

WE FLESH: MUSSER, SPILLERS, AND BEYOND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BODY

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I am a *homo sapiens* american Blackwomxn (AFAB)¹ and yet I am not a human. This paper explores the lived experience of *homo sapiens* but not human that I call “lived flesh,” a lived experience distinction that shouldn’t be possible on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2012; 1968) account of human subjectivity in *Phenomenology of Perception* and “The Intertwining—The Chiasm.” The use of flesh is deliberate and emerges from my engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” through Toni Morrison’s (2004) *Beloved*, Hortense Spillers’ (1982) “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” and “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Amber Musser’s (2018) *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, and Audre Lorde’s (2003) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The affective, experiential, and ethical practices of american Blackwomxn in these texts problematize Merleau-Ponty’s account of human subjectivity and his account of the generality of Being (“The Intertwining—The Chiasm”). Merleau-Ponty’s effacement of raced, sexed, and gendered difference results in a construct of the human subject that cannot include all *homo sapiens*.²

¹ Gender-nonconforming, assigned female at birth.

² I take them up to them to think beyond a desire in critical phenomenology to expand the notion of the subject to include non-majoritarian lives. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy (2017) provides a thoroughgoing account of the ways that white gaze as an “achievement” (243), white discursive practice, and white embodiment invent, project, and define themselves against the Black body as nigger, thing, sexual deviant, criminal, and subhuman and the toll of this definition (as well as the ways Black lives live beyond this quotidian thingification). Despite this, Yancy holds onto the notion of us “human subjects” even as he problematizes what it means to be human for white folks sutured to antiblackness and white supremacy (256) and gestures to Black “subjectivity” and the “agency” that is often tied to notions of subjectivity (247–254). Lisa Guenther’s (2020) definition of critical phenomenology, emerging from her reading of Lorde, is stirring in its designation of critical phenomenology as both a philosophical and political practice engaged in “restructuring the world’ in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence” (15–16). Yet as a political practice, it falls back on an appeal to inter/subjectivity—where our imaginings appear to be limited to subjectivity—that seems to undercut its philosophical practice.

First, I outline two accounts of the body: Merleau-Ponty's account of the body proper/lived body and Spillers' captive body (as contrasted with the thief's body) of the pornotrope. My claim is that the body proper of Merleau-Ponty's "originary acquisition" does not guarantee the subjectivity of all *homo sapiens*.

Then I move to three accounts of flesh. I will start with Merleau-Ponty's account of flesh as an "element" of Being, not matter. I follow this with Spillers' account of captive flesh—which is most certainly matter—that serves as the vestibule for the thief. I intervene to deny the total captivity of flesh via an excerpt from Morrison's *Beloved*.

Finally, I conclude with an exploration of the practices of lived flesh. On my account, lived flesh—particularly the flesh lived by Blackwomxn—can name itself in erotic, communal, and transformative acts as exceeding captive flesh. I take up Musser's account of the pleasure in abjection of brown jouissance in *Sensual Excess* and Lorde's erotic engagements with her lover Afrekete in *Zami* to explore these ways of being with others.

I: BODY

The Lived Body

The *Phenomenology of Perception* and "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" situate the subject in an intimate engagement with and through the world. Specifically, the body is the horizon or condition for the existence of a world. The body "accomplishes" existence—it is in the lived body that existence takes on its full meaning. Existence is marked by the inextricability of the physical and the psychical in every action, which is only possible for humans (Olkowski 1982-1983, 99–101). The body is not, nor can it ever be, an object; nor is it just a positing consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty (2012) the body is a whole, an "indivisible possession" whose positions are known through a "*body schema* that envelops them all" (100–01). A body's schema is its "manner of expressing . . . in and toward the world" (103). As such, the body is not a collection of parts, but a community of imbricating relations. Each part of this body "envelops" all and each other part.

Because the body is always implicated in the world that appears for it—and this world is never bare (Olkowski 1982–1983, 103)—to emerge as a lived body in the world is to emerge into a world with other lived bodies and things. It is the existence of others and things that affirms subjectivity. All perception—including self-perception—is partial, ambiguous (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 172). The things and others perceived are their own horizons. Self-knowledge is impossible without another to see us and confirm our subjectivity. Subjectivity is affirmed intercorporeality in sight and touch.³

Moreover, we always already have some affective or attractional relationship to the others and things in our worlds, as Merleau-Ponty situates the body proper in an "osmosis between sexuality and existence" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 172). Subjectivity occurs in a

³ See Merleau-Ponty 1968, pages 142-43 and 245.

sexual milieu. For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is bound up in intercorporeal relations between others and things (Stawarska 2006, 101). These relations play out—touch and are touched—through sensorial organ/izations of sexuality (Toadvine and Lawlor 2007, 436). Human existence, “the movement by which facts are taken up,” is sexual (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 173). Sexuality is the background against which things exist as meaningful (160).

