categories of the spaces we inhabit simply by momentarily inhabiting them. He notes that the heterotopia is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... that can be found in the culture... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). Foucault cites as an example of the heterotopia the theater, which “brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another” because it “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (5).

These criteria for the theater as heterotopia make it clear that feminist theater is an even more thoroughgoing example of a heterotopia because in feminist theater, not only are the divergent worlds brought onto the “rectangle of the stage” in terms of setting, but also in terms of rhetoric. Feminist theater may expose us to a story, but it also exposes us to a critical viewpoint of gender and power. In it, the bodies of the female characters expose and critique the violence of a phallogocentric

culture.<sup>39</sup> Most significantly, the instrument used for this type of exposure is the body of the female characters, which are maimed, scarified, or otherwise sacrificed in the service of indicting the power structure that oppresses and violates them. Feminist theater aims to redress the damage of the cultural imaginary that posits women's bodies as landscapes to be demystified; they make Mulvey's fetishistic scopophilia an impossibility by making the female body a site of discomfort, fearsomeness, or truth telling. Thus the heterotopia of feminist theater makes of the corporeal body a *rhetoritopia*, a physical location that serves as an "other space" of gender construction that deconstructs and violates the norms of femininity established, rendering the body a site of horror meant to contain and express a persuasive argument about the impact of violence against women as it relates to colonialism and the cultural imaginary that posits women as equivalent to the rapable landscape.

Petrona de la Cruz Cruz is a Mayan playwright whose personal history is reflective of the violence of colonialism. She grew up in a rural Mayan community, where women's sexuality is circumscribed. She left her community as a young woman because she was raped and impregnated and elected to raise the child and work as a domestic servant while gaining an education. Unlike most Mayan women, she has attained a junior high school education. Moreover, with the help of Isabel

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<sup>39</sup> I indicate "the female bodies" of characters here and limit myself to a discussion of female characters for the sake of focus and space. There are theatrical productions that deconstruct gender and sex by portraying characters with bodies less clearly marked within a binaristic sex and gender system, and while I appreciate the work they do for feminist concerns, I do not write about them in this chapter.

Juárez Espinosa (and some funding from U.S. scholars and organizations), she started La FOMMA (*Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya*), a women's rights advocacy organization with the aim of helping Mayan women and children who are victims of domestic violence. The primary tool de la Cruz uses to help the women gain empowerment and to educate the public about male violence against Mayan women (and the colonial implications involved in that violence) is theater. While much violence against women is normalized as "traditional," modern Mexican culture is actually a complicated, history-laden hybrid of Spanish colonial influences and bastardized Indigenous cultures, as Teresa Marrero indicates:

Nation and tradition join as unholy forces, particularly for Indigenous women. The use of the term *traditional* is highly problematic, given the complex historical processes that have modified Indigenous life since the conquest. In its most negative sense, *traditional* implies the calcification and misuse of power by local Indigenous authorities... It also implies the reproduction of colonialist Spanish values by Indigenous patriarchal structures of thought. (313)

With such a complex colonial history and colonialist attempts to inculcate norms of self-loathing and denigration of Indigenous cultures, violence against women is excused as an Indigenous cultural norm, a remainder of barbarism or savagery that neoliberal ("white") ideologies accept and dismiss as intrinsic and unfixable. According to Marrero, domestic violence is *not* a traditional norm, and colonialism is the primary factor complicating its acceptance as such. She notes that the story of the conquest is reduced to a story of rape: Malintzin (or La Malinche or Doña Marina, as the Spaniards referred to her) was Cortés's translator, but she is rumored to have also been his consort, so Cortés, by raping Malintzin, in turn, raped

the people of Mexico and colonized the land. This story renders Malintzin as the metonymic representation of Mexico's "body": the entire culture and territory of Mexico is reduced to a single Indigenous female body that is violated, and the victim is blamed for not only her own violation, but for the downfall of the entire culture. She is called *La Chingada*, "The Fucked One," because not only was she "fucked," she "fucked" her culture in the process. Moreover, all women are seen to be potentially "weak links," vulnerable to giving in to passion or desire, making rape within the culture a crime blamed on the victim. Marrero, quoting Petrona de la Cruz Cruz, notes that this ideology embeds misogyny into the cultural ethos and that this kind of thinking relegates a power structure of gender that replicates the power structure of colonialism:

Being an Indian woman within her own ethnic community "implies all of the subordinate, colonial relations: the negation of all autonomy; the negation of the Self in favor of biological reproduction and its model of subordination; it implies the negation of their own lives, their sexuality, the expression of their affect." (315)

In this context, the heterotopic space of the theater helps women to regain the "expression of their affect," by allowing them the creative freedom of acting out the violence enacted upon them. In the heterotopian space of the theater, the "normal" relations of the culture (what has been normalized under colonialism) are displayed and inspected, critiqued and evaluated, but as feminist theater, there is an element of subversion, which draws viewers' attention to the inequity attendant to gender relations under a neocolonial paradigm. Petrona de la Cruz Cruz admits to the danger attendant to her theater work: "Being an actress is considered a very

daring activity, one is thought of as crazy, lacking modesty... but through theater we can expose family and social problems that cannot be said in any other way” (qtd in Marrero 316). In a culture in which violence against women is considered inevitable and is tolerated (Marrero 318), using the space of the theater demonstrates both an ingenious understanding of its heterotopian possibilities and a profound level of bravery.

Among the most important feminist critiques in de la Cruz’s work is that of marriage. Mayan women of Highlands Chiapas have only one kind of social capital within their culture: their virginity, which guarantees a legitimate marriage. Therefore, the women have a great fear of being raped; to complicate matters, it is also customary to sell a victimized woman to her rapist (Marrero 315). While neoliberal outsiders may forlornly look upon this as a “native” custom, it is in fact a Judeo-Christian Biblical law stated in Deuteronomy 22:28-29. It should be noted that, while we have limited access to written records about the pre-Columbian Mayan traditions, we do have full access to European traditions and can definitively trace this ideology to that source; nevertheless, it continues to be attributed to “traditional Indigenous cultures.”<sup>40</sup> Marrero points out that positioning Indigenous women as “La Chingada” generates an uneasy gender paradigm, for the neocolonial situation that exploits both European values systems and Indigenous cultural anxieties alters the cultural position of men as well as women: “By analogy,

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<sup>40</sup> Marrero posits that the notion of “honor” (and the correlating belief that men are the protectors of the honor of the community) is another example of Highlands cultures adopting European values.



Indigenous men assume the (neo)colonialist role of the 'conqueror' historically attributed to Hernán Cortés, the first European *chignon*, the 'big fucker' in the colonized Mesoamerican imaginary" (315).

Perhaps one of the most revolutionary things about the work of La FOMMA is the mission behind it and the attention to real life as a corollary to the theater. Tamara Underiner avers, "[A]n unflinching attention to the day-to-day realities facing Mayan women and children informs both process and product in the work of La Fomma" (358). She cites provision of daycare and education as among the features that distinguish La FOMMA from other Indigenous theater troupes. She further notes that Mayan men are rarely implicated in the plays, but forces of global economic change and its negative effects on the Mayan nuclear family are (358). Underiner's research indicates that women play all of the roles in the plays, both male and female parts, and she cites this as revolutionary for Mayan women, who "already play roles in tourist, anthropological, and social dramas by wearing their culture on their backs: working at their looms or washing clothes at the river, the native women dressed in ribboned braids and embroidered *trajes* have become a favorite tourist photo opportunity and travel poster subject" (359-60). Moreover, she notes that women are not generally allowed to perform in public; even during "Holy Week celebrations, men in drag act as women both for comic effect and to highlight proper gender behavior through its exaggerated opposite" (360).

Thus, the many layers of performance being renounced and revised make this feminist work truly revolutionary: the performance of femininity, the

performance of an ethnic femininity for tourists as a vocation, and the performance of masculinity (by a woman who has been acculturated to these former performances) in a culture in which men perform femininity as instructional. The heterotopian space of the theater makes it possible for performances of masculinity and femininity to be held up to the light of public scrutiny, but it is the rhetoritopia of the female body in that space that makes the argument about gender inequality as a result of colonialism a clearly resounding critique. Rather than perform masculinity in a way that is instructional (as men do for women during religious festivals), the all-female cast of actors performs masculinity as they experience it, exposing it as violent, unjust, and a byproduct of colonialism.

*Una Mujer Desperada* (*A Desperate Woman*), written by Petrona de la Cruz Cruz, is perhaps the most feminist of La FOMMA's productions to date. The play addresses issues of economic inequality, domestic violence, incest, and the inescapability of women's plight. It is about a family of primarily women—a mother and her three daughters—who experience crippling poverty as a result of the limitations of being women in the culture. Marriage is portrayed as the only solution to problems of poverty, as women are forbidden to earn money or own land, yet the men available for marriage are violent, alcoholic, and controlling.

The story of *Una Mujer Desperada* opens when the main character's first husband comes home in an alcoholic rage and begins to beat his wife. Her female neighbor intervenes by pushing the husband away, and he drunkenly stumbles to the floor, hits his head, and dies. The women conspire to hide the cause of his death,

but their fear is expressed in a way that clearly indicts the system of justice as it relates to issues of gender. María says, “No Juan, please don’t die! The neighbors will think that I killed you, they won’t believe that you fell!” while her daughter expresses mixed feelings: “He made us suffer so much! Let him rest in peace and may God forgive him! We don’t even have enough to buy a mat to bury him in! My poor father left us in misery!” (de la Cruz 296). The husband spent all of the family’s money on alcohol, leaving them starving and ill, so María is forced to marry again, this time to a man who does not drink but beats her and tries to have sex with her eldest daughter, noting that when he married her mother, she became his property. Carmen (the eldest daughter) is more aggressive than her mother and attempts to escape, inciting her stepfather into such anger that he kills her mother with a machete and tries to kill Carmen as well, but Carmen shoots him first. The authorities arrive to take Carmen away, and she asks for lenience for having committed the murder in self-defense, but gets no guarantees. The play ends with her leaving the room with the gun and killing herself off set, in the bedroom.

My inclusion of this play in this study is not obvious when compared to the other works researched here. It is not metaphorically complex, and the women’s bodies in the play are not sites of horror meant to appall the male viewers or intended to subvert imaginaries positioning the land as a female body. Nevertheless, there are important reasons for a close study of this work. First, de la Cruz, as I mentioned earlier, has a junior-high level of education; therefore, her work may not be as rhetorically complex as that of the other artists, playwrights, and poets I

compare her to, due to those limitations. Yet it is important in feminist analysis not to simply privilege rhetorics that reflect Eurocentric/U.S.-centric class and racial hegemonies at the cost of marginalizing Indigenous systems of knowledge production; just because it is not layered with multiple linguistic meanings (though these plays *may* be so layered in their native languages and lose something in translation to Spanish and then to English—and perhaps plurisignation is not the only meaningful measure of artistic worth) does not mean that this work is not meaningful as feminist rhetoritopia.

Moreover, the very act of putting women's bodies on stage in a culture that does not allow women a public space, combined with the very act of putting women's bodies on that stage as part and parcel of their recovery from domestic violence is incredibly dangerous. The action of the play may not be a symbolic sacrifice of the feminine body, but the act itself could be an *actual* sacrifice of the feminine body. Indeed, de la Cruz notes that the storyline involving the woman murdered with a machete is based on a real event in her village (Marrero 318), which caused de la Cruz to become "very, very focused." These women literally risk their lives to partake in these productions, and men watch and learn. Seeing the impact of a lifetime of gender-based violence played out dramatically in a brief hour on stage concentrates the impact and holds it up to the viewer in the heterotopian space of the theater, where male spectators are confronted with their own complicity in the replication of colonialism through their performance of gender in their intimate relationships as well as their juridical system. Petrona de la Cruz Cruz

herself claims the power of feminist theater best in an interview conducted by Diana Taylor when asked about her experience as a sexual assault survivor and leader of a feminist movement:

As I said, playacting has been the therapy that helped me out. I've been able to shout to the world, to the audience, about the pain inside, about all I was feeling. Sometimes, when you are angry you would like to get even, but it's not possible. However, when you are on stage you can get even, you laugh, you enjoy it. You live every moment of pain and sorrow, and for me this is very important and satisfying.

This idea of "getting even" speaks to the power of feminist theater. Its power lies not in remediating violence through more violence but in *literally* speaking truth to power. The "power" in question sits in the audience, uncomfortable and guilty, watching their actions (performed on the bodies of women in men's clothing) play out across the stage. They see themselves in the bodies of women, who undermine gender hegemony by claiming masculinity in the name of critiquing and suspecting its motives. "Getting even" lies simply in reclaiming a female body, using it to perform masculinity in a culture with very strict gender roles, and by effectively undermining Mulvey's fetishistic scopophilia by making the female body read as male, which is to say undesirable, powerful, and completely in the wrong.

*Miriam's Flowers*, by Puerto Rican playwright Migdalia Cruz, is a theatrical representation of the impact of neocolonialism in the United States that offers a lens through which we can examine the notion of the female body as the site wherein the violence of colonialism inhering in social constructions of femininity manifests itself; it also posits the female body (conceived of as territory) as the site of a

potential radical reclamation. The play centers on a Puerto Rican immigrant family living in a New York ghetto. Miriam, the protagonist, is a teenage girl who lives with her mother, Delfina and her mother's boyfriend, Nando. It opens with the recent death of Miriam's little brother, Puli. A train runs along the park where Puli played baseball; recently, he ran onto the tracks to get his ball and was crushed by an oncoming train. The rest of the production demonstrates the family unraveling: Delfina devolves into alcoholism; Nando's machismo is undermined by his inability to improve the situation or soothe Delfina's and Miriam's grief until he leaves in defeat; and Miriam grows into a sexual aggressor and finds solace and a sense of power in self-mutilation. *Miriam's Flowers* addresses the violence of neocolonialism and the double bind of femininity: Miriam is expected to be a "nice girl," silent and witless, but she is the strongest person in her family, the one most grounded in reality, and this strength conflicts with her position in the power paradigm.

Moreover, neocolonialism looms: the train (once a metaphor for progress, now a metaphor for soulless progress at the cost of the environment and neighborhood viability) literally tears their family apart; Delfina makes pigeon soup to comfort her family, not understanding that the birds of New York are riddled with diseases; their poverty and isolation are seemingly interminable. In an interview with playwright Migdalia Cruz entitled "Black Opium," Tiffany Ana López elicits some of the main concerns the playwright attempts to address in her work, drawing attention to matters of colonization and the physicality of the body. Cruz discusses the conundrum of having cultural roots in Puerto Rico, a physical location with no

political sovereignty, while being physically connected only to the United States, the very oppressor of her ancestral land. Cruz claims, “The one thing women always own is our bodies” (211), and women’s colonized bodies play a central role in her work.

