THE GOOEY, THE BLOODY, AND JUST PLAIN GROSS: EXPLORING ART AND VISUAL CULTURE WITH AN ABJECR VISUAL METHODOLOGY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art Education in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016

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This doctoral study concerns itself with the diverse and abundant images of disgust in fine art and popular visual culture. My study is grounded in a deep understanding of disgust and the psychoanalytic theory of the abject as developed by Julia Kristeva and modified by later scholars like Chanter and Butler. However, these scholars do not concern themselves specifically with the arena of the visual. To address this lack, I have developed an abject visual methodology. This abject visual methodology is predicated on other methodological works, like Sandoval’s *Methodology of the oppressed*, and it is designed specifically to elucidate the intricate intersections of material, process, subject, narrative and viewership in application to art which disgusts. I use my abject visual methodology to create a taxonomy of abject art, which provides a broad survey of the types of disgusting or psychological uncomfortable images found in the art world. This taxonomy also allows for a demonstration of my abject visual methodology as a tool of inquiry and analysis. Finally, I argue for the relevance of both abject art and an abject visual methodology in art education, a discipline that in general avoids the controversial. Abject art can lead to a fruitful and generative revolt that allows not only for personal expression but the construction of deep empathetic connections and the ability to manage critical thinking.
DEDICATION

To my Mom, Terri Lynn Livingston,

for all the late night coffee runs, editing sessions, and general support.

You have been saying I was almost there for years, now it’s finally true.

I love you.

And to Molly McGee and Cosette Annabella,

who have been the best graduate school counselors on four legs. You sat on my feet the entire time I wrote this and for that you deserve all the snausages you can handle.
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1.0: Welcome to the Gooey, the Bloody and the Just Plain Gross

1.01 I Can Haz Abject Trading Cards, Plz?: Why the Abject Sings to Me

The abject first came to my attention circa 1989. I had no idea at the age of 7 what sociological and psychoanalytic systems were. However, I did have in my possession a newly purchased package of Garbage Pail Kids (Figure 1). For those who were not young consumers in the 80s, Garbage Pail Kids were the baseball cards of the abject. These cards, created by Art Spiegelman of *Maus* graphic novel fame, were quite simply vile and they featured demented spoofs of Cabbage Patch Kids dolls. These adorable chubby-cheeked children, crowned with Shirley Temple curls sipped ice tea from toilets and stuffed themselves with dinner plates of gooey eyeballs, saliva dripping from their waiting mouths (Figure 1). These feral cherubim stripped off their skin to reveal bloody muscles and brushed their teeth with fresh-squeezed pimple pus.

My father had purchased, at my eager request, a pack of the cards for me from a local convenience store. My mother was repulsed (which at that age was a plus), wrinkling her nose at the card deck. Why I wanted these cards so badly is hazy, but I imagine a fellow classmate had sung their praises. Or perhaps I had noticed an advertisement for them in the back of a comic book alongside an ad for “real” x-ray glasses and toy flying saucers. The cards appealed through their astute ability to mock the insipid and saccharine Cabbage Patch dolls, the type of dolls that my grandmother loved and wanted her little granddaughter to love too.¹ These cards were more than just a

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¹ I must admit, her desire for this was never satisfied, as this dissertation will surely confirm.
² For more on Pop Surrealism see Jordan, 2005.
³ For more on “The Final Girl” phenomenon in horror movies, see Clover, 1993.
⁴ For more on the abject in CSI, see Pierson, 2010.
sarcastic recasting of the immensely popular Cabbage Patch Kids, they were undeniably and shockingly gross.

![Garbage Pail Kids](image)

Figure 1. Garbage Pail Kids, *Larry Lo Mein*

It wasn’t until high school that I found any visuals that shook me in the same way the images of Garbage Pail Kids had through their potent combination of repellence and desirability. I was 17 and looking through a contemporary art book when I encountered
the work of Kiki Smith. Instantly, her work took me back to that childhood moment of wanting to look and wanting to turn away that I had experienced with Garbage Pail Kids. Smith’s *Untitled (Train)* (1993) (Figure 2) was a challenge to regard, but one I could not quite reject. In the image, a white female figure bent slightly at the waist and strands of red beads trailed out from her crotch, spilling across the floor behind her. The figure was beautiful, like a Greek marble statue, as were the sparkling red beads. However, the image of menstruation on display was almost more than my naïve sensibilities could take. It was gross, it was shocking and my desire to look made me uncomfortable.

Menstruation was a private act, something no 17-year-old girl likes to be reminded of, let alone stare at in a public space. The paintings I was shown in my high school art class were beautiful, the sculptures graceful and technically virtuosic. You were meant to enjoy those works. Finding pleasure in *Untitled (Train)* seemed impossible at first, although there was something fascinating or perhaps compelling about her work. I kept going back to those pages, to all of Smith’s disgusting but yet strangely beautiful work.

Years later in art school, I discovered pop surrealism, a genre full of disgusting and compelling images. Pop surrealism was reminiscent of the beloved toys and Garbage Pail Kids of my youth, not the high art images taped to the art room walls or even the slides in my art history lectures. This new genre was simultaneously arresting and familiar, disconcerting and nostalgic, and the artists were highly skilled, affording a great attention to detail. Their work appealed to my love of representational art but differed in their concentration on more macabre subject matter: cartoon characters covered in blood, little girls who looked like dolls and other uncanny concoctions. The content was

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2 For more on Pop Surrealism see Jordan, 2005.
frequently gross and at times strangely comical, often made more palatable by their sleek and polished finish.

![Figure 2. Smith, Untitled (Train) (1993)](image)

The more I looked, the more filth I saw. Disgust was everywhere: on movie screens, television, magazines and more. Films were filled with blood and gore and yet you couldn’t turn away from the “final girl” desperately running from the axe wielding maniac. Television was similarly full of violence, but it also featured gratuitous autopsy scenes that took the viewer into the victim’s dead body, following the bullet as it pierced flesh and organs. This is not to mention the renewed fascination with that most infamous horror movie icon: the zombie, which proliferates in video games like Left 4 Dead, Dead Rising, Call of Duty: Black Ops, appears in films like the Resident Evil franchise (2002)

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3 For more on “The Final Girl” phenomenon in horror movies, see Clover, 1993.
4 For more on the abject in CSI, see Pierson, 2010.
and *28 Days Later* (2002), and television’s hugely popular adaptation of *The Walking Dead* graphic novel (Kirkman, 2006) coming soon after. Walking through the aisles of the book stores there were magazines advertising extreme tattooing, a glimpse into the world of Hollywood monsters and special effects and publications like Juxtapoz and Hi-Fructose that were devoted to Pop Surrealist art, graffiti and urban fashion (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Example of Pop Surrealism, Ryden, *The Birth* (1994).

And the Internet was home to everything one could possibly imagine! Extreme body modification websites feature penile bi-furcation, clitoral piercing and scarification, a plethora of sub-cultural pornography from hentai to tub girls. This is not to mention websites like Morbid Anatomy (Ebenstein, 2014) devoted to anatomical curiosities and

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7 hentai- animated pornography popular in Japan, which often features tentacles.
8 an internet phenomenon which features women in bathtubs spraying anal fluids and then playing in them (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tubgirl)
medical history like an online version of the Mütter Museum, or Rotten.com, which boasts an amazing fifteen million hits a day and houses a collection of disgusting yet fascinating mangled and contorted images of the human body, dead from any number of improbable causes. These images, whether in print or on screen, are absolutely disgusting and horrifying. Yet I, like many others, are strangely compelled to look.

This conflict between being repelled and being lured in by these images has compelled me towards the theoretical realm of abjection and disgust. I have invested time and energy in these ideas because I believe they can help explicate the complex attraction and repulsion, lure and loathing imbedded in many visuals, from the Garbage Pail Kids who play with excrement to Smith’s sculptures that drip iconographic menstrual blood. These ideas have the potential to aid in the exploration of these images in a way that can unseat the knee-jerk impulse to ignore, denigrate, or reject them. I may not have reacted in the ‘typical’ manner to unsavory images, but I have seen my mother, grandmother, classmates and professors respond in the immediate and ‘conventional’ way to these images, turning away in disgust and abjection. My own interest in these works elicits their strong disdain and judgmental retorts, “That’s what you like? But it’s so … gross. Why would you look at that?” or “It’s dark—I don’t believe in looking at dark and yucky things.” And then there is the ever-present but unspoken question, “What is wrong with you? If these images gross me out and make me feel uncomfortable, something must be wrong with you if you like to look at them.” The literature of the abject and disgust can aid in the exploration of these images and psychoanalysis can explain both the average

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9 Frequently Asked Question section of Rotten.com (http://www.rotten.com/FAQ/)
viewer’s reaction to these works and my own very different reaction while throwing light on the rising popularity of these images.

However, as I explored the abject both theoretically and in the realm of visuals, I discovered there was no text that concretely linked the theoretical to the visual. There were authors who used the abject to talk about art, but often it was shorthand for disgust and didn’t delve deeply into how the works were abject, or what that really meant beyond appearing gross. This was particularly true of more contemporary reconfigurations of the abject, which politicized the abject as a tool for both understanding the mechanics of oppression and possibly circumventing them. No one was linking these possibly liberatory ideas to the production of disgusting images, nor was anyone refuting these images as having somehow lost their abject and potential radical status. In short, no one seemed to be talking in depth about disgusting images. The abject seemed to apply to substances and social oppression, not the images upon which these social logics were made visible. With a lack of an abject visual methodology, I couldn’t even begin to study the images I was interested in, like Pop Surrealism and the abject body in popular culture, without first rectifying this gap in the literature through the creation of just such a methodology.

1.02 Dirt Doesn’t Exist, but Disgust Sure Does

With disgust and the abject in mind, my project focuses on deep philosophical matter, matter which has engaged me and other scholars and artists in many hours of thought and concentration: shit, blood, urine and pus. Shit may seem to be an odd or at least distasteful topic for higher educational inquiry. The gleaming white tower of academia may seem incongruous with excrement. However, since the rise of
postmodernity, the demolishing of hierarchies and the rise of the lowbrow, shit has become fair game and with good reason. It and numerous other substances make us turn away in disgust; these materials incite shame; they are the stuff that we label unclean. These corporeal visages of filth structure our experience of the world, separating what is clean and good from that which is defiled, degraded, dirty and bad (Douglas, 1966/2000). The role these substances play in ordering our world seems enough to warrant their study. My project deals with getting underneath the “eww” response engendered by these images to see what makes them both repulsive and fascinating.

Understanding disgust is central to understanding these images and exploring their impact and popularity. I am using *disgust* to describe things that elicit or appear as if they would elicit a certain affective or emotional response, one of repulsion. Miller (1997), author of *The Anatomy of Disgust*, explains that disgust “is a serious [emotion], implicating our moral sensibility, love, politics and our sense of self” (p. x). Disgust, for my purposes, encompasses both the psychic and the physical repulsion experienced toward certain materials, particularly materials that cross categories and confuse borders. As Douglas (1966/2000) notes, “Our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions” (p. 8). It is this ordering system that our disgust responses are based upon; thus, our disgust creates and explicates the system all at once. Disgust creates the cognitive dissonance that defines the abject.

The abject is similarly embodied in filthy and sordid materials. Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as substances that were once a part of the body but are no longer: urine, blood, tears, shit, vomit, snot. These now “othered” substances elicit repulsion and anxiety. They create a crisis of cognitive dissonance and shifted consciousness in the
viewer that is characteristic of the abject. The abject is also housed in the corpse and in rot, decay and vivisection.

Many images, especially in contemporary visual culture, deploy a kind of aesthetics of disgust, a desire for and interest in those things that look like they would cause or that do cause feelings of repulsion and unease. This aesthetics of disgust is found in high and low forms, in commercial and fine art. The abject provides an entryway into the exploration of the aesthetics of disgust and why we like things that also repulse us. However, I found that the specifics of how the abject is applicable to images had not been concretely theorized or explained in an approachable and comprehensive manner.

The effect of the abject is more complex, more individualized, more long-lasting than disgust alone and is paired with a fascination and an attraction. Some have argued that there is attraction in disgust (e.g. Miller, 1997); however, I think that this is inaccurate and that what they are describing has slipped over into the realm of the abject. I say this because scholars of the abject try to understand how shit can be both a joke and a crisis, in turn exciting pleasurable laughter followed by nausea. Scholars of disgust seem to ignore where and why disgust is just disgusting versus when disgust joins with allure. The psychological shift that occurs from a brush with the abject, or an image of the abject, is more impactful than just disgust because it is accompanied by attraction or compulsion, a desire to look and to interact. This attachment to a disgusting thing actually creates a new classification system, something not quite subject (human), but more than object (a thing), the abject.