Yet while sexuality organ/izes human existence and perception, it is not the primordial ground of being. Merleau-Ponty (2012) attributes this to an originary commonality: the embodied facticity of having sensory organs and faculties. All bodies emerge first into a natural/anonymous world, a world of *homo sapiens* and not *homo sapiens* that is prior to ego and culture. The lived body is claimed by (and claims) an “*originary acquisition*” of the natural or “physical world”. The lived body that emerges in *Phenomenology of Perception* has a doubled subjectivity: that of the anonymous, pre-personal “I” and the named “I.” It is the pre-personal I, the one “for which we are [not] responsible,” the one “that has already sided with the world,” that is shared in common by all (224).

To summarize, I have identified what I believe are four salient features of the lived body of Merleau-Ponty.

1. The lived body is whole and indeterminate.
2. The lived body is never an object.
3. The lived body is always already intersubjective because
 - a. All bodies are subjects, and
 - b. All bodies are the condition for the having and being-in of worlds that have both subjects and objects.
4. The lived subject-body lives an atmosphere of sexuality as a condition for the turning to and feeling for/toward others and objects in the world.

Limitations of the Lived Body

Merleau-Ponty’s claim of the “originary acquisition” gestures to a pre-cultural and embodied condition of neutrality shared by all *homo sapiens* that seems to guarantee the transition from *homo sapiens* to human subject.⁴

⁴ I read Merleau-Ponty’s account of the originary acquisition as the natural body. We happen to be born with certain bodies. *Homo sapiens* hold certain attributes in common that distinguish them just enough from other *animalia*. The attributes of these bodies allow for the acquisition of certain habit/uations. For those reading Merleau-Ponty as resisting a description of the “originary acquisition” as biological/natural versus cultural, one may object that biology (or the concept “natural”) is an acquisition or a habit of retrospection. In her thorough, insightful, and provoking article, Alia Al-Saji (2008) takes very seriously Merleau-Ponty’s account of man as historical. In her careful work on the temporality of perception (notably, rhythm and memory), Al-Saji takes this history to be a thick event. If man is a historical event; then the “biological” or “natural” attributes that separate *homo sapiens* from other fauna and flora must also be historical. I take Al-Saji to be saying that not only do we not come into this world as human; *neither do we come into this world as homo sapiens*. Our species distinction—also thought of as the subject/object distinction—is an acquisition/cultural habit (41–48). I read Al-Saji as nudging her readers to consider that there is a past prior to our past as *homo sapiens*, a past “which has never been present” that Merleau-Ponty takes up when he takes up the “originary acquisition.” We are in agreement that the human subject occurs at the level of culture/history. Yet I maintain that though the prepersonal

Merleau-Ponty (2012) discounts raced, sexed, and classed differentiation at the level of the biological level *homo sapiens*. *Prior to* ego acquisition/development, one is assigned to a group. Group-assignment does not require ego acquisition. Group assignment is sociogenic/cultural. *If* there is such a thing as *an* originary acquisition, it is not singular. Just as group-assignment precedes ego acquisition/development, in some cases it also precedes *existence*. I was Black and assigned-female before I was on this plane. I could be a totally different Andrea (actually, I would have been named “Gladys”), certainly, but they too would have been assigned-Black and assigned-female *in utero*. Christina Sharpe (2016) describes “living in/the wake” as an example of this socio-biological difference that destabilizes the ease of *homo sapiens* to subject on the grounds of group assignment and de-humanization:

Living in/the wake of slavery is living “the afterlife of property” and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/ status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children. (15)

Partus sequitur ventrem, in which the Black child inherits the “non/status, the non/being of the mother,” is the social code that overrides even phenotype to designate status/subject difference between *homo sapiens* at the level of biology. I want to be clear that I am not saying that at the level of DNA Black people are outside of *homo sapiens* species belonging. What I am saying is that at the level of natural acquisition that is lived contingent upon group assignment, Black people as *homo sapiens* are excluded from *homo sapiens* as subject.

The Captive Body/Flesh

In Spillers (2003), the human subject is a normative claim that is made through denigration. This normative claim is also a *nominative* claim, a claim about naming as a meaning-making and status-conferring project.

Spillers calls this an American Grammar, where grammar is the science/technology of the relations that produce the human subject. The grammar book teaches how to capture and deny certain bodies. Indigenous and African bodies are *translated* from subjects/bodies into captive bodies/flesh. It is through the apprehension of the captive body that the human subject emerges (208).⁵ What does it take to capture a body, to arrest its subjectivity? It requires lusty despoliation of the captive body; a flaying of the flesh; the picking out of the eyes; the use, the tying, chopping off, and emptying of the hands; the breaking and re-breaking of the mouth; the starvation and the noosing of the neck—an itemization, what Spillers

might not participate in a subject/object distinction, the prepersonal body that is “affectively open to the world” which “is already a tentative rhythm since it has a sensory history, constituted from previous encounters with the world and others” participates in distinctions at the attributory level that implicates the prepersonal in culture assignments (55).