The bodies in *Miriam’s Flowers* are quite seriously under siege, and violence is a central trope throughout although Cruz makes a point of complicating commonly held notions of oppression and the violence it engenders by upending our assumptions about gender-based violence and introducing the idea of violence inflicted on the self as redemptive. Cruz utilizes the iconography of the Catholic Church, the issue of dislocation within impoverished immigrant communities, and the notion of violence as reclamation to create the story of Miriam, a young woman who, like countless cultural icons before her, uses self-mutilation and self-sacrifice in an attempt to reclaim her lost identity. Miriam frequently prays to the Virgin Mary and Jesus while she self-mutilates and likens her wounds to Christ’s stigmata. However, Miriam’s comparison is not so outlandish, for her wounds are merely physical manifestations of the rhetorical violence impacting her poor, immigrant family, and her body as rhetoritopia becomes the sacrificial vehicle through which that violence is made apparent. Miriam’s family gets an \$8,000 settlement for Puli’s death, a pittance that is clearly meant to indicate how manipulated by the system these people are; with it, she buys her family a color television and long winter coats for her mother and herself. Miriam then walks about the neighborhood wearing her coat with nothing under it, flashing strange men and having sex with them. These

invocations of Catholicism, violence, poverty, and commercialized sex directly indict colonialism and the impact of colonial rule on powerless countries.

In her interview with López, the playwright Migdalia Cruz expresses the issue of colonialism as a central concern to her:

I've been a person forced to assimilate with America as my home, not Puerto Rico, which is where my roots are and where my parents are from. A lot of Puerto Ricans write from an unempowered place, searching for power. I don't know if that's true for all Latinas. I don't think so because I think that Mexicans have their country. Puerto Ricans don't, really; we have a commonwealth, whatever that means. And it's always been a part of this country. They've fought for it, settled for things, yet not been able to vote for president. (qtd in López "Black Opium" 203)

This concern translates into the text of *Miriam's Flowers*. Identity is a central concern among immigrants to the United States, but Puerto Ricans who immigrate to the mainland U.S. are among a rare minority moving from a "U.S. territory" where everyone has tenuous political status to a place where only *they* have tenuous political status. They have no "homeland" to attach to, the homeland having been colonized and riddled with the trappings of the colonizing power, including forms of neocolonialism, including media and the marketing of capital goods. López writes, "The physical body is... the site for understanding the issues of identity that charge Cruz's plays" ("Violent" 58), and indeed, identity struggles surface throughout the play. Miriam wears her mother's slip to try to seduce Nando; Delfina claims she would like to look like Sophia Loren; Nando attempts fruitlessly to find his place in the family; and Miriam claims at Puli's funeral that pop music helps her to tell the future, a future determined by the dominant culture, not her own, calling into



question who determines the fate of the colonized. When Miriam asks her mother to tell her a story, Delfina tells her, "I don't know no stories." Having been robbed of their histories, they have no stories to tell. Worse yet, Delfina, being illiterate, has no hope of gaining new stories. Bereft of heritage and opportunity, their physicality is the only thing left to them, and it is constantly under attack from outside forces that seek to appropriate it. I posit that, nevertheless, in this play, Miriam's body is deployed as a rhetoritopia, and the violence that accrues on her body is only a symptom of the violence of colonialism and patriarchy she struggles under.

This loss of identity is deployed constructively by Cruz, who places violence not simply at the location of the domestic sphere, not simply at the location of the gender paradigm, and not simply at the level of neighborhood violence. She creates a much more complex theory of the genesis of violence. In the world of *Miriam's Flowers*, power is a top-down model based on the insidious impact of neocolonialism that creates a complex web of violence that permeates communities and social discourse to such an extent that it becomes inescapable and embedded in every facet of life, finally manifesting in attacks on the physical body. Intra-cultural violence is a factor of bigger violences perpetrated in the form of poverty, ghetto life, and neocolonialism with the attendant loss of identity and roots. The script contains various references to the meaning and fate of the "ombleego" (the remains of a baby's umbilical cord), indicating this concern with identity and roots. The ombleego is the vestige of that original source of nutrition found in the mother's body. It becomes infused with importance for the characters of the play, who are

ever more disconnected from what might sustain or nurture them or their independent identities. It is the intersection of these factors in the characters' lives (violence, colonization of their identities, racism) that creates the violent paradigm the characters operate within.

Cruz closely examines the problems of colonialism as they manifest in the female body. As López notes in "Violent Inscriptions," Cruz uses her work "to highlight the violent actions behind the construction of community in its struggles over power and boundaries that so often result in the literal policing of the female body" (59). López's research indicates that when community is formed in response to violent, oppressive conditions, more violence is engendered, and most often, women's freedom is more constrained in an effort to keep them safe from harm. The result of this is that women are doubly oppressed, and their bodies become the site of restriction. Their limitations come not only from outside their community, as men's do, but also from within. In the context of colonialism, of course, this means that colonized women's bodies are doubly policed, and also that colonized women are constantly compared to an ideal of European femininity that is nonexistent in actuality, effectively pitting colonized and colonizing women against one another at the expense of what I like to think of as their own corporeal sovereignty.

The net result of this is a complication of interpersonal relationships within the community. The women in *Miriam's Flowers* not only feel angry at and constrained by the men around them; they are also distrustful of other women. Miriam and her mother, Delfina cannot connect with one another because Delfina

insists on seeing Miriam as an adversary, and as such, Miriam's body is constantly under rhetorical attack. Delfina refers to Miriam's death when Miriam refuses to eat her mother's pigeon soup, claiming that when Miriam is dying, her pigeon soup is the only thing she'll want. Miriam asks her mother, "Why do you always talk about those things? Don't you like me? ...Why don' you talk about you dying?" Her mother doesn't apologize for hurting Miriam's feelings; she simply tells her, "I'm just being realistic. Everybody dies" (70). For Delfina, the ultimate destruction of the body is not cause for concern or alarm but an inescapable reality to be borne. When Miriam tells her mother that she (Miriam) has a big heart, her mother says, "Oh. How pretty! Big hearts and no brains. You are like a stuffed animal, Miree." Miriam asks her, "What kind of animal?" and Delfina responds, "Something very small with no lips" (70). Delfina cannot show her daughter love or affirm her positive qualities. Instead she mocks her and dehumanizes her, attempting to re-inscribe her body as something small and inconsequential, unable to speak, rhetorically powerless and inanimate, not unlike the feminized landscape of the American imaginary. This image of the body under constant assault from external forces working to define it according to hegemonic needs is precisely what feminist artists confront when they create works that re-inscribe the female body in defiance of the narrow confines of social normativity.

Miriam starts having sex with the grocery store owner, who provides her with razors for her self-mutilation, and she blames her mother for eventually "chasing" him away. Delfina says, "Good. Good. Without a man you're gonna go

crazy. You're gonna get put in a crazy house soon and don' look at me to visit you" (79). Delfina, trapped in the machinations of self-hatred manifesting in misogyny directed at her daughter, would be pleased to have Miriam's body removed altogether and uses the institution of sexism to her benefit, differentiating herself from Miriam by relationship status. Delfina accuses Miriam of blaming her for Puli's death, and then in turn blames Miriam: "You're blaming me, aren't you? ... You're still blaming me, you bitch. And you're the one shoulda been there. You should always watch out for your baby brother" (78). Puli's death is a direct result of environmental and institutionalized racism: their neighborhood doesn't have a park where children can play safely, so Puli plays ball with his father, Nando, near a train track and gets killed. Rather than place the blame where it rightly lays, the community turns against itself, thereby complicating notions of violence and positing an implication that violence works from a macro level downward, a system against which no one is prepared to struggle. In such a paradigm, women perceive other women as perpetrators and are suspicious of them and the designs they may hold on their already colonized, besieged bodies. Miriam has dreams of "alligator women. They was coming here, to the Bronx to get me out" (66). But she doesn't go with them because she is afraid to leave the only place she knows and the familiar things of home. Thus, even when deliverance arrives, it comes in a suspect, monstrous form, and Miriam fears it even though (or perhaps because) it is decidedly feminized, even without the features of a woman's body.

While relationships between women are fraught with tension and competition, women's relationships with men are similarly afflicted by the machinations of the culture in which they live. Female perpetration of violence against men is a recurring theme in *Miriam's Flowers*. Miriam repeatedly physically attacks Nando, who only defends himself once by slapping her, after which he is deeply remorseful and apologetic (61). As Delfina blames Miriam for Puli's death, Miriam blames Nando. Nando wants to grant Delfina's one wish: to have a pet bird, but he does not earn enough money, so he makes her a birdcage out of popsicle sticks he finds on the street. The gift, predictably, is rejected in a violent encounter in which Miriam attacks Nando's masculinity, using the cage as an excuse for the diatribe, ending with Nando being knocked to the ground and crushing the cage (74-75).

This encounter leaves viewers to wonder if Miriam attacks Nando because he is emasculated or because in this violent cycle, the only thing men have to offer women who dare to ask for winged creatures is a cage. For women who are tired of the "literal policing" (López "Violent" 59) of their bodies, the last thing they desire is a jail made of garbage. Migdalia Cruz's methodology wisely mirrors that of Petrona de la Cruz Cruz in that both playwrights have a subtle understanding of the problem of violence in the lives of women in their communities and are loath to place the responsibility solely on the men in their lives, even though they often are the perpetrators. A clear understanding of violence against colonized women implicates the rhetoric of colonialism rather than simply the men reenacting the power

paradigms colonialism models. Nonetheless, mistrust of others within one's community is rife.

Miriam isn't the only one who distrusts the men around her. Delfina accuses Nando of leering at Miriam, establishing the competitive structure of women relating to each other through their relationships with men and their bodies (69). When Delfina teaches Puli to dance, she makes him place an orange between their bodies so that he doesn't "get fresh" with her or the women he'll dance with in the future. When he claims to not understand what she is implying, she says, "You know what's fresh... It's when, you know, how boys can be" (68). She perceives even her son, an insouciant little boy of seven, as the germ of a future predator. Women cannot depend on the men around them or trust them because men are divested of the power associated with manhood through their disabling encounters with poverty and racism, a factor that further determines women's social instability in a colonial paradigm.

The problem of Mulvey's male gaze is complicated when the gaze is directed at women who are multiply colonized. While feminist film theory addresses the problem of men projecting their own fetishized fantasies onto the women they view, these discussions often do not adequately address the complications of race in male perceptions of the female colonized body. The strategic deployment of violence by female artists desiring to address these issues in their work serves to upend simplistic masculinist responses to the portrayal of the female body.

Cruz addresses this problem of the male gaze and violence by introducing the complicating nature of self-inflicted violence on the female body. In *Miriam's Flowers*, men, while not directly perpetrating violence on the women around them, do make half-hearted efforts at traditional notions of masculinity, aiming to protect women's bodies, but in their efforts toward surveillance, they are unable to see the women the female bodies contain. Nando is unable to recognize what the women around him represent. He steps in chocolate ice cream and mistakes it for "dogshit" (73): he cannot tell what is sweet from what is foul. This inability to see cripples his relationships with the women in his life. Nando has a discussion with Puli in which he tells Puli what it means to be a man: "And you don't let nobody look at your wife. You don't let other men look at what's yours. You... take care of it. Men don't get scared. Not of other men. If you get scared of other men, you hide it. It helps if you hit them" (60).

While Nando declares ownership of and responsibility for the territory of the women's bodies in his family (modeled after colonial relationships, as established earlier), he simultaneously advocates violence against other men. Even though he tells Puli that men should take care of the women who belong to them, when he sees Enrique and Miriam together, he does nothing to protect his sixteen year-old stepdaughter from the thirty-five year-old grocer's sexual advances (65). Interestingly, he claims that men should not fear other men, but he doesn't mention how they should feel about women. Delfina is less than patient and solicitous to Nando, and Miriam attacks him physically and behaves like a sexual predator

around him, a role usually reserved for men, placing Nando in the uncomfortable position women usually occupy (74). Miriam uses her body to reverse the power paradigm and to reclaim some semblance of power on behalf of all women in the play; colonized men become the collateral damage in this coup against masculinist, colonial hegemony.

Cruz's play utilizes the problem of violence against women to empower Miriam through the very violence that seeks to undermine her. Enrique is no better off than the other men in the play's social milieu even though he engages in the criminal act of sex with a minor. Miriam seems to be in charge in these interactions, and Enrique, like Nando, knows that Miriam has reclaimed some discernibly feminine power through the use of her (female) body. Because her body is the site of violence and her character serves as the pivot for the action of the play, her reclamation of power can be read as a feminist reclamation of the body. Indeed, she inverts the power paradigm to such an extent that the women gain control while the men scramble to find their footing.

Enrique, after his affair with Miriam, is finally reduced to chasing pigeons around for Delfina's soup pot. When he catches a pigeon, it is only because she walks up to him and is too lame to escape. He lacks the power to kill the bird, heretofore associated with women in the play (Delfina's desire for a bird, Enrique's insistence that he's "not no fucking bird," and Delfina's characterization of Miriam as "a very small animal with no lips."). He debates whether to call the bird Mary (the Virgin) or Marilyn (Monroe, the whore), illustrating his narrow, masculinist conception of



womanhood. He settles on Marilyn, but his choice of a name (and thereby colonizing identity since it is the colonizer who names the colonized) for the bird is rendered irrelevant because the bird is summarily executed upon entering Delfina's kitchen, where Miriam's physical presence has abolished the nonsense of dichotomous thinking when it comes to women. Delfina effectively destroys the dualistic virgin-whore paradigm that Enrique attempts to deliver to her home by breaking Marilyn's neck. It is Miriam's deployment of her body that brought Enrique to pigeon hunting (he was trying to gain her mother's favor), which brought the bird to Delfina, who re-signifies it as consumable.

Enrique and Miriam's conversation about the cannibalism of crows serves as the clearest metaphor for the problem of intracultural violence around them. "You know what's interesting," Miriam avers, "How crows eat other crows. What's the matter wif those crows? Or are they right? Are we supposed to go off eating all our dead relatives?" (65). Enrique is trying to have sex with Miriam while she insists on having this gruesome discussion, but she claims she is too tired to. The only offer Enrique makes to help her is to hold her legs open for her so that he can achieve release (66). Cannibalism serves as the most apt metaphor for the violence Miriam experiences in her family and community. Rather than sustaining one another, they devour each other, even to the point of devouring the pigeon, which, regardless of having been situated in the virgin-whore paradigm, is still female. Miriam later accuses Enrique of cannibalizing her: "Why do you want to kill me? Why do you want to drink my blood?" (71). Cruz complicates the situation of the colonized

feminine body by introducing the factor of intra-cultural violence, using the body of Miriam as a rhetoritopia on which the violence of colonialism plays out in horrifying ways.

Re-inscription is a crucial tool to be used in the struggle against a colonizing power; it is the power to alter the (colonized) identity and rename oneself in the process. In the play *Miriam's Flowers*, no one directly confronts the issue of the loss of identity except Miriam, the personification of the colonized body, who reclaims her territory by re-inscribing it with flowers. Institutionalized racism and classism have so colonized the characters of the play and imbued their lives with so much violence that their community and family relationships are disrupted, making everyone see everyone else as a potential threat or a danger to their physical wellbeing. This goes beyond the matter of gender; it is the colonial dismantling of an entire culture. In this universe of violence, in which every element of self has been absconded with, the natural response to reclaiming stolen goods is new violence, but the most effective violence is that which is self-inflicted; it is a vigilante justice that does not create a vast network of victims. In this reclamation, Miriam posits herself as a saint, sacrificing herself through scarification and offering her body for use by men. This use of Miriam's body, I argue, makes it a site of horror and discomfort, rendering it a rhetoritopia that exposes the plight of women being cast as an inanimate landscape awaiting hegemonic inscription and surveillance to imbue it with meaning.

