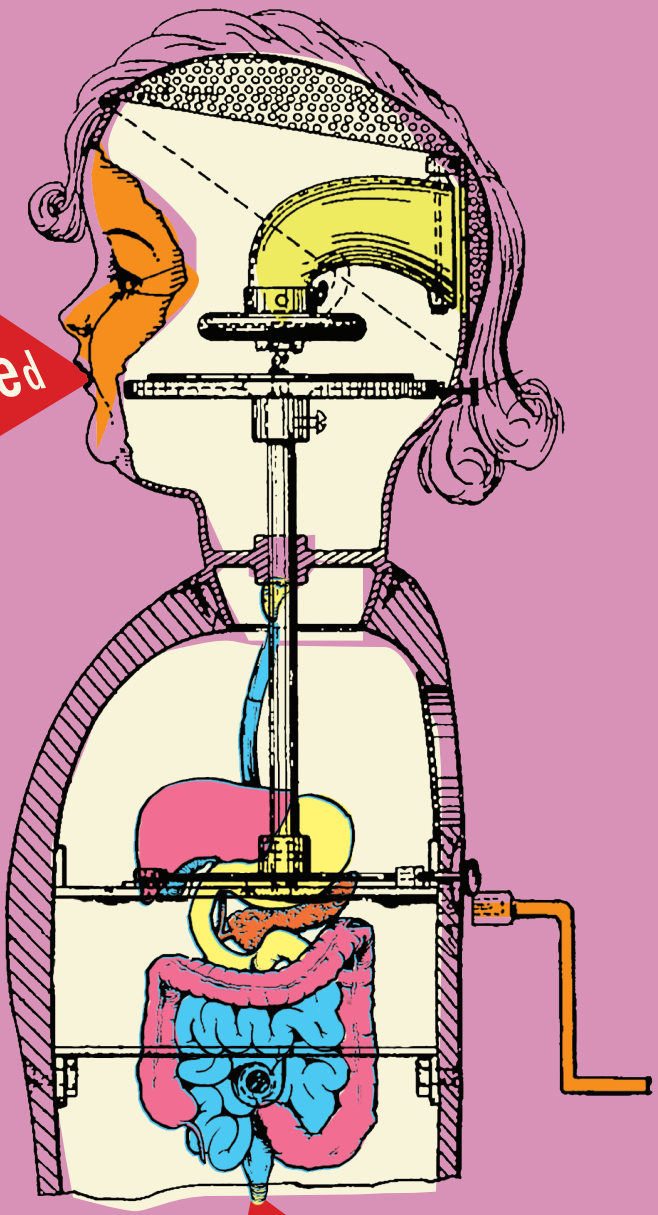
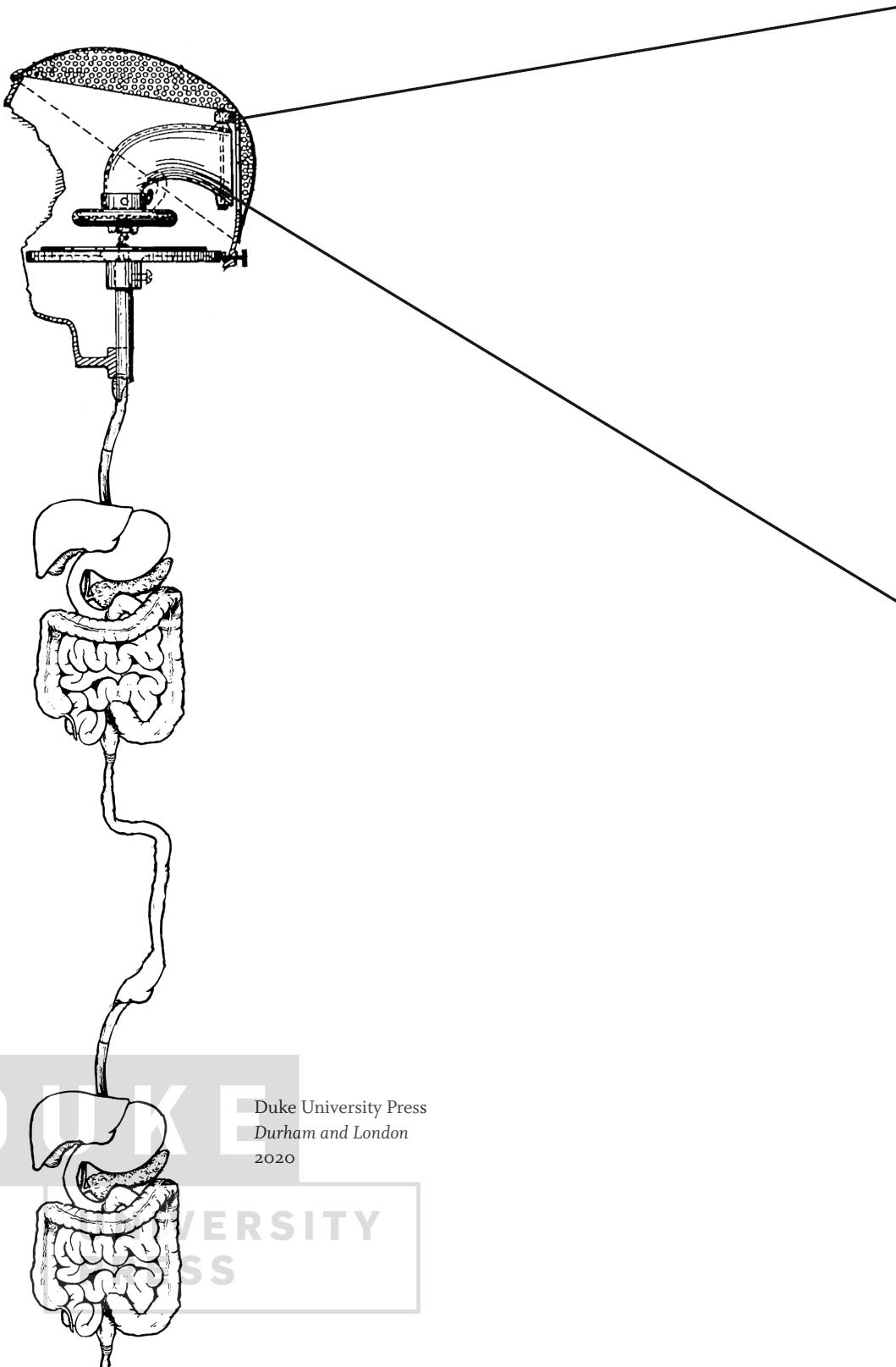
abjection incorporated



mediating the politics of pleasure & violence

EDITED BY
MAGGIE HENNEFELD
& NICHOLAS SAMMOND

abjection incorporated



Duke University Press
Durham and London
2020

abjection incorporated

mediating the politics of pleasure & violence

edited by

maggie hennefeld & nicholas sammond

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee Harrison
Typeset in Whitman by Westchester Publishing
Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available at the Library of Congress
ISBN 9781478001898 (hardcover: alk paper)
ISBN 9781478003021 (pbk: alk. paper)
ISBN 9781478003410 (ebook)

Cover art adapted from Christoph Adolf Giebeler-Wanke, "United States Patent: 1325013 A—Phonetic Doll," December 16, 1919.

Color versions of artworks featured in this volume, and additional images, may be found at http://scalar.usc.edu/works/abjection-incorporated-insert/index.

contents

acknowledgments

We would like to thank our contributors, who patiently supported the development of this project and who thoughtfully revised their essays when the 2016 presidential election and numerous #MeToo revelations moved us to rework our concept of abjection. We are immensely grateful to Elizabeth Ault, our inspiring and brilliant editor, and to Courtney Berger, Ken Wissoker, Kate Herman, and the rest of the team at Duke University Press for shepherding the volume through production. Vanessa Cambier, Alicia Fletcher, and Sarah Crawley provided crucial editorial assistance. Nicholas Sammond would like to thank Mike Zryd, Cannon Schmidt, and Chris Dingwall for reading iterations of his essay, and Agata Szmygin for her wry smiles and unwavering support. Maggie Hennefeld would like to thank Nicholas Baer for his extensive, insightful feedback and moral support, as well as Cesare Casarino, Alison Griffiths, Laura Horak, Kathleen Karlyn, Linda Mizejewski, Kyle Stevens, her comedy students, her family, the volume contributors and Nic, and everyone who attended our SCMS panel at nine o'clock on Sunday morning for their generosity and intellectual engagement with this project, and Alex Tolleson for his always joyful, intelligent, and loving support.

