

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

PHENOMENOLOGY
CLIMATE ACTIVISM
CYBORG
DISABILITY
COVID-19
NECROPOLITICS
PEDAGOGY
INTERSECTIONAL SPACES
PEOPLE OF COLOR
ILLEGAL BODIES
DAIVA WORSHIP
FLESH
MEDIATIONS OF BODY
COGITO
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CORPOREALITY

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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LITS)

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Editor's Note | v–viii

Contributors | ix–x

Forum

Necropolitics and Neocolonialism in International Assistance and Bias against People of Color

Tala Dowlatshahi | 1.1–1.6

Reversing Chronic Disease through Functional Medicine: Acknowledging Privilege and Seeking Justice

Rosalynn A. Vega | 1.7–1.17

(Il)legal Bodies: Activism, Climate Fictions, and Climate Culling

Jonathan Hay | 1.18–1.28

Medical Humanities Pedagogy: Beyond Ethics, Towards Empathy

Samantha Allen Wright | 1.29–1.36

Autoethnographic Reflections on Ageing, Bodies, and Olding as Ontology of Care

Joanna Latimer | 1.37–1.51

Becoming Cyborg: On Deafness, New Materialism, and Pivoting a Research Agenda

Krista Kennedy | 1.52–1.61

Difficult Negotiations: *Daiva* Worship within a Matrilineal Feudal Society

Parinitha Shetty | 1.62–1.70

Mediations of Body in Popular Spaces/Culture

Corporeality and Transcendence: Physicality, Suffering, and Eroticism in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*

Yannis Mitsou | 2.1–2.20

(Re)Animating Black-Native Life in M. Carmen Lane's *Calling Out After Slaughter*

Morgan L. Ridgway | 2.21–2.35

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Abhishek Sharma

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The inexhaustibility of questions around the human body hinges on modernity's perception of it as both private and public, a pre-given flesh and a politically encoded frame. Since Descartes introduced the formalised philosophical divide, giving rise to modernity's dyadic lens of subject and object for interpreting reality, the human self has been cleaved into a thinking being, *Cogito*, that remains disengaged from its material extension, *res extensa*, the body. This has problematised the modern perception of self as it wrestles to counter the body's uncertain standing within post-Cartesian discourse. Rather than being dismissed as an expendable material for the *Cogito*, it is slowly gaining recognition as the essential seat of humanness. Merleau-Ponty calls it the "flesh of the blood"—"*chair du monde*"¹—to indicate its intersubjective nature, through which the human 'self' experiences the world. As a relational entity, the body becomes a contested site of political, economic, and cultural constructions. Bourdieu focuses on the unreflective body through his idea of *habitus*, Judith Butler investigates gender performance of masculinity and femininity, and Foucault points towards "biopower" as a means of systemic control of collective bodies—all of which suggest a body struggling with its status as an *a priori* entity as it slowly becomes self-aware. Underneath all ideological constructs, however, lies a more seminal anxiety that is born out of the body's awareness of its own deterioration which often elides its awareness. The uncertainty arising from the body's anxiety about its continual decay and its struggle to determine whether it is a pre-given flesh or an ideologically inscribed construct presents modernity with a complex problem that has no easy resolution.

The *angst* born out of the awareness of inevitable decay prompts modern societies to hurriedly marginalise, hide, or even forget failing bodies. While philosophy and literature acknowledge finitude as a precondition of life, popular culture perceives the body's mortality as a hindrance. The uncertainty born out of human beings' undated appointment with death is pondered upon in philosophy and celebrated in literature because it lends gravity and urgency to human life choices and relationships. The popular culture, on the other hand, tries to either forget or fight mortality by cultivating a desire for young, healthy, able, heterosexual norms. It floods public spaces with advertisements featuring idealised bodies and integrates these images into ordinary people's daily lives. This repeated exposure to curated images of healthy bodies creates a deceptive illusion of an eternal present, where healthy bodies appear immune to the erosion of time and exist indefinitely. Popular culture's sole strategy to counter the uncertainty born of the frailty of human existence is to instil a false sense of confidence that humans can combat mortality. To achieve its objective, normative culture, on the one hand, sells dreams of a

¹This phrase is taken from Merleau-Ponty's final work *Le Visible Et L'Invisible* which was published posthumously in 1964.

healthy body and, on the other, regulates and systematises the sick body through the enforcement of medical, legal, and religious frameworks. The sick body is constrained by rigid medical doctrines, medico-legal systems, and ethico-religious discourses and is systematically sidelined out of mainstream culture.

The autonomous *Cogito*'s belief in its self-transparency, where it does not need the mediation of bodily sensations to arrive at certainty, makes it view the body as a material substrate to be controlled and used. To overcome its own fear of uncertainty, the rational *Cogito* requires this material substrate to function as a self-sufficient unit. For this designated purpose, educational, health, and religious institutions are developed to discipline bodies and build faith in their ability to fight the eventuality of dying. These institutions create bodily norms and enforce them directly through discipline or indirectly through subtle mechanisms of monitoring and standardisation. In reality, though, the body's compliance with institutional systems' predetermined schedules does not prepare a self-sufficient unit to fight sickness and death, but slowly transforms into a homogenised and conforming entity that can be controlled by institutional authorities. Its aspirations slowly begin to mimic the illusory aspirations of autonomous consciousness, such as the pursuit of permanence through health and a recognition of its autonomy through social performances, which are promoted and legitimised by institutions as shared behaviours. Over time, these aspirations become sedimented in the body, and it unreflectively believes them to be its own habitual desires which are then inherited by other bodies around it. This dynamic mechanism crystallises cultural normativity into rigid social hierarchies, passed on to coming generations by a docile conforming body and used by institutions to penalise nonconformist deviations which are perceived as a challenge to these ever-evolving power structures.

The experience of bodies' breakdown due to chronic illness, injuries, or gradual wearing down with age forces popular culture to relook at its illusions while confronting the frailty of the body. Institutions attempt to reduce the lived experience of pain and fear to an empirical understanding of the body's physical dysfunctions. Their ahistorical and acultural diagnoses conveniently label these bodies as specimens for geriatrics, pathology, or trauma studies. The suffering of a body enduring chronic illness or losing a limb in an accident, however, is not just the subject for diagnosis but a human being in real pain being changed as a result of it. The distress felt by a failing body is real and remains etched in memory as it painfully recalls its ability to engage with its surroundings when it was healthy. The pain of loss is exacerbated by the body's fear of an uncertain future, as it doubts its ability to deal with that uncertainty effectively. The body's struggle with the loss of a healthy past and an uncertain future further obliges it to renegotiate the meanings of its agency and even identity. The fragility, thus, offers new insights into the meanings of contingency and dependence, exposing the limitations of human will, of which healthy bodies remain blissfully unaware.

Such bodies—whether ill, disabled, or aging—along with other marginalised victims of rigid normative hierarchies, such as racialised and queer bodies, foreground a different understanding of corporeality than that of Cartesian discourse. They are

sensitive to distributive epistemology, which views the human self as essentially intersubjective, with a sense that self is not solely based on rational autonomy but is relationally distributed among others and their contingent conditions as well. These bodies are either dependent on others for their existence or aware that their identities are formed by connections with their respective histories and environments. They cannot conceive of an autonomous mind that is anterior to and disengaged from their historical conditions and intersubjective reality. These bodies counter the popular illusory narratives of youthful, healthy, and admired bodies propagated by these institutions. They not only resist institutional attempts to exert control but also question attempts to legitimise their narratives of oppressive discipline to fight an uncertain future. The monitors of discrimination, markers of femininity and masculinity, are used to force these vulnerable bodies to conform to their temporal rhythms, giving them a false sense of continuity where the assumed linearity of time ensures that the future will remain as secure as their present. When their attempts to control fail, they exclude these nonconformist bodies from inhabiting legitimised cultural spaces. For instance, racialised bodies are discriminated against and made to bear the historical scars inflicted by carceral systems targeting them based on appearance; gendered bodies are shunned as they endure a lifetime of cultural scrutiny and commodification due to conforming standardisation; and disabled bodies are marginalised in cultural imaginary to prevent their continual interrogation of idealised healthy bodies with their presence. These nonconformist bodies, nonetheless, continue to elude institutional attempts to discipline them. Even their visceral responses to everyday occurrences—such as crying, laughing, arousal, anger, frustration, and embarrassment—anchor them in a reality that defies the illusion of standardisation. A core assertion of nonconformist epistemologies around the body is that authentic knowledge of the world can be gained only through the flesh. Affect theory recovers this dimension from post-Cartesian neglect to argue that all emotions are essentially bodily events, not mere representations of inner states, but occurrences in the flesh. The bodies are brought to the centre as registers of psychological wounds which are recalled through their muscles and postures, and relived in nervous rhythms to retain what consciousness is struggling to forget.

One tangent of nonconformity also seeks to completely go beyond the messy indignities of physicality by imagining an existence as pure consciousness. To be free of the anxieties born out of sickness, decay, and discrimination has increasingly seduced human imagination to the allure of a virtual world by forgetting its physical vulnerabilities. However, in the aftermath of COVID, governmental institutions and corporations have formed a nexus, seeking control over the virtual domain and replicating their oppressive models. The virtual world has irrevocably altered the understanding of both the physical body and identity. The experience of raw pain of a loss, the effort required in recovery, and the forgetting of pain to mutate into another self, are now reduced to homogenised biometric data that can be monitored through health applications and body devices. Despite the cold precision and permanence of statistical data, though, it fails to grasp the urgency felt by a fragile body while making critical life-and-death choices to navigate its transient existence. Nevertheless, medical institutions tout this

statistical body as a portion of reality whose accuracy and understanding of physical functions far exceed the inherent experiences of the actual flesh. A similar attempt to control the body is also visible in social media, where authoritarian structures masquerade as protectors of citizens' rights, even as they curate content. People, with their various avatars, enjoy a vicarious sense of freedom to showcase their creativity or feel empowered by browsing loads of new information or gathering new ways of reading culture by engaging with make-believe worlds of entertainment. The reality, however, is quite different: all these actions are being monitored and categorised to control these bodies and their minds. Decisions affecting millions are driven by social media algorithms, and lives and thoughts are systemically regulated to sway opinions to gain specific objectives. There is, then, a deep paradoxical relationship between people in the world and their personas in the virtual world, where bodies participate in roleplaying to experience a liberating sense of autonomy. While the virtual world widens the divide between a physical body and its avatars, it also, ironically enough, gives authorities insights into these bodies' deepest desires and frustrated ambitions, enabling them to covertly govern them through surveillance.

The complexity of the virtual landscape is further intensified with the advent of AI, which falsely promises to replicate human rationality without its physical impediment. It reinforces Descartes's idea that thought can exist without material body, against which nonconformist bodies push back, and ends up performing an apotheosis of Cartesian *Cogito*. AI converts the unpredictable unconscious desires of humans into computable processes, offering new ways of engaging with the world. Academicians, who are at the forefront of adopting AI methodologies, are already grappling with the old debate of whether content is distinctly separate from its mode of expression. The rigour of writing to articulate meaning, failing in this attempt, and then trying again is now supplanted by AI that provides a ready substitution of expression. In doing so, though, AI not only polishes ideas but also alters them surreptitiously, even before they are fully developed, thus exerting more control than is ethically acceptable. The anxiety underlying attempts to articulate meaning, born out of the struggle between what we mean and what we say that constitutes human subjectivity, is now replaced by a reliance on technology which has the potential to change the essence of what humans are.

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Necropolitics and Neocolonialism in International Assistance and Bias against People of Color

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My main research focus is ethnographies and the lived experience of people of color, particularly women of color, working in the international assistance sector. As a senior global advisor focusing on decolonization and systemic change, I am driven to explore how to promote theories of change within this sector, which in my view continues to dehumanize the global South and to center the knowledge, “pragmatism,” and resilient capacity of the global North. Specifically, I argue that the colonial and current neocolonial approaches by the West contribute to the ongoing subjugation of bodies in the global South. This paper investigates the implications of necropolitics on people of color in the international humanitarian aid sector, analyzing how racial biases shape relations among workers within this sector while curtailing its ability to serve and empower communities within the global South.

I was born in Iran in the 1970s and emigrated to the United States. Our family thrived in Tehran. We lived in a nice house in a good neighborhood. My father worked in the education sector and my mother was trained in England as a nurse. In the late 1970s, my father moved us to a safe, leafy suburb near San Francisco. The environment was beautiful, and the neighborhood was very wealthy. After we moved, an almost decade-long war broke out between my country and Iraq. During this period, The Shah of Iran was ousted in favor of more conservative anti-western leaders, which meant that my father lost his education sector job, and we could no longer return to Iran. We moved into a small apartment. Homelife for us in America was tense, often due to ongoing financial struggles. My father couldn't find long term work, due to rampant Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia.

The sad events in Iran, with so many young soldiers and innocent families dying due to the war and bombing, compounded by my family's financial challenges, and the xenophobia we faced in America produced emotional turmoil within my family, a sense of disconnection from the country we had left, and alienation within the country we were now supposed to call home. All of this was particularly hard on my father, a soft-spoken, slight man who spoke (and still speaks) with a thick Middle Eastern accent. I recall the white fathers of my friends, red faced from too much drink, leaning into me when I was about seven years old, demanding to know “what my people were doing over there” and

why my father “didn’t work,” clearly implying he was lazy. My family was often taunted at gatherings. On our way out of a Disney movie, a white man in his truck nearly ran over my sister. When my dad raised his voice urging the man to be careful, he got out of his vehicle with his wife, both yelling at us: “terrorist sand n..... get out of *our* country.”¹

My brother, sister, and I started working early in order to support our family. I began at the age of twelve and worked for over a decade in restaurants, bakeries, and cafes, sweeping, cleaning, and picking up after white, wealthy families. Men used to come in and point to me and my sister: “I want the dark brown one to make my cappuccino, she makes good cappuccinos.” They would whisper to their friends in blue suits, “Hey how would you like to roll around with *that* for just fifteen minutes?” Such comments suggested a sense of control over my body, which was effectively leased for the eight hours while I was on shift, sweating and bending, typing at the cashier stand, sweeping and wiping the dishes clean. I remember the rough dry feel of my hands after working all day.

Both my race and class position marked me as other. White friends would often scan my body, reassuring me that I wasn’t foreign but looked more like a “tan American.” They interpreted my body as they saw fit, in order to fit me into their narratives. I wasn’t the “evil terrorist from that bad country”; I was American like them, just tanner. They, on the other hand, had full ownership of their bodies. During the summers that I worked, they vacationed, reclining themselves in their velvety chaise lounge chairs, their faces pink from sun, stretching their legs and arms, long, pale, and sinewy.

I began to think critically about my own experiences only after I went to the University of California at Berkeley and engaged with some of the most prominent feminist women of color scholars. Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* and bell hooks’s *Aint’t I a Woman* became my touchstones. I began to participate in body identity rallies, mixed race heritage meetings, Middle Eastern student networks, and women of color groups, and slowly began to step proudly into my own brown body. What it meant to be from Iran finally resonated with me, spiritually and ancestrally. I raised my fist at these meetings, shouted in support, and was surprised to hear my deep, strong voice rising from my lungs. I felt like my dry exhausted body was being nourished for the first time.

I moved to New York for graduate school and began focusing my thesis on what it means to live in my skin as an Iranian-American, the experience of split identity, and the dehumanization of my body and those of my fellow Iranians. As I entered my professional life, specializing in the humanitarian and international development sector, I felt a connection to the dehumanized people we were trying to help: the “vulnerable” and “poverty stricken,” “resource poor” men and women from the global South, their bodies dusty and dirty, their children begging for water in ripped, stained clothing. It pained me to see that their bodies were the object of the gaze of Western, white donors with neocolonial and greedy intentions; scanning, judging, and telling these black and brown bodies what to do, where to eat, how to grow, how to live.

¹The term "sand" is in reference to the Middle Eastern deserts.

Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe's book *Necropolitics* highlights how former colonizers operated from a deeply disturbing and dehumanizing perspective:

That colonies could be ruled in absolute lawlessness was due to the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the conqueror's eyes, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life* [...]. *Colonial occupation* itself consisted in seizing, delimiting and control over a geographic area—of writing a new set of social and spatial relations on the ground. (77–79; italics in original)

Mbembe uses the term, necropolitics, to refer to a colonially rooted model where western, mostly white, colonial, and neocolonial powers determine the value of black and brown bodies, which are often deemed less valuable than white bodies. He underscores the social and political dynamics perpetuated by colonial and current neocolonial powers as decision-makers in the lives of mostly brown and black bodies. Drawing upon the theories of Frantz Fanon, Mbembe shows how the violence thought to be constitutive of colonial regimes is actually a defining and dangerous feature of modern democracies. Moreover, recent global developments, including the migrant crisis, resurgent nationalism, and new digital technologies that serve to dehumanize populations have brought this violence into the foreground. In recent years, we have seen the real and symbolic neocolonial violence Mbembe describes play out in the current conflict and western media coverage of white Ukrainian bodies as mirrors of our own bodies, compared to dehumanizing representations of Palestinian bodies, with murdered children often treated as potential terrorists rather than as innocent victims.²

In the context of international development, necropolitics can also perpetuate marginalization, exclusion, and inequities by determining how resources are allocated, which issues are prioritized, and who gets to participate in and benefit from development processes. A classic example is how the IMF and the World Bank make their loans conditional upon deflationary austerity measures which prevent local governments, mostly in the global South, from delivering necessary services and supporting the needs of their communities while keeping them trapped in a cycle of debt. Confronting colonial and neocolonial systemic issues, necropolitics provides a framework for crucial discussions on how to break down power structures in order to foster inclusive and transformative participation in the international development and aid sector. We must call attention to the intentionality behind white people's self-perceptions as rational and neutral knowledge incubators, dominating over communities of color.

In "Necropolitics and the bodies that do not matter in pandemic times," the authors offer a useful recent example of how neocolonial systems reinforce the hierarchies Mbembe describes, focusing on the excessive and deliberate exclusion and stigmatization of people of color in health organizations' response to the COVID crisis:

²See Naraharisetty for more information about the representation of Ukrainian and Palestinian bodies in western media.

What we are witnessing is a virus marked by ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, gender related, age related inequalities as well as many others, which expose some more harshly to the contagion and lethality of the disease. The socioeconomic and cultural impact of the pandemic, mortality rates and the valuation of some lives over others, are only a reflection of the historical inequalities that condition us. (Nunez-Parra et al. 194)

Mohit Mookim describes the vaccine apartheid advanced by Bill Gates and the private sector to prevent countries mostly in the global South from accessing and distributing a cost-free, patent-free vaccine. By hoarding intellectual property rights, Gates effectively told the international community that bodies in the global South were not capable, trusted, nor responsible enough to develop their own vaccines. Instead, Gates offered up a textbook neocolonial perspective where the knowledge and rights to the vaccine had to be incubated and held in the west:

Maintaining his steadfast commitment to intellectual property rights, Gates pushed for a plan that would permit companies to hold exclusive rights to lifesaving medicines, no matter how much they benefited from public funding. Given the enormous influence Gates has in the global public health world, his vision ultimately won out in the Covax program—which enshrines monopoly patent rights and relies on the charitable whims of rich countries and pharmaceutical giants to provide vaccines to most of the world. (Mookim)

The colonial and neocolonial policies and priorities of international development organizations lead to a disconnect between the needs of these communities and the development projects intended to assist them, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and marginalization, a lack of representation, poor access to resources, and an intergenerational and intersectional knowledge gap.

Significantly, the unspoken feelings of racial superiority that position local communities as powerless and passive recipients of Western aid also shape the dynamics within humanitarian organizations. This in turn silences the very voices that might serve to challenge the neocolonial mindset and the structures of domination it underwrites. This is something that I and many of my colleagues of color have experienced first-hand. The objectification and marginalization of my body assumed many forms at various international organizations where I worked. A medical doctor at the World Health Organization scanning my body from head to toe commented that I looked like “a Singapore airlines flight attendant.” A chief of staff from Scandinavia would scold me when I left the office to take care of my young child, but allowed his fellow Scandinavian female colleagues, who also had children, to work from home. My body wasn’t allowed the same time with her child as the white women in the office. I was expected to favor white employers over my own child.

After leaving these organizations and with more independence and freedom to write about these issues, I started to explore how other women of color felt and whether they had similar experiences. I surveyed numerous women from different backgrounds who work in the international assistance sector and encountered many stories that resembled my own. These women talked about microaggressions, salary disparities

between local staff and those operating at headquarters, mistreatment by superiors, religious discrimination, and Eurocentric language barriers. Significantly, they also noted that the marginalization of people like them prevented their organizations from getting the input needed to understand the issues confronting the local communities they were aiming to assist. One Palestinian woman who worked for a humanitarian organization in the Middle East reported that she was paid at the local rate, which was roughly one third or one half of an international staff salary, even though she had international experience and an education equivalent to that of her colleagues. Another biracial woman, employed in the international development sector, described a meeting in which a colleague from an African country was having internet issues; a white colleague jokingly remarked that she was calling from “the dark net.” When she raised the issue later, her concerns were dismissed. Workers from the global South who confront such attitudes feel, with good reason, like they are not treated as equals or as full participants in crucial discussions about how to address humanitarian needs.

Conclusion

There is a lot that can be done to combat the toxic dynamic at work within the international assistance sector as it confronts climate change, global health and pandemics, and food insecurity. By increasing representation and ensuring equitable access to resources, international development organizations can work to end systemic barriers and create a more inclusive sector. They can prioritize tackling racism, diversify hiring practices and promotions, and provide more training and leadership opportunities to people of color. People of color employed at these agencies can also positively influence organizational priorities and contribute to strategic decision-making that is inclusive and understanding of the communities where aid is being given.

Although Mbembe offers a bleak picture of how necropolitics shapes relations between former colonizers and those who they formerly colonized, he is not without hope. Indeed, he suggests we must revise our understanding of the human in order to promote reciprocity and recognition across racial and national boundaries (Mbembe 184–189). As communities of color, the global majority, we must be more proactive in advocating for our own communities, in fostering diverse spaces focused on dialogue and understanding, and in building networks for radical empathy and the re-humanization of groups from the global South. Finally, we must recognize our unique capacity as women of color to serve the common good and to be effective advocates for change in all of the arenas where our actions are measured against what we preach.



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Reversing Chronic Disease through Functional Medicine: Acknowledging Privilege and Seeking Justice

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This piece is based on twenty-eight months of digital-auto-ethnographic research. While my research methods included traditional ethnographic research in face-to-face settings and digital ethnography, my personal experience is also embedded in the work. In this piece, you will find “interludes” that provide glimpses into my healing journey. When writing in this autoethnographic register, I provide “thick descriptions”¹ (Geertz 3) of how I experienced illness and recovery. By including my own story, I am acknowledging that the observed and the observer are inextricably intertwined. All ethnography is relational. Ethnographic data results from a trusting relationship between ethnographer and participant. Furthermore, in autoethnography, the researcher turns the ethnographic lens upon themselves. I expand the potential purposes for conducting ethnography to include personal healing and recovery. These “interludes” demonstrate what is at stake for patients of functional medicine; add (auto)ethnographic texture; and preface my arguments about nested ecologies, the social microbiome, privilege, and health and food justice.

Functional medicine is a model that has been shown to produce better outcomes than conventional medicine in a 2019 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Beidelschies et al.). Functional medicine is a personalized and holistic approach to treating chronic disease. It is both an alternative to, and an outgrowth of, conventional medicine. Many functional medicine doctors are conventionally trained. These doctors turned to functional medicine after becoming frustrated with a healthcare system that pharmaceuticalizes health problems instead of seeking to create lasting health. Thus, functional medicine presents a series of paradigm shifts to conventional medicine. One primary paradigm shift is the switch from the body-as-machine model to a “systems biology” approach—which acknowledges that every part of the person, and their environment, are thoroughly interconnected. Functional medicine uses systems

¹“Thick description,” a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a detailed, “fleshy” account of field experiences that provides context and interprets the meaning of human actions and behaviors. It goes beyond describing facts and events through careful and systematic observation, self-reflexive analysis of the researcher’s own assumptions and biases, and empathy with the participants’ perspectives and experiences.

biology to identify root causes and, ultimately, promote healing and recovery. This involves exploring patients' biochemical individuality, and may incorporate tools such as gut microbiome² testing and genomic profiling.³ The following interlude begins to demonstrate how “systems biology” unfolds in a single person's life.

Before I was born, my mother was diagnosed with an “irritable uterus”—beginning in the fourth month of pregnancy. Doctors gave her betamimetics,⁴ including Terbutaline, to develop my lungs as they anticipated I would be born very premature. Two years before my birth, researchers in gastroenterology found “Terbutaline decreased the sigmoid motility index⁵ both in healthy subjects and in patients with the IBS [Irritable Bowel Syndrome]⁶” (Lyrenäs 1). When we both returned home from the hospital, my mom breastfed me until she returned to work several weeks later, at which time her milk dried up and she switched me over to formula, but I “projectile vomited” every time she tried to feed me.

When I was six, I began having terrible cystic acne.⁷ Genetic testing has revealed that I am less efficient than “normal metabolizers” at ridding my body of harmful estrogen metabolites.⁸ As a child, I was exposed to both “natural” estrogens⁹ and environmental xenoestrogens (in rBST-treated dairy products,¹⁰ steroid-injected beef, and BPA-laden food),¹¹ which accumulated in my body. A dermatologist put me on oral and topical antibiotics. I took the oral antibiotics for years, and used the topical antibiotics for nearly two decades—unknowingly causing severe damage to my microbiome.¹²

When I was about eight, I started to have migraine headaches. I took ibuprofen every day, an adult dose (four tablets), sometimes more. Ibuprofen, among other NSAIDs,¹³ has direct antimicrobial properties that can damage the microbial composition of the gut. I had severe constipation, which was exacerbated by poor diet. I remember a two-week period in the seventh grade when I ate nothing but ramen. When I was fourteen, I was diagnosed with IBS. The gastroenterologist who diagnosed me suggested that a low-fat, high-fiber diet would help me with my IBS symptoms. Acting on

²Gut microbiome refers to the ecosystem of microbes that live in your intestines.

³Genomic profiling refers to the laboratory analysis of a person's genes and how they interact with the environment.

⁴Betamimetics are drugs used to treat preterm labor by inhibiting uterine contractions.

⁵The sigmoid motility index is a measurement of the sigmoid colon's motor activity.

⁶Irritable Bowel Syndrome is a digestive condition characterized by abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, gas, diarrhea, constipation, or a combination of both.

⁷Cystic acne is a severe form of acne characterized by red, inflamed, puss-filled lesions deep within the skin that can be tender to the touch.

⁸Estrogen metabolites are substances that are produced when the body breaks down estrogen.

⁹Here, I am using quotes to signal how “natural” and synthetic hormones are used at *unnatural* levels in cattle farming.

¹⁰Recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST) is a synthetic hormone injected into dairy cows to increase milk production.

¹¹Bisphenol A (BPA) is a chemical used in polycarbonate plastic and epoxy resins that is remarkably similar in chemical structure to synthetic estrogen and has been shown to activate estrogen receptors.

¹²Although the “microbiome” is usually used to refer to the gut microbiome, the human microbiome, in fact, includes all microbes living on or in the human body.

¹³Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs used to reduce pain, inflammation, and fever.

this advice, I turned to a high-carb, wheat-heavy diet. From the perspective of functional medicine, this only worsened my future diagnoses of Small Intestine Bacterial Overgrowth (SIBO), celiac disease,¹⁴ and leaky gut.¹⁵

My early childhood signals some of the ways an individual's microbiome can become damaged (i.e., as a side effect of medications, shortened or lack of breastfeeding, health-harming practices that are prevalent in Big Agriculture, environmental toxins, and resulting hormonal shifts). I argue alongside fellow anthropologists and functional medicine interlocutors that the health of humans, environment, and economy are interdependent. Threats to the microbiome are greatest for people of color and those living in poverty. At the same time, activists point to how marginalized communities are less likely to have access to healthy food and neighborhood green spaces (Agyeman 88). I will describe both in turn.

Food justice (i.e., equitable access to nutritious food) goes hand-in-hand with health justice (i.e., equitable access to health) since food is a primary health-sustaining resource. In this vein, Andrea Freeman introduces "food oppression" (Freeman 2221). Dr. Mark Hyman, a functional medicine expert, takes Freeman's argument a step further when he writes, "We talk of food deserts and food swamps, but perhaps a better term is 'food apartheid,' an embedded social and political form of discrimination that recognizes that these areas of food disparity are not a natural phenomenon like deserts" (Hyman 226). Dr. Hyman explains "food apartheid" is increasingly used to describe how, through lack of real food and overabundance of processed foods, food oppression makes people of color sick, fat, and disabled. Both Dr. Hyman and Freeman contribute to food justice critiques regarding the whiteness of community food security and argue for food access in low-income communities of color. In Dr. Hyman's view, "food apartheid" disables and kills more people of color than anything else (236).

Food justice organizations, attempting to do the abandoned work of the neoliberal state, take responsibility for the provisioning of food in low-income and minority communities. In so doing, they inadvertently allow the dismantling of food assistance programs. While farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, organic farms, community gardens, food-justice organizations, and small-scale family farms are on the rise, these creative alternatives do not contest state and corporate power, and may, thus, reproduce neoliberal forms of governance (Guthman, *Neoliberalism and Food Politics* 1177). While these examples of community action are beneficial, they can also reinforce the idea that community groups are responsible for addressing problems that are systemic in nature.

At the same time, these strategies can neglect socioeconomic and racialized inequality. Food scholars have described how farmers' markets and other sustainable agriculture venues are primarily frequented by whites and, through discourse circulated in these spaces, become culturally coded as white (Guthman, "Bringing Good Food to Others" 439; Slocum, "Anti-racist Practice" 342; Slocum, "Whiteness" 525). Seen

¹⁴Celiac disease is a chronic autoimmune disorder in which the body's reaction to gluten damages the small intestine and prevents the body from absorbing nutrients from food.

