

## CHAPTER 1

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# Abjection

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For Julia Kristeva, the intolerable, or abject, body leaks wastes and fluids, in violation of the desire and hope for the “clean and proper” body, thus making the boundaries and limitations of our selfhood ambiguous, and indicating our physical wasting and ultimate death. In her view, human and animal wastes such as feces, urine, vomit, tears, and saliva are repulsive because they test the notion of the self/other split upon which subjectivity depends. The skin of milk, for instance, puts one in mind of the thin skin membrane that defines the borders and the limits of the physical body; because human skin provides only a relatively flimsy and easily assaulted partition between the body’s inside and the world outside, this milky reminder disturbs our distinctions between outside and inside, I and other, moving us to retch, and want to vomit in an acute attempt to expel the scum from our being (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 2–3). As Elizabeth Grosz observes, “Abjection is a sickness at one’s own body, at the body beyond that ‘clean and proper’ thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, the ‘clean and proper’” (78). The abject body repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety. We disavow our excretory bodies because they are signs of disorder, reminders of the body’s ambiguous limits (its leaking from multiple orifices), and of its ultimate death: “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, *cadaver*” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3).<sup>1</sup>

Kristeva’s theory of abjection originates with her distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Here, Kristeva

claims that language is the outgrowth of certain drives and desires that are somehow “presymbolic,” or we might say, prerepresentational. These drives and desires are *semiotic*, and their life exists in the place or space of the *chora*. Kristeva adapts the concept of the *chora* from Plato’s *Timaeus*, a dialogue between Socrates and Timaeus about the nature of material existence, where the *chora* is usually translated into English as “receptacle.” This passage from the *Timaeus* indicates that for Plato, the *chora* is the place out of which *being* develops:

For the moment, we need to keep in mind three types of things: that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be [*chora*], and that after which the thing coming to be is modeled, and which is the source of its coming to be. It is in fact appropriate to compare the receiving thing to a mother, the source to a father, and the nature between them to their offspring. (Zeyl 50d)

The *chora* is thus related for Plato, as for Kristeva, to the maternal. It is the place where the developing “thing” (in Kristeva’s case, a child) is “nurtured.” In human relationships, this nurturing consists of the mother responding to the child’s needs (that is, her heterogeneous energies and drives), and directing both the expression and the satisfaction of those needs. The child experiences hunger, alertness, and drowsiness, all of which are answered by the mother, who suckles the child, talks to her and makes faces at her, cuddles her as she drifts into sleep, and so on. Though the child hears words spoken around her, she has not yet been initiated into formal language, but experiences the world mainly in terms of rhythmic or sporadic movements, sounds without prescribed sense, feelings of pleasure or pain whose origin or cause is indefinite. Language is already beginning to develop in this semiotic phase of existence, since certain patterns of being in the wake of sound are imposed on the future speaking subject. She hears certain sounds—words—repeated around her, and registers a variety of tones and vocalizations in her surroundings, and they may gradually begin to correspond to states of bodily feeling, for instance, her mother’s soft whisper as she enjoys the warmth of being at the breast and filling her belly. The child is thus beginning to experience correspondences of sounds, words, desires, and feelings; a world is beginning to take form, but it is still a world that is largely dependent on the mother and her body for its maintenance and definition.

The semiotic phase is followed by a rupture, which Kristeva thinks of with reference to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Lacan writes of a time in a young child’s development when she recognizes herself in a mirror for the first time. “What’s that?” the child thinks. “Why, that seems to be me, since

when I move, the image moves; I see where I begin and end, so I am an individual, and that means that I am not continuous with my mother's body, but separate from it." This introduces the child to the idea that not only is she a person separate from the mother and from objects in the world, but also that persons and objects can be reflected back to her through representation, through images or figures that depict or describe persons and things, but which are not identical with those persons or things. This is the point at which encoded words become central. Because the child had not previously been aware of the world as a representational place of persons and objects, she had no connection with naming. But now, as she begins to cross from the semiotic—in which language was all movement, rhythm, sounds without referent—into the symbolic—in which language points at persons and things and gives them a public meaning—she needs to know the names of persons and things in order to communicate with others. This moment of drift from the semiotic toward naming—toward becoming participatory in a signifying system—is for Kristeva a "thetic phase" (98). Kristeva depicts a young child in a state of language in which the semiotic and the symbolic are cooperative: the sound the dog makes—"woof-woof"—becomes the signifier for the dog, and the dog is called "woof-woof" by the child. This is a thetic moment, in which the child "attribute[s] to [an entity] a semiotic fragment, which thereby becomes a signifier" (43).