Color versions of artworks featured in this volume and additional images may be found at http://scalar.usc.edu/works/abjection-incorporated-insert/index.

introduction

Not It, or, The Abject Objection

maggie hennefeld
& nicholas sammond

The abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. —Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

In the final analysis, oppressors must be reduced to sovereignty in its individual form: on the contrary, the oppressed are formed out of the amorphous and immense mass of the wretched population.
—Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms"

This volume springs from the existential fault lines that now characterize contemporary politics and culture, like weeds growing out of a crumbling sidewalk. Anonymous internet trolls spew hate speech, neoliberal policies accelerate rampant inequality, climate change threatens irreversible catastrophe, as does authoritarianism worldwide, and traditional journalistic organs are frequently compared to varieties of putrid garbage. Abjection both drives and defines this moment. Yet, strangely, in the midst of this mad race to claim a rapidly diminishing higher ground, there accrues political value in emphasizing one's own social persecution and economic dehumanization. While some of us are always already abjected—marginalized because of our race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, nationality—other self-styled minorities, such as men's rights groups and white supremacists, have attempted to co-opt the rallying cries of the truly oppressed, claiming the status of the outcast. Every genuine liberation protest is now echoed by its scandalous inversion, exemplified by

perverse chants such as "Blue Lives Matter," "Affirmative Action for White Applicants," or "Men's Rights Are Human Rights." If social authenticity is a currency that derives from a wounded identity, abjection is its lingua franca. In other words, many people normally associated with the dominant culture are increasingly claiming an abject status in order to adopt, ironize, and undermine the markers of marginalization by which damaging social and power hierarchies have traditionally been administered and enforced.

Though abjection is utterly ubiquitous in twenty-first-century politics, its theorization is too often itself abjected in critical humanities scholarship: it gets pigeonholed as either one more facet of the bad object of psychoanalysis, or as an outmoded offshoot of Enlightenment philosophies of class conflict (i.e., old materialisms). Indeed, the two most influential twentieth-century theorists of abjection, whose works map tidily onto those debased fields, are undoubtedly Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille. Kristeva has generatively defined the abject in *Powers of Horror* (1982) as "that which is cast out." This abominable matter further comes to symbolize all the reviled forms of difference by which meaning and identity are delineated in language and culture. Kristeva writes: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated."[1]

In Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to abjection and selfhood, the child, as it learns to identify as a sovereign subject, regards the products of its own body (and the bodies of others)—blood, snot, piss, shit, mucus, sperm, rotting flesh—as vile, disgusting, and in need of suppression, rejection, and regulation. The latency of such infantile abhorrence, as Bataille notes, has an irresistible political influence. For example, when the invocation of "Mexican rapists," "nasty women," and a news anchor accused of "bleeding from her wherever" can aid in restoring the ultimate sovereign white male subject, a robust, critical, and sustained engagement with the abject is absolutely necessary.[2] Sadly, Donald Trump's campaign, then his presidency, have given us daily (if not hourly) reminders of the toxicity of this dynamic between infantile narcissism and regressive nationalist politics.

Kristeva's semiotic-psychoanalytic account of the abject—that unbearable excess that the ego will always scramble to reject—primarily concerns issues of subject formation, particularly the negotiation of boundaries between the child and its mother, or the corporeal regulation of the sovereign subject. In contrast, Georges Bataille emphasizes not the psychic training of the ego but the politics of the social. "Abjection and Miserable Forms" (1934), written

during Hitler's rise to autocratic power in 1930s Europe, focuses on the oppression of the wretched masses by sovereign rulers. For Bataille, it simply does not matter if the individual ego has the will to cast out certain gross or reviled matter, because "general abjection," he argues, is "wreaked by impotence under given social conditions." In other words, abjection is imposed on the social body by a sovereign imperative, regardless of one's developmental bodily discipline. He adds that "filth, snot, and vermin are enough to render an infant vile; his personal nature is not responsible for it, only the negligence and helplessness of those raising it." Though written nearly fifty years before *Powers of Horror*, "Abjection and Miserable Forms" still offers crucial context for the structural theories of abjection and individual subjectivity that Kristeva would later articulate.

Abjection Incorporated explores the tensions between (and beyond) these critical paradigms, presenting perspectives on a historical moment in which a meaningful distinction between the self-disciplining subject who reviles gross bodies and the sovereign imperative that excludes wretched social masses is in constant threat of collapse. In this neofeudal moment epitomized by Donald Trump and a growing host of other tin-pot autocrats, individual self-governance and political sovereignty are understood by many as one and the same (consider how the president's inflammatory tweets can carry greater political significance than his official executive statements). To this point, Trump's ascent to sovereignty (or at least to the office of the American presidency) has unleashed a firestorm of competing performances of abjection. For many, Trump and his followers embody the abject underbelly of a democratic body politic, the "deplorables."[3] In contrast, for Trump's supporters, "draining the swamp" means cleansing government of soft-hearted progressives and moderate Democrats and Republicans—"cucks" and "basic bitches" in the language of the "alt-right"—rather than addressing endemic corruption. To paraphrase Judith Butler, Trump's presidency delivers "the perfect ideological contradiction," in that Trump has channeled rising populist anger over class inequality and the ongoing immiseration of the working poor under global neoliberalism and pinned it onto differences in culture, geography, and racial or ethnic identity.[4] Perversely, the permanent struggle for equity and social justice has a nemesis in the violent bigotry that abjects a slew of cultural Others: women, people of color, immigrants, gays, trans folk . . . the usual scapegoats of misogynistic white bigotry and structural racism. The Trump presidency, then, is a timely and painful illustration of how abjection has become central to the negotiation of social identity—both in one's difference from the Other and in one's estrangement from the self.

A key problem posed by this volume, and an existential issue in this political moment, is how to distinguish between who gets to be a sovereign ego and who has to be abjected for that ego to feel (temporarily) secure in its own sense of self. Who is being sacrificed on behalf of the nostalgic, ethno-nationalist wager to "Make America Great Again"? Amid mass displacements, deportations, perpetual war, environmental degradation, an emboldened police state, and the declining prospects of well-paying jobs for a shrinking middle class, the threat of abjection—of falling into a miserable place—remains a pervasive reality. Yet, at the same time, appearing to be socially abject, although strongly undesirable in daily life, can generate widespread sympathy and even institutional redress—payback for what Wendy Brown has called "wounded attachments."[5] Being abject (or performing self-abjection) often carries significant political capital. Like the charlatan crying "fake news," however, the wolf garbs itself in sheep's clothing, seeking sympathy not as a perpetrator but as a victim—of an allegedly oppressive majority of minorities. Though cynically nihilistic, these tactics have the effect of minimizing actual crimes and obfuscations, also making it extremely difficult (or at least mentally exhausting) to articulate the difference between the compulsory social abjection of minoritized others and right-wing opportunistic appropriations of rhetorics of marginalization.

The essays in this volume strive to elucidate that vital distinction between involuntary abjection by dominant social forces, and performances of (self)-abjection that proliferate with the withering of the neoliberal state. For feminist/queer and critical race theorists (such as Judith Butler, Mel Y. Chen, or Darieck Scott), the individualizing drive toward abjecting unwanted elements from the body politic intrinsically forms the basis of normative, white, patriarchal, and heterosexual iterations of the (unmarked) self, which underpin the sovereign subject. The exclusion of the abject shores up the defensive circumscription of the ego in its potential spectrum of social and corporeal identifications. In Bataille's terms, "The imperative forces do not exercise their coercive action directly on the oppressed: they content themselves with excluding them by prohibiting any contact" with the Other (say, by building a wall).[6] Although contact with the wretched masses is forbidden to the sovereign subject, those masses, paradoxically, can never be eliminated. In fact, this "wretched population" must remain present as an object of disgust and fascination, and as an abject lesson that drives the individual oppressor's maintenance of sovereignty and self-rule.

This volume plumbs that fragile and contested zone of permeability between the wretched and the ruler. What are the murky affects, partial objects,

and ambivalent attachments, we ask, that mediate between the sovereign ego and its teeming outside (or repressed inside)? In differing ways and to varying degrees, the essays in this volume offer case studies for delineating between cynical, voluntary self-abjection, and involuntary social abjection. Abjection—properly understood, deployed, and critiqued—offers a contested but necessary instrument to resist the wholesale dismantling of civically inclusive spaces, of democratic social practices and political institutions, and of economic processes that might foster equity—or, at the very least, less grossly unequal distributions of wealth, power, and resources. In other words, the abject and abjection have become pivotal terms in the accumulation, contestation, and deployment of power in twenty-first-century life.