¹⁵Leaky gut occurs when an impaired intestinal barrier allows toxins to enter the bloodstream, triggering an inflammatory response that can lead to disease.

through an intersectional lens, phrases such as “getting your hands dirty in the soil” signal an agrarian past that is more easily romanticized by privileged whites than impoverished people of color (Guthman, “If Only They Knew” 389). As an intersectional scholar, I point to how socioeconomic privilege is embedded in romanticization of “getting your hands dirty in the soil.” In this vein, Dr. Deanna Minich, a functional medicine practitioner, explains how she is implementing her desire to enrich her gut microbiome with soil. She says, “Sometimes I’ll go out in the garden and I maybe won’t clean something probably as well as I would have, as if I bought something from the store” (*The Human Longevity Project* 1:05:42–48). As someone who has focused on improving microbiome health as part of my health journey, I acknowledge that exposure to chemical-free dirt can have positive health outcomes. At the same time, as a medical anthropologist, I signal how functional medicine practitioners’ microbially-optimized gardens are markers of privilege since growing organic vegetables requires multiple resources: land, education, and time.

Instead, I argue for the role of the state in “mainstreaming” regenerative agriculture. Dr. Hyman comments, “Remarkably, food that is good for you is also good for the environment, our depleted soil, our scarce water resources, and the biodiversity of plants, animals, and pollinators, and it helps reverse climate change” (Hyman 55). In so doing, he argues regenerative farming as integral to both environmental stewardship and human health. Since food policies shape both the natural environment and human health, food policy reform must address human-environment linkages.

Dr. Prescott and Dr. Logan, functional medicine practitioners, have academically defined “grey space” as neighborhoods characterized by clusters of fast-food outlets serving ultra-processed foods, sedentary screen time, lack of access to quality health care, factories, pollution, and billboards cajoling an unhealthy “lifestyle.”¹⁶ In contrast, describing the work of their friend and colleague, Richard Mitchell, Dr. Prescott and Dr. Logan emphasize how neighborhood greenness is a marker of socioeconomic privilege. I disagree with Mitchell et al.’s proposal that access to “green space” is an answer to socioeconomic inequality and health inequality (Mitchell et al. 82). They found that mental well-being is socioeconomically determined, but that the effects of socioeconomic inequality can be ameliorated by up to forty percent if individuals had good access to green areas (83). Mitchell et al. write, “If societies cannot, or will not, narrow socioeconomic inequality, research should explore the so-called equigenic environments—those that can disrupt the usual conversion of socioeconomic inequality to health inequality” (84). Dr. Prescott and Dr. Logan support this assertion, writing, “In an urban environment, a vegetation-rich shared commons with some water and diverse wildlife is a living, breathing, omnipresent disruptor of inequality” (100). While I support the “greening” of poor neighborhoods, I argue that planting trees is *not* a sufficient response to the pressing concern of socioeconomic inequality.

Socioeconomic poverty (and, thus, microbial poverty) can be observed at the neighborhood level. Dr. Prescott and Dr. Logan connect dysbiosis (a microbiome that is out of balance, leading to pathogenesis) to income inequality. They argue that lack of exposure to diverse microbes is, in and of itself, a form of impoverishment (87).

¹⁶See my critiques of “lifestyle” at the end of this piece.

Overlapping microbial and socioeconomic poverty, in turn, undergirds booming rates of noncommunicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, allergies, autism, depression and other mental disorders, autoimmune conditions (e.g., Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, celiac disease), and neurodegenerative diseases. Looking beyond individual health, I argue that social diversity is critical for the health of society. Given that social diversity and microbial diversity are intertwined, interactions between different groups of people quite literally diversifies the gut microbiome of diverse actors. Through equitable access to nutritious food and natural environments, a socially just society promotes equitable access to microbial diversity.

When I reached menarche, my periods were up to eleven months apart. At age fifteen, my OB/GYN recommended I take the birth control pill to “regulate my cycle.” I took the pill for the next fifteen years. However, due to my genetic uniqueness, ingesting synthetic estrogen on a daily basis in the form of birth control pills was definitely hazardous.

In college, I developed cholinergic urticaria and photosensitivity (i.e., an allergy to heat and sun). This was either due to histamine intolerance¹⁷ or mast cell activation syndrome¹⁸—I've never been properly diagnosed—and lasted for the next thirteen years. An allergist recommended three types of antihistamines (targeting H1 and H2 receptors, etc.) taken through five pills a day. Not wanting to take so many medications, I chose instead to avoid sun and heat. Demonstrating how underlying causes can lead to multiple health problems, my total avoidance of the sun for years on end contributed to my subsequent vitamin D deficiency.

By the time I began my PhD studies at UC Berkeley, my frazzled immune system made me vulnerable to common viruses, putting me in bed for a year. I was also diagnosed with Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) 3,¹⁹ despite having been vaccinated with Gardasil,²⁰ receiving normal Pap smear results each year, and testing negative for Human papillomavirus (HPV).²¹ Meanwhile, my immune system was on triple-duty protecting me from diseases like typhus,²² which I was exposed to while conducting ethnographic research for my first book.

My experience is demonstrative of systems biology. Viral hits to my immune system, combined with long-term oral contraceptives, vitamin D deficiency, multiple

¹⁷Histamine intolerance is a condition where the body has difficulty breaking down histamine, a naturally occurring chemical found in certain foods, leading to a buildup of histamine and causing allergy-like symptoms like headache, skin reactions, digestive issues.

¹⁸Mast cell activation syndrome is a condition where mast cells release too many chemicals like histamine, leading to symptoms including hives, swelling, flushing, diarrhea, dizziness, abdominal pain, and even life threatening anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction that can lead to shock, drop in blood pressure, and narrowed airways).

¹⁹CIN-3 is a precancerous condition characterized by severely abnormal cells on the surface of the cervix, also known as high-grade dysplasia.

²⁰Gardasil is a vaccine that trigger's the body's immune system to produce antibodies to fight nine types of HPV.

²¹HPV is a group of viruses spread by skin-to-skin contact that can cause some types of cancer, including cervical cancer.

²²Typhus is a group of bacterial infectious diseases that are spread to humans by fleas, lice, and chiggers. Symptoms include fever, headache, chills, bodyaches, cough, digestive issues, confusion, and rash.

single nucleotide polymorphisms (variations in a single base pair in a DNA sequence; SNPs), and a three-generation family history of cervical cancer and dysplasia left me vulnerable to the spread of abnormal cells on the surface of my cervix.²³ Furthermore, birth control pills likely played a role in my worsening gut symptoms since they have been shown to increase leaky gut, contribute to gut dysbiosis, induce intestinal inflammation, and impair nutrient absorption.²⁴

Functional medicine practitioners point to the effects of the external environment on the body. For example, when my gynecologist recommended the pill, she was following the standard of care. Since 1960, adolescent girls have been placed on birth control pills for “menstrual regulation” (Liao e758). This history is linked back to second wave feminism, the separation of womanhood and motherhood, and the increased presence of women in the workplace (Johnson 63). At the same time, my Vitamin D deficiency was worsened by my lack of exposure to sunlight—exemplifying how the external environment directly effects our bodies. Living in Mexico for several years in a region with more than ten times the safe limit of arsenic in the water (see, Alarcón-Herrera, et al.; Fisher et al. 401; Galetovic Carabantes and de Fernicola 365)²⁵ and a lifetime of eating arsenic-contaminated rice²⁶ placed me at a greater risk for developing cervical cancer, despite not having HPV. Also, my extended research trips to impoverished, rural areas characterized by a lack of infrastructure, overcrowding, fleas, lice, and chiggers put me at risk for contracting typhus.

I offer the concept of “nested ecologies” in order to illuminate how systems biology extends beyond the body to the surrounding environment, thus linking “internal” and “external” ecologies (Vega 9). This ecological thinking, applied to the human body, represents a paradigm shift in medicine. In the existing medical approach, separatism (approaching different organs in the human body as discrete entities) makes it difficult to identify connections among different symptoms and organ systems; it obscures from view connections between the body and its surrounding environment. Dr. Hyman linked this oversight to silos and reductionism in medicine—that is, when different medical specialties, practicing in isolation from other specialties, treat only the symptoms related to their area of expertise, thus failing to take a systems approach to the body and address underlying causes. In essence, the very organization of the healthcare system obfuscates the effects of humans on the environment, and, conversely, of the environment on human health.

However, ecological thinking does not, in and of itself, represent a change in social values or an awareness of privilege and disadvantage. Thus, I offer the concept of “nested ecologies” to describe how systems biology extends to the environment *and*

²³Experiences like mine, unfolding in the absence of HPV, point to new potential therapeutic targets for cervical cancers. See, The Cancer Genome Atlas Research Network. “Integrated genomic and molecular characterization of cervical cancer.” *Nature*, vol. 543, no. 7645, pp. 378–384, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature21386>.

²⁴See, Danner, Bridget. “How Birth Control Affects Your Gut.” *Bridgit Danner Lac. FDNP*, 8 Dec. 2018, www.bridgitdanner.com/womens-wellness-blog/how-birth-control-affects-your-gut.

²⁵According to USGS data on arsenic contamination in U.S. water supplies, the arsenic level in Sacramento, CA where I grew up (5 µg/L) can also contribute to cancer over time.

²⁶<https://www.fda.gov/files/food/published/Arsenic-in-Rice-and-Rice-Products-Risk-Assessment-Report-PDF.pdf>

makes space for issues of inequality. I am offering “nested ecologies” as a heuristic tool for understanding how functional medicine uses systems biology to contextualize bodies within ecological environments. Thus, “nested ecologies” is shorthand for how functional medicine providers view complex environmental factors as forming part of, and playing a determining role in, the health of an individual’s biological system. Through “nested ecologies,” I am furthermore presenting a visual analogy, since, like Matryoshka dolls, the internal ecosystem within the body is shaped by the external ecosystem that surrounds it. This multilayered analogy encapsulates “situated” and “exposed” biologies (Lock 11; Wahlberg 313), and the external ecosystem which encompasses political, economic, social, and physical factors.

I had an initial intake visit with an internal medicine physician in October 2018. She did a round of exploratory labs and by November she had diagnosed me with chronic fatigue, chronic Epstein Barr²⁷ (with titers²⁸ 38 times the “positive” cutoff), an MTHFR SNP (heterozygous for C677T, effecting methylation),²⁹ a burgeoning autoimmune process (based on a positive lab result for antinuclear antibodies),³⁰ and hypothyroidism³¹ (low T3). She began treating me for hypothyroidism with liothyronine. Despite low T3 (overall production of triiodothyronine) in comparison to the average individual, my Free T3 (triiodothyronine that is not bound to a protein so it is available to enter tissues where it’s needed) tends to be normal. Free T3 is the better indicator to use when assessing a patient’s need for triiodothyronine; however, Free T3 is not usually tested by conventional medicine doctors. Since I had sufficient Free T3, taking liothyronine essentially induced hyperthyroidism, giving me heart palpitations, tremors, anxiety, and insomnia.

I became wary of the iatrogenic effects of pharmaceuticals.³² I began to take matters into my own hands regarding my pursuit of health. I ordered a number of direct-to-consumer labs to detect food sensitivities and use that information to guide a gut healing protocol for myself, thus healing my IBS and SIBO. Also, after discovering IgG³³ reactions to BPA and mixed heavy metals, I took binders for several months to help remedy the problem.

This marked a turning point for me as a bioconsumer since I had to exercise my socioeconomic privilege in new (and expensive) ways. I identified a functional medicine doctor I could afford and is very well regarded in the functional medicine community. I also located a functional nutrition team who was willing to work with the doctor I selected. The doctor and nutritionists were located in different states, and were all more

²⁷Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), or herpesvirus 4, is a viral infection that spreads primarily through saliva. An estimated 95% of U.S. adults experience an EBV infection in their lifetime (“Epstein-Barr Virus”).

²⁸A titer is a measurement of the concentration of antibodies present in a patient’s blood.

²⁹Methylation is a biochemical process which involves adding methyl groups to DNA or RNA, thus altering gene expression and protein production.

³⁰Antinuclear antibodies (ANA) attack the nucleus of healthy cells in the body.

³¹Also known as underactive thyroid, hypothyroidism is a condition where the thyroid gland does not produce enough hormones, leading to fatigue, weight gain, trouble tolerating cold, joint and muscle pain, constipation, dry skin, and thinning hair.

³²Iatrogenesis is when prescription medication causes harmful complications or disease.

³³Immunoglobulin G (IgG) is the most common antibody found in blood circulation. IgG for antibodies for particular substances in one’s environment increase when the individual is exposed to that substance.

than two thousand miles away from where I live in Texas. This did not pose a problem, since we were able to communicate as a team via video conferencing, telephone, and email.

Today, I am stronger than I have ever been, and healthier than I was even as a small child. Over the course of this journey, my month-long Medical Symptom/Toxicity score³⁴ has fallen from 103 to seven. Less than ten is considered optimal. Looking back, I am in awe of how extraordinary my recovery has been. My laboratory tests have consistently been negative for autoimmunity. My blood levels for heavy metals are in the normal range. My pap smears have not detected any HPV or cervical dysplasia in the past six years. Beyond merely addressing nutritional deficiencies, I have learned how to optimize methylation through diet. My symptoms of estrogen dominance are melting away. I no longer have migraines or fatigue. While I am no longer taking thyroid medication, my thyroid symptoms have also improved. By ceasing the medication, my irregular heart arrhythmia has stabilized.

I no longer have histamine intolerance, seasonal allergies, disordered activation of my mast cells, nor cholinergic urticaria—allergies to the sun. My test results were also negative for leaky gut and SIBO, and I consider that I no longer have IBS. My periods have steadily dropped from 86 to thirty days apart. My husband and I were blessed with a natural, unassisted pregnancy and a healthy baby girl.

I am well today because of the vast out-of-pocket expenses we paid at every turn of my healing journey. During 2019, the year the majority of my healing occurred, my out-of-pocket health expenses totaled \$22,898. This figure includes a few medications, lots of supplements, occasional doctor's visits, nutrition counseling, and extensive lab testing. This figure excludes research-related costs (like registration for continuing medical education and fees for online courses), indirect, health-related expenses (such as organic food at the supermarket and "clean" cosmetics), and expensive modifications we made to our house (including exchanging old carpet for tile and installing a whole-house water filtration system). The true costs of holistic health are actually much greater than what this enormous figure suggests.

By recognizing that I *purchased* my recovery—an option that is out of reach for most people—I am calling out and critiquing my own privilege. The privileged elite can afford to live unaware of how the majority struggle economically, and how certain resources and types of care are inaccessible to many (Rogerson 167). I argue that for inequity to be remedied, inequity must first be acknowledged. Thus, I am intentionally attentive to how intersecting race- and class-based inequalities structure who is able to recover from chronic disease and how these inequalities are, at times, inadvertently reinscribed by well-intentioned functional medicine practitioners seeking to reverse chronic disease.

When some functional medicine practitioners and health educators speak about "lifestyle" as a "choice," they seem unaware of how their assertions are situated within their own middle- and upper-class lives (Haraway 583). The type of food that people eat

³⁴The Medical Symptom/Toxicity score, based on patients' responses to a questionnaire, helps to measure a person's current status on a spectrum of health and disease.

is shaped by where they live, what they have access to, what foods cost, and what they can afford. Furthermore, people have different degrees of education in nutrition—which is related to economic capital and is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 114). Who we hang out with—our social network—is also a form of capital.

I suggest that functional medicine practitioners and health educators recognize how their own perspectives and choices are framed by their relative socioeconomic power. This type of hyper-self-reflexivity (Kapoor 637) would help reorient functional medicine’s current conversation regarding positive “perspective” and correct “choices” toward issues of social justice. At the same time, I offer “nested ecologies” as an invitation for more functional medicine practitioners to refocus on how social, political, and economic factors figure into systems biology.



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(Il)legal Bodies: Activism, Climate Fictions, Climate Culling¹

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When the non-violent environmental protest group Extinction Rebellion (XR) was created in late 2018, I was completing a Masters in Research in Science Fiction² Literature. Although initially nervous, I understood the urgent need to non-violently protest the lack of governmental action on the climate and ecological crisis (as it has since become known).³ In November 2018, I took a copy of Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* with me to London, where I was joined by thousands of fellow activists on the streets around the Houses of Parliament and Downing Street, many dressed as animals, with banners and flags protesting the sixth mass extinction⁴ and ongoing anthropogenic climate-related genocides across the globe.

Within ten minutes of reaching the centre of the city, I witnessed the arrest of one activist “locking on” to a section of scaffolding which he’d wheeled into a junction already overflowing with exuberant protestors. Winterson’s climate fiction had instilled in me a sense of the cyclicity of human hubris on the scale of planetary extinction—although it was deeply inspiring to witness this popular uprising of ordinary people who understood the endangerment of all varieties of life in the Anthropocene, it rapidly became apparent that concerted revolution against extinction was to be subject to biopolitical disciplining.

For Foucault, populations in aggregate always entail illegality, due to the varying positionalities, actions, and interactions of their constituent subjects (100). As this indicates, political hegemony is deceptively fragile, resting upon a façade of mass compliance. Subsequently, for the ruling order, biopolitics or “[d]isciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in

¹Acknowledgement: I am deeply grateful to two fellow activists for providing feedback on this article in draft form, and also to its anonymous peer reviewer.

²Hereafter, SF.

³The declaration of a climate crisis by the UK Parliament in 2019 remains one of the most significant wins of XR to date. See, Taylor, Matthew. “The Extinction Rebellion Scorecard: What Did It Achieve?” *The Guardian*, 25 Apr. 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/25/extinction-rebellion-assessing-the-impact.

⁴For a detailed and lucid account, see, Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. Henry Holt & Company, 2014.

trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model” (Foucault 85). In this manner, the mass regulation of bodies is the great legislator of democracy, and yet can never close the circle of its own finitude. As this implies, “if they tell you you can’t, then you can” (Chumbawamba).

I wrote this article whilst wondering what use literature can be in the light of escalating state repression. From a UK context, this piece charts the complex intersectional pathways that have contributed to the escalating illegality of bodies—those of myself and thousands of other climate activists. I utilise autoethnography to narrate my experience of the shifts in the legal landscape over the last six years, and in doing so, situate my partial and subjective perspectives alongside those who participate throughout a complex matrix of civil and planetary rights movements. My intention is to demonstrate and document the extent to which, over this short period, legal apparatuses have increasingly criminalised environmental protest.

Later that same day in 2018, whilst a small group utilised their bodies to block a side-street to Parliament, a Member of Parliament remonstrated with me to allow his car through the human barricade. He would, he promised, vote for green bills from that point forwards, providing activists allowed his car access to the parking spaces at the Houses of Parliament that day. His voting record did not suggest that there was much likelihood of this change of heart, and he left frustrated, walking the last three minutes on foot, through crowds conducting miniature citizens’ assemblies, organising marches, and hosting listening circles. Over the following year, despite membership of XR continuing to grow at a rapid pace, protests were regularly curtailed by the Metropolitan Police’s (MET) imposition of Section 14 of the Public Order Act,⁵ forcing early ends to hundreds of peaceful protests by way of blanket arrests. By the end of 2019, the MET’s effective ban on climate protest was deemed to have been illegal (Gayle and Dodd); this important decision deemed protestors’ bodies legal retrospectively, and spared many from fighting potential criminal convictions, but could not turn back the clock.

In the intervening months, the UK government’s failure to enshrine ecologically-sound principles and protections in line with its declaration of a climate crisis had continued unabated. Meanwhile, Jonathan Fuller and others registered a legal complaint against members of the UK government for pursuing policies causative of climate genocide in line with Article 30.2(b) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC 20). Although this dossier outlined “the 400,000 people killed a year by climate breakdown, the commencement of the annihilation of several low-lying island states and the range of other harms” that continue to be caused by members of the political elite, and although the MET police force has confirmed that these actions are indeed criminal, there remains no investigation against political or corporate actors (Extinction Rebellion).

Ironically, whereas disciplinary measures had failed to prevent XR’s growing political influence, the zoonotic COVID-19 pandemic almost entirely halted its momentum. Against a backdrop of millions of deaths, the onset of severe chronic illness for many more, and multiple lockdowns, it was no longer feasible to organise direct

⁵See, Gov.uk. “Public Order Act 1986.” *Legislation.gov.uk*, 1986, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64/section/14.

protests. By the time lockdown eased, attendance for the group's protests was significantly diminished, with the highly controversial new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 also severely restricting the right of UK citizens to protest.⁶ In the parliamentary debates which culminated in this bill's approval, Members of Parliament frequently cited the disruptive nature of actions by XR as a precedent for the need to restrict the right to protest. Although disruption is annoying to those it affects, it is key to effective civil rights advocacy (Mead), as in the case of the suffragettes, and of the freedom riders.

By this point, I was teaching SF to university students; a praxis almost irreconcilable with the dire and widespread scientific evidence of continuing anthropogenic climate impacts. Whereas Climate Fiction (CliFi) texts such as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*⁷ provided a valuable critical means of future apperception for students who will have to live through the impacts of the climate crisis, space-faring Golden Age texts such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels⁸ suddenly appeared far less relevant. I was now teaching climate fictions, whilst living through climate fact. In our Anthropocene context, all extrapolation which imagines far-flung human life centuries into our future (or which inscribes any 'destiny' to technocultural development) is fiercely circumscribed by our societies remaining neither sustainable nor regenerative.

In the climate movement, however, bodies themselves had become tools of resistance. By late 2021, new environmental protest groups such as Insulate Britain, Just Stop Oil, and Animal Rising⁹ were gaining traction, finding creative ways to circumvent the UK's new anti-protest laws whilst largely abandoning the exuberant overtones of XR. Following protests outside/within the grounds of oil terminals in April 2022, injunctions were brought about by the fossil fuel industry and ratified in the UK courts (TFL). These injunctions make it a specific offence to protest in the vicinity of fossil fuel infrastructure, and impose a strict fine upon individuals doing so, with a low threshold of evidence needed for convictions. Such injunctions have since been extended for the foreseeable future (Laville; Kelly 6). This variety of corporate injunction—against both named and unnamed protestors—was unprecedented in UK law, and artificially reduced the range of viable targets for effective climate protest (Cutcher).

At this time, the landmark supreme court judgement "Director of Public Prosecutions v Ziegler and others"¹⁰ had recently been decided, giving a legal precedent for any disruptive peaceful protest with the objective of mitigating harm caused to human life in aggregate (Library of Congress). By late 2022, protest activity by groups including Just Stop Oil was intensifying in relation to the UK government's planned approval of more than one hundred new fossil fuel licenses (Lawson). These approvals flew in the

⁶See, Gov.uk. "Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022." *Legislation.gov.uk*, 2022, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/32/contents.

⁷*The Windup Girl* is set in an all-but-underwater Bangkok ruled by mob bosses, following societal collapse.

⁸The *Foundation Universe* series is set across millennia and every facet of our galaxy.

⁹Insulate Britain demanded that the government insulate all homes, in order to improve energy efficiency. Just Stop Oil demanded an end to all new fossil fuel licenses in the UK, and now demands the UK government phases out fossil fuels by 2030. Animal Rising demands an end to animal suffering and anthropocentric agricultural practices.

¹⁰See, UKSC. *Director of Public Prosecutions (Respondent) v Ziegler and Others (Appellants)*. 16 July 2024, <https://supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2019-0106>.

face of an extensive array of scientific evidence that any government's continued investment in fossil fuels stands to cripple the future of life and biodiversity on the planet. I took part in a protest in November 2022 with a few dozen others, using our bodies to block automotive access to Parliament Square between Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament. This action caused an average delay of under five minutes to motorists (Diffenthal), and was cheered on by pedestrians in the vicinity.

That same month, hundreds of other activists utilised their bodily agency as a means of protest, and many were eventually found guilty of a range of crimes, including "causing a public nuisance" and "wilful obstruction of the highway with a non-motor vehicle" (Rufo). Unlike myself, many people received custodial sentences for their activism, and the mental, financial, and social tolls of such sentences cannot be understated. In the following months, sit-down protests were criminalised on all roads in the UK, and later, in response to a change of protest strategy across 2023, marching on roads as a means of protest was likewise criminalised (Shackle; BBC). When cases reach court, defences pertaining to the climate crisis are often specifically ruled out (Siddique), ensuring that protestors are unable to defend themselves, and effectively silencing their moral justification for protesting climate breakdown (Berglund et al. 24). This increasingly common act of verbal violence allows the physical violences of extractivism to go unchallenged. Over this short period of six years, protestors' rights to protest anywhere in public have been vastly eroded by an unfolding range of targeted changes to UK law.

In the Anthropocene, inequalities between living bodies are intensifying. Humans living in the global south alongside a vast array of non-human life around the world stand to be disproportionately affected by the impacts of continued fossil fuel investment by governments and corporations; no government should be systematically silencing those who highlight such ecological atrocities, or the ecological principles they represent. As UK citizens, myself and many others feel that it is especially crucial to use our bodies to pressure governments towards enacting sustainable and regenerative societal paradigms, particularly since police forces in many other countries have traditionally taken a considerably more regressive, violent, and often murderous approach to protest (Berglund et al. 6). In tandem with the mass casualties predicted by climate science, the twenty-first century will be a century where the body is more subject to abjection than ever.

In 2023, there were more than 47,000 estimated human deaths caused by climate change as a result of temperature extremes across Europe alone (Gallo et al. 3101). At the same time, in low- and middle-income countries, climate change has already increased heat-related neonatal mortality rates by up to 50% (Dimitrova et al. 5). Although subject to a high degree of uncertainty, future mortality estimates are immense (Carleton 2099). Meanwhile, state discipline in the UK is taking the form of increasingly authoritarian anti-protest legislation. In May 2023, our civil liberties were distilled further by the advent of the Public Order Act 2023,¹¹ which criminalises environmental protest even further, whilst granting police forces powers to stop and search anyone deemed by

¹¹See, Gov.uk. "Public Order Act 2023." *Legislation.gov.uk*, 2023, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15.

the state to have dissident opinions, without the need for evidence of illegal activity (Badshah). This power has since been exercised to arrest known activists in their homes and seize their property, at times when they were not actively protesting (JSO).¹²

These moves to criminalise protest (and discussions of it) have drawn criticism. As UN Special Rapporteur Michael Forst stated in a January 2024 report:

These developments are a matter of concern for any member of the public in the UK who may wish to take action for the climate or environmental protection. The right to peaceful protest is a basic human right. It is also an essential part of a healthy democracy. Protests, which aim to express dissent and to draw attention to a particular issue, are by their nature disruptive. The fact that they cause disruption or involve civil disobedience do not mean they are not peaceful. As the UN Human Rights Committee has made clear, States have a duty to facilitate the right to protest, and private entities and broader society may be expected to accept some level of disruption as a result of the exercise of this right. (Forst 1)

The UK government has, to this date, failed to respond to Forst's letter of allegation that its anti-protest laws are in breach of the Aarhus Convention.¹³ Soon after, the UK's court of appeal ruled that "beliefs and motivation" pertaining to the climate crisis cannot be relied upon as a legal defence in activism-related court cases (Tobin). In the months since, dozens more activists have been handed hefty custodial sentences for participating in climate protests, including sentence lengths previously unprecedented for peaceful protest.

In a July 2024 trial, five Just Stop Oil activists were jailed for between four and five years for attending a Zoom call relating to planned protests on London's M25 motorway. Following their sentencing, more than 1200 celebrities, artists, and academics signed an open letter to the UK's Attorney General which condemned the injustice of the sentences (Bell). The letter's plea was denied. Less than two months later, six further activists were found guilty of having climbed a gantry over the M25, and five were sentenced to custodial imprisonment, with terms of between one and two years. The average delay caused to motorists by this protest was four-and-a-half minutes (Sharkey). These sentences once again received international condemnation (Clarke). As I write, two more protestors have just been jailed for two years, for throwing soup over the glass and frame of a Van Gogh painting (Lawson-Tancred), in an act which symbolically recruited, and thereby transformed, the signification of the famous artwork (Abrams and Gardner). In spite of their rallying cry—"what is worth more, art or life?"—the painting itself was undamaged.

These environmental activists, to put it bluntly, are not being jailed for protesting, but instead in relation to the cause they are protesting about, whilst the real climate criminals continue headlong in facilitating extractivism. One of the earliest works of

¹²For video footage of some such raids, see, Howie, Michael. "Just Stop Oil: Police swoop on 27 activists suspected of summer airport chaos plot in wave of raids." *The Standard*, 28 June 2024, www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/just-stop-oil-arrests-airport-disruption-summer-metropolitan-police-b1167458.html.

¹³The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe established the Aarhus Convention in 1998 to establish common rights to safe living environments.

climate fiction (or CliFi) is Ian Weekley's 1974 novel *The Moving Snow*. It opens chillingly, describing the onset of an unprecedentedly massive snowfall as a result of climate change:

It was transport that broke down first, as I've said, and as one would expect. People gradually got used to that and hardened to the steady flow of stories that, in themselves, were a condemnation of any advanced technological society. The registered death toll rose, imperceptibly, as news came in from outlying areas of bodies discovered in the snow and people trapped in their cars, frozen or poisoned by their own exhaust gases. The list of missing gradually became a list of the dead, and the list of missing was a long one. [...]

No transport meant food shortages, malnutrition, and some starvation. Things weren't too bad in the south, and there was many a community elsewhere that thanked God for its coastal location where foreign aid supplies could be landed. (Weekley 11)

Fifty years later, up-to-date climate projections suggest that food shortages will indeed be one of the earliest climate impacts on wealthy nations, as a result of crop failures (Kim and Mendelsohn).¹⁴ Devastatingly, the increasingly likely breakdown of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) could lead Britain to a climate which precisely mirrors the opening vista of *The Moving Snow* in the next few decades (Cooke). Fifty years on, many emerging aspects of the climate crisis seem like climate fiction themselves.

