

A Lyrical Approach to Abjection

Olivia Bell

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Maya Sonenberg

Rae Paris

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Olivia Bell

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Maya Sonenberg

Department of Creative Writing and Poetics

This critical essay explores Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as it pertains to the porous boundaries "separating" the self—as subject and as deject—from sublimity and exploitative violence. Additionally, this essay investigates the utility of lyricism in conjunction with the abject. How can lyricism more acutely navigate the murky terrain of the abject? And what does the use of lyricism say about the subject's engagement with abjection? Through personal reflection and analysis of *Annihilation* by Jeff Vandermeer, *Mandibula* by Mónica Ojeda (translated from Spanish to English as *Jawbone* by Sarah Booker), *Bunny* by Mona Awad, and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* by Angela Carter, this essay seeks to better understand the labyrinthian ambiguity of these questions.

A Lyrical Approach to Abjection

Five years ago, I read *Annihilation* by Jeff Vandermeer for the first time. I devoured the book in half a day. The hypnotic quality of the prose entranced me, especially when the language wrestled with the mysteries of cosmic horror. The scene in which the protagonist, a stoic and solitary biologist, encounters the metaphysical entity whom she names the Crawler was especially provocative:

A raging waterfall crashed down on my mind, but the water was comprised of fingers, a hundred fingers, probing and pressing down into the skin of my neck, and then punching up through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain...and then the pressure eased even though the impression of unlimited force did not let up and for a time, still drowning, an icy calm came over me, and through the calm bled a kind of monumental blue-green light. I smelled a burning inside my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote.¹

Reading this passage felt ineffable, as if I had accessed a previously unrecognized potential for my poetic sensibilities. The lyrical prose subsumed me in the bodily experience of the speaker by rendering the cerebral nature of the action as paradoxically tangible. Vandermeer wields imagery with such musical precision through techniques like consonance: “probing and pressing down into the skin of my neck, and then punching up through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain.”² The repetitive sounds in this sentence mesmerized me. Additionally, the unflinching description of such violent imagery forced atmospheric dread to shroud me. That much of this excerpt is one sentence is intentional, too, because it creates a breathless tone, adding to the panicked mood. Without these lyrical elements, this culminative scene would not have been as vivid and horrifying for me to experience. It would not have stuck with me, prompting my skin to prickle at the mere thought of it.

¹ Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*, intro. Karen Joy Fowler, (Broadway, New York: Macmillan Publishing Group, 2024), 181.

² Ibid.

Though sometimes pejoratively labeled as purple prose, lyricism calls to me. It feels natural for me to convey the sensorial elements of story through beauty and metaphor. Lyricism points to itself, as if indulging in its own richness; it utilizes musicality and poeticism to express the bottomless depth of human emotion. And there is perhaps a no more potent emotion than horror—that primal feeling of unease, an unease which insists upon itself just as lyricism does. Horror is explosively reactive, a site wherein human emotion cannot be subdued; horror is fully-embodied, naked, resistant to suppression. How, then, can horror's intensity be fully expressed on the page? How may one bury their readers in that experience? I believe that lyricism has the capacity to more acutely communicate horror because lyricism and horror both demand attention and defy careful restraint.

After meditating on my reading of *Annihilation*, I realized that I had been attempting to construct similar landscapes of looming anxiety in my own work, yet I struggled with the urge to curb my instinctual lyricism. I thought that imbuing the page with beauty would distract from the narrative's content. As a result, much of my writing felt disjointed, as though my stories did not know what they wanted to be. My hesitant lyricism clashed with the story; the results were distractingly awkward. But Vandermeer's work inspired me to embrace uncanniness. I began to lean into the juxtaposition between horror and decadent language. I investigated the contours of my lyricism and discovered its potent potential to describe horror. In doing so, I experimented with language that I previously shied away from, such as grotesque imagery. This practice both invigorated and intimidated me. I feared what those who read my work might think of me, as though my writerly obsessions projected the darkest corners of my psyche for all to see.

Yet, it was comforting to discover that this strangeness was not and is not at all unique to my writing. According to Tess Thackara, many young women in my generation seek to create art that speaks “to something deep in the body, producing responses that range from carnal attraction to disgust,” a phenomena, I think, that is rooted in the political horrors of the contemporary moment.³ Thackara’s thoughts resonate with me; I receive similar visceral reactions from those who read my work. My prose dwells in horror as it lives and thrives in the body, focusing particularly on “obscene” elements of the human condition which America’s puritanical social order forcibly repress: violence and fantasies of violence, sexual desire, and recognition of one’s bodily processes and anatomy.

In such dissective meaning-making, I would be remiss if I did not contemplate Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Kristeva postulates that the abject is the offending object beyond an ambiguous border which defines selfhood. To be more explicit, this border delineates the self from what induces disgust or horror: the abject. And what induces disgust and horror is often dictated by the culture in which the subject is situated. As a result, the boundary of the abject is porous; the self can seep from one side to the other, or simmer in-between, with little resistance. And, if an individual’s positionality necessarily defies a culture’s narrow strictures, thereby muddling that culture’s strict definition of selfhood, then that individual may have the potential to more readily navigate the abject.

When the subject approaches the abject, or dwells within it, they can transcend a restrictive selfhood constructed by social order. Yet, such an experience still produces horror; the disintegration of the culturally situated self forcibly removes the subject from all the context of their socialized understandings. They are thrust into a new selfhood, one which is alien, one

³ Tess Thackara, “Why Contemporary Women Artists Are Obsessed with the Grotesque,” *Artsy*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-contemporary-women-artists-obsessed-grotesque>.

which unencumbers them from cultural obligation yet leaves them unmoored and terrified. Here, we see how the border of abjection is ambiguous: it stretches alongside the subject's knowledge. Thus, "that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject."⁴ The abject extends past the blurred constraints of its domain; it is the antithesis of stratification. The abject seeps through its own border, both within and without the subject, the individual. The individual who recognizes the farce of subjecthood in relation to social order, who identifies their own potential for abjection, or who crosses entirely into abjection's murkiness, has diverged from the self. Both terror and awe thrive in this unsteadiness.

Yes, there is a paradox to explicitly address here. How can the abject both promote liberation for the subject and simultaneously induce disgust and horror? The answer is ambiguous, just like the abject itself. When the subject loses their sense of selfhood, they obtain a new perspective, one which is at odds with their conditioned frameworks. They transform into what they have been taught to abhor. This disruption is disorienting, intense, scary, yet transcendental. The subject suddenly exists outside the stricture of social order, a structure which is oppressive yet is nonetheless familiar to the subject. In this abrupt dissonance, the subject is sure to experience both wonder and fear. Horror here can feel ecstatic; the subject is both exhilarated by and terrified of their loss of selfhood.

The abject, then, fascinates me. It is a space ripe with ambiguity and profound emotionality, a space where both horror and lyricism can thrive. It is my goal to explore this morphing boundary of abjection and, furthermore, to transgress it—to soak my characters in their abjection and discover how they both balk in fear and are freed.

⁴ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," In *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 216.

Vandermeer's depiction of the biologist and the Crawler in *Annihilation* outlines this complex and varied relationship between the subject and the abject. In the novel, a mysterious force called Area X has engulfed a great swath of coastal land. Within the bounds of Area X, nothing is as it seems. Biological refractions materialize: organisms multiply, merge, or otherwise transmute entirely. In encountering these oftentimes indescribable transformations, the characters possess an overwhelming sense of dread.

The unnamed protagonist, referred to as the biologist, has been sent into Area X to study and document these metamorphoses with the hope of finding a way to halt Area X's continuous expansion. In the aforementioned excerpt, the biologist encounters the Crawler, an incomprehensible creature which dismantles her foundational perception of the world. Upon confronting the Crawler, the biologist's skull, the protective encasing for the organ which cultivates her insight and identity, is "crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote."⁵ Here, the Crawler functionally acts as an abject being. Interaction with this abjection destroys the biologist's sense of self; this dissolution causes immense horror and physical pain.