A significant difference between Plato's concept of the *chora* and Kristeva's use of it is that Plato goes on to describe the *chora* as a kind of non-thing with reference to being:

[W]e shouldn't call the mother or receptacle of what has come to be . . . either earth or air, fire or water, or any of their compounds or constituents. But if we speak of it as an invisible and characterless sort of thing, one that receives all things and shares in a most perplexing way in what is intelligible, a thing extremely difficult to comprehend, we shall not be misled. (Zeyl 51b)

Plato finds the *chora* to be a kind of cipher, a receptacle whose only function is to contain being, and being's source is simply the father. For Kristeva, the *chora* is not characterless. Though it belongs to an arrangement that is prior to symbolic representation, it is nonetheless a place or space of significant activity, rather than an empty receptacle. The child's early intimacy with the mother's body is not only itself a kind of language, defined as it is by patterns of sound and movement, but it is the ground of all symbolic, or social language; it is what makes language acquisition possible.

Bearing in mind Plato's reduction of the *chora*, or place of the mother, to nothing, we might be able to see how it is that Kristeva's work is revolutionary. She is interested in the variety of ways in which semiosis and *chora* have been forgotten or repressed in and through a symbolic language that we might say is aligned with the Platonic view of the *chora*. The symbolic order, as it has taken shape in global culture, is an acculturated language that often simply acts as, sees itself as, a substitution for bodily instincts. The semiotic relationship to the mother, which had a less external relationship to the world—constituted as it was largely by the child's drives and their private articulations—begins to be lost as the child enters the symbolic. And Kristeva proposes that much of the symbolic language in which we engage has the effect of establishing and maintaining us in a relationship with the not-Mother, who becomes the other, and we inhabit a world too radically external to the mother.

However, Kristeva tells us that the semiotic and symbolic languages are not discontinuous or discrete from one another:

These two modalities—the semiotic and the symbolic—are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called “natural” language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. (24)

The symbolic bears traces of the semiotic, of the mother tongue, of the “various processes and relations, anterior to sign and syntax . . . [which are] previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language” (96). So, the activity of the symbolic is not without what has largely become the pre-conscious or unconscious semiotic, even as it is a transformation, or sublimation, of it.

Kristeva's contribution (in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and elsewhere) to efforts by philosophers and linguists to see the relationships among language, mind, and culture is to posit the semiotic processes as elemental to art. *Revolution* treats Mallarmé and Lautréamont, showing how radical poetic language simultaneously incorporates and violates conventional grammar, syntax, and meaning.<sup>2</sup> For Kristeva, a revival or recognition of semiotic language creates the possibility for breaking out of the constraints of a law-governed symbolic order, to create art that violates conventional rules, and “murders” proper meaning. Dreams and fantasies continue to remind us of the presence of the semiotic in our mental life, as do artistic and poetic productions.

Kristeva's argument for the retrieval of the semiotic strains or energies through a reading of poetic language is revolutionary, since a rigid insistence on the priority of the Symbolic Order in symbolic language<sup>3</sup> not only makes linguistics a failed or partial enterprise, but also stifles creativity and silences the body. If the semiotic state is a time in which the child's bodily instincts are given more expression, more play, the child who has entered into the s/Symbolic condition finds language exerting its regulating influence the more forcefully on the bodily instincts, so that the psychology and behavior of the child begin to be shaped in the image of the Symbolic.<sup>4</sup>

In the mirror phase, the child begins to turn toward that formative figure in her life that represents the symbolic order, which Kristeva and Lacan both associate with The Law of the Father, though Kristeva also associates the father with love, and this is another way in which she qualifies or complicates Lacan. As Plato indicates, the source and model of becoming "real" in the world is understood as the father, in contrast to the receptacle within which early dependence takes place, which is the mother. Thus the sensual and maternal semiotic world is largely supplanted by the symbolic world, which involves turning toward the rules of language, of expression, of codified behavior, of rules and regulations, of conventions.