Horrible Laughter at the Limits of Abjection

It would be funny if it wasn't so sad.
—Bernie Sanders (in reference to Jeff Sessions's appointment as the US Attorney General)

Why does the spectacle of abjection so often provoke grim, morbid laughter rather than demeaning ridicule or cynical mockery? We often describe genres of comedy that linger between referential horror and obscene farce as "dark," "black," "cringeworthy," "gallows humor," or sometimes "anticomedy" (jokes with bad taste and no apparent point). While these modes at their best resist "punching down" and making laughing stocks of already marginalized subjects, their social politics are also more complex than merely "punching up" by lambasting those with undue power, influence, or normative legitimacy. Abject humor, then, engages the liminality of affect and the ambiguity of social relations by confronting the grinding operations of power with a perverse mixture of joy and dread. Abjection, as a state of being or as a rubric for critical reading, may lend itself to horror as well as to comedy, but its ultimate stakes are bigger than either. The abject objection derives from and contributes to an extremity of affect, a dislocation of the self, in which screams and laughter become indistinguishable, the sound of what Kristeva (following Jacques Lacan) calls *jouissance*. For her, "*Jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion."[7]

A good example that helps tease out the multiple valences of abjection is the popular film *Get Out* (dir. Jordan Peele, 2017), a horror/satire allegory

about the history of slavery and race relations in America. The film projects its social critique through an absurd lens that further sharpens its urgent political message. Peele depicts a racial dystopia in which black bodies are enslaved not through forced labor or mass criminalization, but through fantastic neurosurgical body swapping. As one white character puts it, "Black is in fashion," so the late-capitalist mode of antiblack slavery turns on possessing the Other's body in the most literal form imaginable: by placing one's failing consciousness into it. Black bodies are auctioned off to elderly, disabled, or cosmetically abjected white consumers, while black consciousness is banished to the "sunken place": a free fall into an inner space from which one watches one's own body continue to act as through a distant screen.

The abject objection lurks in the often reproduced tearful, silent gaze of the protagonist, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), a look of mute terror and grief, as he realizes the utter banality of the horror he faces: that what happens in *Get Out* isn't fantastic. It's merely the logical extension of a long-standing tradition of physical, then cultural, appropriation—one that has always been rooted in the total, debased alterity of the black Other. The next logical step, argues Peele, rather than simply co-opting the art, culture, and lifeways of black people, is that white consumers occupy their bodies. The film is a parody of an abject white liberal fantasy of becoming black: to be inside a black body but to somehow remain white. The black body imprisons the black soul, and the white consciousness that inhabits it assumes the mantle of warden and beneficiary.

As with abjection itself, Chris's look when he is compelled toward the "sunken place" appears neither comic nor horrific. His eyes glisten with tears, and in them we can see a reflection of something, perhaps ourselves. His face presents itself to the camera, to the audience, for the experience of the *jouissance* about which Kristeva writes—not merely joy nor horror nor any singular, nameable emotion, but a raw experience of the terrible possibility of (not) being. Yet while Kristeva in her own racial formation would only imagine the audience for *Get Out* as white, Bataille might well see, in his notion of social abjection, the bottomless dread of that unrelenting structure of white supremacy and racial violence by other means. That horror has fueled African American comedy for generations, and it runs through the work of Richard Pryor, Paul Mooney, Dave Chappelle, and Wanda Sykes, a humor in which laughter is always tinged with grief, horror, anger, and exhausted sadness at the implacability of that formation.[8]

The tension between laughter and terror that Peele mines presents two key facets of abjection, but they are not the only ones. The abject, in eliciting the

nameless affect through which the sovereign subject emerges—as Thomas Lamarre reminds us in this volume—is not so much a stable heuristic as something illuminated in its situational specificity—legible only through its objects and practices. The film's "off-color" or "dark" sense of humor refuses the spectator a comfortable position, a stable vantage point for disavowing the evident parallels between the film's voyeurism of racialized bodies and its allegory of the "sunken place." Laughter at screenings of *Get Out* is a scandal—a necessary but impossible mode of affective experience, provoked by horrifically comical situations just exaggerated enough to distort the trauma of their referential violence.

In this instance, then, abjection allows one to understand the already ambiguous category called "comedy" (is it a mode or a genre?) in its capacity to do far more work than simply elicit laughter. (This derives from the Aristotelian presumption that laughter is always less than other, serious affects, and that laughter can only signify humor.) While laughter is often mistaken for a mere displacement of abjection, comedy itself is frequently devalued within the cultural hierarchies that ascribe authenticity or social relevance to a given genre or aesthetic mode. This is the case because comedy—no matter how graphically violent, offensively crude, or vividly grotesque—has the power to present even the most disturbing content as entirely unserious. From the bawdy, sacrilegious play of the medieval carnival, to the brutal comic beatings celebrated by the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, to the spectacles of bodily explosion (decapitation, dismemberment, diarrhea) prevalent in children's cartoons, there is nothing exceptional about finding ecstatic delight in the abject genres of laughter. Now, however, "as both an aesthetic mode and a form of life," Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai write, comedy's "action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that intensifies and impedes the pleasure."[9] In other words, comedy is not reducible to an escapist flight from the traumas of brutal reality, as in theories of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin), gallows humor (Freud), or benign violation (McGraw and Warren). When all culture increasingly appears to be in a state of permanent carnival, there is nothing particularly exceptional or liberating about subverting the exclusion of reviled matter. As comedy expands to encompass the anxious and the horrible, it signals the abjecting of a tidy poetics of being, of anything ever again being "just a joke."

To dwell a bit longer on the collective trauma/avatar named Donald Trump, part of what has made his presidency so horribly compelling (though for many unsurprising) is his utter lack of conventional orthodoxy: his self-caricaturing

persona, his gleeful replacement of standard Republican dog-whistle race baiting with indifferently inadvertent acts of overt racism, and the ease with which liberal laughter defers outrage or action in the face of his daily defilement of American political decorum: who would possibly take this buffoon seriously? When Congressman Keith Ellison first suggested, on ABC News in July 2015, that Trump might be the Republican nominee (let alone the next POTUS), his ominous prophecy provoked not cautious dread but incredulous laughter from his fellow panelists.[10] (Kristeva reminds us, "Laughter is a way of displacing abjection.") Yet, even while Trump's casual statements elicit pure outrage and disgust—condoning white supremacy, denying climate change, and authorizing mass deportations of immigrants and refugees—laughter still adheres to him (and to the burgeoning cast of characters once close to him and now purged, from Sean Spicer to, as of this writing, Kirstjen Nielsen). As John Oliver put it in January 2017, "A Klan-backed misogynist Internet troll is going to be delivering the next State of the Union address. . . . That is not normal. That is fucked up."[11] Defensive laughter against Trump (provoked by late-night commentators such as Samantha Bee or Trevor Noah) thus oscillates between dismissive mockery and sheer outraged howling. As Walter Benjamin has written (also in the context of rising fascism and looming war), dreadful laughter can provide an inoculation against "mass psychosis."[12] In this vein, late-night political satire, at its best, provokes modes of laughter more potent than simple outrage and mere disgust; at its worst, it incites the weary chuckling of a smug yet rapidly failing liberalism. Beyond relief or deflection, it helps frame the tangled and ever mobile line between the laughable and the horrible—yet always at the risk of anesthetizing a viewer exhausted by the onslaught of countless political outrages.

The essays in this volume go well beyond the distancing laughter of deferred abjection by lingering in zones of contamination—between repudiation and redemption—wherein attempts at abject defacement recoil back onto the sovereign subject.[13] While some laughter thrives on disavowing its own fascination with the abject, other affects refuse that narrow exclusionary logic—not simply displacing abjection, but confronting it head-on. Many essays in this volume take up the tipping point where the abject becomes funny, playful, solicitous, and irresistible; others examine how the violence of repulsion is further shaped by unlikely absurdities, unexpected horrors. Above all, the essays in this volume treat the comic as important and significant, but as only one facet of the abject.

Yet a moment's reflection on the abject in comedy may not only help to trace its ubiquity in the current cultural landscape, but also to offer a way into

abjection in other modes, other affects. Concisely put, even laughter has its Other. Comedy, as it has been conventionally defined, involves the reversal of expectations by playing on misperceptions between appearance and reality. Something about the image of a paradigmatic ideal assaulted by its own carnal, degrading physicality—such as a pompous and dapper gentleman falling into a mud puddle—provokes irresistible laughter. As Alenka Zupančič puts it (invoking Lacan's famous argument that the madman who believes he is a king is no crazier than the king who also believes he is a king), "What is really funny and makes us laugh most . . . is not simply that the baron falls into the puddle but, much more, that he *rises* from it and goes about his business as if nothing had happened."[14] He acts as if his very baron-ness requires that he ignore the mud on his all too human body. Beyond the dangers of failing to recognize the potential for physical violence inherent in absurd nonsense, thus blinding ourselves to its real political perils, the social dynamics of how incongruous bodies become funny are extremely complex.

Classical theories of comedy generally view laughter as a means of regulating social relations of power. In Henri Bergson's well-known definition of the comic, laughter functions as a "social corrective" by cruelly or callously deriding those whose behavior appears out of step with the pace of modern life—because their bodies strike laughing observers as overly mechanical, rigid, or thing-like. In contrast, in recuperative theories of laughter (such as the carnivalesque), dejected, vile, and grotesque bodies revolt against their own exclusion and therefore become the basis of contagious laughter and collective refusal.[15] Yet, scholarship on grotesque comedy similarly strips the body of its abject instability by locating exceptional difference in a transparently subversive (and necessarily temporary) power. The carnality of comical abjection resides between these two familiar paradigms: between a disciplinary trap and a subversive escape. It represents a volatile effect, unleashed from the impossibility of consigning excessive comicality to either total discipline or momentary subversion. Bodies (both real and social) signify, and abjection's business is to get rid of that which muddies the sign, to differentiate between signal and noise. Comedy revels in the noise (uncanny spectacle, graphic corporeality, violent imagery), emphasizing its messy entanglement with the signal (i.e., with plain language)—their constant raveling and unraveling.