It is important to acknowledge that the biologist is the only character who interacts with the Crawler and survives. Perhaps, as a character of mixed Asian heritage, as is disclosed in the novel's sequel *Authority*, the biologist is better equipped to confront the abject. Her positionality necessarily defies the constrictions of a white social order. Additionally, the biologist describes herself as a guarded person, content with fleeting and superficial relationships. It is difficult for her to garner intimacy because she understands the world through the lens of her profession: places and people are ecosystems and organisms for her to examine.

⁵ Vandermeer, 181.

As the biologist ruminates on her experience of emotional remoteness, she says her husband “began to call [her] ghost bird, which was his way of teasing [her] for not being present enough in his life.”⁶ The biologist’s tendency toward observation rather than social participation may lend further credence to the idea that she is a subject uniquely capable of engaging with the abject. She already operates outside the constraints of social order. The Crawler, then, as an avatar of abjection, acts in communion with her upon their meeting. These two beings—the biologist and the Crawler—recognize one another in their brief yet powerful interaction.

Still, in the biologist’s terror, the Crawler appears sublime as it operates outside her preconceived perceptions. The biologist, then, in encountering the Crawler, turns into the deject/the stray, an individual who forsakes their sense of self by engagement with the abject. In such engagement, the deject repudiates any cooperation with social order and turns, too, into what is abject. More simply, in confronting the abject (the Crawler), the biologist transmutes from the subject into the deject. She has passed through a border which dissolves her selfhood. By doing so, she can “forget the point of departure and find [herself] removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where [she is]—delight and loss.”⁷ So, the biologist reconfigures horror in her experience as the deject. She has the potential to reclaim her painful anxiety.

On the other hand, one who remains on the side of social order, the subject, both desires and is repulsed by this border of the abject, a border which defines their selfhood. Indeed, “we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.”⁸ If the abject can be sublime—like the Crawler—then perhaps the subject can transcend

⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” In *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 103.

⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.

from a restrictive selfhood that is imposed upon them by an oppressive social order, becoming instead the deject, a personhood ripe with possibility—like the biologist. The abject, ever the host of ambiguity, holds both horror and the sublime. Horror flourishes in the abject. Lyricism feasts upon the sublime.

Acts of transformation in literature often communicate a transgression of the boundary instated by the abject, a scenario which lends itself to horror. These transformations are rich spaces for expression of abjection because individual identity is threatened with destruction in such a process. Yet, transformation is one of life's inevitabilities. This prompts me to reflect on what Barbara Creed says about the ever-present abject, how it always beckons "the self to take up its place, the place where meaning collapses."⁹ In my writing, I am obsessed with transformations as a site of abjection. This may be due to a lifelong anxiety rooted in the fear of change, tethered as I am to the bounds of structured routine. I am reminded of periods in my life before pivotal shifts—the way I would lie awake in bed and stare at the ceiling for hours, mind catastrophizing, sweat pooling in my palms, drenched in a sea of overwhelming dread.

I have spent so much time ruminating about incoming disruptions to comfortable routines, fretting over how they would unsettle my rigid understanding of myself and the world around me, raised as I was in a white, affluent, and Mormon family. The boundaries of such an upbringing are narrow; I understood the world through a very particular set of beliefs. My perfection, derived from a devout and chaste sinlessness, was imperative. My purpose, as dictated by the church, was to seek out and revere a man's love over all else, even if it smothered my capacity for independence and cultivation of queer desire. Straying from the church's

⁹ Creed, 215.

doctrine in behavior or in thought, which I so often did, left me heavy with complicated feelings of guilt. I developed an internalized misogyny which guided my every decision, an indicator of my feelings of worthlessness. Any diversion from the path which was taught to me as life's only viable option rendered me frozen with anxiety, despite my overwhelming yearning for true growth and discovery.

Eventually, as I came into my own with age, I renounced my religiosity. By rejecting my family's faith, a religion with doctrine which contradicted my most stalwart values, I became the deject, an outsider to a community which demanded conformity. Though it scared me, I could not force myself to obey.

I realize that such anxieties are self-centric; they emerge from the fear of losing selfhood in becoming the deject, of approaching the abject. Change and transformation force one to surrender oneself to the unknown, to suspend control and instead inhabit a liminal space wherein the ego is contested and the self may transmute into something unrecognizable. In this liminal space, one's original sense of purpose dissolves, leaving only horror.

Though my fears are not at all unique, they are central to my craft. Transformation blooms everywhere I look. My characters shift from humans—ofttimes of similar positionalities to myself—to animalistic; from sanity to insanity; from corporal to mechanized; from alive to disintegrating corpses or uncanny specters. Within these transformations lives the inescapable dissolution of my characters' selfhoods and their disturbing confrontations with liminality and ambiguity, with abjection. More complicated still, a common byproduct of these transformations is the characters' sublimity of the abject; these characters interpret the obliteration of their selfhood as an unencumbering, a mode for empowerment, and an opportunity to better understand the world in which they are situated. Their monstrousness—their violence, sexuality,

and bodily processes and appearances—become their power and clarity, not their fear or shame. They themselves become the abject, additional fixtures in the narrative’s lyrical grotesquerie.

In my work, I grapple with the sublimity of the abject through lyrically vulnerable confrontations with the grotesque. Indeed, I believe there is little else in my craft’s arsenal besides lyricism which can act as a metaphorical equivalence of the sublime, of gripping horror, of an explicit confrontation with the abject. But how can I communicate my obsession with what is abject, this overwhelming anxiety which is both the fuel for and barrier to my desires and motivations? How can I adequately express what Kristeva explains, how “imaginary uncanniness and real threat... beckons to us and ends up engulfing us?”¹⁰ Is abjection’s border sometimes a necessary construction and not just an arbitrary boundary enforced by an oppressive social order? If so, what does that look like? And, concurrently, when is it useful to wield lyricism to portray the abject as sublime? How can I navigate all this complicated ambiguity with sensitivity?

Puberty exemplifies the paradoxical elements of the abject. Through an act of transformation, the subject succumbs the self; their bodily processes produce both horror and awe. And outside dangers, such as exploitative desire for pubescent bodies, demonstrate the ability for the abject to simultaneously contain disgusting and inexcusable behavior, an abjection which diverges entirely from the sublime.

More particularly, female puberty acts as a compelling well of horror because the grotesque is “inherently associated with the feminine” as the female body, in all of its boundless intersectional incarnations, is oftentimes considered a deviation from that of the “normative” white

¹⁰ Kristeva, 97.

cisgendered male body.¹¹ Many notable hormonal and anatomical shifts occur during female puberty which further highlight this supposed deviation. For instance, the female body develops the potential to menstruate, a physical state which is disparagingly framed as abject. This is evidenced through demeaning characterizations widely implicated onto the menstruating body; I recall jokes made by family at the expense of my changing body, the way my emotions were reduced as a mere happenstance of this new and unfamiliar cycle. Still, menstruation is often thought of as a state of impurity—of abjection—due to the body’s uncontrollable excretions comprised of blood and uterine tissue. This discharge, though often a sign of health and wellbeing in the female body, induces disgust or is thought of as unclean. In this way, the menstruating individual continuously encounters their own abjection through confrontation with such excretions which seep from the body on their own accord.

Accompanying menstruation during female puberty is the development of desire: a transformation from childhood innocence to burgeoning sexuality and aggression. The cultural puritanism of the US frames these two types of interlinked arousal as abject, most particularly as it pertains to the female body. Puberty grants the female body increased agency and desire which threatens American social stricture, a fascistic fantasy which seeks to relegate the female body to a role of subservience. This gender demarcation labels the pubescent female as monstrous, as dangerously distinct from that of the “normative” and “dominant” male. Therefore, American cultural codes frame the pubescent female body as abject. But, as has been previously expressed, the abject simultaneously induces both fear and desire. I cannot help but believe there is a widespread cultural fear and desire for the transformative power granted to the bodies of those who experience female puberty, that gradual ambiguity, that liminal space of being.