As López notes in the introduction to her interview with Cruz, “[S]he writes about the poverty of women. Consequently, the body becomes the only physical thing her characters fully own” (202). Miriam embraces this notion of owning her body (in spite of the fact that others around her are consistently trying to manipulate it to adhere to their own perceptions of what a woman’s body is for), and to make her point fully, she asserts her existence and ownership by marking the territory of her body.

While Miriam’s actions toward herself may be read as self-destructive or hurtful, in this context—in which the character is so disenfranchised as to have nothing left except her body, and that, too is at stake—her behavior, on the contrary, seems redemptive. “I actually didn’t think of it as self-mutilation initially,” Cruz states in her interview with López, “I thought about it as trying to be a saint and the need to make your own stigmata. Instead of waiting for it to come upon you, you cut into yourself and try to create some kind of spiritual healing this way... It’s ... about what happens if you strip a person of all their things. The body is all you’ll have” (“Black Opium” 214).

Miriam’s self-inscription is an attempt at reclamation. She repeatedly claims that cutting herself does not hurt. She tells Enrique that she does it “for fun,” and when she wants to cut Enrique, she claims, “It’ll only hurt a little bit” (67). When Miriam begins to cut into Enrique’s flesh, he expresses concern that his wife will be angry. Miriam, truly saintly in her work, does not aim to take anything for herself, nor will she leave anything in the hands of her oppressors; she inscribes Enrique’s

wife's name into him, branding him as the colonized territory of his woman (67). At the same time, however, she is gentle with Enrique, telling him, "You shouldn't do nuffin' that makes you hurt" (66), further underscoring her claim that when she cuts her skin, it doesn't hurt. As a rhetoritopia, the self-inflicted violence is not painful because it is instructive and persuasive. It is done with the aim of changing perceptions, of disrupting the gaze. The actual cut hurts less than the rhetorical incisions of phallogocentric, colonial hegemony.

In addition to denying the painfulness of self-mutilation, Miriam denies everything that should be assumed about cutting oneself, but she confesses the truth to the statue of the Virgin Mary (as one marginalized woman addressing another), "I bet you bleed a lot more than I do. Look. I don' bleed hardly at all. See? See? You remember how it is, now? To be alive?" (67-68). In her religiosity, she aligns her actions with those of the saints, praying to the Virgin Mary and maintaining a profound connection to Saint Martín de Porres, the Patron Saint of interracial justice, poor people, public services, and social justice. Clara Escoda Agustí claims, "in order for Miriam to become visible both within her family and for the larger, American society... the protagonist begins a process of 'critical re-signification' of the Hispanic woman's role and identity" (290).

To the Virgin Mary, Miriam expresses a belief (not a wish) that she is

...never gonna die – not from my wounds anyway. I never go in deep and I don't make them long. I make little points that add up to a picture, a flower picture. And sometimes they're so pretty they make me cry, and I like that

'cause when I get those tears on my hands and on my arms, they sting, and then I know I'm alive, 'cause it hurts so bad. Does that happen to you, too? (71).

Miriam affirms her immortality (the change she enacts by subverting the gender paradigm) by aligning herself with saints and minimizing her personal costs in the endeavor. Miriam notes that her inscriptions are small things that “add up to a picture, a flower picture,” significant for a girl who is surrounded by seemingly insignificant situations that either do not come together in her view to make sense at all, or combine to create a terrifying understanding of hegemony. The picture she creates on herself, however, is one of redemption and new life. What it is for Miriam that “hurts so bad” is left unclear; whether it is the burning of her tears falling on her stigmata or the fact that the picture she creates through scarification offers such a stark contrast to her real life, it makes her cry. Maybe it is the reminder that she is alive, though the forces surrounding her conspire to make her inanimate and penetrable as an unexplored landscape.

Miriam's behavior provides an apt metaphor for the struggle of colonized women willing to confront multiple forms of colonization: she has assessed the diminished conditions of her life and the life of her community and offers herself as a sacrifice to change it. Not only is the pain of her actions irrelevant and insignificant, the existential payoff she gets in exchange is powerful: she feels alive, and she alters relations among the other characters of the play. Considered the property of others in a complex social web of violence and destruction, without a home to which she can claim roots, she “carves herself into her hands.” This self-

inscription removes her from the hold of her colonizer and the forces that colonization puts into place and places her firmly back in her own hands.

Agustí notes that the play *Miriam's Flowers* is a means of effecting change, and though she does not use Foucault's term of heterotopia, Agustí does seem to conceive of the theater as a space in which performance enables us to produce and externalize what she terms a private "inner search": "Most importantly, the performative and public nature of theater allows Miriam's inner search to become an actual piece of performance art for the audience" (290). The externalizing of the "inner search" is what feminist theater is about; furthermore, it is about making the point that the "inner search" is necessary because the female body has been so drastically effaced through the discourse of colonization and rhetorics of femininity. What Agustí misses, however, is that the female protagonists' bodies are rhetoritopias in which violence is reenacted for the purpose of exposing male violence against women and the role global colonialism plays in what seems to be reducible to interpersonal violence or the foibles of individuals.

Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* is a symptom of gender relations as lived through the rhetoric of colonialism. Women are too often metaphorically perceived as strange lands to be discovered, but this metaphoric linking of the body and the land is ultimately destructive, as it robs women of agency and purpose and conflates them with conditions of political conquest, replacing the sentient woman with overwrought meaning, ultimately leading to violence. In cinematic productions like Almodóvar's campy film, men are portrayed as guileless and likeable, even when

they are rapists, for it is not their fault that they should conflate reality and fantasy, conflate the body with the conquerable territory. This is akin to neoliberal readings of Indigenous and other non-“white” cultures, in which the reprehensible actions of Indigenous men are seen as symptomatic of their culture rather than symptomatic of colonial conquest and the struggle to regain power on at least an interpersonal level.

Feminist theatrical productions envision a different relationship in which Almodóvar’s mother-monster, disguised as land, comes to life and begins to tell the truth about colonialism. The heterotopic space of the theater creates these opportunities, for the theater is a space that both reflects the norms of the “outside world” and places these norms under suspicion, as Foucault notes, holding them to the light to be examined thoroughly. The female body in this space becomes the feminist rhetoritopia; it is the means by which these norms are painstakingly scrutinized, making the body a location for an imagined community in which women can witness the wounds of gender rhetorics manifest on the bodies of other women, sacrificed or scarified for the purpose of creating and supporting the imagined community.

## Chapter Seven

### The Feminine Body Politic is Naked and Abject:

#### Corporeal Sites of Horror in Feminist Performance Art

The February 26, 2011 issue of *The New York Times* published an editorial entitled “The War on Women.” The editorial begins, “Republicans in the House of Representatives are mounting an assault on women's health and freedom that would deny millions of women access to affordable contraception and life-saving cancer screenings.” The May 19, 2012 issue of the same paper published another editorial called “The Campaign Against Women,” which states, “Last month, the Senate approved a reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, designed to protect victims of domestic and sexual abuse and bring their abusers to justice. The disappointing House bill omits new protections for gay, Indian, student and immigrant abuse victims.” “The War on Women” is all over the news, with Republicans scorning it as fictitious while Democrats use it as leverage during election season. Rush Limbaugh, the radio host popular among the extreme right wing, has found himself the target of umbrage for implying that if “we” (meaning “taxpayers”) are expected to “pay” for birth control (through government-funded healthcare), then women should “post the videos online so we can all watch.” In other news, Jan Brewer, Governor of Arizona, has launched a vicious campaign (SB1070) against immigrants, policing the borders more vigilantly and empowering the police to ask a suspected immigrant for proof of citizenship, in addition to



eradicating Ethnic Studies programs in Arizona on the grounds that they may cause ill will toward white people. Meanwhile, each election seems to bring a new Amendment to another state constitution, limiting the definition of marriage to one man and one woman. Identity, Border, The Body: the trifecta of nationalist discourse.

In the drive to create and maintain boundaries (of sexuality, nation, and gender), women's bodies become the battleground, metonymically representing the nation by producing white babies in a marriage that is designed for reproductive—not recreational—sex. This wave of new legislation reifies the female body as a territory to be conquered and tamed, and the fact that border disputes are occurring simultaneously only serves to underscore our need for control. Women seeking an abortion must have transvaginal ultrasounds in some states now, in violation of rape laws that make it illegal to penetrate a woman against her consent. Yet, this scopophilic drive to *see* the interior, to assess what it has to offer, resembles the quest of colonial explorers of the sixteenth century: *What's in there? How can it be exploited?* Women who are poor are consigned to make more babies or to manage their sexual desire and remain virginal. As I established in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, the colonized woman is the almighty mother, while the mother of the colonized cannot attain the ideal.

But it's not just legislative changes that impact women; there are social changes that reflect this current of controlling and mediating the female body. Middle class mothers are urged to read books on "natural" (i.e., Third World)

childbirth, birth with no medical intervention, preferably staged at home rather than in a hospital; in addition, they are to espouse “attachment parenting,” a parenting style that calls for “breastfeeding on demand,” “co-sleeping” with the baby on their chests, and “wearing” the baby in a sling, effectively tying women to their domestic responsibilities more than at any other time in recorded history and converting their bodies to the sole landscape on which the child exists and subsists, never breaking contact with that feminine terra firma. During naptime, good mothers post their tips for creative homemaking and entertaining on *Pinterest*, where every woman can feel like a domestic failure if she browses long enough. It’s the 1950s again.

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Michel Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias” claims that modern cultures rely on “other spaces,” spaces that are neither within nor quite outside of the social realm but contain and manage situations that cannot be contained within the culture itself, such as criminality, insanity, and sexuality. These “other spaces” bear a resemblance to the familiar spaces we encounter regularly, but they have a primary reason for existence that is counter to the cultural norms; nevertheless their exigency must bear out, so we must maintain these spaces. Foucault’s third principle of the heterotopia is that it “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (5). As demonstrated in the previous chapter, he cites (among prisons, mental wards, and

boarding schools) the theater as a heterotopic space in which many “worlds” are juxtaposed.

In a theater, the world of the audience chafes the several, diverse worlds of the plays in repertory; thus the theater becomes a liminal space in which the “real” world can observe several different “worlds” from a discreet distance. Rebecca Schneider, in her book, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, notes that feminist performance art makes the body into a theater:

A mass of orifices and appendages, details and tactile surfaces, the explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts, and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege. The body made explicit has become the *mise en scene* for a variety of feminist artists. (2)

Schneider’s reference to the body as the *mise en scene* for artists is particularly relevant for feminist artists because the female body is a cultural site of *difference*, a deviation from the norm of the male body. These “orifices and... tactile surfaces” of the female body are a matter of great attention in Western cultures, rife with literary fantasies (dating back to the era of American colonialism) of men roaming over a giant female body under threat of being consumed, all the while sating one’s own hungers with wild abandon. Thus, this idea of the body as theater is relevant and important, for it offers the possibility of perceiving the body as a postmodern physical, political, and rhetorical location used for the purpose of communicating what systematic language and social conventions cannot. Specifically, the body-as-theater theory posits the body as a means of unraveling the

false binaries attendant to rhetorics of race, sex, gender, nationality, and sexuality and the ways in which all of these (not so very) diverse rhetorics interface to manifest gender inequality and rhetorics of femininity.

Foucault's theory of the heterotopia establishes clearly that the heterotopia is a physical space, and that it is a space of containment. As I have noted previously in relation to poetry, Steven Axelrod has developed Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, coining the term *heterotropia*, which Axelrod deems as the "space" created within poetic conventions, wherein a poet can manifest "an other space of difficult access, order, purification, surprise, and pleasure" (73). For Axelrod, Elizabeth Bishop's poetry was a *heterotropia* because it often had "a complexly reciprocal and even quirky relationship" (74) to the "real world" it depicted and upended. I posit that the body-as-theater, the *mise en scene* that the "explicit body" manifests, works as both a heterotopia (an "other place" that "juxtaposes in a single real space several spaces") and a *heterotropia*, an abstract, creative "non-location" of sorts due to its artistic and literary features. But because it has features of both Axelrod's *heterotropia* and Foucault's heterotopia, it is what I have termed a *rhetoritopia*, a *heterotropia* within a heterotopia, with the specific function of persuasion, using the physical body as a site of resistance and rhetoric.

Foucault also cites the mirror as an example of a heterotopia, as it is a "place" where we can see ourselves, yet it is not a "place" at all, and we are not really "there" even though the mirror does exist in reality and reflects our spatial position. This notion of the body as being both "there" and "not there" but of having no way of

knowing for certain if it is indeed “here” without looking at the mirror for affirmation is deeply relevant to feminist performance art. Jane Blocker refers to “the literal body” as an opposition to the “hoped-for body” in her book *What the Body Cost*. The hoped-for body is the body we desire based on social constructions of beauty, propriety, and appropriateness. The literal body is the mess presented by performance artists, who confront and subvert masculinist hegemony through performance of the literal (female) body (or as Schneider would call it “the explicit body”).

Foucault notes that heterotopias “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (3). The explicit body in performance—in its *realness* and its insistence on depicting the *real* processes of the body in opposition to hegemonic rhetorics of femininity—places those rhetorics under suspicion of a kind of violence that accrues on our bodies. Such a body neutralizes and inverts the power paradigm by making itself a site of horror and violence and by publicly questioning the set of relations it seems to “designate, mirror or reflect.” What appears to be gross complicity with feminine norms is in fact an exaggerated, mocking rejection of those norms; what appears to be self-mutilation is a violent reinscription and reclamation of the flesh in dispute; what looks like a humble acceptance of a subservient role is in fact a mirroring critique of the power in question. Feminist performance art creates complex rhetoritopias in which the physical bodies of the artists are sacrificed in the service

of projecting the horrifying endgame of the cultural norms of femininity, and the ways in which rhetorics of femininity (forced upon the female body) undergird our notions of nation and citizenship. I would posit that feminist performance art is a means of awakening viewers to the violence and brutality that such social norms have inoculated us against and made invisible.

Jane Blocker notes that women's bodies and queer bodies are seen as naturalized rather than performed, citing the audience response to the work of Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse*, where Chicago staged a bathroom filled with tampons and menstrual pads painted red. Blocker notes that the audience perceived this work as "natural" or not performed. She claims, "[T]he female and the queer are... not seen to be performing at all" (113). Females are seen as "the very essence of filth and pollution," so their work about pollution and filth would be interpreted as "natural" and normalized rather than interpreted as metaphorical work. Thus, feminist artists tend to take on this naturalizing categorization as filthy and polluted and address the ideal of the hoped-for body by asserting the existence of the literal body.

This deliberate literalization of the body through the depiction of bodily processes is intended to make the viewer uncomfortable and squeamish and to chafe against the viewer's notions of the body's literal and ideal states in conflict with one another. Blocker indicates that the body is a condition of "never knowing," a "theater for a patriarchal fantasy," and that women are merely "suspected of being the real body that performance surrogates" (16). This notion of the female body as theater is important to feminist performance art, for their bodies are theaters

reclaimed, and the state of “never knowing” is embraced and flaunted tauntingly: the body is suspected of being too “real,” and so feminist performers make it more real and therefore more horrifying, disrupting the patriarchal fantasies that have been projected onto it.