In an analogously prescient vein, Gregory Benford and Hilary Foister's 1980 novel *Timescape* speculates on the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest for monocultural farmland: "The snag is that the Brazilians cut back so much of their jungle for the sugar cane fields. That lowers the number of plants which can absorb carbon dioxide from the air. Trace that effect round a bit and it explains the shifts in the world climate, greenhouse effect and rainfall and so on" (Benford and Foister 103). The prognostic quality of such CliFi texts speaks foremost to predictable mistakes, emphasising the scientific lessons which our species has failed to heed in the decades since (Levy et al.). I passionately believe that the best CliFi for Anthropocene times also functions rhetorically. As is implied by the increasingly ruined base diegesis of *Timescape*, salvation in the novel's narrative can be attained only by looking to—and generating dialogue with—the past, neatly refuting the capitalist truism of perpetual progress.

It is not in any sense fiction that many of the world's billionaires have, over the last five years, invested heavily in personal bunkers which will allow them to retreat from the very climate emergency that they have sponsored (Plested; O'Connell; South and South; Lam, et al.; Cousin and Schultz; Ritchard). Likewise, the publications of leading transhumanists evidence very similar intentions and trajectories; namely, in the direction of survival of the wealthiest through the climate crisis (Thomas 173). Societies have always had their doomsday preppers, but this particular separatist approach is now

¹⁴Geographical impacts in the UK are also likely to be exacerbated by its north/south divide.

becoming a *de facto* necropolitical imperative. Climate culling¹⁵ is not science fiction, but a deathly reality, and seemingly provides a rationale for climate inaction. All those who are not ultra-rich become abject bodies, to be either left outside the bunker in our future, or locked away in our present—for daring to violate the narrow ideals of the same neoliberal orthodoxy that is leading us all closer towards societal collapse. The same ultra-rich individuals—who comprise a miniscule fraction of the world’s population—are overwhelmingly responsible for ongoing global carbon emissions and their related climate impacts. Season 4 of the SF series *The 100* satirises climate culling and bunkerization very capably, with the added irony of the show being an Amazon Prime series.

Geoengineering, the most plausible future pathway from our own reality, is an equally terrifying prospect (Wallace-Wells)—SFnal depictions are necessary to illustrate the chaos this last-ditch approach will cause as a result of meddling with hugely complex atmospheric systems. As I have outlined above, whilst there is a deep imperative for the 99% to engage in activism, acting becomes significantly more difficult in the face of repressive new laws which contravene human rights conventions, legitimised only by ever-lengthening prison sentences. I only hope that this stifling of protest in itself can become a great imperative to mobilisation. One line from the SFnal television series *Years and Years* always sticks in my head, speaking back to our present from a ruined UK of 2034: “We blame these vast, sweeping tides of history, like they’re out of our control, like we’re so helpless, and little and small. But it’s still our fault. [...] This is the world we built” (Mulcahy). Particularly where activists have been silenced, CliFi contributes towards making the climate and ecological crisis visible once more. Writing now, I recognise that I personally find most pedagogic value in CliFi narratives which refute the overwhelming tendency of literature towards eucatastrophe. The teleological ideology that our species’ salvation is somehow assured no longer rings true to my ears—I believe that a move towards a CliFi syllabus from an SFnal one may prove valuable to teaching any future generations about where we went so wrong, in our interrupted drive towards the stars.

At the time of press, nineteen people are serving prison sentences for their affiliation with Just Stop Oil in the UK.¹⁶ At least a dozen more are non-custodial prisoners on curfew, having been electronically tagged.



¹⁵An emergent ideology amongst some powerful and wealthy individuals, centred upon intently prepping to survive the climate crisis on an individual basis, whilst acting with negative intent to preserve life on Earth more broadly. Examples of such negative intent include: fossil fuel advocacy and/or lobbying, climate change delegitimization campaigns, reduction of press freedoms, and the criminalisation of protest rights.

¹⁶See, RIPS. “Current Political Prisoners.” *Rebels in Prison Support*, 2024, <https://rebelsinprison.uk/rebels/>.

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Medical Humanities Pedagogy: Beyond Ethics, Towards Empathy

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Most medical humanities curriculums focus on students going into healthcare fields, with the intent of training more empathic practitioners and helping students learn about systemic issues like healthcare disparities and bias in medical research. Although these goals are vital, I argue that medical humanities curriculums benefit *all students*, regardless of majors and career goals. In this piece, I explore how a medical humanities focus in undergraduate humanities classes can increase medical literacy and help students become better advocates for themselves in healthcare settings. Furthermore, I examine how medical humanities topics, beyond ethics, can be a powerful pedagogical tool. Several years ago, I had the pleasure of reviewing Mita Banerjee's 2018 *Medical Humanities in American Studies: Life Writing, Narrative Medicine, and the Power of Autobiography*. In the book, she asks us to reconsider the relationship between medicine and the humanities, writing that we must think about "not only what the humanities can do for medicine but also what medicine can do for the humanities" (Banerjee 33). I've been thinking about that line ever since.

As an English professor trained in the medical humanities, I'm aware that the humanities is often seen as a service discipline. At my small liberal arts university, I often hear talk about how English classes can support other disciplines. How can my literature classes help a business major? How can I tailor my writing classes for engineering majors? Since I fully believe that a robust liberal arts education can serve students their entire life, regardless of their career path, I am open to these conversations with my colleagues on how best to support their students in my classes. I believe future accountants need an art class the same way that future doctors need humanities training—belief in a well-rounded liberal arts education remains the foundation of many universities. But I always wonder: what can the other departments do for my humanities majors? Why is this conversation usually a one-way street? I have never been asked by a biology professor, as an example, how they can best serve humanities majors. As Banerjee aptly points out, understanding the relationship between medicine and the humanities needs to be central to medical humanities research moving forward.

At my university, I only occasionally teach a medical humanities class, and when I do, the class is usually for nursing or biology majors who need to fulfil their humanities core requirement. However, in the past few years, I have started incorporating medical

humanities topics into my writing and literature classes. My thought process was simple; even if students are not going to be healthcare professionals one day, couldn't they benefit from better health literacy? All my students, even in the occasional online class I teach, are presumably corporeal and need to be educated about how to exist as a human with a body. Students who are too shy to voice their opinions about "political" topics will often find their voice when we discuss medicine and medical care. Maybe they've been treated poorly by a medical professional or are coming to terms with a loved one's serious diagnosis. I've found that even the quietest student has something to say about healthcare.

From my teaching in the past few years—usually core curriculum writing and literature classes—I've come to a new conclusion: the medical humanities is not just for students going into healthcare fields. It is not just for science students. The medical humanities is for everyone and is a valuable tool for undergraduate education, regardless of a student's major. Everyone needs basic medical literacy, an understanding of the healthcare system, insight into how issues of medical bias and healthcare disparities affect society, and a more complex understanding of issues with ability, disability, and chronic illness. The medical humanities is vital for medical professionals, but these lessons have broader application in many different classrooms. By extending the medical humanities beyond the medical classroom, we can improve health and medicine on a larger scale. Equally important, the medical humanities provide students of all majors with a sense of empathy for those around them—a skill we value highly for medical practitioners, but one that is useful for everyone. Furthermore, by acknowledging and expanding the need for medical humanities curriculum outside of medical schools and programs, we can foster a more egalitarian relationship between medical education and the humanities. Although this is not a comprehensive guide on how to introduce these topics into undergraduate general education classes, I share my experience and several practical tips for incorporating the medical humanities into a wider variety of classrooms.

The term "medical humanities" was coined after World War II and by the 1990s reached a transatlantic audience. It is a diverse field with scholars in medical and scientific fields, as well as in various humanities disciplines. However, this disciplinary diversity can make it hard to pinpoint the status of the field at any given time. In fact, the very definition of the medical humanities is difficult to locate and reveals tensions between humanities scholars and medical professionals. As Banerjee argues in her book, the medical and science fields often focus on how the humanities can enrich medical education, whereas humanities scholars see the medical humanities as an interdisciplinary field (33). For example, the American Association of Medical College's (AAMC) definition of the medical humanities is solely limited to pedagogy:

Content or pedagogy derived from arts and humanities and integrated into the teaching and learning of medical students, trainees, and practicing physicians. The approaches and experiences with this education are often interprofessional, interdisciplinary, and co-designed to teach and sustain diverse competencies for better health outcomes for patients, communities, and populations (qtd. in Health Humanities Consortium).

Meanwhile, the Health Humanities Consortium does not explicitly mention pedagogy:

The Health Humanities is the study of the intersection of health and humanistic disciplines (such as philosophy, religion, literature) fine arts, as well as social science research that gives insight to the human condition (such as history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies.) The Health Humanities use methods such as reflection, contextualization, deep textual reading, and slow critical thinking to examine the human condition, the patient's experience, the healer's experience, and to provide renewal for the health care professional (Health Humanities Consortium).

These two definitions indicate a wide divide in the field; medical professionals see the collaboration with the humanities as a tool to enrich medical education, with little room to explore how medicine can contribute to the humanities whereas the Health Humanities Consortium, comprised of an interdisciplinary group of scholars, focuses on a more holistic approach.

However, pedagogy is still an essential part of the field and all research in the medical humanities comes back to the classroom to achieve one of the most important goals of the field: creating more ethical and empathic healthcare professionals (although medical humanities scholarship has important implications outside the classroom, such as public policy or medical research). Currently, medical schools regularly offer medical humanities classes. These classes are largely viewed by students as useful, although they are often still elective options rather than required courses. A 2021 study in the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* found that medical humanities classes have a:

[...] range of benefits including better grades, less burnout, improved clinical judgement, better critical appraisal skills (including about wider problems such as overdiagnosis) better prepared students for real life careers in medicine, enhanced medical professionalism, greater empathy, and appreciation that patients' problems go beyond their biology. (Howick et al. 87)

Their results show that medical humanities classes are being taught in the UK, Canada, and the US: "We identified 18 accredited medical school programmes in Canada, 41 in the UK, and 154 in the US. Of these, nine (56%) in Canada, 34 (73%) in the UK and 124 (80%) in the US offered at least one medical humanities course that was not ethics" (Howick et al. 86). Most medical humanities scholars would argue that there should be more than just one or two humanities classes in medical education, but even a small inclusion of the field into the healthcare classroom shows that the medical humanities has firmly found a place in medical training.

Despite the role medical humanities plays in medical education, the perception of these classes can vary greatly. In a 2021 study of medical students' views of medical humanities classes, surveys revealed that the students were divided on the importance of a medical humanities curriculum. When asked how the humanities related to medicine:

[P]articipants were split 55 to 45% in favor of humanities being a compulsory component of the course. The main reasons against compulsory integration were either the humanities being unnecessary to medical education or that students would be disinterested in the topics, which may be due to the lack of discussion

around the utility of humanities in medicine. Disinterest as a reason to avoid compulsory teaching could strengthen the idea that many students perceive the medical humanities as a separate entity from medicine. Conversely, those in favor of integration, cited its importance to a well-rounded education, and proposed that students in “need” of the skills obtained by the study of the humanities are those who would opt out from elective courses. (Petrou et al. 5)

This data suggests that there is still a prevalent belief among medical students that the humanities is not part of medicine at all, but rather a tool that can help medicine if one chooses to take the elective class. The false dichotomy—that the humanities and sciences are entirely separate disciplines—is troubling. And since medical humanities classes are still largely elective, one can reasonably assume that humanities is seen as a service discipline here, too. With these classes as electives, the implication is that the humanities can aid science education, but these classes are not an integral part of a medical education, but rather a helpful bonus, provided that a student wishes to partake.

This perspective, which sees the humanities as service to medicine, is the reason why it took so long for me to incorporate health humanities topics into my classes. Even I saw the medical humanities as a useful tool for future medical professionals, rather than as a vital lens for looking at the world. I am aware that the push for medical humanities in a general education classroom may seem like an attempt to either justify my own scholarly existence or to simply get the opportunity to teach my specialty. This perception is another reason why I resisted bringing the health humanities into classes for non-science majors for so long; what purpose does the health humanities have outside of an undergraduate or graduate medical classroom? Does your average student, the business major or the criminal justice major, need to read illness narratives and discuss medical ethics? Rather, I kept my specialty contained to my own research and writing, and the occasional class for nursing majors.

Naturally, as with many things in our daily lives, the COVID-19 pandemic changed my thinking and my teaching. During the pandemic, I noticed that many COVID-19 policies were written for local governments, businesses, schools, and other venues by people who were not medical professionals. Many of these policies were impossible to follow, difficult to understand, or downright odd. For example, an order from the state of Michigan allowed hardware stores to remain open but would not allow for customers to purchase paint, plants, or flooring (Oosting). A town in New York banned the use of leaf blowers, fearing the machines would spread the disease (“Explanation of Ban on Leaf Blower Use”). When my university wrote our COVID policy, we looked at many area schools and found many other confusing and strange policies. Wisely, my university worked with our county’s public health department to put together a strategy which allowed for on-campus COVID testing and vaccination clinics—useful and proven disease mitigation tactics.

The chaos and confusion during the pandemic offered a real-life learning experience for my technical writing students. Technical writers need to have both knowledge (or collaborate with a specialist) and the writing skills necessary to explain their topic to their audience. So, I tackled this dilemma in my *Special Topics on Technical Writing Class: COVID-19 Policies*, taught in Spring 2022. The class contained no science

majors. All students were either majoring or minoring in Business or English (the two most common majors for our technical writing classes). Our goal: learn how to write easy-to-understand health policies for schools and businesses.

The class, a short 8-week course designed for seniors perusing our technical writing minor, culminated in an assignment which asked students to choose a venue and write a COVID-19 policy for the summer of 2022. The policy had to be written for the public and would be, theoretically, displayed online (as opposed to an internal memo for employees only). Students also wrote a rationale, explaining how they designed and wrote this policy. Their policy and rationale had to cite current and credible medical research into COVID-19. The students did exceptionally well; their policies were simple, made sense, and all students had plans for how the policies could be adapted as new medical, federal, or state guidelines evolved. The most important part of the assignment—also the hardest part—was for students to learn how to find and read current and accurate medical guidelines and explain those guidelines to an audience with a low-to-average health and reading literacy.

Initially, the main goal of the class was to strengthen the student's ability to write policy, but one of the most valuable things that came out of the class was the in-class discussions and readings. In the class, we dove into issues of illness, disability, and the realities of public health policy. Students were tasked to find readings outside of our syllabus and share them with the class. For example, at the beginning of the course, we had a lively discussion on COVID-19 vaccines. Everyone in the room was vaccinated and most students held the view that people who were vaccine-hesitant or anti-vaccine were uneducated, conspiracy theorists, or, as one student said, "just bad people." However, throughout the course, we began uncovering why people would not trust our medical system and why conspiracy theories were prevalent. The conversations ultimately led to a greater understanding of why some people chose not to be vaccinated. We discussed how personal freedom, deliberate dis- and misinformation campaigns, medical trauma, and historical medical injustice (such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study¹) could make people skeptical of public health initiatives. The goal of this was not to have students question vaccination. In fact, we spent a great deal of time going over the research to understand why vaccines were an important part of slowing the pandemic. Instead, we discovered empathy for those skeptical of vaccines. Students realized that if we villainize those who make decisions different than ours, we cannot collectively work toward a healthier society. This lesson is something healthcare professionals learn quickly in their studies and on the job, but for those outside the healthcare industry, understanding why people behave and think differently from you about public health creates a greater sense of understanding and tolerance towards difference. In today's heated political climate, these lessons are vital.

Of course, as a humanities professor, I value these types of conversations, regardless of students' disciplinary home. Education is inherently a political act; landmark pedagogical texts like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and

¹In the 1930s and 40s, The Tuskegee Syphilis Study unethically studied syphilis in black men. The subjects of the study did not give their informed consent and, once penicillin existed, were not offered the drug to cure the disease ("The Untreated Syphilis Study").

bell hook's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) make cases for education to give voice to those marginalized by society. The humanities has a history of incorporating social justice issues into the classroom as a way to literally do what our name suggests: explore and understand humanity. Writing studies, for example, has long brought in queer theory or critical race theory into the writing classroom. It's in this environment that most writing professors today have been trained; bringing in issues of race, class, sex, and gender are all common themes in humanities, particularly, writing classes.

Issues of ableism, health disparities, and more generally, health literacy, are not as common in the humanities classroom, even though many instructors are trained in leading these often-uncomfortable instructions. Building on social justice pedagogy, which many of us already incorporate into our classrooms, the health humanities provides a lens for students to challenge their own assumptions about health and ability, understand those around them, and become more educated and health literate. Health literacy (the ability to find care and understand basic healthcare directions) is remarkably poor in the United States, with “only 12% of Americans hav[ing] proficient health literacy skills. Many adults may have difficulty completing routine health tasks like understanding a drug label or using a map to locate the closest health center,” according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (Office of the Surgeon General). In the United Kingdom, the National Institute of Health Care and Research estimates that 4 in 10 adults struggle to understand “health content written for the public” (Gursul). Undoubtedly, this issue exists in many other countries.

One of the barriers to health literacy is poor literacy skills. Even on the college level, many students struggle with reading. One study proposes that “One in five employed American adults with a bachelor's degree lacks important skills in literacy” (Fain). Humanities classes, which often require critical thinking, reading, and writing skills could address the literacy problem, while a medical humanities focus could improve health knowledge. By critically thinking about health issues, learning the realities of health care disparities, and by being exposed to medical humanities texts, students can leave the class empowered to make their own health decisions and understand medical settings and self-advocacy better. Of course, major issues with literacy cannot be solved by one course, but attention to critical thinking through the humanities is always helpful. Combined with the fact that many humanities instructors already bring in social justice and other difficult issues into class, why not the medical humanities?

I don't expect most instructors will find themselves in the position to teach a class on COVID-19 policies. However, there are many ways to incorporate the medical humanities into general education courses. One assignment I often incorporate into my writing classes asks students to write an essay describing pain. I don't define pain at all; students can interpret pain as a physical or emotional state (or both). The assignment encourages students to develop their vocabulary and ability to describe difficult concepts (key skills for writing), but also has them question the logic of the traditional pain scale. I pair this writing prompt with Eula Biss's 2005 creative nonfiction piece “The Pain Scale.” Her work questions the logic of the commonly used pain scale as she tries to register and rate her own severe and chronic pain. “I struggle to consider my pain in

proportion to the pain of a napalmed Vietnamese girl,” Biss writes, “whose skin is slowly melting off as she walks naked in the sun” (12). “You are not meant to be rating world suffering” Biss’s friend advises, “This scale applies only to you and your experience” (12).

This writing exercise always brings up questions of medical necessity in class. If a doctor tells you to go to the ER if your headache is a 10/10, how do you know what a 10 is? When and how do we advocate for ourselves in a medical setting? Why are women and people of color less likely to be believed about pain? The medical humanities, in this instance, provides interdisciplinary education to students while equipping them with valuable life skills. Incorporating the medical humanities into humanities classrooms provides an answer to Mita Banerjee’s question: instead of thinking only about what the humanities can add to medicine, adding medical humanities into non-medical classrooms gives concrete and practical evidence that medicine and science can aid the humanities.



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Autoethnographic Reflections on Ageing, Bodies, and Olding as Ontology of Care

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Introduction

This piece traces how I became involved in social research, methodology, and theory—‘ways of knowing’—that are concerned with care, bodies, practices, intimacies, materialities, and affects. In the article I have focussed particularly on my early experiences with older people, as both a nurse and a sociologist, and on how I developed a critical, theoretically engaged ethnographic methodology. I know I couldn’t have become the writer, teacher, supervisor, and thinker that I have without my early experiences of doing care and becoming-with¹ older people. These helped me realise that I needed to find ways to make visible how, where, and when older people are enplaced and marginalised, and how ‘ageing’ is situated in and by contemporary culture, including by the very institutions that supposedly support growing older—for example biomedicine, and health and social care.

My early work on medicine, health care, nursing² and older people,³ and more

¹The concept of *becoming-with* emerges from feminist science studies and posthuman theory, most notably in the work of Donna Haraway. Haraway uses the term to describe the co-constitutive processes through which beings—human and nonhuman—emerge as a companion species; it foregrounds relationality, mutuality, entanglement, and response-ability across species boundaries, challenging notions of individual autonomy. In my own paper “Being Alongside,” I explore *becoming-with* otherness as *being alongside*, a mode of relationality that preserves difference as well as connection. See, Latimer, Joanna. “Being Alongside: Rethinking Relations Amongst Different Kinds.” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 30, 2013, pp. 77–104.

²See, Latimer, Joanna. “The Nursing Process Re-examined: Diffusion or Translation?” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 22, 1995, pp. 213–220; Latimer, Joanna. “Socialising Disease: Medical Categories and Inclusion of the Aged.” *The Sociological Review*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2000, pp. 383–407. Latimer, Joanna. “Nursing, the Politics of Organization and the Meanings of Care.” *Journal of Research in Nursing*, vol. 19, no. 7–8, 2014, pp. 537–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987114562151>.

³See, Latimer, Joanna. “Older People in Hospital: The Labour of Division, Affirmation and the Stop.” *Ideas of Difference: Social Spaces and the Labour of Division*, edited by K. Hetherington and R. Munro, *The Sociological Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1997, pp. 273–297; Latimer, Joanna. “The Dark at the Bottom of the Stair: Participation and performance of older people in hospital.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1999, pp. 186–213; Latimer, Joanna. “Commanding Materials: Re-accomplishing Authority in the Context of Multi-disciplinary Work.” *Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2004, pp. 757–775.

recent research on genomics at the beginnings and ends of life,⁴ including dementia science,⁵ include many collaborations with other colleagues in the social sciences as well as with nurses, biologists, neuroscientists, and clinicians across the UK, Europe, Australia, and North and South America. This research is ethnographic in the sense that it involved immersion over long periods of time in all facets of where, when, and how ageing and older people are imagined, enacted, and performed. Methods have included analysis of biomedical, media, and cultural representations of ageing, interviews with older people and their families, with scientists and clinicians, and health care practitioners, as well as participant observation of scientific, health care and medical practices in multiple locations—at the bedside, in laboratories, in clinics, and in the home.

It is important to stress here the serendipity of my intellectual development—I did not plan the directions and opportunities I followed. Rather I relied on a mode of attention, rather than intention, and the development of a subliminal capability, organic and evolving, of being open to being ‘written’ and ‘rewritten’ by text, knowledge, experiences, practices, and encounters over time. This capability concerns what de Rond refers to as making meaningful connections, seeing bridges rather than holes, as he puts it, especially “those things organizational research seeks to minimize in its emphasis on efficiency” (de Rond 253).

To situate my knowledge-making as partial, located, and critical (Clarke et al. 12), the piece that follows illuminates how this work began with my becoming “intimately entangled” (Latimer and Lopez 252) *with* and *by* ageing persons and bodies early on in my life. Specifically, my encounters with older people helped me understand that how we experience and think being and growing old are situated, by complex socio-cultural, material, and political entanglements, especially by dominant humanist and late modern notions of what it is to be a full person; yet by touching and being touched by older people in my work as a nurse and then as a sociologist I have been able to become-with what it means to grow old and imagine personhood differently.

Playing Nurse

My encountering the old and their care started as a young girl in the early 1960s. When I was about 6 or 7 years old, I would put on my play nurses’ uniform and go and help in a private nursing home for older people two houses along from where I grew up. Wimbledon, now, as then, was a much sought-after suburb of London. The nursing home was in a large Edwardian, detached house, all wood panelling, flowery carpets, and chintz covered furniture and curtains. It was both a nursing home and a family home.

⁴See, Latimer, Joanna; Bagley, Mark; Davis, Terence and David Kipling. “Ageing Science, Health Care and Social Inclusion of Older People.” *Quality in Ageing & Older Adults*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, pp. 11–16; Latimer, Joanna. *The Gene, the Clinic and the Family: Diagnosing Dysmorphology, Reviving Medical Dominance*. Routledge, 2013.

⁵See, Latimer, Joanna, and Alexandra Hillman. “Biomarkers and Brains.” *New Genetics and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2019, pp. 80–100; Milne, Richard, and Joanna Latimer. “Alzheimer’s Disease and the Evolution of a Post-genomic Science.” *New Genetics and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636778.2019.1683213>.

The nursing home seemed comfortable, but dark and hushed. I can remember the smell—of wood polish and a faint aroma of cooking and stale urine and something else—maybe older, decaying bodies. The matron and owner of the nursing home was a kindly, buxom woman. The family were great friends to myself, my mother, and one of my brothers, who used to help the matron’s husband with all the odd jobs. I think they were semi-retired—he had been a travelling salesman at some point, and she a nurse. My memory is of a small pantry on the ground floor, where we made the tea—green Denby China cups and saucers, and white China feeder cups—laid out on trays with biscuits, fruit cake, or sliced bread and butter, which I would take to the residents in their rooms. I have no memory of the residents going outside in the garden, or of them in a sitting room. What I do have is a vivid image of the older women in their rooms, either in or sitting by their beds, as if in a perpetual evening. There were several residents in each room. Many of them were extremely old, pale, almost translucent, wrinkly, and frail—becoming not just invisible but inchoate, slipping into the “dark at the bottom of the stair” (Latimer 186). I have a vivid memory of cleaning a very wrinkled, paper-thin, skinny bottom of small gobbets of shit, pale like putty. I remember the smell and the old woman’s wispy grey hair and pink scalp. She was turned on her side, I don’t remember there being much of an interaction between us.

For me there was something profound and, in hindsight, perhaps life-defining in the experience of touching and “being touched” (Letiche 63) by such very old people. Here I allude to Letiche’s emphasis on Merleau-Ponty’s lifeworld paradigm and the concept of the reversibility of touching and being touched, wherein the ‘subject’ (who touches) and ‘object’ (who is touched) are radically interrelated and co-constituted. Specifically, I wonder what were the ‘conditions of possibility’—the diverse socio-material conditions—that were needed for a child, dressed up and playing nurse, to be allowed to do such a thing? To what extent was it possible because these people were somehow not just invalid, but subject to a process of invalidation? They were being rendered less than full persons. On the other hand, it may not be permitted today for ‘health and safety’ reasons and to protect both adult and child. Yet this also means opportunities for children and older people to interact may be being missed. This moment in my own history takes place in about 1961. The old people in the nursing home were the “deeply aged” (Turner 114). These very old people were sequestered, ‘stabled’ as a colleague once called it, waiting out the rest of their days in an endless twilight—unadorned, seemingly reduced to what we would normally think of as bare life—of becoming merely bodied, merely animal: becoming Other to what is held dear as being fully human.

Becoming a Nurse

About sixteen years later, having studied English Literature at London University where I was trained expertly in the analysis of text, I was at an impasse. I was unsuccessful at getting the funding I needed to take up a place at Oxford to do a PhD on *Piers Plowman*, a medieval satirical poem written in around 1380 by William Langland, about an ordinary man, rather than a knight or a king (I was always a bit of a leftie!). It explores the challenges faced by poor people trying to live virtuously in the religious and social corruption of late medieval England. While living in a shepherd’s cottage with my

boyfriend, the biographer Richard Holmes, and apple-picking on the local farm, I saw and responded to an advert for a cleaner at a small geriatric hospital in the nearby market town. The hospital was in a former workhouse, and I started cleaning there straight away for 50 pence (equivalent to 50 cents) an hour, doing my first shift work, clocking on 7am–4pm or 4pm–10pm. We cleaned everything except the patients and served meals and washed up. The cleaners were all women—farm workers’ wives and mothers—and the hospital was spotless. I worked there for about seven months from 1976–1977, moving after 3 months from being a cleaner to being a nursing auxiliary (or care assistant), so I then got to clean and feed patients, lift people in and out of baths and chairs, and endlessly make beds. Unlike the nursing home in Wimbledon, this was a state-run British National Health Service (NHS) hospital for long term geriatric care. These no longer exist. A geriatrician visited once a week (coming from the County Hospital). To my fury, having ensured all the patients were clean and dry before the ‘great man’s’ arrival, we nurses had to stand in the sluice while he did his ward round.

My memories of this hospital are very different from the private, family-run nursing home in 1960s Wimbledon. It was light and airy and, setting aside those people who were kept in bed all the time, patients were a bit livelier. Those who were deemed able were dressed and taken to a sitting room during the day or, on warmer days, to a glassed-in veranda overlooking the garden. While it was not what Erving Goffman calls a “total institution” (12), a closed system where patients are cut off from the outside community, care was routinized and delivered *en mass* rather than on an individualised basis, a form of organization that Goffman describes as managing people in “blocks” (7). But the older people’s liveliness stopped at this—they were not included as participants in how the world they inhabited was organized, they were not members included in ‘world-making,’ they had almost no voice. To put it bluntly, they were treated as non-persons, as less than fully human, cared for in a block, ‘processed,’ and ‘serviced.’

The afternoons and evenings saw quite a few visitors. But there were issues. Some older people seen as “confused” and likely to wander, were restrained in Buxton chairs, tipped back with a table locked in front—trapped in a cage—keeping them in place (Fig. 1). They were also sedated with tranquilizers. When in bed, these patients had a draw sheet tightly tucked around their middles to restrict their movements, and cot sides on their beds to stop them from climbing out. There was one patient who was kept in bed like this all the time—she had contractures and deformities. I never saw anyone taking her out into the garden or involve her in any kind of activity to enhance her abilities. In general, there was no rehabilitation ethos, or even really a sense



Fig. 1: The infamous, tippable Buxton chair (www.crcmh.com/buxton1.jpg)

that people could be helped to have a future or simply a better end to their life.

The routine was rigid—with rotas for baths and washes, as well as two hourly toilet and pressure area care rounds, the latter aimed at the prevention of pressure sores for people with reduced mobility. Pressure area care consisted of washing the bottom, and applying zinc oxide to the sacral area, and heels of the feet, as well as moving the patients’ position (‘turning’ them). All meals were served like clockwork. The food was good—nutritious and home cooked. The patients did not have any choice about what happened to them, how, or when. And there was almost no privacy or variation—everyone got pretty much the same. In addition, the patients were not included in either the organization of the hospital or in doing anything to help—they were served, moved, dressed/undressed, bathed (once a week), toileted or potted, fed, put to bed, got up. Furniture was basic and uniform. Many clothes were like the furniture, communal and ill-fitting. When patients had their own clothes and if their relatives did not take them home to wash, they could be sent to the laundry and were often lost or came back shrunken.