¹¹ Thackara.

Female puberty is a transitory period, a time of suspension between childhood and true adulthood. The border of abjection becomes blurred, pliable. In this extended experience of transformation, female bodies turn into “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systemic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.”¹² It is uncomfortable for the subject to behold the abject, this feminine puberty, a period in which the body is continuously shedding its childhood self to mutate into the carnal desire and cruelty of adulthood, a time in which distinctions become obscured. In bearing witness to this radical transformation, the subject is reminded of a horrific promise: the abject, an aspect of our animalistic insides, will certainly rear its head inside each of us; the abject is a dormant entity that abruptly roils in our guts, seeking purchase in our cognizant lives.

Female puberty signifies abjection in *Mandíbula* by Mónica Ojeda, translated from Spanish to English by Sarah Booker as *Jawbone*. The novel, set in Ecuador at an expensive, private girls’ school, primarily investigates abject transformation and desire. For me, Annelise and her schoolteacher, Miss Clara, are the most provocative and visceral characters in the narrative. They demonstrate two distinct types of abjection: the sublime and the exploitative.

Annelise, a wealthy pubescent girl who wields her privilege with cruelty, possesses an acute self-awareness of her ongoing transformation. She claims that there is “no one more pervertible or contaminable than a teenager,” thereby signaling her recognition that puberty is a continuous absorption into the horror of adulthood.¹³ Gradually, she grows to access its sublimity through her cruelty, a trait which grants her power and agency. For instance, she creates a deity

¹² Cohen, 6.

¹³ Mónica Ojeda, *Jawbone*, trans. Sarah Booker, (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2022), 189.

and encourages her group of friends to both worship and fear it. She calls this otherworldly being the White God and characterizes it by saying that “the father of creation is a mother who wears a wig and smells of Dior.”¹⁴ By worshipping this drag-queen god, a figure which defies strict gendered distinctions, Annelise and her group of friends navigate their own marginal state of being, their abject deviation from heteronormative stratification. Moreover, Annelise’s motivations in naming this deity the White God also reference the way she thinks about puberty.

In a letter to Miss Clara, she says:

And here’s the interesting part, Miss Clara: white horror represents cosmic horror in terms of that mystic sensation. White, as you said in class, represents purity and light, but also the absence of color, death, and indefiniteness. It represents that which merely by showing itself anticipates terrible things that cannot be known. It’s such a clean and luminous color that it seems to be on the verge of becoming cloudy, on the verge of reaching its perfect pallor. In other words, white is like silence in a horror movie: when it appears, you know that something awful is about to happen. This is because it can easily be perverted and contaminated. In fact, one of the disquieting aspects of the color white is that it is pure potential, always close to becoming anything else.¹⁵

Annelise’s conceptions about the color white directly reflect her conceptions about puberty and adolescence. She, too, is “close to becoming anything else.”¹⁶ Her changing body and mind signals her potential for corruption and/or transcendence. To Annelise, the amorphous and tenuous color of white signifies this continuous pubescent transformation which absorbs her.

Indeed, Annelise recognizes that the abjection inside her is a different self, one which diverges from her girlhood innocence. This unrecognizability both frightens and invigorates her. She relishes in her monstrosity and pinpoints that puberty is a time when the childhood self, the subject, straddles the permeable boundary of the abject, thereby teetering into inhabiting the role of the deject. Her horror is made more poignant in that it is a biological inevitability, a

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183

¹⁶ Ibid.

disorienting chapter in which a little girl discovers “that there was someone more scurrilous inhabiting her body and sharing her thoughts; a girl who was her and, at the same time, wasn’t.”¹⁷ The pubescent girl is both the subject and the deject at once, becoming herself the border of abjection.

Annelise knows that her bodily processes greatly discomfit her teacher, Miss Clara. Prior to Miss Clara’s tenure at Annelise’s school, past students at her previous school, whom Miss Clara refers to as the *M&Ms*, traumatized her by breaking into her home and subjecting her to torture, the particularities of which are left hauntingly enigmatic. This event led Miss Clara, already an obsessive and paranoid individual, to develop a pathological fear of female puberty and adolescence. Annelise poses as a caricature of this fear in *Jawbone*, recognizing it as a site to rupture the traditionally established power dynamics between herself and her teacher. Annelise taunts Miss Clara with her changing body and, in a private letter to her, writes that “after the death of childhood, something [threatens] to open its eyes inside our stomachs, breathing, making itself known, something that’s been around since creation or even before.”¹⁸ Here, we see Annelise embrace the power in her abjection, the potential for sublimity. Even more, Annelise recognizes Miss Clara’s fear and desire for pubescence. Annelise confronts Miss Clara with this knowledge by writing, “to you, we *are* puberty, nothing and everything, and therefore, we’re also a special form of organic matter, and that makes us vulnerable to a kind of possession.”¹⁹ In explicitly acknowledging Miss Clara’s terror, Annelise wields her power. And, as is later revealed in the novel, she pushes her teacher to a breaking point with no return.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 185

¹⁹ Ibid.

Miss Clara's abjection stands in stark contrast to Annelise's. Disturbingly, Miss Clara abhors her students' pubescent bodies while simultaneously scrutinizing and sexualizing them, thereby exemplifying the fear and desire associated with the abject. It is difficult to parse out the ambiguity of abjection when the behavior described loses its sense of sublimity and turns, instead, into something thoroughly damaging. No excuse can be made to justify Miss Clara's disgusting desire for her students. There is no empowerment to be found, no sublimity to be gleaned. Her abjection is not rebellious against an oppressive social order which seeks to strip power from her. On the contrary—her abjection seeks to strip power from her students, which demonstrates an additional ambiguity related to the abject: sometimes, the border is not marked arbitrarily. Sometimes, it exists as a measure of protection.

The girls, in their pubescent transformations, gain power in their supposed monstrousness. They gain increased agency and freedom. Miss Clara, too, is freed from social strictures in her desire for them, but her desire is plainly exploitative. Miss Clara cannot access sublimity by following the destructive pathway of exploitative abjection. Rather, she dissolves entirely in horror; her sense of self dissipates into an unmitigable monstrousness. This is not an ecstatic experience for her. She does not obtain a new and empowering perspective. Instead, Miss Clara invites her own extirpation.

Miss Clara's abjection is different from her students'. Hers, instead, is one of exploitative desire. Such deviancy cannot be considered sublime. Instead, the border of abjection here is a necessity for the fabric of social wellbeing. Ojeda relays Miss Clara's dangerous frame of mind through a lyrical stream of consciousness:

She tried not to feel ridiculed, to look away as her students' rear ends cut off her head, but ever since what happened with the *M&Ms*, she'd had little control over her feelings. Her body was shattered, and any twisted breath pushed her into the void: an abyss of legs hypersensitive to the atmosphere's touch... Their skirts opening up like umbrellas during

break made her tremble. She believed that with time, the sensation of danger and helplessness before the nymphets would diminish, but the months only strengthened the galloping of her fear... The pubescent corneas of the girls in 1A, for example, were dreadful to her. Their little premenstrual fingers would end up like Ximena Sandoval's, she thought, and maybe they'd stick them in their mouths and suck on them just like Fernanda Montero and Annelise Van Isschot did in her classes... She felt a profound disgust when, first thing in the morning, she entered the classroom and saw the eight or ten or fifteen pairs of bleary eyes in 3B, still sewn shut with the thread of their pillows. And the way the fingernails of the girls in 2C were always packed with dirt. And the length of Priscila Moscosco's eyelashes. And the nipples that protruded from Marta Aguirre's blouse. And Daniela Correa's moist lips. All the little bodies, the hot wombs and inflatable clitorises, made her bones feel strangely irritated, there where she couldn't scratch. Sometimes she wanted to throw her skeleton down the stairs to alleviate the itching, break apart as the dean looked on lazily, swallow boiling water to lacerate the anguish of unexpected physical contact.²⁰