Ana Mendieta, a Cuban performance artist, worked in the United States and Cuba in the 1970s, using her own body as a model for her work, which deployed images of a divine feminine body inscribed into natural environments such as the earth, trees, and streams. Mendieta, concerned with the problem of cultural imperialism in her native country—from which she lived in exile—rendered herself a part of the earth and concerned herself primarily with the problems of racism, violence against the female body, and the personal alienation rendered by imperialism. She was removed from Cuba as a child as a part of “Operation Peter Pan,” a project that sought to “rescue” children from the perils of communism and was raised in foster care in rural Iowa. Her work, rife with blood and imagery from native Cuban cultures, reflects the loss of homeland, the vulnerability of femininity, and the violence of cultural imperialism.

Mendieta accomplished her work in a variety of media, using her body in some works, such as *Rape Scene*, where she staged the aftermath of a rape by covering her naked body in blood and draping herself, face-down across her kitchen table, planning for her friends at University of Iowa to find her when they turned up at her house for study group. This installation, *Rape-Murder*, was in response to the occurrence of several rapes on her college campus. Kaira M. Cabañas notes, “Her

body was the subject and object of the work. She used it to emphasize the societal conditions by which the female body is colonized as the object of male desire and ravaged under masculine aggression” (12). Thereafter, Mendieta began placing animal organs around campus, leaving their blood to trickle away onto the sidewalk and into the gutters. Cabañas indicates that Mendieta used her body as a stand-in for the nameless, formless rape victim. This is the crux of Mendieta’s work: the presence of absence. Works that depicted her corporeal body did so in an effort to lend her own physicality to women divested of theirs; works in which her body does not appear mark the absence of it, evoking a longing for a physical female presence that has been violently wrested from the scene.

Her film *Sweating Blood* showed her posed with a cow’s heart balanced on her head, the blood slowly trickling down her face, and her installation *Untitled (Mutilated Body on Landscape)* was a performance in the Hotel Principal, Oaxaca in which she wrapped her entire supine body in a white sheet, like a corpse, spattered the sheet with cow’s blood, and placed a cow’s heart over her own, which continued to leak blood onto the sheet. This leitmotif of blood resurfacing throughout her work is reminiscent of the writings of Criolla nuns from the colonial era of Mexico.

Bridging two cultures and religions (the Indigenous Aztec and the Spanish Catholic) and bearing the cultural memory of a violent and bloody conquest, the nuns (as I noted in an earlier chapter) crafted autobiographies called *vidas* in which blood flowed at an alarming rate. Their visions were rife with visitations from a bloodied and wounded Jesus in need of sexual favors or demanding them to suck his stigmata.



Mendieta's work is somewhat like this, simultaneously evoking an Indigenous cultural appreciation for blood as a life force while playing on the Western anxieties of blood as abject gore and horror. Indeed, the hearts evoke Aztec blood rites in which the heart of human sacrifices was torn from their chests still pulsating. The blood and the hearts certainly evoke a sense of violence and suffering, but they also evoke essentialist notions of woman: the anxiety attendant to emotionalism and menstruation are both borne out in these performances. Mendieta's work aims to heighten that panic in viewers. Moreover, her choice to stage works in rural Iowa, Cuba, and Mexico while including Indigenous elements in all speaks to a hemispheric reading of the Americas that was before her time.

Mendieta's most famous work is her *Siloueta* series. These works evoked goddess imagery to reclaim a lost connection to land. Using her own body, she carved the shape of women's bodies into landscapes, and photographed them. The *Silouetas* (many "Untitled") were created with leaves, grass, dirt, and mud; if her body was present, it was eerily so. Some images seem to be tomblike, such as one that shows her lying in the bottom of a hole—seemingly blasted from rock—her head and torso covered with greenery, her face obscured by the greenery, seemingly evoking notions of suffocation. Other *Silouetas* show her burning in effigy, a straw-and-stick figure of her body in a state of total conflagration. Still others show only a shallow recession in earth where her body must have been, shaped like a pre-Columbian goddess figure. Some of these shapes (merely silhouettes of her actual body) are simply outlines or shallow indentations in the earth; some are filled with

gunpowder and lit on fire; still others are merely decorated with flowers or red powder, evoking memory and blood (and also vaginal/labial imagery). Many of Mendieta's *Silouetas* absented her physical body, leaving instead only her silhouette but retaining the notion of race (through the use of titles like *Black Venus*) and war's colonial aftermath (through the use of materials like gunpowder), thereby complicating perspectives on colonialism by introducing her small feminine form into the dialogues about racism, colonialism and feminism and forcing the three issues into conversation with one another (Blocker 115). As Rebecca Schneider says, quoting Mendieta herself on the aim of her work, "Tragic and beautiful at once, the pieces are haunting, umbilically tied as well to Mendieta's experience as a Cuban exile and redolent with her aim that her work help to 'end colonialism, racism, and exploitation'" (119).

The idea of the body as tied to the land is fraught with complexity, as I have established earlier: the conflation of the female body with the geography of a conquerable territory is a kind of violent erasure of the literal female body in favor of an idealized, stylized body that does not bleed and is always in the service of men needing nurturance and sustenance. Moreover, the images portrayed evoke goddess imagery resembling Venus of Willendorf-like figures (or labia) in their abstract representations of female curves absent any identifying, personal features (like faces, for example). However, Mendieta's work subtly undermines this masculinist fantasy by implicating the viewer in the absence of the female body: where has she gone, and who is to blame for her disappearance? This question haunts the viewers

of her nature works. Moreover, if the figure is a goddess, and she is gone, it implies a sort of nihilistic misogyny that not only rejects the aspiration toward religious redemption but also rejects the notion of the divine in the feminine. Such a rejection may be a central tenet of many belief systems, but the images are so simultaneously whimsical and haunting, so beautiful in their depictions of nature, and so sensual in their evocation of the female body, that they nevertheless tap into a sense of absence and longing in the viewer. One cannot help but be moved.

As Jane Blocker notes in her examination of Mendieta's oeuvre, white middle class feminists, in an attempt to differentiate from patriarchal cultural mores, claimed a goddess-centered religion without ever inquiring into the essentialist notions about the goddesses they created (*Where* 19). Mendieta, by positioning her body in alignment with the earth, and by inscribing small goddesses onto leaves, interrogated essentialist notions of femininity, divinity, and "woman" with the complicating factors of race and the status of colonized (and exiled) figures of womanhood. Her brown woman's body in the frame of her works places viewers in the position of reconceptualizing the dark-skinned woman as divine. Moreover, these works disrupt notions of an ethereal, European goddess figure, the hoped-for body that contrasts with the literal body, by introducing the element of blood. These references to labia, menstruation, or mortality (blood resulting from violence or the missing body in a landscape) undermine the possibility of divinity by likening the body to a mortal, *real* woman's body experiencing *real* pain or *real* violation as a result of neocolonialism and misogyny. Foucault's idea of the mirror as heterotopia

may also be relevant here: we look to images of women in art as a means of comparison to our own form as seen in the mirror. This work absents the woman, and thus absents the comparison. We do not find ourselves there, and this absence makes us question our own presence within the paradigm.

Mendieta's work makes her body a rhetoritopia in which the female form is used as a site of rhetorical persuasion on the topic of violence against women, particularly violence resulting from colonialism and cultural imperialism. Mendieta's untimely death, under suspicious circumstances (she was in a fractious relationship with another artist, a man, who claimed she fell out of the window of their apartment during an argument) was widely perceived as suicide, and her works of indentations of women's bodies in the ground were seen as foreshadowing her suicidal tendencies. This inclination to perceive Mendieta's work as merely personal is a means of diminishing her vociferous and brilliant critique of the ways in which women's bodies are implicated in neocolonial discourses. While life and art are certainly mutually reflective, especially if the art is feminist in nature, the art should not be perceived as merely an outcropping of the artist's emotional disability, a foreshadowing of her propensity to suicide.

The work of Diamela Eltit, a Chilean writer and performer, also uses a woman's body (both fictional and her own) as a site of resistance to nationalist imaginaries, but Eltit's work is subtly different from the others cited here. Her work is not particularly about a colonial assumption of power, but it does directly address the role of women under a political regime that relied heavily on nationalist identity

and gender roles, namely Pinochet's violent assumption of power and repressive authoritarian regime in Chile throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

The other thing complicating my inclusion of Eltit in this chapter about performance is that she is the author of a novel (titled *Lumpérica* in its native country and *E. Luminata* in its English translation in the United States); however, Laura Garcia Moreno argues, "*Lumperica* is one of the most radical experimental projects to have emerged under Pinochet's regime. Crossing the boundaries between writing and performance, this highly unusual text in which bodily and linguistic cuts overlap stages the attempt to symbolically reclaim a heavily surveyed, regulated public space..." (122). The performative nature of the text, with its linguistic disruptions and discontinuous plot, is underscored by the structure of the first chapter of the book. In this chapter, sections are headed thus: "THIRD SCENE," followed by "REMARKS ON THE THIRD SCENE," and "NOTES FOR THE THIRD SCENE," and "MISTAKES IN THE THIRD SEQUENCE" or, perhaps more tellingly, "SECOND SCENE, PRODUCTION OF THE CRY." These apparent stage directions are a taunting invitation to perform the text though with a dour knowledge that doing so is nigh impossible. Finally, the other justification for the inclusion of this novel in a chapter about performance art is that Eltit developed a section of *Lumpérica* into a performance she titled *Maipu*, a video she made of herself reading and enacting the action (self-mutilation of her arms by cutting) of the book in a brothel in the city of Maipu, Chile.

*Lumpérica* is written in a highly abstract, postmodern style, using portmanteau words and irregular syntax intended to illustrate the fragmentary nature of life under a dictatorship. Indeed, the title itself evokes the Marxist concept of the lumpenproletariat (the common, unenlightened working class people), *mujer* (the woman) and America (the aspiring capitalist country's nationalist identity in question). In light of Eltit's abstruse wordplay—which renders translation a matter of intuition as much as grasp of linguistics—and for the sake of consistency, this chapter refers to the English translation of the book, translated by Ronald Christ as *E. Luminata*, a vague term not quite translatable but indicating “The Illuminated One,” referring to the main character of the novel. (Incidentally, this character is named “L. Illuminada” in the Chilean version of the text, clearly playing on gender: the “L” would be pronounced “el,” as in the male pronoun, while “Illuminada” has a feminine ending. It also conjures the Catholic mystic traditions of Early Modern nuns, who experienced visions in their state of illumination.) She is a homeless, mad woman in the center of a public plaza who is illuminated by the light from a neon sign in front of a crowd of “the pale ones” (the lumpenproletariat referenced in the title), who watch dispassionately as she slams her head on the cement until blood runs down her face; burns her arms in the flame of a fire she kindles; slashes her arms; and has lesbian sex with the Madonna.

Robert Neustadt indicates that gender played a substantial role in Pinochet's nationalist ideology. Women's groups worked for the government by promoting and modeling traditional gender roles, and loyalty to the nuclear and extended family

was rhetorically conflated with patriotism and national ideals: “Nuclear families were to support the great ‘national family,’ *la patria*, directed by the father figure Pinochet, who purportedly served the will of God. Ultimately, the *discurso pinochetista* projected an image of the ideal woman within the symbolism of the Catholic Church, the Madonna” (118). This use of the church—as a means of constructing social roles intended ultimately to undergird nationalist agendas and ideals of citizenship predicated on masculinism and patriarchy—is as old as the relationship between Christianity and the Americas, as evidenced by the earlier chapters of this dissertation.

*El discurso pinochetista* relied on ideals of femininity, but those ideals of course, are grounded solidly in corporeal realities. The bodies of women were the corporeal facts fundamental to the ideals of *la patria*, for the very notion of a family relies on a woman’s body to produce (babies, labor, and breast milk at the least). Christ compares Eltit’s work to that of Catalina Parra, a performance artist who cut a map of Chile into pieces and then sewed it back together with red thread and covered the sutures with gauze as a metaphor of the cultural and social dismemberment of the country (207). What is interesting about Parra’s work when examined in conjunction with Eltit’s is that it indicates that Chilean women felt a sense of fragmentation generated by their physical conflation with the nation’s geography under Pinochet’s rule.

Garcia-Moreno cites the chapter entitled “Ensayo General” (translated by Christ as “Dress Rehearsal”) as an example of how the act of bodily mutilation

speaks to the difficulty of living under a totalitarian regime. She notes that a photograph of the gashes on Eltit's arms precedes the chapter: "This visual representation of a wounded body calls attention to the wound and the cut as central to the novel: as both the condition of the performing subject under dictatorship and at the same time as a perplexing strategy to intervene within an already wounded, urban, national sphere" (125). This "perplexing strategy" Garcia-Moreno refers to is, in fact, a strategy women have used for centuries as a form of dismantling hegemonic ideals about women's bodies: if the body is to be the ideal representation of the nation, then mutilating it mutilates both the ideology and the national fantasy. It is an extremely effective (albeit radical) way of reclaiming the body, for if the body reclaimed is a broken one, the damage is only more physically apparent than that which was ideologically rendered. This is the cost feminist performance artists pay when making their body into a rhetoritopia; it is a sacrifice of the individual body in the service of exposing masculinist rhetorics of femininity.

Neustadt notes that *el discurso pinochetista* "projected its own fictional representation of an ideal woman—the Madonna—and placed her prominently upon a pedestal," emphasizing women's roles in the new nationalist regime as women and mothers. Quoting Mary Louise Pratt's assessment of the situation, Neustadt writes that Chilean women were expected to uphold spiritual values and "serve as repositories of national traditions" (qtd. in Neustadt 129). This idea of woman as repository is suffused with meaning and metaphor. A repository is merely a storage facility and does not have agency or critical thinking abilities. Eltit's radical



acts of public self mutilation deface the ideal of woman as Holy Mother and mangle the repository, thereby compromising the integrity of the national traditions the repository is meant to contain.

*E. Luminata* also takes on the conflation of land and the woman's body when the narrator says, for instance:

—she was not jam-packed to overflowing between the legs so as to receive the illuminated sign against her breast all night long, until her back was the vein of the trees that received her at each battering, laid waste/ she was an image. Her legs flared up with apprehensions produced on command from her brain. (27)

This segment is so layered with metaphor it is difficult to parse: there are many layers of rape implicit here: the metaphorical rape of the nation, having been taken over by Pinochet's coup d'état and the actual rape of women taken into custody for not having properly filled their nationalist roles are conflated, along with the metaphorical level of women's individual identities and rights being forcibly overtaken and subsumed by religious and state ideologies. The light of the neon sign in the plaza is inescapable, a constant presence in the novel, representing the totalitarian state of constant surveillance and control. The only light is a glaring neon sign representing the neocapitalist goals of the U.S.-supported regime. Here it is at her breast, perhaps suckling like a child, deriving nutrition from the mother figure, and subsisting on women's bodies. There is also the conflation of land and the woman's body in the image of her back as a "vein of trees," an American landscape, to be sure, but a far cry from the idealized "rolling hills like breasts" and "rivers like natural veins" found in the journals of early explorers to the Americas.

Eltit's work embraces this conflation with irony, making the rhetorical fusion a result of a violent gang rape and subverting the national imaginary that depends on feminine docility to advance its goals.