Moreover, and I think this is critical, there was almost no relationship between the nurses and the patients—they were divided from each other. The patients were Othered. During quiet moments, the staff sat in the bathroom having a cigarette and a cup of tea, or some food saved over from mealtimes. While there was no overt cruelty, and the care was from some perspectives impeccable (with minimal falls and pressure sores),



Fig. 2: A drawing of patients at the hospital by me (c. 1976).

the patients were primarily looked upon with dis-taste—as bodies that were heavy, demanding, and which had gone beyond their sell-by dates, super-fluous to requirements. Even death was routinized. My ‘first death’ en-tailed my helping a qualified nurse lay out Billy, an old farmer. The nurse showed me how to wash him all over, put coins on his eyes to keep them closed, stuff his orifices with cotton wool to stop them leaking, tie up his penis with a piece of bandage, and lay him out in a paper shroud ready for collection by the undertaker. I was shocked at the lack of love, of care in her gestures and approach. And Billy was very old—91; there were no relatives at his bedside during his last hours. These people were Deleuze and Guattari’s “weary old ones” who may only “pursue slow moving opinions and engage in stagnant

discussion by speaking alone, within their hollow head” (214). And yet this was an expensive institution—24 hour care on the NHS’s budget, for people who were very

unlikely to go anywhere else except to their graves. It was rather like a waiting room. Lots of people died in the six months I was there.

At night when I got home, all of this—the injustice, the inhumanity—made me weep with anger, frustration, and anguish. I loved the work, and I loved the patients—I was seared by compassion and care. And weirdly some of the patients seemed to love me back—we lifted each other. Like Billy, who always used to hold my hand when I talked to him, down close and intimate. So, I decided that I had to do something to help and applied to all the London teaching hospitals to train as a nurse. All but one rejected me—put off perhaps by my degree in English and sensing I could be too questioning! Fortunately, University College Hospital (UCH) School of Nursing, a progressive and revolutionary school, accepted me. At UCH, I worked in every kind of environment from intensive care, acute medicine and surgery, emergency medicine, orthopaedics, oncology and radiotherapy, to sexual diseases, labour ward and post-natal care, paediatrics and gynaecology; from learning how to manage a cardiac arrest, to delivering a baby, to how to look after burnt twin babies on ventilators as well as the terminally ill. I was so lucky because the people who trained me, on the wards and in the school of nursing, encouraged my critical imagination and helped me learn how to become a practical, informed, conscientious, creative, and highly organized nurse.

My first ward as a student nurse was a geriatric ward at St Pancras Hospital. In many ways, this was very similar to the hospital in Kent but with marginally more of a rehabilitation ethos—people were walked, given physiotherapy and occupational therapy to try and help them get home or into a long-term institution such as a nursing or residential home. There was a sense of some patients at least having a future. This unit too was in an old workhouse. One of the wards (not the one I worked on) was locked—it was called “Ward 9.” This is where the psychogeriatric patients were kept. But at St Pancras, there was some dedication to the patients as individual persons—as students we got to ‘know’ them and were endeared to them. But still it was about getting through the work of administering to their bodies, keeping them maintained, in the hope that we could get them back on their feet enough for them to get out. The problem of course was that for the very disabled, there were so few places to go and often little support for them at home.

In all three of these institutions, the work was profoundly heavy: the older people I looked after had lots of trouble—difficulties walking, speaking, moving, eating, pissing and shitting, thinking, expressing. There was a lot of incontinence and disability—as nurses we were, to be honest, buckling under the work. But it is through these locales that I experienced how older people and old age were being thought of in a British context at that time: as extremely ambivalent and problematic to not just medicine and health care, but to society.

The downgrading of the work and the value of the people who needed it was accomplished by how they were being instituted: it was in the very fabric, smell, and texture of the buildings and in the sense of the patients not being mobile—socially or literally—and the sense of stagnation. Dennis Norden, a British comedian and writer, once said to my father that the trouble with marriage is it’s daily. The trouble with care

of the elderly is it's daily—and it jars with a cultural ethos which is, in late modern Britain, increasingly becoming more and more about mobility, change, direction, speed, attitude, competition, and productivity—being in a state of perpetual becoming. And older people's care is expensive, with not much *gain* if you are a health economist.

Older People, Health Care, and Medicine

In the early 1980s, a focus on older people as a problem to be managed in the NHS began to be made more and more explicit. I had two jobs which made me a participant in the management of the problem of older people. The first was helping to set up a Community Hospital in West London.⁶ The hospital was supposed to be a revolutionary approach to help keep people at home. As I found, the aim of its inception was to help prevent unnecessary use of Accident and Emergency (A&E) and services designed to address conditions requiring rapid intervention and stabilization, rather than long-term or chronic care, at the nearby teaching hospital. The Community Hospital was thus the in-between—in-between the acute sector and the community sector. Its other political relevance was that it allowed General Practitioners access to beds and the opportunity to look after their ill patients in a hospital environment, and so begin to extend their scope, something that the Royal College of General Practitioners was pushing for at the time, and which was supposedly in their as well as the government's interests.

The hospital had a fixed maximum length of stay (3 weeks). Our patients could be of any age (from 16 upwards) and be suffering with any illness providing they did not require hi-tech interventions or would take longer than 3 weeks to sort out, or die. GPs referred a patient, but it was the nurses who had the authority to do a home assessment and assess their suitability for care at the community hospital and admit and discharge patients. We also designed our own policies and practices and instituted a special person and family-centred ethos. What patients got was low-tech medicine, but intensive *nursing* care, as well as physiotherapy and occupational therapy, tailored to their specific situation—both their health as well as their psychological, emotional, and social situation.

As the London postcodes of W2–W9 had the highest population of older people living on their own in any UK city at that time, many of our patients were in fact elderly. It was here that, unknowingly, I first experienced the concept of 'bed-blocking.' Bed-blocking was a term applied to patients who were supposedly medically ready to leave the hospital but who could not because of lack of suitable care or support in the community. My experience at the community hospital introduced me to the importance of tying timeliness and appropriateness to healthcare practices. While there had always been rules of thumb over how long someone should take to recover from a heart attack or a specific type of operation, what I was introduced to at the community hospital was an explicit notion of needing to manage how hospital resources, especially 'bed days,' were used: we had specific policies about how long someone could be in hospital and kept track of this including setting targets for when and how they would be discharged. These policies directed my practices to regiment bodies around specific temporalities: a

⁶See, Latimer, Joanna. "Nursing in a Different Way." *Senior Nurse*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1987, pp. 28–29.

way of organizing, underpinned by asking—always and constantly—if someone was not getting well enough to meet their discharge date, then why not? Did we need to revise their treatment, change our approach, or were they at the end of their life? And if so, did we need to change gear, provide end of life or palliative care and help them achieve a reasonable death? And most importantly, how did all this connect to their situation, them as a person, and what they wanted.

This way of organizing can be understood as a new approach to managing what was called the ‘bedstate’—the production of turnover or throughput so that beds could continuously become available for new admissions. Bedstate management makes the flow through the beds as important as the care given to the patients while they are in them. But I realised later that it does more than that—it is a strategic value that creates an assessing gaze, a way of looking at patients from the perspective not of their health or treatment but from the perspective of managing the hospital resources. As a new young Ward Sister, I was also sent on management and leadership courses, and my boss (the District Director of Nursing) talked to me about having my own budget, asking me to think in terms of what resources I needed to do the job we were tasked to do. I was experiencing the NHS under new management.

Later I took over the running of an acute medical ward at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where the association between older people and ‘bed-blocking’ became more and more explicit. The ward I took on had to have beds available for emergency admissions every seven days and was notoriously blocked in the winter months. For example, one of the patients I inherited, aged 82 and who could not be discharged because she had dementia and there was nowhere safe for her to go, had been blocking one of the ward’s acute medical beds for two years. My experience and skills at organizing and assessing patients and maintaining throughput was partly what got me the job.

Critically, I was immersed in the historical politics being enacted around being old, figured as being alive beyond the capacity for personhood, and questions over who is responsible for their care. These are the people now thought of as in their fourth age, the people needing not medicine, but what has become categorised as personal or *end-of-life care*. Bed-blocking is still in the UK news as what is plaguing the efficiency and efficacy of the NHS, with stories of acutely ill patients being treated in hospital car parks and corridors because there are no beds available for them to be admitted to.

Becoming a Social Scientist

Having published research undertaken while practising as a nurse,⁷ I was invited by the Director of the Nursing Research Unit at Edinburgh University to apply to the Scottish Home and Health Department for a fellowship to train as a social scientist. I won the fellowship and joined Edinburgh’s Faculty of Social Science doctoral program. It was a mind-blowing experience—more serendipity, perhaps—because the program not only cherished the experience and contribution of those of us who had been practising nurses, but also introduced us to continental post-structuralist philosophy and epistemology of

⁷See, Latimer, Joanna. “Stress and the Student Nurse.” *Nursing*, vol. 10, 1980, pp. 449–450; Latimer, Joanna. “Learning to Listen.” *Nursing*, vol. 27, 1981, pp. 1186–1187.

science alongside ethnomethodology, the Chicago School of Sociology, ethnography, and contemporary thinking in Anthropology. My research, an ethnographic study of older people's assessment, diagnosis, and care in an acute medical unit, like the one I had run myself, was later published as *The Conduct of Care*.

My research approach combines the skill of textual analysis learnt as an English literature scholar with the theoretical and methodological grounds I was learning to work with as a social science doctoral student. Drawing ethnography together with textual analysis helped illuminate the relationship between discourse, everyday interaction and practices, and the production and reproduction of power relations. There are many different approaches to, and uses of both, ethnography and textual analysis. My own approach brings together the traditions of ethnography and textual analysis in a way that enabled me to focus on the cultural, social, and experiential significance of how care, medicine, and science are practised and situated. The analytical approach helps unpack the worlds people make together and the politics they are entangled in, particularly making processes of inclusion and exclusion visible.

My critical, theoretically engaged methodology has developed over time in collaboration with many others, particularly my husband Rolland Munro,⁸ a philosopher of organization. Writing brings into view how different kinds of knowledge, work, and persons are easily devalued, including attending to the experiences of those who are easily marginalized (for example older people, children with rare genetic diseases and their families, as well as non-human animals). My underlying aim is to critique the conditions of possibility that underpin these hierarchical relations, including helping sociology pay more attention to how the ordering of the social involves much more than just human beings. Here I often draw upon different artists and poets to help illuminate these complex relations of inclusion and exclusion.

The New Sciences of Ageing

Most recently I have been exploring how scientists, doctors, politicians, families, and communities are beginning to be confronted by the fact that more and more people are living longer but not necessarily well. My latest work with biomedical scientists and colleagues in social sciences explores how different alignments and associations are constituting a “new dynamics” or “new sciences” (Walker 2) of ageing, and the way this new dynamic is affecting how growing older is being thought and done, both inside medicine, inside science, inside culture, and inside persons.

My own research on ageing explores scientific, medical, and health discourses, policies, and practices that together seem to constitute this “new dynamics” of ageing as a shift away from seeing ageing as inevitable biological decline linked to age in years, towards exploration of how individual ageing is “subject to influences over the lifecourse” (Walker 2). I am concerned whether the new sciences of ageing, while attempting to prevent or protect us from ageing's worst effects, devalue older people and

⁸For example, Latimer, Joanna, and Rolland Munro. “Keeping & Dwelling: Relational Extension, the Idea of Home, and Otherness.” *Space and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2009, pp. 317–331.

what getting old means.

My analysis of how biomedicine represents ageing and of laboratory practices and processes focussed on ageing, shows that in their laboratory experiments investigating aging scientists rely on animal models such as nematodes and mice.⁹ As such, human biology and nature get reduced to organisms who in turn get reduced to genes and their effects. For example, in one program focussed on ageing and dementia, scientists investigating how a specific gene effects neurological function in nematode worms measure how slowly or quickly or how often a nematode worm thrashes its tail as evidence of dementia. What gets made absent is a situated, embodied subject. For example, how these worms were bred and programmed to represent a genotype, or how they were observed and treated as a consequence of the experiments themselves.

Moreover, with experiments using animal models, situatedness is represented as ‘environmental forces,’ figured by scientists of ageing in terms of very specific notions of stress, toxicity, and chance. These forces together with the specifics of species biology are seen by biologists as influencing how an individual or population ages (or doesn’t). They do not in their experiments take account of wider social or cultural influences on how an individual or population ages, including their own experimental cultures and processes.

I have also shown how bioscience’s reimagining of the ageing body reinforces how the ageing of social body is being reimagined. On the one hand, some of the scientists in my research represent ageing as burdensome and in need of curing. For instance, during a visit to a laboratory where the scientists are studying the genetics of cell senescence through experiments with skin cells,¹⁰ one of them shows me a sample under the microscope. As I peer down the lens, the scientist explains that senescent cells are cells that no longer replicate; he describes them as “stagnant,” and as “accumulating in the body and causing disruption.” In framing ageing cells as obstacles within the biological body, the scientist is mirroring how older people and the aging population are viewed as burdens within the social body—both ageing cells and ageing persons are enacted as problematic, as clogging up both the social and biological body. On the other hand, I found bioscientists enacting biological ageing as dynamic and adaptable, with scientists increasingly describe ageing to me as ‘plastic’ and ‘malleable’—as processes that can be influenced and potentially improved.

In summary, I found that ageing bodies are depicted in the bioscience I investigated as declining, losing vitality, and threatening to drain resources; and at the same time, I found biological life being framed by scientists in molecular terms, that is

⁹See, Friese, Carrie, and Joanna Latimer. “Entanglements in Health and Well-being: Working with Model Organisms in Biomedicine and Bioscience.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2019, pp. 120–137; Latimer, Joanna. “Science Under Siege? Being Alongside the Life Sciences of Ageing, Giving Science Life.” *The Sociological Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2019, pp. 264–286; Latimer, Joanna, and Alexandra Hillman. “Biomarkers and Brains: Situating Dementia in the Laboratory and in the Memory Clinic.” *New Genetics and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2019, pp. 80–100.

¹⁰Samples of skin cells being used in the experiments are ‘models’ of ageing; the cells come from a very specific group of people with an inherited early ageing genetic disorder known as Werner’s syndrome.

as programmable and flexible, so that ageing, with the right technological interventions, can be subject to enhancement. Bioscientists thus help justify the need for intervention in ageing, and help to show that ageing can be managed, delayed, or even reversed, for the benefit of both individuals and society. As one biologist put it to me, her research on delaying ageing was more valuable than focusing on a single disease like Alzheimer's Disease, because "not only do you not have the disease, but you are younger, fitter, and more productive."

Thus, through my close encounters with *how* the biology of ageing does its work I can illuminate how and when the new sciences of ageing are caring for, about, and with ageing, and when they reinforce negative depictions of ageing bodies and persons.

Olding

Contemporary cultures celebrate the promise, hope, and voluptuousness of the new, the young, and the productive, while the processes of becoming old are constructed in an alignment of biomedicine and politics as deeply troubling and disordering. While the emphasis in the late 20th century has been on ideas of fluidity and perpetual becoming (Bankston 3), this beautiful idea runs alongside the facts of perpetual unbecoming; of how over time, living beings also seem to be perpetually becoming Other: old frail, diminished, burdensome, inhuman.

Chronological age has been a key category in most cultures—from personal and social identity to kinship relations and cultural categories (e.g. infant, child, teenager, adult). In Euro-American societies, age underpins institutions—it is used to shape and underpin socio-legal infrastructures, social policies, education systems, employment structures and practices, health care organization, and finance and insurance. It is difficult, for example, to get a mortgage after a certain age, and you certainly can't get one before a certain age. Mary Douglas might describe 'age' as a "classification system" (17), infrastructural to cultural systems of value, with deep old age, as already discussed above, and older people, marked as of little value, even monstrous, for the biological as well as the social body.

But age and ageing are also deeply problematic in terms of personhood and the lived experience of growing old. As the science fiction author, Ursula le Guin stresses, 'ageing' is an existential event, material and affective, embodied and figurative. She writes about "geezerhood" and the "diminished thing" that the older person is made to represent, asserting that "Old age isn't a state of mind. It's an existential situation" (13). Debunking the myth that you are only as old as you feel, she says: "To tell me my old age doesn't exist is to tell me I don't exist. Erase my age, you erase my life – me" (14). In addition, Pat Thane the historian of ageing argues in her essay "Old Age," that there is very little that is uniform about how an individual ages—ageing up close expresses a situated and positioned individuality. For me, *Mumbling Beauty*, Van Gelder's marvellous collection of photographs of the artist Louise Bourgeois in her later life,

depicts some of this complexity.¹¹

Given that growing old is both a biopolitical construct and a lived condition of being-in-the world, I want to suggest a term other than ‘ageing’ that helps us hold onto this doubling. The term ‘Olding’ rather than ageing, keeps hold of the idea that aging is embodied, situated, and of existential importance as at the same time as it captures the possibility of becoming-with ageing and older persons as matters of care. Ingold and Palsson in their book suggest the mattering over time and space that is growing old as a form of “biosocial becoming.” But I want to press how ageing is simultaneously situated as a process of perpetual *unbecoming*, and of perpetually becoming Other. Flesh, time, materialities, language and culture, and the socio-political, entangle in the ongoing production of ageing and of older personhood. The difficulty is that the unbecoming of growing old is situated by how personhood in the contemporary moment is figured in terms of keeping younger, fitter, and more productive for longer, of keeping becoming *somebody*; in contrast, growing old is figured as unfitting, inappropriate, unseemly: as a process of becoming Other. So, in pressing the ontology of Olding I am pressing the need to not just think-with but become-with, even live-with as Donna Haraway (5) might put it, Olding. Specifically, Olding helps hold on to the recognition that how persons age is situated and often hard, but that older people do not need to be othered as a result of becoming differently. While ageing is often imagined through the perspective of dominant notions of personhood as a process of degeneration, decline, and loss of all that is most valued about being human, the ontological shift that Olding demands—a shift to touching and being touched by and with ageing and older people—shifts how being and growing old are thought and experienced; as even, perhaps, of becoming less masked by all that situates, including accomplishment and adornment—social, material, cultural—and as such, as more rather than less human.

For example, in his contemplative late poem “Lebensweisheit Spielerei” (“Playing with the Wisdom of Life”), first published in 1954, Wallace Stevens associates later life with an “indigence of the light, a stellar pallor that hangs on threads” (504):

Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls
In the afternoon. The proud and the strong
Have departed.

Those that are left are the unaccomplished,

¹¹*Mumbling Beauty*, Van Gelder’s photographs of the artist Louise Bourgeois in her later years, offers a deeply nuanced portrayal of ageing as both an intimate and complex process. Through these images, Bourgeois appears neither simply frail nor purely resilient, but instead as a figure who embodies the contradictions of growing old—wisdom and vulnerability, presence and withdrawal, endurance and transformation. The collection resists the conventional tropes of ageing that often depict older individuals as either diminished by time or heroically defying it. Instead, Van Gelder captures Bourgeois in moments of quiet contemplation, playful irreverence, and artistic engagement, emphasizing the fluidity of identity in later life. The photographs highlight the way ageing unfolds not only in the body but also in the textures of lived experience, memory, and creative expression. In this way, *Mumbling Beauty* challenges reductive narratives of decline, inviting viewers to see ageing as a layered and ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed state. It aligns with broader cultural and philosophical inquiries into ageing as a process that is as much about transformation as it is about loss.

The finally human,
Natives of a dwindled sphere.

Their indigence is an indigence
That is an indigence of the light,
A stellar pallor that hangs on the threads.

Little by little, the poverty
Of autumnal space becomes
A look, a few words spoken.

Each person completely touches us
With what he is and as he is,
In the stale grandeur of annihilation. (504)

The poem's *bathos* turns the impoverished light of the evening of life into an almost false light. The fall, of the day, of the year, of the light, appears cosmic in its associations: the dwindling in which "the proud and the strong" have departed is when we can be touched by each other as "unaccomplished," revealed for "what (s/)he is and as (s/)he is." Growing old may be "annihilation" of sorts, stale, but it is nonetheless grand, the antithesis of the life-giving light of "accomplishment" and the adornment that makes us proud, it is when we become "finally human." Stevens himself, playing with the idea of what gives life wisdom, seems to be suggesting that wisdom is earned through the experience of the ordinary and the everyday, what elsewhere he describes as the "plain sense of things" (502). My relation to the double figure of Olding—as simultaneously biosocially *unbecoming* and as becoming differently to all that is most valued in contemporary ideas of personhood—is possible in the moment when I touch and am touched by the plain sense of being "after the leaves have fallen" (Stevens 502).

Concluding Remarks

My lived experience of both becoming-with older people through immersion in their care and of becoming entangled in how the needs of the aged are positioned—aroused in me a sense of it as a critical site of social in/exclusion and (in)justice. This lived experience has also always helped me ground my theorizing, research, and teaching. Moreover, my research on the politics of care which draws out of my experience as a nurse and an ethnographer of many different care contexts, has helped to explicate how healthcare enacts power relations as well as mundane processes of inclusion and exclusion.

In this biographical account, I have offered some insight into the serendipity in my life through which I have developed an approach that reveals and addresses the assemblage of discourses, practices, political machines, cultural values, iniquitous distribution of wealth, and the disinterest of medicine, which constitute how ageing and being old are thought and experienced. I have drawn on my own experience and research to suggest that someone entering this category of being old is an event—a situated process of emplacement.

Here I have sought and continue to seek ways to rethink ageing and ‘being alongside’¹² older people, to propose a new kind of ontology, Olding. The ontology proposed by Olding involves a doubling: touching and being touched by the plain sense and materiality of ageing as a process of unbecoming while simultaneously not framing unbecoming as becoming Other. My own lived experience of caring helped me to understand that thinking and becoming-with Olding can help us rethink what it is to be human and a full person. This involves, as I have suggested, a recognition that how persons age is relational, and that the very institutions that are meant to support ageing and older people can figure older people as less than human and intensify their invalidation.



¹²In this paper, I argue for being alongside as well as becoming-with those who can be made to seem and as less than human. See, Latimer, Joanna. “Being Alongside: Rethinking Relations Amongst Different Kinds.” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 30, 2013, pp. 77–104.

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Becoming Cyborg: On Deafness, New Materialism, and Pivoting a Research Agenda

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I've been severely and profoundly deaf since a bout of spinal meningitis when I was two. For much of my life, this bodily aspect and its many dimensions were not particularly interesting to me. In fact, I thought it was the least interesting thing about me, as did my parents, and getting accustomed to wearing a hearing aid and working through years of speech therapy as a child were simply practical matters. We never used the word 'disabled' to describe me. I underwent a mainstream education, skipped a couple of grades, went to college early and then dropped out, worked in restaurants, temp jobs, and call centers, and eventually spent nearly a decade doing high-contact business development, mostly through hours of phone calls each day. As I pursued a bachelor's degree at night, I realized that I much preferred the energy of campuses and classes to that of corporate life. Eventually, I decided to pivot and go to graduate school to pursue a master's and, eventually, a doctorate in Rhetoric, Scientific, and Technical Communication.

Once I got to doctoral work and started studying rhetorics of technology, deafness and its technologies weren't even a consideration as potential foci. I fell in love with authorship studies and intellectual property theory, eventually spending ten years writing a dissertation and a tenure book on radically distributed collaboration in encyclopedias, both 18th century and digital. My questions focused on the rhetoric and ethics of information ownership and circulation, which led me into archival research on communities that supported the development of encyclopedias and the ways they strategized and accomplished that support. Western materialist theorists—namely, Latour—were helpful for thinking through the ways that humans and technologies function together in these contexts, and I read and used Latourian theory as a scholarly tool, not as a way of living. The way that new materialism facilitates ecological examination of affordances and constraints (Gibson) was useful for thinking about networks of printers, writers, and presses.

I did in fact receive tenure and have continued with the usual duties of a research professor with a simultaneous path in administration at both department and national levels. It's been an interesting and challenging ride that's taken me to places I hadn't imagined I'd go when I was growing up in Arkansas: I've published in the US, France, and England, and delivered invited talks in Ireland and South Korea. I spent a year as an

NEH Distinguished Visiting Professor at a bucolic private college tucked away in the hills of New York state. I'm currently wrapping up a term as director of our doctoral program (ranked in the top five in our field), teaching undergraduates and doctoral students (and occasionally winning teaching awards), serving as a senior research fellow in one of our institutes (one of the most interesting ones), and working on a co-authored book (under contract to a top press). This is the tidiest, most polished version of my professional narrative, full of either academic braggadocio, plain facts, or both. It conceals many things.

There's a notion that floats around academia called the Shadow CV. It's the shadow of the long list of accomplishments that each of us totes around and submits for tenure, promotion, grants, fellowships, awards—a CV of the challenges, struggles, and failures that are invisible to those who aren't in the trenches of your career. While its uses are varied, political, and sometimes contested (Gawuga), it's a way of accounting for the vital junctures and achievements that aren't claimable on annual reports or valorized by the academy. While I'll spare readers an extensive accounting of these shadows that have shaped my career, there came a series of junctures about a decade ago that reconfigured my relationship with disability and then proceeded to rearrange my research agenda, theoretical lens, and eventually my understanding of how I move through the world.

The First Juncture

The truth is indeed that I didn't think much at all about deafness, either personally or conceptually or theoretically, until I was well along the tenure track. I had been recently diagnosed with advanced degenerative joint disease, which explained the increasing pain issues I was experiencing, and fell into a pit of depression at the thought of dealing with yet another bodily thing. I'd not encountered any information on the ways that pain affects cognition or the ways that being a d/Deaf listener requires extra cognitive effort. I didn't identify as disabled, had no accommodations in place at my job, and thought that my two physical factors—degenerative joint disease in one ankle that causes chronic pain and deafness in both ears—were separate issues, and that the chronic pain was much more of a problem than the deafness (still true in some regards, really). Instead, I was frustrated and increasingly depressed, wondering why I hadn't been able to make the progress I wanted to make on my tenure book, and increasingly worried about my ability to file my case within the constraints of my tenure clock. Finally, one of my senior colleagues and mentors sat me down and told me that I was going to need to file for an extension on my tenure clock sooner rather than later. I was horrified.¹ I met with my chair, then sat down to figure out how to make the argument. Because I hadn't sought treatment for depression and none of us were aware of the impact of chronic pain, the argument had to rest on deafness. And I knew nothing about deafness, other than how to live my life.

Faced with a short deadline for an incredibly high-stakes argument, I reached out to my friend, Tom Wright. Tom and I met in our doctoral program when he joined a

¹Nobody who needs extra time on their tenure clock should be horrified to ask for it. And yet, the enculturation of years of being an "A student," of pushing hard to reach goals, or of perfectionism can make it very hard to ask for more time. If you need more time, make the case for it.

cohort that was a few years behind mine. He was also deaf and we eventually discovered that we had remarkably similar stories: meningitis at an early age, mainstream educations, ways of being that didn't center deafness in the ways we negotiated the world. The difference, though, was that Tom had understood the utility of studying deafness far earlier than I and had written a master's thesis on improving deaf literacy expectations. He sent me a file of relevant articles and I searched for other statistics on the number of d/Deaf professors (I knew none then aside from Tom²), and I wrote the appeal over the course of one fraught, snowy weekend. It was successful and I gained another crucial year, but it also was the first factor that began to steer me from the research agenda I'd been relentlessly following for a decade.

Writing that appeal brought me face to face with the fact that deafness did in fact deeply influence my life as a professor. Professing requires hearing in very different environments and contexts than my previous career had, or even than being a successful grad student had. Professors are expected to attend meetings that feature rapid-fire, contentious discussions that frequently feature a range of accents from various regions of the US and other countries, and are often held in rooms with "inspirational" architecture that feature high ceilings which draw sound upward and large windows that bounce it around a room in ways that are sometimes unpredictable and always wearing.³ CART⁴ is helpful but lags behind the conversation, making it hard to negotiate turn-taking in real time. In my case, the added cognitive load of parsing all this on top of presenting information or engaging in discussion inevitably results in a migraine after a couple of hours. When coupled with the chronic pain that results from being on my feet for hours of teaching (because I walk up to students to hear what they're saying in my discussion-driven classes) and walking around campus, the result is being cognitively shorted out in ways that significantly lower my ability to process spoken language quickly. I learned that when I let this go on and don't rest sufficiently, I fall down at random moments. Taking care of my bodily needs can mean sleeping 10–12 hours a night for cognitive repair, and that plus my other job duties meant there was no quality mental time left for writing, since early mornings accommodated the course prep that couldn't happen in the evenings.

So I had to admit that deafness was clearly a factor in my life and career, one that imposes unavoidable constraints as well as affordances in the category of d/Deaf gain.⁵ But it was still not one to which I wanted to devote an entire research agenda or a journal article or even to write about informally. I merrily planned a post-tenure agenda on

²One of the consequences of passing is the absence of a community that shares your identity. I've written about this in Kennedy, "I Forgot I'm Deaf!" Happily, I've since found other d/Deaf faculty in my field and they are unfailingly brilliant and generous.

³*The Mind Hears* (<https://themindhears.org>), a blog for and by d/Deaf academics, has explored this issue extensively. See, for example, Caicedo, Ana. "Conquering Faculty Meetings (or Not...) When Deaf/Hard of Hearing." *The Mind Hears*. Nov. 19, 2020. <https://themindhears.org/2020/11/19/conquering-faculty-meetings-or-not-when-deaf-hard-of-hearing/>.

⁴CART stands for Communication Access Real-Time Translation, or live transcription by a human. It is rapidly being replaced by AI transcription, especially in online contexts.

⁵The concept of d/Deaf gain acknowledges deafness as a way of being in the world that offers valuable perceptions and insights. See, Bauman, H-Dirksen L., and Joseph J. Murray. *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*. U of Minnesota P, 2014 for a thorough exploration.

rhetorics of craft that would allow me to keep building on my reading of western materialist theory and extend my research on rhetorics of technology in a different direction.