⁵ Spillers (2003) does refer to “African female subject.” This use of “African female subject” is juxtaposed with the brutality she experiences “that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males” that constitutes the “female flesh ‘ungendered’” (207).

calls the “atomizing” of the captive body in this way—in an ongoing attempt to capture and keep captured, to fix and name, what was formerly the mobile African subject. The captive body sets the conditions for the uncaptive human subject and inter/subjectivity.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers (2003) traces the distinction between the human and African and indigenous peoples vis-à-vis their different relationships to the speech-writing system, incursion, and sexuality. This act is not just *representational* of an ongoing encounter—it is not just an act of intellectualization, of a brain in a vat—it is written on the African body through actual torture and theft and the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (207). The African body becomes captive—a thing/object for the thief/human subject—in the simultaneous discursive and incursive act. Spillers examines the way William Goodell records/describes these quotidian invasions via the whip, and Goodell’s mastery of the written word helps to situate him as the subject, *He Who Could Not Be Whipped*. The captive body is made flesh: penetrated, flayed, seared, whipped, tortured by instruments masterfully wielded by seemingly invisible hands. Captive flesh has anatomy not as a human but as an object of use or study does. The “laboratory prose” positions Goodell as the subject.

Why is the captive body whipped? The captive body is whipped to keep and create it *as captive*, to render it flesh. Whipping and other forms of corporeal torture are pedagogical tools designed to teach the flesh how to be—and only to be—captive.⁶ This is an attempt to “seve[r] the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” and the *sameness* of the torture for all captive bodies regardless of genitalia instantiates a “los[s]” of “gender difference in the outcome” (Spillers 2003, 206).

The creation of the captive body/flesh is the creation of a sexual object—and biological other—such that it cannot prevent itself from being seized by the thief in any meaning-full way:

(1) [T]he captive body as the course of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities project a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; (4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (Spillers 2003, 206)

The captured body cum captive body/flesh as an ongoing historical production of sexuality, race, gender, and porosity is distinguishable from the body proper of *Phenomenology of Perception* and the body of flesh:

1. Bodies qua subjects are historically and socially situated. That is, what a body is, what a subject means or intends is a product of the milieu in which it is, means, or intends. Bodies qua subjects are created.

⁶ See Willis 1985, pages 199–202 and 208–10.

- a. For Merleau-Ponty this suggests the coequality of different embodied worlds that emerge from a shared original *homo sapiens* commonality.
 - b. For Spillers this suggests that not all *homo sapiens* are body-subjects.
 - c. The production of some *homo sapiens* as subjects and some as captive/flesh is the work of a grammar of race, gender, sex/uality, and the proximity to invasion.⁷
2. Formerly African bodies/subjects are stolen in an ongoing historical encounter of the TransAtlantic Slave Trade.
 - a. This “trade” (theft) exchanges the African body for the captive body/flesh.
 3. To be captive body/flesh is to be denied motricity, sexuality, and other necessary conditions to be produced as a subject.
 - a. The denial of subjective-sexuality is commensurate with an externally inflicted excessive salaciousness.
 - b. The denial of sexuality is also the denial of sexuate and gender difference as well as *the imposition of biological otherness*.
 - c. The loss of the power to represent and power to ward off is also the denial of the power to name.
 4. The captive body/flesh is still in the world, but not as a subject, as a captive/ating object for the use of the subject.
 - a. This is a change in the phenomenological situation of the captured body.
 - b. Pedagogical practices (a grammar of torture and non-humanization) seek to enact a different kind of entity of lived experience for the captured/captive body to distinguish it from the thieving body.
 5. Sexuality, the ability to name, and motility are limited to the thieving body/subject.
 - a. The thieving body becomes the only body able to inhabit linear space and time, the only body “free to take up the present and past as it wishes, and in the manner of its choosing” and thus we might posit the thieving body, the body living whitely or living whiteness as “temporally present, or even, futurally directed,” in a way other than the captive body (Ngo 2019, 247).
 - b. The thieving body, the body living whitely, is the only body that retains and maintains the kind of gender-difference and gender-specificity required to participate in sexuality.

⁷ Because race is a social fact and historical process—and not a biological fact—antiblackness is not necessarily tied to an immediate phenotype or relations between particular phenotypes. Moreover, because race as a social fact is contingent upon context, I focus on the US American context. This context is the result, and producer, of a “historical context,” which means that what white is and who qualifies as white has changed over time. In “The Phenomenology of White Identity” Linda Martín Alcoff (2019) outlines the ongoing production of white identities. White people are the result of an historical and ongoing process (176–77).

II: FLESH

The Lived Body of Flesh

In “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” rather than a body that, as in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, is a “specialized self, familiar with a single sector of being,” a generalized account of Being emerges (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 224). The body of flesh is “a *sensible for itself*,” an event of Being that is inhabited by the sensible (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135). The body of flesh has two phases: objective and subjective. These two phases are inextricable, touching and forming each other in and through the flesh.