Recent scholarship on comedy and difference has focused on theorizing the ambiguities of comical affect, particularly the ambivalences of comedic pleasure in relation to the liberating performance of self-abjection. In Ngai's critique of affective labor and neoliberal capitalism, for example, she asserts

"the zany" as a significant aesthetic category of post-Fordist production.[16] In zaniness she finds the quirky exuberance and eccentric warmth that often drive the production of affective labor in allegedly "dematerialized," flexible, and networked economies of value. In this vein, studies of gender and humor (M. Alison Kibler, Rebecca Krefting, Linda Mizejewski),[17] race and satire (Bambi Haggins, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, Glenda Carpio, Mel Watkins),[18] and ethnicity and laughter (Gayatri Devi, David Gillota, Robert Stam)[19] have proliferated in response to the recent explosion of comedies about corporeal identity and socioeconomic marginalization. Feminist comedians have been emboldened to celebrate their own difference through graphic slapstick (Ilana Glazer, Bridget Everett, Leslie Jones), biting self-referential stand-up (Margaret Cho, Tig Notaro, Maria Bamford), and defiant confessional literature (Lindy West, Roxane Gay, Gabourey Sidibe). Yet, at the same time, these women are predatorily harassed with *ad hominem* scorn and online death threats. Again, debates about whether grotesque bodily display is liberating or shaming are no longer adequate in a climate of permanent carnival and rampant transgressive discourse.

Feminist scholarship on affect and emotion has repeatedly refused to consider laughter with the same degree of nuanced complexity offered to other ambiguous expressions of emotion. Instead, many of these works, such as Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion* and *The Promise of Happiness*, consider only the negative feelings: pain, hate, fear, disgust, shame—with "love" as the ultimate horizon of collective affirmation. Ahmed glosses over laughter, she explains, because communal laughter has a coercive element that may force bodies into false and constrained senses of affective intimacy: "When we are laughing, we are facing each other; our bodies are mirroring each other. I might hear the joke, and when I register what has been said, I might find that I do not find it funny, or even that I find it offensive. When I hear the joke, it becomes a crisis . . . if I stop laughing, I withdraw from bodily intimacy."[20] Since "affect" refers not to an individual state of experience but to a shared economy of intimate circulation, for Ahmed laughter and humor stem from unequal structures of feeling. Like Ngai's notion of the neoliberal mandate to happiness (or what Berlant has theorized as "cruel optimism"), laughter compels a bodily response and is imagined to be coercive on this register.[21]

Even the joys of whimsical laughter are not beyond these gift economies of affect as reciprocity and obligatory participation. As Ahmed argues in "Feminist Killjoys," "To revitalize the critique of happiness is to be willing to be proximate to unhappiness. . . . There can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do."[22] This raises a paradox of joy and its relation

to violence: Does "killing joy" necessarily exclude the affects of joy, particularly laughter? To invoke Bataille in "The Practice of Joy before Death," "There are explosives everywhere which perhaps will soon blind me. I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them."[23] Bataille's fatalistic joy is a far cry from the manipulative forms of capitalist happiness that Ahmed and Berlant (and others) have critiqued. Abject laughter—not the laughter that displaces abjection, but that embraces contamination—is part of the wager of this volume. Laughter, we argue, has the power to shatter the coercive constraints of prescribed happiness by launching the feeling subject toward the threshold of abjection. There, comedy gives way to a range of raw, ineffable experiences, in which the precarity of our sovereignty punctuates its value.

Abject comedy plays on the failure of laughter to prop up the faltering boundaries of the ego, or to erect a safe distance between the laughing subject and the comic object. Laughing in relation to the abject is not a mechanism of disavowal (as in callous or cynical laughter), but an experience of radical openness to the simultaneous necessity and permeability of all boundaries and borders. (There is no such thing as a truly closed border, since even sovereign borders must also leave themselves open to the privileged bodies and the multifarious forms of capital and traffic that have license to cross them.) Abjection often returns—resisting displacement—in forms that may be violent and gruesome, and just as often, surprisingly funny. Part of Bataille's project to dismantle the abject formations of authoritarian politics involved significant experimentation with the intermingling of seemingly incompatible feelings, such as joy, anguish, pleasure, violence, poetic sacrifice, outrage, and disgust.[24]

This volume builds on that crucial project, confronting the abjection of difference by channeling its uncertainties of affect and instabilities of experience. The title of this volume, *Abjection Incorporated*, goes beyond the intentional agency of a single sovereign subject, taking up the immanence of collective refusal—when a deliberate displacement by abjection is embraced and absorbed—incorporated—at the very moment of exclusion and repudiation. At the same time, "incorporation" is a pun on the freewheeling cultural capital that now accrues from performances of social marginalization. On both fronts, it is crucial to rethink the relationship between pleasure and violence, acceptance and rejection, that awaken the ongoing task of critique: to resist the compulsive and unthinking disavowal contained within every act of abjection—and to confront the uncontained messiness lurking at all levels of culture, society, and politics.

Abject-Oriented Materialisms

There is no theory of abjection without the trace of an agentive, embodied subject. Our commitment in this volume to rethinking the abject stems, in part, from our discomfort with the diminishing place of the subject in certain discourses in the critical humanities. The displacement or elimination of the subject in variants of affect theory, new materialisms, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology (ooo), while important for theorizing life in an increasingly networked society, also effectively declares the subject largely irrelevant just at that moment when the possibility of laying claim to a sovereign subject status, and through it some degree of effective political agency, has been (grudgingly) extended to those generally described as its Other(s). At the risk of stating the obvious, this would include people of color, the poor (working or otherwise), women, queers, the differently abled—those who have been abjected in the name of securing the ongoing efficacy of an unmarked, transcendental subject. With the death of the subject and recession of the human, Jane Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter*, "All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief."[25] Bennett (like Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, or Tony Sampson, for instance) draws on the metaphor of the network to explain this inextricable linking of all forms of bodies and matter. The abject has at best a tenuous place within this critical paradigm, because the counter-politics of abjection require the oppressive weight of actual and residual boundaries—divisions between self and other, between sovereign individuals and unruly masses—and would be obscured, if not eliminated, by the epistemic erasure of those boundaries. In other words, the abject exists in necessary opposition to the productive fantasy of the individual or social body as an agential or sovereign being: it erupts from the impossible fantasies and repressed violence underpinning that sovereign subject. The strands and nodes of the network, we argue, are spattered with blood, pus, and a simmering stew of corporeal excreta—or at the very least need to be viewed as such. In this vein, the abject has much to offer variants of new materialisms. It provides methodological traction for recognizing the productive ability of matter to connect us, yet in ways that avoid resurrecting the old specters of the desiring subject, the decisional sovereign, or agency grounded in an outmoded and unreflexive humanism. One need only look at the fierce ongoing debates today in the United States about who "matters" to appreciate the continued importance of the abjectly material, agentive subject—and the political urgency of its possibilities and effects.

The abject objections articulated in this volume provide a vital means of troubling both the sovereign subject and its problematic diminution in theories of networked society. The authors in this volume claim no unified stance on the relative value of the reported death of the subject, yet we argue that our turn toward abjection in this instance offers a middle way: a chance to engage productively with Deleuzian immanence and *assemblage* (what Erin Manning, returning to Deleuze's original, has termed *agencement*) without wholly discarding the subject, or the imperfect, uneven, and contingent agency produced in, around, and through it. New materialist scholars, such as Bennett, Massumi, Jussi Parikka, Nigel Thrift, or Sampson, have offered nuanced revisions to the trap of the overdetermined subject when it is located in networked social and new media environments. In theoretically distinct ways, they emphasize sociotechnical instances in which classic humanist subject-object relations do not obtain, or within which agency is better understood as a momentary accretion of immanence, rather than resident in discrete bodies (as in *Get Out's* satirical dystopia). They position themselves between heuristics of distributed affect and constitutive violence. Varying in approach, each has described monadic formations in which a relatively ephemeral subject acquires agency at and through impermanent affective nodes. This model of the subject differs from the humanist notion of a stable and ongoing predicate entity that exists independently of its momentary networked iterations.

