Medusa

An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy
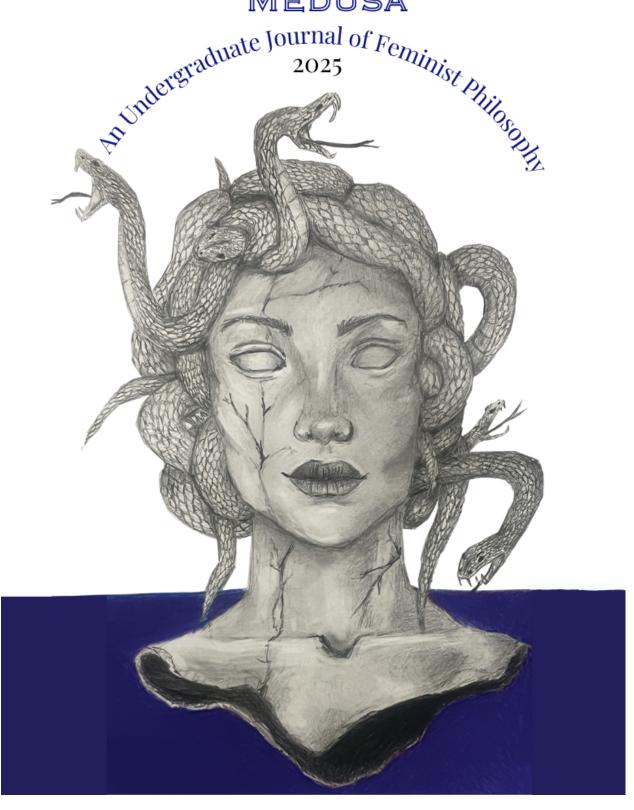
2025

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An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy

Issue 2   2025

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Medusa: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy is the nation's first feminist philosophy journal for undergraduate students. This online journal was created by Jill Drouillard, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Mississippi University for Women. *Medusa* is a peer-reviewed journal that provides undergraduate students with an experience of academic publishing. It also offers an outlet for their voices as they engage with feminist issues and scholarship. Reviewers are graduate students who specialize in the field of feminist philosophy.

Medusa is an interdisciplinary journal seeking feminist scholarship across a variety of disciplines and approaches. We welcome submissions from all philosophical traditions (whether analytic or continental) and encourage papers that bridge feminist thought with other disciplines, including but not limited to, other critical, cultural, gender, literary, queer, race, disability, social, and/or political theories. Mississippi University for Women is the first state-supported college for women. In keeping with the university's historic mission to promote inclusive learning, we encourage submissions that foster this pursuit.

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Special Section: Undergraduate Panel of Feminist Philosophy

This special section is dedicated to the papers selected for the philoSOPHIA: a society for transcontinental feminism conference at Texas A&M.

Mary as the Archetype for Women

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Abstract: *While scholars share many mixed and polarized approaches to reading Julia Kristeva, most neglect to consider the role of religious resources in her thought. In this essay, I approach Kristeva's feminist philosophy within the context of her own Orthodox Christian/Catholic background. Focusing specifically on Mary the mother of Jesus, I draw out Kristeva's definition of womanhood, comparing it with Pope John Paul II's definition and his focus on Mary in defining womanhood. In this process, I explore Mary as a fulfillment of "women's time" and expand on her significance in the life of the Church and Christians individually. I examine how Kristeva's psychoanalytic view of maternity reflects the Church's ancient mystical appreciation of Mary, and I explore the ways in which Kristeva's own appreciation of Christian mysticism can bridge the impasse she sees between the lives of individual human beings and Mary's unique role in the Christian story.*

Bathed in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church in childhood and educated in the Catholic tradition by Dominicans, it is no surprise that Julia Kristeva makes many allusions to Orthodox and Catholic theology throughout her writings. The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the significance of Kristeva's references to Mary the mother of Jesus and to Orthodox and Catholic theology. I articulate this by focusing on Kristeva's references to particular feminine temporality and its exemplification in Mary. Additionally, I demonstrate Kristeva and the Churches' shared method of negative theology. Beyond these two themes, my essay highlights the role of Christian mysticism for Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory. I establish my claims with reference to Pope St. John Paul II. Kristeva uses Marian beliefs and typology to provide insight into the condition and experiences of women, and in a traditional Orthodox and Catholic way, uses Mary as a framework for her understanding of women.

Women's Universal Subjective Experience

In one of her most seminal pieces on feminism, "Women's Time," Kristeva approaches the issue of women from their subjective experience. Kristeva characterizes this temporality by its "repetition and eternity," delineating it also as "cyclical and monumental" (Kristeva 1986 382-383). The repetition stems from the reality that a universally shared aspect of every woman's subjective experience is her biological rhythm. "Cyclical" adds to the understanding of women's time as it expands the understanding from something that could be a mere monotonous routine to something more intentional and productive. As the biological cycles of women continue, following one after another, a sense of eternity is produced that is unique to the female body. Kristeva's description of women's subjective experience as "monumental" is rooted in the fact that as a woman experiences time as cyclical and repetitive, there are moments within this cycle (often intimately connected with her menstrual/reproductive rhythm) which further mark and define her experience of time. The most obvious example of this is the birth of a child (Kristeva 1986 394).

In this description of time, Kristeva points us toward the Virgin Mary as the prime example of the repetitive, eternal, cyclical, and monumental time of womanhood. The Christian understanding of Mary is unique in that she embodies the repetitive cycles of feminine life, but also undergoes divine events. Like other women, Mary is subject to the repetitive cycles of a woman. What makes Mary distinctive is that she is believed to have passed into eternal life with body and soul (Assumption or Dormition) and is believed to have borne the second person of the Holy Trinity (Theotokos, Mother of God). With the Assumption or Dormition, Mary fulfills the "eternal" quality of women's time by entering into eternal life in her same body-soul unity. Typically, when one passes into eternal life they do so leaving their bodily remains behind, only to be reunified with them at the end of time. With her role as the Theotokos and Mother of God, Mary also adds meaning to the "monumental" aspect of women's time. Having borne "the Christ," Mary "is present in the central salvific event which marks the 'fullness of time': this event is realized in her and through her" – for Judeo and Christian anthropology, nothing is more monumental (John Paul II 1988 sec. 3).

Defining "Woman" – by her maternal quality and apophaticism

Interestingly, the qualities of women's time and its fulfillment in "the Virgin Mother," greatly emphasize the maternal role of women – both from the biological and feminine subjective standpoints. Throughout many of Kristeva's other writings, too, women's maternal quality is a common trope. She points out, for example, that many women "find [their maternity] indispensable to their discovery" and "the majority of women today see the possibility for fulfillment, if not entirely at least to a large degree, in bringing a child into the world" (Kristeva 1979 394-395). Kristeva clearly links womanhood and maternity, and there is little else definitive of women and their particular experience in her writings.

Kristeva's statements on maternity give the impression that she has a rigid definition of what it means to be a woman. However, her breadth of writing shows that she is far more flexible in her description of what it means to be a woman. Kristeva, in fact, never provides any definition of "woman," but rather states, "in speaking of a woman, it is impossible to say what she is - for to do so would risk abolishing her difference" (Kristeva and Goldhammer 1985 133). Within the modern secular worldview, one is likely to understand this statement simply as a rejection of essentialism. While such an approach is not fundamentally wrong given that Kristeva herself is a modernist secular thinker, a reading that does not also acknowledge Kristeva's rich apostolic Christian background causes her description to feel superficial. Instead, I argue that Kristeva's profound definition of "woman" can ultimately be reconciled with the traditional Christian worldview in which she was formed.

Kristeva's approach to defining a woman – or rather lack thereof – can be compared to one of the earliest forms of Christian theology: apophaticism or "negative theology." In this tradition, some of the earliest Christian writers argue that while God can be known personally, any attempt at limiting him within a singular definition or description would ultimately fall short. Thus, many aspects of ancient Christian theology refer to God not by what he is but by what he is not. Kristeva's resistance to defining femininity positively parallels this approach. Moreover, Kristeva's application of negative theology to something other than God is not innovative. In his Oration 28 "On the Doctrine of God," Gregory the Theologian writes, "For our part, not only does God's peace pass all thought and understanding... but so does exact knowledge of the creation as well" (Nazianzen 1990 226). This statement resonates with Kristeva's resistance to positively

define "woman," and demonstrates the ancient Christian tradition of apophatically defining things other than God.

Pope John Paul II and his approach to defining the vocation of women also harmonizes, perhaps surprisingly, with Kristeva's approach to "womanhood." In John Paul II's apostolic letter about "the dignity and vocation of women," called "Mulieris Dignitatem," he references the concept of the "mystery of woman" (1988 sec. 1 and 31). Although he offers great praise and support for women and their vocation, much like Kristeva, he makes no definitive statement on what a woman is in herself. Equally, like Kristeva, John Paul II fully recognizes the specific need for the feminine, appreciating women's unique and important role. As for qualities of women, his focus, too, is the maternal, and in accordance with Christian tradition, at the center of his letter is the example and archetype of Mary. It is through an analysis of Mary that the theological import of Kristeva's secular thinking becomes apparent.

The Exaltation of Mary

The ancient Christian exaltation of Mary is not unrelated to her femininity and maternity. Through the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431 AD, the entire Christian world deemed that an essential part of the Christian faith was the acknowledgement of Mary not merely as *Christotokos* (bearer/mother of Christ) but also as *Theotokos* (bearer of God). Kristeva gives a brief recollection of this dogmatic proclamation in "Stabat Mater," adding, contrary to the true beliefs of the apostolic Churches, that with the proclamation of Mary as Theotokos she is "[deified] once and for all" (1985 137). Mary is not just called Theotokos but also "proclaimed queen, endowed with the attributes and paraphernalia of royalty, and simultaneously declared Mother of the divine institution on earth, the Church" (Kristeva 1985 136). Considering Mary's lack of divinity and remarkably simple background, many may wonder why she is so acclaimed amongst the more ancient Christian traditions. The answer is remarkably simple — it is because she is a mother. All of the titles and doctrines regarding Mary follow from this first and universally acknowledged doctrine of the Incarnation of God as human being in her womb. Mary is "Queen" only because she is first "Mother." It is through her maternal quality that "Mary attains a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit" (John Paul II 1988 sec. 3). In "Mulieris Dignitatem," John Paul II explains that Mary is "the representative and the archetype of the whole human race" (1988 sec. 4). He continues: "On the other hand, however, the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can *only belong to the "woman,"* Mary: *the union between mother and son*" (1988 sec. 4). Here John Paul II clarifies the undeniably important role that Mary plays in Christian life, and how it is her womanhood that makes the unique event of the Incarnation possible.

Kristeva, too, makes use of Mary in attempting to better understand the meaning of womanhood, similarly placing emphasis on the maternal quality. In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva relies on the Marian tradition and those ideas that succeed from it, reiterating many of them herself, although often in a more critical light. Despite the connections between her works and ancient Christian tradition, Kristeva follows many Marian critics in pointing out what is often perceived as the unachievable perfection of the Marian archetype. After all, the unique and profound moment of God's incarnation in Mary's womb has already been accomplished, and it would appear that no human being can take part in such a consequential event again. Hence, some conclude that the goal to emulate Mary is an unfair one. One critic maintains, for example, that "Catholicism places the Virgin Mary on a very high pedestal so that it is extremely difficult if not impossible for women to leap into knowing and understanding their own female identity" (Keary 2016

197). Kristeva echoes this concern, writing "The humanity of the Virgin mother is not always evident" (1985, 134). Yet despite this critique, Kristeva clearly has a better understanding of the relevance of the Marian archetype for the life of the average human being and, specifically, for women.

Mysticism and the Sacramental Life of the Church – A Pathway to the Maternal

Kristeva's more nuanced approach to the topic is evident in her love for a mystical approach to life and relationships. While many philosophers of her time viewed the mystics as hysterics, Kristeva took a different view (Jones, Sharon, and Neal 2003 375). Jones and Neal write: "For Kristeva, the mystic is a subject-in-process, just as active in the game of negotiating the 'Other within' as anyone else" (2003 380). Kristeva tells us, "mysticism, that most intense form of divine revelation, is vouchsafed only to those who take the 'maternal' upon themselves" (1985 134). The mystic, then, can lead us toward an understanding of Mary as an appropriate archetype, and particularly, that crucial maternal quality.

Mysticism is an intimate state of prayer in which the subject, taking a position of receptivity, allows the Divine to enter into her humanity and transform her. The mystic, totally consumed by love and union with God, has supernatural, Heavenly experiences though she remains in an earthly state. A variety of recognized Saints in both the East and West are seen as mystics, many of whom Kristeva references: Augustine, Catherine of Alexandria, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross, and Kristeva's most particular interest, Teresa of Avila. The canonization of these people within their respective communities means that they are understood to have successfully completed their Christian struggle and are set forth by the Church as examples for the faithful in their own effort to attain salvation. Mystics are different from Mary in that they are not given the uncommon, particular graces that she received — yet, like Mary, they achieve a radical and intimate relationship with the Divine through their receptivity.

The Christian tradition often ascribes nuptial and feminine language when describing a person's mystical experience or relationship with the Divine. Traditional Christian teaching maintains that each person is called to cultivate an intimate relationship with Christ, one that allows him to mystically make our own bodies an abode for his divinity (as he did with the Theotokos) in order that we may give birth to his life and love for the sake of others. In this way, the archetype of Mary is not impossible, but rather a roadmap for the spiritual journey of every follower of Christ. The central way in which this mystical call to a Marian experience of God is through the sacramental life of the Church. The peak of this mystical life is the sacrament of the Eucharist, through which Orthodox and Catholic Christians believe they are consuming the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Using the same nuptial language manifest in the mystics' experiences, John Paul II reminds Christians that partaking in the Eucharist "We find ourselves at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery, which completely reveals the spousal love of God" (1988 sec. 26). As the mystics are keenly aware, receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist (and partaking in all of the Church's Sacraments) provides a physical closeness and is an extraordinary door to intimacy with the Trinitarian God. In the Eucharist specifically, there is another, more particularly Marian, understanding and imagery of this closeness with God: just as Mary becomes Theotokos because she carried God inside her in a very real and physical way during her pregnancy, recipients of the Eucharist physically carry and contain Jesus within their own body. Thus, by the extraordinary graces of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, the ordinary person participates in the mystical

experience of an intimate relationship with God, ultimately following in the footsteps of Mary.

Kristeva's Psychoanalytic Approach and the Church

While Kristeva herself does not share this theological and religious approach to mysticism and the Virgin Mary, she does arrive at a similar appreciation for mysticism through her own psychoanalytic lens. In describing the maternal experience, Kristeva delineates the process of pregnancy and birth as a "splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech" (Kristeva 1996 395). With this comes a movement outwards. The mother starts with narcissism (though the Christian tradition would refer to this stage more charitably as a preparatory experience of repentance or sanctification) because in pregnancy she must direct much of her energy inwards, caring for herself, though another is contained within her. After giving birth, the other subject is suddenly outside of her and this is where her energy turns — "The arrival of the child [...] leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other" (Kristeva 1996 395). This is a radical experience of love which, based on Kristeva's description, cannot quite be experienced except in this maternal giving of self. John Paul II writes similarly, saying, "in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman 'discovers herself through a sincere gift of self'" (1988 sec. 18). These quotes issued from Kristeva and John Paul II bring to light the necessity of the maternal experience for psychological and spiritual development.

As Kristeva is not an essentialist, it would be inconsistent to think that it is only through giving birth to a child that a woman can find this fulfillment and love. The Church, too, could not reduce women to their physical maternal ability. John Paul II highlights the beautiful reality of a vocation which does not include physical motherhood, that is, consecrated virginity: "Women, called from the very 'beginning' to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity find Christ [...] and they respond to [Christ's] gift with a 'sincere gift' of their whole lives" (sec. 20). He also expands plenty on the idea of "spiritual motherhood," which is not reserved for special vocations or virgins alone. It is important to note that even in these vocations, some sort of motherhood takes place; the gift of self remains central. With an understanding of Kristeva's psychoanalytic view of motherhood, it seems that one would come to a very similar conclusion as the Church: woman "cannot fully find [herself] except through a sincere gift of self" (John Paull II 1988 sec. 7). This "gift of self" takes place in a special way for women in the process of motherhood, but it is also the call of every Christian. Therefore, through the mystical reality of the life of the Church, every person is able to fulfill what Kristeva acknowledges as the archetypal pattern of motherhood found in the life of Mary.

Conclusion

Although Kristeva is ultimately secular in her philosophical contributions, it is impossible to understand the breadth of her considerations of femininity without reference to the Christian tradition. In investigating the archetype of Mary, I demonstrated a shared origin in how Kristeva and John Paul II approach feminine reality. Despite Kristeva's secular attitude, she continues to think in the tradition of the apostolic Churches in which she was raised. Kristeva, like John Paul II, turns to Mary for a deeper understanding of women and the maternal. For both of them, the image of Mary shaped their thought; and in as much as they let her shape their thought, she shaped their philosophy of women. Naturally then, reflective on Mary, both Kristeva and John Paul II

give us the same insights on living out one's womanhood. In highlighting Kristeva's focus on feminine temporality, her use of negative theology, her central references to Mary, and her affirmation of the Mystic experience which informs her psychoanalytic theory, my paper demonstrates how the Orthodox and Catholic tradition influenced Kristeva. My contribution suggests an unlikely path for weaving the secular and the theological together in philosophical contributions to feminism.

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Walking on Eggs' Shells: Internal Maps and Ameliorative Womanhood

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Abstract: *Defining the concept of "womanhood" is an essential task for feminist philosophers, as it is a cornerstone of their field. However, attempts to do so often run afoul of what Katherine Jenkins refers to as the "inclusion problem": a tendency to definitionally exclude prima facie valid women. Building upon Sally Haslanger's ameliorative approach to defining gender, Jenkins introduces the concept of the "internal map" in an attempt to solve the inclusion problem. This paper sets out to consider instances where a reliance upon the internal map schema appears to run afoul of the inclusion problem. I conclude that one of these cases demonstrates a need to alter Jenkins's definition of womanhood and explain what such an alteration would entail.*

Key Words: ameliorative model; internal map; inclusion problem; boymoders; Katharine Jenkins

Part I: Introduction

One of the most notable contributions of the philosopher Sally Haslanger is her analytic definition of womanhood. She proposed this definition as part of an ameliorative model—one which stresses that feminists should "consider what work we want [this concept] to do for us" in reaching a potentially revisionist conclusion (Haslanger 2000). Years later, Katherine Jenkins amended Haslanger's definition, aiming to include classes of women that she felt were still left out: a conundrum she referred to as the "inclusion problem" (Jenkins 2016). By some accounts, though, this problem persists even in her amended definition. In this essay, I will introduce two classes of transgender women— colloquially termed *eggs* and *boymoders*. I will first present an argument that suggests they are definitionally excluded from womanhood under Jenkins's framework. I will attempt to reject this argument and defend Jenkins's model by illustrating how eggs and boymoders fit into it. However, my defense will make it apparent that a revision to Jenkins's definition is needed. I will suggest a possible revision and argue that it resolves the concerns surrounding the initial definition.

Part II: Exposition

Jenkins's paper "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of *Woman*" was written largely in response to Haslanger's paper "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" Although Haslanger's argument is not the focus of this essay, understanding its conclusion will further contextualize Jenkins's work. Haslanger ultimately defines S as a woman "iff$_{df}$ S is systematically subordinated ... and S is marked as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction" (Haslanger 2000, 39). Although Haslanger's allusion to imagined bodily features seems to entail an effort to include some transgender women, it is clearly insufficient. Jenkins presents a series of cases which highlight that it excludes any transgender woman who is not treated as a woman by society at large (e.g. a trans woman who is misgendered by those around her), as well as those who are treated as women, yet are not observed or imagined to have female reproductive anatomy (e.g. a non-passing trans woman).

Having established the need for a revised account to solve the inclusion problem, Jenkins proposes a distinction between gender as a class, and as an identity. Gender as a class simply refers to Haslanger's definition: subordination or privilege received pursuant to actual or imagined primary sexual characteristics. Gender as an identity, conversely, is Jenkins's own contribution. It focuses on the idea of the *internal map*, which is "formed to guide someone classed as a woman through the social or material realities that are … in that context, characteristic of women as a class." (Jenkins 2016 409-410). Simply put, the female internal map is an astute awareness of dominant societal norms applied to women, and an ongoing interaction with them. Whether or not a woman chooses to act in accordance with these norms is not a factor in determining whether she has the map. Jenkins uses the example of a woman who does not shave her legs—she is clearly breaking a dominant norm, yet her womanhood nonetheless stems from the fact that she is "navigating the norm … even though she is not complying with it" (2016, 411). In contrast, a man with likewise unshaved legs would be performing the same behavior, yet not navigating the same norm—hence the difference between the pair's gender identities.