The mother is left behind—abjected, Kristeva says—and with her all elements of the self that threaten or violate codes of behavior and discursive expression. She is thus separated from "the clean and proper subject," whose body is regulated by codes of good social behavior, and repressed in and through symbolic language. For Kristeva, everything that is filthy or disorderly or uncivilized is in the same "place" as the left-behind mother, in the realm of the abject. Like the semiotic, then, the abject is also what is suppressed and repressed within and through symbolic language. So this horror of the abject body is, as with the semiotic, linked with the body of the mother, but with an even more radically other mother than that addressed through the concept of the semiotic. One of Kristeva's interests is the ways in which the necessary abjection of the mother—our separation from her in order to become individualized, to take objects, to enter language, to become good citizens of the family and the social world—is mistranslated into the abjection of women in general, who are reduced to the maternal function.

The abject is, as we are beginning to see, a more radical alterity than the semiotic: it refers to the power of the mother's body over the child, a power that is not perfectly brought under the control of the Symbolic or Paternal Order. The mother's body represents a threat, and in her essay, "Stabat Mater," Kristeva demonstrates how the threat of the mother is brought under control, domesticated in the myth of the Holy Virgin, mother of Christ. She argues

that the Christian virginal representation of the maternal satisfies the aims of the (phallogocentric) Symbolic Order because the virgin is the impossible ideal up to which all women are held, and serves as mother, daughter, and wife to the Holy Son. Kristeva herself disrupts this narrative in the course of the essay by inserting stream-of-consciousness soliloquies about the experience of maternity. For Kristeva, the pregnant woman—as opposed to the figure of immaculate conception, the erasure of women’s sex—is a figure of the doubling of self into other, and the eventual splitting of the self into the other, a figure that bespeaks both the identification of the self with the other, and the negation of self in the other that makes the recognition of the other possible.

The symbolic order mostly succeeds in abjecting the mother, repressing her power, as Kristeva indicates in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”:

It is as if paternity were necessary in order to relieve the archaic impact of the maternal body on man; in order to complete the investigation of a ravishing maternal jouissance but also of its terrorizing aggressivity; in order somehow to admit the threat that the male feels as much from the possessive maternal body as from his separation from it—a threat that he immediately returns to that body. (*Desire in Language* 263)

Abjecting the mother goes beyond simply recognizing the need to separate from the mother, and enter language, because it is also motivated by the Paternal Order’s fear that the mother’s body is a devouring body. The semiotic mother, we recall, does participate in the process of imposing patterns and order on the life of the infant, and is, in that sense, an arm of the Symbolic Order.<sup>5</sup> The abject mother is an archaic mother because she is, as Kelly Oliver says, “pre-identity, presubject, preobject” (57), and in that way, utterly non-compliant with the clean and proper bodies regulated by the symbolic order: “Kristeva gives [in *Powers of Horror*] a [further] example of the revolutionary effect of the repressed maternal in language. [Here,] the authority of our religion, morality, politics, and language comes through the repression of horror [of the abject body]. . . . Our culture is founded on this horror” (101). As Oliver says, “The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders; and the abject points to the fragility of those borders” (56).

#### PAIN

We might view each socially abject body as analogous to the mother who is both the object of waste and, with her menstrual blood, its distinctive source;

each is a castoff unless and until it reenters the cultural logic that articulates health and beauty, a reentry advertised by the aesthetic clinic. Each experiences, to borrow a concept from David Bakan, *telic decentralization*. In biological terms, telic decentralization describes the action of living cells that divide and differentiate in the service of organismic growth. The teleological, or purposive form of the body is understood as both its drive toward integrity and its capacity to function in specialized ways. Bakan conceives of the human body as composed of various loci of organization, or multiple teleological centers, including *disease tele* and *constructive tele*. Disease tele are of the lowest order, because they do not work for the common good of the organism, and do not communicate with the constructive tele. Bakan also posits a psychical form of telic decentralization, making use of the Freudian tripartite mind, in which the psyche as a whole splits into the id, ego, and superego. In a healthy organism, the three psychic telic centers communicate with one another, working toward the greater good of the organism. This form of telic decentralization accounts not only for the mind's complexity, but also for its degeneration into incoherence or fragmentation: certain experiential trauma may be repressed, producing neuroses and psychoses which result from a lack of free-flowing communication among psychic centers.