Our description of new materialism(s), of course, oversimplifies a varied field of inquiry, the boundaries of which are often in dispute. More fluid versions of new materialism, for instance, are aligned with poststandpoint or intersectional feminisms, and they recognize the importance of questioning the primacy of the sovereign subject over other forms of collectivity and distributed cognition and affect. At the same time, however, such approaches note the inescapable systems of power and domination that are nonetheless maintained within the "posthuman" landscape. The withering of the nation-state, for instance, and with it the traditional foundation for the sovereign subject, goes hand in hand with the globalization of capital flows and the concentration of power in fewer and fewer hands. Similarly, the matrix of affiliation and affect asserted by social networks such as Facebook or Twitter is predicated on economies of attention that harness the decentered subject in apparently involuntary, unremunerated, and (paradoxically) self-commodifying labor. As we have learned in the aftermath of the 2016 election, the status hierarchies developed, maintained, and contested through such social media—who earns more "likes" for their posts—are quite visible. Yet less visible is their

value for data mining through devices as seemingly innocuous as a quiz that asks "which Smurf are you?," the likes of which were mobilized by the Trump campaign to produce fine-grained voting maps and to target its message in precise (and politically effective) ways.[26] Here the economy of "liking" and of recirculating (as in "retweeting")—converting the violence of appropriation into transient tokens of affection—serves as an effective (albeit flawed) hedge, an ephemeral act of subjectivation that takes the place of sovereign subjectivity.

One response to the ongoing operation of increasingly decentralized power is what Karen Barad has termed "agential realism," the analysis of contingent and situational agency and subjectivity.[27] Arguing for a fluid subjectivity that is inherently local and situational, Barad articulates "a theory which insists on the importance of constructed boundaries and also the necessity of interrogating and refiguring them." For Barad, "boundaries are not our enemies," because

> they are necessary for making meanings, but this does not make them innocent. Boundaries have real material consequences—cuts are agentially positioned and accountability is mandatory. The shifting of boundaries often helps bring to the surface questions of power which the powerful often try to submerge. Agential realism insists that mutually exclusive, shifting, multiple positionings are necessary if the complexity of our intra-actions are to be appreciated.[28]

As with Mel Y. Chen's concept of *animacies*—a continuum of agencies from the seemingly inert to the human that is deeply imbricated in regimes of race, gender, sexuality, and class—this is a new materialism that decenters the subject without displacing it entirely. It is that ambivalent (or multivalent) subject and the ephemeral agency it gains at the boundary between subject and object (and ego and abject), the comic and the violent, between matter and being, that the essays in this volume explore. Our notion of agency is always partial, momentary, and sometimes only clearly intentional after the fact. It is an agency produced both by the constitutive violence of subjective and corporeal difference, and by the impossibility of ever erasing or normalizing the oppressive power of structural hierarchy.

In this vein, Barad and others (such as Chen) offer alternatives to overly reductive humanisms and to narrow new materialisms. They critique what they describe as excessively celebratory accounts of subject-object disruption, which they argue ultimately fail to articulate actual relations of power adequately, and many of which are enacted by privileged subjects. Such

accounts may reveal interesting and significant assemblages of actants, but at the cost of abjecting others, of effacing power and its real and often local, individual, and human effects. Conversely, previous work by theorists of the abject in popular culture, such as Tina Chanter, Barbara Creed, or Carol Clover, too often risk stepping into a cul de sac of critical exegesis by imagining that merely gesturing toward and delineating processes of social abjection renders them somehow less effective. The implicit expectation in such works is that exposure to the harsh light of critical analysis will reveal the mechanisms by which privilege asserts itself through abjection. This has certainly been a conceit of comedy studies: to valorize the exposure of bodies marked as grotesque, abject, excessive, or corporeally debased (cf. Haggins, Kohen, Mellencamp, Rowe).[29] Such ideological critiques, though crucial, inevitably reach a political impasse in their attempts to subvert the effects of abjection, producing a model of sovereignty that clothes the normative sovereign subject with the markers of exceptional identity, attaching a hyphen as a compromise.[30]

This is exactly the argument that Jane Bennett poses in *Vibrant Matter*, a touchstone of new materialism for many. Attempting to move past what she sees as a stultifying negative dialectics, and working to articulate a model of agency distributed across a range of actants (some of which are human), Bennett critiques the vulgar Marxist notion of *demystification*—a belief in the evaporation of false consciousness in the face of dialectical thinking. Claiming that what "demystification uncovers is always something human, for example, the hidden quest for domination on the part of some humans over others, a human desire to deflect responsibility for harms done, or an unjust distribution of (human) power," Bennett claims forcefully that "demystification tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency." "Those are the tendencies," she avers, "I resist."[31] In Bennett's vital materialism, agency extends also to nonhuman actors, wherein participation requires ceding notions of individual effectiveness or responsibility in favor of distributed affectivity.

This conceptual/theoretical move has the virtue of calling out or unseating sovereign subjects deeply imbricated in privilege, and of aptly modeling the monadological distribution of power and affect-as-power in and through networked social life.[32] Yet it does so at the considerable cost of naturalizing the distribution of power through its accumulation in the hands of increasingly fewer sovereign subjects—and this, to put it in Bennett's terms, many of the authors in this volume *resist*. To be a node in vibrant matter is to be part of a relatively undifferentiated mass, which for a theorist of abjection (such as

Bataille and Kristeva) is to be the necessary Other to those who still lay claim to the increasingly rare and valuable privilege of sovereign individuality.

Such attempts to decenter the human-ness of all forms of matter (both inert and corporeal) have the troubling potential to erase the violence bound up in the exercise of power.[33] Privilege owes a great deal to hierarchies of sovereign subjectivity that predate and still underpin much of networked society. Which is to say, it's a straight line from Gamergate to the alt-right presidency of Donald Trump, in which a billionaire could appeal to young white men (and 53 percent of white women) whose sudden experience of precarity, their fear of sharing or losing the seat of sovereignty, has translated into virulent rage and a fierce need to violently abject feminists, queers, immigrants, and people of color as Other.

The abject has always concerned the fragility of boundaries between pleasure and disgust. "Spasms and vomiting protect me," Kristeva claims. "I use them throughout my life, in my repugnance—the intermittent retching that will distance me from, and allow me to avoid, objects and extreme situations that I experience as menacing and dangerous: defilement, sewage, sordidness, the ignominy of compromise, in-between states, betrayal. Fascination and rejection at the same time, abjection is the jolt that leads me into the abject but also separates me from it."[34]

Yet what are we, as parts of a social body, to do with our disgust? To give an intermediated example, actress of color Leslie Jones was singled out on Twitter in the summer of 2016 by sexist white supremacist fans of the original *Ghostbusters* (1984). When Jones fought back in the same forum, many on the internet were shocked and appalled by her retweets of the racist and misogynistic abuse that had been leveled at her.[35] The only woman of color in a celebrity cast of female comedians, Jones was targeted by a coordinated campaign of vicious online harassment—abhorrent but sadly unexceptional compared with the hateful attacks that female public figures of color often encounter. Samantha Bee has succinctly described the gender politics of online participation: "Being a woman on the internet means receiving frequent bouquets of chivalrous offers to tear you in half . . . especially if you have the nerve to run for president, talk about politics on TV, or criticize literally any video game."[36] In addition to demonstrating the habitual racist vitriol endemic to many spaces of networked discourse, Jones's example also reinforces the point that hierarchies of subjectivity have their roots in an old materialism that is still very much alive.[37]

The refusal to see an African American as fully American (or as fully human) is an old form of bigotry; the circulation of that bigotry across multiple

platforms—from 4chan (and 8chan) trolls harassing stars of color to neo-Nazi marches protesting the removal of Confederate statues—represents a remediation of an all-too-familiar legacy of structural racism and institutional enslavement. To say that black lives matter, then, is to invoke a fraught material history in which African American slaves were fungible commodities in a system predicated on their circulation as *objects*, and on the denial of their status as subjects. Nicholas Mirzoeff invokes Jane Bennett's notion of vital matter to make this point when he demonstrates how race can become especially symptomatic in the new materialist account:

> The denial of agency to matter central to Bennett's agenda (and with which I am sympathetic in itself) is equated via a quote from Bruno Latour to the moment "when the Founding Fathers denied slaves and women the right to vote." Quite apart from the false equation of slavery and the right to vote, what happened to understanding the chattel part of chattel slavery, so central to *Dred Scott*? An enslaved person was an "article of property," an object, non-human and commodified. Whether we agree with this classification or not, we must accept its immense and continuing significance. Race, in Bennett's account, is a problem only for what she calls political ecology, not the theorizing of materialism.[38]

Like Mirzoeff, who argues that the idea of vibrant matter effectively whitewashes the capitalist history of chattel slavery, many of the authors in this volume share a concern about the violent erasures that occur when matter displaces issues of subjectivity, (non)sovereignty, and human desire.

In many essays in this volume, such as those by Eugenie Brinkema, James Cahill, and Meredith Bak, abjection represents something more graphic and unsettling than vibrant: something between embodied vibrant matter speaking back and the return of the repressed. As Mirzoeff puts it, "My anxiety with the material, nonhuman and universalist turns in academic discourse is, then, how quickly we seem to forget all the work that has been done to establish how and why so many people have been designated as non-human and bought and sold as material objects."[39] The bodies and persons who have been abjected, enslaved, trafficked, and dehumanized argue for self-critical, subject-oriented materialist approaches to counter the erasure of their exceptional difference and violent expropriation.[40] While such ideological critique inevitably runs the risk of reaching a political impasse in its attempt to subvert the effects of abjection, new materialist approaches often underplay the importance of the production and regulation of subject-object relations to dynamics of power in intermediated existence. The harassment of Leslie

Jones is a case in point: the rise and fall of trending topics on Twitter perform the seemingly organic distribution and flow of affect, but for some the effect of the flow is anything but abstract—as when someone like Jones struggles to be a subject in that flow while suffering as the repeated object of its violence.