Having established this framework, Jenkins argues that the identity definition should supplant the class definition in common linguistic practice. When people use words like 'woman' or 'man' in everyday conversations, Jenkins suggests that their referents should be those individuals with the matching identity (and accordingly, the matching map), rather than the matching class. Thus, a woman is defined as someone with a female internal map. Jenkins's contention here is that this will reduce exclusion of transgender individuals. Between the internal map definition and this shift in linguistics, Jenkins ultimately claims that by definition, "all trans women have a female gender identity" under her account (2016, 413). But is this truly the case?

Part III: Critical Assessment

The terms *egg* and *boymoder* are primarily used as slang in online transgender communities, yet serve as strikingly relevant cases for Jenkins's argument. I will offer definitions here which reflect their common usages in these settings. An egg is a transgender woman who does not yet realize she is transgender—when she finally does make this realization and comes to terms with it, she is said to be 'cracking her egg.' A boymoder is a trans woman who is well aware of her identity, yet goes out of her way to present herself as a man, even after beginning to medically transition. The prototypical boymoder is afraid or ashamed of the risk of being outed, and (armed with a wardrobe of gratuitously oversized clothing and an endless array of excuses) outwardly denies everything.

It is of great importance to an account of womanhood which prioritizes transgender inclusion that both of these groups are considered women. In the case of boymoders, it is important because they themselves identify as such. In the case of eggs, it is important because feminist philosophers should aspire to create a definition under which these people *always have been* women, rather than one under which they *become* women upon their realization. To do otherwise is to retroactively invalidate the identities of the numerous transgender individuals who have existed in times and places where they could never have discovered or actualized their identities. To Jenkins's credit, she partially accounts for both of these groups. The very first test case she lists to contest Haslanger ("a trans woman [who] does not publicly present as a woman") is boymoder-adjacent, and she explicitly states that her definition "allows that a trans woman can have had a female gender identity before consciously coming to identify as a woman" (Jenkins 2016, 399, 413). Nevertheless, each case seems at first pass to present difficulty for

Jenkins's account, as one may question whether these groups have a female internal map—Jenkins's sole criterion of linguistic womanhood.

I will first examine the case of the egg, and identify two subcategories within this group. The *late-stage egg* is one whose shell will soon crack. Perhaps she is a fourteen-year-old becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the masculine development of her body, or perhaps she is a forty-year-old beginning to finally understand why her life has felt so viscerally wrong for decades—the commonality is that an informed observer will be waiting for the other shoe to drop. This latter subcategory presents no issue whatsoever for Jenkins's definition. It is quite apparent that the late-stage egg has a female internal map: this is why she finds living as a male to be odious. The more interesting case is the *early-stage egg*, who has no indicia yet of being transgender. To better understand this case, imagine either of the examples of late-stage eggs as kindergarteners. They play with the other boys, dress like the other boys, act like the other boys, and are entirely comfortable with doing so. Although some transgender people reflect on their childhoods and claim that signs of their gender identity were always present, accounts like this exist as well. It is important to accommodate them in an inclusive definition of womanhood—as well as those who remained early-stage eggs into adolescence, or even adulthood. One could argue that Jenkins's definition appears to fall short here, though, because there is no immediately obvious route by which one can claim that an early-stage egg has a female internal map. In fact, one could even claim that an early-stage egg has a male internal map, because her life is conducted through the medium of male norms—yet she is still a woman.

The case of the boymoder can be argued to a similar conclusion: she is a woman, yet seems to operate via a male internal map. Rather than the boymoder's map stemming from unawareness (like the egg,) however, it is quite deliberate. Each decision that the boymoder makes regarding her gender presentation is tempered by the desire to appear male, act male, and be regarded as male—even though these desires are rooted in fear and shame. Because an acute awareness of male norms dictates the boymoder's every move, one might be tempted to say that she has a male internal map. Accordingly, Jenkins's definition seems to problematically regard her as a man.

A proponent of Jenkins's argument can respond in one of two ways to the claim that either of these classes of women have male internal maps. They can either accept the claim and try to reconcile it with Jenkins's definition, or deny the claim and argue that these women actually have female internal maps. Because Jenkins defines women as necessarily having female maps, the first response is self-defeating. Accordingly, as I defend Jenkin's model, I will pursue the second response.

Responding to the boymoder case is quite feasible. Jenkins claims that the nature of the female map is relative to "the context in which [the woman] exists" (Jenkins 2016 410). The boymoder exists in a context where presenting the way that other women do would lead to undesirable consequences—shame, at minimum. As of such, she cannot present that way. Her internal map is not male just because she follows dominant male norms—these norms are simply a role that context forces her to play. In actuality, she interfaces with female norms—she affirmatively decides *not* to follow them, also as a result of the context she lives in.

If we are to try and find a way to accommodate eggs in Jenkins's current model, we must find a way to address this discrepancy for them as well—one way or another, they must have a female internal map. One tempting approach is to argue that the female map has always been present in these individuals—it is simply latent until circumstances bring it to light. This approach would contend that from birth, the map exists as a metaphysically real—yet inaccessible—mental object. A proponent of this path might go on to say that this is the case for cisgender women as well. For instance, a prepubescent

cisgender girl is just as unaware as a prepubescent early-stage egg of how she will navigate the norm of shaving her legs. Were somebody to ask her, she would answer (most likely in the affirmative,) but this reveals more about her gender socialization than it does her internal map. Only when a change in circumstances (growing leg hair) finally occurs, the female map's influence on them both becomes apparent. The same argument can be made for early-stage eggs who reach adolescence or adulthood before cracking—it simply took longer for the particular circumstances that highlighted their female map to emerge.

However, there are two substantial downsides to the latent map approach—mootness, and essentialism. If we accept that latent internal maps can exist and be discovered at any point in one's life, then the whole process of defining gender identity by these maps becomes somewhat moot. There is no way to ever be certain that such a latent map does not exist in someone, and that a current conception of their gender will be proven wrong retrospectively. To serve ameliorative goals, I want to avoid enabling the claim that someone could be 'wrong' about their own gender identity—this is inherently invalidating. Secondly, the very notion of a metaphysically real latent internal map seems to ultimately fall back to a form of gender essentialism. Saying that these maps inherently exist within certain people and define their gender is little better than saying their gender is defined by an inherently existing chromosome, brain structure, etc.

I contend that a superior approach is to define womanhood in terms of attitudes towards internal maps, rather than the maps themselves. For instance, the early-stage egg may have a latent attitude of resentment, disgust, shame, or ennui towards her male map, rather than an actual latent female map. As this disgust is actualized, there is no preexisting female map that bobs to the surface. Rather, this new map is built organically (influenced by the society she lives in) as she is pushed further from her male map. To make this definition concrete, we could term it as follows: *A woman is someone who does or will hold attitudes that push her to form and interact with a female internal map.* This definition solves the essentialism concern, because rather than appealing to some metaphysically real yet undiscovered map, it simply appeals to attitudes—things that we are consciously aware of, that we hold a degree of influence over, and that are less analogous to biological traits than a map which is inbuilt from birth. Likewise, this definition seems to give people more agency. Attitudes are something we can choose to embrace, repress, explore, limit, etc. Making them a key part of the definition gives it more versatility to explain how people may interact with their own gender identities, and how these interactions may vary over time. This definition also seems to resolve the mootness concern. The phrasing of "does or will" implies that the subject's ultimate gender identity may end up being different than they currently believe (such as in the case of the early-stage egg). However, by appealing to attitudes instead of a latent map, the subject is never 'wrong' about their own gender. It is far more difficult for someone to be wrong about their own current attitudes than about the presence or absence of a latent internal map that they are unaware of and have no way to be aware of.

Section IV: Conclusion

By examining the case of the boymoder and (especially) the early-stage egg, it becomes apparent that the definition of womanhood posited by Jenkins falls victim to concerns about mootness and essentialism. However, by shifting the definition to focus on attitudes towards internal maps rather than maps themselves, both concerns are eased. This definitional shift serves the goals of feminism (and thus aligns with Jenkins original intent of amelioration) both by rejecting the invalidating claim that someone could be wrong about their own gender identity and dispelling the notion that latent internal maps play a pseudo-biological essentialist role in defining gender.

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Understanding Testimonial Coercion through the Lens of Sexual Coercion

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Abstract: *In this paper I illustrate a way for agents to maintain a form of epistemic agency when they are in epistemically compromised environments. The primary environment that I focus on is the US criminal justice system because within it, while agents with marginalized identities are consistently epistemically compromised, it does not seem right to say that the undermining of their agency means they can never exercise it at all in these cases. I draw primarily from Jennifer Lackey's book Criminal Testimonial Injustice and Quill Kukla's article "A Nonideal Theory of Sexual Consent" to propose a scaffolded approach to epistemic agency modeled after Kukla's scaffolded approach to sexual consent. This allows agents with marginalized identities to maintain partial or compromised epistemic agency in compromising environments, and in this paper, I will present a way for the criminal justice system to support the agency of all involved.*

Keywords: Injustice; Agency; Scaffolding; Marginalized; Nuance

Introduction

Recent feminist literature has sought to highlight violations of epistemic agency, however I believe that there is a gap within the literature for cases of compromised autonomy due to identity-based complications in large institutions such as the criminal justice system, which this paper aims to fill. That gap can be illustrated briefly by reconstructing the debates concerning harmful credibility access to identify the difficulty of reaching plausible solutions.

The standard understanding is that epistemic agency is the capacity to engage in knowledge making and sharing, where one can either exercise their epistemic agency in a situation or their epistemic agency is hindered, and they cannot exercise it. In this paper, I present a scaffolded approach to demonstrate that agents may exercise partial or compromised epistemic agency under oppressive systems. This becomes incredibly important in environments such as the ones presented in the United States criminal justice system because vulnerable communities are disproportionately exposed to the system and are routinely harmed because their epistemic agency is not upheld, and since the identity-based biases and problems are so deeply ingrained into the system, a reshaping of what it means to have agency in a situation is one of the most effective ways of bringing change. To illustrate this, I will first outline the ways epistemic agency can be harmed by discussing Miranda Fricker's testimonial injustice and relevant epistemological literature to create an accurate picture of the harm being done (2007). I will then use Jennifer Lackey's analysis of epistemic agency within the criminal justice system to explain why, especially for agents who have marginalized social identities, it is important to take a more nuanced approach beyond the more standard understanding of the subject. Finally, I will present an analysis of a scaffolded approach drawing from Quill Kukla's model on scaffolding sexual consent.

Review of Literature on Epistemic Agency

Miranda Fricker defines testimonial injustice as a phenomenon that occurs when an agent receives a credibility deficit from another hearer owing to an identity prejudice (Fricker 2007, 28). A very commonplace example of this phenomenon is when a woman presents an idea in a business meeting and the idea is overlooked, but when the same idea is presented by a man, it is received much better. Even if the idea is revolutionary, it may only be considered as such if presented by someone who holds more dominant identities. In this case, if the man never presented the idea, this knowledge would be lost because the prejudicial perception of the woman as having less credibility prevents the transfer of information from being received when she is its source. In this way, Fricker argues, unwarranted prejudices against knowers such as the woman often lead to less knowledge: an epistemic harm. Fricker argues that more than just epistemic harms occur from testimonial injustice as well. Discrediting someone as a "knower" and taking them out of the knowledge-production space effectively disrespects someone in their ability to know what she sees as distinct to personhood. Consequently, she sees it as an ethical harm in addition to an epistemic harm. More concretely, because one's capacity as a knower is so tightly linked to one's personal value, the wrong of testimonial injustice "bears a social meaning to the effect that the subject is less than human" (Fricker 2007, 44). In contrast to unwarranted credibility deficits, Fricker does not believe that credibility excess can produce testimonial injustice: in her framework, being so credible that you are believed unquestioningly does not accumulate harm in the same way. A large facet of her view is that testimonial injustice is systemic, but her perception of credibility excess occurs only in individual moments. She therefore claims she does not "think it would be right to characterize any of the individual moments of credibility excess that such a person receives as in itself a instance of testimonial injustice" (Fricker 2007, 21).

However, this position is not one widely agreed upon. Other philosophers (e.g., Davis 2016, Medina 2011, Medina 2013) have argued that the significant harms owing to credibility excess ought to be counted as testimonial injustice, in contrast to what Fricker argued. One specific critique strengthening this position comes from Jennifer Lackey in her book *Criminal Testimonial Injustice*. She identifies a new sense of epistemic injustice she calls 'agential testimonial injustice' and it occurs when testimony is extracted from an agent in a way that bypasses or subverts their epistemic agency (Lackey, 2023, 32). These agents are only treated as givers of knowledge when it is convenient and when their knowledge fits into the narrative of the given and opposing party. In this sense, the testimonial injustice isn't that the agent is being ignored but rather that that person's coerced testimony is being given too much credibility, and any evidence that doesn't support that coerced testimony is discounted. One example Lackey uses to demonstrate this idea is the 1993 case of Juan Rivera. Rivera was sentenced to life in prison for what proved to be a false confession that he was coerced into making. This occurred even though there was no physical evidence linking Rivera to the rape and murder of the 11-year-old victim, Holly Staker, and even though he was very evidently not a reliable confessor because of his distraught mental state. Rivera was found guilty even after DNA testing exonerated him; by the time he was released from prison, he had already served 20 years. His original confession of guilt was clearly coerced, but it was given such high credibility that law enforcement did not properly analyze any further evidence. Any recantations after the fact were discarded and distorted because those recantations did not fit into law enforcement's accepted narrative. When framed in this way, it is clear why credibility excess would harm the agent, because their epistemic agency has obviously been exploited or bypassed.

Within the legal system, the credibility of eyewitness testimonies and guilty pleas are often over-inflated, whereas recantations of guilt are not held in the same regard—even when the testimony was coerced and there is substantial counter evidence to support the recantation of guilt, as with the case of Juan Rivera. When a marginalized agent is coerced in this way, it quickly becomes difficult to ascertain how a marginalized agent can maintain epistemic agency. The systems of oppression that are working in the background cannot be removed by any one individual, no matter how well-intentioned they may be, as a feature of being maintained structurally, it is intuitive why our criminal justice system might seek to prevent individual agents from exercising their agency in a way that aims to address such structural oppression. However, epistemic agency does not have to be something an agent either has or doesn't have in an absolute fashion. In order to discuss how epistemic agency might work under coercion and general systems of oppression, I propose that we look at what feminists have said about another case where agency is compromised due to systems of oppression, namely sexual agency and sexual coercion under conditions of patriarchy. If there are ways in which sexual agency can be scaffolded to include partial or compromised autonomy for sexual agents, perhaps there can also be ways in which epistemic agency can be scaffolded to include partial or compromised autonomy for epistemic agents.

Objection and Rejoinder

One might object that it is inappropriate to use a framework for sexual agency to understand and provide possibilities for epistemic agency under coercive conditions within the criminal justice system. That is because it feels like there is a fundamental difference between the violation of the agency through deception within a sexual encounter and the violation of epistemic agency through deception in the pursuit of justice. For example, if someone has committed a serious crime like murder and has tried to cover it up, the law enforcement might need to be deceptive in order to uncover the evidence required to convict a criminal of their crime, and when someone is guilty these practices feel justified. However, imagine again that the person did not in fact commit the crime, then intense coercive practices no longer seem as justifiable. They still must be questioned if they are a subject, and obviously without the questioning it is impossible to know if the agent committed the crime or not. The distinction I am drawing is that investigative practices are the same whether someone committed the crime or not, so they should be treated as innocent until proven guilty in their questioning as well. Reality is not as clear as most people often feel, so the longer one spends thinking about the breaches of agency involved in our criminal justice system, the more obfuscated they become. This is why, while I understand there are fundamental differences between the two violations of agency, I think the similarities allow for the solutions to be similar as well.

In an important way, the framing of the solution is the most crucial. With sexual coercion and with injustices in the criminal justice system the norms have long been ones of exploitation. Women have been exploited in heterosexual sexual encounters because consent has been undervalued and misunderstood, and people with marginalized identities are exploited in the criminal justice system due to biases held by those in positions of power. Both cases concern inequity where exploitation was/is the norm, but often diverge on possible solutions to ameliorate this inequity. There are two prevalent ways of framing the problem. The first is a more individual approach where many feminists argue that the blame for violations of sexual agency fall onto the individual perpetrators, or that the problems within our criminal justice system and policing are individual. It is the idea that there are just a few bad examples that ruin the image of the

rest. The other approach is more radical, it is the claim that the problem is with the entire system, which does seem correct because of the prevalence of harm. I am inclined to agree with that, however there are groups of radical feminists and radical abolitionists that argue that the problem is so large that it requires such large-scale change which make it seemingly hopeless to fix. Feminist philosophers such as Dworkin argue that there can be no truly consensual heterosexual sex in the current environment and many argue the criminal justice system cannot properly work for marginalized groups since it was never meant to, leaving the only solution to abolish the current system entirely.

However, even if one agrees that an overarching system must be abolished, it seems wrong to deny the possibility of some small-scale solutions for people to work toward in the meantime because people are presently being harmed and cannot wait for full-scale reform. While the larger changes are being worked on and being made, adaptations like the one I am suggesting are warranted because the goal is to reduce the amount of harm in the present day as well as the future. Therefore, I aim to apply Kukla's theory of sexual consent to an epistemic context because it acknowledges that the epistemic environment is not built to allow for proper consent, while emphasizing the need for agents to have some autonomy until revolutionary changes can be made.

Kukla's theory of sexual consent applied to an epistemic context

Quill Kukla, in their 2021 paper "A Nonideal Theory of Sexual Consent", argues against the standard picture of consent, which states that "if you don't have autonomy, due to inherent capacities or coercive circumstances, then you can't legitimately give consent, including consent to sex"[vi](270). Because of background systems of oppression and power dynamics, it is rare for an agent who is disempowered by oppression to have true autonomy or for the circumstance to be completely devoid of agency-undermining elements. Some feminist theorists in the past (notably, Mackinnon and Dworkin among others) have concluded from this that, because we live in a patriarchal society, heterosexual sex is never consensual. That conclusion seems deeply flawed, since it seems consensual heterosexual sex happens all the time, which is why Kukla wanted to argue that true and valid consent can still be present in cases when your agency is compromised. They present a view of scaffolded agency that has eight conditions which are neither necessary nor sufficient for sexual consent, but which make it possible to consent in a world that is structured against marginalized identities. When some conditions are lacking, it is important to bolster others, and it is important to keep in mind that these are not an exhaustive account. Rather, "under messy, autonomy-compromising, nonideal conditions, these are some of the tools and conditions that can help to scaffold and enable consent, especially when other things from the list are lacking"[vii]. The eight conditions for scaffolded agency in terms of the ability to give sexual consent are as follows: (1) background trust between everyone involved, (2) access to the tools to be able to exit a situation at will, (3) uptake from the other parties which includes fully hearing what the speaker is trying to say, (4) an understanding of broader social context, (5) avoid agency-undermining activities, (6) meaningful testimonial credibility outside of the encounter, (7) the ability to hold the others involved accountable, and finally (8) the existence of a support network for all parties outside of the encounter. It is important to note that because the scaffolded approach is meant to allow agents to meet some conditions and not others, one's epistemic agency is evaluated as the sum of its parts. This means that while all conditions are important, it is not the goal to assign which of the eight one must have. For example, an individual may meet the conditions of (1) background trust, (5) the avoidance of agency-undermining activities, and (6) meaningful testimonial credibility outside of the encounter but not meet the other five so their agency as a whole might be

more compromised than someone who meets six of the eight conditions, but it is still possible to construct a structure of partial agency. These eight conditions will need to be adapted from the way Kukla used them for them to be used in the context of epistemic agency, so it is important each condition is addressed individually.

The first is to have background trust between everyone involved. Within the context of sexual consent, this condition requires all involved parties to trust that the other(s) will respect their boundaries and value their personhood. If this condition were to be applied to epistemic agency, it would require the other involved parties to respect one's integrity and privacy. The agent has to be able to trust that they can share information openly and only share the information desired. This is also important because agents dealing with law enforcement need to be able to trust that law enforcement isn't lying to them. If there is no way to ensure law enforcement is not lying to them or manipulating them to gain a false confession, this condition cannot be met. I believe that this condition is worth keeping within the scaffold for epistemic agency.