Later in the same chapter, section 1.3, the narrative point of view shifts to first person, in which "E. Luminata" details a sexual encounter with a woman she refers to as the Madonna (while also referring to herself in terms that render her Madonna-esque): "and my madonna tongue moistens her tremulous madonna tongue" (34); "and my madonna tongue touches her madonna breast and moistens it" (35); "and my madonna lips suck her madonna breast longingly" (35); "and my madonna mind entreats her madonna mind and touches it" (35); "and my madonna furrow seeks her infertile madonna furrow" (35); "and my madonna hand touches her hot madonna knees" (36); "and my madonna knees clamp her madonna knees tightly" (36); "and my madonna hands spread her madonna knees and they lick her" (36). This obviously sacrilegious imagery does not require a great deal of close reading, but I would like to focus on two elements: one is the material between these quotes, and the other is the idea of the "infertile madonna furrow."

This reference to the Madonna's labia echoes the work of the previously discussed sixteenth century Mexican nun (also held to the unapproachable standard of the Holy Mother), who wrote about Her menstruation and claimed that she had been inside the Virgin's vaginal canal and that "the womb of our Lady [is] a very lovely little cave most beautifully adorned, but I could not spy whether what embellished it so were flowers or precious stones; it was most beautiful, but there is

nothing created to compare with it" (qtd. in Arenal and Schlau 408). This kind of rhetoric in the sixteenth century was subversive because it simultaneously celebrated and honored the Madonna while also reducing her to human form and making apparent the physicality of the body in question. Rather than transcending their physical bodies in pursuit of achieving the glory of the Madonna's body, Mexican nuns rhetorically shifted the Madonna's body to be more like their own, thereby achieving holiness through a deft persuasive move. Eltit takes this strategy further by invoking sexuality more explicitly; rather than simply visiting the Madonna's womb in a vision, she introduces an explicitly lesbian sexual act, aligning their "madonna furrows" (notice the lowercase "m" here) and engaging in non-procreative sex, even referring to the Madonna's furrow as "infertile," thereby undermining the entire role of woman as responsible for reproduction of the nation-state's ideology and the lineage of *la patria*.

Moreover, what interests me is what happens in between these excerpts I quote here. The "pale people" (the lumpenproletariat) stand around watching this intercourse, and she visualizes them with their heads cut open with probes in their brains and the blood draining out of their bodies. Marx's lumpenproletariat were the working class people whose consciousness would never awaken, no matter what atrocity they were faced with; they were the albatross around the neck of those engaged in the revolutionary struggle because they would never achieve class consciousness. It is interesting that they are "pale people" in this text, which possibly implicates the United States (both governmental forces and capitalist

businesses) for underwriting many of the atrocities that occurred in Chile, effectively “whitewashing” the lumpenproletariat, who blithely carry on without fighting back, happy to bask in the rays of the neon lights of capitalism that cast everything else into darkness. Eltit’s homeless madwoman, the least empowered individual in a patriarchal, neocapitalist culture, indicts her onlookers, wondering how their brains work, marveling at their numbness in the cold, dark plaza.

The section of the novel entitled “Ensayo General” (or “Dress Rehearsal”) utilizes an extreme deconstruction of language, creating portmanteau words that often integrate animal sounds and references to cattle (such as the words “moo” and “vaca,” the Spanish word for cow). The translation of this section to English must have been incredibly complex, for it goes beyond simply mangling syntax to destabilize the narrative; it also mangles at the level of the word and the syllable, which is foreshadowed earlier in the text, when “E. Luminata” burns her arms and “then with her mouth stuck to her hand she broaches the opposite meaning of her phrase. She deconstructs the phrase word by word, syllable by syllable, letter by letter, by sounds” (43). The reader should know by the time “Dress Rehearsal” comes toward the end of the novel, that it will be nearly inscrutable, and so it begins: “She moo/s/hears and her hand feeds mind-fully the green disentangles and maya she erects herself sha/m-an and vac/a-nal her shape” (150). Like the rape scene in which she ironically and confrontationally likens the woman’s body to a raped landscape, here she ironically likens the woman to cattle, the allegory for mindless followers of an ideology, yet she is “mind-ful,” meaning both that her mind

is full (not forgetting or denying the violence she has experienced) and that she is deliberate in her assessment of the situation and her self-reincarnation, in which shaman-like, she will reshape herself through cutting.

A black and white photograph of Eltit, taken after this chapter was read and performed at the brothel in Maipu and filmed for her video *Maipu*, precedes “Dress Rehearsal.” The presence of this photograph in the book shifts the book to a discourse of performance, placing the performance and the book in a recursive loop of intercommunicating genres. Hence, Eltit’s work disrupts even the clearly demarcated lines of genre. The first incision is narrated thus: “It is solely a mark, sign or writing that is going to separate the hand that frees itself by means of the preceding line. This is the cut by the hand” (153). Thus, the cutting is a kind of writing, a reinscription of the skin that demarcates the line between the hand of the agent and the body that has been co-opted by the national ideology. This cut, she avers, liberates the hand from the body so that it can regain agency and re-mark the territory of the body outside of the rhetorics of religion, gender, and nation.

Eltit’s performance in the Maipu brothel has many layers of signification. The performance among whores (from a book about a homeless, insane lesbian) indicates her concern for women in unconventional, counter-ideological roles. Moreover, it makes a metaphor of prostitution, indicting the totalitarian ideology that insisted on strict gender roles for making prostitutes of all women, for using women’s bodies for gratification. Finally, I like to think of it as a means of reaching out with a vision of sisterhood, in which her actual body becomes the rhetoritopia,

the space which is neither here nor there, neither compliant nor noncompliant (for doesn't the state demand self-sacrifice and self-numbing, but doesn't the ideology of a neocapitalist religious state also rely implicitly on a wholesome female corporeality?). Eltit sacrifices/scarifies her body in a room filled with women who she believes can be uplifted from the status of lumpenproletariat, those who can be E. Luminata (illuminated) through feminist art, those who she hopes will steal back their bodies from the violence of the nationalist rhetoric, inspired by the re-inscription of her skin, which makes the "hides" of the women who join her counterrevolution discontinuous, unusable, and illegible: "The first cut is a seizure—it is a theft—on the plane of the skin's surface which is divided by breaking up its continuity. A line is given so that it may be acted upon" (156).

There is little critical literature on the difficult and visually aggressive work of Katia Tirado, a Mexican feminist performance artist born in 1965. Antonio Prieto Stambaugh's essay in Diana Taylor and Roselyn Constantino's edited collection *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform* is the most definitive work on Tirado's oeuvre; indeed, Stambaugh indicates that there is little written about performance art in Mexico "due to the virtual nonexistence of critics interested in this genre" (255). Stambaugh notes that, while Tirado's work addresses "issues such as the body's vulnerability... the intersections of gender and national identity, popular urban culture, and violence" (250-1), she does not "identif[y] her work as 'feminist'... a decision often associated with the desire not to be pigeonholed" (251). This aversion to feminist identification is not about a rejection of feminist principles

but a cautious maneuver to avoid the inevitable dismissal of her work's importance or relevance to other sociopolitical ideas; nevertheless, I argue that her work *is* feminist in its implications and that it relates precisely to the genealogy of feminist resistance I establish here, as Tirado uses her body as a rhetoritopia to resist and undermine conceptions of the imagined, hoped-for female body and the nation.

Stambaugh's personal interview with Tirado affirms this. She notes that her work is a critique of what she calls "the contemporary feminine condition" (qtd. in Stambaugh 252) through a performance of "unsexy nudity" (qtd. in Stambaugh 252) intended to "deliberately [upset] the viewer's expectations" (252). This rejection of feminine norms of sexual availability and attractiveness aligns perfectly with the resistant work of other feminist performance artists cited here. Moreover, Tirado employs "archetypal images from different religions, particularly those that display the ability of women to simultaneously seduce and terrorize" (252). This pan-religious approach evokes the history of colonialism in Mexico, which was effected through the manipulation of religious ideology, including a reliance on strict enforcement of gender roles. So, while Tirado's work ostensibly addresses the "contemporary feminine condition," it positions that condition in a historiographic framework that interrogates and deconstructs the conditions predating it. While Tirado steers away from limiting herself to being labeled "una feminista," the content of her work establishes her as such, and the absence of that label only serves to draw attention to that nomenclatural elision.

Tirado is best known for her work entitled *Exhivilización: Las perras en el celo*, a title that employs wordplay (again an ambiguous blend as in Eltit's work) by affixing a prefix to the term "civilization" that implies that the work goes against civilization, or it exhibits or exposes the corruption and misogyny that lies beneath concepts of civilization. It further references female dogs in heat, feminizing the term *perro*. Generally, the term *perro* means *dog*, irrespective of the dog's sex, unless it is relevant to sex the dog, in which case the term *perra* is used. Tirado's use of *perra* simultaneously draws attention to the sexing and the degradation of women; moreover, its juxtaposition with the term *Exhivilización* implies that women are degraded and reduced to their sex and sexual accessibility as a result of the forces of "civilization," which the performance promised to expose.

The performance consisted of Tirado and another female performer dressed in *luchadora* costumes, with flowing manes of hair coming out of the masks, underscoring their animalism, as Stambaugh notes (253). The performance was staged in a wrestling ring (which had a giant phallus with a firecracker on top of it at each corner) with the two women bound together by elastic cords and connected by a vacuum cleaner hose, the opposite ends of which were inserted into each of their vaginas. The effect, according to Stambaugh, was the sense of "a startling two-headed creature" the two ends of which were each striving to reach the penises at the corners of the ring and light the firecracker on top (253). Around the base of the ring, filmed images of pierced vaginas were projected. Items such as tools and Mexican curios dangled from the piercings, thereby configuring the vagina as a



source of productivity (confronting gender norms by using tools associated with masculinity) and artistic cultural representations, as well as depicting the vulva as a site of resilience and strength for withstanding the weight of these hanging burdens. On the other hand, these items could be conceived of as prosthetic penises or testicles, intended to disrupt the binary gender paradigm.

The performance also included a female midget (who suffered from a disease causing premature aging) dressed as a *quinceañera*<sup>41</sup>, thereby inserting the abject feminine (as an assault on the hoped-for, imagined feminine) into a performance clearly asserting and complicating women's sexuality. The role of the *quinceañera* is most interesting for its juxtaposition of the imagined body (the virginal, youthful, privileged *quinceañera*) and the lived, realized body; it reveals (exhibits/exposes) that femininity is a social construction dependent on the converse of what might be termed the prosthetics of femininity (the dress, the tiara).<sup>42</sup> The midget stood on the backs of the two *luchadoras* and performed "popular ballads about love and treason" (Stambaugh 254), again invoking Mexican cultural traditions but simultaneously representing that the ideal, imagined feminine is built on the backs of women denied full humanity, who must suppress their sexuality, which is deemed

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<sup>41</sup> A *quinceañera* is a fifteen year-old girl, dressed as a princess, with a coterie of feminine handmaids (her court) on her coming-of-age birthday. *Quinceañera* parties are notoriously costly, yet average families will go to great lengths to host a proper celebration.

<sup>42</sup> Halberstam's work, *Female Masculinity* explores the ways in which masculinity is dependent on what she terms the "prosthetics of masculinity," positing that when women adopt the prosthetics of masculinity, the artificial nature of gender begins to unravel.

animalistic, yet also be willing to unleash it in the service of male pleasure.

Stambaugh notes that this grappling between the two sides of the “monster,” each tugging in a different direction and struggling to ignite the phallus in an explosive ejaculation, represents the animosity fostered between women via cultural narratives that denigrate women and pit them against each other, such as La Malinche, Eve, and the Virgin Mary. I would posit that it takes on both that opposition between actual women and the opposition and bifurcation women experience internally, a kind of spiritual parsing that defies cohesion and insists on a sense of shame, self-abnegation, and violent rejection of our desires and drives.

Elsewhere, Stambaugh has noted that Tirado is more than a “performancera” (performance artist), noting that she should be considered “una encuer-actriz,” (a naked actress), not merely because she exposes her body in her works, but also because she exposes the machinations of the feminine paradigm that undergird her socially constructed identity, “las energías tribales y eróticas de lo femenino” (Prieto), the tribal and erotic feminine energies. This kind of assessment seems too essentialist for the subtle aggression Tirado employs in her criticism of the gender paradigm. Tirado does not really seem to believe in some essentially natural erotic and tribal energy that is gendered feminine; rather, she seems more interested in deconstructing (or even *wrestling with*) the masculinist structures at play in rhetorics of colonialism, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation and launching an aggressive assault on the kind of naïve imagining that likens women to the erotic tribal or the animalistic.

The rest of this chapter will examine performance artists who have primarily worked in the United States. Such a transition requires, of course, a different lens for examination. If colonialism, the threat of European/American supremacy, and governmentally sanctioned violence overshadow the works of Latin American performance artists, then the machinations of late capitalism as it informs femininity and nationalism must inform the works of twentieth and twenty-first century feminist performance artists working in the United States. Rebecca Schneider avers, “The ways in which desire in late capitalism is instituted and circulated as insatiable, promoting infinite accumulation, has placed the emblematic female body in a particular relation to impossibility—always just beyond reach, symbolizing that which can never quite be acquired, even for those possessing a body marked female” (5). Thus, advertising directed at women beseeches us to shop more, accumulate more, consume more, for we are in desperate need of prosthetic devices to shore up our femininity; nevertheless, the female body will continue to be an “impossibility,” no matter how our bodies are culturally marked, because we can never attain enough capital to secure our femininity, for it is always at risk of revocation.

In the Introduction to this dissertation, I indicate that colonialism generates a rhetoric of race that depends on categories of “white (power)” and “nonwhite (lack of power)” and that these categories are mutually constitutive and inclusive of gender paradigms. I further indicate that white women’s bodies are effaced in the discourse surrounding the ideal feminine body and the new land while colonized

women's bodies are abused and devalued as corporeal intransigencies that impede the realization of the Mother/Other in the New World. Schneider's reference to the role of material accumulation in the service of shoring up femininity affirms this point. Thus, white women are encouraged to seek "that which can never be acquired" as evidence of their efforts to at least try to attain the ideal standard of the hoped-for feminine ideal. This particularity of patriarchy is a present concern for white feminists in the United States, who are not only targets for advertisements for products that can shore up their fragile femininity, but also are undergoing a new onslaught of rhetorical acts of violence in the form of legislation limiting their bodily freedoms and conflating their bodies with public property. This paper will discuss three feminist performance artists (Orlan, Hannah Wilke, and Lee Price) who reclaim the marked body being effaced by such masculinist discourses through aggressive representations of their white, feminine bodies.

Orlan, born in 1947 in France, began performing in the 1960's, confronting the marginalization of the female body by using her body in public spaces for performance art pieces. Her early work in France involved the use of her semen-stained wedding trousseau, hung out to dry on a clothesline, and crawling along the streets, using her body as a measure for distance. In the 1970s she changed her name, symbolically re-inscribing herself and placing herself outside of the colonial discourse that had invested her with an oppressed identity. Her work has always addressed issues of race, but her most recent work, beginning in 1990 with the surgical reconstruction of her face when she turned forty, has been the most

provocative means of drawing attention to the inherent racism and sexism of Western beauty standards. While some may perceive her work as “uncritically accepting socially imposed ideals of beauty by using cosmetic surgery to become the ‘ideal woman’” (Blair and Shalmon 16) or even as masochistic, Orlan herself finds it to be, on the contrary, sadistic toward the viewer (Ince 58). On the intentions driving her work, she avers, “My work is not a stand against cosmetic surgery, but against the standards of beauty, against the dictates of a dominant ideology that impresses itself more and more on the feminine flesh” (qtd. in Blair and Shalmon 17). Thus, her efforts are to imbue the viewer with a sense of anxiety, dread, and awareness of the violence undergirding norms of feminine beauty.