This flesh of “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” is the condition for the body; it is what the body shares in and with the sensorial world. So rather than biology being the condition for the body and the sensorial world, it is flesh (131–35). Flesh is the connective medium, a “tissue that lines . . . sustains and nourishes” the shared world of subjects and things (132). It is “not a thing” but a kind of state, a kind of *manifold* for the emergence of things: “a possibility, a latency” (133). “The flesh is not matter;” it is “an ‘element’ of Being” (139) that is marked by “reversibility” (144–47) and sets the grounds for intercorporeal experience. While there is no outside of flesh—the subject does not exit flesh—to be human is to be *in* the flesh and *of* the flesh not as a thing or an object (141).

Critiquing the Body of Flesh

Merleau-Ponty’s fleshy revival at the end of his life suggests a critical reassessment of the normal subject that emerges in *Phenomenology of Perception* via his conclusions about blind people and the structure and capacity of perception of the normal subject.

Let us conclude that the tactile field never has the scope of the visual field, the tactile object is never wholly present in each of its parts like the visual object, and, in short, that touch is not vision. . . . The blind person’s world and the world of the normal person differ not merely in the quantity of matter available to them, but moreover in the *structure* of the whole. . . . The total signification of our life—of which the notional signification is never but an extract—would be different if we were deprived of vision. (2012, 233)

This quotation demonstrates the operation of the “normate” in Merleau-Ponty’s thought (Reynolds 2017; 2020). It is not just that “touch is not vision,” it is that blindness is a deprivation of the fullness of the world and a lack in the “*structure* of the whole” of being in the world.

Drawing from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Reynolds (2017) takes up “normate” for its simultaneous and imbricating structure that brings the lived space, meaning, and the bodily schema to bear on our understandings of the subject and dis/ability (420). “Normate” is the necessary condition for the existence of the normative. And, per Reynolds (2020), it is social through and through (244–45).

Though Reynolds (2017) critiques the ways in which Merleau-Ponty falls back into ableist notions when he describes the ability of non-blind people to simulate blindness and the seizing of the cane as at hand (in the way the organist seizes the organ), he also reads Merleau-Ponty as turning ableist notions about the good life against themselves in service of non-philosophy (422–27). I appreciate these care-full and engaging readings of Merleau-Ponty. However, while Merleau-Ponty may be open to the *existence* of other worlds, I believe he does not go beyond the normate for an understanding of those worlds as not deviant. I find it striking that Merleau-Ponty uses “us” to identify with the “normal person.” He implicates the abilities of his body in his account of perception.

Drawing on Reynolds’ account of “ableism” and Garland-Thomson’s account of “material anonymity,” Christine Wieseler (2019) challenges “conceptions of the ‘normal’ subject in phenomenology.” Wieseler critically reads Merleau-Ponty’s “primary interest in examining case studies of people with illnesses and injuries [as an effort] to gain a better understanding of the ‘normal’ subject by way of contrast” (71). Specifically, Wieseler turns to Garland-Thomson’s account of mis/fit—and its application for raced, gendered, sexed, and additionally othered ways of being in the world—to develop her critique of Merleau-Ponty’s implicit normative claim that the normal human subject/lived body is white, male, cis, and abled (72–73). The characteristics of the mythical norm/ative⁸ body allow these bodies to be lived as anonymous, and it is this “material anonymity” that assures and secures their fit in the world (71). A “misfit” occurs when there is an insufficient fit, when one has a *material conspicuity* that is experienced as an arrest of the “I can,” or as a reason for being “stopped” (72).

In “From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity,” Beata Stawarska (2006) argues that the “reversibility” of flesh is predicated on a conflation of intracorporeal and inter-corporeal touch. Stawarska claims that this conflation means that Merleau-Ponty’s account neglects sexuate difference and effaces the other. Merleau-Ponty substitutes his hand for the hand of the other in the handshake encounter (92–99). His hand “annexes” the other’s. “[T]he experience of one’s own body comes to provide the matrix for intersubjective or intercorporeal relations” (94). Annexation is the condition for inter/subjectivity.

In “Urban Flesh,” Gail Weiss (2006) explains Irigaray’s account of the danger and violence in Merleau-Ponty’s account of flesh as “pure generality.” Flesh is not pure generality. Flesh differentiates in/as its ongoing manner of stylization in its manner of bringing things into being. A style is an identifiable cohesion that fixes a way of being. As Weiss explains, for Irigaray, being is “always already differentiated” through sexuate difference (148).

⁸ “Somewhere on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me’. In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing” (Lorde 2007, 116).