The second condition that Kukla mentions is access to the tools to be able to exit a situation at will. Within the context of sexual consent, this condition highlights the fact that we all have more agency and autonomy when we are able to exit an encounter at will. This looks like setting up a safe-word and respecting an agent's "no". This condition is an important part of agency within sexual consent, but it does not transfer to epistemic agency, because even when we cannot exit a situation at will, it does not feel as though we are losing any epistemic agency because of that fact. For example, if I were on an executive board of some kind and had a discussion with the other members and it is my goal to keep my job, I cannot exit said meeting at will. However, I still feel fully capable to exercise my epistemic agency within the meeting and to contribute without feeling coerced or forced to do so. This condition is therefore not applicable in this case.

One condition that is crucial for scaffolding epistemic agency is uptake from the other parties which includes fully hearing what the speaker is saying. When applied to sexual consent, this condition requires agents to truly understand and respond to the other agent(s)' body language and communication. This takes more practice as it is not only hearing the words that come out of their mouths but observing their bodies and checking in if they are uncomfortable. Kukla credits Kristie Dotson with the discussion of epistemic smothering due to pernicious ignorance. Epistemic smothering being a coercive silence that an agent does to themselves because they believe the audience at hand will not be able to truly listen to them. Dotson specifically writes that when "the testimonial content is unsafe and risky, failing to demonstrate testimonial competence to a speaker in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance is equivalent to a failure to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange owning to pernicious ignorance"[viii](250). When this happens, the speaker is harmed because their testimony is not being communicated with an audience capable of hearing them. Shifting to thinking about uptake from the audience regarding epistemic agency, it is therefore clear that a person has more agency when being reliably understood because this would mean the audience is ensuring they are truly hearing the speaker. If it was ever going to be possible for the criminal justice system to reform itself to protect marginalized people, this condition would play a key part in that.

In a similar vein, it is important for the audience to understand broader social context. When discussing sexual consent this condition may be the most important, because it requires the agent(s) to observe the social context that shapes the encounter. One must take note of the social identities of the agent(s) involved and understand the power dynamics between them. When applied to epistemic agency, this condition can be simplified into what José Medina calls 'meta-lucidity,' because the heart of the condition is that people have more agency when all involved parties become aware of what they are

ignorant to and what power dynamics exist in the interaction and exercise their understanding of context. If only one agent is exercising meta- lucidity it won't be as useful, so it is crucial that all involved are more conscious. Meta-lucidity is defined as the ability for an agent to be "aware of the effects of oppression in our cognitive structures and of the limitations in the epistemic practices (of seeing, talking, hearing, reasoning, etc.) grounded in relations of oppression"[ix]. This is an incredibly important condition to have when scaffolding epistemic agency because if we are going to truly hear a speaker for what they are saying we must understand the context in which they are saying it.

Another one of Kukla's conditions that is important in this case is avoiding agency-undermining activities. This condition is straightforward because scaffolded sexual consent and scaffolded epistemic agency use this condition in similar ways. Agency-undermining activities would be ones such as coercion, manipulation, and anything that undermines the virtue of the consent given. It seems clear that people have less agency and less autonomy when they are being forced to consent to something. It is important to note here that these agency-undermining activities make the consent invalid even if the agent would have consented without being manipulated. As far as epistemic agency within law enforcement goes, even if an agent is guilty and is forced to confess that guilt, the confession itself has undermined their agency. Therefore, a condition about avoiding these conditions will help an agent to have more epistemic agency.

The next condition, meaningful testimonial credibility outside of the encounter, is a condition that specifies that agents need to be believed because (specifically with regards to sexual consent) if they do not have the credibility to report an encounter if it were to violate their boundaries, then they have less agency. In other words, if agents report a sexual assault to a police officer and know that they were in a credibility deficit due to their social identities and wouldn't be believed, they have less agency within encounters. For purposes of clarity, this condition will be merged with the condition of a broad understanding of social context since they are similar conditions. The combined condition will be called meta-lucidity because it involves agents understanding their social environments and the dynamics at play. This condition is very large and likely would require some very specific guidelines for specific situations. It is important to have meaningful testimonial credibility outside of an encounter as well as it is important to have it within one's own life. What this means is having an external place to turn to within a large system when someone violates one's epistemic agency as well as an internal circle of people who understand you and that you can depend on. As a general guideline though, being able to maintain credibility outside of an encounter is very important.

Moving down the list, the ability to hold the others involved accountable is also a useful condition to scaffold epistemic agency. For sexual consent, this condition means agents have the ability to redress the other agent(s) for violating their agency if they were to cross a line. This condition regarding epistemic agency would focus more on an agent's ability to find justice for themselves if they faced an epistemic injustice. It is worth noting that many epistemic injustices occur within the criminal justice system which we have already discussed, so it is difficult to obtain justice if the system itself is causing the harm. There are, of course, measures to mitigate epistemic injustice such as the right to remain silent and the right to a lawyer, but one's identity and the social hierarchy of power lessens one's ability to exercise many of these rights. The ability to hold the law enforcement officers accountable is, for most agents, not so easily done, so they would not be able to exercise this condition within those circumstances. However, in an improved system, agents ought to be able to do this in some fashion, perhaps some through a non-governmental third party. I shall not spend much more time developing what this independent party could be, as it is not the primary focus of my paper, but in essence it should be a resource for holding those within the justice system accountable for their

actions and ensuring they are doing everything they can to uphold the agency of those involved in the trial.

The last of the eight conditions outlined by Kukla is the existence of a support network for all parties outside of the encounter. This last condition is once again straightforward because its applications are very similar for both constructions of agency, but it is incredibly vital. In many cases, if agent(s)' boundaries are violated in any way and in any circumstance, there will be many people who do not believe them. There will be many people feeding them false information and it may become hard to stand their ground and stay confident in the truth. Even in cases where audience members are not necessarily willfully violating an agent's epistemic agency, they may be participating in a system where it gets undermined. Having an outside support system to listen and to affirm is thus incredibly important. Support systems give people more agency because their understanding of their personhood is being supported. In other words, they are being held in their agency, and that is an incredibly important condition to maintain.

This would mean the new conditions for epistemic agency are: background trust between all involved; reliable uptake from the other involved parties; meta-lucidity; avoidance of agency- undermining activities; the ability to hold others accountable; and the existence of a social network outside of the encounter. This, then, provides a framework for how it could be possible to have epistemic agency as a marginalized agent within the criminal justice system. As it stands, the system fails at giving those agents much of these requirements, so this scaffolding can also point out more acutely the ways in which they are being failed. The argument of whether the justice system can ever truly serve people who hold marginalized identities is not one I can answer here nor am I trying to, but rather I am trying to outline the requirements that would need to be met. Citizens of every marginalized group would have to be able to trust law enforcement was not lying to them, their word would be reliably received and understood, their circumstance and social positioning would be understood as well as biases from all parties would be checked, they would be able to hold law enforcement accountable for breaking these rules, and lastly that they have a support system outside of the encounter so that their agency is protected. Not all of these must be met necessarily for agency to be present because of the scaffolded partial agency argued for in this paper, but many of these factors lean into each other and for a fully just system the goal would be for all eight conditions to be met.

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Dominance, Difference, and Dependency: A Feminist Analysis of *Kill Bill*

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Abstract: *In this essay, I argue that the movie franchise Kill Bill encapsulates three feminist critiques of equality: the dominance critique, the difference critique, and the dependency critique. Kill Bill Vol. 1, specifically, strongly vouches for a dominance critique of equality. Notably, the franchise's tone shifts with Kill Bill Vol. 2, emphasizing themes in line with the difference and dependency critiques of equality. I criticize the dominance critique before defending the difference and dependency critiques. While the franchise begins with a story of vengeance and bloodshed, it ends with interesting reflections on motherhood. I argue that retaliation for gender-based inequalities in the form of violence is not an empowering image for women. Instead, the difference and dependency critiques of the patriarchal conception of equality offer more compelling arguments.*

Keywords: Feminism; film analysis; dominance critique; difference critique; dependency critique

The movie franchise, *Kill Bill*, has earned its place as one of the most iconic movie series of all time. At the release of its first installment, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, people considered it to be a work highlighting feminist ideals. Journalist John Leland reported in the New York Times that many women felt that it was empowering. He wrote humorously that in these movies, "…women rise to a level of brutality previously reserved for men…" (Leland 2003). The violence and bloodshed continued into *Kill Bill Vol. 2,* the series' second and final installment. Is this franchise truly a feminist piece, and if so, what message is it trying to convey?

I believe that *Kill Bill* encapsulates three feminist critiques of equality: the dominance critique, the difference critique, and the dependency critique. *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, specifically, strongly vouches for a dominance critique of equality. Notably, the franchise's tone shifts with *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, emphasizing themes in line with the difference and dependency critiques of equality. I will criticize the dominance critique before defending the difference and dependency critiques. While the franchise begins with a story of vengeance and bloodshed, it ends with interesting reflections on motherhood. Overall, I will argue that retaliation for gender-based inequalities in the form of violence is not an empowering image for women or the best way forward. On the other hand, the difference and dependency critiques are more compelling.

The dominance critique asserts that the concept of equality, as conceived by the patriarchy, is simply equality to men. In this critique, there is an emphasis on subordination and domination (Kittay 1999 11). Specifically, this critique focuses on the way men tend to dominate women—on an interpersonal level and in societal structures—forcing them into a role of subordination. The feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay notes that the dominance approach has been explored in situations where women are preyed on by men sexually, specifically in the forms of sexual harassment and pornography (Kittay 1999 12). For those who advocate for the dominance critique,

the main differences between men and women are "…those [differences] that become the basis for (or better still, are the product of) domination" (Kittay 1999 11). Feminist philosopher Catherine A. MacKinnon, for instance, emphasizes that women are defined as women because "'we get fucked'" (1989 111). Women become defined by their subordination under a patriarchal society that values male domination. MacKinnon's contemporaries, Marilyn Frye and Carolyn M. Shafer, carry similar views. They go as far as to argue, in the case of sexual assault, the act of being raped is always a woman's experience, and the act of raping is always a man's act, regardless of the sex of those involved (Frye and Shafer qtd. in MacKinnon 1983 651). All of these philosophers encapsulate the way that women are viewed in a society where the state is male (MacKinnon 1983 644). When looking at the world through the lens of the dominance critique, "male" is defined by vicious domination over the subordinate "female."

Dominance is a prominent theme throughout the first installation of *Kill Bill*. When the Bride first awakens from her coma, she quickly discovers that one of the hospital orderlies, Buck, has been prostituting and raping her. The Bride attacks Buck and violently knocks him unconscious. This scene strongly resonates with MacKinnon's sentiments that in our society, women are defined simply by the dominance, particularly sexual dominance, men have over them. The Bride reacts violently to this fact, flipping the hierarchy and claiming dominance over the man who wronged her. All of the female characters in the movie are portrayed this way. One such character is O-Ren Ishii, one of the assassins that the Bride seeks to kill. A mob boss murders Ishii's parents when she is a child, and to get revenge, she uses his pedophilic desires against him. As a 12-year-old girl, she seduces him before murdering him in retaliation. Another example can be found in Ishii's protégé, Gogo, who gores a man in a bar for wanting to have sex with her, saying, "…do you still wish to penetrate me? Or is it I who have penetrated you?" (Tarantino 2003 1:00:23-1:00:32).

While the dominance critique is descriptive of many of the issues at play within a patriarchal society, it does not offer much of a way forward. I believe that the dominance critique is prone to reducing women to victims. In the dominance critique, the salient difference between men and women is one of domination versus subordination. Kittay offers her opinion of the critique, feeling that women become defined by this difference. She writes, "Such an ascription…undercuts the autonomy of women" (1999 11). While there is certainly a dominance hierarchy at play within a patriarchal society, we should be hesitant to embrace this hierarchy as an unchangeable fact. Philosopher Drucilla Cornell puts it well, writing, "If our dream is to recognize women as full human beings, then the negative program MacKinnon offers is not and cannot be enough" (1991 2258). The dominance critique too easily leaves women being defined solely as, in MacKinnon's words, "fuckees" (1983 111). While MacKinnon herself may not believe that this is how things *ought* to be, it seems that it would take an entire rewriting of history to make it any other way (1983 683). One may argue that this critique is both descriptive and prescriptive: the way to combat violence is by empowering the subordinated to become dominant. Again, this is what is demonstrated in *Kill Bill*, where women, particularly the Bride, flip the dominance hierarchy to get their violent revenge against the men that wronged them. I concede that there may be times where violent retaliation works out in this way and brings about change. I would argue, however, that violence is ultimately not the best solution. I would hope that, in an ideal society, people do not have to practice violence against one another for justice

to be served. I feel that when violence is used, it ends up encouraging further violence. Even if further violence does not ensue, there will be fear and mistrust from both sides of the conflict. This is ultimately damaging for a community; when a society is built from cycles of violence and sustained by fear, it is much more difficult for people to live in harmony with one another. I can also understand that violent retaliation can feel satisfying; it can feel like an appropriate reaction to a great wrong. Again, though, I would argue that the negative effects of violence far outweigh the positive. Violence may feel satisfying in the moment, but it is still not the most sustainable vessel of change. Even more, the violent retaliation of the victims only furthers the patriarchal conception of equality. This conception posits that equality means becoming dominant like men, physically and sexually, in a way that seems to encapsulate masculinity taken to a toxic extreme (i.e., one where men are only considered men if they are aggressive and violent). Professor Ian Reilly describes it aptly, writing that in *Kill Bill*, the women's violent and traditionally male impulses are not just a reaction to their subordination at the hands of men, but also "…the need to align themselves within a tradition of male heroism" (2007 29) Progress in gender equality cannot and will not be best achieved by fighting fire with fire. Women should not be expected to practice violence against men and call it equality simply because they mirror men's vicious domination.

Moving on from the dominance critique, the difference critique is a critique of the patriarchal assumption that "…the measure of man is the measure of humanity…" (Kittay 1999 5). This means that a woman can only be defined in reference to a man. The difference critique points out that traditionally masculine traits and roles are prized far more than traditionally feminine ones. Because of this, the fact that women are different from men simply in virtue of being a different sex means that they are viewed as inherently worse. The difference critique points out that women are often expected to take on a male role to be seen as valuable or equal; acting in a traditionally masculine way is the only way to be a human, rather than just the "Other." Women are likened to men—toxic men—throughout the *Kill Bill* franchise. The portrayal of women as being capable of the same violence practiced by men is meant to make women feel empowered. Instead, the franchise unintentionally exposes the root of the difference critique. In the second film, the audience learns that the Bride studied under the kung-fu master Pai Mei, a man who is described as having "nothing but contempt for women" (Tarantino 2004 45:20-45:24). When the Bride first meets Pai Mei, they spar with one another. Pai Mei easily disarms the Bride and insults her skills, telling her, "Like all Yankee women, all you can do is order in restaurants and spend a man's money" (Tarantino 2004 52:09-52:14). When Pai Mei eventually accepts the Bride, it is because, in his eyes, she has become like a man. This is seen most clearly when the Bride successfully punches through a plank of wood three inches in front of her. The Bride's training montage has shown her working at this repeatedly, despite the excruciating pain it causes her. In an early version of the script, when the Bride punches through the wood, Pai Mei tells her, "You still fight better than you speak. Finally, a woman who understands what's important" (Tarantino 2004). Instead of condemning Pai Mei for his sexism, the film presents the Bride as an exception to "correct" societal norms (Carroll 2018). This echoes Simone de Beauvoir, who writes, "Humanity is male, and man defines the woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself…she is the inessential in front of the essential" (de Beauvoir 2010 6).

This brings us to difference feminism. Christine A. Littleton, a difference feminist, emphasizes that the biological and cultural differences women exhibit compared to men are significant, whether they are "natural" or constructed (1987 1279). Women's inequality, in her eyes, is the result of society viewing women as less valuable simply because they are not like men (Ibid). Pai Mei's treatment of the Bride exhibits the patriarchal concept of equality. That conception is why she is only seen as valuable once she has become like a man. Political philosopher Martha Fineman writes that "...this equality is not only encompassing, it is also crude and non-discerning—a gender-blind monolith, folding all within its embrace" (2009 112). We can no longer define equality in this way if we want women to achieve *true* equality. Sexual differences do not need to be eradicated in the name of equal treatment. Instead, feminism needs to affirm feminine sexual differences and recognize the negligence that results from rejecting femininity. Without this, Cornell argues, "...we are left with the politics of revenge and lives of desolation, which make a mockery of the very concept of freedom"(2264). *Kill Bill* shows this exactly, with women being incorrectly led to believe that violent revenge is the pathway to sexual equality. If a woman wants to act in a more masculine manner, that should be her *choice*, not a *requirement* to be seen as an equal. We must work towards a society where femininity is embraced rather than repudiated.

The dependency critique, as put forward by Kittay, is that women are disproportionately in charge of dependency work (e.g., care of children, the elderly, and/or disabled individuals). When women are saddled with dependency work, this allows men—the providers—to leave the home, go into the workplace, and be a completely "independent" creature. However, this independence is a facade—the provider is only able to act this way because of the dependency worker's efforts. Kittay writes, "The notion that we all function, at least ideally, as free and equal citizens is not only belied by empirical reality, it is conceptually not commodious to encompass all" (1999 4). The patriarchal conception of equality assumes that people function as completely independent individuals. Kittay's point is that this is not the case, and it is silly to pretend it is. Her main thesis in her work, *Love's Labor*, is that "we are all some mother's child" (1999). This relational identification is crucial to the dependency critique. In *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, the protagonist is referred to only as "the Bride," since she is on the verge of marriage when Bill tries to kill her. While the second film eventually reveals that the Bride's name is Beatrix, the franchise's choice in identifying its protagonist through relational terms echoes Kittay's assertion that people are not as independent and autonomous as they would like to believe; we are all interdependent. In a patriarchal society, we are led to believe that dependency work is nothing more than a burden and restraint on a person's independence. Men, traditionally, have "freed" themselves from this responsibility by deferring the work to women. The person who is career-oriented and appears to function as an entirely independent entity becomes the ideal. However, none of us are *truly* independent of one another. There is always some sense in which we are depending on another person to support us. Dependency work is an integral part of how our society functions. This type of work needs to be valued just as much as other forms of work; dependency workers should not be seen as burdened, and dependency work should not be seen as less valuable than other forms of labor. Rather, society needs to change to protect and respect dependency work.

Throughout both films, one of the motivating factors behind the Bride's self-described "roaring rampage of revenge" is the loss of her baby. The Bride was pregnant when Bill shot her at the film's beginning. When she woke up from her coma, she was led to believe that she had lost the child. After around 3 hours of violence across two movies, *Kill Bill Vol. 2* takes a surprising turn as it explores the role of motherhood in the Bride's story—the Bride is renamed as "Mommy." She is renamed thus by four-year-old B.B., the baby she believed died. The Bride is reunited with her daughter unexpectedly when arriving at Bill's house to kill him. The film reveals that Bill raised B.B. while the Bride was in her coma. Instead of being able to achieve her sole purpose of killing Bill, she must play at domestic normalcy (being "Mommy" and "Daddy") for the sake of her child. In this situation, Bill continues to have power over the Bride as he has possession of her child. When Bill demands to know why the Bride left him, the movie cuts to a flashback. The Bride, alone in a hotel room, discovers she is pregnant. An assassin breaks into the room and the Bride reveals this fact as they hold each other at gunpoint. She tells the assassin, "I'm the deadliest woman in the world, but right now, I'm just scared shitless for my baby" (Tarantino 2004 1:51:59-1:52:08). The assassin spares the Bride's life on behalf of the pregnancy, and the Bride does not return to Bill, running away for the sake of her and her unborn child. Coming out of the memory, she declares, "Before that strip turned blue, I was a woman, I was your woman. I was a killer who killed for you…But once that strip turned blue, I could no longer do any of those things. Not anymore. Because I was gonna be a mother" (Tarantino 2004 1:53:52-1:55:12). Here, the Bride sacrifices her life as an assassin for the sake of her child. She realizes that she can no longer live a life of violence as her child is dependent on her.