Orlan, prior to her surgeries, would have been categorized in traditional Western parlance as lovely, with symmetrical features, full lips, fair skin, and alluring eyes. The fact that she began her transformation at the age of forty is meaningful because Western notions of beauty are extremely ageist, and forty seems to be the age at which women begin to panic about losing their youth. Of course, the loss of youth is ultimately embroiled with the loss of beauty, and many women begin to consider cosmetic surgery at that juncture of their lives. Orlan’s choice to undergo a series of surgeries beginning in the year she turned forty is ironic because her surgeries were not intended to enhance her beauty but to make manifest the hidden, extreme violence that attends women’s efforts to maintain beauty standards.

The goal of the surgeries (of which there have been nine to date) is to select images of traditional feminine beauty from the Western canon of art and to appropriate one feature from each female subject. This choice draws attention to the metonymizing nature of the gaze. Most often we hear praise for a woman's parts—women are reduced to legs, breasts, hair—rather than the woman herself (indeed, it is the legs of Betty Grable, not her hands or feet, that made it into the cement on the Hollywood Walk of Fame). Orlan's work, in appropriating one part—presumably the most alluring part that is most often extolled—from each female subject, draws attention to the ways in which women are seen not as humans, not even as bodies, but as body parts. Moreover, it draws attention to the ways in which a compilation of those individual elements of beauty does not add up to a beautiful woman. Her face is a bizarre conglomeration of mismatched features that is highly unappealing, an artistic (re)imagining of the ideal, hoped-for woman, the ultimate result of metonymizing women by feminine features.

Foucault's notion of the mirror as heterotopia is a significant consideration in discussions of women's bodies, for the mirror is associated with vanity, and among feminists, body dysmorphic disorder, and eating disorders. As I establish earlier, Foucault's mirror-as-heterotopia is the "place" where we see ourselves and yet are not; however, for women, it is the place we *think* we see ourselves or see ourselves incorrectly because of hegemonic ideologies informing our notions of the ideal, hoped-for, unattainable body. Thus, plastic surgery is a capitalist resource for women to achieve the hoped-for body, to find their (hegemonically defined) desired

body in the heterotopia of the mirror. Orlan's work takes on the idea of the image in the mirror, subverting that heterotopia by making a rhetoritopia of her own body through literally deconstructing the face she sees in the mirror each day.

Most significantly, Orlan's work relies heavily on documentation. The surgeries are undergone on camera while she is awake (and often smiling). She uses the European term when referring to the operating room, which is "operating theater." This inclusion of the term "theater" underscores her interest in the theatrical nature of not only her performance but of the performance of gender, in general, for the performance doesn't end when she exits the operating theater. Upon completion of the surgeries, she documents the healing process photographically and sculpturally, making installations of her bloody gauze and displaying photographic series of her face in various stages of healing as the days go by. These portraits of her bruised and swollen face are difficult to view, and they conjure images of domestic violence, something that is kept hidden and secret, not unlike the process of healing from plastic surgery.

To this end, her work is visually aggressive and difficult to behold, but this is the point: she is attempting to invert the rhetoric of violence by performing it on her own body in an explicit and present way, refusing to hide the "beauty secrets" that our culture so fetishizes. She makes a production of the surgical alteration, thereby making her body a "site of public debate" (*Orlan 7*) around which issues of feminine corporeality are discussed. Moreover, she complicates that violence by embracing it and positioning herself as both subject and object of both the violating colonialist's

gaze and the physical acts of violence directed at women's bodies. Depicting violence enacted on the female body in the name of beautification and achievement of the feminine ideal, she draws attention to the shocking violence that attends the construction of the "female" body and disrupts hegemonic notions of power. Her work asserts that women *do* embrace the rhetoric of femininity and beauty, but it also indicates how that rhetoric is ultimately destructive in a *real*, corporeal sense; more than just words and ideas, it is a system and practice of violence and secrecy that feminists refuse to maintain.

Thus, video footage of Orlan receiving a chin implant while she talks about her mouth (the site of pleasure and consumption, and also the site that emits cries of pain, as Blocker avers) and the opening of a second "mouth" are gruesome for more than one reason. The visual spectacle is horrifying, as we do not want to be confronted with the abject—blood and the breakage of the skin-boundary limning inside and outside the body. But the metaphor behind the performance holds its own kind of horror: a woman who insists on talking about beauty in a critical way to the point of opening another mouth/wound to do so if necessary.

Orlan's work is admirable in an examination of hemispheric studies for more than just the above stated reasons; her work also explicitly and deliberately takes on issues of race and colonialism. Once she completed her surgery series, she began a project of digitally modifying self-portraits of her post-surgery face in a series entitled *Defiguration-refiguration: Self hybridation*. In these portraits, Orlan's surgically altered face is digitally altered and "combined with the features found on



artifacts from pre-Columbian... civilizations and masks from a number of black African civilizations” (*Orlan* 166-7) as a means of complicating notions of colonialism, race, culturally-informed standards of beauty, and essentialist notions of femininity. This hybridization of racial features on a feminine body already established as a “site of public debate” strives to disrupt the converse relationship between colonial and colonized women and to make of Orlan’s body a rhetoritopia in which a transhistorical, transnational imagined community is realized with the aim of subverting hegemonic paradigms of feminine beauty.

Of course, Orlan’s work has met with criticism, and some of it has employed the language of feminist critiques of the body as it is experienced in culture. She has been accused of having body dysmorphic disorder, a psychological condition in which the patient’s self-image does not align with the image that others in her culture have of her. People with body dysmorphic disorder seek to alter their bodies through dieting or purging to lose weight, or through cosmetic surgery to alter what they see as substandard features, and this disorder has espoused a rallying cry among feminists for “realistic” representations of women in the media. This adoption of feminist language, combined with misreadings of her work fueled by anxieties about normalizing plastic surgery, has, at times, put her in conflict with mainstream feminist rhetoric. Nevertheless, looked at from a twenty-first-century perspective, Orlan’s work reclaims medical discourses that limit women’s access to abortion and demand invasive medical procedures as a means of “earning” abortion services by making clear that discourses of medicine and health have blurry

boundaries in our late-capitalist culture: the concept of “elective” surgery (cosmetic surgery, abortion) is exposed and subverted as being tools deployed in communicating and marketing rhetorics of proper femininity.

Nevertheless, Orlan’s work makes it clear that her self-image is not what is at stake in her work; it is the image that others have of her and project onto her through their expectations of Western beauty and womanhood. Orlan does not seek surgery to be more attractive or to fit with cultural ideals of beauty; she seeks surgery to flout those ideals. She does not liken her actions to self-mutilation (*Orlan* 199), and she does not enjoy or seek pain, as evidenced by her use of local anesthetics during the performances (Ince 63). The work is not about pain or about self-harm, but about an attempt at reclaiming femininity from a colonizing hegemony that constructs women according to standards of beauty most enjoyed by men. Orlan’s work is done, not on her own behalf, but on the behalf of women, who are on the losing end of the discourse around corporeality and femininity. Through Orlan’s work of literally re-inscribing her face in an attempt to flout conventions of beauty that have served to essentialize women, she re-creates an identity that, while not completely external to the hegemony in which she operates, is at least a reconfiguration—and sometimes a mockery—of the cultural values at play in late capitalism’s efforts to sell femininity.

Hannah Wilke’s oeuvre spans decades, beginning in the 1960s and ending with her death in 1993 (though this ending date is not truly precise because she made the process of her death into a work of art through filmic and photographic

documentation, which was exhibited after her death). Born in 1940, the child of immigrants, Wilke was a natural beauty known for her ribald and zealous sense of humor and her love of the female form. She used herself as a model in her works, and though her appearance and form were of a piece with patriarchal notions of feminine pulchritude, her work was often about subverting her beauty. Wilke's early works were small terra cotta sculptures of vulvas, and her willful embrace of female body imagery in her artwork both marginalized her in the popular media and made her a feminist icon.

As Jane Blocker notes, ("real") art is seen as the purview of men, and women are seen as their subject. Masculinist representations of female bodies (or male performances of femaleness) are seen as performances while women's bodies are always seen as "real" and incapable of performing something outside of their own experience (*What* 16). Thus, women are not perceived as capable of making cultural productions because they are the *product* of culture. Indeed, femininity is a cultural production (or a social construction), and women perform it, but due to masculinist discourse, that performance is naturalized and seen as something women naturally do. Thus, the works of many feminist performance artists is naturalized and discounted as not being *real* art.

Blocker indicates that in her lifetime, Wilke's work was considered "diaristic" and "narcissistic" (39), meaning that it was simply a chronicle of her personal experiences and not culturally relevant. Constance Zaytoun notes that during Wilke's career, her work was the site of "much controversy on both artistic and

socio-political grounds. Many critics dismissed her body art in particular as essentialist and narcissistic and argued that her work did not challenge the dominant culture and its production of visual representations” (150). Zaytoun continues, noting that even some feminist critics have “position[ed] Wilke as a cultural feminist whose use of nudity privileges the biology of women and, as such, fails to critique sexual or gender-based constructions” (150). This kind of disagreement, particularly among feminists, indicates that Wilke’s work inspired angst over the role of women, and I posit that Wilke was simply ahead of her time, creating radical art long before we were generating postcolonial feminist thought and postmodern notions of the social construction of gender. Nevertheless, her work presented us with opportunities to think differently about feminism and representations of women’s bodies in public art. Indeed, Zaytoun confirms this: “After seeing the first *Intra-Venus* exhibition in 1994, however, critics reevaluated Wilke’s “performalist self-portraits” (her own moniker) within her oeuvre, realizing that, indeed, her project was both purposeful and important, and does question the placement of the body within cultural ideologies” (150).

One of Wilke’s earliest popular works (1975) was called *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*. It involved chewing up pieces of bubble gum, shaping them into vulvas, and sticking them all over her upper body. She photographed herself in various poses like a fashion model, naked from the waist up, with the sculptures stuck to her face and torso. The photographs were displayed in a gallery where she staged a performance called “The Adult Game of Mastication” in which observers were

offered a stick of gum to chew. Wilke would demand they spit the gum out into her hand, form the gum into little vulvas, and stick them on their owners' faces.

This kind of work is highly relevant to my analysis of feminist efforts to reclaim the body. The fashion-model-like portraits show a body in poses that we all associate with femininity and beauty, the hoped-for body we are taught to desire and that late capitalist advertising promises to sell us. It shows us the tamed, beautiful body that we desire, but it covers it with vulvas; it essentially reclaims the territory of the female body through marking it literally female, exposing the essential marker of femaleness. More significantly, the performance marks the bodies of the viewers with the female insignia as well, thereby subverting the male gaze and ideas of conquering and taming the female body and subjugating it to satisfy male desires. The white female body, effaced through normalizing discourse of femininity and beauty, of wholesome motherhood and endless production, of nurturance, and of conflation with inanimate land in need of conquering, is found in Wilke's work to have already been conquered and is even already marked with survey lines, in the form of little vulvas, marking it irrefutably female and denying the masculine signifier. Rather than allowing the male to trample over the territory and mark it for himself, the territory consumes him, subsumes him, marks him in a realization of the fear expressed by early colonialists in their journals.

Also significant is the term "starification," which is a pun for "scarification" and is meant to evoke the tribal practice of marking bodies through scarring. This invocation of the tribal sensibility is meaningful in American art because of the

fraught and contrived dualistic relationship between tribal and European cultures. “High art” culture rejects that which is tribal because it is considered “low” and “unevolved,” but ideas of “high art” also establish and perpetuate beauty norms as well as racism. According to Blocker, “Taken as a whole, the sculptures, photographs, and performance make reference to aesthetic ideals of beauty: the seemingly unending tradition of the female nude... the problem of fame and beauty for a woman artist, and... the relation between scarification rituals and beauty secrets” (*What* 40). Blocker notes that the presence of these labia, formed by mouths (which echo the vagina in the sense of being moist holes) that reproduce tiny versions of themselves, serve to represent what she calls the *literal body* (*What* 40-1), the body that does not attempt to hide or transcend its socially unaccepted parts.

The tribal is popularly deployed only in the service of degrading; thus, fashion magazines display women in highly sexualized poses wearing vaguely “tribal” patterns to indicate their sexual rapacity. Wilke’s work undermines this colonial mindset by being both the subject of the art and the creator, thereby giving agency to the usually powerless subject and by adopting scarification, a “beauty rite” embraced by many Indigenous cultures. Moreover, her embrace of scarification is for the purpose of disrupting European, anti-tribal beauty norms: the “scars” are placed on her face and on her breasts, desexualizing her breasts and disrupting the symmetry of her lovely facial features. In addition, she renames them, punning on the idea of these “scars” and calling them “stars,” invoking a cultural association not

only with natural beauty (as in the stars, twinkling above on a romantic evening walk) but also of movie stars, the royalty fetishized by the American public. She makes herself over into a “star” as the subject of her art, implying that she will be famous, that her art will be received to wide acclaim (an ironic, humorous gesture).

Zaytoun notes that *S.O.S.* also evokes danger, an indication that something is wrong or someone needs help:

*S.O.S.* is a distress call inviting us to witness her symbolic markings on her body and, by extension, the experiences that have scarred her. The star sculptures represent an external manifestation of internal scars as well as the visible stampings of the ways in which women are objectified. By insisting on the scarred woman’s body in performance—all of her movements, gestures, and interactions with spectators—Wilke demonstrates the suffering of women with both pathos and parody, turning our attention to both visible and invisible markings. (135)

Thus, Wilke’s work is an effort to make apparent the silent, hidden ways in which violence manifests on the bodies of women. The use of tiny vulvas rather than fake bruising indicates that it is not simply physical violence that results in this wounding; it is a result of violent rhetorics that reduce women to body parts and naturalize their experiences. Moreover, Wilke herself noted that she “chose gum because it’s the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece” (qtd. in Zaytoun 136). This idea of women being used up and discarded is extremely significant to my genealogy of feminism resulting from colonialist discourse because the colonial venture considers women, as conflated with land, as a usable and replaceable commodity, a territory to be sown and reaped for the resources it has to offer.

Incidentally, Wilke did also create art that more explicitly evoked violence; *So Help Me Hannah* is a photo installation of her nude form lying on the floors of public spaces, standing naked on roofs, holding tiny guns or with tiny images shaped like guns displayed across her naked breasts. These uses of the “masculine prosthetic” (as Judith Halberstam refers to guns) juxtaposed with her lovely, lithe, white, feminine and fearless or lifeless form, can also be interpreted as an uncomfortable interface between the feminine and the masculine in our culture.

Wilke never shied away from making use of her body, even at the end of her life, when it was decimated from lymphoma. She insisted on documenting the process of her death, and her life partner of a decade (who ultimately became her husband a few months before her death), Donald Goddard (who had photographed her *So Help Me Hannah* series) filmed and photographed it. He still insists that the work was hers, claiming that she was the auteur, the visionary, and that he was merely the instrument (Goddard 129).