The Second Juncture

A year or so later, my friend and colleague Minnie Bruce Pratt⁶ commanded me to enroll in her famous Maymester seminar in Creative Nonfiction. This immensely popular class always filled the same morning that registration opened, and it filled with *everyone*: Writing majors in search of summer credit hours, graduate students who wanted to pursue an elective that fostered writing that was very different from most of their seminar papers, and even professors who were using the assignments to draft creative sections of articles or books. Minnie Bruce had been suggesting that I take her class for years and each time, I'd said no, not this year, I'm so tired, and I have to focus on this tenure book. But then the book was in press and one morning I woke up to an email from her that said, in effect, "You are taking this class this year. It will be the last time I teach it before I retire. I have saved you a seat and you will register for this class and you will write about deafness." The latter was news to me, but because I was out of excuses and had learned that it was generally a good idea to do what Minnie Bruce told me to do; I registered and showed up one cold May day, ready to dig in. The two weeks passed in a stream of twelve-hour days crowded with homework, writing, and class, and by the end, I had written eighty pages about deafness.

That was in 2015. I have not written about another topic since.

In the course of banging out those eighty messy pages, I realized how deep my own embodied relationship with technology is, given the fact that I wear hearing aids for an average of sixteen hours each day and have for nearly half a century. Details about hearing aids, audiological testing and audiology offices, the failures of batteries, and other aspects of this technology permeated my writing, which had moved at such a fast pace that it did not include much self-censoring and only paused for reflection during reflective assignments. As someone who is physiologically rather than culturally deaf,⁷ I've used these increasingly sophisticated bits of technology on every day of my remembered life to navigate the hearing world, participating in verbal environments each day and never learning sign language beyond the basic alphabet. My careers as a business development specialist or as a professor would still be possible without them, but they would look quite different. I had intuitively known all this before taking Minnie Bruce's class. How could I not? But now I was face to face with it on the page. On many pages.

⁶Pratt was an internationally recognized poet, activist, and educator who passed away in June 2023. She is much missed.

⁷Cultural Deafness (usually connoted through the capitalized D), describes folks who use sign language, socialize in Deaf communities, and attend Deaf schools such as Gallaudet. Hard of hearing or physiological deafness (usually connoted through the small d) describes folks who largely exist in mainstream environments and may have little or variable contact with cultural Deafness. Indeed, for most of my life I knew no other d/Deaf people.

The Third Juncture

The following spring semester, I taught the first iteration of what would eventually become my Persuasive Robots class. While our discussions began with automata tales from ancient Greece and China, they rapidly moved to modern and then contemporary periods, spending a fair amount of time on issues with robots, AI, or algorithms that we all face today. We began thinking together about cyborgs by watching the RoboCop remake and then reading Andy Clark's *Natural Born Cyborgs*. Clark suggests that far from the sort of visually dramatic human-machine integration depicted in movies like RoboCop, humans are already functioning cyborgs when we perform tasks like externalizing our memory on post-its or calendars. The students and I spent a lot of time discussing whether or not they thought this applied to them, and then I repeated a move I'd made before in my technology seminars: taking my hearing aids out, letting them be passed around the room, and asking the group if I was still their professor without my hearing aids. The usual reactions ensued: big-eyed stares, confusion, stammering. We worked through it, and then I asked them: "Am I a cyborg?" It was the first time I'd thought to ask that question, even of myself. Nobody was comfortable making the claim that I definitely was, not even me. But we kept coming back to it in the following weeks as they wrestled with the construction of the cyborg, and then I kept coming back to it long after the class was over.

Long-term wearers of today's algorithmically driven hearing aids enter into a symbiotic relationship with their aids, particularly with the multiple smart algorithms that separate syllables, reduce background or wind noise, minimize feedback, and in my case, compress high-range sounds down into my lower hearing range. Daily work with any hearing aids, but particularly AI-driven ones, shapes the wearer's abilities at a very deep cognitive level, working with the brain's neuroplastic nature to maintain or rebuild the auditory cortex. Keeping a healthy auditory cortex in turn contributes to mental health on a number of levels by encouraging real-time problem solving as I parse and participate in conversations. Being able to participate in conversations increases the likelihood of engaging in social interaction, which leads to the considerable benefits of being in community and reducing loneliness, which studies have shown are essential elements of flourishing and living a long, healthy life.⁸ They also increase the wearer's likelihood of finding romantic partnership and engaging in economic participation, as I've written about elsewhere.⁹

At the same time that the algorithms are influencing these fundamental aspects of my existence, my use contexts and patterns consistently train the multiple algorithms of the aid, teaching them preferred sound levels, commonly encountered speech types, and acoustical dimensions of listening environments. This human-machine collaboration is ongoing, personal, and complex, and any disruption, particularly lengthy ones, will

⁸For a roundup of recent research on this topic see, among others, Ross, Elizabeth. "What is Causing Our Epidemic of Loneliness and How Can We Fix It?" *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, 25 Oct. 2024, www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/24/10/what-causing-our-epidemic-loneliness-and-how-can-we-fix-it; and *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. US Public Health Service, 2023. www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.

⁹See, Kennedy, "I Forgot I'm Deaf!"

inevitably have a substantial impact on cognitive health. Consistent hearing aid use has been linked with reduced instances of dementia (Lin and Black), and maintaining an influx of verbal information strengthens the neural pathways needed for language processing, preventing the brain's neuroplastic nature from repurposing those pathways or closing them altogether. This close interdependence effectively transforms the wearer into a cyborg. Which means that I'm a cyborg, as is any disabled body that is directly interfaced with technology.¹⁰

As disability studies scholar and self-identified cyborg Jillian Weise contends, a disabled human wearing a compulsory medical device is in a completely different category than an able-bodied human who has opted to wear a device like a FitBit or to engage in biohacking. In theory, humans always have the choice to interface with a smart device or not. We decide to purchase and wear a FitBit or Apple Watch for biometric monitoring, possibly to keep an eye on exercise or sleep levels. Maybe your doctor recommended it or maybe you just felt it was a good idea. If you wear it and it enhances your understanding of your body and goals, then it's worked. If it flags a potential issue before it becomes a real issue, then it's a tremendous success. You decide to begin wearing it and you can take it off at any time. For Weise, such wearers are 'tryborgs' rather than cyborgs, wearers who do not truly experience what it means to be interfaced with and dependent on a medical device.

While the distinction between tryborg and cyborg is a useful concept that I rely on in both teaching and scholarship, I believe that the distinction is not as hard as Weise presents, just as the distinction between able-bodied and disabled bodies exists on a spectrum. For many bodies, aging is a central factor in that spectrum: what of the elderly person who lives alone, still gets around fairly well, but wears an Apple Watch because they want to be sure that someone will be notified if they fall? Or who has just a bit of arrhythmia that they want to keep a close eye on? They could ostensibly just take off the watch, but the cost would be higher for them than it would be for a weekend warrior who takes off their FitBit. The cost is still higher for those who interface with a compulsory medical device—that is, a device that is not really optional for maintaining one's body or its functions. Sure, I could decline to wear hearing aids. You probably have a relative who has in fact declined to wear theirs. In practice, though, would you decline a pacemaker that would permit you to live another 20 years? An insulin pump that would save you from organ damage while substantially smoothing out your days and extending your life by decades? A smart prosthetic leg like Weise's? Or, as in my case, a smart hearing aid that helps a physiologically deaf body go about its verbally-focused days as a professor, an engaged community member, a member of a family that only speaks English rather than signs? It's likely that you would not decline many of these things if you needed them.¹¹

¹⁰For more on the necessity of disability in the definition of the cyborg, see, Kafer, Alison. "The Cyborg and the Crip: Critical Encounters." *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013; Thomson; Weise.

¹¹Hearing aids do have a low rate of successful adoption, although that is changing as people gain more experience with wearing objects such as earbuds throughout their lives. The 30.2% adoption rate of 2015 rose to 39.1% by 2022 (Jorgensen).

Another factor of being a cyborg is facing mundane mechanical problems: when these devices break, the consequences are immediate. “The tryborg is always distanced by metaphor, guesswork, and desire,” writes Weise, who wears a prosthetic leg. “When my leg suddenly beeps and buzzes and goes into ‘dead mode’—the knee stiffens; I walk like a penguin—the tryborg is alive without batteries. When I sound like a bomb in a liquor store, the tryborg hurries on, nonelectric.” When my hearing aid unexpectedly runs out its charge, I miss face-to-face meetings, text my partner instead of talking, and would find it substantially more difficult to teach my discussion-based classes. This isn’t something I necessarily experience as hardship, but rather as an inconvenient facet of regular life: being a cyborg means managing technological breakdown, much like having a body means skinned knees or being in the occasional sling or cast. The ups and downs of cyborg life are a way of being, as foundational disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson noted decades ago: “For people with disabilities, such hybridization is often consonant with actual experience [rather than a metaphor]. The disabled person fuses the physically typical with the physically atypical. The disabled body is also often merged with prosthetics such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, or white canes. [...] All persons with physical disabilities thus embody the ‘illegitimate fusion’ of the cultural categories ‘normal,’ which qualifies people for human status, and ‘abnormal,’ which disqualifies them. Within this liminal space, the disabled person must constitute something akin to identity”—the identity of the cyborg (114).

One of the most modern core differences between the tryborg and the cyborg is the nature of consenting to algorithmic data collection. Both experience algorithmic data collection, and indeed that may be the entire reason that most folks opt in to wearing fitness devices. In this case, if the wearer wants to stop collection, they could simply remove the device. The cyborg faces a different situation: their consent to integration with the device is driven by essential bodily needs or functions such as insulin or cardiac regulation. The data collected tracks their every heartbeat or the chemical results of every morsel consumed or the noise levels and voice tones of every environment and person throughout the day. Consent is far less meaningful when the wearer doesn’t have a real choice (Tschider, “The Consent Myth”; “Meaningful Choice”).

When I first began wearing a smart hearing aid in 2014, I was both fascinated and horrified by its geolocation functions, even as I benefitted from them.¹² My current AI hearing aids also track my steps and falls; the next generation of hearing aids will also likely be able to track blood alcohol levels through the thin skin of ears. I can revoke consent for some but not all of this data collection and even with consent, the manufacturer doesn’t disclose how and to what extent the information is de-identified, where it is stored and under what security conditions, or when and to whom it is sold.¹³ Because of the high costs of a set of AI hearing aids—my current ones cost \$5,000, paid for with insurance and research funds, and need to be replaced every four to five years—

¹²See Kennedy, Krista. “Designing for Human-Machine Collaboration: Smart Hearing Aids as Wearable Technologies.” *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2018, pp. 40–51, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3188387.3188391>.

¹³See Kennedy, Krista, et al. “Balancing the Halo: Data Surveillance Disclosure and Algorithmic Opacity in Smart Hearing Aids.” *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 33–74, <https://doi.org/10.5744/rhm.2021.1003>.

the data collected is assuredly almost entirely based on white collar and middle-class or better environments, thus ensuring that even if the costs do eventually fall within the reach of working class wearers, the R&D will not have been based on the noisier work environments that they very likely encounter.¹⁴

For these and other reasons, being a cyborg carries risk of harm and is never outside the legislative realm and therefore the political realm. This has been true since the advent of smart prosthetics and is increasingly true today. The inability to revoke consent to data collection poses new risks in the era of DOGE,¹⁵ when data is being collected, consolidated, and weaponized. If I attend a protest while wearing my hearing aids, will that geolocative data eventually be collected? Will it imperil me or others associated with me? A year ago, it wouldn't have occurred to me to worry about this particular aspect; now, the future implications are much hazier.

Thinking through these ethical and legal dimensions of cyborg life has transformed my research agenda: where before my fascination with data ethics focused on information compendiums, now I'm wending my way through questions about the ethics of algorithmic data collection in compulsory medical wearables. It's also required that I reconsider the ethics of my theoretical apparatus and broaden that lens. The ways that Western new materialism or object-oriented ontologies (OOO) apolitically flattens agency, rendering humans, technological components, and amoebas (among other things) as equal agents, became less useful as my agenda later turned to considering disabled bodies and their direct interface with technologies. As generations of disability studies scholars have argued, the disabled body has long been culturally constructed as having little or no political or economic agency (see, Burch and Rembis; Rose; Schweik; others) and assistive technologies carry with them very different rhetorical implications than popular gadgets. Consider, for example, the rhetorical differences between a motorcycle and a mobility scooter, and the different ways that those technologies interact with humans, funding, politics, and cultural constructions of agency. In search of materialist theory that accounted for agentic difference, my theoretical reading has taken a turn into feminist materialist theory and, lately, toward indigenous ways of understanding animacy and reciprocity. This literature is transforming not just my scholarship but also the ways I consider and relate to the animals and other nonhumans in my house, community, and the wider world. Ethically considering the entangled relationship between cyborg bodies and technologies has also led me to an interest in autoethnography as a rigorous research method (see, Kennedy and Long).

These questions about the cultural construction of the cyborg and the ethics and risks of algorithmic data collection have led my legal studies collaborator, Charlotte Tschider, and I to think extensively about a string of related questions: whether or not cyborgs should be a protected class, given the enhanced risk of harm they face; what

¹⁴See, Kennedy, Krista, and Noah Wilson. "The Banality of Digital Aggression: Algorithmic Data Surveillance in Medical Wearables." *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression*, edited by Jessica Reyman and Erika Sparby, Routledge, 2019, pp. 214–230.

¹⁵DOGE is the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency, launched at the beginning of Trump's second term. The department's ostensible goal has been broad cost cutting, but it has also undertaken unprecedented collection and consolidation of citizens' data.

appropriate privacy doctrine might involve for wearers of compulsory medical devices, and what ethical patient (and provider) education concerning algorithmic data collection might look like.¹⁶ We're currently at work on a co-authored book titled *Cyborg Health: The Law and Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in Health Care*. This work, along with daily life in the professoriate, has also led me to sort through the ways my own cyborg life has developed over time and to explore the intersection of education, technology, deafness, and chronic pain. This trajectory has resulted in creative publications that are quite different from the academic writing that has been my bread and butter for many years: an essay,¹⁷ a poem,¹⁸ and that eighty pages that I drafted in Minnie Bruce's class has evolved into a creative nonfiction book project that I'm currently calling *Attuning: A Deaf Cyborg Education*.



¹⁶See, Tschider, Charlotte A., and Krista Kennedy. "Legal Issues in Cybernetics and Robotics." *The Law of Artificial Intelligence and Smart Machines*, edited by Theodore F. Claypoole. American Bar Association, 2019, pp. 281–301; Tschider, Charlotte A., and Krista Kennedy. "Data Discrimination: The International Regulatory Impasse of AI-Enabled Devices." *Legal, Social, and Ethical Perspectives on Health and Technology*, edited by Motahareh Fathisalout-Bollon and Anna Berti Suman, Presses Universitaires Savoie Mont Blanc, 2020, pp. 147–168.

¹⁷See, Kennedy, Krista. "Being Seen Deaf, or, Pools as Borders." *Tendon Magazine*, Johns Hopkins Center for Medical Humanities and Social Medicine, 2019. <https://hopkinsmedicalhumanities.org/tendon-magazine/being-seen-deaf-or-pools-as-borders/>.

¹⁸See, Kennedy, Krista. "Being Ecological | Ecological Being." *Wordgathering: A Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022, <https://wordgathering.com/vol16/issue2/manifestos/kennedy/>.

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Difficult Negotiations: *Daiva* Worship within a Matrilineal Feudal Society

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I stand before the *daiva*¹ (the spirits that are associated with the protection of a feudal agrarian society and are worshipped in certain regions of southern coastal Karnataka, India) and in the *chavadi* (the enclosed sacral space where the ritual of *daiva* worship is held). The space is too small to accommodate the devotees who have gathered there. The women are huddled at one end, carrying babies or holding on to little children. The men are at the other end crowding into each other. It is the day of the *nema* (one of the rituals of *daiva* worship), the annual ritual of the *daiva*, and the extended family has come together. The male members of the family are standing beside the *ujjal* (a wooden swing which is hung in the *chavadi* on which the sacred paraphernalia of *daiva* worship are placed) on which is placed, before the ritual begins, the silver breast plate, the silver sword, and the silver mask bearing the face of the boar with its long golden tongue hanging out. The men of the family stand in a prominent place beside the *ujjal*, for they will have to participate in the ritual conversation with the *daiva* and answer the questions it asks of them. The *chavadi* is filled with the sound of the *vadya* (the synchronized music

¹*Daivaaraadhane* is a faith tradition and a form of ritual worship that exists in the southern districts of coastal Karnataka and the northern tip of the Malabar region in Kerala. The power that is worshipped through the ritual called as *Nema* or *Kola* can be worshipped in the form of an animal like a boar or a bull. It can also be the deified spirit of a brave warrior who met with an untimely death fighting on behalf of the weak against the might of the powerful. Very often the stories of these warriors would describe them as having died fighting against the might of the inhuman landlord. These powers are part of the agrarian feudal world and in them the human and the animal intersect with each other. The sacral space where these powers are worshipped is called as the *chavadi*. It has a *ujjal* or wooden swing in which is placed the silver sword of the *daiva*. A lamp is lighted before the *ujjal* every evening, all through the year, and the *ujjal* is the focal point of the *chavadi*. All landholding households called as *guthus* will have a *chavadi* and a *daiva* attached to it.

For more information on *daivaaraadhane*, see, Gowda, Chinnappa K. *Mask and the Message*. Madipu Prakashana, 2005; Upadhyaya, Padmanabha U. *Coastal Karnataka: Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India*. Rashtrakavi Govind Pai Samshodhana Kendra, 1996; Hari, Kumar K. *Daiva: Discovering the Extraordinary World of Spirit Worship*. Harper Collins India, 2024; Padmanabha, P. *Special Study Report on Bhuta Cult in South Kanara District*. Census of India, Series 14, Census of India, 1971; Ishii, Misho. *Modernity and Spirit worship in India: An Anthropology of the Umwelt*. Routledge New Horizons in South Asian Studies, 2020. This list was prepared by my research student, Nandakishore, who is working towards his PhD Degree on the nineteenth century missionary transactions of the Basel Mission with the indigenous cultural world of the region, which is today called as Dakshina Kannada.

from a collection of musical instruments played during the *nema* consisting of the *kombu*, saxophone, and *chende*) and the smell of jasmines. The heat of the fire burning from the torch which is carried by the ritual torch bearer makes the small crowded space hot and cramped.

At the centre of the ritual space is the impersonator of the *daiva*. Wearing the silver mask of the boar, the breast plate which shapes into two rounded breasts with pebbled nipples and a protruding belly, and the heavy silver *gaggara* (a type of anklet made of brass or silver) which chimes with every step that he takes. He is dancing in a frenzy, swirling round and round and the garlands around his neck whirl and break loose into scattered jasmine petals. The sharp tip of the silver sword, held at the end of his outstretched hand, makes a circle around him drawing the boundary between the human and that which transcends the human. Slowly the man has been replaced by a hybrid creature that is female above the waist and male below, bearing the head of a boar. The boundaries between the species and the sexes, between the human and superhuman have melted and spread into each other. The nomenclatures through which I have been taught to know the world have been disarrayed and jumbled. The order of knowledge has been breached and a vast unknown cosmos of powerful presences, that rule through fear and authority, that manifest themselves through the miracle of birth and the presence of the dead among the living, has been reinstated through the ritual of the *daiva*. I am struck by the incompleteness of knowing anything in all its fulness to the point of closure. The human impersonator has been transformed through the transcendence of faith into a powerful force that bears kinship to the fertility of the fields and all that grows in them and around them, that guards over the many offshoots of life that are interlinked through the hierarchies of a feudal agrarian order, and regulates the cycles of the seasons. Resplendent in his ritual garb, he who in the quotidian ordinariness of social living is placed low in the caste order has been made ritually sacrosanct, uttering prophecies and deciphering omens and signs to those who, through the power that is belief, have metamorphosed him into the *daiva*.

I, the descendent of a long female line, born into a matrilineal family, stand before the *daiva*. I, who teach in the university, who has held conversations on gender and politics and society with many generations of students, stand there at the intersection of multiple epistemologies. I have read with my students the archives of the imagination from across the world. I have debated with them on the many imaginaries of human communities and the structures of power that traverse these communities and structure them. I have felt with them the terror of the plague stricken Thebans and watched the horrifying self-blinding of Oedipus. Could he not bear to see what the sightless Tiresias had known at the beginning of human time? Or is it that he could not bear the sight of himself, that had been revealed to him retrospectively, in a blinding vision of horror?

If I were to be asked for my address on the map that charts the spectrum between atheism and belief, I would give a pin code of that region that traverses across the many milestones of agnosticism. But in that *chavadi* I am no longer certain. I am too timid to open myself to the boundlessness of belief that disturbs and distorts the lexical order of reason and rationality. I grope my way through the opacity of faith, trying to grasp and understand those leaps into the beyond of history. I try to wrench apart the protocols of understanding into which I have been trained, and attempt to structure new protocols of

knowing that are commensurate with the phenomenon of many transcendences that are generated and reaffirmed in that *chavadi*. I stand there balancing precariously on a liminal threshold. I do not know the beginning or the end of that threshold, and whether I walk in or walk out through it. I stand on that threshold as I slowly melt into both sides of the threshold. Those standing around me have so easily crossed that threshold that only I can see as a threshold. They have crossed it many times without ever experiencing it as an act of border crossing. I have struggled to communicate with those experiences that emanate from the materiality of human existence and yet transcend that existence. I have only been able to appropriate them through the nomenclatures and systems of knowledge that are generated and disseminated from within the institutional structures of academia. How do I dismantle the order of that academic discourse and open it to the nascent unruliness of the irrational? How do I legibilize that which has not yet been languaged into the abstractions of knowledge systems? How do I inhabit worlds that are amenable to epistemologies that are alien to me? And why do I need to enter those worlds on their own terms?

Teaching a paper on gender I take recourse to Nivedita Menon. She writes of how the mystical experience of bhakthi “expressed a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the loss of maleness as power and the loss of femaleness as sexualized powerlessness” (57). In order to illustrate how the bhakthi saints “demystified the body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that ‘sex’ the body,” she quotes the tenth century Bhakthi poet, Devara Dasimayya:

If they see breasts and long hair coming,
They call it woman,
If beard and whiskers
They call it man.
But look, the self that hovers in between
is neither man nor woman... (qtd. in Menon 57)

Maybe this is the extreme edge of knowing that we can reach, through the structures through which we have been trained into knowing. We cannot go beyond our knowing without losing the power of legibility. But that beyond of knowing is always there at the edges of lucidity, entering through tiny fissures and breaches, and forcing the renewal of knowing or threatening its disaggregation.

The male members of my family occupy the space adjacent to the *ujjal*. The *chavadi* is mapped into a graded order of sacral spaces with the *ujjal* at the centre of it. It is adjacent to this *ujjal* that communication is established between the *daiva* and the male members of the family. They have the privilege of carrying out the ritual conversation with the *daiva*, making requests of it and answering questions posed by it. Although they belong to a matrilineal family and although they occupy the privileged space in the *chavadi* by virtue of tracing their descent through their mother’s line, they, not their mothers or sisters or daughters, have the privilege of standing before the *daiva* and talking to it. But they can only speak to it in their *mother* tongue.

They can enter the *chavadi* all through the year without desecrating it, unless they bear the pollution of the death of a kin related through their mothers’ descent line. But

menstruating women and women who have not yet completed the mandated number of days after child birth cannot enter the *chavadi* as they are considered to be ritually impure. When I menstruated for the first time, the first thing my mother told me was to not enter the temple or the *chavadi* during those days. I was not told the reason why. That all the women before me had obeyed this order was ratification of its authority. Every year, in the month of February, a ritual called *keddasa* is offered to the *daiva* which is a celebration of the menstruating earth. The field on which the ritual is held has to be drenched with blood. The headless bodies of fowls beheaded by the *daiva* are left to bleed into the cracked dry earth of the field. Cockfights take place in the evening of the *nema* and the wounded birds bleed into the field. The blood that makes stains on the dusty surface of the field and trickles into its fissures, ritually symbolises the menstrual blood of the bleeding earth. The devotees gathered there celebrate the earth's fecundity which will sprout in the paddy field, the vegetable patches, the areca nut and coconut gardens and the banana groves. When did my menstruating body and those of my grandmothers become impure? How did the blood of a menstruating body become polluting in an agrarian world that survives on the fertile bounty of the earth? When did the fertility of her body debar a woman from entering those sacral spaces that celebrated fertility as an awe inspiring and life sustaining force that is to be venerated? How can the *daiva*, bearing breasts of silver which suckle those who turn to it as a mother, deny breast, bleeding, child bearing women entry into her *chavadi*?

I stand before the *daiva*. It is pointing its silver sword towards me and making cradling gestures. I understand it to mean that it will nurture and protect me as a mother. It will protect me as a member of the female line that from mother to daughter has offered it its annual rituals and submitted to its power. When I became a mother I became a stranger to myself. Turned blind with the dazzling intensity of an emotion that made me perpetually vulnerable I had to braille read my body and the relationships through which I had hitherto lived my life. This tiny creature, gouged out of my flesh was so delicate that I did not know how to fold it into my cradling arms and suckle it. I would never again be free of the obligation to protect another human being that held me to it with threads that were stronger than steel cables. Would I be imprisoned by the strength of that entwining with another life, that would last as long as my life? I too could create life but did I have the power of the *daiva* to protect what I had created? Did I have the strength needed to care for another with whom I was welded with such intensity of emotions that it made me perpetually brittle? I look at the *daiva* and bow before it with opened palms placed together. Is it a gesture of supplication? Gratitude? I don't know.

The ritual dance has come to an end. The offering of puffed rice and tender coconut has been made. The mask has been removed and the time for talking to the *daiva* has arrived. The mediator between men and the *daiva* has initiated a conversation. He is the bearer of the ritual status of an interlocutor. A request has to be made. A permission has to be granted by my family to the group of villagers who crowd round the *daiva*. The feudal agrarian hierarchies are reinstated and enacted in that *chavadi* through the supplication of the villagers.

The dialogue between the *daiva* and the devotees begins. I am among the women to whom I am bound through the kinship of grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and sisters. We are on the margins of the dialogue of men with the half female *daiva*. But,

when the *daiva* speaks, s/he speaks the language of men. First the male members of the family are asked for their opinion. Then the *thantri* (member of a subset of Brahmins in Kerala and Karnataka who are allowed to perform temple rituals) is asked for his opinion. There is a male consensus that the request of the villagers should be granted. They want to renew a ritual to the *daiva* that has been stopped. They want to be allowed to borrow the sacred ornaments of the *daiva* to conduct that ritual. Both the human and superhuman participants of the ritual are in agreement that the request should be granted. But the women cannot be left out of this decision. The land belongs to them and the rituals of the *daiva* are carried out by them. They have to be asked for their opinion too, however unnecessary it may seem and however reluctantly it is conceded to. My mother is called before the *daiva*, as the eldest member of the female line. She is old and fragile. The *daiva* asks for her opinion. She does not agree to give the jewellery of the *daiva* which is in her safe keeping. She cannot grant permission for what is being asked. She foresees trouble if the request is granted. Acceding to this request will split the village into two warring factions. Across the years she has had to be vigilant to keep the quarrels of the different factions in the village and in her *kutumba* (the extended matrilineal family) from entering the *chavadi*. It has been difficult and sometimes these animosities have sneaked into the *chavadi* evading her watch.

She has seen too many struggles for power played out on the battlefield of the *chavadi*. She has been too often pulled into the politics of a feudal patriarchal system, where the interests of caste and gender, of tenants and landowners and landowning families are pitted against each other. She is cynical. Like Tiresias she has seen it all and can foretell the rest. She refuses permission. The *daiva* tries to persuade her, her nephews try to cajole and coax her, the *thantri* tries to use the authority of his position and caste, but she is stubborn in her refusal. She has lived too many years to be in awe of the systems by which she was framed into a matriarch. She cannot be persuaded. She tires of the persistence of the demand made on her and leaves the *chavadi* abruptly, a stubborn old woman who can stand up to the *daiva* and the male members of her family.

At a time when women were rarely educated, she and her sister had been educated beyond the limits laid for women. But when her sister had said that she wanted to become a doctor, her father who was a doctor had refused. Instead, both sisters had been allowed to pursue a post graduate course in psychology. They completed the course from Benares Hindu University through the distance education mode. And every year, for two years, they had travelled to Benares with a group of fellow students and friends to take the examinations. She did not speak much about it to us. Both sisters had been married after completing the course and they did not pursue a career. What we knew of her youth was given in bits and pieces tagged to conversations in the present. But the friends of those days had remained with her. Her release from the domesticity of marriage was through annual trips across India with these friends. She kicked off her domesticity for those days and returned recuperated. When her mother died, my mother had been reluctantly pushed to take over the charge of the old crumbling ancestral house, built by her great grandmother. Her mother had bought the house and taken the responsibility of looking after the *daivas* that dwelt in it and ruled it when the house had been auctioned during the division of the property. My grandmother had refused the advice of her husband not to buy the house and bought her ancestral home with his earnings. My grandfather had died before I was born. But when my mother spoke of him I could hear the yearning for

a man who had gone askance of the masculinity required of a feudal landlord. Returning to her ancestral house my mother was forced to take a position that she had never wanted. But she had internalized the obligation of responsibility to her mother, the *daiva*, and the family, and she had learnt the difficult art of anticipating trouble and disarming it.

Now, I am called before the *daiva* and asked for my opinion. I agree with my mother's decision. I have had to keep watch over another intruder. I have had to keep the *chavadi* out of limits to right wing political forces that have spread across the country staining its spectrum of many hued sacral spaces, that flow from one delicate shade to another, with the uniformity of orange. Under the onslaught of these forces, the many spiritual traditions of conversing with God, in my country, have been uniformized into a monolithic political instrument of hate and anger called Hindutva. Through its divisive nomenclatures of insiders and outsiders it has normalized violence and murder. I have had to stand guard against the entry of this violence into the *chavadi*.