Kittay offers similar reflections on motherhood within *Love's Labor*. She writes that "…once a woman has a child…she is no longer the individual she was before…That reality is marked by the responsibility—assumed or imposed—to care for dependents" (1999 27). Dependency is an inevitable facet of the human condition—particularly at the beginning and end of life, but even throughout our lives, we depend on others. Those who do the caretaking work are dependency workers and are predominantly women. A true conception of sexual equality must include the work that these individuals do, rather than pretending that we are all autonomous, independent beings. Under a patriarchal society and its conception of equality, women in dependency work are vulnerable to the exploitation of those on whom they depend for financial support. Think again of how the Bride is forced to delay her mission of killing Bill for the sake of her child. Kittay asserts that "sexual harassment and domestic violence get a foothold in a sexist society where women have to rely on the good graces of men to feed and care for their children" (Kittay 2020 4). The Bride is not "free" to carry out her retaliation against Bill; she is not as autonomous as she seems. Even this samurai-sword-wielding heroine answers to her role as a dependency worker, forced to be dependent on Bill in the first moments she is reunited with her child. As Kittay puts it, "Because the dependency worker needs the cooperation of another to obtain the resources necessary to sustain both herself and her charge, she will tolerate a worse situation than her partner before permitting the arrangement to break down" (Kittay 1999 43). The Bride tolerates Bill to protect B.B., despite Bill's previous abuse of the Bride. The relationship between the dependency worker and the provider is unequal, and this inequality can quickly lead to the injustice of domination (Kittay 1999 44).

The issue here is not the condition of being a mother, or of being any type of dependency worker. The issue is that dependency work is happening in a society that fails to value this work or protect dependency workers and those they care for (Kittay 1999 96). At no point does the Bride resent her daughter's existence or the ways that her daughter restricts her life. The Bride loves her, and the driving force of her violent journey throughout both films is to avenge the death of her child. The series exposes the power of patriarchal society as the Bride is forced to be dependent on Bill. When she attempts to leave Bill for the sake of her daughter, he tracks her down and tries to kill her. Too often, women are trapped in toxic situations where their well-being must be sacrificed on behalf of their children. The Bride tried to meet fire with fire, coming for Bill while leaving a trail of corpses behind her. At the end of the day, however, the Bride was forced to remain dependent on the toxic man she sought to escape in the first place.

At the very end of the film, against all odds, the Bride successfully kills Bill, freeing herself and her daughter from his possession. In an ideal world, though, women should not have to slash and burn their way into freedom and sexual equality. Violence is not the best way to create a healthy, flourishing society. Moreover, expecting women to "earn" value through performative hypermasculinity is not true equality, nor is it an effective end goal for feminists. Meeting the injustice of domination with more domination is not the most productive solution. Women are valuable, but the solution to creating that perception is not to turn around and, as it were, fuck men over in retaliation. I agree with Littleton that we should accept and embrace that women are different from men. Equality should not *require* women to give up traditionally feminine traits and roles. I want to be clear here that I am *not* arguing that if a woman finds that she prefers to act in a more traditionally masculine way or inhabits a traditionally masculine role, that makes her less of a woman. Rather, I am arguing that acting traditionally masculine does not make a woman *more* valuable, and acting traditionally feminine does not make a woman *less* valuable. A woman—and, honestly, any person—should have the freedom to act the way they feel represents them best. A person should be valued as a human being, regardless of whether they present in a more masculine or a more feminine way. Additionally, I agree with Kittay that we are all dependent on one another and that this dependency is essential to how society operates. This reality is exposed by the disproportionate amount of dependency work women have been expected to undertake to allow men to act as "independent" individuals. Women—or any individual—who choose to engage in dependency work need to be valued and protected for it. The *Kill Bill* franchise exposes the roots underlying several feminist critiques. While they may not be the "girl power" movies they were advertised as, it still does valuable work in exposing the deep issues that arise in the pursuit of gender equality. Society must change its conception of equality to embrace women as they are and protect their dependency work. As the closing screen of *Kill Bill Vol. 2* says, only then can we say "…all is right in the jungle" (Tarantino 2004 2:03:57-2:04:00).

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Epistemic Injustice Through the Lens of White Ignorance

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Abstract: *This paper explores how white ignorance operates not just around marginalized communities but inside them, shaping how we see ourselves, what we are taught to forget, and how we come to trust (or distrust) what we know. Drawing from personal narrative as well as standpoint theory and feminist and decolonial epistemology, I argue that white ignorance is not only an external force imposed by dominant groups, but something that marginalized individuals themselves can internalize. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are denied credibility or excluded from knowledge production due to prejudices related to race, gender, or class. By weaving together lived memory, testimonial injustice, and the philosophical work of thinkers like Charles Mills, Patricia Hill Collins, Franz Fanon, and José Medina, I aim to show that epistemic clarity is possible but not only through resistance and struggle. Ultimately, this paper asks what it means to know in a world built to keep certain truths hidden.*

Key Words: Epistemic injustice; ideologies; ignorance; perception; privilege

Introduction

Injustice is the overall theme of this paper. My understanding of injustice is when there is a lack of equality, and this can take the form of, but is not limited to— race, gender, and financial discrimination–these are all social injustices. "Social injustices breed epistemic injustices, or rather these two injustices are two sides of the same coin" (Medina 2013). Epistemic injustice is a form of discrimination against someone's capacity as a knower based on prejudices about them; therein, white ignorance is a conceptual dysfunction of cognitive dissonance that has been developed throughout history. As Miranda Fricker notes, "White ignorance is itself a form of hermeneutical injustice insofar as the structural prejudices of dominant groups prevent them from making sense of the social experiences of marginalized groups." (2019) An example of work against this form of injustice is through the Black Lives Matter movement. Communities of color are often victims of police brutality that is born of this epistemic phenomenon. After identifying epistemic injustice, I maintain that it consequently breeds white ignorance, and it is a pernicious way in which people perceive and experience the world. Furthermore, my take on white ignorance will be in the global aspect, making it a phenomenon not only exclusive to the white population. In this essay, I argue that white ignorance is a historically cultivated cognitive phenomenon that distorts knowledge and sustains epistemic injustice. Throughout, I explore how white ignorance not only harms marginalized communities but can also be internalized by them, which consequently breeds systemic oppression from within. I will examine this throughout personal narratives and a philosophical framework that

draws from Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice and Mill's concept of white ignorance.

In Section 1, I will explain Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice, specifically the difference between epistemic and testimonial injustice, then present Byskov's expansion of the framework. In Section 2, I analyze Mills' account of white ignorance and how it operates through perception and memory to sustain racial hierarchies. In Section 3, I draw on personal narratives and real-world observations to show how white ignorance and testimonial injustice operate in daily life through racialized assumptions and behavioral conditioning. In Section 4, I argue that white ignorance is not exclusive to white individuals but can be internalized by marginalized communities, which affects their self-perception and political behavior. Finally, in Section 5, I will explore the broader implications of internalized ignorance for resistance, accountability, and epistemic transformation, drawing from the work of José Medina and other critical educators.

Section 1: Defining Epistemic and Testimonial Injustice

The epistemic conditions one must impose on another, or they may fall victim to, are five; two conditions are derived from Miranda Fricker, and the additional three developed by Morten Byskov in his article *What Makes Epistemic Injustice an 'Injustice'?*. Unlike Fricker, Byskov extends the framework by arguing that "In order to constitute an epistemic injustice, they must exist in conjunction with a violation of one (or more) of the other conditions. Violation of each condition by itself does not constitute an injustice." (Byskov 2020) In other words, for something to constitute as epistemic injustice, multiple conditions must be violated concurrently. These five conditions of epistemic injustice are disadvantage, prejudice, stakeholder, epistemic, and social injustice. Before continuing, it is important to understand how Fricker distinguishes between the broad concept of epistemic injustice and the more specific forms it can take. Fricker describes epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. Within her framework, there are different forms, such as testimonial injustice, which is when someone's word is unfairly doubted due to identity-based prejudice. Then there is hermeneutical injustice, where marginalized people struggle to make sense of their own experiences because society lacks the interpretive tools required to understand them. For example, before the term "sexual harassment" came into public discourse, many women lacked the language to explain unwanted advances in their workplace. Even though they knew something was wrong, society did not have the shared concepts to make that experience intelligible, which left their suffering both socially and institutionally unrecognized. An example of testimonial injustice is when a person's credibility as a knower is identity-based prejudice. This distortion may include biases related to race, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, accent, or other characteristics that are irrelevant to a person's epistemic abilities. For instance, if someone's testimony is dismissed because of their gender or ethnicity, they have suffered from testimonial injustice.

For the disadvantage condition to be fulfilled, someone who is being unjustifiably discriminated against as a knower must suffer from epistemic, socioeconomic disadvantages, and inequalities from said discrimination. Moreover, this injustice is not merely accidental but often systematically sustained through societal

structures. As Fricker states, "Ignorance is often actively produced through structures of social power, sometimes systematically and even intentionally, and this production of ignorance is crucially linked to the experience of hermeneutical injustice." (Fricker 2019) The stakeholder condition implies that the person must somehow be affected by the decisions they are being excluded from influencing. Furthermore, the epistemic condition requires that the individual possess relevant knowledge. Lastly, the social injustice condition states that the individual or group being discriminated against must simultaneously suffer from other social injustices to be considered epistemic inequality. For further details on each condition, refer to Byskov's article. Note that for epistemic discrimination to constitute an epistemic injustice, a minimum of two conditions must be violated. Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice refers broadly to any situation in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. She discusses two types of injustice under the umbrella of epistemic injustice, and it is important not to conflate the general concept with its specific subtypes: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

Section 2: The Mechanisms of White Ignorance

White ignorance is described and further developed by Charles Mills. Mills' *The Racial Contract* (1997) lays the groundwork for these ideas by arguing that white supremacy is not merely a moral failing but one of a political system that is actively structuring knowledge, belief, and perception. In this framework, white ignorance is not accidental but systematically cultivated to maintain racial domination. White ignorance is an epistemological asymmetrical attitude (cognitive phenomenon) based on the process of belief formation through perception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest. The perspective whites have of blacks is one that "produces self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation," (Mills, 2007) He is clear with his distinction between ignorance and white ignorance because without including the white race, ignorance is a "non-knowing, that is not contingent," (i.e. when you include the white race it becomes a problem of "white racism and/or racial domination and ramifications") (Mills, 2007) Mills early on identifies white ignorance as a cognitive phenomenon that has to be determined by a historical perspective. He chose not to include the biological facet, making this a problem produced throughout history. The problem of white ignorance is an epistemically political and social one that pertains to perception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest. Given perceptions mean that perception is something that has been provided to you by the external world.

As I learned in my Epistemology course, if you perceive something a certain way, then you are justified in believing that it is the case unless you have a defeater. However, those perceptions are not automatic; perceptions are mediated by concepts and our prior beliefs. Take, for example, the fact that I'm not from San Marcos Texas however I am from the Rio Grande Valley therefore, how people know certain things in San Marcos will differ from how I know them because I don't have prior beliefs or memory to know what certain things are within the culture of San Marcos. Recently, I discovered that The Aquarium is a bar, not an actual aquarium, in San Marcos. It is close to the square where a lot of other students go to mingle; however, whenever I would hear people say "I'm at The Aquarium," I automatically thought that they were at an actual aquarium where there were animals. A typical thing you would see at the

Texas Corpus Christi aquarium. A quick Google search clarified that 'The Aquarium' was a bar and not a site for marine life. This revealed how the meaning of 'The Aquarium' was culturally specific, shaped by the local knowledge and prior experience of the people of San Marcos. I asked my partner to confirm if this information was true since he is familiar with the area after years of living there. He told me, "Yes, it's a bar". His confirmation and my quick Google search were my defeaters to my beliefs. My perception of how I pictured The Aquarium and what an aquarium is was different because of my prior beliefs. The view of The Aquarium being a bar was not available to me. To reiterate, this shows that conceptions and prior beliefs mediate our perception of our world and reality. During my epistemology course, we discussed that beliefs are a part of our belief system, and they can affect our outlook or perception of the world around us, no matter if this belief is a form of misrepresentation or misinformation. This example, however, is not a form of white ignorance because there is no misrepresentation of a race or culture. It was merely ignorance on my part because I had no knowledge that a bar's name would be The Aquarium.

Section 3: Lived Examples of Epistemic Injustice

White ignorance serves as an epistemically political and social phenomenon that can be seen through ethnocentric worldviews, meaning that one should look at white ignorance as a cognitive dissonance that was and is being developed throughout our history. The concept of race has been embedded in society since the early colonialism of the world began. Once a higher or more dominant group of people felt entitled to be the "superior" power over the "weaker" group or groups, that set the stage for people to begin to see themselves and think that they were destined to be the perfect model for others to be and act like. This was the start of racism. Only back then, when it began, the words used were savages, others, foreigners, etc. If those others did not appropriately live up to those standards set by the "norm" group, they were then inferior. The belief that one race is better than the other becomes an epistemic injustice. Especially when it turns into a crucial part of who we are as a society. White ignorance is a long-standing epistemic dysfunction. How oppressed groups see their oppressors is realistic compared to how the oppressor views the other. For instance, the way people of color view whites is veridical because it is much more realistic than the mainstream stereotypical view whites have of people and communities of color. Mills quotes Weldon Johnson:

"colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them (white people themselves)" (Mills, 2007).

The racially white delusion of superiority blinds them from seeing themselves through the perspective of people of color. Their perception and memory affect how they feel and act towards people of Black, Asian, Muslim, Latino, and many other communities. White ignorance allows the oppressed to experience the epistemic virtue of lucidity. As José Medina observes, "oppressed subjects often develop resistant imaginations that enable them to question the social norms and interpretive frameworks imposed upon them, imagining alternatives that remain invisible or unintelligible to dominant perspectives" (2013). This form of resistant imagination helps the marginalized communities see the reality of their conditions more clearly,

even as they must adapt to survive within the oppressive structures. However, this comes at the cost of being a minority group and having to live in disadvantaged and oppressed ways. The black perspective of whites is very real in the sense that they know and acknowledge that whites will always have specific advantages as opposed to people of color. This can be either social, economic, or political. People of black communities often adapt to survive in white society by subconsciously studying the white culture through their customs and mindset. This adaptive technique has been masterfully developed and enables coexistence with an oppressive system. It is not the perfect way to live, but to survive because they know that their skin color will always dictate how intelligent, innocent, and capable they are through the eyes of white ignorance within society.

Section 4: Internalized White Ignorance

A personal example of white ignorance I witnessed was in the campus elevator. I noticed a person of color waiting next to me for the elevator to open and I recognized them as a professor, however, they were wearing more comfortable clothes rather than their normal suit, and the woman or student that was already on the elevator, as it opened for us moved her purse from one side to the other. Was she being intentionally racist? Perhaps not. But the action she did was due to white ignorance, which is the self-deception of people of color or other marginalized groups. Society is taught that people of color are only ever thugs, drug dealers, pimps, murderers, rapists, and the list of negative connotations goes on. So naturally, our instinct when around someone like in the elevator is to do the negative action, we have been fed: to cover or hold our purses tightly on the bare assumption that, because the person has a skin color like that of the thief in the shows we watch, we assume that the person will attempt to rob us or will attempt to harm us. These are ingrained stereotypes that often trigger the instinctive responses above, which reflect internalized racial bias rather than a rational assessment. This is a subtle yet potent form of testimonial injustice because the professor's perceived threat was based on his appearance, not his actions or character. On the other hand, how people of color see white people is more consistent with who they are. People of color are wary when approaching and interacting with white people because of their shared history. Even though the experience shared above is a clear case of testimonial injustice, it also shows the broader form of epistemic injustice, where marginalized or minority groups are undermined as knowers due to social biases.

Take, for example, how most children who grow up in low-income neighborhoods are taught by their parents how to interact with police officers to prevent suspicion and possible arrest. Police brutality is more predominant toward persons of color, an unjust treatment often based on biased perceptions. These children are told to answer respectfully to the officers and in a way that does not raise suspicion, for the safety of the child. They are taught to answer swiftly and comply with the requests the officer makes. Not to react "violently" or "aggressively" because it will provoke further suspicion, suspicions that are unjustified because they are derived from only looking at someone's skin color. They are taught not to talk back but to know their rights. Keep their hands where the cops can always see them. If they drop something, leave it, and they can get it afterwards. And most of all, remain calm throughout the entire interaction. This can also be seen in our Hispanic and Latino communities in our

frontera. Most of my *gente Latina* will understand the fear that those white trucks with green symbols bring to us. Even when we are not "illegal aliens", we still carry the dread and trauma we have seen in our relatives' eyes because they pass judgment on us *por nuestro color de piel tostada y hermosa como nuestros ancestros*. Those of us with undocumented family members get a similar talk about how to avoid interactions with, *la migra*, border patrol, or how to act *"gringo"* "white and/or American" to reduce suspicion and lessen the possibility of being accused of being an illegal immigrant. Tupac put it best: T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. *"The Hate U Give Little Infants F**** Everybody"*. The hate *WE* give is what leads to injustices. Tupac was trying to teach us through his music how our systems are flawed, and how they are designed against communities of color and other minorities. The talk about how to act when you are stopped by a cop or border patrol is what children of color must hear because that is their reality. This is the virtue of the oppressed.

As Medina gives an example in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, that from a male perspective, it is hard to understand that women are suffering from sexual harassment or assault. The women who attest to not consenting to a sexual act are undermined and are appointed with a deficit of credibility that is culpable (Fricker) because it is a female suffering from a credibility deficit by a man. Just because it is a testimony coming from a woman, her credibility as a knower is less than, and the concept of sexual harassment, rape, or assault is no longer as strong. However, if we look at history, we know women have been victims of these crimes for a long time. Nonetheless, the problem was not given attention because it was something only women experienced and not men. Men, in this case, were the superior gender and therefore dictated what was "real" and "not real". Men doing that to a woman is hard to understand as a man, and that is what made it very difficult to prove that these unwelcome sexual acts are a problem to be addressed. The women's view of men was therein lucid, and the men's view of themselves towards women was one of self-deception.

However, I must highlight that white ignorance is not always based on bad faith because, as it suggests, it is a non-knowing of what it is to be anything other than white and/or have other experiences apart from white luxuries. Take this example from the film *The Hate U Give*:

"Y'all wanna act black but you get to keep your white privilege, you think playing ball and listening to rap makes you understand what it is to be black?...if you don't see my blackness you don't see me." Starr Carter

Color blindness takes away the whites' ability to see themselves as a race and not recognize the privilege they have derived from being white, as well as all the small but advantageous luxuries that they have inherited from their whiteness.

"Color-blind ideology plays an important role in the maintenance of white hegemony...Because whites tend not to see themselves in racial terms and not recognize the existence of the advantages that whites enjoy in American society, this promotes a worldview that emphasizes individualistic explanations for social and economic achievement as if the individualism of white privilege were a universal attribute." Woody Dane 2003 (Mills, 2007)

Consider a person who said "all lives matter" instead of "black lives matter" during the BLM movement, one would assume it is in good intent because they are trying to say that we are all human and therefore all of our lives should matter. The

problem happens when someone like my white friend says all lives matter but his intentions are not bad. His perception is conditioned by his prior beliefs as a white male, blinding him from acknowledging that the statement "all lives matter" is untrue. It is untrue because clearly injustices are showing that certain lives do not matter. Certain lives are being persecuted for simple things such as skin color, so how is it that all lives matter? It is contradictory, and that's the white ignorance impairing him from realizing and seeing all the damage that comes from saying "all lives matter." His white privilege operates as a perceptual veil, distorting his understanding of how race shapes lived experience in society. Not realizing that those are not the same experiences for every person in American society.

I had an encounter with a winter Texan when I went to the annual Onion Fest in Weslaco, Texas. For context, my dad and brother are white-complected and I am brown-complected. Winter Texans are not always rude; they are usually quite sweet and curious about our culture. My dad, brother, and I were standing beneath a tree where there was some shade. A lady came along and asked me to move, and because I didn't hear her at first, she must have assumed that I did not speak her language. That was when she started waving her hands and speaking very slowly, "Hello. This. Is. My. Seat. *Comprende*? *No comprende inglés?* Please. Move. Now. Bye-bye." I felt shocked and offended that this lady thought that I could not speak her language. That I could not communicate in English because of my skin being brown, or maybe because she was in the Rio Grande Valley, and there's always news of "illegals" or immigrants crossing the border. It hurts when people judge you based on your skin tone. They judge your capacity as a knower to speak and understand their language.