Or, to put it in Butler's terms, the bodies that matter—those abjected to secure the sovereignty of the dominant minority—form an abject objection to their erasure by new materialisms. More than a backlash against their abjection, this is the result of a principled objection. When Jones was castigated for retweeting the most offensive of the slanders against her to underline their offensiveness, she revealed the violence by which intermediated subjects are *repeatedly* stripped of their agency and sovereignty. Darieck Scott, in his discussion of gay African American men in literature and in social life, asks, "Is this question [of the role of abjection and domination in racialization] ultimately best focused on identifying those elements of that experience, that history, which tend toward the overcoming and surpassing of domination and defeat?" That is, if one is still actively abjected, does a heroic recounting of moments of resistance to that abjection really get at the ways in which being abject, and not overcoming, transcending, or denying it, may be a form of resistance? Discussing abjection as lived by American gay black men, he continues, "What can the historical, inherited experience of . . . enslavement and what it might have taught, conscious and unconscious, provide for us by way of useful lessons or templates?"[41] This is an urgent claim for future scholarship in fields that intersect with and complement the critical study of race and oppression. The point is not simply, following Mirzoeff, to delimit the materiality, the mattering, of race and its erasure in new materialisms and elsewhere (though that is important). It is also to explore in rigorous detail the *productivity* of those moments of abjection. As Scott puts it, "Within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer."[42] When one is the thing abjected, rejected in defense of the security of others (of their need to be other than Other), that abjection is not without the possibility of a perverse form of agency. Living such contradictions—simultaneously as an admittedly contingent subject and as a castoff to ensure the (greater) subjectivity of one's "betters"—cannot be corrected through simple demystification. Nor can abjection be subverted

easily by disrupting the boundary between subject and world—by becoming disruptively *present as subject*. Rather, only by walking that border, tracing its variations between agent, self, and other—between boundary, interior, and exterior—may one call into question, even for a moment, the transitory and ephemeral subjectivation of the nodal, networked, and indeterminate self of the new materialist age. Expanding on and moving past Kristeva, Chen describes this as "a clashing embodiment of dignity as well as of shame." The abjected agent, she argues, is rich in affect, imbricating "high stature and base animality, the blendings embody an intensity, a fraught collision between humanity and 'zeroness.'"[43] For Chen, abjection does not simply organize subjectivity; it also creates the potential for an affinity with the abjected, with the animal materials that have just been cast off at the ground zero of subject production.

Some might object that to explore abjection, particularly in psychoanalytic terms, is not new—not in the paradigm-shifting way in which new materialisms are new. Yet, by definition, novelty has never been the point for the return of the repressed. Novelty as a value is a hallmark of late capitalism and, in the case of human (academic) commodities, of the neoliberal (approaching neofeudal) imperative to embrace rather than deny one's commodity status, to update, upgrade, and adopt early and often. In the networked age, we offer ourselves up as willing objects, rejecting subjective agency in favor of being the "LinkedIn," "searchable," and ultimately fungible agents of a cloud-based sovereignty. The point of the abject stems from its urgency: it is useless except inasmuch as it helps to produce those subjects that are supposedly no longer relevant.

The Road to Abject Incorporation Is Paved with Negative Critique

Critiques of the abject in art, media, and popular culture often describe the act of abjection as punitive and isolating—the maintenance of social norms through the agency of the ego. Each essay in this volume is dedicated to moving beyond that valuable but narrow conception to consider the ways in which the abject may be summoned and deployed as an *objection*—a means of preemptively producing exceptional difference to undermine the stability of normative discourse. Taking in a variety of topics in visual and material culture, from talking dolls to postwar graphic media to stand-up comedians, the contributors to this volume share a common interest in moving the abject and abjection beyond the narrow confines of the psychoanalytic (and especially

the even narrower defile of the mother-child dyad), the punitive, and the exclusionary. Building on the foundational theories of abjection outlined by Kristeva and Bataille, they rethink these unconscious-oriented approaches by examining an intermedial and interdisciplinary range of texts. Above all, they pursue the productive disruption that may follow the dissolution of boundaries between the real and the feigned, the subject and its objects, the sublime and the profane, out of which abjection forms the space for an objection. They do not attempt to recuperate the comic from the violent, nor to cordon off violence from the laughable, but to explore their common (and generative) threat to the self, and to the social body.

Because these tensions between the state and its sovereign subjects figure so centrally to our account of the abject objection, it seems appropriate to open this book with Sylvère Lotringer's "The Politics of Abjection," an excursus on George Bataille's 1934 essay "Abjection and Miserable Forms." For Bataille (and for Lotringer), abjection is not simply constitutive of culture through the individual, but also derives from and contributes to larger operations of sovereign subjectivation and social immiseration. For any oppressive ruling class to understand itself as justly sovereign, it must find its abject Other among the masses of the oppressed, and thereby demarcate the filth and decay from which it is inherently different (yet to which it is necessarily related), through means that are seemingly benign but manifestly cruel. This act of imperative exclusion is neither inherently comic nor directly violent. Rather, it becomes a graphic inscription of the relations of power on the social landscape. "Abjection results not from a dialectical operation," Lotringer explains, merely "feeling abject when 'abjectified' in someone else's eyes, or reclaiming abjection as an identifying feature." Instead, he argues, it happens "precisely when the dialectics break down." This broken dialectic, then, becomes the condition of possibility for the abjected masses to object to sovereign rule and to assert the autonomy of their social existence.

Abject Performances: Subjectivity, Identity, Individuality

The first section of the volume, "Abject Performances: Subjectivity, Identity, Individuality," redraws the line between social performances of abjection and the living bodies that produce and animate them. Each of the three essays in this section, by Michelle Cho, Rebecca Wanzo, and Maggie Hennefeld, explores a different aspect of performativity, locating its abject politics within economic, geographic, and intersectionally identitarian contexts. The consti-

tution of the body politic through comedy is frequently gendered, too often by abjecting women (especially women of color), and thereby limiting or regulating their powers of comedic protest or resistance.

Michelle Cho considers one national inflection of these conjunctions between abject comedy and female corporeality in "Popular Abjection and Gendered Embodiment in South Korean Film Comedy." Cho poses a notion of "the beautiful abject," which she understands as "a new form of popular abjection" in which "gender transgression, made pleasurable as abject spectacle, signals both the endurance and the instability of patriarchal gender norms." Drawing on the feminist and queer theories of Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Rowe, and Jane Park, Cho reads the ubiquity of female grotesque types (or gendered abject comedy) in South Korean media as a symptom of the crisis of masculinity in the nation's militaristic patriarchal society. Looking at both domestic and international receptions of South Korean romantic comedies, such as *My Sassy Girl* (2001) and *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006), Cho argues that "spectacles of abject excess disavow the actual violence of gendered abjection, as a fundamental condition of mainstream, late-capitalist Asian modernity." She thus extends the notion of abject comedy as constitutive of the social body politic to explore the gendered and racial mediation of international flows of commodity capital and cultural images.

In "Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics," Rebecca Wanzo looks at two recent comedies, Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011–13) and Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012–17), both for their obvious differences (race) and for what they have in common: a predicate condition of abjection that situates the millennial woman in a state of being always already precarious. In these and several other recent gendered sitcoms, Wanzo notes, abjection is deployed to signal the protagonist's precarity. (Contrast this, for instance, with *Friends* (1994–2004), in which a cast of underemployed and unemployed [white and stereotypically beautiful] characters live in relative luxury.) Yet for Wanzo, abjection is more than simply a sign of precarity; it is the very condition that drives the comedy of these series, even as it dooms their protagonists. "Inhabiting a world in which mobility is frozen—economically, politically, romantically," Wanzo warns us, "these women's bodies become sites of the modern mire of economic and intimate abjection."

Maggie Hennefeld's chapter, "Abject Feminism, Grotesque Comedy, and Apocalyptic Laughter on *Inside Amy Schumer*," returns to the bodily violence popular in feminist satirical comedy. Hennefeld theorizes an "abject feminism" as a political response to the social contradictions between individual

self-making and collectivist advocacy in contemporary popular feminisms. Given the inadequacy of recent arguments based in intersectionality to resolve this driving contradiction between identity and collectivity, Hennefeld claims, images of apocalyptic or world-shattering violence (spontaneous decapitation, cannibalistic self-petrification, and ritual mass suicide) provide impossible but necessary rejoinders to the impasses of feminist politics. Theorizing the gendered stakes of the distinction between abject comedy and carnivalesque unruliness, Hennefeld argues that abject feminist laughter provides a space "for acting out the contradictory meanings and ideals of gender identity and its shape-shifting relationship to feminist politics in the twenty-first century."