III: LIVED FLESH WE FLESH

What if prior to theft, flesh was the primordial status of all *homo sapiens*? What if when the bewildering encounter transformed freely relational African flesh/body into the captive/stolen body and flesh, it also transformed relational pre-european flesh into the European, then white, subject? This transformation instigates a subject-object relation in which the human subject/thief maintains its subjectivity by fleeing from its fleshiness and turning toward surface, transparency, and determination (Musser 2018, 48–50). The human subject/thief tears itself apart from fleshy being-with and projects that *wounding* onto the captive flesh through continued violence. Antiblackness and white-supremacy are the structures that have been produced to keep the captive body/flesh as an open wound, so that the flesh may be experienced as a lack *only*. In these last sections I will explore the experience of flesh that exceeds total capture.

To live beyond the clutches of the human coil is a unique opportunity “to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis” that is “unique in the ages” and develop expressive and affective engagements otherwise (Cooper 1892, 144). I see the possibility of this capacity beyond that of subjectivity and humanity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2004). This “unique” “possibilit[y] of the crisis” is what I want to think about as *lived* flesh.

I am drawn to the “critical fabulation” of Toni Morrison’s “recombinant narrative” (Hartman 2008, 11–12).⁹ In *Beloved*, through the character, Sethe, Morrison channels Margaret Garner, “a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation” (Morrison 2004, xvii–xix). Sethe escapes enslavement at “Sweet Home” and flees to Ohio to be reunited with her kin. Baby Suggs, holy, Sethe’s mother-in-love arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio years earlier after her child, Halle (and Sethe’s “choice”), bought her freedom from their enslaver (13). Baby Suggs, holy, put her heart “to work at once” (102). This is the work of Clearing, of making place and kinship that exceeds the experience and ethical concerns of the human subject.

⁹ “The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. ‘Fabula’ denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is ‘a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors.’ . . . By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story . . . from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done . . . I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe ‘the resistance of the object.’ . . . The outcome of this method is a ‘recombinant narrative,’ which ‘loops the strands’ of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present. Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise” (Hartman 2008, 11–12).

In the Clearing¹⁰ ritual, Black people gather in flesh. This Clearing is a geography where flesh exceeds and differentiates itself from the logic and grasp of the human subject/captors. That is, the Clearing ritual—a practice of sounding, touching, sorrowing, and joining—affirms the excessiveness of Black lives and the fact that flesh can never just be captive.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart . . .

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Touch others with them . . . stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed . . . No, they don’t love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. . . . And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. (Morrison 2004, 102–04)

The lived flesh of the Clearing has kinship arrangements—children, parents, lovers—who inhabit simultaneous affective positions—laughing, smiling, dancing, crying—in and through touch and voice. It all gets mixed up. This mixing, this clearing, is not possible for the human subject who requires—even in its ambiguous perception—a steady and individual point of orientation. *We* flesh. In this here-place, in this geography, in this space and time beyond that of the yonder, *we* are “deeply loved” and deeply loving, touching, singing, laughing, weeping, dancing, communing in nature. This is flesh—lived flesh—I’m talking about here, flesh that insists beyond the piecemeal assemblage of the human body/parts. Baby Suggs, holy outlines the constructs of the human “they,” the space of “yonder” and their acts that exclude flesh from humanity.

Spillers (2003) seems to echo Baby Suggs, holy’s epistemological, axiological, and phenomenological assessments about the capacity of them “yonder.”

¹⁰ Morrison (2004) capitalizes “Clearing” in the novel. In my reading this designates the Clearing as both a place “where Baby Suggs had danced in sunlight” (101) and a practice.

Whatever my mother, niece, and I might say and do about our sexuality (the terms of kinship are also meant collectively) remains an unarticulated nuance in various forms of public discourse as though we were figments of the great invisible empire of womankind. In a very real sense, black American women remain invisible to various public discourse, and the state of invisibility for them has its precedent in an analogy on any patriarchal symbolic mode that we might wish to name. (153)

The Clearing is a “wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (Morrison 2004, 102). It is invisible to those “yonder.” The Clearing ritual is “an unarticulated nuance” to the human subject yonder, that apprehends the lived flesh as parts, items, objects for use and not of, engaged in, and constituted by collective kin-marking process.

For Merleau-Ponty (1968), the flesh is not matter and is not a being itself. As an “element” of Being, it is “[un]thinkable by itself” (139–40). And since the body accomplishes thought, it is unlivable. Morrison provides an account of *lived flesh*. “We Flesh” is the lived sensor-sensed of the Black self. Lived flesh is a kind of lived being-otherwise that destabilizes Merleau-Ponty’s account of the lived body and the body of flesh.

An Erotics of Lived Flesh

Morrison’s critical fabulatory flesh is an otherwise of affect, kinship, and identity. An understanding of the Clearing as a world/region beyond (coeval, simultaneous, and intimate with, but inaccessible by) the experiential/perceptual realm of the human subject highlights different life projects for lived flesh.