Bakan applies the concept of telic decentralization beyond the individual body and mind to the relation between individual persons who are divided through their bodies from the larger social body. Here, Bakan focuses on physical pain as he discusses this separation: "Pain is the burden of the organism separated out of the larger [social] telos . . . the occasion when one is ripped from union into a condition of physical individuality" (64).<sup>6</sup> For both Bakan and Elaine Scarry—who adapts a number of Bakan's concepts in *The Body in Pain*<sup>7</sup>—the ego moves to externalize, or make alien, the source of its suffering. Significantly, Kristeva says, "The object has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (*Powers* 1). The alienation of pain (from the self) and the objectification of pain (as diagnosis) are psychotherapeutic counterparts for the sufferer seeking relief. Diagnostic objectification, the means by which the sufferer brings pain into the external, and potentially curative, world of cause and effect, is also the means by which she psychologically makes pain alien.

The point of substantiating pain is to cancel it. Intervention is the point at which sufferer and nonsuffering community meet, an event that must take place in order for the sufferer to retrieve her social connectedness: "A cry of pain coming from one person may, at the very least, evoke in another an effort to help the person who is in pain; and thus pain is also a means of returning to the *dominion* of the social telos" (Bakan 61, emphasis added). (Alien) pain

divides the sufferer not only from her own (pained) body, but also from the (supreme) pain-free population for whom pain is a deviant and unnatural condition. Reestablishing oneself among this group—becoming “recentralized”—requires not only that the sufferer make her pain known, but also that the pain be eliminated (Bakan 61). To objectify pain is thus to stamp it out in two senses: to give it tangible shape, and, potentially, to extinguish it. In other words, she must lose her suffering parts. Though Bakan has compassionate healing in mind when he speaks of pain’s obliteration, it is also true that the obliteration of pain removes the sight of suffering from “the dominion of the social telos.”

Through their developing recognition that the aesthetic surgical industry needed justification on medical terms, as a service in relief of pain and suffering (and thus committed to the “recentralizing” of its patients), aesthetic surgeons had found by the mid-twentieth century a viable way to define their enterprise as a respectable and necessary medical practice by claiming that body beautification acts as a kind of psychotherapy. As both Sander Gilman and Elizabeth Haiken demonstrate, the aesthetic surgical industry owes what legitimacy it now enjoys to the reciprocal ideas that dissatisfaction with the body causes unhappiness, and that this unhappiness will lift when the patient’s body is beautified.<sup>8</sup> Gilman points out that the birth and development of psychoanalysis roughly coincides with the establishment of modern aesthetic surgery, and observes an inverse relationship between surgical aestheticizing and psychoanalytic therapies:

The basic premise of aesthetic surgery rests on the simple reversal of the psychosomatic model that underlies orthodox psychoanalysis. For the psychoanalyst psychic ‘misery’ is written on the body as physical symptoms; for the aesthetic surgeon, the ‘unhappiness’ of the patient is the result of the physical nature of the body. (*Creating Beauty* 13)

The industry’s continuing use of this “somatopsychic” dynamic, in which altering the body affects the mind, comes forward in its specialized use of the term “psychosurgery” to indicate the ultimate destination of the surgeon’s scalpel (see, for example, Engler 30–32). Pruzinsky’s and Edgerton’s well-documented 1990 observation that “[t]he only rationale for performing aesthetic plastic surgery is to improve the patient’s psychological well-being” (217) indicates that by the beginning of the 1990s, better mental health had become the industry’s *raison d’être*.

The estrangement of persons from the body parts that cause psychic affliction—in obeisance to a social telos that requires bodily sacrifices in the



name of wellness—is active in an aesthetic surgical industry-imaginary that decentralizes the targets of its appeals, encouraging prospective patients to see the body as an inventory of parts, one or more of which produce suffering, and which must thus be erased. On the whole, the aesthetically unmodified body is posited as an unfortunate deviation from the beautified bodies considered integral to a well-functioning relationship between the individual and her society. This is to say that the felt alienness of the unsatisfactory body parts to the sufferer's ego is always tied up with the very ways in which the body is understood by a community whose language allows only for an abjecting model.