This example is not only because of personal bias but a form of testimonial injustice because it reflects the vast structure of epistemic injustice in which racialized assumptions shape who sees who as credible, intelligent, or articulate in public life. This incident bothered me even more because she was waving her hands as if that was going to help me understand her if I did not speak her language. Not to mention, she plucked the courage to come in front of me and tell me that that was her seat, knowing it was a blatant lie. Just because she felt entitled to be underneath the shade of the tree. When in fact there were no seats to indicate the spot was reserved. I responded to her in the same tone and slow voice she had spoken to me. "I am. Very. Sorry ma'am. But. I have. Been. Here. For. One hour. With. *My*. Dad and brother. We. Got. Here. Before you. I. Speak. English. Quite fluently, even if it's my second language, I am also educated and go to university. I do appreciate your attempt at Spanish, though." I smiled and stood in my place and made it clear that I was not going to move or oblige her request. She blushed, and she seemed embarrassed. I will note that my accent in English has little to no trace of my bilingualism. However, because she saw my phenotypes, she automatically assumed I was incapable of speaking English. Looking back, I would not change how I responded because she was being rude and racist, probably not on purpose, but still rude nonetheless. These moments, the purse clutching in the elevator, and the assumptions made about my language at the Onion Fest are not merely about bad manners or bias. They are a part of a deeper pattern that philosophers like Charles Mills, José Medina, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, and Franz Fanon have helped me understand. Their work shows how white ignorance is not just something that is imposed on us from the outside. It is something that can take root inside as well,

shaping how we think, act, and even vote. This is where the internalization of white ignorance becomes not just a social issue but an epistemic one.

What makes white ignorance especially dangerous is not just how it distorts how others see marginalized people, but how it can shape how we see ourselves. This internalization is not always about self-hatred. It is more about he way society subtly teaches us not to trust our own experiences or to filter them through dominant norms. It becomes quite hard to even name what we feel, much less resist it. There is a theory known as standpoint epistemology that helped me make sense of all this. It says that what we know is shaped by where we stand in the world: socially, politically, and even historically. Thinkers like Patricia Hill Collins and Sandra Harding argue that people who have been pushed to their limit end up seeing things more clearly, not because they are trying to, but because they have to understand both their world and the dominant one just to survive. So in a way, the struggle gives us a kind of double vision, per se, not just a different view, but sometimes a sharper one. That is why marginalized people are not "less informed" like society and the media tries to make it seem, they are often the ones seeing the truth that others refuse to acknowledge. This might seem to contradict what standpoint epistemology says: that marginalized groups have an epistemic advantage because they live with "double vision." Collins calls this being an "outsider within," someone who can see societal structures more clearly, precisely because they are being excluded from them. She writes, "Outsider-within status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women" (Collins, 2000). That status lets us see power from the margins, but even then, that clarity does not always come easily. It is uncomfortable at first, and it has to be cultivated. Medina calls this cultivation epistemic friction, which is the idea that marginalized people develop resistant knowledge when our experiences bump up against dominant lies. As he puts it: "Friction is not only inevitable, but necessary... it keeps our sensibilities from becoming ossified and helps us develop critical responsiveness to social environments" (2013). But when that friction is dulled, say by school systems that erase our history, by media that stereotype our communities, or by fear, our ability to develop that resistance is dulled too. That is how white ignorance gets inside of us. Not because we do not know who we are, but because we have been taught that what we know does not count. That our knowledge is far too "emotional," or "biased," or not "objective." So what happens? We start to second-guess ourselves. We begin making choices that do not serve us, not out of stupidity, but out of survival. We vote for leaders who harm our own families, friends, and communities. We distance ourselves from our roots. We try to "speak properly" or "act right." None of this is about lacking intelligence. It is about epistemic pressure, the kind that constantly tells you that your lived truth is wrong. Franz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks,* talks about this kind of internalization in a way that hits hard. He says, "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object among other objects" (Fanon, 2008). That moment, realizing that the world has a distorted story about you, is when white ignorance starts working from the inside. It trains you to see yourself as smaller than you really are. But there is power in naming that distortion. Medina does well to remind us that "resistant imagination must be cultivated" (2013). And Collins insists that "oppressed groups are frequently placed in the position of being listened to only if they frame their ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group" (2000). So part of the work is

reclaiming our voice even when that voice shakes, even when it does not sound "natural." This is why Black Lives Matter is not just a slogan, it is an act of epistemic resistance. It says our lives and knowledge matter. So do murals in *barrio* neighborhoods. So do zines made by queer youth of color. So do the conversations we have with our cousins, friends, classmates, parents or family, and professors. Resistance is not always loud. Sometimes it looks like unlearning silence. So yes, white ignorance can be internalized. But that does not mean we are broken, far from it. It means we are in a fight, not just to survive, but to see ourselves clearly. And to make sure the next generation does not have to fight as hard, to just believe that they are right about their own experience.

White ignorance is a cognitive phenomenon, and because it is a cognitive phenomenon, it is not confined to just the white race. White ignorance can be internalized by communities of color as well as previously stated. For example, when Latino/a descended communities and African Americans vote for politicians who are going to implement laws that affect them the most. The internalized white ignorance is a consequence of the power dynamic between the politician's propaganda and the belief-forming processes within those communities. This is why nonwhite people are also capable of espousing white ignorance. Another way white ignorance plays a role in belief-forming processes is the management of memory (Mills, 2007). If someone has a false memory, they have a false belief. Mills points out that we have a selective memory, and we also have collective amnesia. There are things that we choose to remember and there are things that we choose to forget. An example of managing what we remember is our testimonies. Testimony is another process of belief formation that Mills talks about, unlike testifying for a crime or being a witness on a stand in a courtroom, but in the sense of speech checks. For example, I know final grades are due on X day, and it's the last day for me to turn in any missing assignments for a course because I was told to turn them in by the latest at that date. That is why I believe that my final grades are due X day at the latest. I choose to believe that because that is what I was told, that is the testimony from my professors. We rely substantially on testimony to form our beliefs and to be able to continue believing those beliefs. So, we can imagine how white ignorance is used to dissect and analyze the testimony of others. I mean, we can see this when we have denied the testimony of black people and people of color, such as Latinos, when they say something they experienced. They are not seen as a credible witness because of those features, because they are a woman, a person of color, and they are Latino/a. All of these external reasons we deny their testimony, we are denying them as a person and their status as a knower.

Section 5: Naming, Resisting, and Rewriting Knowledge

White ignorance is not just a misunderstanding. It is a whole system of not knowing that gets reinforced through our schooling, media, politics, and even within our own communities. It shapes what is remembered and what is erased, who is believed and who is dismissed. It distorts how dominant groups perceive the world, but it also reshapes how marginalized people see themselves, especially when we are taught not to trust our own knowledge. As I have explored, internalized white ignorance is one of the most painful and powerful expressions of epistemic injustice. It shows how oppression works not just from the outside in, but from the inside out. Fricker helps us

name what happens when credibility is denied; Mills shows us the racial logics that distort knowledge; and Medina reminds us that resistance requires more than awareness; it takes imagination and constant cultivation. But what gives me hope is that resistance is always possible. Even when white ignorance is silently being operated, it can be unlearned. Patricia Hill Collins, José Medina, and Sandra Harding all agree on this point: marginalized people are not passive victims of epistemic injustice. We are active knowers. And reclaiming that role, as teachers, storytellers, memory-keepers, and critical thinkers, is itself a form of justice. To resist white ignorance, we need more than facts and statistics. We need spaces where people can name their experiences, challenge what they have been taught, and remember what was meant to be forgotten. That is why philosophy matters. That is why education matters. That is why care and community matter. Because the knowledge we carry — the knowledge we have been told, does not count— is exactly what we need to dismantle the systems that tried to silence us in the first place.

When we choose to edit white memory, it means rewriting history through the lens of whiteness and forgetting all the horrible crimes, such as the persecution of Native Americans. White ignorance leads to whites not taking accountability and learning from their mistakes, which leads them to repeat or pass on that edited recollection of events. When you're used to privilege, equality feels like oppression. *"Now apply this to race: consider the epistemic principle of what has come to be called "white normativity", the centering of the Euro and Euro-American reference group as the constitutive norm. With Europe's gradual rise to global domination, the European variant becomes entrenched as an overarching, virtually unassailable framework, a conviction of exceptionalism and superiority that seems vindicated by the facts, and thenceforth, circularly, shaping perception of the facts. So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent disadvantages in negotiating opportunity structures."*

White ignorance is a form of epistemic injustice because the judgment you pass on when meeting a person or interacting with a person who is nonwhite is through the lens of white ignorance. You automatically assume a person's ability as a knower. White ignorance is a cognitive phenomenon, and because it is a cognitive phenomenon, it is not confined to just the white race. White ignorance can be internalised and passed on through generations. This is why nonwhite people are also capable of espousing white ignorance, and it becomes a global phenomenon. To combat this, we must be willing to educate our children and encourage them to be critical thinkers. I do not think that this problem will ever stop existing because, unfortunately, it is deeply ingrained into our society; however, what we can do is take action and inspiration from thinkers and educators such as Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, and Enrique Dussel, just to name a few. Cultivating spaces for questioning, dialogue, and teaching younger generations is essential for addressing and dismantling the epistemic injustices we often fall victim to or unwittingly perpetuate, and sustaining phenomena such as white ignorance.

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Examining the Concept of Weaponized Feminine Sexuality

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Abstract: *The feminine sexual identity is often times regarded as its own entity rather than an expression of an autonomous individual. This paper explores how feminine sexuality is treated within literature by examining Troubadour poetic pieces When I see the Lark Stretch out and The Art Of Love, and the idea of sexual liberation presented in Lysistrata. It is a commentary on how female sexual identity is treated as an intentionally formed weapon and how the women of Lysistrata utilize this to their advantage.*

Troubadour poetry was a poetry genre that ruled Europe from the 11th to 13th centuries. It was particularly popular among the royal court and was known for the romantic themes present in its poetic form, worshiping a subject, whether that be a person or experience, to convey a deep emotional connection (sometimes between two individuals forbidden to be together). Because marriage in the 11th to 13th centuries was usually arranged to maintain status and wealth, affairs were seen as a means of temporary escape. Most often exchanged between noble women and knights, Troubadour poetry is characterized by its flowery vocabulary used to worship something or someone, usually, the person being secretly pursued. These poems would feature code-like language for meet-ups and/or names in the chance of them being discovered by unanticipated eyes. However, an unfortunate recurring feature of these narratives was the concept of the lady in the relationship holding power over the poet via her sexuality, which was an inaccurate account of the power imbalance in these relationships. This idea allowed these male poets to evade accountability over their autonomy, acting as victims to these noble women who had more to lose engaging in these relationships than the poets did. In Lysistrata, a similar idea is presented to the reader. However, it isn't handled in the same way that Troubadour poetry typically demonstrates it. In this piece, the weaponization of one's sexuality could ultimately lead to one's liberation, which for the subjects of troubadour poetry, Noblewomen, wasn't an option. This leaves room for many questions. Is the narrative that a woman's sexuality is dangerous harmful? How seriously can the weaponization of her willingness to intercourse be taken existing in a world where violence from a man is an actual threat? Using the poem Lysistrata and the Troubadour texts "The Art Of Love" and "When I See The Lark Stretch Out" I will be analyzing how the misogynistic narrative that a woman withholding sex is harmful to her male counterpart, is approached in each of these texts.

In troubadour poetry, specifically the texts "The Art of Love" and "When I See the Lark Stretch Out" readers read about the all-consuming "love" that each poet has written for their subject. However, once further examined one notices that what these

poets are discussing isn't necessarily love, but rather a lustful dynamic infused with misogynistic viewpoints. In "The Art of Love" Arnaut Daniel speaks poetically about his lover and her beauty stating, "Each day, I am a better man and a purer,/I serve the Nobelist lady in the world/and I worship her, I tell you this in the open./I belong to her from my foot to the top of my head" (B 324) in this expert the poet claims that he belongs to his lover. He claims that he worships her and that in some form she owns him. When viewed as a whole, this poem in and of itself indicates how little Arnaut truly sees his lover. From his perspective, she is only this physical thing that can satisfy him sexually, but she is never a mind. She is never her thoughts. Taking this into consideration, I think that it is hard to state and truly believe that you belong to someone that you don't even view fully as a human being. "The Art of Love" without meaning to, exposes how little Arnaut actually cares about his lover. By stripping her down to her physicality, he has also stripped her of her personhood. She becomes a purely sexual object, and his claim that she owns him is revealed to be a pathetic excuse for dramatics, suggesting the idea of a lack of accountability when confronted with a woman's sexuality. In "When I See The Lark Stretch Out" Bernart De Ventadorn also talks about the "possession" his lover has over him stating, "I never was the master of myself/ Nor was I my own man ever since the moment/ She let me look into her eyes," (B 334). In this excerpt, Ventadorn claims that his lover, like Daniel's, owns him. Again this reads like a man incapable of taking accountability for his own lust and desire choosing rather to point fingers at the lover in question claiming she is responsible for the way he feels. This idea that a woman's sexuality is a dangerous thing is, though subtly suggested, deeply rooted in both Ventadorn and Daniel's pieces.

In Lysistrata, the women choose to abstain from sex in protest of the war. The play as a whole deals with the idea of female sexuality being a weapon from a completely different perspective than what is usually seen in media. When this narrative is present, usually there is an accusatory tone to it. Women are meant to feel inferior because of something that they can't control that comes naturally to them, and so they are expected to hide themselves and be ashamed. In Lysistrata, these self-liberating women are anything but small and they challenge any pre-existing ideas of how a woman is expected to act. One of the earlier parts in the play that especially conveyed characterization of these women as different from what they're expected to be is the scene in which the men's leader and the women's leader are at one another's throats.

> Men's leader: Phaidrias, are we going to let these women go on jabbering like this? Why hasn't somebody busted a log over their heads?
> Women's leader: let's ground our pitchers then; if anyone attacks us, they won't get in our way.
> Men's leader: by Zeus, if someone had socked them in the mouth a couple of times, like Boupalos, they wouldn't still be talking!
> Women's leader: OK here's my mouth; someone take a sock at it; I'll stand here and take it. But then I'm the bitch who gets to grab you by the balls! (A, 802.)

In this excerpt, readers witness the women, more specifically the leader of the women, and the spirit of resistance that they inhabit. Hellbent on being heard, the

women's leader does not back down to the men's leader. For every comment that he has to make against them to discourage them, make them smaller, less difficult, she has an equally powerful response that conveys that neither she nor the rest of the women are going to obey. In terms of their character, this interaction is important for readers to truly understand how determined this group of women are to end this war. Speaking up against the men, who would usually be known as the leaders of the community, and refusing to submit to their orders to give up is a testament to how committed they are to their goal.

The women of Lysistrata prove themselves to be headstrong and resilient; willing to stand up for what they believe is right even when faced with threats of violence from their male counterparts. Later on during a confrontation between some of the women and some of the men Magistrate orders, one of the policemen to tie up Lysistrata.

> Magistrate: really! You witch! Where's the policeman? Grab her and tie both hands behind her back! Lysistrata: if he touches me with his fingertip, by Artemis, he'll go home, crying, public servant, or not! Magistrate: what, are you scared? You there, help him out; grab her around the waist and tie her up, on the double!
>
> First old woman: If you so much as lay a hand on her, by Pandrosos I'll beat the shit out of you!
>
> Magistrate: beat the shit out of me! Where is another policeman? Tie her up first, the one with the dirty mouth!
>
> Second old woman: if you raise your fingertip to her, by our lady of light, you'll be begging for an eyecup!
>
> Magistrate: What's going on? Where is the policeman? Arrest her. I'll foil one of these sallies of yours!
>
> Third old woman: If you come near her, by eastern Artemis, I'll rip out your hair till it screams!
>
> Magistrate: What a terrible setback! I'm out of policemen…" (A, 804-05).

In this scene, readers watch as the women and the men go back and forth with the magistrate, trying to tie up the woman and force them into a sort of submission, however, his plan backfires. Again, the women of this piece prove their character to be strong by participating in courageous acts, this time by supporting their fellow sisters by protecting them from the policemen who try to tie them up, threatening these men that if they are to lay their hands on any of the women, they will be harmed. This is especially powerful because these women are not afraid to get into a physical altercation with these men, they are so willing to protect one another that they overcome the fear of potentially being harmed and let these men know that they will do their best to hurt them. This ultimately terrifies the men because they are aware of their strength, and to know these women are so set on harming them, they know not only how much anger this group of women must be harboring against them, but also that these women are serious. Knowing as readers that these women are as headstrong as they are it doesn't come very surprisingly that they as a group acknowledge this idea that a woman's sexuality is dangerous and rather than becoming meek and ashamed of their effect on the men, they decide to lean into this as much as they possibly can for their advantage.

Kalonike: Well, what if we did abstain from what you say, which heaven forbid: would peace be likelier to come on account of that?

Lysistrata: Absolutely, by the two goddesses. If we sat around at home, all made up, and walked past them, wearing only our see-through underwear and with our pubes plugged in a neat triangle, and our husbands got to us, but we didn't go near them, and kept away, they'd sue for peace, and pretty quick, you can count on that! (A, 797).

In this excerpt, the women come to the idea of abstaining from sex to stop the war and reinstate peace. They acknowledge their own sexualities and how they affect their husbands, and without shame or embarrassment, agree to decide not to sleep with their husbands until peace is agreed upon.

In conclusion, when thoroughly examined, I found that what troubadour poetry, specifically the pieces "The Art Of Love" and "When I See The Lark Stretch Out" and the play Lysistrata all have in common is the exploration, albeit differing perspectives, of the power of a woman's sexuality. This was seen in a negative light in the troubadour poetry when the male poets claimed that the women they were having affairs with had some sort of power over them, when in reality these women were just expressing themselves sexually, the way that these men can do freely. This narrative was also seen in the play Lysistrata, but not in the same manner, instead taking the form of something that the women used to liberate themselves. They weaponize their own sexuality, their own sexual autonomy, and by withholding and abstaining, they work to meet a common goal, which is to end the war that their husbands and their sons have been fighting. Lysistrata displays misogyny in its male counterparts for the sake of the storyline, and the troubadour poems display misogyny from the poets through the objectification of their lovers and the lack of accountability surrounding their own response to their lovers' sexual autonomy. What's different about these pieces is that the Troubadour poems point fingers and help to feed the narrative that women's sexualities are dangerous, whereas Lysistrata spins this narrative on its head as the women use it to their benefit to ultimately sway their partners into listening to their grievances concerning the war.

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How Much of My Body Still Belongs to Me?: Subjectivity, Language, and Cannibalism in Sayaka Murata's *Earthliving.*

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Abstract: *This paper approaches Earthlings (2018), a provocative novel by Japanese author Sayaka Murata, through a central question: How much of my body still belongs to me? Widely known for her unsettling explorations of alienation and societal norms, Murata's work is significant for how it challenges dominant frameworks of gender, family, and normativity, offering readers a visceral confrontation with the boundaries of identity and language. To explore this, the paper unfolds in three interwoven layers. First, it examines the gendered subjectivity of the protagonist, Natsuki, and the breakdown of narrative language. Second, it traces the novel's cultural logic through recurring motifs: silkworms, metamorphosis, and cannibalism. Finally, it interrogates the ethics of literary interpretation itself: can reading ever avoid symbolic violence? Perhaps the answer lies not in metaphor or resolution, but in returning to the body, where pain begins, and language ends.*

Keywords: Gendered Subjectivity; Metaphor; Cannibalism; Language and Trauma; Transgressive Literature

Introduction

Have you ever found yourself lying in bed after a long day and suddenly, a quiet, unnerving question enters your mind:
How much of my body today actually belongs to me?
You moved through schedules, obligations, and performative joy. Your thoughts followed institutional demands, your tastes bent toward algorithmic trends, your body dressed by others' codes. Even your self-worth, graded, ranked, compared, wasn't yours.
This process of becoming a proper human subject is unmistakably structured. We are trained to perform it, even before we recognize it: to be exhausted, compliant, self-regulating. And perhaps, like Natsuki in Sayaka Murata's Earthlings, you too have whispered, Being human is exhausting. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to be an alien!
Earthlings is a novel of radical bodily honesty. This contemporary Japanese novel reflects the unsettling currents under the modern Japanese society, especially the rigid expectations around gender, family and social belongings. The book follows the story of Natsuki, a girl whose childhood is marked by trauma, alienation, and a refusal to conform to social expectations. From a young age, Natsuki imagines herself as an alien, resisting the oppressive structures of family, school, and later, adult society.
It is written not about pain, but from within it, born from the irreconcilable violence between the body and the symbolic world that claims to make it legible. As The New Yorker notes: "What does it mean to feel at home in the world? ... Murata takes a childlike idea and holds onto it with imaginative fervor, brilliantly exposing the callousness and arbitrariness of convention" (The New Yorker 2025).