I would not describe Ojeda's prose as strictly lyrical in *Jawbone*, though there are certainly some notable deviations from that sentiment, such as in this excerpt. There are many narrative strands with varying stylistic modes throughout the novel: transcripts from therapy sessions, an unsettling letter from Annelise to Miss Clara, non-chronological plot arcs, and more. But the strand I am most compelled by is that of Miss Clara's sometimes lyrical and always deranged stream of consciousness. In these sections, sentences and paragraphs bleed into one another. Miss Clara's anxiety, desire, and anxiety about her desire are all palpable on the page. Observations made about her students' changing bodies are tinged with both fascination and repulsion. Here, there are certainly lyrical segments: "sometimes she wanted to throw her skeleton down the stairs to alleviate the itching, break apart as the dean looked on lazily, swallow boiling water to lacerate the anguish of unexpected physical contact."²¹ In moments like these, there is a sick sense of musicality. The consonance feels hypnotic, as though we are witnessing Miss Clara descend into the voracious pit of her mind. Her desire, both projected toward her students and toward herself, encapsulates an exploitative violence which further divides her abjection from that of the

²⁰ Ibid., 174.

²¹ Ibid.

sublime. Ojeda, too, builds a tower of explicit lyricism by describing a series of three escalating images. Many of Miss Clara's ruminations proceed in this way. Her thoughts tumble into a self-perpetuating oblivion: she is chained to upsetting and intermingled thoughts of abuse and desire. Ojeda's lyricism sears these images into the reader's memory and keeps them gripped to the page.

Miss Clara finds that she cannot tolerate bearing witness to female puberty, to this suspended state of abject transformation. She is ceaselessly wearied being surrounded by young girls in flux, a flux that Annelise antagonistically describes as "the creation of a monster that crawls around at night; an unpleasant body that cannot be trained."²² When inhabiting the positionality of the subject, Miss Clara both fears and desires this adolescence. This is a disconcerting aspect of her character and is explicitly acknowledged in moments such as when she refers to her students as "nymphets," a nauseating adjective coined by Vladimir Nabokov for his novel *Lolita*, a novel which inhabits the horrendous perspective of a pedophile.²³

Still, in both instances of abjection present in this excerpt, "the monster enforces the cultural codes which regulate desire."²⁴ Cultural codes encourage pubescent females, whose bodies are framed as monstrous, to repress their developing desire and view their bodies as repulsive entities. On the other hand, Miss Clara's monstrous abjection rightly villainizes her character, as it positions itself on abuse. While the pubescent girls gain empowerment in their bodily development and loss of selfhood, Miss Clara descends into exploitation. Both instances exist in the abject; yet, sublime abjection promotes discovery and ecstatic horror whereas

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ Ibid., 174.

²⁴ Cohen, 14.

exploitative abjection turns Miss Clara into an irredeemable monster, one which justifies the existence of abjection's border.

Miss Clara seethes that "the girls from 5B wanted her to sweat bait and cry milk so they could cannibalize her authority. They were weaned daughters and needed flesh."²⁵ Here and in the excerpt above, Miss Clara identifies the state of suspension which her students inhabit: they are both children, wishing to be nurtured, and are gradually transforming into the realm of adulthood. Eventually, after receiving Annelise's letter and descending into a state of derangement, Miss Clara kidnaps one of her students and tortures her, a cyclical narrative arc when considering Miss Clara's experience with the *M&Ms*. Miss Clara herself becomes the deject in crossing the border into abjection, into exploitation. As opposed to the sublimity that can be found in the abjection of *Annihilation*, Miss Clara's desire to exert her power over those who possess less agency than her is necessarily disgusting, rooted as it is in exploitation.

Up until this point, we have discussed lyricism's ability to express the sublimity of abjection. Yet, Miss Clara cannot access the sublime. She is a harbinger of exploitative abjection. So, what is lyricism's utility in Miss Clara's sections? The lyricism here, instead of amplifying any supposed sublimity, highlights Miss Clara's abject deviancy, rendering her desires as even more disgusting. The meandering prose forces the reader to dwell in the discomfort of her exploitative thoughts, thereby reaffirming her potential for harm. Lyricism is not a tool limited to the act of communicating sublime beauty and awe. Miss Clara's ruminations, for instance, are written lyrically to force the reader to contend with the depth of her exploitative horror. Her behavior and the language used to describe it are a reminder that not all forms of abjection are

²⁵ Ojeda, 173.

there arbitrarily; at times, what is abject must be condemned for social health. And in *Jawbone*, Miss Clara's exploitative abjection is the most potent of its many horrors.

Reading *Jawbone* struck a tender chord with me. Raised in a high-control, patriarchal religion, my first experiences with female puberty were fraught with shame. I was taught to relate to my body as an object mapped exclusively for male desire. My body was reduced to an instrument of sexual temptation; exploitative desire directed toward me was my responsibility to deter. With this inculcated awareness, I looked at the changing topography of my body in the mirror, one of the first girls to go through puberty whom I knew, and thought of is as monstrous, as abject. I felt immense shame, too, at the prospect of being desired against my will. I urgently felt that I needed to avert those who would use my body, figures like Miss Clara.

Moreover, I was taught that my own desire, *especially* my queer desire, was something I ought to be ashamed of—that the awakening of my body was not a biological inexorability but rather an aberration of the purity I was destined to uphold until I was yoked in marriage. I remember thinking of myself as disgusting for both of these things—for believing that I was responsible for others' desire and for the awakening of my own desire. Puberty, already a confusing time for most, was made doubly distressing by this conditioned mortification.

I did not yet understand that the body I inhabited was not an object of humiliation but a gift to be cherished. The experience of pubescent transformation is abject, yes, but it can be a wonderful and exciting abjection, one with the potential of accessing sublimity. I wish I had known that there was empowerment to be found in this transformation, that by fully accepting the maturation and mutation of my body that I could perhaps nurture my creativity and sense of agency. Moreso, I wish I knew that this sublime abjection was not similar to the abjection of

exploitation, that I was in no way responsible for the way a degrading culture had encoded my changing body as a site of disgust and desire.

There is certainly value in delineating what is necessarily abject, such as Miss Clara's pedophilic desire in *Jawbone*. It is possible to condemn such behaviors by investigating the contours of their abjection. However, in my work, I hope to engage primarily with sublimity. I want to imbue my characters with knowledge of their rebellious power, especially the power that can be derived from their perceived monstrosity.

In 2024, I wrote a story about a young woman in a toxic relationship. Sam, her partner, routinely abuses substances and returns home where he coerces her into sexual contact. As a result of this violation, her inner being fractures into two: her conscious self and a "creature" which gradually consumes her. At the point of their merging, I wrote:

I cozy up to the creature inside the body, the boundary between us disintegrated into nothingness, and it feels as though my mind is being composted, being turned over in our hands until I am gone and dead, our body going on, living, piloted solely by this creature; either that, or I am being absorbed, turned into, amplified—the possibilities are meaningless to me, I who seethe and foam inside our body, my thoughts a throbbing dislocation, nurtured through whispers to and by the creature: *We are for each other, we need no one else, feel our blood in our wrists where it's warm, feel the heartbeat against our throat, so vital we could turn to a puddle of want, have us, be us, with us—*

This unnamed character transmutes her grief from her relationship into a source of power, a violence which is uncomfortable yet reasserts her agency. The repetition churns into a kind of chant, as though the creature and the character grant each other courage through the intoxication of their communion. This excerpt, all a single sentence, tumbles across the page, imbuing it with their escalating energy. The character and the creature take up space for themselves, finally, through this language. Her merging with this creature—with her abject self—is cathartic, ecstatic, sublime.