According to Zaytoun, “The installation involves 16 monitors—arranged in a four-by-four grid—that proceed chronologically, left-to-right, each simultaneously displaying footage from the last two-and-a-half years of her life” (149), and each monitor’s material is two hours in length. The effect is such that the end of her life is occurring simultaneously, thereby disrupting notions of time (and consequently, aging, a great source of concern for the female body in a patriarchal culture). The other part of the installation is a series of photographs of Wilke in the end stages of her life, body parts exposed, as always, but now swollen with chemical traumas and



physical traumas: chemotherapy caused general swelling and tremendous weight gain, while bone marrow harvesting and other testing caused localized traumas. She is depicted in hospital gowns gaping inappropriately, glimpses of her breasts and lush rolls of fat on display. Her body is connected to machinery through wires and tubes, her hair is in various states of falling out, and her countenance varies from placid to anguished.

Its gruesome medical-realism is akin to Orlan's work, insistent on depicting the literal body in *real* pain: the failure of the hoped-for that patriarchy strives to hide. Yet while Orlan's work exposes the violent results of rhetorics of femininity that encourage us to manage a post-capitalist, material body predicated on plastic enhancements, Wilke's work critiques and exposes a subtler, more pervasive ideology, that which disallows the decomposition of the feminine form and codes decomposition as not feminine. Wilke's hairless head, juxtaposed with her hanging, weary breasts and dolorous expressions echo her earlier works depicting her nubile body in fashion-model poses, and this, I posit, is what makes them simultaneously so beautiful and so disturbing: she insists on maintaining the female body as feminine, reconstructing femininity and inscribing the territory of her body with her own narrative. It is not a fertile landscape on which one can make a home, but it is not quite a horrifying image of death. Though the labia-shaped gum stars are long gone, her decaying body marked woman remains and redefines "woman," "beauty," and "femininity."

Working at a time in our culture when women were first striving to gain the right to wide access to birth control and safe and legal abortions, Wilke's early work depicted the feminine body as a nubile territory disrupted by the insistent presence of tiny labia; this work should be considered in relation to her later work documenting the decay and decomposition of the feminine form in a medicalized discourse. That we do not see women dying—hairless, vulnerable, and sagging—is evidence of our desire to encapsulate femaleness with a border of femininity. Wilke's work is a body bleeding over that boundary, and it is incredibly relevant to feminists of the early twenty-first century, who have found a need for a return to the same concerns we thought we'd squared away in the 1970s.

The art of Hannah Wilke and Orlan deal specifically with the culturally identified female form at risk or in pain, displaying real manifestations of pain, wounding, death, and suffering. But they do not do so simply for masochistic purposes or for the purpose of further subverting women's agency; rather, they attempt to deconstruct notions of power by displaying the results of the deployment of power as it manifests on women's bodies. Nevertheless, their work is ultimately a reclamation of power, and their bodies, in displaying that reclamation of power, are displaying a kind of appetite that has been sated: a hunger for power. Lee Price's work addresses the desire for power and the inequitable distribution of it, but rather than showing the damage that the exertion of power over women does, she portrays women fulfilling their appetites for food, as women's eating is a patriarchal concern that feminists have long established is a thin veil for women's hungers writ

large: hunger for food, power, or sex. Price's work conflates food, sex, and power in her realist paintings of women in the act of eating.

Born in 1978, Price is a new artist, whose work is not yet widely critiqued. Her realist paintings (oil on linen canvas) are easily mistaken for photographs (and often are in discussion threads in online forums). She works from photographs of (primarily) herself with food, shot from overhead. Many times, the work is set in an enclosed space; one of Price's favorite spots is the bathroom, with its innate associations with purging and shame. *Refuge*, for instance, is an overhead painting of a woman sitting on the floor of the bathroom, her back pressed against the closed door, surrounded by open two-liter bottles of soda and open and spilled bags of chips on the floor and the closed toilet. There is also a series of paintings of Price naked in a bathtub, eating: *Strawberry Shortcake*, *Ice Cream*, *Grilled Cheese*, *Self Portrait in Tub with Ice Cream*, *Strawberry Swirl*, *Cocoa Puffs*, and *Self Portrait in Tub with Chinese Food* are the titles of seven different paintings, all of which portray her eating the titular items.

The choice to frame these paintings in a bathroom intentionally evokes eating disorders. Price admits to being concerned about the issue of women's appetites for food in our culture: "In regard to food choices, I'm always going for something that is considered indulgent, forbidden, or comforting. The paintings are about compulsion" (Stringer). This language referring to the "forbidden" and women's consumption is significant within a cultural ethos based on a Christian myth in which a woman's appetite (ostensibly for food but metaphorically for much

more, including sex) is forbidden and quelled. Moreover, certain kinds of food are forbidden women because if women eat them, then they will grow fat and unattractive, clearly no longer buying into the femininity paradigm that requires constant discipline, economic consumerism, and surveillance.

Of course, the question of surveillance is directly addressed in Price's work, which positions the subject as always viewed from overhead while the viewer looks down upon her. She notes that her choice of point of view is often met with critical scrutiny: "My use of the bird's eye view gets interpreted as a voyeurism thing or a God's eye view a lot—it's neither. It's the subject looking down on herself—observing herself in the act" (Stringer). She further notes that in her early works, the subject may not be able to help herself or stop herself from committing the "compulsive act" of eating this way, but is careful about assessing a sense of shame to her subject. "In a few of my paintings," she avers, "the figure is *eyeing* the viewer. In these paintings, the figure's actions are uncensored and an absence of guilt is much more prevalent. These are meant to convey an acceptance of hunger, a lack of guilt about having an appetite—not just with food, but in general. However, in most of my paintings the model is watching herself" (Stringer).

In this way, Price's work is not only an effort to portray the guilt and shame around eating but to deconstruct that shame through self reflection and to extract an "acceptance of hunger...[and] appetite—not just with food but in general," meaning of course, hunger for all of the things women are forbidden: the freedom to not worry about physical appearance; the freedom to attain power based on

intelligence or wit rather than appearance; the freedom of sexual expression.

Moreover, the model is “watching herself,” a move that encourages us to not look outward for capitalist efforts to market hegemonic standards of beauty to us but to look at ourselves and find power in flouting feminine norms of beauty by claiming our appetites and the bodies they create.

Price notes that viewers who struggle with eating disorders perceive shame in the works and that she herself intends the element of shame to come into some of her works, but in a complex sense: “I think many people interpret the paintings [as] the model... having an ecstatic experience with the food. The viewer brings their own background to what they are viewing. Usually the people that see the shame are those who have experienced an eating disorder and who have felt this shame themselves” (Stringer). Price intends her work to investigate the issue of food/appetite shame within our culture and to speak to viewers individually, allowing a viewer’s own sense of shame or ecstasy to inform the work so that the woman who has deeply integrated a sense of shame from our culture’s ethos around gender and food will find recourse to question that sense of shame yet will also find in the paintings a space in which her hunger is validated. On the other hand, women who have not integrated that shame can find exuberance and joy in the way Price’s subject consumes with wild abandon, which can lead the viewer to a sense of empowerment about her appetites.

Price has a distinctly feminist interest in her work. She discusses the socialization of gender role ideology and claims to address that intentionally in her

work: “In regard to women/food issues, I think that many women are brought up, both through our immediate families and through society, to nurture others at the expense of our own needs. We hide our appetites, not just for food but in many areas of our lives, and then consume in secret” (Cusak). Price’s work intends to disrupt ideas of women feeding and nurturing others by showing a woman, alone, feeding herself in direct conflict with the gender role ascribed. Her reference to “appetites... in many areas of our lives” is clearly a reference to more than simply food, and is an indication that Price sees the metaphorical significance of female consumption, of the link between food and power. Moreover, she subverts the Mother paradigm by depicting figures who feed themselves rather than someone else.

A particularly fraught element of Price’s works involves women’s sexuality. Her subjects are often completely naked or posed in a bed with food. Yet the work is anything but sexy; in fact, her work is not even a meditation on the female form in the “high art” sense of the female nude. The works are disquieting images of women binge eating sloppily and carelessly, and there is very little to be found upon close examination that is erotic. Price indicates that her work is concerned with the negative appropriation of women’s sexuality:

I believe that our culture objectifies women and encourages women to objectify themselves. So I have a great concern over my works being interpreted in a sexualized way... When I’m choosing poses, I often find myself leaning toward images that repulse instead of attract. However, I still need to bring the viewer in. Get them to want to look. Optimally I look for images that initially attract and then, after some scrutiny, disturb. (Stringer)

The choice to portray her subjects nude or lying in bed in erotic poses with food, therefore, is complicated by the hegemony she works within. Moreover, her aim is to disrupt notions of sexuality by making them disturbing and unsettling. *Asleep*, for instance, shows a sleeping, nude Price on white sheets, curled on her side with cupcake wrappers flanking her body, as though in post-coital cuddling, while *Cherry Cheesecake II* shows her in a white nightgown on white sheets, lying on her back and holding a cherry cheesecake low on her groin, one finger in her mouth, and her other fingers covered in cherry filling. *Cherry Cheesecake II's* subject looks straight into the frame as though making unashamed eye contact with the viewer as she licks what could metaphorically represent menstrual blood (cherry juice) from her fingers. These works highlight our cultural anxieties over women's appetites for sexuality yet also subvert them: these women are unabashedly consuming, not unlike my earlier analysis of the Tupinamba women of Brazil, fully engaged in the cannibal rite and fully aware of the anxiety they cause their male observers. There is an aggressive quality to Price's work in her choice of "images that initially attract and then, after some scrutiny, disturb," a deliberate intention to disrupt ideologies of feminine sexuality through active and urgent consumption.

Price's work is widely misunderstood by the public as being simply about food or eating disorders or poor Lee Price herself. Rani Molla of the *Santa Fe Reporter*, who reviewed Price's exhibit, *Full*, wondered, "Why is she eating so much, so poorly, and in secret? Most pressing of all: Why does she seem so unhappy about it?" This inclination to interpret the work autobiographically (as though the "she" in

question is a monolithic “someone” existing outside of a constructed performance and miraculously showing up in all of these pictures; and that “she,” the subject is conflated with “she,” the creator because the female body cannot be performed, as it is too “real” in Schneider’s terms) continues *to this minute* to dog feminist performance and documentation of feminist concerns. Molla, a female writer, is critical of Price’s appetites, and writes in a frenetic tone about the consumption of junk food depicted in *Full*: “The exhibition’s title, *Full*, is stuffed with irony. The sheer quantity of food consumed should sate anyone, and the wise-words assumption is that were Price full, she’d stop eating.” This assumption that Price, the artist, is hungry or consuming this food outside of the frame (perhaps while she’s painting, brush in one hand, Twinkie in the other?) points to the continued existence of an impulse to “diarize” the works of feminist artists. Rather than perceiving the body in question as a rhetoritopia, a space in which the female subject’s body is used to make an argument about the position women occupy in our culture or about the hegemonically constructed relationship between consumption and women, the work is instead read as a manifestation (or tragic portrayal) of one woman’s hysteria.

Molla reinforces this bias when she comments on *Sleeping With Peaches*, a triptych in which Price lies draped in a white sheet in a post-coital snuggle with a bowl of peaches in two panels and is absent in the third. Molla approves of this painting as compared with the others because “the food is not a ‘bad’ one” and “Price’s relationship with that food seems more casual, healthier, controlled. She is



unconcerned enough to doze in its presence, and when awake, to consume a normal amount.” The language of the reviewer is rife with patriarchal norms governing women’s bodies: “bad,” “control,” and “consume a normal amount” should alert a careful reader to ideologies of governance, normalization and power. So engrossed in “Price’s” relationship to the food at hand, the art reviewer neglects to mention the technique or the art or to even comment fully on the subject matter: women do not sleep curled around a bowl of peaches, but this reviewer assumes the task of commenting on the subject of the painting’s (really the painter’s) relationship to the food as being healthy or unhealthy (and by extension: acceptable or unacceptable, disciplined or undisciplined, appropriate or inappropriate, feminine or unfeminine).

Molla is destabilized by this scene and seeks some sort of redemption or healing for the artist who paints these pictures, claiming, “[S]he can alter her behavior, whatever its impetus or underlying reasons. The food she consumes doesn’t have to be all-consuming.” Molla is sure there is some individual, psychological force driving these paintings, indicating that the work is not exactly art. As Jane Blocker wisely says in her discussion of responses to Judy Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom*, “Although it was obvious in 1917 that Duchamp’s urinal (*Fountain*) was shocking and scatological, no one thought that Duchamp had to pee” (*What* 108). This kind of anxious response and wish for Price to be cured of her eating disorder is not isolated and is in fact echoed in the blogosphere; *Ms. Magazine Blog* published a brief and supportive summary of Price’s work with a decent feminist analysis and a preemptive shunning of fat-phobic readers with this

disclaimer: “Warning: Some images below contain nude women and may be considered NSFW (although we don’t find women’s bodies—or their enjoyment of food—taboo here at the Ms. offices!). Nevertheless, the disapproving and diagnostic comments queue up below the images:

- “This seems to have the potential to subvert and all, but it also can be received and pathologized as a glamorization of binge eating—especially that painting near the toilet.”
- “That toilet bowl made me nervous.”
- “Sorry, but whatever the commentary at the top of the page says, eating Doritos on your bathroom floor is not ‘enjoyment’; it’s desperation. If it were clearer that this was a personal picture of *disordered* eating and not a generalized statement about women and food, I’d get it.”
- “These are photographs, not paintings. Not a medium of ‘high’ art, rather, something every American does with their phone. Very sad, esp. the one with the potato chips, eating beside a toilet.”
- “I don’t have all this ‘shame’ when I realize that my belt is squeezing me and I’ve eaten more than I needed. I just think, ‘that’s uncomfortable; better take it easy next time.’”
- “Chilling! A picture of the link between women and eating disorders.”

The references to eating disorders are plentiful, but I’ve harvested only a few that are representational. Not only are the viewers eager to diagnose the artist with an eating disorder (calling for “a personal picture of *disordered* eating”) and to dismiss her work as glamorizing binge eating, but also many readers are eager to establish themselves as “above” the food discourse, as the example of the reader who purports to have a gentle and conscious, patient conversation with herself each

time she overeats: “better take it easy next time.” The work is derided as not “high” art (even unto the point of denying that the paintings are actually paintings but are photographs, implying that some sort of trickery is at hand) and that the works are destructive to feminist aims of raising awareness about and combating eating disorders.