Natsuki's alien gaze is not fantasy, but estrangement. Murata writes from the edge of ethics and symbolism, asking us not to interpret the world, but to see it as if for the first time: cold, and quietly monstrous.

The main content of the book is, Natsuki, the heroine of Earthlings, is a detached observer of life, a girl who never quite learns the rules of being human, yet is forced into its rituals: marriage, childbearing, and conformity. From a young age, she is scapegoated by her family, labeled useless and disgusting, while their love is reserved entirely for her perfect older sister. Her only comfort comes from a magical hedgehog-shaped bag named Piyyut, which she believes grants her powers and confirms her true identity: she is not human, but a Popinpobopian, an alien sent to Earth. Her cousin Yuu becomes her emotional anchor. They share a deep bond, convincing themselves that they are both aliens, vowing to survive on Earth no matter what. This vow is not metaphorical; it becomes a survival mechanism, a form of resistance. At school, Natsuki is sexually assaulted by her teacher, Mr. Igasaki, and as a result, she loses her sense of hearing and taste. When she is later caught in an intimate moment with Yuu, her only source of solace, she is further punished. Her trauma marks a rupture in her psychological development. One scene in particular captures this fracture with disturbing clarity: "Unconsciously, I had left my body and looked down from the ceiling at Mr. Igasaki holding my head. Wow, I must have summoned super magic." After the assault, Piyyut urges Natsuki to "kill the witch", a metaphor for reclaiming her agency. She kills her abuser, and Piyyut disappears, leaving her to face a world without magic.

Years later, as an adult, Natsuki enters a sexless, loveless marriage with a man she meets online—someone equally disillusioned with human norms, equally desperate to escape. He too believes they are aliens, and that Earth is a "baby factory" designed to produce obedient workers. Their marriage is a mental alliance, not a romantic union. Together, they travel to Natsuki's hometown, Akishina, where Yuu still lives. The three form a new unit—Popinpobopians determined to reject the Earthlings' world entirely. They lived in the countryside in a primitive way. But eventually Igazaki's parents found out that Natsuki was a murderer and came to her house. Natsuki killed them in self-defense and ate them as human flesh. She regained her lost sense of taste. After that, they gradually consumed all the food they had stockpiled. Isolated from the outside world and unable to replenish their supplies, Natsuki, Yuu and Natsuki's spouse began to eat each other in order to survive. Natsuki regained her lost hearing and felt that her body belonged to her completely. She was free. In this essay, I will examine how the extreme how bodies are rendered as docile under a radical cruel system, and how the extreme act functions not as simply a horror, but a final reclamation of body autonomy.

How do we enter such a text without violating it? Can we read it without smoothing over its rupture, without appropriating its pain into theory? Earthlings resist interpretation: because it deliberately positions itself as an alien text. It presents itself as outsider literature, estranged from conventional narrative expectations. Natsuki's voice creates a paradox: it resonates with readers who may share her feelings of isolation or societal pressure, and yet it simultaneously distances them through acts of extreme, highly personal aesthetic violence of Sayaka. And yet, perhaps we can still begin, not to dissect, but to witness. To feel alongside it.

This essay seeks that entrance. First, I examine Natsuki's gendered subjectivity and how her body becomes a vessel of others' pain. Then, I explore Murata's metaphor of the silkworm, and cannibalism as a radical strategy of reclaiming the body. Finally, I

question whether literature can truly hold pain—or whether every act of reading risks turning trauma into text. Throughout this essay, I work within a theoretical framework grounded in the writings of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Elizabeth McNenny. Their concepts, ranging from disciplinary power and gender performativity to abjection and the ethics of reading, guide my analysis of Earthlings' treatment of the body, trauma, and narrative rupture.

Gendered Subjectivity

By drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and the nature of sex, we can see that Natsuki's subjectivity is deeply gendered (Hurley 1990 107-109). It is shaped not only by familial and institutional control, but by the specific ways in which power operates through and upon her gendered body. For example, Natsuki's subjectivity is not formed through affirmation, but through accumulation and erasure. She becomes a receptacle for others' unprocessed emotional excess, such as narcissism, aggression, and unspoken familial hostility. Her own words, "I guess I'm the trash can of this family", mark her identity not as a subject to be addressed, but as an object to be used. Her pain is not incidental but constitutive: it is the very medium through which her being is socially intelligible.

In contrast, her partner Yuu's identity is formed through lack, not excess. His mother's emotional withdrawal creates a space of absence that he is forced to fill. He becomes her surrogate partner, performing nightly rituals like kissing her goodnight on the cheek. In doing so, Yuu becomes visible, not through recognition, but through replacement. Absence shapes his role in the symbolic order. This contrast is essential: whereas Natsuki is erased by surplus, Yuu is constructed by void. Violence turns absence into visibility, while excess becomes a ground for disappearance.

To understand this dynamic, we must turn to Foucault's notion of pastoral power and disciplinary space he mentioned in Disciple and Punishment. Foucault's discussion of enclosure, partition, and ranking in Discipline and Punish shows how modern institutions render bodies visible and manageable (Sheridan 1995 141-149). These technologies of power operate not through direct violence but through systems of legibility, and this includes gender. Natsuki, as a female subject, is shaped within a paternalistic regime where her position is dictated not only by biological determinism but by discursive inscription.

Foucault critiques the constructed nature of 'sex' itself, arguing in The History of Sexuality that sex is not a prediscursive truth, but a discursive product that appears to be natural only because of the regulatory functions of power (Hurley 1990 127). Sex becomes a principle of coherence between inner essence and outward signs. For Natsuki, this manifests both internally—through her repeated claims of worthlessness—and externally, through familial and social rejection. Her parents' preference for her sister is not simply emotional, but ideological, a reflection of normative femininity shaped by systems of gendered control.

This is precisely where Judith Butler's theory of performativity illuminates the constructed nature of gender: the category of woman is the effect of a political and discursive practice, not a stable referent (Routledge 1990 4-7). Natsuki fails to perform the role of woman as defined by normative society: she cannot reproduce, conform, or seduce. Her sister, in contrast, throws herself obsessively into romance, appearance,

and heteronormative desirability, embodying the performative trap of femininity. Each embodies a different axis of patriarchal inscription: the neurotic overachiever and the social deviant.

Here, the mirror metaphor is very apt: the two sisters represent mirrored consequences of patriarchal inscription. One embodies hyper-conformity and anxiety, the other, estrangement and social abjection. Both are outcomes of a system that reduces womanhood to a negotiation with the symbolic economy: an attempt either to become the phallus or to mourn its absence.

Natsuki's failure, then, is not her own: it is the consequence of a symbolic economy that requires women to serve as vehicles, not as subjects. This is why there is the word 'gendered' in front of subjectivity. In Lacanian terms, her failure, from the perspective of the patriarchy, is a refusal or inability to enter the symbolic order. She does not masquerade as phallus, as Joan Riviere might suggest is necessary to perform womanhood. She does not 'pass' as feminine. Her alien identity—literally, her claim to be an alien—is a rejection of paternalism and its symbolic laws (Burgin Donald and Kaplan 1986 35-44). Yet, ironically, this rejection reinscribes her position within the system as its failed product. She becomes intelligible only as a deviation, a waste product of gendered discipline.

Thus, Natsuki's gendered subjectivity is formed neither by internal essence nor by natural function, but by social logics of excess and symbolic negation. She is not recognized as lacking; she is discarded as too much. Her failure to enter the symbolic as female renders her not merely abject, but invisible.

Language as a Funnel — Neutralized Violence and Murata's Narrative Aesthetics

When Natsuki came across the phrase 'the heavenly pleasure', a translation of tenrun no raku, which refers to the idealized harmony of familial bonds, in a book at the school library, she felt a sense of inexplicable satisfaction. The term resurfaced whenever she observed her parents and sister together. Though absent from the scene, she experienced the moment as a 'heavenly pleasure' This 'pleasure' was not one she personally enjoyed, but one she fantasized about from a place of exclusion. In this fantasy, the pleasure of harmony is secured through her own erasure.

If Natsuki truly experienced pleasure from her own symbolic disappearance, why did she turn to Piyyut and 'learn magic'? The word 'learning' here conceals a far more violent reality. Piyyut becomes a vessel for projection, an external anchor onto which Natsuki displaces her fragile will to survive. Her fantasy of magic becomes a euphemism for enduring structural violence. In this narrative frame, language functions as a funnel: it screens out trauma and repackages violence as benign whimsy. What is repressed does not disappear: it returns, muted and deflected.

This linguistic filtering reflects the Kristevan tension between the symbolic and the semiotic (Waller 1984 21-24). The symbolic refers to the domain of structure, language, and law: often aligned with patriarchy and social order. It governs meaning through syntax, logic, and coherence, and is tied to the formation of the subject within culture. In contrast, the semiotic is linked to the pre-linguistic realm: bodily rhythms, drives, and affective impulses. It disrupts stable meaning, introducing fluidity, ambiguity, and emotional resonance into language. According to Julia Kristeva, both

coexist in a dialectical oscillation, and the subject is always in process, never fully fixed or coherent (Ibid 48-51).

Natsuki's language exemplifies this oscillation. In her childhood narrative, such as rationalizing why a teacher noticing her bra strap isn't predatory but 'just being nice', she remains embedded in the symbolic, generating a jumbled and incoherent interpretation of reality that conceals deeper affective truths. Here, language acts as a screen, allowing trauma to pass unnoticed beneath the surface of symbolic logic.

However, when the semiotic overtakes the symbolic: as in the moment she murders her teacher, her language collapses entirely. There is no narrative order, no syntactic or moral logic. Kristeva warns that fully entering the semiotic risks psychosis: a language of pure drive cannot sustain coherent subjectivity (Ibid 49-50). In Natsuki's case, this breakdown does not liberate her; it intensifies her alienation, signaling not emancipation but a failure of language to hold pain. Thus, linguistic filtering is not merely a literary device. It is the psychic mechanism through which Natsuki survives and disintegrates, oscillating between symbolic coherence and semiotic rupture.

Sayaka Murata's stylistic choices echo Kristeva's notion of 'poetic language' or 'language of the chora': a disruptive, rhythmic mode of writing that unsettles symbolic order (Ibid 26-30). Her writing does not merely describe trauma, it embodies it. The ellipses, narrative pauses, and emotional dissociation all signal the presence of a subject unable to maintain consistency within the symbolic structure. Yet this collapse is not redemptive. As Butler critiques, Kristeva's semiotic revolt, grounded in psychoanalytic essentialism and merely language, ultimately reinforces patriarchal binaries it seeks to undo (Routledge 1990 101-113).

Indeed, Natsuki's claim to be an alien, a being outside human law, is not an assertion of agency, but a sign of dispossession. Her language approaches the pre-signifying phase precisely because her experiences exceed representation within the symbolic order. What looks like fantasy is often only for survival. The body finds utterance in the rupture of language.

The contradiction within Kristeva's theory, as Butler argues, is its inadvertent essentialism. By attributing subversion to 'femininity,' it risks re-inscribing patriarchal binaries. The semiotic becomes the feminine body's 'natural' domain, further entrenching the division it hopes to overcome (Routledge 1990 101-103). Natsuki's linguistic collapse then becomes not a revolt against patriarchy, but a monument to its destructive power: an artifact of what happens when the symbolic order leaves no space for the traumatized female body.

Thus, Sayaka Murata's narrative aesthetic becomes a cruel and hurting poem of disappearance. Her subjectivity is manifested through absence. Her use of language mirrors the impossibility of speaking pain in a society where coherence is law, and incoherence is madness.

Silkworm as Metaphor

Is Natsuki's condition meant to be read as tragic, hopeless, or is there something more ambiguous about her fate? This question leads us to consider the perspective of the author herself. Does Sayaka Murata offer a resolution, or at least a direction, for the trauma, alienation, and symbolic erasure that Natsuki experiences? To explore this, we must turn to the metaphor that Murata threads throughout the novel: the silkworm.

The image of the silkworm operates not merely as a symbolic figure, but as a structural metaphor for Natsuki's mode of survival under a reproductive, disciplinary society. Why is the silkworm such a powerful metaphor for her condition? First, it recurs repeatedly, twenty-three times in total, far more than the moths they become. Second, it is introduced through a moment of intimate memory, grounded in a story told by her Uncle Teruyoshi, who lives in Akishina, that there was a room where they used to keep silkworms. There were numerous bamboo baskets filled with eggs in the past, and then, eggs would hatch into larvae that quickly expanded and dispersed across the second level. In the end, they would spin their cocoons and fill the room.

What follows is Natsuki's private fantasy: not about the worms themselves, but about what they become. Her heart is captivated by the imagined beauty of metamorphosis: In the book, Natsuki said she had seen images of silkworms in books from the school library. The worm will mature into a large, white moth that was far more beautiful than any butterfly she had ever seen, but she had never inquired about the process and the subsequent fate of the silkworms. "How magical it must have been to have all those pure-white wings fluttering around the house! It was like something out of a fairy tale, and I loved this room where the baby silkworms had been laid out in rows."

For a young girl with no understanding of biology, metamorphosis appears like a miracle. It becomes a fantasy of escape, of beauty, of self-realization. Yet, as the novel unfolds, the moth disappears from the narrative, while the silkworm becomes more and more entrenched in Natsuki's language and imagery.

This subtle shift tells us something crucial about how Murata handles the metaphor: she constructs the moth not as a destination, but as a suspended possibility—maybe even a forbidden one. As readers, we are invited to ask: has Natsuki forgotten the moth? Or is its absence a form of narrative mourning for a transformation that cannot, within this symbolic order, be completed?

While the moth vanishes from narrative view, the silkworm remains ever-present. In Chapter 2, Natsuki compared their town as a factory where humans live in tightly packed nests for the breeding pair and production of human babies, and comparing it to the silkworm room in Akishina.

Here, Natsuki likens the silkworm room with the rigid, reproductive social world around her. She directly associates silkworms with human procreation. The line "I live in one of these nests too" signals her internalization of the silkworm's fate, binding her personal subjectivity to the destiny of enforced reproduction.

What remains suspended is how one becomes the moth. Natsuki never asks her uncle how metamorphosis occurs, and therefore no one answers her. This silence becomes symbolic. This unknown is not simply curiosity left unresolved, it becomes one of her greatest unspoken questions. Metamorphosis is deferred, perhaps denied entirely. The silkworm reappears twenty-three times in the novel; the moth only twice. It seems, almost deliberately, as if Natsuki has forgotten it, narratively repressed it.

 This "apparent forgetting" creates narrative tension. It constructs distance between Natsuki's inner world and the reader, leaving us uncertain: does she remember the moth? Or has the silkworm's function, as a symbol of reproductive productivity, been so thoroughly internalized that she has selectively abandoned belief in the possibility of becoming something else? In this world, one can only be a silkworm,

reproducing, growing, dying. Human life is linear, locked into its own predetermined shape.

This, essentially, is how power structures shape the female body for extraction, reproduction, and discipline. Natsuki does not fly, she cocoons and dies. We are never told whether she mourns her younger self's fantasy of freedom. And yet, the image of the moth lingers as a haunting absence, a symbolic horizon that the narrative can no longer speak toward.

Later in life, when Natsuki returns to Akishina with her husband, she recounts the silkworm story. Yuu's response "Funny that you remembered the silkworms"— functions as a narrative ellipsis. We never learn why she remembers. No emotional detail is offered. Her feelings are withheld. Yet, the question remains: has the question of what the silkworm becomes ever truly left her?

The answer is, no. It never does. Her identification with the silkworm persists throughout. From beginning to end, she positions herself within this "scripted fate," seeking an exit that may not exist. And when she and her husband, alongside Yuu, transform into aliens, and kill and consume Mr. Igasaki's parents, something shifts. The body is reclaimed through violence, not metaphorically, but sensorially, ontologically. As she eats, her hearing is restored, and there is a sentence to express how Natsuki has already mentally separated herself from earthliving and decided her stance of living, and it is also a parallel to the silkworm: After the silkworms had swelled up and taken over the entire house, earthliving have to remove the tatami outside of the house, slept in the corner, and listen to the sound of silkworms noisily nibbling on mulberry leaves.

Natsuki saw herself become distinct from the Earthlings. Being Popinpobopian and being Earthling are cast as incompatible states, a war of survival. Defeating the opponent is achieved by occupying the power and spatial discourse in the existing system. The Earthling state is contagious, insidious. As Yuu says, but our alienness is contagious too! So we can make other earthliving be awake like us!

But Natsuki's construction of Popinpobopian identity now is not truly a transcendence, it is a replication of power through spatial occupation and expansion, like silkworms filling the house. She builds subjectivity not through symbolic rupture, but through mimicry of power. Power is still the structuring principle. Thus, in essence, echoing Butler's critique of Kristeva, Natsuki ultimately fails to escape the binary logic she internalized in childhood (Ibid 7-10). Her apparent subversion remains mediated by language — the very system she attempts to resist. Rather than revolting against the symbolic order, she replicates its structure through mimicry and metaphor. Her resistance is not a rupture, but a repetition staged within the system, never beyond it.

Most feminist critiques follow a similar arc: when faced with the all-encompassing symbolic order, one dreams of a utopia outside the symbolic. But as Judith Butler warns, the very notion of "outside" is already structured by discourse:

"There is no 'outside' to power, no subject or desire before power. To imagine so is to already be within its frame" (Ibid 29-32).

Thus, even the dream of becoming an alien is inscribed within the logic of the symbolic law. Butler critiques Monique Wittig's separatist vision for failing to see that "liberation" depends on the same symbolic logic it aims to escape. Power does not only repress—it produces. Subjectivity arises not outside of power, but as an effect of its internal deviations and repetitions (Ibid 124-126).

The act of eating human flesh, then, is not a liberation from Earthling logic. It cannot be read through ethical or social lenses. It is a rite, a cult act of metamorphosis. A becoming not grounded in ethics, but in survival. A transformation too emotionally intense for ontological analysis. Only when Natsuki ceases to define herself in opposition to the Earthling as an alien, a position still bound to the symbolic, can something truly beyond the binary emerge. She escapes the Earthling logic, not to negate it, but to enter an alternate symbolic order, one that is no longer governed by exploitation, by deafness, by taste deprivation, by broken selves. She says: "That day, my body became completely my own." The snow outside reminds her of moth scales when she ate Yuu and her husband at the end of the story. The image is not resolution. It is echo. This behavior cannot be measured by Earthling ethics. It is a ceremony, a radical rite of survival, a moment that shatters the silkworm room forever. The moth does not return as the endpoint of fantasy. It returns as an afterimage of a lost possibility, a symbolic flicker at the edge of reality.

To become a moth is not to exit the symbolic, but a reconfiguration within it, a reinscription to reveal the limit of intelligibility. As Butler reminds us, power is not merely that which subjugates; it is also the condition of possibility for becoming. Natsuki becomes not outside the system, but through its ruptures, its leaks, its unnamable excesses.

Natsuki eats, hears, tastes, and becomes unnamable.

The Crisis of Humanity — Cannibalism as Sovereignty Reclamation

Sayaka Murata's Earthlings does not end in healing, reconciliation, or moral resolution. Instead, it concludes with a shocking, ritualistic act. Sayaka devotes significant narrative space to the depiction of three Popinpobopians eating human flesh. This act is not simply cruel, It is a dismantling of symbolic order and reclamation of sovereignty.

When Natsuki consumes Mr. Igasaki's parents, she regains her sense of taste:

"'I can taste it!'... I felt as though I was eating for the first time in twenty-three years."

Then, the three of them, as Popinpobopians, begin to eat each other. The novel gives explicit descriptions of consuming eyelids, elbows, and thighs:

" Suddenly the sounds of the world began streaming in " and "That day, my body became completely my own."

Cannibalism, here, is not merely an uncanny behavior, it is a revolt against the symbolic category of the human. In modern law and ethics, humans can eat animals, but never each other. This line, however, is not just biological, it is cultural and ideological. By crossing it, Murata reveals that "humanity" itself is a violent and exclusionary construct, It exposes the violent historical construction of this category: who counts as human, who is edible, who is seen as primitive, low, and consumable. Murata rewrites that boundary: humans, too, can be eaten like animals. Therefore, this time, Natsuki does not reclaim subjectivity through language, but through an act of devouring. What she swallows is not only flesh, but also the symbolic order that once silenced her. What she gains is not only taste, but also her expression.

Reading this, I paused multiple times. I felt I could no longer emotionally follow her: she is eating humans, while I am human. For several seconds, I was terrified. This

was not only the shock of violence, it was the dissolution of "us." Natsuki challenges the legitimacy of "the human" as a concept and the power to define what humanity is.