#### COMMUNICATION AND EXPULSION

The disarticulation of mind and body, and body from self and society, centralized for Kristeva in the abject mother, is brought forward as a problem for feminist psychoanalysis by Teresa Brennan, who would answer Freud's "riddle of femininity"—involving women's greater depletion of sublimating energies following from the Oedipal conflict—through a focus on his theory of the mind as an economic, individualized, autonomous structure. Brennan argues that subjects are not autonomous entities, but exist in a lived relation to and exchange of psychic energies with other subjects. The "imprint" of one's own psychic energies—desires and demands—is always potentially transferable to the other, and this dynamic defines the process of masculinization and feminization. Brennan returns us to Freud by establishing the body as structuring a language fundamental to psychological subjects. She argues, in phylogenetic terms, that beings in utero speak a language that is both logical (allowing for a communication with flesh that facilitates growth and development), and affective (in a dependent relation with the flesh of another). Physiological growth involves a chain of interconnected events that progresses from one state to another:

Presumably facilitating connections are basic to the language of the flesh, which has to be logical, in the sense that one thing connects with another in a way that facilitates growth. . . . [L]ogical thought, the connections made through words, is a kind of mimesis of a hypothetical original form of communication which was both mental and physical. (223)

Yet the constructive power inherent in human language suffers because at some point language becomes disconnected from the affective feeling that once made up a part of its character.

This process has, for Brennan, gendered significance, so that the male subject's language typically disengages from its affective part, displacing it onto an other, while it is the female subject that typically accepts this imposition, and loses some capacity for transforming feeling into speech. This imposition has devastating results for women:

Moreover it is a divorce that suggests that affects, or emotions, are the confused residue of the original logic of the flesh, left over and muddled up once they have been subtracted from that original logic through speech, after the subject has been cut off from that fleshly logic, or castrated. (224)

Masculine practice displaces or disposes of affective feeling onto the woman, needing her, but as a kind of wastebasket, so that she becomes the castrated affect. Woman's relegation to affect and body remains, however, somehow unnatural to the logic of the body in Brennan's construction, inimical to the communicative potential of body language.

Brennan qualifies the constructionist jump to the social, not in order to argue that social conditions do not inform psychological subjects, nor that change is possible because social conditions are largely constructed. She looks at features of reproductive embodiment that may predispose us to certain psychological patterns, the understanding of which, she argues, can help us to more effectively modify social conditions. Brennan focuses on the body as a pre-conditioned language: there is a biologically realized tendency to connectedness that the body acts out, and that the body imitates. That tendency, on a biological level, is essentially constructive: it makes life, it assures growth. For Brennan, physiological growth is logical: a chain of interconnected events that takes us from one state to another. Acknowledging Lacan's positing of a psychological world that is structured as and by language, Brennan wants to locate this in the body, in the flesh:

If, as I have argued, some part of the structure of language is based on an original form of intra-uterine communication, then the question had to arise as to why language works in ways that either facilitate or hinder connections. Presumably facilitating connections are basic to the language of the flesh, which has to be logical, in the sense that one thing connects with another in a way that facilitates growth. This suggests that logical thought, the connections made through words, is a kind of mimesis of a hypothetical original form of communication which was both mental and physical. And if, as I have argued, the word can be turned in certain directions, a turning hinged on its connection with a

visual image, affects, and motor activity, then this direction will affect the ease with which connections are made. This must be so, given that the image can lock a word inside hysteria (femininity). In masculinity, the outward forceful projection of image and affects should allow those words to flow more freely, but at the price of a divorce from affective feeling. (223–24)

In this model of body and communication, the network of connections is purely constructive. There is no address to the problems of decay and dying, to the presymbolic semiotic that is illogical and eventually abject, or to the fact that growth entails waste.

Therefore, to Brennan's answer to the riddle of femininity, I would add that the wasting of the flesh is also an aspect of the body's life, activating a symbolic that both resists abjection and associates it with the female body. Understanding this initially involves acknowledging that the growth of the body entails the expulsion—the abjection—of its nonnutritive contents. Just as the body is an articulate organ that fosters communication in the service of growth, this growth—and later, mature health—of the body requires the expulsion of what would otherwise contribute to sepsis. As natural as it may be to have communication among cells in order to promote growth, and an intrauterine “conversation” with the cells of the mother's body upon which the fetus depends, that fetus is also expelling waste through the placenta into the mother. Thus, our growth and health entail not only a certain constructive logic, but also the expulsion of the contents of decay and death. This is the way we first know what it is to expel into and onto an other.