The benefits of the abject lie in its potential to radically shift viewers’ subjectivity and to reverse hierarchies of denigration as applied to marginal groups (Butler, 1993;
Hook, 2006). While disgust and the abject may seem straightforward when explained as above, their varying definitions, multiple uses and characteristic ambiguity make the terms more complex and often contentious. For example, in contemporary art the abject is discussed on a regular basis, but it stands in for disgust and is often stripped of its ability to shift or strip subjectivity, its fluid ambiguity, its emphasis on permeable borders and its political uses (Butler, 1993; Houser, Jones, Taylor & Ben-Levi, 1993; Hook, 2006). For example, Kaufman (1998) states that Kiki Smith’s work is abject, but never goes into exactly how it is abject, or what that means in the context of Smith’s work. In my dissertation, I explore the abject and disgust through an in-depth study of the literature surrounding these ideas and pull from scholarship a way to approach dissonant visuals that both are meant to be looked at and seem to ask us to turn away, exploring how and why this paradox works.

1.03 Getting to the Gory Core: Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1) What insight into dissonant cultural artifacts\textsuperscript{10} can be gained by focusing on disgust and the abject as entryways into paradoxically appealing and revolting productions? I propose that problematic modernist hierarchies that reify beauty and malign disgusting images are at the heart of this question and can be challenged through the use of a theory of the abject.

\textsuperscript{10} I use this term because of its broadness as it is a term that originates in the social sciences and refers to anything that was made by humans and demonstrates the creator’s culture (Ezell & O’Keeffe, 1995).
2) What would an abject visual methodology be? This question I frame because of the ambiguous and often synonymous use of the terms abject and disgust and by a lack of literature that discusses disgust and the abject in visual art in a nuanced and specific way.

1.04 Other Necessary Veins: Subquestions

My supporting questions, or subquestions, are as follows:

• What are the visual characteristics of disgust and the abject?
• Where and how is the abject used in art and contemporary popular visual culture sites\textsuperscript{11}?
• Why is the abject both revolting and alluring?
• How might the abject intersect with political, social, or economic critiques?

1.05 Disgusting, but Not for Me: Delimitations

Within my study I focus on abject objects themselves, my own interaction with them and in some cases the intentions and interests of the artists. However, during the course of my research I found many interesting visual sites, theoretical veins, and methodological tools, which could have been employed within an exploration of disgusting and abject images, but are outside the purview of this study. For example,

\textsuperscript{11} I will be using the term art and visual culture, or popular visual culture, throughout this project to refer to the division between the two. Visual culture refers to a broader category that includes art as an institution, as well as popular visuals from media, advertising, and broader material culture. Art as an institution refers to the museums, galleries, and academic centers that determine the conditions of the art world. One of the ways in which visual culture acts as an umbrella term that covers more than artistic institutions is the expansion of visual culture to include the sensorial and a whole range of information that is received from multi-media experiences like those of theme parks (Duncum, 2005; 2004). While the use of visual in visual culture may seem at odds with the sensorial, our world is still occulocentric making vision the sense that dominates our experiences (Mirzoff, 2009; 2012, Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). I refer to both art and visual culture to note that the phenomenon I am discussing, usually disgust and the abject, occurs both in institutional art settings as well as in the broader arena of visual culture, demonstrating an institutional, market, and popular interest in filth.
there are a multitude of visual sites that could have been used to demonstrate the role of
disgust and the abject in art and popular visual culture, including other art works (Houser
et al., 1993), but also children’s toys like Bratz dolls (Duncum, 2007) with their
grotesque physical proportions, media sites like *Jackass* (Brayton, 2007), comics and
graphic novels (Zolkover, 2008) and cemeteries (Chadha, 2006), to name a few.

Other methodologies could have been used to address both my sites of study and
my research questions. For example, Media Studies often focuses on audience reception
studies, especially as they pertain to movies and television (Staiger, 2005). Issues
pertaining to reception and the audience could have been used to investigate who looks at
disgusting images, why some people enjoy them while others simply reject them. This is
an area that I would be interested in developing in the future. However, anything
concerning audience in this study is cast in broad statements based on data from Internet
art and toy blogs or my own personal experience and is not part of a main argument or
used as primary supporting data.

Similarly, relying on Appadurai (1988), one might benefit from looking at the
“secret life” of these objects. This idea comes from art history, museum studies and
anthropology and could be applied to abject art, examining who looks at these images,
who buys and owns these objects, where demographically and geographically the objects
are found. Unlike audience studies, this approach foregrounds the object—a type of
biography of things. However, this is also outside the purview of this study, since I focus
on the “work” these objects do, the impact they have on the viewer, not the life of the
objects themselves.
Contemporary art and visual culture could be understood using theoretical structures outside of the abject. Ideas used to approach contemporary art are seemingly limitless and others have approached pop surrealism in particular through a history of comics (Klein, Schaffner, & Nahas, 1999), a more straightforward continuation of surrealism (Jordan, 2005), and a combination of fine art with a commercial design oriented aesthetic (Anderson, 2004). However, in each of these approaches the authors continually discuss the transgression of borders, ambiguity and bodily substances while missing the fact that their ideas synchronize with those of the abject and disgust, ignoring the theoretical elephant in the room. With these inadequacies in mind, my project fills in gaps opened up by other scholars.

Trauma studies and memory studies could be used to approach abject art, since both are often attuned toward violent or painful imagery. Freud sees trauma as a wound to the mind and following this trajectory, trauma studies “explore[s] the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience” (Caruth, 1996, p. 22). Caruth’s work is pivotal to this new theoretical field emerging from literary studies. Her and others’ work attempts to understand the experience of war and genocide, as well as persistent racism and fear, through artistic representations of these events: survivor literature, fictional books on these types of events and artworks that memorialize these events or take them as their subject (Kleeblatt, 2002). Even Adorno’s proclamation in 1962 that “it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz” (as quoted in Kaplan, 2007, p. 21) and the field of Holocaust or memory studies surrounding this statement, is something I have pursued during the course of this study, as it deals
with horror and catastrophe. However, Adorno’s point, as Kaplan (2007) notes, is about the fear of pleasure in the face of horror,

for while I agree with Adorno that there is something ethically wrong with finding pleasure in the representations of the pain of others, the works I examine here offer pleasure that derives not from the pain of others but from the complexity of artistic representations that invite us to think critically about the Nazi genocide.

(p. 21)

Kaplan’s work in studying the aesthetics of catastrophe, specifically how these events are memorialized in artwork, as well as Butler’s (2009) work on how war is framed culturally, also could be a way to approach these sites since they share a commonality of horror and disgust, violence and bloodshed. Similarly, I have considered Brown’s “Wounded Attachments” (1993) because many of the images that I study feature the wounded, broken, or truncated body that becomes the subject of identity formation and politicization in Brown’s work. I have also looked at Scarry’s The Body in Pain (1987). However, in the course of these investigations, I have found these works to be misaligned with my own. While I respond strongly to them and can even envision some of them being applied to some of the sites of this study, the works mentioned above deal with real bodies, either literally or representationally. The sites I am studying may reference the body, even depict the body, but do not stand in for real victimized bodies. Even when the objects of study are fictional—like Time’s Arrow by Amis (1991), about a fictional Holocaust doctor—they represent a specific reality that my own sites do not. Rather, my objects of study depict fantasies. I have chosen not to emphasize these materials because of their application to real tragedies.
Another vein of research that could be applicable here, but is beyond the purview of this dissertation, is the use of the theory of Terror Management. First developed by Ernest Becker in his book *The Denial of Death* (1973/1997), Terror Management Theory, TMT, argues that much of our existence as human beings is devoted to repressing, refusing and conquering our fear of death. It is our terror over our eventual demise and the rot and annihilation that ensues that has lead to civilizations being formed, the creation of religion and the production of great art. This work appears very close to Kristeva’s abject, particularly in regards to an emphasis on death and the corpse. However, TMT lacks the emphasis on psychoanalysis and sees death as the main motivator of all terror. Kristeva’s interest in death is about disintegration and a destabilization of the self, which can happen in instances other than death, like serious illness, or even codependent maternal relationships where the ego is in jeopardy, but not the actual body.

Similarly, while the grotesque has come up in relation to my study, I have chosen to not focus on it because of its long and very specific history, which was not necessarily explicitly about disgust. While grotesque in common parlance means disgusting, its etymology stems from the Greek use of the word to signify a merger of flora and fauna into monstrous creatures and comes from Greek and Roman decorations (Harpham, 2007). While an exploration of the slippage of the grotesque to mean disgusting might be within the purview of this study, the grotesque in its original use is not pertinent to most of the contemporary art I am looking at, which can be better explained by disgust or abjection.
The current focus on ontology or affect—ways of being versus ways of knowing—has influenced my interest in disgust and the abject; however, this is not at the heart of my inquiry, although it is a supporting theoretical position. Pile (2010) suggests that affect is the quality of life that is beyond cognition, beyond expression and “unable to be brought into representation” (p. 8). While emotions can be named and expressed, that is, they have cognitive and representational elements, affect does not and is implicated primarily through bodily reactions. Affect is noncognitive in the sense that it happens in the body and can be seen in a bodily reaction, before cognition can take place and make sense of the event. Here I refer to Masumi’s (1992) and Sedgwick’s (2002) work.

Similarly Anderson and Smith offer a “general plea for thinking seriously about how ‘the human world is constructed and lived through the emotions’ calling for a fuller programme of work, recognizing the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing, in the broadest sense” (as cited in Pile, 2010, p. 8). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) see affect as an asocial bodily response that is made known in the passage from one state to another, the ongoing process of becoming, that is registered through intensity as an increase and decrease in power. Affect, then, is the body’s ability to disrupt social logic, and create meaning that cuts through social interpretations, confounds logic and scrambles expectations. To Sedgwick, affect offers “a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective, to the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community” (as cited in Hemmings, 2005, p. 554), or a way to address specificities. For many scholars like Sedgwick (2002) affect is political. Influenced by feminist Carol Hanisch’s (1970) now famous argument that the personal is the political, scholars (e.g.,
Sedgwick, 2002) have shown that embodied experiences, like that of sexual desire or racial identity, involve the personal and have larger political ramifications. Moreover, intersubjective affective experiences can be a way to build community and counter political violence through empathy.

While affect is important because of the embodied nature of the abject, cognition or judgement is also important to an abject visual methodology as a way to counter emotion, so that the viewer of the abject is not simply overwhelmed, losing the rational faculties needed to analyze and reflect on the abject experience. Because of this joined need for both emotional and intellectual input, I am influenced by and use aesthetics. However, while I believe an understanding of aesthetics is important to understanding art, particularly contemporary art and postmodernism’s influence on qualitative evaluations of art, my intentions here are not to prove the aesthetic value of these works in a modernist way; nor is aesthetics the theoretical foundations of my project. These works are most certainly not about beauty in a conventional manner. Kant (1790/2009) would be appalled at toys that ooze and sculptures that menstruate. He would deem them unworthy of artistic inquiry. Similarly, many modernist aestheticians would find designer vinyl toys and pop surrealism unworthy of study, as well as the theories of democracy, the power of low brow and the value of disgust, that underwrite these endeavors. My work is steeped in postmodern inquiry and based in the democratic, multivocal, metanarrative oriented contemporary notion of art and culture. While this is a factor in understanding the context of my sites and my own theoretical grounding, demonstrating that these theories and sites are postmodern or exploring their fulfillment of postmodern aesthetics is not the main point of this work.
Another theoretical area that I have steered away from is that of the carnivalesque. According to Hyman and Malbert (2000), the imagery of the carnival “deals with masks and monsters, bottoms and enemas, feasting giants and misshapen birdmen and a hen with fools: fools capped-and-belled, fools hatched from eggs, whole ships crowded with fools, processions of fools” (p. 9). The imagery of the carnival is rife with representations of the body out of bounds, images that stress the base materiality of the body. Shit pours from bared asses, breasts hang pendulously and fat threatens to explode beyond the skin’s container, all in a display of grotesque realism “which elevates the lower stratum above the upper regions of the body; rationality and mental resolve are replaced with bodily fluids and defecation” (p. 63). This sounds like it would be related to the abject and thus be important for my own study, and it is to a certain extent. Kristeva was deeply influenced by Bakhtin (Moi, 1986), particularly his work on linguistics. However, there are two main reasons I am not including the carnivalesque in this study. First, while the works I am looking at may be funny, I do not find them to be uproariously so. Humor may be at work, but it is not the humor of carnival, which “invokes a laughter linked to the overturning of authority; it is ‘that peculiar folk humour that has always existed and has never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes’” (Hyman & Malbert, 2000, p. 14). Like its boisterous laughter, the overall nature of carnival is optimistic. Hyman and Malbert (2000) explain that carnival “is authorized transgression, framed by the surrounding order in time and place. When the frame constricts, the crowd may rebel, but the essential impulse of Carnival is positive, regenerative, a seasonal excess of high spirits.” (p. 75). Even when bawdy humor may be active in the images I am studying, I feel it is overshadowed by the uncanny, anxiety and an unjoyous, perhaps compulsive,
impulse to look. The lack of uproarious laughter and joy signals the abject over the carnival. Even when the abject is applied to humor as it is in Limon’s (2000) work, it is uncomfortable, obnoxious and an upheaval of the parts of the self that one wishes to banish, to abject.