These comments indicate that Price’s feminist work is as much a source of conflict among feminists as Orlan’s and Wilke’s, and, of course, the mainstream press reviews (Molla’s being an exemplar in the *Santa Fe Reporter*) perceive it to be solipsistic and regressive: “what *is* her problem, anyway?” Such reception is the plight of the feminist rhetoritopia because the female body is assumed, as Schneider and Blocker have established, to be naturalized and un-performable: female artists are “suspected of being the real body that performance surrogates” (Blocker 16). Our culture looks at these works and says, “These are not performances; they are manifestations of a troubled psyche.” Or in a more Puritan sense, they are stories that contain the seed of a conversion narrative, and so we weave a gendered jeremiad around them and make these works into an opportunity for grace: *Perhaps these poor women can become normal or can at least be used caution others to be so.*

I posit that Price’s work does seem to contain a narrative trajectory about eating, and perhaps it reflects her own internal psychic shift around her appetite in the context of gender; nevertheless, it also is relevant to the cultural narrative about women’s appetites. Her earliest work is of women eating in the bedroom and the bathroom, and they rarely look at the camera. Price herself is ambivalent about this

aversion of the gaze, claiming that it relates to both shame and to an internalized experience that excludes the viewer. She perceives *Sleeping with Peaches* as a sort of turning point. She claims having hated making it and feeling that it was not turning out right and then realizing that something shifted for her, citing Molla's review as a means of shifting her perspective. She calls the work "a transition piece, a bridge that carries me into my next series, which concentrates on the positive associations between women and food" (Stringer). Molla's review of the work may adopt a frenetic, threatened tone about Price's work and absolutely adopts the language of differentiation, almost exhorting Price to embrace the peaches in the painting as a means of entering into a space of gender normativity and a controlled quelling of the appetite, but the result of Molla's admonition is to empower Price and to bolster her hunger and to morph her work into more sensual subjects. Price avers, "In some of my most recent works the women seem to be coming out of the closet eyeing the viewer—not censoring their hunger" (Cusak).

So while the first paintings were about women hiding their appetites, the series after *Sleeping With Peaches* depicts women joyously consuming, lying in bed wearing silky negligees and gazing back at the viewer unabashedly. *Butter* depicts a woman (Price is the model) dressed in a camel-toned negligee with a box of cinnamon rolls and an open tub of whipped butter into which she is apparently dipping the rolls before eating them. She looks squarely, almost daringly, straight into the frame. In *Blueberry Pancakes II*, the figure eats a plate of blueberry pancakes in the bathtub, and her gaze is fixed on a stick of butter at the edge of the tub on a

plate, from which she is cutting off a hunk to add to her pancakes. *Jelly Donuts* shows the subject lying among white sheets in a white tank top and underpants, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, a smear of jelly across the front of her shirt. Her head faces the viewer, but her gaze is averted slightly to her left and she seems to be smiling to herself: the viewer is outside of the joke. These post-*Peaches* works clearly conflate food and sexuality, dragging our gender ideology (as it relates to food) into the light of feminist analysis. Of course, like other feminist artists who make their body into a rhetoritopia, a stage on which the drama of our social narrative plays out, she sacrifices her body in the service of a greater discourse about the systematic quelling of women's appetites through rhetorics of femininity.

I began this chapter with excerpts from media coverage on the War on Women because I believe that feminist performance art reflects the extremity of this very real war, but my intention of including performance artists whose work started as early as the 1960s is to indicate that the War isn't new; it's just the most recent juridical manifestations of a consistent undercurrent of misogyny that bolsters ideas of nationalism. In the introduction to this chapter, I note that it's the 1950s again, but I want to end this project by happily indicating that we do not have to wait a decade for another Hannah Wilke. This current wave of new, restrictive legislation underscores the ideology of the female body as a landscape in need of managing and controlling, and it establishes a clear constitutive *outside*: the foreign and the queer. Yet the contemporary performance artists I cite here disrupt that ideology of the

Motherland that feeds and nurtures by making the body a site of horror and by consuming instead of feeding others.

Performance art is a slippery genre because it encompasses more than theater, more than visual art, more than language. It is simultaneously a play on language, a play to be watched in a theater, and the play of light and image in a visual still representation like photography (or Lee Price's realist paintings based on photographic self-portraits). This violation of genre boundaries works perfectly for feminist artists using the body as a site of resistance because the body itself must be able to slip between categories, genres, labels, and it is the question of boundaries (or borders in general, including geographical ones) that such work confronts. The female body as rhetoritopia is purposefully deployed to do what Foucault's heterotopia does: it has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (3). This work subverts the utopian ideals of the hoped-for body generated through nationalist discourses outlining and defining the boundaries of white womanhood, so it is to be expected that Mendieta's work should be considered a forewarning of her "suicidal impulses," or that Orlan's work should be considered a manifestation of "body dysmorphic disorder," or that Lee Price should be accused of having an eating disorder.

The works of Latina American feminist artists demonstrate the ways in which nationalist identities rely upon rhetorics of femininity while colonially empowered, feminist artists from the United States subvert the stylized, pale and

delicate depictions of ideal, hoped-for femininity found throughout the Western canon, making the white, feminized, female body a horrifying site of insatiable consumption or repulsive, corporeal deconstruction to the point of maiming or death. Nevertheless, even feminists have difficulty with this kind of work, still fearful of the label of “hysteria,” still suspicious of other women bringing them down. Nevertheless, these feminist artists are willing to offer their bodies as rhetoritopias, metonymically representing the disorders intimately associated with endgame femininity—starvation, dismemberment, disappearance, surgical alteration beyond recognition. They attempt to make of their bodies a new territory where an imagined community of women can collaborate and regain agency, even in the throes of constant (ideological) colonial takeovers of the territory of the feminized body.

## *Conclusion*

### Diaristic Resistance: The Personal is Still Political

In 1969, Carol Hanisch, an activist in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) wrote an essay entitled "The Personal is Political" for an anthology of women's writing on feminism. In it, she discussed her participation in therapy, noting that she prefers to think of therapy as a political action, where women share their personal experiences and come to the understanding that their problems are not "personal" but are, in fact, byproducts of a misogynous system, in which there are only "bad alternatives." In this essay, she famously notes, "Women are messed over, not messed up!" This idea that the problems women encountered were not a byproduct of their own troubled psyches or their inability to adjust but were a result of an untenable situation within a cultural structure was revolutionary at the time.

The popularity of the language used by the WLM has understandably waned in the intervening years while feminists have troubled the concept of whose "personal" experience determined the "political" agenda feminists engaged with. Nevertheless, feminists still find it necessary to use the diaristic as a mode of cultural production, and, as I have indicated in this study, feminist cultural productions using the body as a site of radical resistance continue to be perceived as simply personal and not of political or cultural importance because of their diaristic nature. Nevertheless, feminism still insists that the diaristic can be culturally and



politically resistant. A feminist cultural production that employs the literal body—one depicting the *real* experience and *real* body of the creator—is more than simply an expression of personal experience because as an anticolonial feminist act, it becomes part of Mohanty’s feminist imagined community, a rhetoritopia that is both transcultural and transhistorical. In its insistence upon the graphic reality of the body, it confronts the effacement of the female body through a discourse that spans multiple histories and cultures, and is aimed at deconstructing an idealized colonial identity predicated on race, class, sex, gender, and sexuality privileges.

This feminist work continues to be important because efforts to efface the *real* female body continue to thrive. Sarah Silverman’s memoir *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee* recounts Silverman’s life in humorous, scatological terms. Silverman’s work as a comedian makes the female body present and real through dark humor. She is unafraid of using the terms “cunt,” “pussy,” and “vagina,” and her work violates many of our cultural taboos with respect to gender. Silverman’s work, while ostensibly comedic, often verges on performance art; it is provocative and often not funny at all, but often deeply sobering and thought provoking. Her intention is to challenge our notions of propriety and to normalize women’s experiences, so she frequently speaks cavalierly of rape, incest, and bodily processes.

When writing about her television show, Silverman notes that censors demonstrated a discrepancy in what they determined to be acceptable language. She claims, “There’s essentially no limit to how often we can say ‘penis,’ ‘balls,’ ‘scrotum,’

and 'shaft,' but female anatomical language is a big, flapping red flag (so to speak)" (189). She goes on to indicate that her censors insisted that, in one episode, she change her reference to "a bushy vagina" and its "bulge of the pubic hairs" to simply "a woman's genitalia," while another episode containing a graphic account of homosexual male anal sex that detailed the recipient's anus being stretched and distended from overuse was accepted in spite of being, in Silverman's estimation, far more graphic. She notes that in another episode, her character, upon learning she was born intersex, refers to her labia: "According to the censor, 'labia,' in this instance, was too 'graphic,' and we were asked to remove it. Labia? Fucking seriously? We can say 'penis' and 'balls' until the cows come home, but *labia*? ...It was not a stretch to me to view this as telling little girls to be ashamed of their bodies" (191).

Silverman's analysis echoes important facets of this study: silencing indicates shame, and the drive to discursively efface the female body is as strong as ever. But this silencing is a wider phenomenon. Silverman admits to facing a great deal of criticism outside of the cloistered world of television censors as well. Many cultural critics and Internet hobby critics deride her work as inappropriate and not humorous, completely missing the point that their discomfort was her primary intention. Such discomfort, she avers, should indicate to us how we think and feel about the female body and its processes. The need to make references to that body more general and oblique is a desire to abstract the literal, to make it less threateningly real.

While this study has focused on the cultural sphere, it has been my intention to explicate the ways in which the cultural sphere reflects and informs the juridical one; thus I began my study in the colonial period of the Americas, when concepts of Humanism informed the perspectives of European interlopers, who needed to perceive the original inhabitants of the Americas as savage and therefore less than human. Perceiving the Indigenous Americans this way and criticizing their gender hierarchies as less civilized, at a time when gender ideology in Reformation Europe was shifting and changing, I have argued, was a central point in constructing a colonial identity: real humans privilege men and masculinity, and the New World would be a place where masculinity and the conquering of nature would reign. Women's bodies, perceived as "natural" in their reproductive processes, including the mess of menstruation and its attendant inconveniences, were aligned with nature, the body to be conquered and commanded. Thus, masculinism took root as a central tenet of colonial identity, and along with it, the determined effacement of the "natural" female body in American discourse. This effacement continues into the twenty-first century, making the real female body the last colony, governed by discourse that elides its real presence.

The effort to discursively efface the female body in juridical discourse continues to present itself (and interact with the larger cultural sphere) in the guise of an insistence on appropriateness and propriety. Feminists who refuse to elide language specific to the female body face public shaming and censorship. In June, State Representative Lisa Brown, a Michigan Democrat, was banned from speaking

on the House Floor during the final legislative session of the House of Representatives because she said, “Finally Mr. Speaker, I’m flattered that you’re all so interested in my vagina, but ‘no’ means ‘no’” (Brown). This statement, evocative of the anti-rape movement rhetoric used by the WLM in the 1970s, was made in a heated debate about new restrictive abortion legislation in the state of Michigan. Her Republican colleague Mike Callton said that he would never use the language she employed in front of women or “mixed company,” as it is so vile and offensive, and other Republicans echoed his claim (Thistlethwaite). What is it about the anatomically correct term “vagina” that makes it so threatening that it cannot be uttered in the hallowed halls of our judiciary? How might this relate to Lauren Berlant’s claim, cited in chapter three of this study, that one’s body must be abstracted in order to be considered an American citizen? The specific, unidealized, non-male body, and especially the real presence of the excessive body of the sexually active woman who refuses to be a mother continues to be an affront to our juridical definition of citizens’ rights because our notion of “American” rests on a masculinist ideal of conquering an insensate, feminine territory.

Speaking aloud the names of female genitalia in public amounts to radical feminist discourse only because it is derided as inappropriate and personal, something scandalous that should be kept private. But I argue that there is more to this argument of inappropriateness and privacy. The discursive effacement of the female body in public venues (whether cultural or juridical) has real consequences. Women’s bodies disintegrate into metaphor in a colonial cultural milieu. The rolling

hills and meadows of a landscape are breasts and wombs, while buildings and rockets take on the shape of phalluses, superimposed onto the “natural” landscape of the female body. The “natural” is taken for granted and not discussed. But then how do we tell about an act of rape? How do we demand our rights to not reproduce with the parts we cannot name? If feminist cultural productions rely too little on metaphors, it is because the metaphors are consuming us. The only response is to confront the metaphor with the graphic and the real, to claim corporeal sovereignty.

Silverman’s work may seem to be more in line with the examples I’ve offered in this study than Brown’s political speech because Silverman’s is deliberately non-normative. She does not seek approval; indeed, she rejects it and does not professionally attempt to maneuver through the legal system as a means of gaining women’s rights (though she does participate in mainstream political activism through fundraisers and protests). Brown, though ostensibly mainstream in her efforts to gain social equality for women, stepped outside of the norm to do something unimaginable: announce the presence of a vagina in austere, phallogocentric legislative proceedings. After Brown was banned from speaking, she and other female legislators performed a reading of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* on the statehouse steps (Thistlethwaite).

While I have focused my study on women determinedly outside the norm and therefore shunned, I like the juxtaposition of Silverman and Brown because they slip in and out of the normative and the non-normative, one working (offensively and deliberately) outside the norm but occasionally participating in

legally and socially sanctioned political action, the other spending her days in a proper suit, yet one day rising up with a furious cry of “vagina!” Both women extend beyond their socially defined borders to engage in what I have called “conscious performances of conscious performances.” In their public performances, they have performed their femaleness consciously rather than unconsciously reinscribe cultural norms that reinforce feminine docility and silencing. This is especially relevant for Brown’s performance in the legislature and in *The Vagina Monologues*, for every day, she must abstract her femaleness in order to garner respect and not be seen as someone liable to capitulate to special interests because of her vested interest in women’s issues. But it is also true for Silverman, who each time she takes the stage, is accused of being rude and inappropriate (read: not ladylike), for refusing to perform femininity and consciously flouting those norms in her performance.

These women’s actions erode borders between cultural and juridical, appropriate and inappropriate, comedic and violently oppressive; therefore, their acts fall under the rubric of anticolonial feminist cultural productions. Anticolonial feminism uses the rhetoritopian space with the goal of destroying borders. As I demonstrated in chapter five, the rhetoritopia presents the possibility of closing the gap between poetic and musical lyric, and in chapter seven, it blurs the distinction between written word and performance. It seems apparent that the pushing of genre borders is not irrelevant to the intent to rub away at gender borders and ultimately national borders.

This project in general indicates that the rhetoritopia is a transhistorical and transcultural space in which a female body becomes a corporeal location that registers the experience of colonialist patriarchy, a means of communicating to one another the seriousness of the trouble we're in. Women (like Sylvia Plath and the Tupinamba women) serve as ethnographers of colonial patriarchy, providing a studied familiarity with the intricacies of the game and a well-planned resistance to it. That resistance involves a complete break with what is considered appropriate, and the momentary shock of the act is what unsettles the boundaries, troubles the borders, and shifts the discourse slightly. It is slow work, with a high cost, but it should be seen as transfeminist: many feminist movements should mine these types of work for their possible revolutionary potential, for the work of the rhetoritopia is complex and layered, and it attacks colonialism at its root.

Feminist cultural productions that use the body as a site of resistance are not simply about sex, or gender, or sexuality, or race, or class, are not simply about the "wonderland" of the white female body or the literalization of the brown female body. These works are the ideologies upon which colonialism is predicated; thus feminist cultural productions indicate that these ideologies are interlocking and mutually constitutive. The body as rhetoritopia may present the *real* body of only one woman and tell only that one woman's story, and that story may not represent *all* women, but this is no reason for it to be discarded as culturally irrelevant or artistically irrelevant or even irrelevant to the feminist movement, for from this

corporeal “other space,” the rhetoritopia may provide an aperture through which light is cast onto the machinations of colonialist patriarchy.



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