And still, I want to express that there is a bone-deep fear in surrendering one's selfhood, of embracing the abject. I want the fear in these transformations to be palpable, perhaps tender, made vivid and beautiful through a lyricism which lives and breathes on the page. In 2025, I wrote a story about a young woman named Chloe who dies whilst spelunking with her partner. Despite their love for one another, Chloe and her partner are dysfunctional and codependent. In death, their bodies fuse with one another as a literalization of this codependency. And as Chloe navigates the strange bureaucracy of the afterlife with the goal of requesting a separation from her partner, she contemplates the meanings of her relationships and gradually comes to an epiphany about the nature of life. In this story, I wrote:

In the corner of the room sits a terrarium of some intimate world on a stand made of swirled marble. Little creatures run here and there around a medieval monastery, their bald heads shiny and brittle as eggshells. Chloe looks upon the globe and watches its mini-sun rise and set every few moments, watches the scurrying of tiny bodies from one place to another, turning leaden and old, newer versions of selfhood emerging and vanishing like words.

“What can I promise you?” Chloe asks.

The monastery crumbles, turns to dust. Unlikely descendants erect an obelisk cut from sacred stone as a monument. They build a village of brick and ivy on the ruins. The mini-moon rises and falls. The creatures sleep and wake.

“What can you promise yourself?”

There is a crack above her, a grey and dripping sky. There is a growing puddle by her knees, a lover's body molded to her own, an old and familiar grief settling in her lungs. Moisture coats the walls. She wears a helmet and thin shirt. She gulps in water like it is air. This is a fragment: a moment upon many moments, frozen in the litany of time.

Here, Chloe recognizes the ephemerality of her selfhood. In observing the surreal terrarium, she processes the circumstances of her life which have brought her to this moment. She understands the flexibility of time, the way moments stack atop one another and bend “reality.” Through this realization she keeps one foot steeped in sublimity—in her mounting epiphany about the nature of life—and one foot in her abjection, the fear and pain of her drowning in the cave. Through this lyrical meditation on the nature of time and the sublimity of her abjection, Chloe accesses a kind of spiritual freedom.

Writing such things allows me to access my own potential for abjection, my own route toward sublimity. I want to wield unexpected and beautiful language to communicate this sublime abjection. I want to investigate body horror to more clearly understand the horror I have experienced in my own body. And in this combination of sublimity, musicality, and horror, I want to interact with the abject as an opportune space for exponential possibilities, ones which reorient the way my readers understand the corruption threaded in social order.

In the novel *Bunny*, Mona Awad conjures the abject through multiple depictions of transformation. Her protagonist, Samantha, renounces her individuality via assimilation into the cultlike dynamic of her MFA cohort, a group of girls whom she calls the Bunnies. There, her personhood “finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence.”²⁶ Awad communicates this transformation with lyrical and hallucinatory prose.

Throughout the entirety of the novel, Samantha’s trustworthiness is tenuous and, as such, she is a largely unreliable narrator. She lives in a heightened reality, fueled by intense emotionality. Yet, it is only when she is subsumed by the abject, the cult of the Bunnies, that she is swept up by a drug-induced psychosis, an overt rupturing of her selfhood. This change, which occurs in the second act of the novel, is demonstrated clearly by the intensifying, manic fervor of the language:

We are walking down the steeply sloping hill, *la la la*, the hill upon which the towers and bells of Warren shimmer like a wish. Like the corsages we wear on our wrists from Prom Thursdays. As we make our way down the hill, entering the downtown, it’s spooky. The air is different here. Humider. Grosser. The sky a dark pink that reminds us of innards, of what happens in the bathroom with the ax with the Darlings who don’t make it. We’re passing the scary places now. To get to Pinkberry we have to pass some scary places and to get through them you have to think *Pinkberry Pinkberry Pinkberry*. This city is not cute like Pinkie Pie or even scary-cute like a young Marlon Brando. We hold each other close past tattoo parlors and abandoned storefronts. Past the old lady with the spider

²⁶ Kristeva, 101.

tattoo on her neck who will be in all of our stories next week. She is waiting for a bus, a grimy bus, we imagine, that takes her to her trash- and raccoon-filled home where she eats quivery things out of jars. *Hold me close, Bunny. Can you hold me close? Closer?* We cannot hold each other close enough somehow, even though we can't breathe because of how tightly, how fiercely we are hanging on to each other, but it still feels like we are not holding anything. We miss something somehow. Like we could hug and hug and hug until our ribs crack and our hearts burst and our lungs collapse and our arms break off and still. We'd still be hugging air. No body.²⁷

The prose in this excerpt has taken on a hysterical quality. Samantha, in being consumed by the abject, has lost her regulation of self. This is demonstrated by the narration abruptly shifting from first-person (as it was for the first half of the book), to first-person plural—a concrete indication of the disintegration of Samantha's identity and subsequent incorporation into the abject. Such a move is a bold one on Awad's part as this section crescendos in the middle of the novel.

Additionally, the repetition and childlike imagery (references to frozen yogurt, prom, characters from My Little Pony, etc.) juxtaposed with ruminative violence lends the prose the feeling of a macabre nursery rhyme. I, too, am struck by the double entendre of the closing phrase “No body.”²⁸ Evidently, Samantha has forsaken her individual perspective and bodily experience to become amalgamated into the omnipotent “we.” Her mind now floats outside any physical constraints. She has become nobody with no body. She has become incorporated into the seductive power of the abject.

Samantha's incorporation into the cult of the Bunnies is not the only kind of transformation that occurs in the novel. As a sort of initiation ritual before she joins the cult, Samantha learns that the Bunnies' primary goal is to transform animals (bunnies) into men (an ability we learn Samantha is already capable of when it is revealed that she had created Ava from a swan). The Bunnies sexualize their Darlings, as they have named their creations. This is a cruel

²⁷ Mona Awad, *Bunny*. (New York, Penguin Books, 2020), 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

and violent rendering of desire as it calls the Darlings' consent into question. I wonder if the beings that the Bunnies have created, their Darlings, have their own constructs of selfhood and agency; and yet, their sole purpose, as asserted by the Bunnies, is to serve the girls romantically and sexually (though they are never quite successful in their latter goal). This dynamic is a subversion of patriarchal conceptions of power in heteronormative relationships wherein the male partner exerts desire and the female partner acts as a passive recipient. This subversion, another kind of transformation, also exists within the realm of abjection—it forces the reader to confront dynamics enforced by an oppressive social order.

It is only through this act of transformation that the Bunnies find the will to own their carnality, their otherwise abject sexual desire. In this ownership they too have access to their violent impulses, butchering their Darlings when they do not adequately meet expectations. Such is the context behind this scene:

A creature comes running out of the bathroom howling. An animal man. Furry skinned. Floppy eared. Still wearing his dark blue suit. There's an ax stuck deep in its furry shoulder, blood gushing terribly from the cleaved flesh. I watch him run shrieking past the rainbow under which I sit screaming. And yet all that comes tumbling out of my mouth is laughter. Laughter like a laughing brook, my waters sparkling in the sun.²⁹

Still, I ruminate on lyricism's potent ability to communicate the horror of this scene. The staccato rhythm induced by the rapid, short sentences—"An animal man. Furry skinned. Floppy eared"—sharply punctuates Samantha's observations.³⁰ I imagine Samantha blinking quickly at the sight of the hideous creature in front of her as if to dispel him from her vision, the thick scent of blood in the air, the grotesque undulation and tortured pain of the Darling, the sound of Samantha's frenzied aria of laughter. The freakish description of the Darling's body mid-transformation is transposed with the gorgeous image of water and light, a striking and unsettling contrast. And

²⁹ Ibid., 117.