Second, I am suspicious of the fact that at the end of carnival, there is no permanent change; rather, carnival is a part of hegemonic control. It is a safety valve that allows for the venting of pent-up desires and aggressions, but in the end life must return to normal. Bakhtin (1984) emphasizes the therapeutic nature of carnival, but Gilchrist and Ravencroft (2009) argue that Bakhtin’s work “reveals a much deeper message about the hegemonic regulatory function performed by the licensing of deviant practices within such festivals” (p. 35).

Hence, I am concerned that carnival is “deployed to maintain and reinforce social order and, thus, [enacts] the discipline of bodies and behaviors” (Gilchrist & Ravencroft, 2009, p. 36). In this way, the carnival displays a correlation to a Gramscian hegemonic social order in that it is “maintained through forms of consent: an active mechanism of domination between rulers and their subordinates in which structures of social and political dominance are maintained through systems of co-optation” (Gramsci, as cited in Gilchrist & Ravencroft, 2009, p. 38). With this in mind, I have, for the most part, avoided the carnivalesque in this work as I feel that disgust and the abject have a more permanently impactful role on both the individual psyche and social systems.

In the end, while there were many options for visual materials to study and ideas that might help address what I was trying to explore, I found that the abject and disgust were most closely aligned with my interests and resonated most with the other ideas I
found regarding my objects of study. Theoretically, disgust and the abject best allowed for an exploration of the paradoxical dynamics of repulsive art that I was trying to understand.

1.06 Outline

This chapter began with my own anxious feelings about strangely treasured childhood objects, namely Garbage Pail Kids. What follows is my attempt to understand my affection for those and other paradoxically disgusting yet appealing objects. It is grounded in the literature of disgust and the abject. My literature review, chapter 2, is focused on those two ideas and the bodies of literature that explain and expand upon them. In terms of methodology, I begin with an overview of the ways in which visuals and art can be conceptualized as disgusting and abject. I begin here because Kristeva (1982) asserts that the abject is best understood in regards to language and writing, something I argue against and while there are articles and even several books that tackle abject art (e.g., Houser et al., 1993; Meagher, 2003; Sandoval-Sanchez, 2005), none of them lays out a topography of the field, a map of how, why and in what ways images are abject in the depth that I do. Also, certain areas of the abject, like its contemporary refigurations to understand structures of oppression, have not been connected to the visual, which is something that my own abject visual methodology addresses by connecting structures of oppression to the visual. Finally, there are elements of the abject that other scholars have not drawn out in depth, particularly the abject’s intersections with the field of Border Studies, which is something that I outline at length in my methodology and connect to visual artists and images.
Having provided an overview of how disgust and the abject function theoretically, I move on in chapter 3 to look at the construction of methodologies in general, with a particular emphasis on Krauss and Bois (2000) formulation of a methodology to best understand formlessness, or informe. Formlessness, while different from the abject, also deals with the transgression of borders and debasement. While Krauss and Bois label their work a guide, not a methodology, they clearly articulate both a body of knowledge, Bataille’s “informe”, and a system to apply that body of knowledge to art, demonstrated in their guide and in their curated exhibition on formlessness. Their work stands as a guide in regards to the construction of a method, as well as a theoretical point of departure as Krauss and Bois argue in favor of the “informe” in place of the abject. Sandoval’s (2000) Methodology of the Oppressed is also considered, as it links methodology, visual analysis and social justice. While there are definite problems with Sandoval’s work, her goals, including implementing social justice, are in line with my own interests.

Following the review of my methodology, chapter 4, my data chapter, outlines my approach to an abject visual methodology. This includes not only a review of some of the methods or techniques to employ when using an abject visual methodology, like the need for context, but it also provides an extended look at different works of art, what aspects of the abject they depict or enact and how to understand or analyze these works with the abject in mind. This chapter acts as a kind of map to abject visual materials primarily in art, but also in popular visual culture. It is also here that I bring in theoretical ideas close to, but outside, the explicit purview of disgust and abjection, like monster theory (Cohen, 1996) and disability studies (McRuer, 2006), to help argue points that are to be found in
my literature review and expand the range of the abject. Moreover, because this methodology outlines not only what to look for, but also how to understand the ways the abject functions, it can be applied to other works beyond what is covered within the data chapter itself, becoming a tool with far reaching applications.

Having provided a map to abject images and methods for approaching abject art and a taxonomy of the abject in chapter 4. Chapter 5 is an in-depth investigation of the artist Kiki Smith. Smith’s work has been called abject by other critics, but it has not been thoroughly explored or analyzed in depth, or with my own abject visual methodology. This chapter acts as both a testing ground to demonstrate my methodology in depth and to provide an example of how a deeper analysis can work. In chapter 6, my conclusion, I look at the implications for an abject visual methodology, in regards to its use in understanding how abject images function. I also discuss the implications for the expansion of the abject to address social issues in application to art, as well as the potential that my own development of the abject has. I believe that this project has far broader implications than just the art world, particularly in the arena of social justice, even though visual art is the primary site of this study and the place in which I have chosen to demonstrate this further expansion of the abject.
2.0: Filth is Foul and Foul is Fair: Observations and a Literature Review

2.01 Why Gross Matters

2.01.01 improper bodies, improper studies. The human being is not only born but also constructed. As Kauffman notes (1998) “we may not quite be ready to embrace the idea that the human organism is made, not born, but Post Human\textsuperscript{12} examines the implications of that radical proposition” (p. 41). We may not like or even accept the idea that we are constructed, but many veins of inquiry have taken this notion under consideration. According to this proposal the human body is constructed; like a text it is both written and read. Moreover, the body is a cultural text where social law is represented, enacted and transgressed (Foucault, 1990). In her essay *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*, Bordo (1997) explains, “The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control” (p. 90-91).

Whether intended or not, constructionist ideas have denigrated the lived experience of material bodies. As Hekman (1998) explains in her critique of Butler and Bordo’s approaches to the body, “Although bodies are cultural texts, some texts are more important than others and the hegemonic texts that sculpt female bodies cause pain and suffering for ‘real,’ ‘material’ women” (p. 69). Bodies exist, live and feel; they are not only disembodied social constructions. Butler has pointed out, materiality is joined with construction and construction contours materiality in the creation of what she calls

\textsuperscript{12} Post Human is a theoretical body that combines the mechanic and the technological with the biological to question what it is to be human (Herberchter & Callus, 2008).
performativity (Salih & Butler, 2004). There is a reciprocal, if uneven, relationship between materiality and social construction.

Whether it is studied from a biological perspective or as a social construction, the body, in its many forms and functions, has become a major site of study. One track of this current research is to look at the more unseemly side of the body, an area of study that has until the rise of postmodernism been largely ignored or rejected in favor of beauty. Artists have investigated the improper body, asking, “what it means to see the human as an organism, to see that organism as an ‘atrocity,’ to see that atrocity as an ‘exhibition’-on display like an artifact in a museum?” (Kauffman, 1998, p. 37). Cultural researchers and philosophers have devoted a multitude of articles to the abject (Bordo, 1997; Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008; Hughes, 2009; Macedo, 2001; Meagher, 2003), written books on disgust (Kolnai, 2001; Miller, 1997) and even curated exhibitions on the abject (Houser, Jones, Taylor, & Ben-Levi, 1993; Bois & Krauss, 2000).

**2.01.02 what you notice when you study disgust: some observations.** During the course of my research, I have seen disgusting objects appear again and again. Defiled objects and unsavory substances have been cordoned off from our daily lives and inhabit the arena of the private, kept safely away from public spheres where our personal refuse may threaten to violate others’ noses (Laporte, 2002). However, these sordid objects return in one way or another and haunt us like lingering stenches that for all our efforts cannot be ousted with a liberal application of *Febreze*.\(^{13}\) As my awareness of the disgusting grew, I noticed that culturally, we were obsessed with repellent substances and

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\(^{13}\) *Febreze* is an air freshener and “odor eliminator” (http://www.febreze.com/en-US/index.aspx).
had a wide variety of means to both keep them at bay, but also to play with them. I observed that we bag rotten foods in scented plastic before placing them in receptacles that are singularly devoted to the housing of waste. Our filth is then hauled away by specific professionals in a particular and identifiable vehicle to areas maintained for refuse set away from the public eye and nose. Trash is whisked away early in the morning before the world is awake. This maintains yet another boundary, preventing us from confronting our rotting, smelly by-products and acknowledging their accumulation and necessary removal. I perceived that what appeared to be simple was far more complex. Bodily fluids are flushed away to amazingly complex facilities where technicians manage the waste for us so that we never deal with those products beyond a glance into the toilet bowl. I noticed that bathrooms were often white, gleaming, and sparkling, a barrier comprised of bleach and cleanliness, to distract and protect us from bodily waste products. More than just covering unpleasant odors with perfumes, we disinfect the air with products like Oust and Febreze that promise the elimination of odor and germs, killing the contamination that is assumed to accompany filth whether tactile or olfactory.

My newfound awareness of disgust had spread to other areas where I noticed that our dead have their rotting guts pumped out and replaced by chemicals that give the illusion of perpetual life by morticians who are often stigmatized as creepy or strange for their connection with death. Similarly, hospitals, places that contain more bodily substances than most, are sanitized, sterilized and disinfected not only to prevent disease, but also to ward off an association with sickness and death. On television, I saw women in bleached white clothes advertise menstrual products that promise odor protection and
leak guards, their crisp clean wardrobe acting as a semiotic shield protecting the viewer from the messy reality of the menstruating body. We have a need for protection against disgust, both literal and semiotic.

Yet, the body and its sludges reappear in our cultural productions. They haunt us, returning as a specter of ourselves that cannot be banished by bleached clothes and sanitary workers. While real blood may be a contagion, I watched fake blood splatter nightly across televisions and movie screens. Real vomit may invoke a sympathetic regurgitation, but in the horror movie genre, fake vomitus spews from the mouths of the possessed\textsuperscript{14}. A popular game show from my youth featured barf-like *Gak* that rained down on losing contestants.\textsuperscript{15} Bile, the near cousin of vomit, has been the key ingredient in reality TV show’s strange eating contests,\textsuperscript{16} where contestants choke down animal bile in the quest for fifteen minutes of fame and money, while audiences in their homes watch rapt and wincing in commiseration.

Wandering into a local joke shop, I saw latex vomit for sale, only now recognizing the strangeness of desiring a replica of something that in reality is offensive. The same goes for the now classic fake dog poop and flies in plastic ice cubes, all vulgarities, which induce a disgust reaction in the victim of the prank, but causes humor for those who watch piteous displays of repugnance. Watching a television show one night, I discovered that dirty diapers are now replicated as a baby shower party game

\textsuperscript{16} *Fear Factor*, 2001-2006, stunt based reality game show on NBC. Thompson, J.R. (Director).
where the challenge is to overcome the context of a soiled nappy, eat the chocolate feces and identify the type of candy bar used to make the melted “poo.” Real shit is still disgusting. Take for instance the practical joke in which a slightly melted candy bar is placed in a swimming pool,\(^\text{17}\) causing fellow pool goers to feel disgust at the thought of their bodies having come in contact with someone else’s feces and vacate the pool.

Feelings of disgust caused by both real and replicated filthy objects, are ever present. I discovered that there was bread that looked like severed body parts,\(^\text{18}\) fine chocolates that looked like poo,\(^\text{19}\) and candy that had ghastly things in it like worms and crickets,\(^\text{20}\) toys that oozed candy goo from nose shaped containers\(^\text{21}\) and more. Disgusting objects and practices that were once seen as taboo, and in many ways are still forbidden, return to us in games and toys. Humanity has created a place to play with disgusting things because while we are disgusted, sometimes we are also attracted to the repulsive.

**2.01.03 observations on disgust in the art world.** Disgust may seem like a strange topic of study, particularly for someone in the arts, which has traditionally been focused on beauty. Unlike beauty and its Arnoldian handmaiden goodness (Arnold, 1869/2009), disgust, “invites discussions of unmentionables that tend to undercut certain

\(^{17}\) This practical joke/urban legend is most famously found in the movie *Caddy Shack* (1980), but has since been a gag in TV shows like *Las Vegas* (Paul Michael Glaser-Director), season 4 episode 9 “Wine and Misdemeanors” (2007) and *Bob’s Burgers* (Loren Bouchard-Creator) season 2, episode 3, “Synchronized Swimming” (2012).