Hortense Spillers’ (2003) critical work on grammar and discursive projects opens onto an account of flesh that problematizes the narrative structure of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the anonymous, natural, pre-personal world of the human as well as the generality of his account of the carnal body. Spillers’ work in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” and “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” centers the lived experience—via the discursive practices—of the Black female body that emerges in the wake of the Transatlantic Atlantic Slave Trade.¹¹ Spillers outlines the way that the deployment of sexuality affirms the human subject through its denial of the Black female’s human subjectivity. Rather than intersubjectivity, a basic form of lived experience for American Black people is theft and violation. Merleau-Ponty’s (1964) account of subjectivity in “The Philosopher and His Shadow” authorizes these invasions. The subject of the flesh has a grammar of annexation—and rendering others and things as at hand for the subject—and sameness that effaces the other.

¹¹ What I am therefore calling the Trans* Atlantic is that s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents. I want to think Trans* in a variety of ways that try to get at something *about* or *toward* the range of trans*formations enacted on and by Black bodies. The asterisk after a word functions as the wildcard, and I am thinking the trans* in that way, as a means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls the “position of the unthought” (Sharpe 2016, 30).

In Merleau-Ponty's (1964) account, subjects recognize other subjects because they are subjects themselves. "It is true that I would not recognize him if I were *not* a man myself" (170). Likeness is a criterion for recognition as an-other subject. Because Merleau-Ponty is writing in the wake of the historical events of mutilation, displacement, theft, and genocide, I suggest that he has taken his body as un-othered, as *neutral*, which is what allows him to use *his* intracorporeal experience as intercorporeal experience. This neutrality, when combined with the like-to-likeness of inter/subjectivity, indicates that dissimilar, non-"neutral" bodies are unrecognizable as subjects. The like-neutrality of subjects confines intersubjectivity to—and defines it against—the unlike-difference/otherness of other "*animalia*" (168). If for Merleau-Ponty bodies/subjects emerge into a world of intersubjectivity, there is room to think about intersubjectivity/sociality as conditioned by an understanding of non-sociality where *homo sapiens* animalia—as outside of subjectivity—reside. The subject's sociality and cultural world passes through the non-sociality, non-cultural world of animalia. When read through Spillers—where the animalia is Black lived flesh—the subject's sociality and culture must pass through the Black body.

Spillers (2003) treads these (Middle Passage) waters in "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" as she explores the vestibular nature of the Black body and the Human experience:

Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of a highly profitable generative act. She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and "other." . . . [B]lack is vestibular to culture. (155)

I read this vestibular situation as one that undoes the notion that the "black female" is totally conditioned by the trade in enslaved flesh. The black female (mother?) and her "issue" are the very condition for the human subject—a site of difference, difference on sight from which the thief distinguishes itself. I want to linger in the vestibule and consider it as a lived experience. This attention to the vestibular takes up *alterity* and "suggests altogether different relationships to time and space" (Brown 2021, 159). The vestibule, because of its nature, is always becoming. It not fixed; is not an arrival. It is the possibility for arriving otherwise where non-humanity is not just the lack of humanity or "inhumanity;" it is not just captive flesh. The jump into the "unknowable" of alterity funks up the trope of pornography attributed to american Blackwomxn.

There is an opening to consider the flesh that can never be just captive, specifically in the case of american Blackwomxn. "Because black American women do not participate" in the traditional symbolics that have oppressed them, we have no "allegiances" to it (Spillers 2003, 159). As the vestibule from which the subject's sexuate difference emerges, the black "female" body that stands in the flesh has multiple ways of signifying that are beyond the fixed grammar of the human subject/thief (174).

In this play of paradox, only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different test for female empowerment. (Spillers 2003, 228–29)

Out of the “traditional symbolics of gender” lived flesh is in constant movement/transition. Beyond the limitations of the human subject, lived flesh is “transitive” and able to develop its own practices, its own relations and forms of accountability (Snorton 2017, 5–6). These relations include erotic practices that do not collapse into the traditional symbolics of sexuality. The nonhuman erotic practices always already exceed the subject’s grammar. So “Sapphire” may once again “rear her head”—as one of my generous and engaging reviewers from *Puncta* has so evocatively put it—but, if she rears her head as lived flesh, self-named/naming—then she will exceed capture with her motion, her becoming (rather than arrival) and her flux (Brown 2021, 138). At the end of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” Spillers (2003) leaves the reader with the task “to make a place for this different social subject” (228). I understand the task as not to give the Subject/Thief another thing to grasp. It is to love, to honor, to caress the *difference* of those of us who stand “in the flesh.”