³⁰ Ibid.

beside the Darling's cleaved flesh, Samantha's mental state feels as though it is cleaved in two as well. She screams inwardly and yet all she can do is laugh at the horror of her creation. Samantha is confronting the abject here; she begins to embrace the power of its horror by relating it to beauty, rendering the moment as sublime. She is experiencing what Thackara insists, that "the possibility of metamorphosing one's flesh and image—of permeating thresholds—is both intoxicating and anxiety-inducing."³¹ Soon after this scene, Samantha will merge with the Bunnies, becoming swallowed by their abjection, a state which induces both terror and awe.

The Bunnies are forced to confront their own desire, an aspect of their abjection that becomes overt and unavoidable by their Darlings. These beings' transformations are oftentimes botched and grotesque, prompting the Bunnies to bludgeon them with axes. Here, the Bunnies cross the boundary instated by social order, their supposed role as passive recipients in sexual relationships, and transform their innate desire into something tangible, thereby dissolving the repressive selfhood imposed upon them. Even so, the Bunnies experience horror at the sight of the mangled bodies of their Darlings. They scream in terror when confronted with the embodiments of their desire. Though, somehow, they revel in this horror. They still yearn to have sexual encounters with these same bodies. Here, "the feeling of deep dread is... a blade's edge away from erotic desire."³² What could this desire for such repulsive flesh indicate? These characters are both attracted to and repulsed by their Darlings; they are both horrified by and relish in their abjection.

Even so, Samantha ultimately reclaims her selfhood by extricating herself from the Bunnies. She turns away from their abjection, aided by her friend Ava. And yet, throughout the rest of the narrative, Samantha is keenly aware of the Bunnies' allure. She broods on the sense of

³¹ Thackara.

³² Ibid.

belonging she found in their abjection, the corruptive fervor she experienced as a deject.

Samantha's rejection of the Bunnies is made more complicated when one considers that Ava is effectively a figment of Samantha's imagination, as is revealed toward the end of the novel. Such ambiguity begs the question: has Samantha crossed the boundary instated by the abject, back into social order? Or has she inducted herself into a different kind of abjection by crossing another border into pure isolation? In any case, Samantha's horror is an overarching presence throughout the novel, an emotion she only fully embraces once she is a part of the clique of the Bunnies.

I feel such admiration for Awad's ability to communicate these complicated dynamics through her experimental prose. And I appreciate, too, how unbounded Awad's lyricism is from the constraints of a "highbrow" cultural milieu. Awad's stylistic flair brings the lyrical mode directly into our contemporary moment by weaving references to pop culture throughout her musical reverie and by confronting instances of the abject outright. Other writers drawn to lyricism may shy away from mentions of bodily excretions, explicit sexual desire, or gruesome violence. But Awad is not one of these writers. She recognizes the potential for the abject to be a locus of the sublime, a sublimity so aptly conveyed through the beauty of lyricism.

Reading *Bunny* gives me license to relinquish the anxious control I have previously exerted over my characters and narratives, fearful as I was of approaching abjection, of investigating those darker contours of my own mind. This control limited the ability for my stories to manifest themselves as entities which were convincingly speculative or surreal. By allowing my characters and narratives to confront the abject directly, to fully succumb to the power and anxiety of transformation, my instinctual lyricism can finally find its footing, making its way toward more compelling and visceral possibilities.

The entirety of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* by Angela Carter brims with lyrical transformation. Carter's work, often pigeonholed as purple prose for its licentious content and unrestrained musicality, innately lends itself to investigations of the abject because Carter confronts the erotic, the grotesque, and the disgusting with lyrical abandon. In the novel, Dr Hoffman wages a war against reality itself wherein "hardly anything remained the same for more than one second and the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream."³³ Here, reality can be interpreted thematically as equivalent to social order. Through Dr Hoffman's efforts, reality/social order grows murky, indiscernible. And because the technology Dr Hoffman employs to dismantle reality is fueled by individuals' innermost, secret desires, the abject rises to supplant the power vacuum left by the eradication of social order. Any otherwise abject desire, even if exploitative, integrates into the characters' conscious experiences. As a result, much of the abjection explored in the narrative relates to sexual desire, violence, and the nefarious ways the two intersect; indeed, sexual violence disconcertingly recurs throughout the novel. The protagonist, Desiderio, is both victim and perpetrator of these abuses, a characteristic reminiscent of Miss Clara in *Jawbone*.

In this world, the ambiguous border of abjection dissolves entirely. All subjects turn into dejects, a point which reminds me of the breadth of abjection explored in *Bunny*. Much horror ensues due to this obliteration. Though not explicitly a horror novel, Carter curates a horrifying atmosphere through her lyrical engagement with both sublime and exploitative abjection. Her lyricism imbues the content with uncanniness, making the reading experience feel simultaneously riveting and dangerous. The dreamlike quality of Carter's prose mirrors the

³³ Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, (New York, Penguin Group, 1994), 18.

sublimity of approaching the abject, of surrendering one's selfhood. The immensely vivid scenic imagery forces the reader to absorb the abjection which is cemented in the page.

By injecting the abject into reality, Dr Hoffman destroys social order. Widely adopted modes of thought and behavior are forsaken. And in this rearrangement of culture and selfhood, all manner of deviant desire is given license to promulgate. When every subject becomes deject—when every individual forcibly surrenders selfhood—horror is inevitable. Carter's lyricism amps up the horror inherent to this experience:

The sense of space was powerfully affected so that sometimes the proportions of buildings and townscapes swelled to enormous, ominous sizes or repeated themselves over and over again in a fretting infinity. But this was much less disturbing than the actual objects which filled these gigantesque perspectives. Often, in the vaulted architraves of railway stations, women in states of pearly, heroic nudity, their hair elaborately coiffed in the stately chignons of the *fin de siècle*, might be seen parading beneath their parasols as serenely as if they had been in the Bois de Boulogne, pausing now and then to stroke, with the judiciously appraising touch of owners of racehorses, the side of steaming engines which did not run any more. And the very birds of the air seemed possessed by devils. Some grew to the size and acquired the temperament of winged jaguars. Fanged sparrows plucked out the eyes of little children. Snarling flocks of starlings swooped down upon some starving wretch picking over a mess of dreams and refuse in a gutter and tore what remained of his flesh from his bones. The pigeons lolloped from illusory pediment to window-ledge like volatile, feathered madmen, chattering vile rhymes and laughing in hoarse, throaty voices, or perched upon chimney stacks shouting quotations from Hegel. But often, in actual mid-air, the birds would forget the techniques and mechanics of the very act of flight and then they fell down, so that every morning dead birds lay in drifts on the pavements like autumn leaves or brown, wind-blown snow. Sometimes the river ran backwards and crazy fish jumped out to flop upon the sidewalks and wriggle around on their bellies for a while until they died, choking for lack of water. It was, too, the heyday of *tromp l'œil* for painted forms took advantage of the liveliness they mimicked. Horses from the pictures of Stubbs in the Municipal Art Gallery neighed, tossed their manes and stepped delicately off their canvases to go to crop the grass in public parks. A plump Bacchus wearing only a few grapes strayed from a Titian into a bar and there instituted Dionysiac revelry. But only a few of the transmutations were lyrical. Frequently, imaginary massacres filled the gutters with blood and, besides, the cumulative psychological effect of all these distortions, combined with the dislocation of everyday life and the hardship and privations we began to suffer, created a deep-seated anxiety and a sense of profound melancholy. It seemed each one of us was trapped in some downward-drooping

convoluted spiral of unreality from which we could never escape. Many committed suicide.³⁴

In this excerpt, unsettling aspects of the fluctuating landscape are described as piercingly beautiful. All that can be imagined or desired becomes tangible. Imagery and metaphors are abundant and unceasingly spill out across the page. Such techniques paint the world in unnerving color. Unlike objects are made uncanny in their comparisons. Gorgeous, nude women meld into their surroundings, eliminating their selfhood from the boundary of the exterior world. Everything acts against its prescribed nature: birds sing with human inflection, inflict grotesque violence, and possess mammalian features like fangs; the river reverses its established course, defying the very bounds of nature; and the subjects of paintings come alive to exert their will on their surroundings. This disorientation results in maiming and death, frightening consequences which are carefully woven through the musical block of text. Words with meanings that possess such ugliness, like “wretch... vile... massacres... [and] blood” are made alarmingly beautiful in their rhythmic contribution.³⁵ As soon as these consequences are mentioned, they disappear through the next sentence, as if they are expected. Oscillation between protracted sentences and short, cutting lines creates a rhythm that pushes and pulls the reader through this experiential loss of selfhood, of a descension into the abject. The reader is forced to bathe in the discomfort of a world where nothing is what it seems. Indeed, the ornate language characterizes these descriptions as simultaneously divine and frightening, horrible and sublime.