\(^{19}\) Off Beat Treats- http://store.offbeattreats.com/CHOCOLATEPOO.html


\(^{21}\) Hose Nose is a plastic nose that dispenses candy snot from the nostrils- Candy Addict Blog- Top 10 Grossest Candies- http://candyaddict.com/blog/top-10-grossest-candies/10-9-8/
pretensions and pieties we like to maintain about sex, presentability and human dignity in general” (Miller, 1997, p. ix). However, it seems to me that it is disgusts’ ability to undercut our pretensions and cause an intense physical reaction that creates a need for a deeper understanding of this rejected emotion. Turning my attention from disgust in the world at large to the art world, I noted that shit had become as revered as gold. Excrement is canned and displayed as art, the asking price determined by the weight of the ‘can’ of shit converted to the price of gold. Crucifixes submerged in urine are photographed, the Virgin Mary is painted with elephant dung, basketball sized gobs of masticated chewing gum stick to gallery walls through their own sweet and saliva coated stickiness, all of this eliciting a queasy response and disgust, even outrage from some. Vivisected animals with their internal organs laid bare inhabit museums next to rotting food covered in live flies. Galleries are populated by now infamous prints of car crashes and electric chairs. These are the more extreme, literal enactments of foul substances, but these don’t begin to cover the multitudes of contemporarily sculpted and painted images of bloody flesh, sputum, mucus and actions of menstruation.

26 *Some Comfort Gained From The Acceptance Of The Inherent Lies In Everything*, Damien Hirst, 1996.
30 *Bogey Ball*, James R. Ford, 2002-2004, Ford collected his own snot for two years forming it into a roughly 2 inch ball (http://sabrisfunkyart.blogspot.com/2013/05/james-robert-ford.html).
31 *Untitled (Train)*, Kiki Smith, 1993.
lactation,\textsuperscript{32} ejaculation,\textsuperscript{33} masturbation,\textsuperscript{34} defecation,\textsuperscript{35} urination,\textsuperscript{36} auto-fellatio,\textsuperscript{37} coprophilia,\textsuperscript{38} asphyxiophilia,\textsuperscript{39} dacyphilia,\textsuperscript{40} emetophilia\textsuperscript{41} and necrophilia.\textsuperscript{42}

The literal objects that cause elicitation of disgust are pushed to the margins of our everyday lives. However, they return or are re-enacted in our fantasy lives, which are manifest and visualized in culture. What are we to make of this return, especially when this re-emergence often inverts our systems of purity and filth, good and bad, clean and spoiled? Theorists have attempted to understand our complex relationship with disgusting substances, including both our prohibitions surrounding them and our seeming inevitable transgressions. At the heart of this new emphasis on the grosser aspects of the body are the ideas of disgust and the abject. Disgust describes the initial rejection of repulsive images and objects, while the abject deals with both their rejection and their return, as both a haunting and as a forbidden or taboo enjoyment. However, the nuanced definitions of these terms are often ignored and they become conflated, especially in application to the field of visual studies.

\textbf{2.02 Introducing the Literature Review}

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Mother and Child}, Kiki Smith, 1993.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Untitled VII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)}, Andres Serrano, 1989.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{My Lonesome Cowboy}, Takashi Murakami, 1998.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Twilight}, Odd Nerdrum, 1981.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Untitled (Piss in Mouth)}, Keith Boadwee, 2004.
\textsuperscript{38} Fetishistic excitement for excrement (Love, 1994).
\textsuperscript{39} Sexual arousal through oxygen deprivation (Love, 1994).
\textsuperscript{40} Sexual excitement from tears or crying (Love, 1994).
\textsuperscript{41} Fetish surrounding vomit (Love, 1994).
\textsuperscript{42} Erotic interest in the dead and corpses (Love, 1994).
What follows is a review of the literature that has informed my observations above, as well as personal insight into some of the texts and ideas that I have garnered from the process of researching these terms and sites. In elucidating the interrelated concepts of disgust and the abject, particularly in their application to the visual, this chapter lays out the definitions of these terms, with an eye towards their similarities, differences, and interrelations. An examination of the overlap and distinctions between disgust and the abject, as well as an investigation of their origin and loci, can lead to a better understanding of the cultural sites that employ them as strategies. At stake is both a better understanding of these ideas and the images that use them. But more important is the potential of political action associated with disgust and the abject, as well as a better understanding of the injustices leveled in the name of disgust. Disgust has been a motivating factor in atrocities like the Holocaust and continues to be a qualifier in many legal proceedings (Nussbaum, 2007; Nussbaum, 2006), and its role in these matters makes it well worth inquiry. However, the abject, according to some scholars (e.g. Tyler, 2013), has positive political potential.

My project is the creation of an abject visual methodology, something which in the course of my research I found missing. I am limiting my formal literature review to the major ideas that move through the entirety of this work and have inspired this abject visual methodology. I have chosen to place the supporting literature, like disability studies and ideas about the monster, as well as literature about specific works of art, in the data chapter where I describe my new methodology in detail. This emphasizes their separateness from the main theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation, but it allows for their inclusion and a space to demonstrate their overlap.
In the following section, I explore disgust as both a physical and cultural phenomenon. I am particularly interested in the use of disgust in regards to morality and social marginalization, as this is an area that overlaps with the abject productively as a means to make sense of, and counter, oppression. I then delve into the literature surrounding the abject, beginning with a very close reading of Kristeva’s methods chapter in the *Power of Horror* (1982) in which she defines the abject and uses the abject as a tool for literary analysis. Next, I provide a broad look at other scholars’ contributions and usages of the abject, pointing out where I agree with their ideas, as well as where and when I feel they do not work well. A review of these literatures provides a background that helps to explain my own uses of disgust and abjection as applied to visual images, including visual art. The current slippage in how the terms disgust and abjection are understood and used denies a difference that may obscure key moments in understanding the seeming proliferation of imagery that is labeled gross in our visual culture. By developing a way to address and clarify unsavory images, an abject visual methodology will provide a way to approach both individual repulsive images and the larger trend towards disgusting art on a whole.

2.03 Disgust: The Knee-Jerk Emotion

Disgust is defined as causing loathing or nausea, a strong distaste, “repugnance caused by something offensive; strong aversion” and “to offend the good taste, moral sense, etc., of; cause extreme dislike or revulsion” (dictionary.com). However, we are

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43 Dictionary.com is a website that provides definitions from multiple official sources including Random House dictionary, Collins English Dictionary, and The American Heritage Dictionary, among others. While I realize it is perhaps more professional to use a single, well-established dictionary, my work is purposefully democratic and engaged in
most familiar with the feel of disgust, the unconscious heaving of one’s body, the shudder and cold sweat of nausea, the dizzying desire to get away from what is causing these sensations and reactions.

2.03.01 basic definitions. Before further exploring the theories and literature surrounding disgust, I will pause here and look at emotions more broadly. Emotion is defined simply as any strong feeling, or something that causes a reaction, particularly “an intense mental state that arises subjectively rather than through conscious effort and is often accompanied by physiological changes.” More complexly, emotion is “an affective state of consciousness in which joy, sorrow, fear, hate, or the like, is experienced, as distinguished from cognitive and volitional states of consciousness” or “any strong agitation of the feelings actuated by experiencing love, hate, fear, etc. and usually accompanied by certain physiological changes, as increased heartbeat or respiration and often overt manifestation, as crying or shaking” (dictionary.com).

Emotions have been the cause for debate for centuries. As Solomon (2000) notes, “philosophers have been concerned about the nature of emotion since Socrates and the ‘pre-Socratics’ who preceded him.” (p. 3). Emotions have often been considered “more primitive, less intelligent, more bestial, less dependable, and more dangerous than reason” (p. 3). In this model emotions are inferior to reason. Solomon notes that “the emotions have always lurked in the background - often as a threat to reason and a danger to philosophy and philosopher” (p. 3). Emotions were slaves to the master of reason.
However, models of emotions have shifted over time, especially since the affective turn, where emotions have been given a more central role in human life and in cognition. Biologists and evolutionary psychologists have confirmed both the central role and necessity of emotions in human life (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2008, Dunbar, Barret, & Lycett, 2005). Dunbar, Barret and Lycett (2005) explain, “The past three decades have witnessed an extraordinary explosion in our understanding of animal behavior and its evolutionary components” (p. 2) including emotions.

One of the developments in behavioral psychology has been a re-evaluation of the cause of emotions. While events have been understood as the cause for emotions, behaviorists have suggested that emotions are “aroused not by particular stimuli, but by contingencies consisting of the actual or signaled arrival or termination of pleasant or unpleasant events…positive or negative reinforcers” (Fridja, 2008, p. 68). This idea of contingencies and reinforcers demonstrates that emotions are part of a neural network that is predicated on both the body and on learning. However, this still leaves the question of degrees; to what degree are emotions biological and to what degree are they learned, and thus part of a cultural schema? Fridja (2008) explains that while emotions are firmly rooted in biology, “The precise nature of what they are mechanisms for…remains unclear.” (p.69).

The nature of emotions may still be unclear, but the continued exploration into their role and function has resulted in evidence that emotions can impact our ability to perceive, as Ray (2012) explains. Researchers have tested physiological measures while in the midst of fear and disgust, demonstrating that “individuals were able to take in more air, move their eyes faster, and see a larger area during fear than during disgust.” (p. 195).
Emotional responses modify “our ability to prepare for perception and action.” (p. 195). The facial expressions that have been demonstrated to universally accompany emotional reactions (Ekman, 1994) are not just social signals, but offer “biological advantages” (Ray, 2012, p. 195). Emotions then structure our perceptions of the world, making them much more than a strong feeling and debunking the previous idea that emotions are not to be trusted. Emotions cannot be separated from cognition because they structure cognition and they cannot be seen as unreliable because they are an adaptive evolutionary feature; these mechanics serve a larger purpose that keep us as individuals and our species going.

The roots of emotions have also been questioned, as evolutionary psychologists have argued that emotions are evolutionary adaptations (Ray, 2012; Dunbar, Barrett, & Lycett, 2005). Charles Darwin (2012) entered the then nascent field of psychology through evolution in his book _The expression of the emotions in man and animals_ published in 1872. It is in this text that Darwin addresses the emotional and behavioral aspects of natural selection. While this shift to a scientific approach may seem odd in my project, since I have marked it out very clearly as a qualitative inquiry into cultural objects, Ray (2012) points out that it is important to “not see culture and evolution as opposing explanations” (p. 30). Ray goes on to explain,

As Darwin pointed out, organisms are in a dynamic and close connection with their environment. For humans, part of that environment is culture. We live in culture much more than we live in nature, although there is, of course, a dynamic interaction between these processes. (p. 30)

On a similar note, Fridja (2008) explains, “Biological dispositions and cultural determinants, as we all know, are neither incompatible nor mutually exclusive” (p. 70).
Rather there is a dynamic interaction between culture and nature that is particularly important to understanding disgust, as it strongly implicates the body, but is structured by culture in regards to what elicits disgust. Furthermore, Fridja (2008) explains that, “Universality may lurk behind cultural specificity without detracting from the specific meanings of each cultural form” (p. 70). Culture and biology are often pitted against one another, with biology seen as a universal that unproductively erases cultural specificities. However, in positioning culture and biology as intersecting, not opposing one another, biological universalities can be acknowledged, while maintaining the specific cultural meanings that are the basis for difference. While my project is focused on specific cultural productions and cultural trends, the universality that a biological and evolutionary perspective on emotions can create need not detract from the specifics of cultural productions or a qualitative, even subjective, analysis of the works. In fact, disgust’s straddling of the cultural and the biological suggest the necessity of both.

Inbar and Pizzaro (2009) explain, “Most psychologists consider disgust to be a basic emotion” (p. 13). Basic emotions are cross-culturally present, manifesting the same way physically in predictable facial expressions and bodily responses universally, and they are thought to be part of evolution (Ekman, 1994). The facial expression associated with disgust has been linked to the idea of expelling that which we have ingested. Inbar and Pizzaro (2009) note,

the facial expression characteristic of disgust—withdrawal of the upper lip, thrusting out of the tongue, and wrinkling of the nose—may have its origins in the adaptive action of expelling noxious food from the mouth and shrinking the nasal passages in order to prevent pathogens from entering. (p.13)
Ray (2012) makes a similar argument, relying on Darwin’s early work on emotions like disgust, that disgust’s facial expression is similar to and based on “the motor action of vomiting” (p. 196). Ray argues that “emotional expressions such as disgust previously accompanied acts such as vomiting. Over evolutionary time, the expression of disgust came to be a response of its own without the gastrointestinal motor component” (p. 197).

However, while disgust is defined as repugnance, this barely touches on all that disgust can entail. It is related to and caused by rotten foods, swarms of living things, death and decay, as well as violations of moral principles. Disgust is not only serious, but complicated. Its antonyms are to relish or delight (dictionary.com), but disgust’s binary is often constructed as cleanliness or purity. Purity resides next to godliness, making disgust godless and heathen. Yet, a sign of humility, of saintliness, is to walk with lepers, those seen in Medieval Europe as vile bearers of the plague (Miller, 1997). St. Francis was known to have served lepers and St. Roch was known as the patron saint of the plague (Delaney, 2005). Somehow crossing the taboo of disgust in some instances raises the transgressor to a position of spiritual enviousness, while in other instances it contaminates the transgressor. Consider, for instance, the Orthodox Jewish tradition of not touching a niddah, a menstruating or unclean woman, for fear of contamination (Branham, 1997) and association with disgust. Miller (1997) explains that, “disgust is not simply aversive and the content of the disgusting is complex and at times paradoxical. It is commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel” (p. x). These moments of changeability in our relationship to disgust demonstrate its complexity and versatility, as well as it’s dependence upon cultural difference and context.