Amber Musser’s (2018) “Brown jouissance” in the pornotrope takes up this task. Pornotroping speaks to the ways in which black and brown bodies are constructed not as desired *subjectivities*, but as desirable objects, denuded of subjectivity and gender (6–7). Musser’s reading of Spillers’ “pornotrope” draws from Weheliye (2008), who describes the pornotrope as the (political) means through which Black bodies are transformed into “bare life” or flesh (71–72).¹²

Brown jouissance, I argue, gives us ways to think about the possibilities of resignifying that affective fleshiness, by showing us that which is not encumbered by discourses of sexuality, but that which traffics in sensuality, that amorphous quality of fleshiness that Spillers argues was assigned to the “captive body.” (Musser 2018, 9)

Spillersian flesh demarcates the breakdown, the ground of the insurgent; Musser takes up this flesh and fingers the scar with a shiver of pleasure. For Spillers (2003) and Musser (2018), gender is an organizing scaffold of subjectivity; to be ungendered is to be denied subjectivity (Spillers 2003, 222–24; Musser 2018, 108). To live as flesh is to live as excluded

¹² The “bare life” of the *homo sacer* is the condition for the fullness of the life of the human subject (Weheliye 2008, 67–68).

from the guarantee of an emphatic, empathetic, and positively-affirming intersubjective encounter.

Jouissant flesh engages in a “practice of refusal”—a method of thinking (about), doing, and being otherwise (Campt 2019). This refusal to be rendered pornographic is monstrous. To take up the monstrous, to “*clai[m]* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’)” (Spillers 2003, 229), is to live as a warning of/about the failure of the human subject. The etymology of “monstrous” refers to the unnaturalness of its formation, its deviation from the natural socio-biological order, and its role as a “divine omen.”¹³ The natural order of the “traditional symbolics” leads to devastation. To *refuse* the normal or be in the world otherwise is to take up the dread of the pornotrope even as one exceeds it in the course of erotic engagement.

Specifically, lived flesh is more than just the lack of subjectivity; it is the movement and irrepressibility of sensual and affective encounters that insist beyond the objectification of the pornotrope. Musser (2018) refers to this motivity—and ability to signify multiply—retained by the lived flesh as “liquidity” (14). To slip, as liquid does, from the subject’s fingers. The pornotrope fixes the human and imposes the limitations of sexuality and subjectivity. In describing the human subject as the “thief,” Spillers (2003) makes an implicit claim about the tactile projects available to the subject. The thief has a limited range of tactile and affective engagements. They annex, appropriate, steal, clutch, and grasp. The pornotrope creates the *unfeeling* yet sexing subject. *In* the pornotrope, and yet outside of this noose, lived flesh has the oceanic capacity of the erotic.

Lorde’s (2007) account of the erotic engages other practices that the human subject’s grasping/objectifying sexuality does not. Lorde distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic:

[T]he erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. ... The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. (54–55)

For Lorde (2007), “pornography . . . represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (54). The unfeeling yet sexing subject/thief of the pornotrope is the site of an overwhelming pornography. But the excessiveness of flesh, its situation as the always already otherwise of the subject’s logic, is not totalized by this project. As such, the eroticism of the lived flesh opens onto different engagements/relations: the “We” of “We flesh.”¹⁴ On Lorde’s account the erotic is a site of deep feeling *shared* with

¹³ Gordon and Gordon (2016) center the monster as a divine omen/warning in their chapter “When Monsters No Longer Speak”: “[W]e refer to the etymology of the term in Latin, namely, *monere*, which means to warn and its noun correlate *monstrum*, which means divine omen, portent, sign, warning, or abnormality. . . . Monsters are themselves, thus, etymologically, divine warnings, signs that something has gone wrong that are often mistaken as causes and events in themselves” (331).

¹⁴ Lived flesh allows for identification in terms of selves that belong, and are accountable, to a “we” or an “us.” We are made of selves, not subjects. This identification, this *we* flesh-ness, understands the lived fleshy self as an *aspect* of we/us. Whilst within the logic of subjectivity, identification tends toward individuation, the individual autonomous actor; lived flesh can accommodate unique components

and among others (56–57). This is demonstrated in her use of “our/s,” “we,” and “us” significantly more often than she uses “I,” “me,” “my,” or “mine” in the text.¹⁵

For Lorde (2007) the erotic is a “resource,” a “source of power and information within our lives” (53). It is “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are not reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). Where sexuality is a paradigm of the thief/captive flesh, the erotic is that paradigm shift that does the (monstrous) work of naming and making connections (kinships). The erotic calls on us to demand better of ourselves and our shared engagements (57). What Musser (2018) calls the “liquidity” of the flesh allows for the affective, sensual, political, and communal capacity of the erotic.

While Lorde (2007) understands that these capacities are distributed to “women”—Lorde also uses “female”—I suggest that they are an example of what Musser (2018) refers to as “re-gendering” and “queer femininity,” where femininity is not tied to, or only found in, bodies assigned female at birth. “Re-gendering” is a way of being (with others) in the world otherwise (107–09). For lived flesh gender, as an ongoing, open, supple, painful, pleasing, practice of the community, is a gerund (115). The gerund as a fleshy way of doing/living time, the gerund as a practice of, and orientation toward, beginning—to be becoming, to be emerging—is temporality otherwise.