The more I have been pushed into the *chavadi* the more I have been dismantled by its belief systems, its ritual practices, and its community of worshippers. I have entered the ritual through a somatic experience. I have experienced it as the assembling of a community of believers, manifesting that most powerful of human needs, the need to believe in a power that transcends the human which will reinstate justice and order in the world. I have tried hard to experience it as an alternative cosmology and epistemology. I have experienced it as the coming together of a village community in all its vulnerabilities and fears.

This world has opened to me a new aesthetics of quotidian life in which that which grows from the land is crafted by hand and through skills that have been handed from generation to generation, to create the most beautiful offerings for the *daiva*. It is an aesthetics that rejects that most ubiquitous, synthetically produced material in our modern world, Plastic. My responsibility has been to maintain this fragile vulnerable complex onto-epistemic world, guarding it against the onslaught of regressive political interests and economic profiteering.

The entire battalion of patriarchal powers is pitted against us. I am assured of protection by the *daiva* if I agree to be docile to the demanding voices ranged against mine and that of my mother. I would be guarded against the excesses of those powers if I were to concede to their commands sheathed in the intricately wrought protocol of appeals. My male kinsmen are angry. They cannot be forceful in their habituated ways. In the *chavadi* they have to abide by the rules of matrilineality. They ask the *daiva* to give me some time to discuss the matter with them. They hope that prolonged pressure with additional forces on their side will make me malleable. The *daiva* turns to the *thantri*. The representative of Brahmin privilege in a caste hierarchized feudal world. There is a strange irony here. The two men who occupy the extreme ends of the caste order have come together in a patriarchal collusion. The social depth that separates them, which no social ladder can connect, has disappeared in that *chavadi* and they are speaking to each other on that horizontally flattened space of ritual conversation. Like all who have assembled there the *daiva* is sure that the word of the *thantri* will prevail. The *thantri* has been deified for the occasion through the ritual offering of fruits and flowers and the obsequy of low obeisances. The *thantri* is assured in his sense of self worth as a Brahmin, and is sure that his authority will not be defied. Sitting outside the *chavadi*, facing the

daiva through the door of the *chavadi*, he has watched with distaste the ritual of asking women for consent. He is not allowed inside the *chavadi*. Whether it is because he will pollute the *chavadi* or the *chavadi* will pollute him I do not know. He is now angry. How can two women defy the battalion of male power and the authority of the *daiva*. He whose mere presence is believed to sanctify the space it envelops, how can he be defied. He speaks angrily, “Who are these women who will listen neither to the voice of men nor to the voice of the *daiva*? What kind of stubbornness is this? Do they even know what they are saying? Let them give their consent immediately.”

I stand before him, calm and indifferent. I remember Ambedkar, “There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system. It is the system which deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people, from helpful activity” (276). But where is that social space into which caste does not permeate? Is there a fraternity that is not shaped by the asymmetries of multiple intersecting hierarchies? In that *chavadi* and outside it, we are all placed in our particular position along the slopes of social privilege and position. And we keep shifting our position along those slopes. In the space of ritual worship the *thantri* is placed on the top of that graded slope along with the *daiva*. But on the slope of matrilineal kinship and feudal landownership, my mother and I are placed on the same level of privilege. Within academia I enter the asymmetries of knowing and not knowing. It is here that I have struggled to understand and erase, to devise ways by which to negotiate with and rearrange these graded structures of power. I am able to defy the many structures of power that traverse the *chavadi*, only because I too occupy its higher levels and exercise the prerogatives it gives me. Can the disparities of power only be disarrayed, never done away with? Does the disruption of the existing orders of power take place only within and through the exercise of that power, albeit in a subversively deviant manner?

I refuse the command of the *thantri* very politely and walk away. He is perplexed and outraged. Maybe for a moment he too feels the ladder of social hierarchy wobbling beneath him. But as he looks at the faces of the men ranged around him, he is reassured. They too are outraged. They are equals in their common rage. He rises angrily and walks away saying that he will never again attend the ritual in this *chavadi*. People come to me asking me to change my mind. I refuse. I cannot be coerced with anger or authority. The ritual has become a game of thrones. Maybe that is what it always was. An intricately choreographed dance of power. Each dancer trying to shore up his position of authority through a spectacular display of the power of that position. Women, whether in their divine or human manifestation, have been allowed into this theatre of power. They are celebrated for their fertility and they are celebrated as the links in the kinship line. In them the past and the present come together. They manage the *daivas* and they talk back to the men even as they are coerced into a difficult docility. And they struggle to defy the authority of their uncles and nephews.

Do I belong to that *Chavadi*? I who reside in multiple worlds, each skeptical of the other. What powers of decision making do I inherit from these worlds? In that ancestral house I hold the power of a future matriarch, the daughter of the present matriarch. It is a matriarchy that supports and subsists on the hierarchy of caste and landed power. Can I use that power to undermine the foundations on which it stands? I

am confused. Theory and praxis do not seem to meet. How do I make them commensurate with each other?



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Corporeality and Transcendence: Physicality, Suffering, and Eroticism in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*

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Abstract | This essay explores the relationship between the notion of corporeality in its various connotations, notably its aesthetic aspects, and the iconography of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966). The focus on the individual that struggles to achieve the desired transcendence through both artistic production and the gradual development of a conscious poetic relationship to everyday life has interesting philosophical connotations: our focus is not as much on the spiritual aspects of this exploration, as in the corporeal, sensual element that is carefully linked with natural environment in Tarkovsky's narratives. In Tarkovsky's films, and *Andrei Rublev* in particular, the desired transcendence is achieved through the flesh, through the focus on the human body. In this respect, phenomenology proves to be more than a tool for reading the film: the relationship between the present (difficult to approach) and the past (both collective, manifested in culture, and personal, approached through memory) lies at the heart of the film. The relationship between such philosophical concerns and the iconography of the film, the reconstruction of a medieval time, notably depicted as direct and approached through the senses rather than distant like an ideological construction, will be explored through the lens of poetry, perceived as a way to approach everyday life and an almost fetishistic visual and narrative emphasis on a physical violence, the other face of sensuality.

Keywords | Flesh, Corporeality, Transcendence, Violence, Phenomenology, Physicality, Perception, Eroticism, Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev*

In the opening shots of *Andrei Rublev* (1966), a fantasy of the 15th century, in a yet unidentified time and place that already, in its ambiguity, seems to allude to the medieval past, an attack takes place near an abandoned church, in an isolated area by the river. A villager named Yefim attempts to fly in a primitive balloon, patched together out of skins and other raw material, to escape his yet unidentified pursuers, a group of attackers who follow him persistently by boat (*Andrei Rublev* 00:04:47–00:05:03). As he sets off, there is a sense of accomplishment, a dream-like quality, even if momentary (00:05:37–00:06:42); like Yefim's flight, an emphasis on the subjective feeling of transcendence overshadows what we would conventionally call suspense, a rational interest in his fate. His inevitable crash is followed by the shot of a horse, rolling over in slow motion, on the ground (00:07:01–00:07:16). The events, enigmatic in nature, are unrelated to the plot and, up to an extent, to the thematic heart of the subsequent events of the film.¹

One would be tempted to interpret such vivid images through surrealism or psychoanalytic theory and indeed their sensual power and dependence on free association seem to encourage such readings, yet Tarkovsky's often stated skepticism towards both movements on the one hand and the recognition of a totally different cultural background on the other indicate that any reading founded in symbolistic principles could easily prove to be misleading.² Spirituality as an alternative interpretive lens is not safer for our purposes, in the sense that not only can the term be characterized as conveniently broad—in different contexts, the general idea of spirituality could mean almost anything—it also seems to be founded on the well-documented knowledge of Tarkovsky's Christian beliefs

¹Both versions, the 1966 theatrical release *The Passion According to Andrei* and the highly edited 1969 *Andrei Rublev*, follow a fragmented structure consistent with phenomenology's emphasis on fleeting impressions, the often-fragmented character of Byzantine art, and the work of the historical Andrei Rublev in particular. The lifespan of the historical Andrei (often spelled Andrey) Rublev has notably been described as "an age of fragmentation and foreign occupation" in the recent 2023 book-length study *Andrey Rublev: The Artist and His World* (Milner-Gulland 30). See, Milner-Gulland, Robin. *Andrey Rublev: The Artist and His World*. Reaktion Books, 2023.

²Memorably summarized in *Sculpting in Time*:

I have a horror of tags and labels. I don't understand, for instance, how people can talk about Bergman's 'symbolism'. Far from being symbolic, he seems to me, through an almost biological naturalism, to arrive at the spiritual truth about human life that is important to him. The point is that the depth and significance of a director's work can only be gauged in terms of what makes him shoot something: motivation is the decisive factor, manner and method are incidental. (149–150)

A more poetic phrasing of the same idea can be found in his published journals *Time within Time: The Diaries, 1970–1986*:

The basic principle—as it were, the mainspring—is, I think, that as little as possible has to be shown, and from that little the audience has to build up an idea of the rest, of the whole. In my view that has to be the basis for constructing the cinematographic image. And if one looks at it from the point of view of symbols, then the symbol in cinema is a symbol of nature, of reality. Of course, it isn't a question of details, but of what is hidden. (65)

rather than Tarkovsky's films themselves which often contrast orthodox mysticism with 20th century psychological realism (both *Andrei Rublev* and *Sacrifice* carefully explore the theme of despair), naturalistic depictions of rural life, the motif of a latent but persistent eroticism, a consistent dialogue with different cultural contexts through allusions to eastern and European iconography and even some pre-Christian motifs. Indeed, an aspect often ignored, or at least played down, is that throughout Tarkovsky's oeuvre, and in *Andrei Rublev* in particular, sexuality, pagan elements, and an overall emphasis on the human body as an extension of the earth dominate the iconography. That is a corporeal sensual element, which has its roots away from the platonic and neo-platonic distrust in the flesh,³ echoed in most metaphysical worldviews.

To address such difficulties, this paper attempts an alternative interpretive point of view; it explores the relationship between certain philosophical themes and motifs, namely the often-misunderstood *relationship between corporeality and transcendence*, a scene familiar to us from midcentury existentialism, both continental and Russian (I am referring here to thinkers like Lev Shestov and Nikolai Berdyaev) and the medieval iconography of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*. The existential focus on the individual who struggles to achieve the desired transcendence through both artistic production and the gradual development of a conscious poetic relationship to everyday life has interesting philosophical connotations: our focus is not as much on the metaphysical aspects of this exploration, as it is in the corporeal, sensual element that is carefully linked with natural environment in Tarkovsky's narratives.

Andrei Rublev, rooted in various philosophical traditions, perceives the world not only through subjectivism but also as a work of art, as a field to be experienced. Memory, lust, the feelings of loss and grief, and other inner conditions are always attributed to corporeal expressions and the necessity of art; Rublev's yearnings are always to be understood in relation to a material reality, an outside situation. A current theoretical area that provides context for this often-radical approach is *phenomenology*, in its broader sense, in its emphasis on the notion of flesh and its subsequent interpretation of one's everyday perception of the world as a creative, artistic process, realized not intellectually but through the human body.

The research question I explore here is how the corporeal and the ecstatic are regulated narratively and thematically. Transcendence, even if given through a religious iconography and historical setting, is clearly approached in physical terms. This choice has a radical implication: the film expresses an interest not in cerebral or conventionally religious, but in haptic ways of approaching reality (exemplified through activities such as making works of art with one's hands, painting images, and constructing material objects like bells or walls, activities that the film presents in parallel and identifies with one another). It also carries a latent eroticism, closely related to physical pain. These two motifs structure *Andrei Rublev*, leading to a creative approach to life.

When it comes to the term "Transcendence," always difficult to approach, one can think of Kierkegaard's metaphysical, almost ecstatic, view and especially the later

³A notable example of this fundamental platonic belief can be found in the Plato's dialogue, *Phaedo*: "And, my friend, we must believe that the corporeal is burdensome and heavy and earthly and visible. And such a soul is weighed down by this and is dragged back into the visible world, through fear of the invisible and of the other world" (80b). See, Plato. *Phaedo*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, Hackett Publishing, 1977.

20th century's connotations that the term took as it was gradually distanced from overtly religious references. Kierkegaard perceives transcendence as a desire to dance, to walk on the edge as if one were an acrobat in order to escape outward limitations and achieve a sense of fulfillment.⁴ The focus on corporeality is mainly influenced by phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, a work that seeks the relationship between artistic creativity, perception of the world, and the dynamics of the human body. My main argument is that in Tarkovsky's films, *Andrei Rublev* in particular, the desired transcendence is achieved *through the flesh*, through the conscious focus on both the narrative structure and the imagery of the human body. The need for the artist to observe and inhabit the world *poetically*, in the literal verbal sense, that is *creatively*, is a natural extension of this corporeal priority. In this respect phenomenology, as expressed notably by Merleau-Ponty, a thinker who carefully links visual perception with creativity and even artistic production,⁵ proves to be more than a tool for reading the film. Merleau-Ponty discusses visual perception as an attempt to *create* meaning rather than accept it inactively. The perception of isolated objects is impossible, inconceivable. Everything is related to a context, most of all the observer, in many ways described as if he were a poet. Watching reality, for phenomenology, is a procedure that closely resembles artistic production, particularly visual arts. Observation of the world is understood as a process that gives rise to meaning through the senses (the sensual character of observation—notably the often-neglected fact that the *eye* is also part of the human body—is underlined (Merleau-Ponty 38), as a goal in itself, rather than a practical procedure or an attempt to approach a pre-determined reality. Ambiguity for phenomenologists has positive connotations exactly because it indicates the idea that life is open to possibility and interpretation; it is in this spirit that observance of the world proves necessary, an active creative procedure. Works like *Phenomenology of Perception* share with *Andrei Rublev* a belief in materiality and sensual experience, and a trust in an intended reconciliation between the subject that observes and the world as the object of this observation:

That is why we say that in perception the thing is given to us 'in person', or 'in the flesh'. Prior to and independently of other people, the thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance which descends into the world and begins its existence there, and

⁴The literature is too broad for the scope of this paper, but two informative and sensitive books worth mentioning here are *Alterity and Transcendence* (Emmanuel Levinas, 1995), where metaphysics is combined with 20th century political concerns. Levinas focuses on one's subjectivity and personal struggles but emphasizes on an individual's relationship with another person, an emphasis which differentiates the thinker's understanding of transcendence to Kierkegaard's approach); and the more recently translated *Transcendence and the Concrete* (Jean Wahl, 2017), where various existential thinkers and their different approaches on the persistent and often misunderstood notion of transcendence are analyzed thoroughly. Collectively the studies of Levinas and Wahl present the continental understanding of the term Transcendence and the various dynamics it is built on, one of which is clearly corporeality. See, Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, Columbia UP, 1999; Wahl, Jean. *Transcendence and the Concrete: Selected Writings*, edited by Alan D. Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore, translated by Ian Alexander Moore and Alan D. Schrift, Fordham UP, 2016.

⁵"A visual field is not made up of limited views. But an object seen is made up of bits of matter, and spatial points are external to each other. An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable, at least if we do the mental experiment of attempting to perceive such a thing. But in the world, there are either isolated objects or a physical void" (Merleau-Ponty 4).

which can be fully understood only when the eyes seek it in its own location.
(Merleau-Ponty 373)

The limits between materiality and sensual experience are sketched in *Andrei Rublev* as consciously fluid and ambiguous, a depiction that links the experience of life with a strongly ritualistic element, often revived in religious ceremonies or performative demonstrations, paintings, and other artistic explorations that tend to blur the lines between corporeality and the ecstatic. The term “ecstatic” at this point refers to an intended experience of sensual elevation that could be interpreted in erotic or religious terms, but always takes place at the realm of the flesh. A blurring of lines and certainties between corporeality and the ecstatic, an ambiguity that for phenomenologists has positive associations, is central to the structure and thematic concerns of *Andrei Rublev*. Cinema itself, based on close observation of reality and phenomenological in character, seems the natural culmination of this tendency in the 20th century. Observation, so important for the visual arts, is perceived in this context as a corporeal, almost sensual stance that calls for involvement in the material world—a world visually associated by the film with natural environments or pieces of architecture, like the destroyed church—rather than as a behavior that implies the need for detachment, as observation is often perceived in everyday life.

When it comes to *Andrei Rublev*’s understanding of the concept of corporeality, one can note three key factors that structure the film:

1. *Radicality of the Priority of the Flesh*

This is apparent when it comes to the phenomenological connotations of the focus on the human flesh. Subjectivity is understood only in a *dynamic* relationship with the outside environment and such a relation is physical by definition and revolutionary by extension, closely associated with the human body’s need for revolt. Tarkovsky’s narrative is not political in the literal sense of depicting social relations. It is actually rooted in subjective, often intuitional yearnings, and seems to consciously *negate* the kinds of historical allusions found, for example, in Eisenstein’s dialectical editing. Yet this does not preclude radicality; rather, it is the natural continuation of the perspective he expresses. The revolt I hint at refers to the often-violent confrontation with the contradictions of reality when experienced directly, immediately, and through the flesh, without the safety nets provided by rationalization. It is an experience, not a doctrine. Sensuality, as a means of approaching the world, encourages doubt in intellectual certainties and gives rise to ambiguity. The natural culmination of this blurring of limits is a creative impulse that is often violent, yet liberating.

The phenomenological associations of Tarkovsky’s fiction are most evident in his treatment of nature, which is consistently presented as a sentient entity, inseparable from those who inhabit it. Even if Tarkovsky’s narrative consciously keeps its distance from possible political stances and ideological preferences as interpretive tools, there is an inevitable political extension, the recognition of a radicality that lies in the core of the concern that structures the narrative: I am referring to Rublev’s desire to cultivate a more conscious relationship with the natural world, ideally achieving an identification with a pre-civilized, pre-rational realm of reality, exemplified by the trees and the earth themselves, which he seems to perceive as an extension of the human body. The Russian

villagers are likewise presented as inseparable from nature; they are interchangeable with it. The parallel editing of Yefim's fall and the horse's fall in the prologue of the film (00:07:01–00:07:16) offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this idea.

2. *Eroticism and Violence*

The link between the two is unmistakable. Suffering is to be understood as erotic and sensual in its depiction and the intended transcendence (a word often associated with spirituality) always prevails in physical terms. *Andrei Rublev* is a story of redemption and violence (culminating in a murder committed by Rublev himself) but the protestant concept of guilt as a personal error in judgement is absent. Guilt is understood as a physical condition, thus often depicted visually through an erotic iconography. A physical masochism emerges as the natural continuation of this corporeal priority. In this context, voluntary suffering should not be understood, I feel, as a spiritual or inner condition (as it might be in, for example, Ingmar Bergman's existentialism or Martin Scorsese's Catholicism) but as a sensual reality. This tendency is evident in multiple moments: from the depiction of Andrei being tied to a tree and violently kissed by a girl during the pagan ceremony, (00:56:16–00:56:20) to his later enigmatic vow of silence, which functions as an act of self-punishment rather than an expression of religious trust in the future. A proclivity toward martyrdom is mirrored in other acts of hostility toward the flesh that the film memorably depicts, notably the murder of young Foma by the Tatars, shown to collapse in slow motion, hit by an arrow in an evocative, lyric scene (01:47:18–01:47:20) and the torment of an authority figure inside a church preceded by the blinding of the masons (01:45:37–01:45:40), an act of physicality and symbolic importance in a film so concerned with seeing and observation. Overall, an enigmatic sensual aspect in lyric violence is evident. Which brings us to the third factor:

3. *Transcendence as a Corporeal Process*

The platonic call for escaping physicality to elevate oneself has little to do with *Andrei Rublev*. Depicted visually in physical terms and understood philosophically as a physical reality (rather than a mystic one), transcendence as a procedure, as an *experience*, is closely related to embodiment and even natural environment. As we shall see, the final optimistic declaration, "I will paint and you will construct bells," (02:52:10) can be interpreted exactly as a return to a celebration of creativity and artistic expression, *through physicality*.

What these dynamic factors—corporeality, eroticism, violence, and the desire for transcendence—share is the fact that, even though they initially seek to describe one's solitary journey for identity and self-expression, when included in a fictional narrative they inevitably refer to a subject's journey—an attempt by a person to reconcile with exterior reality. This need to approach whatever surrounds us (natural environment or historical events) is carefully linked with the artist's attempt to reconcile a present, difficult to approach, with a past both collective, manifested in culture and simultaneously deeply personal, approached through memory.

Consider, for example, the Bacchic song of the street jester, (00:09:03–00:11:47) whose lyrics satirically target the morals of priests, authority figures, and sexual behavior. This performance is closely linked to the everyday life of rural medieval Russia, in its simplicity, poverty, and immediacy, and at the same time the very idea of the past,

evoking a pre-Christian carnival tradition. Such a combination of collective and personal experience defines *Andrei Rublev*'s view of the Russian medieval past, as a collective dream that also communicates with an artist's inner needs. The relationship between such philosophical concerns and the iconography of the film, the reconstruction of 15th century—a medieval period depicted as archaic, timeless, and yet concrete and physical, rather than presented as exotic or distant like an ideological construction, see notably the weathered faces of the peasants in the inn (00:14:13) or the simplicity of the ritual of the Calvary in the snow (00:46:13–00:49:20)—will be explored in three distinct areas: First, through the lens of Poetry, a term of utmost importance in Tarkovsky's theoretical writings, notably in his essay *Sculpting in Time*. Poetry, in this context, is not to be understood as a genre of literature but rather as a dynamic way for the individual to approach reality and reconcile itself with it, through trust in memory and through an active sensitivity to the outside world.⁶ Secondly, through the almost fetishistic emphasis on physical *violence*, the other face of sensuality, closely related to a historical event, the destructive invasion of Tartars in medieval Russia, but also, in its extremity, closely linked to personal transcendence. Finally, through the *very idea* of reconstruction of the long-forgotten past as a vital need that echoes Albert Camus's and Søren Kierkegaard's interest in the very concept of narrative, in structuring one's lived experience through archetypes, existential heroes (the so-called "knight of faith," a term we will revisit soon), and stories that illuminate the subjective perception of reality.

Through the following open research questions, I intend to explore the nature of the relationship between the already mentioned scheme of corporeality and transcendence. Even if not strictly distinguished from one another, they could be organized in the following way:

- Do these two factors, corporeality and transcendence, form a dichotomy as opposite forces in *Andrei Rublev* in accordance with the traditional neo platonic reading, or is transcendence the natural continuation and culmination of the narrative's focus on the human body? The relationship between extreme violence, often sensualized and closely related to the film's perception of the medieval, and sensuality, the experience of the body in general, is clearly an area of interest when it comes to the study of this dichotomy. Is the emphasis on physical violence to be perceived as a form of transcendence in itself? Is it cathartic?
- Violence, a motif that dominates the narrative, is also sensual in its depiction. Its physicality is based on the fact that pain is also a corporeal experience. Even if it is immanent (in the sense of a direct feeling, an experience focused on the realm of everyday life), Tarkovsky also carefully links it with the historical events of the Tartar invasion—a transitional period that, like all transitional decadent eras, is not devoid of a lyrical aspect in its uncertainties and its apocalyptic tone.
- Is this narrative choice coherent with the already implied transcendental, cathartic power of physical cruelty and self-harm? And when it comes to the

⁶“There are some aspects of human life that can only be faithfully represented through poetry. But this is where directors very often try to use clumsy, conventional gimmickry instead of poetic logic. I'm thinking of the illusionism and extraordinary effects involved in dreams, memories and fantasies. All too often film dreams are made into a collection of old-fashioned filmic tricks, and cease to be a phenomenon of life” (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 30).

Middle Ages themselves, as a scenery and as a thematic concern for Tarkovsky, what is the importance of the coexistence of an oppressive violent physicality and a desire for the individual subject to transcend whatever persecutes it and reach accomplishment through reconciliation with the outside world? Can these desires be fulfilled, or does Rublev's journey indicate bitterness and constitutes the depiction of an absurd flight, not different from the one attempted by Yefim in his primitive balloon? I read such an attempt to fly, such a desire, in Rublev's need to live fully, passionately and creatively, to elevate and transcend himself to another realm, escape from bitterness, to lead a life as authentic as possible, by painting icons in the middle of chaos and foreign invasion, as if he lived in a peaceful environment, away from the struggles of a hostile reality. He is consistent in his spiritual (and sensual, artistic) yearnings. After all, there is something liberating in embracing irrationality.

The three queries lead us to *physicality*, *violence*, and *eroticism*, elements that structure the film both narratively and thematically. In line with Tarkovsky's belief in poetry, the film's plot, though closely tied to historical events and metaphysical beliefs and traditions, stems from an instinctive, childlike acceptance of the contradictions an individual encounters in life. In the context of the film, violence and suffering are almost indistinguishable from the erotic. The kiss the pagan girl gives to a tied Rublev (00:56:16) is a corporeal experience not radically different from the horrifying, realistic depiction of the blinding of the masons. Rublev's gradual acceptance of these contradictions builds to a climax in the Bell Scene, when, through the unexpected encouragement he gives the crying young boy, he turns to optimism, in the least optimistic moment possible (02:52:10). Corporeality and transcendence, when approached not as opposites, reveal a kind of ambiguity; an ambiguity the narrative constantly attempts not to resolve, but to embrace, *linking it* to poetry and creativity. Tarkovsky's alignment with philosophical traditions which are skeptical of rationalism—such as Russian Christian existentialists like Lev Shestov and Nikolai Berdyaev, and to an extent, Western phenomenology—supports this choice. The rational thinker according to Shestov is restrained to pre-determined ideas “Constrained by the truth itself” (24). Similarly, Berdyaev believes these self-afflicted constraints or self-imposed burdens limit western thought, in contrast to what he sees as a more liberating mixture of Bacchic and mystic elements in the Russian cultural tradition. Philosophy “in the west took on a character of rational abstraction. In Orthodoxy it preserved the inward integrality of the spirit” (Berdyaev 43).

The answers to such inquiries are interrelated and constitute interpretive attempts rather than absolute declarations. The medieval setting itself suggests the presence of a physical violence and an overall atmosphere of terror, imposed both by the foreign invaders and the Church authorities. At the same time the same medieval landscape that imposes suffering and fear, in its passions, superstitions and strong religious beliefs, often promises dream-like possibilities and liberating aspects. The medieval—always enigmatic and fetishized in the Western imagination as a time of extremities or mythic knighthood and often contrasted with rationalization and civilization in either negative or romanticized terms—is treated more literally in *Andrei Rublev*. The transition from paganism to Christianity is presented as an ongoing process, captured unforgettably in a pagan ceremony, depicted as sensual and haunting, yet *natural*. The threat this medieval ceremony poses for the monk Rublev is also an inner yearning or fear. This refusal to

project emotion inward and instead tie it to external realms of reality is closely linked to the very environment in which Tarkovsky sets the action: rural, transitional, *material*. The people who inhabit it—farmers and masons—are deeply connected to the land and to the physical world.

In this setting, *spirituality* (religious faith in its various transformations) and *artistic creation* (including manual activities, works that the average person would not normally consider poetic in this setting, such as the public's fascination with the bell in the climactic scene or the repairing of the walls of the Holy Trinity church), are both to be experienced instinctively and through sensory experience. By extension, Tarkovsky's general perception of the notion of "the medieval" has everything to do with the more concrete perception of an artistic production *based on the senses*. The three key forces we explore (Physicality, Suffering, and Eroticism) emerge as natural extension of this very world.

In the following paragraphs we will explore *Andrei Rublev's* perception of corporeality and transcendence through the relation between these concepts and three distinct areas of existential interest: the presumed *revolt of the body*, a desire that echoes mainly Albert Camus's views on corporeality (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21).⁷ The trust in *irrationality* as a theoretical background related to poetry and artistic production in itself and finally Tarkovsky's *yearning for otherness* as expressed through fight motifs and other visual indications of the main character show a tendency towards transcendence.

The Priority of Flesh

As we begin to analyze the visual and thematic motifs and themes that structure *Andrei Rublev*, we notice, as their natural extension, the creation of a visual dialogue between the individual and the material, natural world. The emphasis falls on the corporeal element as an expression of violent contradictions. Flesh in *Andrei Rublev* is persistently depicted and understood not as an indication of a peaceful reality but as an entity in revolt, an entity that *tends to rebel* both against outside reality and the existing status quo. Human bodies are constantly depicted to be dancing (the jester), (00:09:03–00:11:47) struggling (the Russians during the apocalyptic invasions) (01:34:00–01:36:43), experiencing the world in a sensual way (the supporters of the lost religion notably as they run, like shadows, through the woods, holding torches (00:52:22)) and inevitably taking a stance against an oppressive reality (Andrei Rublev himself, combining elements of all these figures, through the film). In this process, transcendence and corporeality are linked, and the already mentioned *radical* character of this "revolution of the flesh," gradually revealed as Andrei Rublev's journey through its various phases unfolds: His passionate artistic creations, spiritual yearnings, erotic tendencies, and evolving

⁷It is noted at this point that Nietzschean ideas on the priority of the body and an overall communication with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interest in the flesh could also provide contexts for future research. For a detailed structural description of *Andrei Rublev* that focuses on visual elements, the first important study in English can be considered to be Mark Le Fanu's 1987 *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*, a work both historically important and sensitive in its observations. See, Le Fanu, Mark. *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky*. British Film Institute, 1987. For academically more informed, sensitive, and evocative descriptions, see, Bird, Robert. *Andrei Rublev*. British Film Institute, 2004; Johnson, Vida T., and Graham Petrie. *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*. Indiana UP, 1994.

relationships—including his ambivalent friendship with the cynic Kyrill and notably their later confrontation (2:38:29–2:40:00)—are all dramatized through the body. So too are his acts of violence like the murder of the soldier (01:39:50–01:39:51) and his self-imposed punishment, which carries a certain masochistic, corporeal sensuality. His vow of silence becomes not only spiritual but also intensely physical. All of this leads toward his eventual celebratory acceptance of life. The same dichotomy of corporeality and transcendence is evident in the depiction of the Russian lower-class people: presented as always prosecuted either by authorities or foreign invaders and visually linked to materiality, determined by the land and the natural landscape.