2.03.02 beyond basic definitions.
2.03.02.01 physicality and disgust. The physicality and immediacy of disgust appear to be an instinctual response, a near universal reaction to things that evoke a strong bodily repulsion (Ray, 2012; Inbar & Pizarro, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009). We do not choose to tear up when something is in our eye or cough to clear our throats. Our bodies take over and deal with the offending substance. Similarly, some argue that disgust is a similarly protective agent, causing us to expel foul tasting foods that may be spoiled, or to avoid death and decay for fear of disease (Ray, 2012; Rozin, Haight, & McCauley, 1993; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). However, this assertion is challenged by others, as Miller (1997) notes that humans are likely the only species to experience disgust and its close kin, self-loathing, since we are messy creatures, “emitting substances and odors that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbors” (p. xiv). This may be supported by the observation that some animals wallow in shit, where the thought of that for most humans is rather offensive.44 Miller would have us believe that it is cognition that controls disgust, not our biological bodies. As Meagher (2003) states, disgust is “fundamental to human beings—we all suffer disgust” (p. 24). With this in mind, disgust is particular to humans, while other emotions can be found in other animals. Fridja (2008) explains that primate grief and elephant grief are like human grief, demonstrating grief’s human, universal status. However, to be disgusted is both “human and humanizing” (Miller, 1997, p. 11) and some (e.g. Miller, 1997; Meagher, 2003) would argue that either

44 While it is counter to Miller’s argument, it is worth noting that many animals, like pigs, do not wallow in shit and actually have a prohibition against their own waste. When kept in paddocks, pigs will use one specific area of the stall for waste and can be easily litter box trained because of their innate desire to separate living space from waste space (Paine, B. (Writer). (1996, November 17). The joy of pigs [Television series episode]. In Kaufman, F. (Executive Producer), Nature. United States: Partridge Films Ltd.).
disgust is not an emotion, because it seems culturally dependent and based in cognition, or disgust is an emotion that is unique to humans. Only proto-humans (children), sub-humans (the mentally ill) and supra-humans (Saints) are insensitive to disgust and belong to a category other than “human” (Miller, 1997; Kolnai, 2001). The apparent lack of disgust in those considered inhuman seems to reinforce the idea that disgust is unique to humans.

But what appears to be instinct, may very well be based in cultural and contextual backgrounds. Stinky tofu is a delicacy in parts of Asia, but the intentionally rotten and fermented tofu is something most Westerners have a hard time stomaching (Steward, 2006). Those who have studied disgust seem to agree on “…its requirement that there be a sensory experience, of a quite specific type, that triggers the emotion” (Miller, 1997, p. 14). There must be some sensation, which causes disgust: the texture of stinky tofu; the smell of rotted foodstuffs; or even the reflection upon a previous sensory experience of disgust, a kind of thinking yourself into a disgusted state. Emotions are more than just physical reactions, they involve ideological and cognitive frameworks (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2008). As Miller (1997) explains, “emotions are feelings linked to ways of thinking about those feelings, to social and cultural paradigms that make sense of those feelings by giving us a basis for knowing when they are properly felt and properly displayed” (p. 8).

2.03.02.02 ways to approach disgust. A taxonomy of disgust has been suggested which categorizes disgust into nine specific traits labeled as, “materially disgusting” (Korsmeyer & Smith, 2001, p. 16) including, excrement, secretions, dirt, disgusting
animals, rotting food, imperfection, fat, diseased and deformed bodies, as well as putrefaction. Korsmeyer and Smith (2001) explain that,

objects of material disgust share the impression of life gone bad, of flesh turning towards death and of a ‘primordial and profuse regeneration of life from the muck of decaying organic matter’. Things that rot and putrefy become the fuel for maggots and bacteria; insects in swarms give the impression of excessive, mindless generation, of life “senseless, formless, surging”. (p. 16)

That disgust is caused by excrement or secretions is really no surprise; they appear as contagious, as formless, they signal the body in flux, moving, digesting bleeding, full of fluids and unpleasant life. Disgust applies to particular animals, like rats, that “exhibit parasitic tendencies,” lurking in dark, dirty places and causes “an almost universal feeling of specific disgust … indefinable anxiety, … the uncanny” (Kolnai, 2001, p. 57), as well as swarms of insects that similarly lurk but also threaten to overwhelm as a horde. It applies to bodies out of bounds, bodies that have transgressed the normal limits through lack or profusion, amputation or malignant growth, even fatness. As Braziel (2001) notes in *Bodies out of Bounds*, “Fat equals … violation of order and space, a transgression of boundaries” (p. 13). Corpulence then becomes disgusting, flesh stretched beyond its precincts, threatening to burst forth, to over take, to reveal its internal putrefaction, the digestion of foodstuffs. That fat is considered undesirable can be seen in the research of McFarren, Dahl, Fitzsimons, and Morales (2010), who have demonstrated that showing people fat bodies while they eat makes the test subjects consume less for fear of becoming out of bounds, or fat, themselves.
Fecundity, usually associated with joy, can become disgusting, signaling not only an over-abundance of life, the swarm, but “life in the wrong places” (Kolnai, 2001, p. 59) or an “‘indecent surplus of life’” (p. 54). It is this surplus that makes figures like the Elephant Man Joseph Merrick or congenital twins and images of tumors appear abhorrent as life bursts forth in the wrong places, disrupting the systematized topography of the normal body.

Disgust applies to dirt itself, “a grayish black layer of uncertain composition … involving smallish sticky particles of … ickiness” (p. 55), which shares a connection with feces, as well as grease, sweat, and nearly all bodily fluids. It is this disgust of dirt that makes us wipe our hands on pant legs when a sink is nowhere near or pull back with the typical nose wrinkle of disgust when we lean on an unclean table and discover it sticky with who knows what.

Yet, disgust finds its most ready vessel in the corpse as the “prototypical object of disgust is … the range of phenomena associated with putrefaction” (Kolnai, 2001, p. 53). This includes, but is not limited to, decomposition, the scent of corpses and the corruption of living bodies. In general, it is the “transition of the living into the state of death” (p. 53) that causes the highest disgust response, because the process from living being to nothingness is itself fluid, full of the wrong kinds of life like maggots and pathogens attacking flesh that is still life like.

2.03.02.03 another approach. Historically, disgust has been theorized as a way to protect the organism from contamination (Angyal, 1941). Charles Darwin was one of the first to write on disgust in his work journals from Tierra del Fuego in 1839. He notes in his journal that the soup on a man’s beard looks disgusting, even though there is nothing
there but soup, because the soup is out of place, contaminated by the whiskers (Miller, 1997; Meagher, 2003).

2.03.02.04 hair. The fact that it is the whiskers, or hair, that contaminates here is worth mentioning as hair, according to Miller, (1997) is akin to other offending bodily substances like pores and sweat. Hair grows out of the body, has intimate contact with sweat and bodily secretion like urine, feces and sexual fluids, and it springs up in unwanted places. Culturally, hair is determined by and symbolically represents race, sex, age and class. It is a cultural and religious symbol in regards to how it is worn or cut and at times a foil to disgust with its attachment to beauty. This is particularly manifested in women’s hair. Hair, because of its relationship to beauty and through that purity and sanctity, is vulnerable to desecration. Desecration as an act causes disgust both through the desecration itself and through the image of desecration that is left in its aftermath. In this instance, desecrating someone’s hair can be disgusting for the individuals whose being is violated. It could be disgusting to the perpetrator of the desecration because they are in intimate contact with another’s body, their hair. It could be disgusting to watch someone’s hair being desecrated because the viewer may empathize with the victim. The image that is left behind after the desecration, the befowled or shorn locks, can disgust those who view it as it is a semiotic sign that stands in for the act of desecration. This explains the impetus in the shaving of heads during the Holocaust and in other instances of imprisonment as a way to punish or denigrate the individual. However, while the shearing of hair can be seen as a desecration when it is done to long locks of head hair, Menninghaus (2003) notes that other hair’s removal is a condition of beauty:
The positive requirements of the aesthetically pleasing body—elastic and slender contours without incursions of fat, flawless youthful firmness and unbroken skin without folds or openings, removal of bodily hair and plucked eyebrows forming a fine line, flat belly and ‘trim’ behind and so on - are at the same time prescriptions for the avoidance of disgust. (p. 7)

Hair is something that must be monitored in its relationship to disgust and helps to explain Darwin’s reaction to the soup on the man beard (and not say soup on his lip or shirt for that matter). This is related to what Herz (2012) calls, “The I’m okay, you’re not okay” (p. 53) reaction. What is disgusting about the whiskers, beyond their overdetermined relationship to disgust because they are hair, is that Darwin later envisions those whiskers having touched his soup, in fact, all soup. This is an imagined transgression as the other man’s beard has not touched Darwin’s soup. Darwin is not pulling a lost hair from his own bowl and feeling the effects of a tangible encounter with another person’s sloughed off body hair. Nor would Darwin feel disgusted at having soup in his own beard, as it is fairly easy to assume that at one point or another in his life, Darwin himself had soup on his whiskers or chin. Rather, it is a fantasy based on the inherent disgust of other people’s bodies.

203.02.05 food. Further grounding his ideas on disgust as a food prohibition, similar to kosher or halal, Darwin discusses a moment of food-based revulsion experienced with a native in Terre del Fuego. The native is disgusted by the meat Darwin

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45 Halal specifically means any object or action permitted by Islamic law. It is most commonly referenced in relationship to Islamic food and drink prohibitions, including the exclusion of pork and alcohol, as well as how animals are slaughtered and how food is prepared.
is consuming, poking at it suspiciously, showing displeasure with its texture, while Darwin is disgusted at a native touching his food. This anecdote demonstrates the dualistic nature of disgust. On the part of the native, it is a bodily response, particularly associated with food, often seen as a biological mechanism that keeps us from eating spoiled or rotten things (Ray, 2012; Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993). For Darwin, it is a cultural outsider who is perceived as dirty touching his food that is disgusting. Disgust is not caused by “inorganics or non-biological matter” (Kolnai, 2001, p. 30) which seems to support the idea that disgust’s function is keeping the body safe from disease.

**2.03.02.06 scent and taste.** Disgust can involve all the senses; however, Kolnai has argued that “the true origin of disgust is the sense of smell” (p. 50), which is inextricably tied to ingestion and food prohibition. Kolnai (2001) notes in his extensive work on disgust,

> The gustatory and olfactory sphere appears to be the primary habitat of disgust. A frightful reek ‘stinks in our nostrils, it has invaded us and intruded into our corporeal intimacy. Nauseas and vomiting, we eject what has in a more massive sense infested our body, possibly with our own initial consent. (p.101)

It seems to me that upon being invaded by a scent that we willingly breathed in, we become ill in an attempt to remove what has entered our space and violated our bodies, and we retch. Scent can be key in the evocation of disgust (Herz, 2012). This vomit is not the sickness of illness, but a sickness specific to disgust. This is a sickness that seeks to avoid contamination, to prevent us from becoming disgusting through our contact with the repulsive.
However, sometimes the scent and taste of disgust are appealing, not prohibitory. Take for instance the taste for gamy meat, things that have been left out to intentionally rot ever so slightly, or ripe cheeses, strongly flavored *haut gout*, which “skirts the edge of the revolting but is thereby rendered - not marginally acceptable - but actually better” (Korsmeyer & Smith, 2001, p. 20-21). Herz (2012) explains, “It might seem that smells are most disgust-inducing because they are so enveloping… Yet sniff information can be misinformation” (p. 54). She goes on to explain the role of learning in the processing of physical stimuli like scent. For example, the scent of things like spoiled milk do not smell innately wrong; wrongness is learned. As a child, you don’t know the milk is spoiled based on the scent, not until you have either tasted it and had a bad reaction or have been cautioned against it. Both Herz (2012) and Miller (1997) argue that we have a body of knowledge, a culturally specific matrix that may be specific to the individual, about what is good and what is not, to map experiences of disgust onto that allows us to determine what is disgusting.