One could say that the two forces or efforts—communication and expulsion—work in tandem, as a physiological unit, which sets up the psyche to attach certain significances to the body's activity. During intrauterine life, it will simply be the case that the subject perceives itself as an articulating body that requires an other into or onto whom it may displace its waste product. Later, it will be the woman/(m)other who becomes the conscious receptacle of choice, at first due to her perceived connection to the child's body, and later due to bodily associations with abjection: menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, excess of adipose tissue. She is, as Kristeva has argued, the fleshly language before it becomes sanitized and masked as the logic of the symbolic order. Maternity is, in this sense, the opening of one's body to the act of being shat into or upon, and interestingly, this dynamic is reflected in the male/female sexual parts.<sup>9</sup>

What I press here, in association with Brennan's propositions about the divorce of mind from feeling that defines the conflict between masculine and feminine, is that disarticulations of language and body also occur within the

frame of reference of the body whose corporate nature is always called into question by the body without firm borders. For Brennan, the divorce of affective feeling from the masculine needs correction, since disarticulate communication corresponds with disarticulate psyches. For me, the same is true; however, to Brennan's emphasis on masculinity's rejection and displacement of affective feeling, I would add rejection and displacement of the body that wastes, and propose that the wasting body is any body that does not exhibit the cultural symptoms of health, including ill health associated with being the weaker sex, race, age group, or shape.

While I agree with and admire Brennan's bold move to read flesh in tension with our fears about essentialism, arguing that this scruple has kept us from really theorizing the body, I remain suspicious of psychoanalytic insights that involve prerational subjects, and see these models as not necessarily phylogenetic and infant developmental absolutes, but as figures or narratives that allow us to enter into a critical dialogue about the displacement of the abject body onto women. The question is how to reconfigure these biological mechanisms in thought and representation so that social life does not mirror their meaning in fixed terms, so that woman does not internalize as her obligation the imprint of masculinity's desire and demand to abandon its fleshly nature.

#### TRANSGRESSION, IDENTIFICATION, AND COMMUNITY

Through this discussion of Kristeva, Bakan, and Brennan, I recognize abjection—both as it originates with Kristeva and as it is implied in the other theorists' focus on the problem of the disarticulate body—as part of an intensely personal state of being. At the same time that abjection is part of the individual's struggle to live as a pain-free self, it is also, as I have stated at several points, a metaphor for the process of maintaining the social body. Kristeva's counterposition of the abject against the Symbolic, with the Symbolic understood as the articulate social order, indicates that the individual in a struggle against her own dissolution is also in a struggle against social alienation.

Kristeva's consistent focus on the individual's struggle against abjection has provoked some criticism of her as apolitical (c.f., Leland), and it is the case that Kristeva is more interested in the self than in selves. Therefore, relocating Kristevan abjection as a social and communal process requires some measure of adaptation, so that we are able to see the body *in* society as the corporate and collective social body, and understand the psychobiological struggle against dissolution as analogous to the struggle for social and communal identity.

Those who have attempted to adapt Kristevan abjection to social action have focused on the struggle *against* social and communal identity, and adapted the abject body as a figure of transgression. This approach is fully warranted, since, in her monstrosity, the abject woman stands apart from both those who are oppressed by the beauty ideal and those who strategically conform to it. She has informed feminist typologies at least since the advent of Cixous's 1975 "Laugh of the Medusa." Countering Freud's conspicuous display of gynophobia and its parent neurosis, androcentrism, Cixous recasts Medusa as a smiling and powerful woman, and rings in a postmodern pantheon of new embodiments, for instance, Heilbrun's androgyne, Daly's crone, Haraway's cyborg. These contend with traditional constructions of the female body as a weak and beautiful ornament disqualified from intellectual and plastic distinction, and offer visions of prodigious bodies with subversive minds, aesthetic hybrids whose nonconformity with feminine ideals betokens their power.

Patricia Yaeger and Mary Russo<sup>10</sup> focus explicitly on aesthetic transgression by envisioning abject women who violate two of the principal categories of philosophical aesthetics, the sublime and the grotesque. Abjection enters their work largely as the Kristevan concept describing body waste and leakage (menstrual blood, withering flesh, excrement), with emphasis on the social positions of those outside the borders of what is "clean and proper." Though Yaeger and Russo do not write explicitly about aesthetic surgery, they are thinking about conformity with the cultural beauty ideals to which the contemporary aesthetic surgical clinic is highly responsive. For both, the abject woman becomes a subversive trope of female liberation: she speaks an alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order. She abandons her oppressive confinement to the category of the beautiful, reforms her association with the grotesque, and contests her expulsion from the sublime. Yaeger and Russo conceive of an aesthetic—unlike the aesthetic surgical imaginary—that revels in abjection, viewing its pressures on the body as symbols of a womanist power, and reforming an aesthetic of the body that issues from misogyny and somatophobia.