It is notable, as already suggested, that this dramatization of a corporeal revolution often takes the form of self-punishment or sensual elevation, often at the same time. In this regard, while the pre-Christian Witch celebration depicted in *Andrei Rublev* narratively serves as a temptation, it is also an iconography of religious ecstasy, not so different from the one suggested in the lyrical sex scene between Alexandre and Maria in Tarkovsky's later film *Sacrifice* (1986), a natural culmination of the same themes. In *Sacrifice*, a defeated or otherwise compromised male figure (Andrei is tied to a tree, (00:56:16) whereas Alexandre cries in agony, infantilized, during a post-apocalyptic time not so different from the timelessness attributed to medieval historical realities in *Andrei Rublev*) (*Sacrifice*, 01:53:32–01:54:44) and a subsequent erotic event are linked with a personal and even social dynamic rearrangement. The line between the educated spiritual tormented man and the “woman of the lower class” (these motifs, schematical as they sound, undoubtedly are perceived not as archetypes but as literal, distinct states of being in the context of the pre-modern literary tradition Tarkovsky follows here) is blurred; in both cases the male is depicted as vulnerable, compared to a fetishized femininity subtly linked with the earth and Russian paganism and implied to relate with a more authentic, even if dangerous state of existence. A state of being the male artists desires. Sexuality, once more, is bound up with acts of submission—ties that bind or other forms of self-compromise. Flesh, in both narratives, becomes a liberating force, albeit a contradictory one.

For Andrei Tarkovsky, the image of the human body, as a natural reality, a literal entity rather than a symbol, visualizes what Albert Camus poetically defines as the “revolt of the flesh”⁸ (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21). The body experiences the world as a field to be explored, literally a world of art. It protests the contradictions it senses, and through this struggle, again in erotic, sensual terms, finally embraces this irrationality instinctively but decisively. In this spontaneous protest, human body for Tarkovsky becomes a means of self-fulfillment and dynamic creation for the individual. Corporeal reality has, in this sense, a priority over the mental cerebral ways to approach reality; the latter are seen negatively by the tradition of philosophical thought Tarkovsky seems to follow here (I am referring both to western existentialism and the already mentioned Russian anti-rationalist sentiments expressed by Sheston and Berdyaev), in the sense that they can easily be influenced by ideological prejudice. *Andrei Rublev* can be read as a cry for living artistically, that is authentically. The most obvious example of this cry for

⁸Camus in his poetic style defines the so-called revolt of the flesh as a violent experience of alienation from one's natural environment and surroundings. The human body experiences itself as if it was not part of this world. This realization leads the individual to unpredictable, intense feelings and actions. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 20–21).

authenticity and intensity of feeling, in the context of the film, is probably The Last Judgement episode, where Rublev even after having experienced all the horrors of the human pain his era presented, suffering both objective wounds and inner fears, and scarred by various moments—from witnessing the blinding of the masons to turning to crime himself—still chooses the humanist approach in art, depicting Judgement full of mercy and harmony. A harmony and a beauty that he accepts and recognizes not in contrast to reality (the platonic and traditionally Christian call for escaping the limits of the flesh and flying into a higher realm) but interwoven in those very extreme moments. The pessimistic views on humanity expressed by his master Theophanes (notably articulated by the older painter, while surrounded by ants, in the roots of a tree, as if already deceased) (00:40:31) are slowly undermined by life itself, in its wild beauty and complexity. Another image implying the same belief in art as creation is the humble white church itself, the lonely building waiting to be frescoed. The simple-minded girl who fascinates Rublev has many aspects analogous with the building, deserted by all and expressing both the Dionysian element (in her expression of wild joy) and saint-like perspective all bodies try to balance in the film.

This revolt of the flesh, a depicted transcendence towards the *material* world, is closely linked with artistic production and everyday life. Lived Experience is not distinguished from artistic sensitivity, as the world becomes an object of interpretation, touch, and meaning for the observer and at the same time defines the subject⁹ that intends to experience. This dialogue between the living individual and its surroundings, in accordance with current, early 21st century post-human doctrines and mid-20th century phenomenological explorations, verbally denies the priority of the subject against the world, a priority that used to be taken for granted in Cartesian western philosophy and Hegelian rationalism. Sensual and poetic as it is, this model of living strongly resembles both cinematic creation and Rublev's brave attempts to approach the world through other visual means like painting, which is the theme of the film. Art and life become inevitably indistinguishable from one another and the linking factor between the two is clearly the human body in its sensual tendencies and violent contradictions. The corporeal element, it should be mentioned, is also in dialogue with the already mentioned broader theoretical tradition of Russian existentialism: the hostile attitude that thinkers like Shestov and Berdyaev express against the trust in rationalism suggested by European analytical cognitivism. These irrational tendencies lie at the heart of the story of the film, the passionate artist who intends to express himself, to fly using raw materials. Metaphorically, he constructs primitive balloons and wondrous flying machines with his own hands much like his model, Yefim the terrified villager from the film's first scene. Or even like Don Quixote, who Tarkovsky evokes again in *Solaris* (1974) during another moment of spiritual elevation and literal flight (*Solaris* 02:12:36). Rublev's journey is driven by instinct and yearning, as he blindly but deliberately pursues elevation, moving further and further away from the suspicious rationality embodied by both the cynic Kyrill and the melancholic Theophanes. The irrational narrative elements are carefully

⁹In phenomenology, as a tradition, subject and object both interact actively to create meaning. Observance is seen as a process of creation. In existentialism, on the other hand, the subject and subjectivism are generally perceived as more important and crucial in the construction of meaning. In phenomenology, it is the procedure itself of observing that gives rise to meaning.

built on a Russian existential tradition; but at this point it is important to realize them as conscious narrative and thematic decisions rather than abstract declarations.

Lived Experience and Perceptions of Reality: The Jester and the Knight of Faith

Being present in everyday experience, through poetry or memory, living authentically and faithfully to oneself can be seen as a very important concept in Tarkovsky's fiction. The whole attitude bears striking similarities both with the focus on action as a form of self-fulfillment, as expressed notably by Jean-Paul Sartre¹⁰ and Henri Bergson's insistence on developing a sensitive attitude towards everyday life and one's surroundings's otherness, an "*attention to life*" (Lawlor 58). Sartre relates creativity to action and personal responsibility, a view he supports sometimes politically and socially (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946) and other times phenomenologically (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943). Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (1896) prefers an *intuitional* approach to life. Both views communicate with Rublev's struggle.

In contrast to Sartre's focus on the future, as a time of self-fulfillment, self-realization approached through action, *Andrei Rublev* focuses on the past, recreated through memory and through a highly idiosyncratic understanding of art, exemplified through Rublev's often fruitless attempts to re-construct reality during the terrifying foreign invasion. The idea of past time, as a personal oneiric point of reference, the intense experience of childhood and dreams, is carefully and systematically identified in the context of the film with Russian medieval reality, in its timelessness, primitiveness, and physical corporeal violence. Sometimes the same need, that is to live intensely through memory and artistic creation is expressed through inner states like fantasies or dreams, a tendency most notable in the two dreams that structure *Ivan's Childhood*. Memory for Tarkovsky, in itself is seen as subjective and dynamic, rather than simply representational, an approach evident in *Mirror*, in its use of free association and its unique structure, based specifically on the blurring of strict limits between autobiography and fantasy. What the idea of the past, as expressed in *Andrei Rublev*, seems to liberate in its relation to corporeality, is an expressive dynamic power, a poetic ability to interpret, redefine, and eventually alter everyday life. This authentic living even if associated with an iconography based on primitiveness and exploration of the past (thus, the emphasis on the medieval world) is experienced directly in the present, in nature, and in its natural extension, human flesh.

The radical idea that human flesh is at war with its surroundings—constantly in revolt, suspended in a tension between embodiment and environment, interiority and exteriority, self and world—yet, precisely because of its immanent physicality, becomes the most truthful mode of expression, lies at the heart of this vision. Unlike cerebral activity, the body directly engages with external reality, making it the most reliable vessel for performative, artistic, and (in the broadest sense) erotic self-expression. This embrace of the flesh as a means to approach otherness finds its philosophical roots in Albert

¹⁰Sartre showed active interest in Tarkovsky, providing a detailed analysis on his first film *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), a review first published in *L'unita* on 9 October, 1963 and later republished in the original French in his collection of essays *Situations* (334–342). Notably, Tarkovsky, when interviewed by Laurence Cosse in 1986, expressed vocal dissatisfaction with Sartre's reading: "I was looking for an artistic, not an ideological defense" (164). See, Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, edited by John Gianvito, UP of Mississippi, 2006.

Camus's exploration of the absurd.¹¹ Camus, describing his archetypal "absurd heroes," dedicates a whole chapter of the *Myth of Sisyphus* to the *actor*, the individual who re-invents itself, through physical performance, through corporeality and dance, every night (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 73). In Tarkovsky's oeuvre a similar concern focuses on the idea of *imagination*. As Maya Turovskaya beautifully summarizes "One thing in Tarkovsky that always strikes the viewer is the unfailing power of the imagination, directed towards what Kracauer terms the 'redemption of physical reality' [...]. The slow-flowing, swollen rivers with their low banks, the moated meadows with grazing, unsaddled horses, the low hills" (Turovskaya 43). Thus, the natural physical reality is closely linked to imagination and imagination, in its turn, is related to the immanent world.

In Tarkovsky's already mentioned *Sacrifice*, a film that in many ways can be read as a natural continuation of *Andrei Rublev*'s thematic concerns, the main hero, Alexandre, comes from a theatrical performative background, being a retired actor, famous for his interpretation of both the Machiavellian Richard the third and the angelic Prince Myshkin (*Sacrifice* 00:26:49). A suffering physical being, Alexandre himself, very subtly seems to embody (literally) the struggle of those only seemingly opposite characters. His final extreme action, his burning of the beloved family house (02:17:10), a sacrifice, as the title indicates and by extension an act of self-destruction is not to be read as a masochistic impulse; the absurd action gradually gives rise to *creation*, an idea evident in the last shot of the blooming tree. Physicality is extended to the natural environment, an extension that reminds us strongly of the observations made by the Finnish architect and film theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa, who interestingly focuses on the tensions between the notions of *house* and *home* in order to conclude that "Tarkovsky's films are about the perpetual search for home, the lost home of childhood" (92). Home is once again to be understood as literal, rather than inner situation, a physical location. The fact that Tarkovsky's protagonists struggle to approach physical realities (idealized locations that, though elevated, are still filmed and depicted as elements of nature, as environments composed of trees, water, and other manifestations of material presence) reveals his underlying concern and sheds light on his oft-stated disbelief in symbolism:

There is a term which has already become commonplace: 'poetic cinema'. What is meant by it is cinema that boldly moves away, in its images, from what is factual and concrete, as pictured by real life, and at the same time affirms its own structural wholeness. But there is a hidden danger for cinema in moving away from itself. 'Poetic cinema' as a rule gives birth to symbols, allegories and other such figures—that is, to things that have nothing to do with the imagery natural to cinema. (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 66)

When it comes to philosophical and literal references, it should also be noted that Alexandre faithfully echoes Kierkegaard's *knight of faith* (Kierkegaard 38), another model for the authentic absurd hero of existential literature. Alexandre's *performative* approach to life, the actor's link to an oppressed sensuality that needs the mediation of the servant Maria (a woman directly identified as a witch, by Otto the messenger) in order to express itself and lead to the desired transcendence through sexual intercourse and through literal flight, in a scene that once more evokes the ecstatic element already

¹¹An often-ignored aspect of Tarkovsky's relationship to existentialism is his intention to shoot a film based on Camus's *The Plague*, a desire expressed in detail in his journals (*Time within Time* 14; 21).

discussed in the description of the breathtaking scene of Yefim's elevation is associated again with medievalism. Maria directly embodies not only the idea of witchcraft, first depicted in *Andrei Rublev*, but also a general link between violent corporeality and expressive accomplishment.

The performative aspects of reality and their link to corporeality are embodied in the liberating, terrifying, and politically radical (as proved by his later punishment) dance of the street jester, in the second episode of the film. He leaps around singing provocative sexual lyrics in a Dionysian beat, the rhythm of his words, palpating and quick, mirrored in his ecstatic violent movements (00:11:30). His tongue that through its song offends and provokes and brings the audience to a deeper consciousness both of the material character of an oppressing outside reality (being such a physical being in himself) and by extension of the state violence, often tolerated or even orchestrated by the Church, will later be ripped out. The act mirrors Rublev's vow of silence and links the two as outsiders, artists, and individuals cast out against the realm of history. It is notable that the jester who literally lives through his body echoes Dionysian pre-Christian ideas in a Christian world: He expresses repressed yearnings and social desires, yet he remains unmistakably a modern creation, his physicality evoking phenomenological and even posthumanist approaches to art and communication with the world. Visually connected to the earth, nature, and materiality, the presence of the eccentric dancer subverts rational anthropocentrism and suggests a surrender to intuitional sensuality as a path to experiencing creativity. Human artistic activity, in this sense, is constantly interpreted as a process of creation, generating new and emergent meanings through a haptic engagement through one's interaction with what is seen and touched. Artistic creation is carefully and systematically linked with passionate living. Of course, passion for Tarkovsky is not devoid of an experience of suffering, a destructive element. In *Andrei Rublev*, pain is not devoid of sensuality and ecstatic elements and passionate living is not devoid of physical suffering. The film focuses thematically on the idea of *passion* (the original title being *The Passion According to Andrei Rublev*) and is deeply concerned with the motif of the suffering human body; an iconography that is medieval in its connotations and culturally familiar to us mainly through its association with Dostoyevsky and also Kierkegaard's individualistic and highly poetic re-reading of biblical narratives.¹²

Passion, in the context of the medieval world of archetypes that the film adopts, could bear two different verbal meanings: an expression of personal emotions that lead to revolt; and passion in the etymological, literal sense associated with the biblical Passion of Christ, echoed in the snowy Calvary scene, as a synonym for suffering. What takes place during the scene is a transportation of the lonely agonizing event to a Russian medieval landscape, complete with peasants standing in for the weeping mother, Jesus, and other archetypal figures from the New Testament (00:46:13–00:49:20). A subtle declaration of the relationship between the realm of the divine and everyday life is expressed in the context of medieval times, 15th century rural Russia.

The Myth of Sisyphus discusses existential angst as well, as Camus explores absurdism in all its incarnations, but in *Andrei Rublev*, pain (passion as suffering) is not so much to be read as an abstract state of being, as it is to be experienced as a sensual

¹²Notably, the story of Abraham, the main theme in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard).

state of being, a corporeal experience: a passion of the body¹³ in the literal sense. Tarkovsky seems to *believe* in pain and link it directly with the ecstatic. Pain, in the context of the film is to be read as an inner condition but also a road to elevate oneself, an ideal familiar to us from Dostoyevsky and various religious traditions. When it comes to its sensual aspects (elaborated upon in many instances in this paper) there is also the element of its latent association to erotic pleasure and intense experience in general. For Camus, by contrast, pain (that motivates several of his heroes, notably Caligula in the same-titled play) has the character of an intellectual struggle. The fact that it is indeed expressed corporeally seems first and foremost, a source of *amazement*, of surprise:

Oh, Cæsonia, I knew that men felt anguish, but I didn't know what that word anguish meant. Like everyone else I fancied it was a sickness of the mind—no more. But no, it's my body that's in pain. Pain everywhere, in my chest, in my legs and arms. Even my skin is raw, my head is buzzing, I feel like vomiting. But worst of all is this queer taste in my mouth. Not blood, or death, or fever, but a mixture of all three. I've only to stir my tongue, and the world goes black, and everyone looks ... horrible. How hard, how cruel it is, this process of becoming a man! (*Caligula and Other Plays* 24)

How different is Caligula's expressive speech on pain to Tarkovsky's documentation of a rather physical naturalistic violence. Scenes depicting physical violence, particularly associated with the medieval setting like the passion of the artisans who are blinded with daggers, during the civil unrest, and already mentioned torments imposed on the street jester, all sensual in their detail, indicate this philosophically interesting difference between Tarkovsky's Russian existentialism in its transcendental quality and Camus's equally passionate absurdism. And yet, Tarkovsky's already mentioned interest in an adaptation of *The Plague* (see footnote 11) suggest a dynamic, complicated relationship between the two thinkers.

The slightly erotic character of the iconography and the motif of a passionate sensuality, evident even in acts of self-punishment and self-destruction (for instance, the monk's vow of silence, the priority of guilt through the film), links the experience of pain and suffering in the flesh with the inner, spiritual quest undertaken by Rublev, through the artistic experience of the world. It is certainly intentional that both the street Jester and the masons, victims of corporeal punishments, are creators of works of art: The blinded eyes of the artisans and the cut tongue of the performer indicate also the *haptic* character of artistic production as the most menacing dimension for the status quo. The jester's dance threatened the authorities not because of the intellectual subtext of the lyrics but because, like all Bacchic manifestations, it seemed to imply uprisings, distrust for the existing order, and the need for carnival-like revolt and a trust in the instincts. Similarly, the moral ideas and often libidinous social ways of the rural class of medieval Russia (the pagan ceremony and the production of the artisans both are born out of this

¹³Allan Casebier in his study *Film and Phenomenology: Towards a Realist theory of Cinematic Interpretation* uses the term "fantasmatic body" (Casebier 91). The body is not just represented on screen but *felt* through cinematic perception. Sensuality, by extension, is a way to participate in artistic creation and identify with the heroes, get involved actively in what is represented. Pain and pleasure are experiences for phenomenologists like Casebier, not abstract ideas. The whole idea of the fantasmatic body perfectly describes Ruvlev's passion. See, Casebier, Allan. *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*. Cambridge UP, 1991.

world), and their association with the earth and nature, makes them uncontrollable, a social factor possibly dangerous for the church authorities and, by extension, the structures of power in general. These artistic expressions (haptic, immediate, rooted in primitiveness, but authentic) will ironically find their culmination in Rublev's sensitive paintings. A more sophisticated and spiritual but surprisingly similarly passionate mode of artistic expression.

It is exactly in this enigmatic setting that Rublev's ambivalence towards speech (exemplified in his vow of silence and his general distrust for articulated speech) becomes the main concern of the plot. Such an approach suggests a radical interrelation between the need for artistic production which is defined by Camus as an "absurd action" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 21), the often erotic in character acceptance of physical pain, and Tarkovsky's interest for corporeal sensuality. The importance of painting as a possible metonym for cinema has also been noted by Peter Green who reminds us, in a poetic yet clear way, that despite his rejection of parallels between paintings and cinema, Tarkovsky's films abound in images and conventions derived from the visual arts, and *Andrei Rublev* is certainly no exception (Green 49). In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky expresses a belief in the autonomy of cinema, specifically referring to *Andrei Rublev*. He actively avoids turning to a literal imitation or visual reconstruction of other works of art, such as paintings in film (a technique often found in mid-century European cinema, notably in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini): "I have never understood, for instance, attempts to construct *mise en scene* from a painting. All you will be doing is bringing the painting back to life, and duly being rewarded with superficial acclaim: 'Ah, what a feeling for the period!' 'Ah, what cultivated people!' But you will also be killing cinema" (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting* 78).

A vocal call for a conscious return to a visual rather than cerebral approach to life and art, visualized as a corporeal, haptic communication with reality, that is a communication that transcends the barriers of rational strictness and puts into question the forced need to result in predetermined ideals, closely resembles the same procedure that Tarkovsky, in *Sculpting in Time*, defines as poetry.¹⁴ The motif of poetry as an often transcendental way to bravely interpret and radically interact with outside reality, the very moment when all hopes seem to be lost can be beautifully summarized in the reassuring promise Rublev gives to Boriska, the crying 14-year old son of the bell-maker, during the unforgettable epilogue: "I will paint, and you will construct bells." A negation of the need of scientific knowledge and a preference for authenticity is implied once more. Boriska, in his youth and sentiment, motivates Andrei to return to the very life he once tried to escape from. Irrationality (how are the bells to be constructed without knowledge? What is the point of painting in such an apocalyptic environment after all?) becomes a creative, powerful force. This haptic approach to art, a persistence on artistic

¹⁴"But to return to our theme: I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms. Certainly, I am more at home with them than with traditional theatrical writing which links images through the linear, rigidly logical development of the plot. That sort of fussily correct way of linking events usually involves arbitrarily forcing them into sequence in obedience to some abstract notion of order. And even when this is not so, even when the plot is governed by the characters, one finds that the links which hold it together rest on a facile interpretation of life's complexities" (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* 18–20).

creation despite the oppressive outside reality and an often-irrational belief in *creation* is poetry in the very literal sense, of constructing new realities as a way to go on.

In the following paragraphs, let us look more closely on this aspect of irrationality, that links corporeality and transcendence in an organic way.

The Importance of Irrationalism: Flight and Transcendence

Tarkovsky tends to follow a tradition of distrust towards scientific objectivism, both in his fictional expression and theoretical writings. An interesting context for this view can be found in the already mentioned explorations of Russian existentialist thinkers from the beginning of the twentieth century. Nikolai Berdyaev's study *The Russian Idea*—a work whose slightly rhetorical tone could be interpreted as nationalistic in character in a modern context, but whose influence on Tarkovsky and mid-century Russian cultural environment is evident—indicates that historically, two opposing principles lie at the heart of the structure of the Russian mentality and cultural identity: a “natural, Dionysian, elemental paganism” (Berdyaev 3), and an ascetic esoteric religious orthodoxy and tendency towards mysticism. In *Andrei Rublev* we can easily define both these elements in various scenes and personalities, albeit not necessarily in contradiction to one another. A notable example of the coexistence of these seemingly contradictory elements is Andrei's belief in, and adoration of, a key character, the simple-minded mute girl raised in the rural areas of Russia. The elemental, precious quality the painter discovers in her, his source of inspiration, rests on the way he perceives her as an almost symbolic figure, close to a more natural state of being. This perception is shaped both by Christian mystical beliefs and by a Bacchic, passionate element evident in her joyful appearance. Yet it is striking that he is ultimately abandoned by her; “betrayed,” precisely because she reveals herself to be an independent human being, rather than the embodiment of an abstract idea. Berdyaev's term, “elemental paganism,”¹⁵ describes perfectly the role and appearance of the simple woman, in the context of the film's narrative.

In the same vein Lev Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem* glorifies irrationality in its distrust for the Apollonian so-called “Athenian” positivism and its impact on Hegelian philosophy through its focus on the need for systematical knowledge. What the two Russian thinkers share, a view echoed in *Andrei Rublev*'s sensuality, is a belief that positivism has something inherently inhuman and misses art's more sensitive care for subtle needs, desires, and inner situations of the individual through its emphasis on general abstractions and axioms. The meditation on factors like poetry, instinct, creativity, and an artist's creative tendency to the world of the senses and intense experience in general is essential for overcoming the limits of what is perceived as a narrow-minded empiricism.

Art, associated with the corporeal experience and the needs of the suffering body, is glorified as transcendental, therapeutic, and powerful in *Andrei Rublev*, while the agents of intellectualism, most notably for our study, the character of Kyrill the monk, defined by his opposition to liberty and his hostility to the rebellious corporeality expressed in popular art, as in the Bacchic dance of the jester, are all associated with fanaticism, seen as alienated from authentic life and depicted in a negative light. The deeply

¹⁵A paganism based on a simple, elemental perception of nature and life rather than a sophisticated Dionysian belief (Berdyaev 3).

personal and at the same time social character of those explorations has often been noted, notably by Pétursson, when he argues that Tarkovsky utilizes this film as a kind of mirror for himself as an artist and as a mirror for his contemporaries (189).

It should be stressed at this point that what moves forward Tarkovsky's narrative is *not* an inclination to flee from the bitterness that is inevitably felt by the individual as Theophanes reminds Rublev and us, while quoting Ecclesiastes: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:17–18 King James Version (KJV); qtd. in *Andrei Rublev* 00:22:55–00:22:57); *Andrei Rublev*, despite its irrational and even mystical visual elements does not stand against education or intellectual activity *per se*. On the contrary, western scientific positivism is seen in the context of the film as limited *exactly* because of what is understood in Russian existentialism as a *lack of depth*, as a thinly disguised contempt towards individual experience. In the film, Kyrill, the skeptic and rational voice, is clearly painted in a negative light. The same pattern can be noticed in the unnamed Scientist of *Stalker*, an insensitive person who wishes to destroy the geographical Zone that provides hope. This tendency bears some striking similarities with western Romanticism, in its prioritization of subjectivism. In radical contrast to the neo-platonic Christian theoretical school of thought that obviously influences Tarkovsky's spiritual tendencies and beliefs, we note that, in the context of the film and its narrative, in the depiction of Rublev's attempts to live passionately yet sensitively, there is no apparent disapproval of the haptic element, of touch, of the cultivation of a poetic (creative) relationship between the experience of individual bodies and the trust in an empirical reality. Irrational aspects of subjective experience like the impact of the images that appear in our dreams, or the need for reconciliation with the distant objects of our yearnings are reconciled with reality in the sense that subjective experience is interpreted as an integral part of everyday life, not excluded from the realm of a dynamic, conscious living.

The *flight* motif, one of the most recognizable of Tarkovsky's images, visualizes the natural continuation of this aesthetic concern, the need to reconcile corporeality and transcendence, to read them not as opposing forces but as links of a common process in an often agonizing but brave attempt to find fulfilment. And as this reconciliation, this elevation, is attempted through the flesh, the ideal of flight is depicted as erotic in character: think of the two couples, Kris and Harri elevating above the earth in *Solaris*, two bodies embracing one another in a way that echoes Marc Chagall's 1942 painting *Au-dessus de la Ville* (02:12:36) and Alexandre and Maria in *Sacrifice* flying after the sexual act, over the bed (01:54:46). *Andrei Rublev*'s prologue, poor Yefim's attempt to metaphorically become a bird through his self-designed hot-air balloon, his short elevation and inevitable collapse, visually expresses the same passion that will haunt Andrei Rublev through the course of the film.¹⁶

Returning to the Human Body: An Interpretation of Corporeality and Transcendence in *Andrei Rublev*

The "medieval" as a thematic concern and not necessarily in its literal sense as a specific era lies at the heart of *Andrei Rublev*. The narrative of the person who, against all the

¹⁶Notably in the original screenplay, published in English in 1991, Yefim attempts to fly with wooden wings, like the mythical Icarus (Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev: A Screenplay* 7).

extremities of the historical reality around it, struggles for self-expression while at the same time being deeply concerned about communicating with Otherness in all its manifestations (God as Otherness, Society as Otherness, the yearning for the body of the other, nature as an external reality, etc.) can only be resolved through transcendence. Through a trust in irrationality as an undeniable aspect of everyday reality, Rublev achieves the desired reconciliation, through an unexpectedly optimistic ending; that is, through his communication with the young boy who instinctively, rather than cognitively, constructs the precious bell.

We explored this journey through the analysis of aspects closely associated with corporeal sensuality in itself as a way for the individual to achieve accomplishment: the phenomenological trust in poetry as a means to perceive reality; violence as a cathartic and ecstatic factor at the same time; and, most importantly for our purposes, memory in itself, the re-construction of a past through narrative (by narrative we could refer to painting in its association to cinema or even memory). Is this imaginary medieval Russia a stand-in for a present reality? Not necessarily, as in a literal sense. Through inner contradictions and instincts attributed to the iconography of the medieval, *Andrei Rublev* seeks to reconcile the individual with outside reality, that is to exist.

Corporeality and the intended transcendence coexist in the context of the film. The latter is depicted as a natural continuation of the emphasis on the human body—a body that is sometimes depicted to be tied to a tree, mutilated by foreigners, blinded, or imprisoned in self-punishment (the vow of silence)—but at the same time glorified as the only way to approach otherness. “Love is always the same” claims the pagan girl to objections of the young artist (00:56:08). The narrative seems to support the same view. In this optimism that echoes existentialism’s declarations, in this absurd victory, we can define *Andrei Rublev*’s perception of corporeal materiality as a liberating impulse.



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(Re)Animating Black-Native Life in M. Carmen Lane's *Calling Out After Slaughter*

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Abstract | Part of how the settler state replicates its power is through managing the conditions and possibilities for life—past, present, and future. The body is a critical part of this biosocial power, and the possibilities for the Black-Native body reveals how settler colonialism materially and discursively orders life. Through M. Carmen Lane's *Calling Out After Slaughter* I argue the settler state assigns Black-Native life a non-living status and I consider how an Indigenous poetics reinvigorates Black-Native life through a critical practice of mourning, love, and care. I argue that Lane mobilizes an Indigenous poetics to generate a liberatory future for Black-Native people in the aftermath of settler colonial terror. Of particular focus are the ways M. Carmen Lane generates a poetics that resists the colonial ordering of the past and present. In excavating the aspects of Black-Native life that have been buried, disfigured, or misremembered, *Calling Out After Slaughter* becomes a textual space that makes material Black-Native people. Lane's development of an Indigenous poetics becomes a method of refusal of the settler colonial state that continues to deny or diminish Black-Native life. In the process, *Calling Out After Slaughter* makes another world more available to our imaginations through the witnessing, reflection, and healing of the past, making way for the reassembly of Black-Native life.