Even with taste, if milk is only slightly spoiled it may not stimulate a response like sickness and induce a prohibition. It seems to me that there are many convincing arguments to the role of biological evolution in the creation of disgust and that the scale upon which many disgust reactions occur may reflect the level of toxicity or threat that the offending substances possesses. For instance, slightly spoiled milk will not kill you, whereas toxic plants that will do serious harm are often very bitter, a taste sensation that most people are so adverse to that it seems biologically programmed as opposed to culturally learned. In short, you must learn what spoiled is and that it is bad before you know that a particular smell signals spoilage and should be rejected. Moreover, a scent in
one context, say in the restaurant, is mouthwatering, but a similar smell in the back alley behind the restaurant can induce vomit (Herz, 2012). For instance, the catch of the day may within the bounds of a restaurant seem fresh and consumable. The same fish just hours later, if that long, can disgust in an alleyway as the same fishy smell in the context of garbage cans is interpreted as having gone off. Taste, Herz (2012) argues is similarly tricky, as something like bitter greens taste bad, or at least like other bad things, but are in fact healthy and desirable.

2.03.02.07 Touch. Touch, too, can lead us astray, as in the Halloween game where one is blind-folded and feels inside a bowl for peeled grape eyeballs, which stimulate a disgust reaction. It is the grape and eyes proximity in density, weight and shape that enable the confusion and disgust issues forth. Because of the faulty and learned attributes of the other senses, Herz (2012) argues for a primacy of vision in regards to the experience of disgust, because, “[s]ight is not instinctive, but it is definitive” (p. 56). She explains, “If you open a container from the refrigerator and see chicken legs covered in furry black mold, you have no doubt that the meat is rotted and you don’t need to check any of your other senses to be sure” (p. 56).

2.03.02.08: SIGHT. However, seeing something disgusting may not prevent you from the emotion of disgust. Take for instance the horror movie. Reports circulated that The Exorcist caused viewers to vomit (Bailey & Barbaton, 2005) and according to Evans

46 I can verify this personally through another experience. While teaching I would have my students do a “Touchy Feely” activity where they would reach inside a paper bag and draw what they felt. This activity always created great anxiety and an adrenaline rush for many students who were frightened both by touching something that they could not see (even though it was in the safety of a college classroom) and often troubled or disgusted by the feeling of things like a Swiffer duster, clay, or fur.
(2012), viewers ran from a screening of *V/H/S* (2012) at Sundance from illness due to a graphic scene featuring a bloody compound fracture combined with shaky camera effects. Others reported illness including fainting and needed EMT assistance during James Franco’s *127 Hours* (2010), a real life story of a mountain climber who is forced to cut his own arm off to survive (Carr, 2010).

Thus, seeing something disgusting does not prevent the experience of disgust; rather, it seems to me and others (e.g., Herz, 2012) that seeing infects us more, or at least more easily, than other senses. While vision does not have the same metaphors of permeability, sight equally infects. Reflecting on the permeation of the body that occurs with scent or taste, I believe that disgusting elements must actually enter the body to cause a full-fledged disgust reaction. As Lazarus (1991) explains, disgust is related to “a strong desire to keep the substance away to preserve one’s bodily integrity” (p. 260), which eventually becomes more than literal. Permeability is integral to understanding disgust contaminating effects. For disgust to be evoked by sound, taste, and scent, I argue that an offending object must enter the body. Permeation or bodily contact in one form or another is necessary for disgust to occur. Simply knowing that there is spoiled milk in the garbage can is not enough to actually elicit disgust, since tucked away in the receptacle designed for filth it cannot threaten the bodily border until the garbage can is open and the scent wafts up and into the body. Similarly, touch has a permeable quality. The body itself is permeable. Our borders are not sealed, but porous. That means that when we touch something disgusting, not only are we in very close proximity to the offending object, we may experience a sense of contamination because of our penetrability.

I maintain that vision lacks the same idea of permeability, as there seems to be
less of an invasion of the body through scopic means. Visual observations can cause immense disgust, but without the same type of permeability or close contact with the offending substance or act. This can be seen in the distance between the audience and a film screen; a distance that can be understood as both a physical distance from the screen and the distance that images create between the viewer and reality. I assert that this is an example of how imbricated vision is within disgust, that even seeing something disgusting at a distance, which dissipates the object’s perceived ability to infect, still causes intense discomfort and disgust. A cultural matrix must be present even with vision because as Herz (2012) explains the viewer still needs to learn what looks disgusting.

However, there is a difference in the way distinct senses process or make sense of disgust. Vision has often been ignored in regards to disgust, with more emphasis placed on taste (Kolnai, 2001; Rozin, Haight, & McCauley, 1993; Miller, 1997). But vision has a much more powerful role in disgust according to Herz (2012), a point with which I am in total agreement. For example, Herz notes that the disgust face also features a narrowing of the eyes, which curtails one’s field of vision, and protects one from disgusting images entering the mind’s eye. Herz also argues for the dominance of vision in disgust responses because vision provides the clearest and most unadulterated meaning. For example, smell or taste information may be confused, but seeing rot or death leaves no doubt.

2.03.02.09 animal origins. Another researcher who has studied disgust as a food prohibition, or as a means to prevent the ingestion of certain foods, is Rozin. Rozin, Haight, and McCauley (1993) view disgust as more than just about food and the sense of smell and taste, noting “a spread of the focus on threat from just the mouth to contact
with the body in general and even offensive sights” (p. 584). Disgust is expanded from food prohibitions and rejection, to include hygiene, death, sex, social morals and violations of the body as a whole. Rozin’s work is most well known through a series of experiments he conducted, testing participants physical and emotional responses to things like plastic “gag” cockroaches, the participant’s willingness to drink a glass of water containing a clean newly opened hair comb and whether participants would consume their own spit collected in a glass.

Eventually Rozin settled on a more generalized theory of disgust as a way to be, “quite distinct from (and superior to) other animals” (Rozin & Fallon, 1987, p. 28). As Rozin, Haight and McCauley (1993) explain,

disgust serves to ‘humanize’ our animal bodies. Humans must eat, excrete and have sex, just like other animals. Each culture prescribes the proper way to perform these actions—by, for example, placing most animals off limits as potential foods and most people off limits as potential sex partners. People who ignore these prescriptions are reviled as disgusting and animal-like.... Finally, hygienic rules govern the proper use and maintenance of the human body and the failure to meet these culturally defined standards places a person below the level of humans. (p. 584)

Disgust is both what signals our roots in the animal kingdom and what points to the constructedness of culture (Meagher, 2003; Miller, 1997).

**2.03.02.10: morality and disgust.** According to Korsmeyer and Smith (2003) disgust is, “at work in creating and sustaining our social and cultural reality” and “helps us to grasp hierarchies of value, to cope with morally sensitive situations and to discern
and maintain cultural order” (p. 1-2). Through this, disgust is leveled at individuals who come to embody disgust, through their inability to discern (ie, their bad taste), their proximity to other substances that are disgusting (garbage men, doctors, funerary workers, or those who work with animals like butchers) and their lack of what society deems clean and proper (the “proper” complexion, gender, sexuality, income, etc.). These things make them dirty, disgusting and immoral. Darwin’s disgust is then centered on the native’s race, his perceived lack of “civilization” and even, perhaps, his lack of Christian morals or “heathen” status. This story demonstrates the role of taste, distinguishing between good and bad and the moral application of disgust, because disgust moves beyond the transgression of taste and smell, beyond the physical to a psychic and moral dimension. As Meagher (2003) explains, while disgust is visceral and embodied, it is also “a socially circumscribed and habituated emotion established and experienced within social, cultural and political structures and settings” (p. 30). Disgust marks out what is clean and proper.

2.03.03 Douglas, dirt and systems. The above type of disgust is related to Douglas’s work in *Purity and Danger* (1966/2000) where disgust stems from cultural taboos about what is clean and proper versus what is dirty. Disgust is envisioned as a transgression of taboos of purity and related to the binary of the sacred and the profane (Douglas, 1966/2000). Brayton (2007) explains that for Douglas, disgust and the removal of dirt as a response “is not based on any hygienic anxiety but rather an arbitrary paradigm that presents itself as an economy of the sacred and profane” (p. 59). Douglas (1966/2000) explains that “reflection on dirt involve[s] reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death” (p. 5). For Douglas, it
is not literal dirt that raises anxiety or creates the emotional response of disgust, but the transgression of the structure of what is sacred, that which is pure and clean and what is profane, that which is disgusting and dirty. Dirt and its emotional counterpart disgust can be created by anything that is out of place according to one’s cultural schema of what is deemed sacred versus profane, pure versus dangerous and clean versus dirty. Douglas’s version of disgust is both broad, in that anything can in theory cause disgust, and culturally determined, rather than a bodily response based in hygiene or a protective mechanism for physical health.47

2.03.03.01 dirt. Thus, disgust seems to go beyond simply spitting out or vomiting up physical contaminates. Schaller and Duncan (2007) have argued that disgust is a “behavioral immune system” as well as a physical protectant. Proponents of this theory argue that it was an evolutionary advantage to view other groups of foreign or unfamiliar people as disgusting and thus to be avoided because the new pathogens that these people may have carried could have killed our ancestors. While this was once a survival benefit to our ancestors, it is no longer beneficial and is actually overstimulated making us unfairly shun people. As Inbar and Pizarro (2009) note, “any individual seen as belonging to a group viewed as strange, foreign, or “dirty” is at risk for evoking a disgust response, and for the reduced moral sympathy that it may entail” (p. 16).

2.03.03.02 disgust, morality and law. It is this notion, that clean is sacred and dirt is taboo and profane, that explains the moral connection to disgust. And while theorists like Kolnai (2003) use disgust as a reliable moral compass, others like Miller (1997),

47 This being said, disgust is still protective, culturally speaking, because of its role in the policing of taboos, the transgression of which could lead to real life material problems, like disenfranchisement from the group, or even legal ramifications.
have noted the danger in assigning morality to an emotion as powerful as disgust. Miller
notes that “disgust makes beauty and ugliness a matter of morals” (p. 11) and not just of
preference. As Masquelier (2005) explains,

Filth, in short, may be nothing but sin and vice versa. Those who engage in
morally suspect activities (prostitution, usury) are considered ‘dirty’ and in need
of ‘cleansing,’ while those who ‘stink’ and cannot wash are condemned as
morally corrupt, put in seclusion, or placed at the bottom of the social ladder. (p. 11)

Disgust becomes an issue of moral hierarchies in Kantian and Arnoldian aesthetics,
where all that is good is sweetness and light and all that is dark and ugly is debased
(Arnold, 1869/2009; Duncum, 2008). It also becomes an issue of law, as moral disgust
has been leveled against homosexuals, Jews, minorities, even women. Nussbaum (2006)
has explored the problematic use of disgust in the law, citing examples like Stephen Carr,
a drifter who killed two lesbians he encountered making love at their campsite in the
woods. Carr argued that his disgust at homosexuality caused his brutal reaction and
should factor in mitigating his charge from murder one to manslaughter, since he couldn’t
control his revulsion, which lead to the crime. Nussbaum’s concern is that some laws cite
disgust as their main or only qualifier, as if all people are disgusted by the same thing,
that it is both universal and substantive enough for the law. Take for instance the 1973
opinion from Chief Justice Warren Burger that still legally defines obscenity in such a
way that it “includes reference to the disgust and revulsion that the works in question
would inspire in ‘the average person, applying contemporary community standards.””
(Nussbaum, 2006, p. 2). To further his point, Burger added in a footnote to his court opinion that obscenity was defined in multiple dictionaries as disgusting or filthy.

**2.03.03 disgust and minorities.** Disgust has been leveled against many minority groups. Holtz and Wagner (2009) study disgust as a way to understand the motivations and rhetoric of far-right conservative bloggers on the internet who write about African Americans and Jews. They explain that,

> The most important and historically old ones [derogatory terms] are likening the members of target group to animals and thereby projecting the disgust associated with certain animals (e.g., Royzman & Sabini, 2001); attributing supposed aesthetic aberrances such as ugliness (e.g. Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, & Hull, 2000); and depriving the members of a group of self-control (Joffe & Staerkle, 2007). These repertoires of derogations derive from and in fact are a functional part of, the representational universe of the dominant group, its culture and ways of rhetoric, serving, at the end, the maintenance of the status quo (Jost, Hunyady, Stroebe, & Hewstone, 2002). (p. 412)

Racist works on the internet rely on a standard, essentialist perspective that conflates the “offending” group with other things that create disgust, making the group themselves disgusting. These blogs rely on disgust and its use as a tool of hegemony that polices and recreates the status quo to enact hatemongering.

While Rozin argues that it is our capacity for disgust that makes us human, the emotional reaction of disgust is leveled against groups that are perceived to break normativity and are through this dehumanized. Holtz and Wagner (2009) describe this in
their account of racist hate blogs,

Research on the psychology of hatred-related behaviour shows that dehumanization is frequently associated with legitimizing inhuman acts against others (Bandura, 2002; Bar-Tal, 1997; Kelman, 1976). But even before aggression takes place, dehumanization or infra-humanization can be seen in the perception of groups and their members, who are not actively discriminated against or stigmatized and even when they are presented as a relatively abstract other.