Yaeger's 1992 essay on the "*maternal* sublime" proposes that women refuse the weak category of the beautiful, and look, instead, to the grotesque and the sublime to serve a feminist aesthetic. Observing that "the world of the beautiful can be treacherous for women" (5), Yaeger notes that this measure of women's value is instrumental in keeping them in invisibility, paralysis, and confinement.<sup>11</sup> In traditional aesthetics, the sublime is more powerful than the beautiful, tied up with ecstasy, force, and movement. Sublimity bespeaks "the

noumenal power of the once-inferiorized [self]" (9), but is "unavailable to the spatially constricted woman" (6).<sup>12</sup> But the sublime woman can involve herself in "joy and vaunting," a self-glorifying that refuses "constriction and miniaturization" (6). Women refuse the beautiful and embrace the sublime by emphasizing their own powers of generation, specifically their maternal power. Asking whether "there is room for women's reproductive labor in the smoke-filled rooms" of the Romantic sublime (9)—associated with conversion, spatiality, and personal power—Yaeger argues that maternity, despite its traditional connection with the grotesque, can belong also to a sublime poetics. She adapts Edmund Burke's view that *terror* is the whole basis of sublimity, positing the birthing woman as a type of grotesque that sublimely terrifies. Yaeger notes that the mother's body has often been defined as defiled, ruptured, and unclean—*abject* in Kristevan terms—and thus argues that the mother's body registers the dread prerequisite to sublimity: abjection conditions the embodiment of robust motion and gore.

Russo's 1995 *Female Grotesque* also conjoins grotesque and abject in the development of a new aesthetic. Emphasizing "grotesque performance" for women, Russo admires Amelia Earhart's aerobatic stunting for its refusal of conventional femininity. The history of literary and artistic representation, as well as the history of public and political discourses, reflects and reinforces the imperative that women keep themselves small and unseen, that they neither take up too much space in the world, nor make spectacles of themselves. As a subversive alternative, Russo prefers that women make themselves prodigious and visible, that they seek majesty, and so disrupt long-standing definitions of the ideal woman as restrained and diminutive. A grotesque performer like Earhart practices philobatism, or the will to be suspended in mid-air, defying her groundedness within and through traditional femininity. The grotesque performer, because ugly and aberrant according to conventional culture, refuses the imperative that she stay beautiful and domesticated, and seeks the heights of self-fashioning with reference to a body that does not obey prescribed limits. For Russo, Earhart's stunting is both a model of female exceptionalism and an instance of woman as sideshow object, simultaneously demonstrating and rebuking her cultural status as a monstrous body.

Noting that the grotesque body is always a social body, Russo rehabilitates the identification of the grotesque, noted by Bakhtin, with "the lower bodily stratum and its associations with degradation, filth, death, and rebirth" (8). She argues that traditional aesthetics has devalued the grotesque body, preferring the classical body, which is "transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek . . . identified with the 'high' or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individu-

alism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie” (8). By contrast, she identifies the grotesque body, “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing,” with the social rebirth and reformation called for by “the non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque” (8). Russo suggests that the ideals upon which Western subjectivity has relied for the construction of its values and knowledge—normalcy, purity, transcendence—constructs itself in opposition to the qualities with which the grotesque is associated: the abnormal or perverse, the filthy or tainted, and the earthly or grounded. The grotesque is also the Freudian uncanny, because Western subjectivity refuses through its ideals precisely what cannot be refused: the mortal corporeality that incites human fears.

Russo argues that the female grotesque and the abject woman are related, since the maternal body has long been associated with the grotesque. The “cave—the grotto-esque” (1) she notes, may be compared to the cavernous anatomical female body. Russo makes this connection through Bakhtin’s “senile, pregnant hag,” and through “a vein of nonacademic ‘cultural feminism’” that valorizes the earth mother, witch, crone, and vampire, arguing that these figures “posit a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the ‘primal’ elements, especially the earth” (1). In addition, she maintains that the locating of the grotesque in art “as superficial and to the margins” suggests “a certain construction of the feminine” as equally devalued and disenfranchised (6). The maternal partakes of the uncanny to the extent that it threatens “always to monstrously reproduce,” to double as conjoined self and other (18); the philobatic imagination, too, “operates, at different stages, both *within and away from* the maternal body” to the extent that subjectivity is formed through the simultaneous love and repudiation of the mother (36). Russo recognizes that “it is an easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes [woman as earth, cave, witch, and vampire] to misogyny [since] all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine—are down there in that cave of abjection” (20). However, she would exploit the association in the direction of a liberation strategy: the woman as “monstrous” defier of social norms.