Keywords | Settler Colonialism, Textual Dismemberment, Material Destruction, Decoloniality, Black-Native Life, Mourning, Indigenous Poetics, Embodiment, Remembering, Biosociality, *Calling Out After Slaughter*, M. Carmen Lane

The question of living for the Native person is perhaps always under siege. Billy-Ray Belcourt has described such living as the conditions of misery that shape the biosocial contours of Native lives and bodies. He writes from the orientation of the reserve, saying, “the feeling of indigeneity is the miserable feeling of not properly being of this world” (2). This impropriety of indigeneity comes with the reality that the colonial state, structured and replicated through threats and the exercise of violence, works to materially destroy Native life. Such destruction may come in the form of higher rates of illness, missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirits,¹ and/or the mental turmoil created through immense and often unrelenting loneliness, anxiety, and fear engendered by state surveillance, control, and extortion.²

The stakes of living are indeed high and yet as Karyn Recollet implores, “we need to make sure that we are all alive so that we can make it to the water” (Recollet and Koonsmo 241). To not be disappeared by a world that wants you dead; to “make it to the water,” as Recollet and Koonsmo suggest, is an arduous task.³ The strategies of survival under such conditions are shaped by fear, terror, and the material conditions that threaten Native life and thus practices of making it to the water are neither abstract nor inconsequential. The water, for me here, signals a future world where Indigenous peoples are able to be in and with their bodies. This is to search for ways Indigenous peoples refuse the alienation of themselves engendered by colonial violence that discursively, materially, and socially severs Indigeneity from the present. To reach the water is to reclaim embodiments and relationships stolen or threatened by colonialism and resolutely move toward the future. I’m interested here in how writing, and in particular, an Indigenous poetics for Black-Native life, is part of these practices of getting to the water by making the bodies of Native people material on the page and thus the world.

¹Coined in 1990 in direct opposition to the use of the historical-anthropological term “berdache,” Two-spirits refers to the pan-Indigenous umbrella term used to describe varied gender expressions and sexualities. Its usage is not universal or a direct substitution for western terms like “queer” but it has gained considerable traction in contemporary Indigenous communities to reflect a range of gender and sexual diversity, as well as the particular cultural, sociopolitical, and spiritual roles non-cisgender or non-heterosexual people historically and contemporarily have within tribal nations.

²See, Dyke, Cornelius M., and Donald K. Warne. *American Indian Health Disparities in the 21st Century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021; Weaver, Hilary N. *Trauma and Resilience in the Lives of Contemporary Native Americans: Reclaiming Our Balance, Restoring Our Wellbeing*. Taylor & Francis, 2025; Dawson, Myrna, and Saide Mobayed Vega. *The Routledge International Handbook on Femicide and Feminicide*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.

³The “water” here evokes the political mobilizing through the phrase “water is life” that understands water as a literal resource and lifeway. Making it to the water is to proclaim the necessity of harm reduction in Indigenous communities that makes the future more available. Water here is a teacher and a healer which offers space for Indigenous communities to practice their relationships with one another and the land.

Black-Native life is terrorized because of the wanton destructive capabilities of the settler state. The settler state is a violent arbiter that, through practices of “documentary genocide,” makes it all but impossible for Black-Native life to have a history (O’Brien vi). The effect of this textual dismemberment not only disrupts and distorts kinship networks, it engenders a hyper-fixation on the body, its aesthetics, its compartments, and its performance. Text, its presence or absence, has material consequences and the power to shape life. The severing of Indigenous life from documents is not only narratively dishonest but it places increased pressures on Indigenous people in the present to perform, present, or otherwise confirm, physically and aesthetically, the narrow colonial knowledge of who Indigenous people are allowed to be. Language, records, and narrative thus remain battlegrounds for freedom in the world and in the body. M. Carmen Lane’s *Calling Out After Slaughter* exists in this ongoing aftermath of textual, bodily, and psychic devastation. Lane confronts the violence of the settler colonial state that works tirelessly to disappear and dismember Native and Black peoples from and in the world. A two:spirit African-American and Haudenosaunee (Mohawk/Tuscarora) artist, Lane’s debut poetry collection brings to the fore the visceral and the embodied to develop a language of refusal that turns away from settler colonial temporal order that generates a non-existence for Black-Native life.

Black-Native life is vacated from the past through disenrollment, through aesthetic narratives, and a racial logic that distorts ancestry in order to perpetuate the settler colonial power to determine Indianness. Chattel slavery and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples created the atmosphere for a burgeoning nation that would become the United States. The afterlife of this genocidal campaign restructured at a social, cultural, economic, legal, and biological level the bodies, minds, intimacies, and communities of Black and Indigenous people across this continent.⁴ In a nation carnivoreously expanding the scope of its territory through forced removal and organized by the structural theft of labor of African and African-descended people, Black-Native life was existentially threatening.

In part this is because Black-Native life is evidence of the failure of the completion of the genocidal campaign that sought to eliminate the humanity of Black and Indigenous people. Given the constant assault on Indigenous sovereignty through tropes of the Vanishing Indian, Blackness is used by the colonial state as evidence of the diminishing “purity” of Indigenous people. Black-Native people are targeted then through both disenrollment and socio-cultural distancing that separates Black-Native people from Indigeneity and normalizes anti-Blackness (see, Klopotek; Mays). Many tribal nations are pressured into aligning with this form of racial discrimination and anti-Blackness as political and cultural practice due to the constant threat of disillusion by the colonial state. The political bind tribal nations are placed in is that sovereignty in the eyes of the colonial state, like whiteness, is intertwined with the denial and/or destruction of

⁴See, Belcourt, Billy-Ray. “Meditations on Reserve Life, Biosociality, and the Taste of Non-Sovereignty.” *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2017.1279830>; Barker, Joanne. *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity*. Duke UP, 2011; Goldstein, Alyosha, editor. *Formations of United States Colonialism*. Duke UP, 2014; Sexton, Jared. “The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign.” *Critical Sociology (Sage Publications, Ltd.)*, vol. 42, no. 4/5, Jul. 2016, pp. 583–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514552535>; King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Duke UP Books, 2019.

Blackness. The treatment of Black-Native people reflects then a deeper and foundational heuristic of settler colonialism that assigns Blackness as labor and Indigeneity as always on the precipice of disappearance.

That Black-Native life continues, however, is also evidence that Indigenous peoples have continued to defy the colonial state by articulating their own metrics for community which itself is an act of sovereignty irrespective of the desires of the American nation-state. Black-Native life, as a form of resistance and refusal is of particular concern here. This investigation into the workings of Indigenous poetics through M. Carmen Lane's *Calling Out After Slaughter* documents how language continues to resist colonial demands that Black-Native life be either nonexistent or fodder for Indigenous survival.

Lane pushes back against the layered disappearances of Black-Native life in contrast to a settler colonial system that Brian Klopotek has described as, "in the context of white supremacy, asserting an Indian identity depended not only on a lack of African ancestry but also on demonstrating antipathy toward people of African ancestry" (219). Central to this is a reclamation of the body and Lane demands the reader witness how an Indigenous poetics—language grounded in the artistic, cultural, and political expression of Indigenous people—can re-animate Black-Native bodies and serve as an inventive foundation for Black-Native futures. This is to further place Lane in a long tradition of Indigenous writers who, as Robert Dale Parker asserts, "shape imaginative language through the routines of human imagination and fallibility, routines that the exoticizing mythologies of mainstream Euro-American culture try to fence off from Indigenous cultures" (134). An Indigenous poetics through imaginative language holds potential to bring Indigenous peoples out of mythology and into reality. Lane's *Calling Out After Slaughter* develops an Indigenous poetics that centers the body, figurative and literal dismemberment, and loneliness that (re)animates Black-Native life in the past and present. Lane's Indigenous poetics make possible a critical practice of mourning that allows for a different type of care for the Black-Native body in both death and dispossession. If settler colonial power functions also in the aftermath of death through the material and textual ordering of bodies, Lane invents an alternative textual world that refuses the nothingness assigned to Black-Native life. Here, I pay particular attention to Lane's poems, dedicated to individuals who the state deems no longer Indigenous. Neither elegy nor aubade in a strict formal sense, Lane dedicates poems to people, places, and ideas as a reflection of the melancholy of loss as well as the insistence of Black-Native life after devastation. Lane's dedication poems operate in two registers. The first is as a reflection of the intimacy between poet and dedicatee that record ongoing relationships with the dead, lost, and loved. Second, they are foundational to the textual animation present throughout *Calling Out After Slaughter* that rescues the Black-Native body from the disfigurements by the settler state.

The severing of Black-Native life at both the individual and the familial level through the denial of Indigeneity through politics of blood quantum, misidentification in death, or discourses of authenticity that may disconnect Black-Native people from community are linked in Lane's poetry.⁵ I argue that these two settler colonial narratives

⁵Racialization through blood is a foundational principle to the workings of Euro-American colonial power in what would become the United States. For Blackness and Indigeneity in particular, the fixation on

mark Black-Native body as either a corpse or as non-existent but never alive in the present. In naming a world after slaughter, Lane refuses this material and temporal cleaving of Black-Native life and generates an Indigenous poetics of mourning that also functions as a hopeful practice of restitution. Such an Indigenous poetics, for Black-Native people, is a critical resource for combating the ongoing colonial conditions of devastation. In foregrounding care, ancestral knowledge, adaptation, and creativity as components of grieving the continued loss of Black-Native life, Lane unsettles the foundations of the existential nature of Black-Native life induced by a violent settler colonial state. Indigenous poetics for Black-Native life is a remedy that refuses a future destined for devastation and instead charts a different path forward.

Given the entanglements of enrollment, race, and settler colonialism, the Black-Native body must confront, particularly in death, the material and discursive severance of Blackness and Indigeneity. Death as a narrative battleground is the central focus of Lane's "Body Parts." This poem, for Esterline Robinson, confronts the terrors of memory as a Black-Native woman has been "hunted & / dismembered // placed in / glass case / overhanging lights / your / descendants / take in / what is left / you / unrecognizable" (132). A feature of Lane's work across *Calling Out After Slaughter*, "Body Parts" builds a practice of mourning that reflects a long history of containment and display of Indigenous peoples (see, Bruchac; Finley; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; Lonetree).⁶ The subject, her body unrecognizable to her own kin, is an amalgamation of parts that have been collected by the bounty hunter of colonialism. The Black-Native woman's body here is an object for display and consumption.

With the "overhanging lights" that are reflective of both museum displays and interrogation rooms, this Black-Native woman is severed from kinship networks and her body has been reduced to parts. Indeed, Lane continues, "her story / obliterated by / genocide & by slavery // together," which identifies intersecting conditions of violence and terror that structure Black-Native life (135). Genocide and slavery, which as Patrick Wolfe has argued produce two particular orientations for Black and Native peoples and bodies, are in fact collapsed into a single body. Wolfe outlines how "in the case of settler colonies [...] the colonizers come to stay, expropriating the native owners of the soil, which they typically develop by means of a subordinated labor force (slaves, indentureds, convicts) whom they import from elsewhere" (868). Lane challenges any notion that these processes are always bifurcated or that the terror that they inflict on the body is not felt across, between, or within individuals. Black-Native life is at the nexus point of a genocidal campaign to assert white settler futurity and a dehumanizing labor system that transformed Black life into not-human. The Black-Native body in death then becomes a

miscegenation and the idea of racial purity or impurity through blood is violent colonial apparatus that attempts to undo Indigenous sovereignty through the assertion of a vanishing people and dehumanizes Black people as engines of labor. Blood as a two-pronged tool of settler colonial power developed the one-drop rule that assured the continuation of enslavement and later a racial caste system of segregation, and blood quantum laws that define Indigenous people in fractions sought to limit tribal nations' ability to enroll citizens and thus limit the size of their nations. These work in conjunction to expand empire in terms of land and extorts people's bodies as less-than-human labor. Black-Native people are thus in the crosshairs, materially and discursively, of the colonial state's reproduction of such power.

⁶This practice of displaying Indigenous people became a particular fixation in the twentieth century United States which saw both the rapid expansion of academic disciplines such as anthropology and large-scale world's fairs in cities like Chicago and St. Louis.

signifier of the entanglement of white supremacy and settler colonialism that masquerades as modernity (see, Sexton; O'Brien).

"Body Parts" reflects on these multiple registers of settler colonial violence through memory work that attempts to excavate Indigenous histories that have been denied or ignored. Lane calls our attention to how the textual devastation that marks Black-Native life is not simply a lack or refusal to document but the active removal of Black-Native life from its kinship networks. The subject of the poem is described as "she who / has had her / name changed / race shifted / body / given away & / abandoned" (134). The active nature of this violence is not happenstance. As Jean O'Brien has described, the discursive violence of settler colonialism works to allow settlers to define themselves as cultural and political authorities by defining Indigenous people out of existence (O'Brien). The body here, which has already been dismembered and set up for display, becomes beholden to settler colonial narratives that determine who she is and how we should come to know her. We are left with literal fragments of a body and a life that the settler state chooses how we reassemble. Her body is abandoned not by her kin but as part of a concerted effort by the settler state to determine how the dead are incorporated into the state's self-concept. In death, the Black-Native body becomes a proxy for the settler state to assert its discursive authority and determine who we mourn and how.

This discursive power makes possible material destruction as the settler state is then able to determine how we name death or if we name it death at all. As her name is changed, "her Indian / erased / by the black / undertaker," Lane intervenes by literally remembering Esterline Robinson (134). Her name and her body are made unrecognizable and her life and body as an Indian woman is made an impossibility. An Indigenous poetics here functions as a practice of reanimation on the page and a different manner of encountering the dead is made possible. Lane's poetic intervention here signals how the body is a critical battleground wherein settler colonial power is contested. The Blackness of the undertaker suggests that settler colonialism encourages everyone on stolen land to participate in the disfiguring of Native life. This is not to locate Blackness in the same position of power as whiteness in the settler state, but rather to call attention to how the unity of Blackness and Indigeneity in a single body disrupts the racial framework that sustains the discursive and material power of the settler state.

This memory and member-ing work are in service of healing, at an intergenerational level, time that has been distorted in service of the continued elimination of Black-Native life as *both* Black and Indigenous. The Black-Native woman who is denied the documentation of her Indigeneity in the past is used by the state in the present to sever the speaker from their own Indigeneity. Lane articulates this work as a physical process, saying "I am picking up body parts— / I am healing this w/whole" (135). The titular body parts move in multiple registers here as "parts" comes to mean the deceased body fragmented by the settler state and the fracturing of time which denies Black-Native people from having an ancestry, thus demanding the Black-Native body remain unmoored from present time and place. The "w/whole" further announces the ways such memory work is always an encounter with fragmentation, through the dual meaning generated through the slash. Lane articulates Black-Native life as an absence that must reckon with the expulsion of members of one's family who are denied lineage, creating

a hole in one's family line. Simultaneously, Lane describes the stakes of an Indigenous poetics to rectify such traumas and devastation, whereby the textual space of the poem makes possible a process of healing that makes the present whole again.

Lane expands on this refusal of dismemberment of Black-Native life in the poem "Missing Women." If "Body Parts" centers the impact at a familial level of colonial violence, "Missing Women" reveals the structural conditions of that violence. The speaker is a witness to the layers of interconnected violence that are the ground of this nation, saying,

not just
missing
but
murdered

forgotten

women
red & black

trans
copper skinned
blue black women

trafficked &
beaten
undocumented

dismissed &
buried

dismembered

in our nation's
shallowest
of graves. (102–103)

Settler colonialism, as an engine of violence, reproduces its power through the continued assault on Native and Black women both as evidence of the omnipresence of colonial power and as practice for the violent apparatuses that the state develops to wield power against everyone. Disappearance, murder, trafficking, and erasure are just some of the tools the state uses to subjugate anyone marked as threatening to colonial hegemony. That women's bodies become sites of this violence is not happenstance or isolated. Here Lane lays bare the web of connected violence that "red & black // trans / copper skinned / blue black women" must confront and that we all must recognize and grieve. Blackness and Indigeneity remain in the crosshairs of settler colonial violence precisely because the assaults against Black, Native, and Black-Native life are foundational to the infrastructure of the United States. The nation, for Lane here, is a graveyard, filled with reminders and

remainders of violence just under the surface. In linking the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people (#MMIWG2S) movement to the theft of Black women and trans women, Lane refuses the severing of Black-Native life not only because of its material reality but because the violence against Black and Native life is intrinsically linked.

Moving between the scale of family and nation, Lane's work across "Body Parts" and "Missing Women" deploys the language of witnessing as a mode of reckoning with loss. The erasure of Black-Native life in death is part and parcel of the systems that continue to steal Indigenous women, Black women, and trans women. Lane's Indigenous poetics narrates these connections to remember the dead, missing, and misremembered. The graves, literal, discursive, and metaphorical that hold Black, Indigenous, and Black-Native life are indeed "shallow" and an Indigenous poetics offers a language full of Black-Native life brought up out the earth and into the future. The texture of Indigenous life and death is not rectified for the settler state, but rather, Lane turns attention to the processes of state violence that sever Black-Native life from time and space.

The inability to imagine the Black-Native body places Black-Native life outside the discursive boundaries that the settler colonial state uses to continue its assault on Black and Indigenous peoples. Black-Native life becomes a misnamed or unmarked corpse reduced to body parts in perpetual limbo. Lane's poetic intervention here then takes that same textual space and maps an escape route for Black-Native life out of these violent conditions that demand Black-Native people only encounter their bodies and families in pieces. Lane offers an Indigenous poetics as a material and embodied mourning practice that, in reassembling the misremembered and stolen, creates a pathway for Black-Native futures in spite of the narrative violence of the state. By reanimating Black-Native life through excavating the "shallowest / of graves" Lane not only unearths the histories of violence and femicide particular to Black and Indigenous people but uses the poem to honor those who have been stolen away. Even as the colonial state denies the realities of its own violence, Lane deploys poetry as an act of resistance and testimony.

Black-Native people do not only exist in death, as made evident by both the speaker of Lane's poems and Lane themselves. This refusal to become extinct continues to threaten settler colonial hegemony and the state adopts additional strategies to assault Black-Native life. Scott Morgensen describes the machinations of settler coloniality as such, writing, "settler colonialism is naturalized whenever conquest or displacement of Native peoples is ignored or appears necessary or complete, and whenever subjects are defined by settler desires to possess Native land, history, or culture" (16). This possessive function of settler colonialism not only generates subjecthood for all under colonial rule but induces an existential dissonance in Indigenous people. Lane's "Indigenous Black Boy" helps elucidate some of these ideas regarding disfiguration of Black-Native life in death and the dissonance of life in the present. The Indigenous Black Boy in this present is for "your entertainment/ your labor / your target practice / your sexual need // his power / understood / by the powers / that be & / their minions" (47). The "you" and the "powers / that be" here highlight new functions of the settler state to disfigure the Black-Native life, only possible in service of colonial desires. While I previously described such ability as a kind of corpsification of the body that dismembers Black-Native life as a means to

police racial boundaries, here Lane draws attention to objectification as another mode of settler colonial power. While the Black-Native woman's body is removed from her ancestral kin, the Black-Native boy becomes an object to be consumed. The settler state here reduces the Black-Native boy to his body and its functions as material goods in service of maintaining settler colonial power.

Lane refuses this dissolution of humanity through an Indigenous poetics that recognizes Black-Native life that "asks to be / nourished / with anybody's / love" (44). Nourishment here is both a signal of a physical need of the body and an emotional and psychic subsistence. Love is not a metaphor but an insistent demand for Black-Native people to be in relation with their kin as a mode of surviving the terrors of the settler colonial present. Lane continues, writing how the Indigenous Black Boy "wants to be / touched // yells out / for comfort / fights to / achieve / intimacy" (45). This resolute desire for intimacy is in direct opposition to settler colonial powers that cleave personhood from the Black-Native body. Comfort and intimacy, as echoed in the ancestral healing work of "Body Parts," is a longing to materialize Black-Native life in the Black-Native body. Love here is a resource that heals the fragmentation of settler colonialism and is a practice of homemaking in the body that is marked by loneliness and dissociation. Erica Violet Lee writes, that "when we make a home in lands and bodies considered wastelands, we attest that these places are worthy of healing and that we are worthy of life beyond survival" (Lee). This living past survival is made possible through an Indigenous poetics that transforms what is unimaginable for Black-Native life.

The Black-Native body, the Indigenous Black boy, finds a new mode of living through reinvention. "Indigenous / Black Boy // wears his / store bought / regalia // bright hats / big shirts / dark backpacks / to hold the / medicines" (45–46). The persistence of the Indigenous Black Boy is marked through the continued adaptation to life that exiles him from Indigeneity through discourses of authenticity. "Store bought" carries with it the shadow of hand-made, "dark backpacks," the shadow of "real" medicine bags, and Lane uses this contrast to disrupt the narrative about authenticity as being something not modern (see, Lawrence; Ramirez). Further, the Indigenous Black Boy refuses to be erased. Lane continues "when he / dances / on cracks / on cracks / over potholes / beside / road kill // everyone / pretends / his heart / does not / beat / does not / love / does not / leap for / joy" (46). The poem, then, as a record of his persistence, reanimates Black-Native identity; medicine still heals, his dance still an act of honoring and love for ancestors and community. Here, an Indigenous poetics is an act of animacy whereby Black-Native life returns to the Black-Native body. Lane's language is itself a refusal to perpetuate the disappearance or misunderstanding of Black-Native life. Lane concludes saying "Indigenous Black / Boy // must be uprooted // cuz he will / never / lay down & / die" (48). Lane turns the narrative of authenticity on its head, marking adaptation, migration, and transformation, as key features in the continued survival of Black-Native life.

In the wake of such violence that denies the "Indigenous Black Boy" life as Indigenous, Lane continues to build a poetics that offers another path forward. In "Clan/Destine" Lane continues this challenge to the presumed illicitness of Black-Native life embodied by the "Indigenous Black Boy." The title itself severing "clandestine" into

two new words, clan and destine, brings forth both familial and communal intimacies and evokes the future tense of an ordained decree. Lane writes:

hidden beneath
my black rage
is our
red road

I am
bone & ash
mixed with cement
stories I need
to hear
buried

often denied

built upon by
steel beams
bricks & glass

one drop continent
unknown quantum
of Turtle Island

imported stone

this dark blood
stuff by bleached
cotton with string
clots & congeals

there is no room
for this thick mass
at any drum. (53–54)

Red hidden beneath Black, Lane positions Black-Native life not only as mixture but as a composite of stories of survival that have been denied in the present. Lane's insistence that Indianness is not negated by Blackness or vice versa emerges through the critique of both the American one-drop rule with the political ordering of Indigeneity via blood quantum. Under such colonial logics, Black-Native life is rendered impossible, and denies Black-Native life a place at the drums and in community.⁷ This isolation or exile is precisely what the titular Indigenous Black Boy above confronts. Yet those stories "buried often denied" are not lost and indeed proclaim otherwise. The momentum of the poem propels the reader toward a world where such bifurcation between Black and

⁷For many Indigenous communities drum circles are a heartbeat for culture and community. Gatherings around and with drums are opportunities for interconnectedness, healing, the exchange of knowledge from Knowledge Keepers, and intergenerational connection.

Indigenous identities is denied, instead creating a new future together, saying, “I say / spirit is / a-callin’ // *Yansá* is cracking / concrete / open // this time Grandmother Spider / is spinning fire // creating us / new life” (54–55; italics in original). New life is born through the meeting of Grandmother Spider and *Yansá*, the former a revered protector figure present within multiple Indigenous belief systems and the latter one of the principal female deities within the Yoruba pantheon, that create space for Black-Native life to have a place in community.

That Black-Native life remains despite these discursive and material attempts to isolate or destroy it is deeply inconvenient for settler narratives that deny humanity to Black people and transform Indigenous people into specters. Scholars have noted that haunting, or ghostliness, is a particular heuristic for understanding the precarities of the Native body within the context of ongoing settler colonialism. For example, Colleen Boyd and Coll Thrush write, “Native ghosts have in fact shaped and informed colonizing encounters in significant ways, becoming stock characters in a quotidian North American drama of displacement, transformation, and belonging” (viii). The ghostliness of Indigeneity is used by the settler colonial state to generate meaning for itself and for its subjects. Jodi Byrd, among other scholars, has described this as the ways the figure of the Indian is “a colonial, imperial referent that continues to produce knowledge about the indigenous as ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ otherness” (19). In the context of Black-Native life, this signification of primitiveness and haunting ghostliness is complicated by the hyper-fixation on the labor of Blackness engendered through the ongoing legacies of slavery, which as Stephanie Smallwood asserts, “reduced people to the sum of their biological parts, thereby scaling life down to an arithmetical equation and finding the lowest common denominator” (43). The power to disfigure or dismember is critical for the settler colonial state’s self-concept which devours Black and Indigenous life in tandem to create narratives of white supremacy, racialized labor, and Native pastness. Black-Native life is, for the colonial state, an embodied contradiction, one that must both be fully alive in order to become a resource for capital and a ghost who is evidence of a vanishing people. The experience of Black-Native life, to be repeatedly dismembered and reduced to parts, then reveals the entanglement of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence as foundational for settler colonial coherence.

The textual worlds of indigeneity are material precisely because the settler colonial state mobilizes discourse to continue to kill Indigenous peoples. To reanimate the Black-Native body through mourning and love is an act of refusal within the atmosphere of terror that is coloniality. *Calling Out After Slaughter* as a text empowers the anomalous marginalia that is Black-Native life to unearth not simply its traumas but the calls for love that are the foundations for the future. In doing so, Lane turns our focus toward Black-Native life not only as historical and material fact but to remind us of the potentials of Black-Native people to unsettle the workings of colonial power through their anomalous position in the state. Daniel Heath Justice points out that the anomalous body “functions as both a personal and a communal ‘interpretive occasion,’” allowing for a constantly renegotiated and contextualized set of meanings regarding ideas about the body, authenticity, human, and history (221). To see Black-Native life as an anomaly is to draw attention to how the ongoing existence of Black-Native people challenges the racial ordering of coloniality while also creating space to acknowledge and reexamine the reality of contemporary lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. In witnessing and

grieving the history of Black-Native life, *Calling Out After Slaughter* builds the necessary interpretative language to renegotiate the place of Black-Native life as part of the complex and specific histories of Indigenous peoples rather than as a literal or discursively dismembered corpse. Black-Native life emerging “after slaughter” is another record of the incompleteness of the settler colonial mission of dominance and dominion. *Calling Out After Slaughter*, as a textual space, refuses the totality of devastation language can have on Indigenous and Black life, and instead honors the scars and charts a path forward.

In “Thirty-Nine Winters” Lane continues to develop this interpretive language through a focus on gratitude as a practice of recognition that invites a rewriting of the future. Lane writes, “you // who have / been part of / the journey / to now / I offer gratitude & thanksgiving / take it in // you who / have evoked // a widening / of vision / this beginning / starts here” (117). On the page “gratitude” and “& thanksgiving” are separated by a wider space causing the eye to linger in the space of gratitude before continuing. This literal space mobilizes the poetics that Lane develops throughout *Calling Out After Slaughter* that demands the reader witness the past as a path toward a different future. Lane continues, writing, “gratitude / is a mercy // heal that shit / let the scar form // hold on to / nothing // let go of the / story // tell the story / again/ now // this time / reveal the whole / of it” (118). Lane’s offering of gratitude and thanks is in service of a rebuilding of the world. The ‘you’ evoked here is battered with the scars to prove it. But it is the process of scarring that reflects healing and is foundational to this new beginning. Healing demands a reckoning with grief, with the stories that have been hidden or told only partially and fester in the body. Allowing the scars to take shape is a process of releasing the pain and burdens of violent pasts and creates the opportunity to tell the whole of it. This whole, made possible through facing language again, is that critical practice of reassembly that allows for a world after devastation.

Mishuana Goeman asks “how might our own stories become the mechanism in which we can critically (re)map the relationships between Native peoples and communities” (12)? Lane’s work in *Calling Out After Slaughter* suggests that the bodies of Black-Native people, in life and death, are central for such maps toward freedom. Across the collection the insistence of Black-Native life begs the question, how might the records, desires, and languages of Black-Native living become a mechanism through which we reorder relationships between Native and Black communities in defiance of settler coloniality? How might the stories of Black-Native people reorient our understandings of care for each other and ourselves? If an Indigenous poetics is instructional insofar that it narrates a method for a radical reorientation of the world, then *Calling Out After Slaughter* materializes a Black-Native textual and embodied method that is in service of building a world after this one. Such an after-world is apocalyptic, not in a dystopian sense but rather in a generative one. That is, the world must end and there is a time after slaughter.

When we encounter the opacity of Black-Native life, it is due to the foundational structures of the settler colonial state that order life, determines who and how people die, and attempts to monopolize the narratives and memories of Black, Indigenous, and Black-Native people. Regardless of the state’s refusal to speak of Black-Native people, Black-Native life is that anomalous dark matter that impacts the understandings and

workings of coloniality, race, the body, and the human. In reclaiming language as a tool to acknowledge the violent pains of history, Lane gives shape to the unique hauntings of Black-Native life. Billy-Ray Belcourt notes in a conversation with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Nisha Ramayya that “poetry can be where the fact of our survivability is not under siege and therefore can create a context for shared struggle and solidarity” (Ramayya et al. 56). *Calling Out After Slaughter* is one such record of what might be possible when the survivability of Black and Indigenous life is not under siege and instead reveals the many axes of shared struggle that are needed to refuse the settler colonial state. If an Indigenous poetics makes another world more available to our imaginations, then Lane carves out a still-to-be-determined space for Black-Native living through poetics. In the process, Lane interrupts the corpsification, the isolation, and the denial of Black-Native life that are needed for the settler colonial state to cohere in the present.

The discursive power of colonialism to name who and what a body is remains foundational to the continued atmosphere of violence we all live in. The persistence of Black-Native life then remains an existential threat to settler coloniality and the living, breathing, and loving bodies of Black-Native people remain under threat. This much is certain, Black-Native life signals a new horizon where what we know about Indianness, Blackness, kinship, and the future can be transformed. In some ways *Calling Out After Slaughter* reshapes Native literature by troubling its edges to reveal how poetics can be made useful for Black-Native life; how it might recalibrate to bring in to clearer view Black-Native people as part of Indigenous nations and communities. In understanding and grieving how Black-Native life has been lost, Lane urges us to heal collectively in service of both individual and community wellness. Through this practiced mourning and the repeated turns toward love and care, Lane outlines a world that can reorder our understandings of history and our bodies. The settler colonial state does not have a monopoly on living despite its ever-increasing violent tools of power. *Calling Out After Slaughter* is an imaginative practice of reassembly and in tending to the scars, literal and metaphorical, a horizon of freedom remains in sight.



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