Accordingly, dehumanization can result from denying targets some typical human or uniquely human qualities (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005; Leyens et al., 2003). (p. 413)

When disgust is leveled against a group it dehumanizes them, making it easier to act out racism in the form of violence. Racism has been analyzed in relation to disgust in Banks and Valentino’s (2012) work on the shift from a disgust mechanism to disgust combined with anger in cultures like in the US and Europe where explicit or official racism like Jim Crow has been abolished, but unconscious or individual racism like the racial animosity leveled at President Barack Obama still flourishes (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Alexander, 2012). Hostetter (2010) similarly explores disgust’s intersection with racism in views of public housing, explicitly connecting “public housing, African–Americans, disgust and fear through a detailed discourse analysis of contemporary representations of public housing” (p. 284). Also, the experience of disgust is explored in the relationship to the sick and disabled in an atmosphere of explicit care and acceptance in Botswana in the

Infra-humanization is a term coined by Jacques-Philippe Leyens in 2000 and describes the essentialist belief that one’s ingroup, whether that is racial, sexual, religious, etc., is more human than the outgroup (Leyens, et. al., 2000).
work of Livingston (2008) who,
explores how people approach and navigate their own feelings of disgust and morbid curiosity towards the aesthetically impaired bodies of their fellow citizens and the problems and opportunities these feelings present in a context where a humanistic ethos is stressed in the public discourse of nationalism. (p. 288)

Livingston (2008) is attempting to understand how disgust is still present and active in both how people feel and act towards the sick and disabled, even when the overarching cultural discourse argues for embracing them and their care as a part of national pride.

Olatunji and Sawchuk (2005) argue that rather than fear or even hatred, disgust is at the heart of homophobia, as well as constructions of the unnaturalness of vegetarianism and the unhealthiness of cigarette smoking. They note that “Given disgust–based appraisals of certain sexual matters and the recent expansion of the boundaries of disgust to include social/moral and interpersonal contexts, disgust may play a role in the formation of negative attitudes toward homosexuality” (p. 946). Furthermore, they argue that,

Despite the fact that disgust is part of our basic repertoire of emotions, capable of eliciting fairly intense physical reactions, being associated with strong avoidance action tendencies and evaluations of certain objects and situations as threatening, surprisingly little theoretical and empirical attention has been given to the role disgust may play in human misery and psychiatric disorders. (pp. 946-947)

2.03.03.04 disgust and the psychological. This role of disgust in psychiatric disorders applies both to how patients are treated, as well as the presence of disgust in place of, or in addition to, the commonly assumed emotions of fear or hatred in phobias
Disgust can be useful in the treatment of these disorders as well, through exposure therapy (Hertz, 2012) or in the treatment of obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders (Olatunji & Sawchuk, 2005). Disgust’s role for the most part, however, has been used not in treatment situations, but as a tool in the formation of hegemony in the forms of not only social attitudes but laws, policy making and public aid that marks out the aberrant or different as not only strange, but disgusting and dangerous.

2.03.05 disgust, psychology and politics. The experimental moral psychologist Pizarro, studies the disgust response in application to morality. In their research, Inbar and Pizzaro (2009), have demonstrated a relationship between having high disgust receptivity, or being easily disgusted, and moral and political conservatism. Studies show that those who are easily disgusted tend to be homophobic and that judgement of homosexuality can be manipulated through environmental disgust factors (Inbar & Pizarro, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2011). When the participants were exposed to foul smells or asked to sit at a dirty desk and then asked how they felt about homosexuality, those exposed to disgust evokers, like the dirty desk, consistently judged homosexuality more harshly (Inbar & Pizarro, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009, George, 2012). Similarly, when people were reminded to wash their hands or were put in proximity to a hand sanitizer, they also made more conservative or harsher moral judgements (Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2011). The relationship between disgust receptivity and political affiliation is so strong that Pizarro has been able to predict who the participants voted for in the previous election based on their disgust sensitivity (Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2011). According to Inbar and Pizarro (2009),
this research has stemmed from a concern that the emotion of disgust has been under researched in regards to the role it plays in moral judgment, particularly in regards to the legal system. Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, and Haidt (2011) even offer suggestions on how to counter disgust’s role in judgement, explaining that lawyers who deal with ethnic clients should stress the similarities between that person’s culture and white American culture and try to build empathy through commonalities. These tactics work to “‘de-otherise’ the individual” (p. 17) and mitigate disgust in a legal setting.

**2.03.06 problems with disgust and the law.** Much of disgust’s use in the law can be traced back to Lord Devlin’s work *The Enforcement of Morals* (1965), which argues that the disgust of an average person is reason enough to make something illegal in the defense of society, even when there is no harm to others at stake. As Nussbaum (2006) explains,

> Similar arguments have been used to support the illegality of homosexual relations between consenting adults: they should be illegal, it is alleged, because the “average man” feels disgust when he thinks about them. It is used to justify the criminalization of necrophilia; it has been proposed as a reason for banning human cloning. And disgust has also been taken to be an aggravating factor in acts already illegal on other grounds: the disgust of judge or jury at a murder may put the defendant into a class of especially heinous offenders. (p. 3)

The defense of society may be difficult to argue with, yet it seems overblown when no one suffers. Nussbaum is critical of the deployment of disgust within the law, not only for its reliance on something that is subjective, but also because it is used both as an explanation for law and in mitigating culpability. Nussbaum (2003) explains,
Thus, throughout history, certain disgust properties—sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness—have repeatedly and monotonously been associated with, indeed projected onto, groups by reference to who privileged groups seek to define their superior human status. Jews, women, homosexuals, untouchables, lower-class people—all of these are imagined as tainted by the dirt of the body. (p. 347)

It is the systemic leveling of disgust against those that are marginal combined with disgust attendant reactions of fear and anger that concerns Nussbaum. Furthermore, when the power imbalance that disgust encourages becomes law then the legal system is hijacked from a place of equality. The inclusion of disgust into jurisprudence can mean that the privileged are treated differently than those categorized as undesirable, furthering inequality and undermining the democratic foundations of our juridical system.

More than just the inclusion of disgust in the legal system, Nussbaum is critical of the very experts in disgust theory. Nussbaum argues that Miller, author of *The Anatomy of Disgust*, himself a legal scholar, and his definition and use of disgust are too close to Devlin’s argument “that a society’s hatred of vice and impropriety necessarily involves disgust and cannot be sustained without it” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 5). It is not just disgust’s use in the legal system then, but also the continued understanding of disgust as necessary or natural and justly applied to people. However, not all who defend the use of disgust in the law are conservative. Kahn in his work *The Progressive Appropriation of Disgust* (1999), argues for a need “to redeem disgust in the eyes of those who value equality, solidarity and other progressive values” (cited in Nussbaum, 2006, p. 5). Kahn argues that disgust is too powerful of a rhetorical tool to cede to those who use disgust for
conservative and reactionary reasons and that it can be used for progressive ideals. Emotions may seem at odds with a legal system that appears based in reason and rationality, but “law without appeals to emotion is virtually unthinkable” (p. 5). Not only emotional appeal, but emotional consensus is necessary according to Kahn, as Nussbaum explains:

Without appeal to a roughly shared conception of what violations are outrageous, what losses give rise to a profound grief, what vulnerable human beings have reason to fear—it is very hard to understand why we devote the attention we do, in law, to certain types of harm and damage. (p. 6)

However, Nussbaum’s concern over the inclusion of disgust is a fair concern since disgust in law has a history of abuse. As Miller (1997) notes, “disgust has thus served as a tool of injustice by discrediting and condemning the distasteful persons and behavior of others and has rendered that condemnation all the more powerful by its origin in a strong emotive response” (pp. 1-2). This is in part because of disgust’s history in law that Nussbaum (2006) cautions against its use. She explains “that shame and disgust are different from anger and fear, in the sense that they are especially likely to be normatively distorted and thus unreliable as guides to public practice, because of features of their specific internal structure” (p. 13).

Take for instance the Ugly Laws, ordinances passed across the country that targeted the poor and disabled for removal from the public eye. As the ordinance in Chicago passed in 1881 explained,

Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or is an improper person to be allowed in or
on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view under the penalty of a fine of $1 for each offense. (Chicago City Code 1881, cited in Schweik, 2010, p. 293)

Schweik (2010) argues, that *Ugly Laws* were part of a strong and unified project shared by and across various city cultures, involving both a judgment about bodily aesthetics and the use of law to repress the visibility of human diversity in social contexts associated with disability and poverty—what we might call the sighting/citing of the ugly. (p. 3)

Ugliness is related to disgust; it can cause disgust and has many of the same qualifiers as disgusting objects in regards to disease and deformation. *Ugly laws* relied on a “rhetoric of disgust” (p. 17) that was made manifest in eugenics, in the temperance and prohibition movements, in anxieties surrounding animality that was applied to both the individual and to the behavior of the public (a disgusting crowd), in urban planning that redefined how bodies were meant to be presented in the public sphere and in other technological, economic and social forms. Disgust acted as an impetus, or at least explanation, for prejudice.

**2.03.03.07 disgust, ugliness and aesthetics.** Ugliness has a long association with disgust, particularly in the realm of aesthetics and art. Ugliness and disgust were rejected during the Enlightenment, in favor of an aesthetic of beauty and its association with both rationality and morality. Aesthetics can have many meanings. From the original Greek word *aesthesis*, which referred to all visual stimuli, aesthetics can simply refer to visuals and their impact on us. As Korsmeyer (1998) notes, “Aesthetics may also deal with conceptions about beauty, but inasmuch as the grotesque may also play an active role in
art, aesthetics in not solely a theory of beauty.” (p. 20). Like *aesthesis*, aesthetics in this use includes more than beauty and moral effects.

Here aesthetics can refer to stylistic elements that enable the viewer to distinguish one style or type of visual from another. Aesthetics can simply be synonymous for appearance. However, the modernist form of aesthetics “equated aesthetic experience with high moral purpose” (Duncum, 2008, p. 124). This version of aesthetics ostensibly separated visuals from social and ideological values, leading to what O’Neil (2002) called an “amoral hedonism, which had no social purpose other than to give a higher form of pleasure” (p. 32). This “hedonism” stems from discounting the social, economic, and ideological content of images in favor of an emphasis on their beauty. In this use of aesthetics cathedrals are only seen for their impressive and beautiful architecture, while their reliance on near slave labor is overlooked. Similarly, the rape scenes in famous paintings like Poussin or Cortona’s *Rape of the Sabine Women* are seen only as beautiful uses of color and composition and the horrific subject matter is ignored (Duncum, 2008). Modernist aesthetics not only ignored ideological and social value, but also repressed sense perceptions that were not in line with moral beauty. As Duncum (2008) explains, the modernist use of aesthetics was founded “on the deliberate suppression of the body and the privileging of mindful activity” (p. 124). The body has to either be suppressed or cleaned of all its vulgar substances.

Ideas about the body as spiritual perfection in material form stripped of uncomfortable animalistic substance like waste, come into prominence during the Enlightenment, which also saw a coexistent interest in scientific exploration. The idea that purity of the body is analogous to the purity of the soul is contemporary with an
emphasis on the body as a place of scientific inquiry, the rise of public dissections and the importance of anatomical inquiry. In 1795 Goethe stresses the need for sciences attuned to the inner body and the need for dissections to gain anatomical knowledge in the face of the emotional response of disgust in his work *Outline for a General Introduction to Comparative Anatomy* (Menninghaus, 2003). Menninghaus (2003) explains that many living during this time period felt that “In the realm of the ideally beautiful, when not only the body’s excretions, but literally its inner organs become visible on the outside, what is at play can only be the disgusting in service to the monstrous or ridiculous” (p. 55). While dissection became popular among the learned, it was not widely accepted. Dissection was seen as an immoral corruption of the corpse, as well as something disgusting to behold. Instead, ideas about the body as an empty vessel, a “glass puppet without an inner corporeal life” (p. 56) were popularized, repressing the inner organic functions and flesh of the body.

Menninghaus (2003) examines the writings of 17th century art historian Winkelmann and the philosopher Herder, describing their ideas on the ideal body. Winkelmann decried painters who, when they could not attain beauty, turned instead to warts and wrinkles. Winkelmann asserted that “wrinkles and folds are ruined regions” (cited in Menninghaus, 2003, p.52) of the body. Furthermore, Winkelmann praised Greek statuary for its perfect contours, uninterrupted by fat, scars, dimples, body hair or other irregularities. Herder agreed and described the presence of veins as “crawling worms” and “knuckles as extruding excrescences” (p. 53). In Winkelmann and Herder’s accounts, flesh that is wrinkled or imperfect is likened to the wriggling, dirt-inhabiting worm, which supposedly consumed dead rotting corpses. The imperfect body was strongly
linked to the corpse and the lowness of imperfection was both a physical attribute, but also had the connotations of moral failings.