In the last chapters of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde (1982) witnesses (as participant) the erotics of doing/living time with her lover Afrekete. Again, Lorde privileges the communal “we” in her practices of “sharing” connection through tension, pleasure and non-pleasure, creation and transformation, and of coming and going together. There is play in Lorde’s description “we had come together” (253). This is a kind of Bluesing/ Beautifying the line, this drawing the ear toward simultaneous orgasmic connection and political intertwining.

Blues/ing—both the musical category of Blues and the lived practice of Bluesing—is a beautifying method of fleshy life. “Beauty is [the] method” of what you can do, how you can lie the pleasure of escape, and the shock of care (Sharpe 2019). It is a “wayward” practice that burst out, making its own space for life. Bluesing is a method that emerges from/in a “love of too much,” and a “*beautiful* experiment in how-to-live” (Hartman 2020, 228). Blues’ use of dissonance, blue notes, and syncopation can be read as “not studyin” the traditional symbolics of classical music. It is marked by simultaneity and frank opacity.

without alienation. Selves are not in opposition to We/Us. What this means is that we are relational, and that being in and of relation is an ontological condition of lived flesh. I allow for relations within and among lived flesh that attend primarily to the flesh. This enlivens my refusal to think lived flesh as primarily evasive or fugitive, as I worry this line of thought—though rich with meaning—can center that which is being fled: the thief. Certainly, lived flesh can (and at times *must*) evade the grasp of the thief; but this to me is distinct from a thoroughgoing account of lived flesh as evasive. This essay is part of a larger project that explores the living and the fleshiness of lived flesh, the We/Us-ness that dances, laughs, weeps, and touches in Clearings. It is less an attempt to give borders to We and *more* an attempt to explore the ontological status and phenomenological practices of the erotic—rather than the sexuality—of “acutely and fully feeling” in our doings (Lorde 2007, 54).

¹⁵ A rough count of the use distribution demonstrates that collective language is used 134 times and personal/individual language is used 34 times.

In addition to its libidinal highs, it also plumbs the depths of depression, suicidal ideation, desertion, and desolation. In Blues joy and pain are shared between the singer and audience in the call and response of created kin. Blues/ing is a method, an experiment in/of the lived flesh that goes beyond the imposed grammatical limitations of subjectivity (Hartman 2019, 227–28).

In “Interstices,” Spillers (2003) turns to Bessie Smith’s Blues/ing as an example of this method (165–67). For Spillers, the singer is a “being-for-self” and the model of Blackwomxn’s wayward/otherwise sexuality—an erotics.

My aim in quoting Michele Russell’s valorization of the singer is to trace her proposal that the dancing voice embodied is the chief teaching model for black women of what *their* femininity might consist in Whatever luck or misfortune the Player has dealt to her, she is, in the moment of performance, the primary subject of her own invention. Her sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and, often, the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers. (166–67)

Smith’s Blues/ing is a testimony of experiences, and practices of struggle and celebration, that are not exhausted by the other, even if they are contemporaneous. This method of creation (of beauty), this love of too much, of the flamboyant, is necessary for—and a mode of—the self-invention and self-regard of fleshy pleasure.

The liquidity of fleshy methods, such as Blues/ing, opens simultaneously onto acceptance and rejection, pleasure and non-pleasure, delight and devastation, the “sheer pleasure” of monstrosity. There is pleasure to be had in abjection, there is self to be lived fully and freely within the object, and there is community to be made outside of subjectivity (Musser 2018, 86–89). This is the soft-tough self, the co-mingling and co-constituting of joy and tears (Lorde 1982, 250).

With Afrekete, Lorde revels in the “possibilities that inhere in inequality” (Musser 2018, 39–40).¹⁶ Lived flesh infiltrates, as an insurgent, hostile territory, whilst knowing that life is more than just the war. The excessiveness, or the beyondness, the too-muchness of flesh, means that it cannot make the kind of same holds on others in the world as the lived body. Lorde transforms both the notion of origin and nourishment in her time with Afrekete.

“I got this under the bridge” was a saying from time immemorial, giving as adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say, was as authentic—as was possible. (Lorde 1982, 288)

With Afrekete, there is lived experience of time otherwise—alterity. “I got this under the bridge,” the “saying from time immemorial” echoes her mother’s sounding out home/mother/tongue in a strange land. Lived time that loops, swirls, spirals, keeps pace with

¹⁶ See also Musser 2018, pages 4, 43, 60–63, 87, and 98–102.

itself, lived at a voluptuous depth unavailable to the Body's time, "planted, fruit-deep" in the lived flesh. Fruit, feeling, and family are simultaneous, and are simultaneously longing and fulfillment. Lived flesh exceeds, *undoes*, and destabilizes the subject's grammar yonder. "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. *You* got to love it, *you!*" (Morrison 2004, 103).

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