There is no delineating oneself from the abject in such a world. Every wild and/or taboo possibility transpires. The psychological fallout in such an environment where one cannot distinguish oneself from the abject is insurmountable. Despite the sublimity accessible in this

³⁴ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁵ Ibid.

experience—evidenced by Carter’s voluptuary lyrical beauty—those who forcibly surrender their selfhoods cannot stand the dissolution of social order. They are completely absorbed in their disorientation and horror; they choose to take their own lives. This revelation is particularly unsettling as the concise three-worded statement “many committed suicide” follows Desiderio’s longwinded and lyrical musings about the sublimity in the dismantling of reality.³⁶ This stark contrast exemplifies the paradoxical horror and beauty to be found in the abject.

The protagonist, Desiderio, is an agent for the Determination Police, a bureaucratic organization tasked with regulating the influx of abjection. Their purpose feels rather parodic of oppressive social orders, especially when they issue commands like “any thing or person seen to diverge significantly from it or his own known identity is committing an offence and may be apprehended and tested.”³⁷ The Determination Police predetermine individuals’ identities, thereby stripping them of agency. Dr Hoffman’s war on reality, in contrast, appears liberating. Yet, Desiderio is sent on a mission to terminate Dr Hoffman in hopes that reality may be restored.

Strangely, Desiderio is one of the few individuals who clings onto a sense of subjecthood through the dissolution of reality. He acknowledges feeling out of place in the previous social order, perhaps indicating that he had already constructed a sense of self outside those constraints. Still, abjection’s many temptations ensnare Desiderio, especially when his desires incarnate as a lover, Albertina, the child of Dr Hoffman. Albertina rarely retains the same shape or form; she/he/they are a character constantly in a state of transformation, altering their behavior and appearance to match Desiderio’s innermost, fluid desires. Though primarily referred to with feminine pronouns throughout the novel, Albertina still relinquishes any obligation to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 63.

performative gendered distinctions by embracing an expressive fluidity, allowing them to assume multiple pronouns throughout the text. Indeed, Albertina addresses this continuous transmutation by acknowledging to Desiderio that “all the time you have known me, I’ve been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire.”³⁸ Here, I wonder if Desiderio’s ability to maintain selfhood through the loss of reality relates to a queer positionality.

By the terms of the Determination Police, Desiderio exists outside his prescribed role. In a heteronormative social order, his experience of queer desire already relegates him to the role of deject; the system represses his desire. Yet, Desiderio straddles the boundary of abjection, choosing to work on the side of an oppressive social order by aligning with the Determination Police. It is solely in Desiderio’s desire for Albertina, an individual who’s very being transmutes through time, that he can recognize the fluidity of his identity, an identity which asks him to recognize and accept his abjection. Through Dr Hoffman’s attacks on reality, Desiderio’s desire for Albertina is normalized and, even, encouraged.

Desiderio is frightened by the prospect of embracing his abjection. In choosing to become intimate with Albertina, in crossing the threshold entirely into the abject, he must first forsake the selfhood that has been thrust upon him, turning his back on a social order with which he is well acquainted. Even so, he is very much aware of the sublimity in his abjection. This is evidenced through his first physical encounter with Albertina:

I took her in my arms. We were exactly the same height and the arches of our bosoms met with a sonorous clang. A terrible cry from the Count’s whore did not interrupt our first embrace. The earth turned on the pivot of her mouth. The sense of seraphic immanence which had afflicted me in the city was now fulfilled. Her arms clasped my neck and her belly pressed against my nakedness as if striving to transcend the mortal flaw that divided us and so effect a total, visceral mingling, binding us forever, so that the same blood would flow within us both and our nerves would knit and our skins melt and fuse in the force of the electricity we generated between us.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 204.

³⁹ Ibid., 136.

Desiderio recognizes Albertina as his equal in this moment, as someone blissfully attuned to the inner workings of his heart. Albertina's heart rests at the same height as his, a heart which when in contact with Desiderio's body makes sweet music, a "sonorous clang."⁴⁰ Carter's word choice here—of sonorous—is intentional. It implies a richness and deepness which asserts itself with urgency. Yet, the clash of soft and hard sounds—the "s" and "c"—is an interesting contrast, perhaps signaling the disconnect which Desiderio and Albertina will later experience in their relationship. Still, Desiderio cannot ignore such resonance. The line "the earth turned on the pivot of her mouth" is particularly poignant.⁴¹ From Albertina's mouth comes truth. Her words teach Desiderio much about the nature of desire throughout the entirety of the novel. And her very being is sublime, awe-inspiring. Desiderio questions his role with the Determination Police due to absorbing Albertina's ample knowledge; his whole world is grounded by her gravity. Albertina is his axis. Their love is so spellbinding that their bodies seek to meld into one another, to become of one flesh so they will never be separated. Their conjoining is angelic—"seraphic"—born from a heavenly source, thereby construed as sublime, despite its abjection, its deviation from the norms constructed by social order.⁴² Moreover, the final sentence of this excerpt exhibits lyrical time by extending the moment of their flesh meeting. Through the strategic use of multiple commas and the liberal implementation of the conjunction "and," Carter illustrates time as a flexible thing, able to stretch alongside the intensity of a single moment.

This passion between Desiderio and Albertina is gorgeous and can manipulate time itself; and yet, Desiderio ultimately rejects Albertina, his abject desires. He executes his mission

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

assigned by the Determination Police by killing both Albertina and Dr Hoffman. His regret is clear from the very first page of the novel as he dedicates the whole story to Albertina:

I, Desiderio, dedicate all my memories
to
Albertina Hoffman
with my insatiable tears.⁴³

His pain in rejecting his abjection, of renouncing empowerment and sublimity, is all-consuming. At the end of novel, Desiderio says, “I knew I was condemned to disillusionment in perpetuity. My punishment had been my crime.”⁴⁴ His memory is forever soaked in the knowledge that he turned away from a new sense of self with his lover, Albertina. Instead, Desiderio is burdened with killing Albertina and with his choice of returning to a social order which strips him of the potential to embrace his true self.

In this analysis, it is difficult not to sympathize with Dr Hoffman’s goals in attacking reality. Dr Hoffman’s agenda centers on the idea that “when the sensual world unconditionally surrenders to the intermittency of mutability, man will be freed in perpetuity from the tyranny of a single present.”⁴⁵ Desiderio conforms to this singularity instead of embracing the possibilities otherwise available to him, something that reminds me of Samantha from *Bunny*. Both Desiderio and Samantha sampled their abjection and nevertheless rejected it. If Desiderio had chosen to become intimate with Albertina, thereby fueling Dr Hoffman’s technology to its full capacity, could he have attained the sublime empowerment we have gleaned from Annelise in *Jawbone* and the biologist in *Annihilation*?