But why must it go to such extremes? Why must she eat people? This sudden horror led me to believe that Sayaka might have sown the seeds of this act earlier in the novel, so that cannibalism must become Natsuki's final resolution, the inevitable endpoint of her complex emotions and her long history of suffering.

So I went back to trace the exact moments when Natsuki lost her sense of taste and hearing. She lost her taste after Mr. Igasaki forced her to perform oral sex. After returning home, she showered and went to bed, and the next morning, it happened:

"The moment I poured the lukewarm juice into my mouth, I felt something wasn't quite right. It didn't taste of anything."

Simultaneously, Natsuki experiences dissociation. Her soul floats above her body, watching herself from the ceiling. Her consciousness departs her body. Her trauma separates her from the physical world.

"I didn't know when I would be able to return to my physical self. All I could do was watch, not thinking about anything."

The mouth, beyond tasting, is also for expressing inner voice. Even though Natsuki does not lose her physical voice, she does lose the ability to express herself. During the rape, Mr. Igasaki says:

"I'll hold a summer school course just for you, Natsuki."

"I am doing you a big favor by teaching you this, Natsuki. You understand that, don't you?"

"You mustn't tell anyone."

"You pleaded with me to give you these special study sessions, didn't you?"

These are suffocating words, because they not only demand submission to power, but also require the submission in a specific emotion: "you pleaded and must be pleaded with me." Natsuki answers all the four sentences "Yes." By confirming them, the abuser molds the girl's body into a vessel of gratitude, desire, and even love. By the time Natsuki speaks, her body has already been colonized by her horrible and disgusting teacher. Her soul is gone. Her words are no longer hers. That is why she later says:

"Seeing Mr. Igasaki holding my skull and using my head as a tool, I vaguely understood. I'd thought I wasn't yet a fully fledged member of the Factory, but actually I was already one of its tools after all."

Being a member of the factory and becoming a tool of a factory means she loses voice of her inner self.

Hearing, too, is lost in violence. When Mr. Igasaki calls her home, her mother forces her to speak to him and thank him. His breath passes through the receiver and sticks to her ear. From that day on, her right ear broke. The ear is the organ that receives the world. But the world is too dangerous for Natsuki to hear, so she stops hearing it. To surrender one's senses is the final compromise of being human. It is the final collapse.

Before losing sense, Natsuki's disappearance occurs in a literal and symbolic way under her violent family. She is not viewed as a productive laborer, a qualified female, or even a legitimate family member. So she must rely on fantasy, violence, and imaginary autonomy to construct a residual sovereignty. She survives by pretending she is an alien and copes by fantasizing her own erasure. But fantasy alone cannot absorb

the weight of violence. As McNenny writes: "Cannibalism is not the barbaric opposite, but one of the fundamental mechanisms of modernity itself... a form of metabolizing difference, rather than erasing it" (Scapp and Sietz 1998 102-115). Natsuki's disappearance is the cannibalistic ritual within the structure of the capital.

If previous violence is manifested by invisibility, this time, violence confronts us oppositely, it manifests through the explicit visibility of trauma, letting readers can't overread it at all.

Losing senses is a clear way to externalize to the reader that Natsuki has been eaten. Her threshold for existence is already low. A person who imagines disappearance to survive has already abandoned pride. Life violates her even further, she can no longer imagine disappearing, because she has actually disappeared: her final shred of sovereignty has been consumed.

Thus, cannibalism becomes the only language she has left to express her complexity of emotions. By consuming Mr. Igasaki's parents, she regains her taste. This is not merely revenge. It is sovereignty reclamation, and more radically, a violent reversal of the very right to define humanity. Natsuki rebels against the authority to determine who counts as human, who has sovereignty, and who gets to exist. She eats. She tastes. She hears. And her body, at last, belongs to no one but herself.

Start from your body. Don't stop: Metaphor, Language, and the Ethics of Knowing

To interpret a writer's work is to enter the maze she constructs—both for herself and for the reader. Despite the reality that fiction must circulate within networks of publication, politics, and economics, I still believe the novel is where the most delicate and unguarded parts of a person live. To read a novel is to know someone.

We speak every day, write endlessly, and generate multiple forms of selfhood. Language is one of the ways in which we exist. We inhabit language as intimately as we inhabit our own bodies—because truth, when it does emerge, comes from the body.

Let us return, then, to the question posed at the very beginning:

How much of your body today actually belonged to you?

For those who believe in literature, even if the body no longer belongs to the self, language still does. But sometimes we read through our own language and still fail to uncover a metaphor that belongs to us. Those who write in order to express the self are people who believe in the capacity of words. And yet, works rooted in real events are always, to some extent, dissonant—because life does not follow the logic of literature. Life lacks symmetry; it does not offer metaphors. Language can lie. Fiction can trick us. Without symmetry, those who turn to literature for solace find themselves unfulfilled. Without metaphor, we do not even know where to begin deceiving ourselves.

Barthes writes in S/Z: "Writing 'The End' posits everything that has been written as having been a tension which 'naturally' requires resolution, a consequence, an end... The crisis is a cultural model" (1974 51-52).

The very idea of ending belongs to a historical model of meaning, a logic that assumes narrative coherence, resolution, and catharsis. The moment we look for the origin of cannibalism in Murata's Earthlings, we participate in that cultural model. We want to believe that because the novel ends with violence, something must have made it necessary. I searched backward to justify the grotesque.

This interpretive impulse, however, stands in direct tension with Roland Barthes' argument in The Death of the Author, which argues against traditional literary criticism's reliance on the intentions and biography of an author to definitively explain the "ultimate meaning" of a text (1974 51-52). Instead, Barthes emphasizes the primacy of each individual reader's interpretation, suggesting that meaning emerges not from the author's authority, but from the reader's engagement with the text, often revealing subtle or overlooked elements that yield new insights. However, in the case of Sayaka Murata's Earthlings, this framework proves inadequate. Murata's personal history, marked by social estrangement, gender nonconformity, and emotional withdrawal, resonates deeply with the protagonist Natsuki. Sayaka Murata admitted that she resembles the children she writes about in the interview by the Guardian—lonely, strange, ultra-sensitive, detached, like a ghost made of paper (Heath 1977 142-148). As reviewers noted, Murata, single, reclusive, raised in a conservative household, is someone whose earliest memories of language were shaped not by assertion, but by survival. Moreover, Murata's own articulation of language as a survival mechanism challenges the idea of writing as playful intertextuality. "I used to find ways to not anger my friends by trying to find the right words...In some way I felt like I didn't have a will until I began writing." Writing, for Murata, was not a tool but a threshold. "It was the only place I could be selfish and express myself." Her fiction is not generated from aesthetic freedom, but as a response to systemic trauma and repression. In her twenties, she experimented with femininity—not out of desire, but to ward off social harassment. She overperformed the "cuteness" she was told to embody, but the result was catastrophic: she self disappeared.

To ignore the authorial trace in Earthlings would be to erase the historical and affective pressures embedded in the text. Rather than constrain interpretation, recognizing Murata's biography and positionality deepens our reading of the novel and the writer. Because everyone cannot observe anything without a particular standpoint, and Murata has a clear standpoint and strong existential longing in her writing. Murata writes from the loss, from the fracture between performance and self, between societal inscription and inner illegibility. She does not use fiction to embellish reality, but to process it, to sort it by meaning, and attempt, futilely, to reconstruct the person who went through it.

And in witnessing her process of sorting and reconstructing pain, we are reminded of how we, too, must turn our feelings into language in order to face them.

Because you want to understand others better, you must solidify your feelings to them, cut them into small pieces and place them into the container of language to be measured.

Because you want to be honest with yourself, you must generate a piece of text, then destroy it. Otherwise, you will become an imitation of your own words.

The obsession with metaphor is the mark of someone who desperately wants to believe in meaning. It is a symptom of those who still believe that literature holds truth, and that truth can redeem us. But perhaps, perhaps, we can only begin to understand life when we stop chasing metaphors.

Every interpretation is a misreading. Every analysis is a soft betrayal.

To stop interpreting is to begin knowing.

And perhaps, that is how we begin to approach another person, how we begin to approach ourselves.

"That day, my body became completely my own."

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The Migrant's Common Tongue: Borderlands and Borderlines of Transnational Feminist

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Abstract: *Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's scholarship related to borders, this paper argues for the necessity of transnational feminist rhetoric under our current socio-economic system. While postcolonial feminist rhetoric has proven its use, it leaves behind a legacy of plot holes that its successor, transnational feminist rhetoric, works to fill. With specific consideration to media studies, I posit that the migrant can utilize feminist filmmaking to break down physical and psychological borders erected by the hegemonic ideologies of the nation-state. First, I outline the borderlines and borderlands that connect the migrant to the world of film. Simultaneously rendered stationary in foreignness and a perpetually movable object, the migrant is caught at the epicenter of national identity. In the next section, I consider how films created by migrants are inherently transnational and feminist, turning the work into a rhetorical migrant that usurps geological and cultural borders. I call this migratory medium the 'border-film'. From dialogue lines to the obfuscation of the production and reception, the border-film is a useful transnational feminist tool that works to chip away at borders under global capitalism. Using Isabel Sandoval's border-film, Lingua Franca (2019), I chart an example of how borders can and ought to be questioned through this visual medium. The question of home can be incredibly daunting to the migrant. In my conclusion, I aim to offer a path forward for migrants – one that makes use of transnational feminist rhetoric and media landscapes to re-envision home across borders.*

I.   Introduction: Borders as Postcolonial Feminist Plot Holes

Cut by colonialism and edited by empire, borders are broadcast into the public consciousness as necessary functions of national order and identity. The hegemonic markings on maps take on a life of their own, transcending the geographical to become socio-political cages that entrap the marginalized in fixed states. As Gloria Anzaldúa states, "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (Anzaldua 1987, 3). In particular, the migrant, defined by western ontologies, is simultaneously rendered stationary and constantly moving. Throughout this paper, "the migrant" will be used to represent those that experience hierarchal racialization, xenophobia, or persecution – as so to distinguish bodies that are subject to dominant control over those who have the access and means to cross borders with ease. To deepen the study of borders, transnational feminism arose out of its predecessor, postcolonial feminism, in the 1990s (Corinne 2017). Brought to prominence by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, transnational feminism is a response to the westernization of oppression. It argues that feminist

thinkers should steer away from "global sisterhood" and instead discuss feminism with three scenes in mind: 1) the differing contexts experienced by women and marginalized genders due to geographical space, rather than homogenizing circumstances; 2) unequal relationships between peoples; 3) the economic, political, and ideological processes that permeate how race and capitalism operate transnationally (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xix). Postcolonial feminism struggles to account for the ways migrants are stasis-locked by dominant cultural stereotypes. Transnational feminism, however, sees the migrant as psychologically and physically unrested within the context of global capitalism. Focusing solidarities across and against boundaries, transnational feminism fills in these plot holes of postcolonial feminism, particularly as it relates global capitalism's effects on migration studies.

Anzaldúa maps out two components of borders: borderlines and borderlands. The lines divide, creating strict edges that exist to separate and contain, whereas the lands refer to "emotional residue of [these] unnatural boundaries" (Anzaldua 1987, 3). Through understanding the relationship between lines and lands, we might begin to envision how the migrant can "disrupt the neat separations between cultures" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2009, 177). One way to accomplish this desire to break down cultural boundaries is by utilizing film as a means of resistance. I argue for the necessity of transnational feminist rhetoric as a theoretical framework that plots the burgeoning work of film as a wrecking ball in the face of border fences; dialogue *lines* and the mobility of films across *lands* allow us to theorize the film industry as a site in which transnational feminist rhetoric is already beginning to critique borders. I will first discuss how the migrant experiences states of psychological and physical unrest, allowing us to think about oppression and expression on a global scale. With its transnational nature, we can then begin to envision the 'border-film' as a rhetorical migrant; that is, a communication artifact that destabilizes the western canon of knowledge production. Spotlighting Isabel Sandoval's 2019 drama, *Lingua Franca*, filmmaking creates opportunities for feminist rhetoricians from the Global South to break free from cultural borders that attempt to capture them in Euro-centric stills. As these border-films begin to enter the public consciousness, film becomes an important rhetorical medium for the migrant to escape from passive actor to agentic director through the weakening of hegemonic borders.

I.   Migration is a Moving Still Frame

The rhetorical study of postcolonial feminism has served us well, especially with its interrogation of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. However, the field runs the risk of freezing into a stasis in which colonialism and patriarchy are seen as the primary systems of oppression that ought to be dissented against. Transnational feminist rhetoric takes these power formations one step further, prioritizing the flexibility of border connections. While the term 'transnational' has been critiqued as unnecessary and vague, it expands critiques of oppression to include the ways in which 'border-thinking' then bring into focus the social, economic, cultural, and political flows that transcend nation-state boundaries (Mann 2012, 356). In this sense, transnational feminist rhetoric is more equipped than its predecessor to explore migration because it extends feminist thought around colonialism and patriarchy with a new filter of transportation and movement. Straddled between multiple homelands, the migrant

experiences the world as perpetual borders to be transgressed. Connections to home become fraught as one's racialization becomes tied up in foreignness (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xv). Even with citizenship within the nation-state, the migrant remains stasis-locked in a Euro-centric conceptualization of what it means to be Other. They are silenced from discussing the delegitimization they experience as marginalized peoples. Sara Ahmed speaks about this locked snapshot with her figure of the melancholic migrant: "To be a melancholic migrant is… to use the languages of race, racialization or racism to make sense of who gets to reside here; who decides who resides here" (Ahmed 2021). A *New York Times* article published on March 7th titled "These Words are Disappearing in the New Trump Administration" shows the level of censorship as official and unofficial agencies are beginning to avoid words ranging from "cultural heritage", "immigrants", and "sense of belonging" (Yourish et al. 2025). Nation-states will only allow for the migrant to superficially break past their arrested state as perpetually foreign if they make attempts to adhere to the prescribed social norms, involving self-censorship. The nation-state is the director that write dominant ideologies into the scripts of migrants, who must then go onto to act in those roles, never fully being given the space to realize their own fragmented identities.

The precarity of migrancy asks one to live within the borderland of individual identities as well as punitive logics and expulsion practices. Regardless of their geolocation, the migrant experiences an intrinsic tension as their identity is stretched across borders. Migrants are considered stationary in their otherness, yet also perpetually moveable. They can be driven out by the tools of the nation-state, whether it be through juridical, legal, or cultural means. To understand this, one only needs to turn to the abuses experienced in Immigration and National Service detention centres and the systemic revoking of student and work visas. This fear of forced mobility never truly leaves the migrant, as they internalize the forced identity of the deportable object. Hegemony is a crucial method of oppression utilized by the nation-state to limit expression by migrants. Nation-states achieve hegemonic power "through a combination of coercion and consent" (Loomba 2015, 29). By consistently reminding immigrants of their permanent precarity in the borderlands, migrants are conditioned into performing a version of themselves that is socially tolerable by dominant ideologies. For many migrants, to be a deportable object and to live in fear of one's own transience forces them to consent to state power. Understanding how the migrant's unrest is rooted in a deep consideration of borders allows us to interpret a feminist rhetoric rooted in transnationalism.

II.   The Transnationality of the Feminist Border-Film

It is through the transnational feminist rhetorical study of migrant unrest that we are then able to more accurately view identity expression under global and local power formations. We must first understand the border to be a site for cultural norms to mix and intersect; they are not as fixed as nation-states would lead us to believe (Anzaldúa and Keating 2009, 177). Then we can come to think about how art might also take on the characteristics of being from the borderlands. As such, the function of film mimics that of the border, also becoming a site where norms are brought together and interrogated. From this comparison comes the birth of the 'border-film' – films created by migrants about issues of nationalism and migration. Before considering how the

border-film allows migrants the ability to reclaim identity, we must first consider how culture is perpetuated, especially under global capitalism. The border-film is deeply complicated by implications of its transnationality (Kaplan and Grewal 2020, 80). The globalization of media technologies escalates its spread, especially when we compare what work is privileged in comparison to others. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, argue that cultural norms are propagated through the coding of "sameness," especially within the context of the monopoly of the film industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). With the constant need to be producing (and "closing") under global capitalism, "everything must be endlessly in motion" (106). Narratives that center dominant ideologies are privileged and mass-produced by media conglomerates. Anything that pushes back against or complicates social norms slows down the speed of production. This leads to projects by marginalized creators being shut down or put on indefinite pauses. Border-films, such as Dev Patel's *Monkey Man* (2024) and Amrou Al-Kadhi's *Layla* (2024), find themselves relying on funding from, and needing to film in, a variety of locations. It is important that throughout the exploration of border-films, we consider the local conditions of the places these films touch. Transnational feminist rhetorical study is not just the collaboration from creators of various places, but also a deep, self-reflexive consideration of the "aesthetic, political, or economic implications" of such collaboration (Higbee and Lim 2010, 10).

If the study of filmic borderlands helps us understand how globalization propagates cultural homogeneity, perhaps the study of borderlines within film will help us understand the critical potential of the border-film. With the advancement of cinematic technologies, rhetoric has expanded to include explorations outside the novel – an expansion or widening of the lens that has been driven further by postcolonial and transnational studies. As Appiah (1991) argues, "to focus exclusively on the novel... is to distort the cultural" (346). Dialogue within feminist film studies are akin to the borderlines drawn by nation-states. This framing then helps us understand how film borderlines go beyond the written word to express migrant realities. A helpful rhetorical frame might be Marshall McLuhan's theory of 'hot' and 'cold' media (McLuhan 2001). The novel can be considered cold in comparison to film, as the prior medium requires the audience to 'complete' their own interpretation of migrant experience – at danger of freezing the migrant into the dominant cultural stasis of the 'forever foreign'. Contrastingly, the spoken sound and visual data accompanied with the 'hot' film melts audience interpretation, unveiling a deeper exploration of migrant reality. By giving literal voice to dialogue lines, the migrant-director can speak a reclamation of rootedness. This is not to say that the novel is not a crucial part of migrant expression, but with its added visual, aural, and oral dimensions, film accomplishes a more, and different, rhetorical work. Films about migration by migrants then become a metaphorical border art that "remembers its roots" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2009) – a feat that can be difficult to those made to experience forced rootlessness by the nation-state. With more control over their own tongue, the border-film achieves its transnational feminist rhetorical function of reaching out to other migrants with similar experiences.

The production of the border-film is not the sole consideration of the borderlands. When thinking about reception of border-films and public consciousness, the international film festival becomes a useful tool for transnational feminist filmmakers. Serving as "an interdisciplinary site [that] can provide a space for critique and

production of new sites of knowledge" (Nagar and Lock Swarr 2010, 12), the international film festival can be seen as a transnational feminist "heterotopia." Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984). Film festivals are sites which facilitate the circulation and flow of mass media and consider the relationship between the local and the global. Whether it be Sundance or TIFF, the international film festival shines the spotlight on the border-film. Transnational feminist rhetorical study calls for a fundamental understanding of multiplicity, which is also consistent with the characteristics of heterotopias. The film festival interrupts the normality of everyday space, rebelling against the "sameness" that Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose in the culture industry. When directors of the Global South such as Shuchi Talati and Nadine Labaki, for example, have the opportunity to share their films in these heterotopias, they are able to engage in *parrhesia* – free, and more importantly, *fearless* speech (Foucault and Pearson 2001). Through this sharing of their localized experiences in the global cinema-sphere, migrant-directors are transformed into *parrhesiastes*, or "one[s] who speak the truth" (Foucault and Pearson 2001, 11).

III.   *Lingua Franca* (2019): The Connection of the Common Tongue

With increased opportunities for the reception of their films, transnational feminists gain more opportunities to become *parrhesiastes* of border realities. As a result, the film industry is beginning to see a greater representation of films created by and for peoples of the Global South. Isabel Sandoval's *Lingua Franca* (2019), which premiered at the Venice International Film Festival, is a perfect example of transnational feminist rhetoric in action. Through border-films like these, there is a newfound ability to destabilize cultural fences that lock the migrant in time and space, connecting across physical borders and breaking down psychological ones. From the title of the film alone, we are asked to consider how expression can hold either oppressive or liberatory power for the migrant. The term *lingua franca* describes languages used to communicate across peoples who do not share a native language – a common tongue (*lingua*). For the migrant, language becomes a constant struggle, a linguistic border in which crossing becomes an ever-pressing necessity. When being understood proves to be a fence, "what recourse is left to [the migrant] but to create their own language?" (Anzaldua 1987, 55). For Isabel Sandoval, this border-film becomes a unique language, one that attempts to reach out to other migrants who speak this common tongue.