Abject Bodies: Humans, Animals, Objects

The essays in "Abject Bodies: Humans, Animals, Objects," by Yiman Wang, Rijuta Mehta, Meredith Bak, and James Leo Cahill, and the art of Mark Mulroney, focus on the dynamic between (non)human subject formation and the disciplinary paradigms that circumscribe it. Abjected bodies often serve as allegorical figures during tumultuous moments of national struggle. A case in point is found in Yiman Wang's analysis of the brief resurgence of slapstick comedy during the 1950s in the People's Republic of China (1949–66). In her chapter, "The Animal and the Animalistic: China's Late 1950s Socialist Satirical Comedy," Wang looks at two rarely discussed zoo-themed comedies, *An Unfinished Comedy* (dir. Lv Ban, 1957) and *A Nightmare in the Zoo* (dir. Shi Lan, 1956), a fictional film featuring a Chinese comic duo in the style of Laurel and Hardy. The latter film was condemned for physiologically repulsing its audiences with performances of animalistic slapstick and for producing dehumanizing satires of state officials. As Wang argues, the subsequent denigration and prohibition of such modes of comedy played a crucial role in "enabl[ing] the very formation of the socialist body politic." Methodologically, Wang draws on an innovative range of theories of animality, comedic physiognomy, and political governance (from Bataille and Derrida to Cai Chusheng and Pang Zhaolin) to shed light on this forgotten archive of Chinese socialist film satire from 1956–57. She thereby teases out a "a strand of vexed *inter(dis)course* between the animal, the animalistic, and the socialist new human in the late 1950s cultural-political landscape," arguing that the comedies unleashed "animalist specter(s)" that "continue to unsettle and haunt socialist projections of ideological purism."

Rijuta Mehta puts a sharp point on the role of abjection in political discourse, illustrating its crucial urgency to theories and aesthetics of state violence. In "Anticolonial Folly and the Reversals of Repatriation," Mehta locates an abjection based in the process of nation formation, the inscription of social relations on the ground and on the bodies of those who suffered under the "follies of repatriation" in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh in the middle of the twentieth century. Comparing representations of women and men during partition in the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and in photographs contemporary with those stories, Mehta suggests that the "new sovereign state produced an abject script not only for Manto's comic irony, by naming it 'unclean,' 'filthy,' 'taboo,' and 'disgusting' under obscenity law, but also for native subjects, especially the women photographed in repatriation portraits between 1947 and 1956." The "abject scripts" that Mehta considers are specific to the violent, painful, and unresolved tensions and experiences of state partition. Similarly, the comic irony that she locates in Manto's work is tinged with the pathos of those violent and graphic productions of nationhood. Like other essays in this volume, Mehta's readings of partition literature and photography forge productive and unexpected connections between theories of the abject and ironically absurd eruptions of state violence—such as the possibility of cosmic laughter at unbearable images of sexual assault and state brutality in postpartition South Asia.

Yet that which abjects is not always of the living; instead, it may refer to the basis of life in death, to the stillness by which we try to understand animation. Meredith Bak's chapter, "Between Technology and Toy: The Talking Doll as Abject Artifact," reverse engineers the uncanny creepiness of one of the all-time most popular children's toys: the talking doll. The abject violence lurking in this allegedly innocent plaything derives from the toy's oscillation between humanoid companion and cold, mechanical apparatus—it is a violence to the very idea of flesh. "Talking dolls encourage traditional nurturing doll play," Bak claims, "but also often require the child to perform strange, violent, or invasive actions to trigger speech." Bak historicizes the talking doll's abject status through an analysis of patent records from the late nineteenth century to the present. Focusing on the technological devices used to record the doll's cooing, gurgling "mama" and "papa" sound effects, she excavates a media archaeology of the doll's morphing voice box technologies, from bellows and valves, to phonograph records and cylinders, to magnetic tapes and digital clouds. She argues that the talking dolls invite children to "engag[e] an ongoing power dynamic to nurture and provide care, but also to abuse and destroy. These conflicting impulses exemplify the 'vortex of

summons and repulsion' characteristic of the abject." By analyzing talking doll patents, Bak demonstrates that even primal abjection has its own intellectual and commercial genealogy, hence archival history. Rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, Bak builds on foundational psychoanalytic readings of talking dolls (as uncanny object and transitional plaything), while opening them to alternative notions of time and historiography than those of the archaic unconscious.

James Cahill's contribution also moves beyond the body—whether fat, animalized, or absurd—via the big toe, "the most human part," according to Bataille. "Absolute Dismemberment: The Burlesque Natural History of Georges Bataille" theorizes the abject dialectics between animality and the human by finally giving the big toe its due as the very "threshold between human and animal life," to assert an anti-anthropocentric critique of the limits of humanism. First, however, Cahill accepts an unresolved dare (or even surrealist prank) laid down by the French intellectual Raymond Queneau: to imagine a dialectical, natural history based on the surrealist writings of Bataille. Cahill does so, he says, "in part for the pleasure of trying it, but also for the economy with which it draws together important strands of Bataille's thinking about animality, aesthetics, abjection, and comic laughter, demonstrating their mutual entanglements in his thought, as well as their untimely productivity in [this] era of accelerated and often frightful metamorphoses, extinctions, exhaustion, and death on a planetary scale." Looking at texts that predate Bataille's 1934 essay on abjection, Cahill's critical antics pose further challenges to the compartmentalization of humanities disciplines today—such as anthropology and natural history—making evocatively perverse use of G. W. F. Hegel's notion of "picture thinking," as the materialist filter for universal truth.

The volume then takes a break from the formal essay for a trip into an autobiography of abjection. Reporting from the trenches of vernacular objection in present-day cultural production, visual artist Mark Mulroney offers an interlude in which he graphically recounts his personal exploits in an abject education system. Sparing no detail, Mulroney depicts (in both word and image) a bio-graphical narrative of his profound confusion at (poorly) mediated sex education, a disciplining made worse by its being delivered in a Catholic school. There, he was instructed in the meanings of his body and the bodies around him while the crucified Christ gazed down on him from the front of the room. Of that Christ, Mulroney observes, "Sure he was dead, but he was also *very sexy*." (Consider yourself trigger-warned.) Mulroney's art translates the eroticism of the martyrs into

vernacular form—or, rather, updates the vernacular to account for the production of new martyrs.[44]

Abject Aesthetics: Structure, Form, System

The final section views abjection in aesthetic terms. The essays in part 3—by Nicholas Sammond, Eugenie Brinkema, Thomas Lamarre, and Rob King—approach the abject as a vital critical category for understanding the fraught relationship between pleasure and violence—in all its forms and surface guises. First drafted before the 2016 elections, these essays excavate the abjected objections long simmering just beneath the surface of American political life and cultural values. They help us understand how abjection has long been incorporated in and by the national body politic.

In "A Matter of Fluids: EC Comics and Vernacular Abjection," Nicholas Sammond explores the circulation of immanent and persistent wartime traumas—both the nightmarish residues of World War II and the unthinkable and unremitting possibility of nuclear war—in Cold War–era pulp comics, especially in *Mad* magazine. Sammond discusses how romance, horror, and satire comics and magazines mobilized the abject in their images (especially those of corrupted flesh, blood, spit, and sweat), as well as through destabilized graphic designs. He argues that in their insistent repetition they formed objections to an increasingly pervasive domestic authoritarianism that marked the early days of the Cold War. Sammond notes that vernacular media such as comics translated the extreme abjection of an already heavily constrained postwar femininity into blatantly misogynistic social commentaries—even though media makers imagined that misogyny as an incisive critique of normative performances of gender and social repression during the Cold War. "Life in the vernacular," Sammond claims, "plowed the furrows of the banal, offering in the mundane and repetitive themes of love, sex, and death a riotous rebellion against a postwar project that could only imagine . . . a deathless fantasy of love in the service of the future."

In "Spit * Light * Spunk: Larry Clark, an Aesthetic of Frankness," Eugenie Brinkema demands that we see abjection as form, refusing to assimilate the abject's graphic excess into the symbolic order to which (in some accounts) it stands as Other. Closely reading the cinematic and photographic work of Larry Clark through the lens of radical formalism, Brinkema insists on moving beyond "the canon of *signs* of abjection," which mistakes that which is abjected for the act of abjection. Instead, she argues for a critical practice that relinquishes "the easy ascription of abjection to things presented to the

eye and mind, thrown in the path of the subject as a nameable, precise sensual content—the definite article of *that* sticky load, *this* maimed corpus." For Brinkema, rather than incorporation, the more productive move is to argue for "abjection's notion of downcasting, lowering, casting off to describe a formal language of uncluttered openness, sincerity, simplification, clarification, a brutalizing of visual language through a paring down to a radical program of exclusion."