I fear that this conclusion is overly simplistic when considering the differences between both Dr Hoffman’s goals and the previous regime of reality/social order. In the end, both have

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

the potential to inflict tyrannical methods of control. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, reality/social order forcibly prescribes identity, a process which induces repression and pain, such as we have seen with Desiderio and his rejection of his queerness. Yet, in a world framed entirely by abjection, such as Dr Hoffman's world fueled purely by desire, exploitative abjection has ample space to thrive, thereby potentially supplanting the sublime. As previously stated, sexual violence is a recurring theme throughout the novel; Carter toys with both exploitative and sublime abjection.

Sexual violence is rooted in the perverse desire for power, to exploit. Here, I am reminded once again of Miss Clara in *Jawbone*. The boundary of the abject is sometimes a necessary construction, one which can protect individuals from exploitative harm. Yet, just as the boundary of abjection is ambiguous and permeable, so must our understanding of abjection itself must be. Not all that is abject is exploitative; that which rebels against social order can be sublime. In my work, I seek to explore this subject matter with delicate nuance and with the understanding that the abject itself possesses its own boundaries and depth. I hope never to conflate sublimity with exploitation; I hope to wield my lyricism as a tool to investigate the sublime instances of abjection, the many ways in which the abject can be a site of possibility and empowerment. I am so inspired by the beauty of Carter's language, of her ability to create scenes that induce both horror and awe. I want to produce a similar response in my readers—I want their consciousnesses to brush against that ambiguous border which grips their selfhoods on one side and dangles transcendence on the other; I want to make their hearts race in fear while they sigh at the language's lyrical beauty. I want my work to mimic the intense bodily high achieved through the dissolution of selfhood. I want to entrench my readers in the sublime horror of approaching the abject.

As a result of my immense privilege, I had the opportunity to live and work in Spain when I was 23. Enticed by grand ideas of adventure, made shinier by five years spent in my college's small town, I seized the chance. Once there, though, I ignored the fears that overlayed my life. I thought that if I did not face them, then they would disappear like sweet mirages, somehow made tender by distance and memory.

By day, I taught English to children and struggled with my bumbling Spanish. Evenings were spent subsumed in conflict, despite living alone and making a few choice friends. Verbal spars with my long-distance partner were frequent and left me emotionally bruised. And during the weekends, he disappeared on benders and I sat in my isolation, as if in a fugue. After months of this mounting tension and a violation of trust in my absence, I broke things off. I became unmoored, living alone in a foreign country, suddenly confronted with the brittle basis of my selfhood, of all the many things I had forcibly pushed down.

My mind was a well of thick distress as I processed my memories from that relationship. I was trapped in recollections of being jolted awake in dark rooms by greedy and coercive hands. I remembered sour body heat. I remembered my gradual silence as I was taken over. I remember thinking that it was something I could endure. And soon, I thought of childhood, too, of a religion which fostered the hateful relationship I developed with my body, with my desire. I made connections where before the pathways had been murky, untrodden. And instead of reflecting on these connections as a mode for understanding or as an opportunity to nurture my heart, I blamed myself. I drowned in these echoes, these landmines which detonated on their own accord at any time of day, leaving me buried in the shrapnel of my recollections. My body turned solely to a clumsy mass of meat, made animate only by the compulsion to survive.

Most days and evenings were spent by myself and in that potent loneliness my thoughts rattled around in my skull until their reverberations were so piercing that I collapsed into a chattering anxiety. I was a hostage to my spiraling mind. Some days, when I entered the apartment after work, I swore I could hear each pump of blood as it traveled through my body. I felt it in the quivering of my lips, in the flinching of my eyelids. My veins shivered. My stomach yawned, hollow. I stripped out of my clothes and stretched out on the ground by the front door to feel its chill against my back, turning to a mound of preserved flesh as the minutes ticked by. I fermented in my senselessness. *I trust no one*, I thought, though I refused to admit that I trusted least of all myself.

I imagined lucid apparitions around each corner of the apartment. They were looming figures with wide-open, unblinking eyes that watched over me with foaming maws. Their bleak faces were casted from the visages of past and current loved ones, their features rendered waxen and misshapen like devilish puppets. Their menacing likenesses were proof, to me, of a pervasive dishonesty, of my own creeping paranoia. I met the abject contents of my body: its boundless tears and slippery mucus and hot sweat and I felt everything so keenly it was as though I turned animal, stripped entirely of all my pretenses. My cheeks blazed with heat; my eyes were roped with thick, red veins. I was slick, made viscous in the pool of my disorientation.

I picked apart details of the repressed past, turning the memories into broken compasses. My mind's appetite was insatiable; it devoured my selfhood and found it so utterly lacking that I became exhausted. I shied away from myself, disgusted by my profound lack of self-worth, wearied by the undercurrents of conformity, all of it simmering in my isolation. My body was a leaking ship that carried me through the river of time. My mind was its weary and apathetic passenger, staring into the bottomless water, wondering how it would feel to dive in, to sink.

Even so, sparks flared, moments which transcended from bodily constriction, projecting my mind instead into exaltation. One evening, as I sat frozen on the couch, I gazed out the window. My eyes glazed over the orange and pink hue of sunset, the way it dunked into the pure endlessness of the windy sea. It was as though I morphed into the colors, made into a pale streak of paint across the sky, entirely subsumed by its brilliance. Another, I walked to the end of the beach where the boardwalk faltered, turning instead to crumbled concrete and clustered tide pools, little worlds filled with curious life. I sank to my haunches and stared at their movement: the bubbles which rose to the surface of the shallow water like so many warm greetings; the sleek sheen of shells; a crab's spindly eyes which wobbled like jelly in its sockets. Another, I went to work and spoke a different tongue with children who giggled at my boorish accent and who felt every second with such wondrous intensity. They sang and cried and sprinted until they turned into boneless puddles. They possessed each moment with such brazen solemnity.

During these sparks, I peeked my head over my own sulking. I came to know that my memories did not own this precious body, could not subdue this thirsty soul. And somehow, as time unwound, I grew familiar with my fear and with the new self that emerged in its place; someone who was both me and wasn't, someone who was more seasoned and defined.

Toward the end of my time in Spain, there was a festival, *la Noche de San Juan*. People littered the beach to light bonfires and barbeque dripping hunks of meat, slathering the sand with their raucous laughter. By then, I had grown familiar with a few people; I socialized with a crisper tongue. I chewed and swallowed and felt the warmth of fresh food in my belly. I sat on a damp towel and coated my feet with the gentle scrape of damp sand. The evening sea breeze lapped at my flushed cheeks. Music blasted from countless palm-sized portable speakers, the audio made tinny from the air's moisture. The basslines thumped in a dissonant chorus until it

felt as though my blood flowed only to that rhythm. It had been months since I felt so firmly rooted in my body, this precious thing. With the others, I ran into the sea's darkness, crashing under the tumult of my legs and a quick wave. The water was a bright kind of cold. Goosebumps budded up on my skin. My insides prickled and I breathed in with a wild rush.

The evening was coming to a close. Above me, fireworks exploded in dazzling color. The scene reflected on the water until it felt as though I was bathing in this ecstasy composed by the firmament. I was blissfully untethered, now floating, intimate with the sky. Before me, I saw many paths and many selves, all of them checkered and lithe, scarred yet gleaming. My fear ignited itself, turning instead to a searing buzz that surged through me. I treaded in the water and let it consume me. My very being vibrated in its flux.

There, I knew. I carry it with me through each day, like a secret talisman in my pocket. The contours of my selfhood are for me to discern. My memories, whispering to me as they still do sometimes, cannot own this resilient body, will not quell this curious mind. It is not in me to yield to narrow constraints. I exist alongside the abject; the abject exists inside me. It is what makes me feel alive.

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