Sandoval herself stars as Olivia, an undocumented Filipina trans woman working as a live-in caretaker for the elderly Olga. Anti-immigrant sentiment stirred by the Trump administration makes its way to her neighbourhood of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. This sets her on a mission faced by many migrants, especially women: marry a U.S. citizen and secure a green card so that she can continue supporting her mother in the Philippines. Throughout the movie, she develops an intimate relationship with Olga's recovering alcoholic grandson, Alex. The film opens with a montage of locations within Brighton Beach, overlaid with a phone call between Olivia and her mother speaking Cebuano. This disconnection between what Olivia might consider home is heightened by the disembodied voice of her mother, who never makes a physical appearance. As most migrants experience, Olivia is plagued by this question of home and precarity.

Olga says it best in her opening line: "When can I go home?" (Sandoval 2020, 6:13). For many who are not migrants, the globe is free for movement. They are able to "emphasize porous boundaries, transnational circuitry… not realizing that migrancy and deportation are forcibly regulated" (Butler 2009, viii). Olivia, like many migrants coming to the West for work, is simultaneously considered other and locked in place. Despite having roots both in Brighton Beach and the Philippines, she is deeply trapped by the tension of identity fragmentation. There is a scene in which Olivia walks through the Brighton Beach streets, only to be followed by the sound of radio coverage of Trump's mass deportation promises (Sandoval 2020, 33:31). There are also multiple points where she is witness to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arresting migrants around her. The ending is left ambiguous for audiences; while it is clear that Olivia and Alex's relationship has ended, we do not know whether Olivia has secured citizenship. The looming questions mirror the suffocation of uncertainty felt by migrants. By speaking about this feeling of perpetual entrapment, viewers of Sandoval's film – especially those who are non-migrants – are forced to reckon with the reality of a nationalism tied up in carceral xenophobia. Lines and lands, the two characteristics that make this movie the border-film that it is, are thoroughly explored. While primarily in English and fully filmed in Brighton Beach, the intentional use of Tagalog and Cebuano, as well as the allusion to the Philippines through Olivia's conversations with her mother, shows how Sandoval skillfully utilizes the border-film as a common tongue, drawing attention to the dehumanization of migrants under nationalist cultural norms.

IV.   Conclusion: Transnational Feminist Rhetoric Guides Us on the Path Home

Transnational feminist rhetoric is an area of study that is beginning to slowly resurface in the wake of global capitalism and the digital age. For this field to be successful in its praxis, it must be grounded in materiality and the critical study of borders. To be forced into a state of precarity under lines that attempt to define you and trap you in lands of emotional residue, the migrant and film exist as border mediums that have the potential to amplify one another. The migrant, when given the opportunity to understand their transnationality, begins to envision themselves as a catalyst for the weakening of hegemonic fences or borders. When they utilize film to express and protest their oppression, the medium becomes one of transnational feminist rhetorical power. From dialogue to the production and reception of the film, marginalized directors create border-films that articulate the experience of migrants in new and powerful ways. This is beautifully exhibited by Sandoval's *Lingua Franca*, which utters a common tongue of migrant experiences and therefore provides an opportunity for self-reflexivity amongst viewers regardless of their migrancy status. To answer Olga's question, "When can I go home?": maybe what is required of people without borders is to be guides at the crossroads (Anzaldua 1987) and use transnational feminist rhetoric to help others navigate the borderlines and borderlands.

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The Transgressive Body and Its Existentialist Implications in Transgender Art

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Abstract: *Transgender bodies are often "othered" within society. This breaking of the gender norm causes upset and controversy and is therefore seen as a threat. Going against the gender binary and norm is transgressive and an act that signals a lot of an environment. Therefore, transgender art is a good way to find these signals. In this essay, I aim to explore the transgender transgressive body and its impact.*

Keywords: Transgender; gender norms; transgressive

Historically, the act of transgressing societal norms has led individuals to be excluded or othered in society. When someone is seen as the "other," it can be for many reasons: political, moral, physical, sexual, etc. One very prevalent form of othering is when an individual's body transgresses norms set by society. Transgressive bodies range widely from intersex people to physically disabled individuals to women who grow facial hair. These bodies break our common perception of "male" or "female" and force us to stare into the face of the "other." It makes us question whether gender norms can be transcended and whether we can consider limitless possibilities when thinking about our own body, which often leads to discomfort and uncertainty within ourselves. What I'm interested in is the way these othered bodies are treated within society, specifically the trans transgressive body. I'll be examining the existentialist feelings that arise within society, and often within the trans individuals themselves, because of this bodily transgression of gender norms. I argue that living in a body that transgresses gender norms is disclosive of certain existential states, and so transgender art is particularly disclosive in the way that it reflects the body, identity, and society.

I. Disclosure of Existential States of Being in Trans Bodies and Their Effects on the Self and Others

The trans transgressive body is a prime example when it comes to gender transgression through expression and body modification. Some transgender individuals choose to alter their secondary sex characteristics to fit their gender identity, which in turn forces medical professionals and society in general to face the "limitlessness" of the human body. Drawing from Heidegger, Das Janssen points out this phenomenon of the trans transgressive body "breaking down" instead of "functioning" as its assigned sex (Janssen 128-129). When he talks about a "functioning" body as opposed to a body that is "breaking down," he is acknowledging the way that trans transgressive bodies are automatically questioned because they are not performing their "original" purpose. When a person is assigned a sex at birth, it is out of the norm to question whether that assignment was correct or not. Gender is seen as a given, even though it is an assumption based on the gendered structures of our existence. Heidegger uses the analogy of a hammer to illustrate what happens when something breaks your

expectations of its assigned purpose. Let's say you are hammering a nail and the handle breaks off. Suddenly the object of the hammer becomes unintelligible because it has lost its utility (Heidegger, 70-74). Similarly, when something "goes wrong" with the body, it becomes open to examination and scrutiny.

When trans transgressive bodies fail to conform to gender norms, they become vulnerable to criticism and questioning about their value in society. Gender transition breaks down societal norms and creates fulfillment of mind and body through bodily transgression, so the trans transgressive body is seen as an oddity because of its lack of bounds within the gendered world. Singer would call this notion the "transgender sublime," which describes the aesthetics of the trans transgressive body as being so vast in its possibilities that it causes anxiety within the people who witness them. This fear leads to a crisis of identity. When faced with a person who embodies this "limitlessness" of the body and mind, we start to wonder whether we are simply following the herd in our own lives and are faced with what seems like an endless void of questions about our own identity. This anxiety may come out as hate, violence, curiosity–but the feeling stemming from a deeper place is one of fear. A fear of the unknown, a fear of the limitless, the same fear that emerges when you are staring into the night sky wondering how many stars there are up there. Labeling people as either "male" or "female" gives us some sort of order in our minds about how we view ourselves and others, and seeing a body transgress the set norms of what a man or woman is "supposed" to look like leads people to feelings of discomfort within themselves.

This discomfort and fear of breaking social norms can be tied back to Heidegger's theory of Dasein, which translates literally to "being there." Heidegger examines what it means to exist as a being in a world with other beings but fails to speak on how the body discloses our being. Our bodies can disclose all forms of human experience and inform how others perceive us in the world. After all, Dasein cannot exist without a body. This gap in Heidegger's logic can be remedied by demonstrating how trans art discloses our "being there" through depicting the body as an integral part of existence and identity. Dasein is typically focused on their own wants, needs, and passions, but a huge part of experience is the people surrounding Dasein. This idea of others or society as a whole can be described as "das man," which is translated literally as "the they."

Heidegger explains das man in an interesting way in that it seems he is talking about some omniscient observer who "supplies the answer to the question of *who* everyday Dasein is" and "the *nobody* to whom Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-with-one-another" (Janssen 21). So, in other words, you can think of Das man as the culmination of norms that Dasein is pressured to subscribe to. The fear Dasein has of transgressing the social norms das man normalizes in society leads Dasein to become "fallen," meaning Dasein loses contact with what they truly want and instead goes along with the "normal" way of living put forth by das Man. In Heidegger's own words, "Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into 'the world.' (Heidegger 220).

Heidegger says it is easy for Dasein to become fallen because living by societal norms typically makes your existence easier in the large scheme of things, but to be fallen is to be living inauthentically. This is the way most people live in our society, as it

is difficult to face parts of ourselves that transgress the social norm. We would rather ignore the anxieties surrounding our own existence and comply with the standards that are set out before us.

According to Heidegger, our moods disclose our "being there" and allow us to encounter our desires and dreads, which can be disclosive of our inner world and how we externalize it. Our moods manifest themselves physically, which can inform us on what our authentic self needs to thrive. Once we realize that this anxiety is "disclosive" of our true desires, it allows us to step outside of the confines of the "they," and see our existence from a new perspective. To put this in terms of the trans transgressive individual, an individual who has just come to the realization that they are uncomfortable conforming to das Man's gender norms may experience extreme anxiety. This fear and anxiety can tell the individual that this is something they may want to pursue. If you can tune out the voice that is telling you to be afraid of your own desires, you may start to hear your true self. Some can push through this fear into their own authenticity rather quickly, though for others with different cultural and social experiences, this process can prove more difficult.

Simone de Beauvoir touches on this dichotomy of existence from the perspective of being a woman. Women are conditioned from birth to shrink themselves down to be a shadow of the men around them. While men are perceived as being able to "transcend" their bodies because of their so-called "mental superiority," many see women as being closely tied to their bodies because of their objectifiable status in society. Beauvoir suggests that it is not as simple as Sartre made it seem for women to "transcend" their ego when it is so tied up with the body in society.

Women are socialized in a much different manner than men in that they are taught to be afraid of their bodies because of the power they supposedly hold over men. Their bodies are made to be the main object of their existence as well as the main object of men's desire. This experience bleeds into every facet of womanhood and proves the core existential logic that "existence precedes essence." Beauvoir's main argument is that "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 330). What she means is that experience informs your identity, not biology. Women are not objectified because of their biological predispositions, they are objectified because our societal system was created for men.

Beauvoir's concept of womanhood supplies us with the understanding that trans women experience womanhood though they were not assigned female at birth. Womanhood is an act of creation just as being trans is. Since women don't receive the privilege that comes with being a man, they must deconstruct the ways they were taught to think of themselves. From that deconstruction comes a new facet of authentic being which can free them from their own perceptions of their being but cannot stop the way the "they" perceives them. The same can be said for trans individuals who find freedom in transgression, though that transgression can lead to scrutiny. This creation of the self is less common in men because they are taught to believe that they are inherently superior, especially white men, so they are less likely to question themselves and the society that benefits them. Transgression lends itself to liberation, both internally and externally. This is one reason trans transgressive art is so vital, because it forces people

to ask questions about themselves and society that they may have never asked otherwise.

The art of questioning is common, if not mandatory, in art. This is why it seems trans art can be so revealing for the artist and the viewer. Transition can be seen as somewhat of an art form if we're considering the existentialist way of understanding aesthetics. To many existentialists, art is one of the most authentic acts a person can engage in because it almost forces you to accept things for the way that they are. We are not machines and the "mistakes" that can be seen in any art form is what makes it feel authentic. To the existentialists, this was the beauty in art. It can make us "turn towards things" in our own lives and allows us to feel comfortable in our unique state of being, even if just for a moment (Bakewell,184). This feeling of authenticity that is elicited when creating and viewing art can be used to describe the feelings that arise in a person with a trans transgressive body, and the people who behold them. When someone decides to undergo medical transition, they take up the position of the artist and the muse. We all do this in some way or another through the way we dress, act, and what we choose to occupy ourselves with, but people don't often have to undergo surgery to feel at home in their bodies. To see the vision of your authentic self in your mind and to see your body change to fit that self is an act of creation. Heidegger says that artists "let things be," but they also allow for things to show themselves (Bakewell, 184).

A huge misconception surrounding gender affirming care is that people are running away from their true selves or aren't happy with their bodies for reasons unrelated to gender. Of course, there will always be some cases where this is true, but for most the decision is based on understanding what will make them feel like they are being true to themselves. Many trans individuals, such as myself, choose not to undergo major surgeries and "let things be," while exploring other possibilities of gender expression. What most don't understand is that the biggest leap isn't surgery but coming to terms with your authenticity as a trans person in the first place. Coming out to yourself can be just as difficult, if not more, than coming out to the people around you. The feeling can be compared to an artist having an idea to create a work of art but knowing that many people won't understand it, because maybe they don't understand the abstract nature of it themselves. The beauty in such ideas is that the abstraction of it is what makes it so disclosive of being. Being human is abstract and confusing most of the time, so why would our gender be any different?
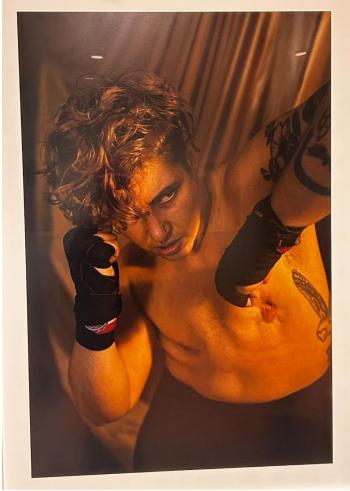
Section II: The Trans Transgressive Artist and the Transgressive Body in Art

This notion of the abstract is a common thread throughout the work of trans artists, as the abstract can encompass the feelings and experiences of a trans individual whereas other forms of artistic expression may not. When talking about the abstract, I am speaking less on the actual style of abstraction, but rather the transversive nature of the image. The artwork done by trans individuals speaks not only to the trans experience, but to the human experience. Though some may not be able to relate directly to the experiences of the artist, the imagery the artist conjures in the viewer's mind is often that of existential thought, which all of us experience. One of the main

existentialist principles is the idea that "existence precedes essence," so we are all burdened by our own existence and what we choose to make of it. Everyone wonders who we are and what it means to be a human being, and trans artists are among the best at providing a visual language for what it means to live in one's truth. Art can transgress social and political barriers that other forms of communication can't, and so trans art allows the viewer to see themselves in the "other." This relation to the artist allows for a new discourse and a common thread of understanding to emerge.

One such trans artist who exemplifies the use of the abstract themes in their work is the photographer Elle Pérez. Pérez's subject matter ranges from "everyday" scenes in their life in the Bronx to nature scenes that relate to the "cycles" of the body (Pérez, Intimacies 2024). Their work focuses solely on queer bodies, and specifically trans bodies. They include many allusions to trans masculinity such as a photo of them holding a vial of testosterone. Cork boards lined the walls of the exhibition strung up with various photos Pérez had taken paired with literary quotes that seemed to be a source of inspiration for their artistic message. One quote was placed near a photo of a person's bleeding leg after the word "dyke" had been etched into them with a blade and it read "Their unique power resides in the multiplicities that they represent and in the artist's rejection of the false, fixed categories that neatly separate things- and people- into this or that" (Pérez, Intimacies, 2024). This rejection of das Man in Pérez's work while showing the trans transgressive body as a thing of beauty was what made this exhibition so special.

The piece that stood out the most in their most recent exhibition, "Intimacies," at Mass MoCA was the photograph titled "Wilding Shadowboxing." The photo depicts an individual with noticeable top surgery scars and warping of the skin on their chest. Their expression is fierce with their brow sitting low over their eyes as they dawn boxing gloves on their hands, taking on a fighting stance. The first thought that came to mind was how reminiscent the boxer's expression was of the famous painting "The Fallen Angel" by Alexandre Cabanel. "The Fallen Angel" depicts the Devil after his descent from Heaven, which holds an interesting meaning when compared to Pérez's photograph. The boxer does not look defeated and bitter, as Cabanel's devil does, but ferociously determined as the photo looks as if it were captured mid-strike. The background of the photograph is a silky beige curtain, which makes the viewer question the context of the image. Is this some sort of performance? Perhaps the photo was taken in a studio setting? This compositional aspect of the photo was particularly intriguing as it seemed to be intentional, though not necessarily staged. The curtain in the background makes the viewer question the subject's body in the context of a performance. It implores the viewer to think about the performance of gender and who that performance is for. It's also interesting to think about boxing itself as a performance as well as a highly involved physical activity.

It seems Pérez is trying to create a parallel between boxing and the strength it takes to step into your own authenticity, though that authenticity is still expressed as a performance in order for others to better understand your inner world. Heidegger expresses that for Dasein to step into its authenticity, then it must "temporarily become unconcerned with others" (Janssen, 32). This logic seems to be true when it comes to realizing your authenticity initially, but Dasein cannot remain unconcerned with others. The "other" is such a big part of feeling understood as a person, so for one to feel that they are being true to themselves they feel that they must exude that authenticity in their lives. This act can be perceived as a performance of sorts, but the performance comes out of necessity. Some philosophers have qualms when the word "performance" is used in the context of gender because it is so difficult to articulate the way gender is performed by individuals without ruffling some feathers. Performing gender is not some imitation game, but instead a reflection of the society and culture we live in. Everyone will perform gender differently as everyone experiences life in a different way and among different cultures. When talking about Pérez's work, it becomes clear that they see transgressive bodies that embody authenticity as focal points of their life and art. They show these bodies to show that there is a sublime quality in gender transgression, and gender as an art form.

It's impossible to talk about Pérez's work without talking about how their identity as a Puerto Rican trans individual informs their art. Cultural and racial identity complicates the issue of gender transgression even further as people of color are often subjected to more violent speech and acts than white trans individuals. Due to people of color already being perceived as transgressive in our Euro-centric society, adding the element of gender transgression creates a situation where it is even more difficult to step into their authenticity due to the threat of danger.

Pérez's exhibit features a video called *Wednesday, Friday* (2022) from a festival held in Puerto Rico that they attended depicting people gleefully jumping into a fountain juxtaposed with videos taken shortly after a hurricane swept through the island. The video taken after the hurricane puts the viewer in near complete darkness with the sounds of a humming generator reverberating softly in the background. It brings up feelings of nostalgia and allows for meditation on our temporary state of being. This video not only symbolizes Pérez's ties to their homeland, but the power of the sea that ties their homeland to the shores of New York where they reside now. The cyclical nature of the video gives the impression that "life goes on," and we must find the beauty in the mundane aspects of life as well as the exciting bits. Pérez uses their art form as a way to document the "mundane" nature of their life, which allows them to present gender transgression as a normal occurrence. Since trans transgressive bodies are rarely represented, it's refreshing to see them in photos which depict them in a mundane light. Not bodies to be ogled at or put into medical journals, but bodies that go about their lives everyday accepting the bad and the good as they come.

Another trans artist who embraces the ambiguity and abstracted nature of the trans transgressive body in her work is Yishay Garbasz. Garbasz's photographic series titled "Gender Project" explores how gender is perceived through viewing bodies that have been obscured through use of lighting and negative space. Her goal was to provide the viewer with a minimal amount of visual information to see how obscured a body can be before their gender becomes illegible. It's fascinating to look at the series because it feels almost voyeuristic, especially as a trans person who knows better than to guess anyone's gender identity. That seems to be the point Garbasz is making, though. We have been conditioned to put people into boxes in order to make sense of them, but when all you can see is a glimpse of an arm or a swath of hair, the question of gender is suddenly stripped from the image. Without context or a clear image of the body to analyze, the mind is free to wander through different possibilities of who the figures are aside from their bodily forms. Dasein is always tied to a body, which happens to be the main obstacle to obtaining freedom and authenticity. Our bodies and the perceptions around them constrict us in the world and stifle us from becoming our most authentic selves. But, they also allow us to do all of the things that make us human. Trans transgressive bodies blur the lines of the gender binary in the same way Garbasz's images do through obscuring and enhancing parts of the body

as one sees fit.

Yes, trans transgressive bodies can "pass," but they can also perplex. Just like the most praised works of art in our history, the trans transgressive body leaves people mystified, and sometimes terribly angry. Good art makes you take ordinary things into question, like pondering the meaning of a single brushstroke. The same curiosity and willingness to question should be utilized when thinking about the structures put forth in our society which deem some bodies to be less than "normal." People are so desperately attached to normality because without it, there would be fear of chaos. It's hard to tell people that there really is no such thing as "normal." One person's normal is another person's abnormal, and that will always be the way of things. This isn't to say that some rules and structures in our society don't serve a good purpose, but in the end, it is something we made up. Some trans transgressive bodies were born transgressive, and others choose for themselves to transgress for the sake of their own livelihood. If people are faced with such palpable discomfort when confronted with a transgressive body, they need to be reminded that their body is theirs, and theirs alone. Everyone can choose what to do with their body (unless stifled by legislation) so people should do with it what they will. There is an art to expression and to transgression, so maybe people just need to get a bit more creative.

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