The abject, in this formulation, presages an eruption, whether into laughter or violence (or laughter as violence), wherein the expulsive force of abjection is often preceded by a dis-ease, a sense of irritation. Thomas Lamarre looks at manga comics for teenage girls, such as *The Wolf Girl and the Black Prince* (Hatta Ayuko, 2011–), surveying their meticulously administered worlds for how they inflect and refract abjection. "A Series of Ugly Feelings: Fabulation and Abjection in Shojo Manga" mounts a detailed critique of Kristeva's "weight of meaninglessness" through what Sianne Ngai calls the "ugly feelings" that haunt popular Japanese shōjo manga, comics marketed primarily to female adolescents. "Ngai stresses how difficult it is to determine whether ugly feelings are resistant or acquiescent in political terms," Lamarre argues, "precisely because they are not object oriented." He analyzes the "objectless feeling of irritation" that arises in encountering manga, both through its depiction of interspecies role-playing scenarios, and in the diffusion of the story across different serial media. Focusing on manga's formal heterogeneity, Lamarre argues provocatively that the irritation that serialization inspires "generates a feedback effect that allows for the conveyance of abjection, as information for the series," and in this case is "the noise whose amplified feedback makes the *Wolf Girl* series into a self-organizing multimedia franchise system."

Last but not least, Rob King disentangles two terms that might at face value be taken as synonymous: the abject and the absurd. "Powers of Comedy, or, the Abject Dialectics of *Louie*" examines the tension between absurdist flight and abject self-degradation in the short films and television shows of the comedian Louis C. K. King focuses on C. K.'s self-authored, autobiographical FX sitcom, *Louie* (2010–15), from its initial reception through the recent revelations about C. K.'s offscreen behavior and his attempted apologies for that behavior. Beginning with C. K.'s short films from the 1990s, such as *Ice Cream* (1993) and *Hello There* (1995), King locates the absurd in *Louie* as the dialectical other to the stand-up comedian's routine self-exposure (grotesque irony noted) through abjection. Rather than viewing the abject as underpinning a comedian's own truth-telling authenticity (a familiar account adopted

by John Limon, Rebecca Krefting, David Gillota, and others), King argues that C. K.'s use of the absurd reorganizes the horror of abjection into a new modality in American comedy: abject-absurd dialectics. Drawing primarily on Deleuze's argument for opposing trajectories of sense and nonsense in *The Logic of Sense* (1969), King argues that, "in *Louie*, absurdist fantasy . . . is an interiorized response to an externalized abjection that seeks to sublate it in thought, to find refuge in an absurdist imaginary that galvanizes the self against the sickening lure of abject states of affair or filthy objects." By invoking the absurd as spectral other to the abject, C. K. avoids the redemptive reading of abject comedy, wherein simple naming of the abject gestures toward regulating the body politic and restoring a conservative and rational order.

The Aftermath of Abjection

Abjection as a heuristic, as a mode of incorporation, as an objection, goes beyond either laughter or horror and cuts to the radical imbrication of these seemingly opposed affects. Methodologically, abject objection is not simply about demystifying the misogyny in horror films, nor just about articulating the affect that motivates the self-loathing comedian. Indeed, limiting studies in abjection to comedy repeats the error of a previous generation of scholars who confined them to horror. This is not merely a generic or modal claim; it is an argument about the timely utility of the concept of abjection and the abject across a range of disciplinary boundaries. Each essay in *Abjection Incorporated* points to a multivalent understanding of abjection as a social, political, and aesthetic operation designed to separate those who *are* or *should be* from those who *are not* or *should never be*, and more recently to provide perverse cover for those who feel their own sovereign subjectivity suddenly threatened by the mere acknowledgment of the Other. As the chapters in this volume vividly detail, the *idea* of abjection—the sovereign reinforcement of the self or the social body through the charged, violent, and perversely pleasurable denial of the other—far from fading, has increasing currency today. The effects of this abjection are very real, though they often unfold in images and events that seem altogether unreal. Laugh, cry, gawk, quake, shudder, or freeze in terror—these encroaching imperatives of abjection can and should continue to produce renewed energies for collective refusal and resistance: for saying "no" instead of always insisting "not I." The abject objection demands more of us than quietude, acquiescence, and incorporation. It is a challenge, asking us who the hell we think we are.

Notes

Epigraphs: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1; Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," in *More and Less*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Yvonne Shafir (1934; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 9.

Color versions of artworks featured in this volume, and additional images, may be found at http://scalar.usc.edu/works/abjection-incorporated-insert/index.

1 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

2 Hunter Walker, "Donald Trump Just Released an Epic Statement Raging against Mexican Immigrants and 'Disease,'" *Business Insider*, July 6, 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trumps-epic-statement-on-mexico-2015-7; Michal Addady, "Outrage Persists over Donald Trump's 'Blood' Remark about Megyn Kelly," *Fortune*, August 9, 2015, http://fortune.com/2015/08/09/trump-blood-megyn-kelly/.

3 Angie Drobnic Holan, "In Context: Hillary Clinton and the 'Basket of Deplorables,'" *Politifact*, September 11, 2016, http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/sep/11/context-hillary-clinton-basket-deplorables/.

4 Judith Butler, "Talking Politics," November 17, 2016, in *Talking Politics*, produced by David Runciman and Catherine Carr, podcast, 54:03, https://www.acast.com/talkingpolitics/judithbutler.

5 Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52–76.

6 Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," 9.

7 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

8 See, for instance, Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); or Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

9 Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 233.

10 "Keith on ABC 'This Week'—7/26/15," Keith Ellison for Congress, video, 0:32, May 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHkPadFK340.

11 Benjamin Lee, "John Oliver on Trump: 'A Klan-Backed Misogynist Internet Troll' Is President," *Guardian* (London), November 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/14/john-oliver-trump-wins-election-last-week-tonight.

12 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 38.

13 Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," 9.
14 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 30.
15 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
16 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.
17 M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).
18 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*; Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, "'Negroes Laughing at Themselves?': Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," in *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 93–114; Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*; Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
19 Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman, *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2014); David Gillota, *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
20 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 87; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
21 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
22 Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 87.
23 Georges Bataille, "The Practice of Joy before Death," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 239.
24 Bataille, "Practice of Joy Before Death," 239.
25 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.
26 McKenzie Funk, "Cambridge Analytica and the Secret Agenda of a Facebook Quiz," *New York Times*, November 19, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/the-secret-agenda-of-a-facebook-quiz.html?_r=0.
27 Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism without the Contradiction," in *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. L. H. Nelson and J. Nelson (London: Kluwer, 1996), 187. Unfortunately, in some selective interpretations of Barad's nuanced approach to decentered subjectivity, agential realism becomes merely a variant of OOO, one that imagines the disruption of subject-object relations as automatically

creating space for new and more radical social formations. See, for instance, Carol A. Taylor, "Close Encounters of a Critical Kind: A Diffractive Musing In/Between New Material Feminism and Object-Oriented Ontology," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 201. See also Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

28 Barad, "Meeting the Universe," 187.

29 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*; Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012); Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

30 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

31 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

32 Bennett sees in this move, borrowed very much from Bruno Latour (among others, such as Michel Foucault and Diana Coole), the opportunity to chart complex phenomena with more nuance (ecological crises, biomedical interventions at other than the gross somatic level, or global agricultural production), and in certain instances to begin to intervene in unexpected ways, through avenues other than the human.

33 For example, laughter marks a vestige of Bennett's central delineation between human agency and vital matter. She elaborates this encroachment through Franz Kafka's spool-of-thread character, Odradek, "who/that can run and laugh"; Kafka describes Odradek's laughter as having "no lungs behind it" and "sound[ing] rather like the rustling of falling leaves." Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 7–8. See also Grusin, *Nonhuman Turn*.

34 Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 185.

35 Ijeoma Oluo, "Leslie Jones' Twitter Abuse Is a Deliberate Campaign of Hate," *Guardian* (London), July 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/19/leslie-jones-twitter-abuse-deliberate-campaign-hate.

36 Matt Willstein, "Samantha Bee Warns Trump after Victory: 'Nasty Women' Not Going Away," *Daily Beast*, November 9, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/09/samantha-bee-warns-trump-after-victory-nasty-women-not-going-away.html.

37 And this very point was repeated when NBC chose Jones to cover the Rio Olympics, where she celebrated herself and her fellow athletes as Americans, and whereupon she was met with even more contemptible online hatred.

38 Nick Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene, Or, The Geological Color Line," in *After Extinction*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 4–5.

39 Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene," 4

40 Recent stories posted from Dubai, India, New York, and Britain suggest that chattel slavery is far from a thing of the past and is sometimes carried out

with the same level of sophistication and organization once practiced by Euro-American slavers. See, for instance, Jamie Grierson, "UK Family Found Guilty of Enslaving Homeless and Disabled People," *Guardian* (London), August 11, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/11/uk-family-found-guilty-of-enslaving-homeless-and-disabled-people.

41 Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 6.

42 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 15.

43 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 40.

44 Color versions of images in Mulroney's chapter may be found at http://scalar.usc.edu/works/abjection-incorporated-insert/index.