The association of physical and cultural disfigurement with power remains, in the visions of Yaeger and Russo, and related celebrations of the monstrous in Daly, Haraway, and Cixous, largely an intellectual and figurative process, calling for a reconstituted female aesthetic imagination that may, to the extent that concepts form practice, activate actual social change. As I have noted, Kathryn Pauly Morgan calls for more direct intervention when she proposes that we have aesthetic surgery as a form of protest. She calls for a

corps of feminist radicals who go under the knife to make their noses bigger, have fat injected into rather than sucked out of the body, add facial wrinkles, and create more pendulous breasts. Like body piercing and tattooing, which were once identifiers of protest and refusal, uglifying aesthetic change could become subversive, undermining “the power dynamic built into the dependence on surgical experts who define themselves as aestheticians of women’s bodies” (162). However, Morgan recognizes that her proposal is utopian, and that “refusal and revolt exact a high price” (163) within the aesthetic surgical imaginary. Thus, she blunts the general criticism that Lynn Segal gives in *Why Feminism*, proposing that formulations of the feminine “in terms of its seditious ‘Otherness’” (50) can seem pitifully oblivious to current social and political realities.

It is those realities to which I will turn in chapter 2, which offers an introduction to the global influence and ideals of the aesthetic surgical imaginary, which normalize our conceptions of the clean and proper body. I will return to the monstrous feminine toward the end of this study, to affirm the power of what I call “inspired abjection” to maintain the possibility of radical alternatives in the midst of these powerful normalizing forces. But my primary interest in the following chapters will be the role of abjection in social and socializing processes, rather than as the mark of the anti-social. In this connection, it is the case, as Kenneth Burke and others have pointed out, that the creation of society is largely a rhetorical process, enacted through *identification*. For Althusser, identification is the recognition of oneself as hailed, as an interpellated object. Notwithstanding his value to our critical lexicon for understanding the operation of the aesthetic-surgical imaginary, Althusser’s stress on the power of the hailing ideology encourages the stress on objectification that also characterizes feminist top-down models of the persuasive power of commercial beauty advertisement. The Althusserian model does provide us a representative anecdote for how the appeal of the imaginary is operationalized, but does not—as much Marxist theory does not—understand people who accede to the appeal as much more than dumb objects.

Kathy Davis has moved us toward a fuller recognition of aesthetic surgical patients as willful and intelligent agents, but has not provided a full explanation of the motivating desire that would explain why, as chapter 2 will show, so many millions are amending their bodies. Developing this explanation means explicating the relationships among objectification, abjection, and identification as elements in the process of creating and maintaining one’s social life. In this process, objectification refers to the commodifying of the body, not only in the sense that Faludi and Wolf develop, of women reduced to the objects of male desire, but also as self-objectification that identifies—in



complicity with the aesthetic surgical imaginary—the parts of the body that should be amended, its object objects. Identification is most usefully understood in the terms established by Kenneth Burke, as motivated by the desire for *consubstantiality*, or “shared substance.” Consubstantiality is, for Burke, a “compensatory” motive that arises out of the human aversion to division. We would, for Burke, rather act together than apart, “and in acting together, [people] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*” (*Rhetoric* 21). Feminist rhetoricians have pointed out that Burke’s stress on identification and on the human aversion to division can lead to the valorizing of social cohesion and the discouragement of protest and nonconformity (Ratcliffe). This is, indeed, a problem that we cannot ignore, especially insofar as identification may be the central motive for acceding to universal beauty ideals. At the same time, identification (as the desire for consubstantiality) has the explanatory power required to move us away from an overly simple conception of the aesthetic surgical patient as an object. Instead, we can come to see this patient as embedded in a vast network of industry appeals that are largely visual, and which bring into view the clean and proper bodies that are purported to result once abjection is complete, once those features and parts that are not consubstantial with an emerging universal ideal are amended.<sup>13</sup>