Aesthetics in this period worshipped perfect flesh, smooth unmarred skin that covered and contained the body’s organs. The model body refused bulges and hollows that might allude to an inside that pulsed, flexed and digested. The ideal form must appear to have been inflated by God’s breath, analogous to glass blowing. The body/vessel must appear empty, devoid of internal systems, filled with nothing but hollow space (Menninghaus, 2003). The emphasis on the body as a shell was adopted by others like Hogarth, who explained in his text *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) that,

In order to my being well understood, let every object under our consideration, be imagined to have its inward contents scoop’d out so nicely, as to have nothing of it left but a thin shell, exactly corresponding both in its inner and outer surface to the shape of the object itself. (cited in Menninghaus, 2003, p. 55)

Arnold (1869/2009) in his famous work on sweetness and light and their role in the ideal culture claimed that “beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection” (p. 46). Perfection is moral, intelligent and beautiful, all things found in high culture and its ideal antecedent, which was Hellenism (Garnett, 2009). As beautiful sensuality was linked to the expression of the soul, the ideal non-corporeal body was to be raised up as a moral thing. It is a desire for the body to express divinity that “the aesthetically pleasing body has no interior, hence allows no dissection or anatomy” (Menninghaus, 2003). The beautiful body as carved by the Greeks is then a counter to the instrumentalized nature of the body in the realm of science. Representation in these
philosophical approaches must be beautiful and through that must implicate a high moral ground.

2.03.08 disgust, aesthetics and Kant. In his Critique of Judgment Kant (1790/2009) explains that,

Where fine art evidences its superiority [to nature] is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, nay even represented in pictures. (p. 141)

Nature appears to be the home of beauty and any representation of nature is like Plato’s cave, a mere shadow to the beauty of the real thing. However, art has the unique ability to imbue with beauty what in nature would displease. Thus in some instances art can subsume nature when its purpose is to improve upon nature.

Art has a purpose, it exists for a reason and that reason must be known to evaluate or judge the artwork. However, as Korsmeyer (2005) explains, “the autonomy of art as purpose without purposiveness” (p. 17) comes from Kant. Art’s usefulness is not found in its purpose but rather in the aesthetic judgment of the work. Graham (2005) goes on to say that

the peculiar value of aesthetic delight lies in this: it is composed of a judgment that is disinterestedly free, free that is to say from both practical and cognitive determination. It is not a judgment of either personal like or general usefulness but a judgment arising from the “free play of the imagination”. (p. 17)

For an aesthetic judgement to be made, artworks must be disinterestedly contemplated, meaning that the work must not be seen as singularly useful, nor can its visual appeal be
purely subjective (Scruton, 2011). Rather, the art must be evaluated in relationship to a “free play of imagination” (Graham, 2005, p. 17) that is not totally free, but bounded by the *sensus communis*, or “a shared sensibility among human beings” (p. 17). Aesthetic judgement is based on taking a disinterested view of a work, subjective taste and the *sensus communis* to make objective statements about the work.

Art’s ability to represent must be evaluated, “it follows that in estimating the beauty of art the perfection of the thing must be also taken into account” (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 140). In regards to aesthetic judgement, it is more important that beauty is harnessed in service of the imagination, than it is that something is simply beautiful or realistic. When something that is horrible or ugly in life, like war, disease or even the overwhelming sublime, can be made beautiful through art’s intervention it becomes a moment of *sensus communis*, or a communally imagined possibility. And through that imagining, the naturally displeasurable becomes something that can be objectively pleasing.

However, disgust is a displeasure that cannot be rescued. Korsmeyer (2005) explains that, “While fear, pity, grief and other discomforting emotions have a long history in the philosophy of art, disgust has no such ancestry. In fact, it is frequently singled out as the one emotion utterly incompatible with beautiful art” (p. 61). Kant (1790/2009) explains that only, “[o]ne kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites disgust,” (p. 141).

For Kant, disgust can never be beautiful, so too it can never be pleasing, worthy, or morally relevant. War, disease, even the sublime can be made into art and become
beatiful and uplifting; disgust alone is outside the ability of the artist and his genius to transmogrify into something more. Kant (1790/2009) continues with disgust saying,

For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful. (p. 141)

For something that elicits disgust, for example rotting food, to be considered art it must be made in such a way as to ask us to aesthetically enjoy the image and to enjoy it within the realm of acceptable group imaginings that form the sensus communis. Meanwhile, the image must reiterate the object that it is meant to depict, the rotting food, so skillful and accurately as to be a re-presentation or improvement upon reality, including its affective impact. This creates a double bind as the original rotting food disgusts us, then so too must the image. But art must please us and we cannot be pleased by the experience of disgust. For Kant, even if it is a carefully constructed and well-executed image, if it is disgusting, it can never truly be art. Kant (1790/2009) goes on to say,

The art of sculpture, again, since in its products art is almost confused with nature, has excluded from its creations the direct representation of ugly objects and, instead, only sanctions, for example, the representation of death (in a beautiful genius), or of the warlike spirit (in Mars), by means of an allegory, or attributes which wear a pleasant guise and so only indirectly, through an interpretation on the part of reason and not for the pure aesthetic judgment. (p. 142)
Sculpture, as a field, is closer to the accurate replication of its objects than say a painting since sculpture produces literal three-dimensional copies which may even be confused with nature. However, sculpture has excluded ugly and disgusting objects in favor of allegories, which allows them to convey ugly ideas, like death, in a beautiful manner. In this way sculpture maintains its position as art by virtue of its aesthetic pleasure combined with emotive and cognitive qualities. Winklemann and Herder similarly held sculpture in high esteem. Not only was sculpture art, but it was great art because “its beautiful stony form was a consequent sublimation of all materiality and scripturality on and beneath the skin of the beautiful” (cited in Menninghaus, 2003, p. 56). Sculpture erased the disgusting innards of the body through its illusionistic depictions of the perfectly contoured shell of the body. It would seem to me that Kant, and others (e.g., Winkelmann), among other reasons, enshrine sculpture for its avoidance of that which cannot be redeemed as art, beauty, or aesthetics; disgust.

2.03.03.09 disgust, contemporary aesthetics and art. Enlightenment ideas about aesthetics continue into modernity. Clement Greenburg, one of Modernism’s most influential art critics, based his work in an “aesthetic modernist approach to art” (Cahoone, 2003, p. 310) that has roots in Kantian aesthetics. Famously, Greenburg (1982) called Kant the first real modernist and Greenburg’s championing of Modernism was based in Enlightenment aesthetics. Much modern art has attempted to find beauty in abstraction, formal elements of color and shape and material expression. Early modernists like Manet may have shown at the Salon de Refuses (“the gallery of rejects”), but their works have been canonized in the history of art and are now upheld for the beautiful use of paint as a material and their intentional move towards abstraction through
flatness. What was once seen as terrible - Manet’s *Olympia* was likened by one critic to a giant spider on the ceiling (Clark, 1984) - became part of a new canon with a different stylistic sensibility that was both new and difficult. While much modern art might be labeled disgusting by the layman, or at the very least ugly, its motivations were often similar to the Kantian sublime, what Korsmeyer (2005) calls “terrible” and “difficult” beauties. Korsmeyer (2005) explains, “Despite their many differences, most of the theories of beauty to be found in the history of philosophy connect the experience of the beautiful with pleasure” (p. 51). However, much art that is quite obviously attractive is also confrontational or discomforting and deals with pain and grief. This is what Korsmeyer (2005), borrowing from Bosanquet, calls “difficult beauty” (p.170). Foster (1995) creates another difficult beauty when he approaches the surrealist’s work through the idea of “compulsive beauty” (p. 102), a beauty that is predicated on compulsion and “the death drive” (p. xix) and contains a dark or disgusting element. Difficult beauty can be something quite different than the consensus built idea of taste or the once popular synonym to beauty, sweetness. However, these examples are simply an expansion of what is beautiful to include a larger or more diverse set of alluring phenomenon, they do not actually address disgust, in large part because these philosophies of beauty are the heritage of Kantian aesthetics.

While Kant cannot find a place for disgust in the realm of art, contemporary aesthetician Korsmeyer argues in the introduction to her work *Savoring Disgust* (2011), “I believe that in its own way disgust is a conduit for accurate if unsettling insights, a feature of the emotion exploited in multifarious aspects in art” (p. 4). Korsmeyer notes that until recently the history of art has for the most part neglected, if not out and out
rejected, disgust. Korsmeyer (2011) explains that “traditional opinion to the contrary, the arousal of disgust often has a positive value in appreciation and understanding of artworks” (p.11). She continues, “In addition to its role as the opposite role to beauty – the paradigm of the ‘antiaesthetic’ as some would have it – there are many ways that disgust converts from pure aversion to paradoxical attraction while retaining its trademark visceral shock” (p.11). Korsmeyer (2005; 2011) addresses the possible presence of disgust within beauty in her exploration of “difficult beauty” (Korsmeyer, 2011, p. 170). Difficult beauty is beauty that is tinged with difficult emotions like pain, making terrible beauty a test case for the inclusion of the one emotion that seems resolutely incompatible with beauty - disgust. Korsmeyer continues, noting that one of the reasons that disgust and beauty seem discordant is that objects that arouse disgust are incompatible with honor and dignity. Korsmeyer (2005) explains, “Unlike the circumstances that promote fear or grief, disgust dangerously truncates sympathy and admiration” (p. 61). She similarly notes that much art that deals in disgust is not beautiful; it satisfies for a variety of reasons like curiosity, but does not please in the way beauty does. Korsmeyer (2011) seems correct in her assessment that it is contemporary art that has dealt most specifically, openly and directly, with disgust. While there have been examples of terrible beauty throughout history, Korsmeyer (2005) cites Caravaggio’s *Doubting Thomas* (1601-2) and John Donne’s poem *The Flea* (1633): however, she also grants that contemporary art has become the home to many explorations into terrible beauty.

**2.03.03.10 disgusting conclusions.** Korsmeyer (2005) claims that disgust has been something that has been considered in the realms of philosophy, aesthetics and art
for a considerable time. And like the Kantian roots of the rejection of disgust in aesthetics, many of the current debates in disgust theory still focus on early texts and examples. For instance, contemporary conversations surrounding disgust still discuss the biological reasons for disgust, which date back at least to Darwin. Disgust’s attachment to the body is so strong that it continues to motivate work on the biological aspects of this affect. But, while its origins are in the body, disgust is deeply intertwined with culture, demonstrating the social aspects of that affect. However, disgust seems to have its limits, limits which contemporary scholarship may have reached. Korsmeyer (2005), discussing the problematic categorizations of difficult and terrible beauty explains that, “…decisions are complicated because the border between terrible beauty and the grotesque or horrid is hazy. Just as prettiness shades into beauty, so terrible beauty shades towards horror and other difficult aesthetic categories” (p. 63).

Disgust’s limits are hazy, but worthy of further inquiry and thought. I turn next to the concept of the abject for a deeper inquiry into what looks very much like disgust, but functions differently. The abject has roots in the psychoanalytic; it is tied to the maternal and has a different relationship to the marginal body. The abject’s relationship to marginalization is co-constitutive as the abject is the jettisoned but the jettisoned allows for ego construction through opposition to the excluded. However, a more straightforward top-down hierarchy of disempowerment occurs with disgust as disgust is simply excluded and does not return, haunt, or aid in the construction of ego. By exploring the abject, I will clarify some of the haziness that surrounds the border between terrible beauty and powerful horror, demonstrating both the deep connections, but important difference between disgust and the abject.
2.04 Powerful Horror: The Abject

2.04.01 you mean object? no. abject: an introduction. The abject is another concept that, understood broadly, causes the affect of disgust. The abject describes a subject position that is founded on “the infant’s relation to the pre-Oedipal mother” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 66). The relationship with the mother that the abject is predicated upon was first formulated by Klein in response to Freud’s work (Doane & Hodges, 1992). Krauss (2000) links the uses of the term abject with the sociological works of Bataille who used the term in a series of unpublished works “which were concerned with the exclusionary forces that operate within modern state systems in order to strip the labouring masses of their human dignity and reduce them to dehumanized social waste” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 69). Bataille’s work with the abject, or what he referred to as the Informe, was influential and has much overlap with the use of the abject, particularly in the arts. However, Kristeva popularized the abject, and she, rethought Bataille’s concept of abjection from an anthropological and psychoanalytical perspective in order to address the constitution of the subject in its negative aspect, emphasizing a subject position which is located at the border between its own subjecthood and objecthood. (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 69)

Writing as a psychoanalyst-semiologist, Kristeva “re-reads” Freud and Lacan, as well as others ranging from Derrida to Leviticus (Kauffman, 1997). In her famous book The Powers of Horror (1982) she develops the abject further, leading her to “re-emphasiz(e) the maternal body as the central axis in the process of the formation of the child’s subjectivity” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 67). Kristeva traces the development of the

49 The Informe and abject will be discussed further in the methodology section.
monstrous female through Western history as a forerunner for her reworking of the maternal body.

2.04.02 the mother. Kristeva believes that “The mother-child relationship is the paradigm for all subsequent subject-object divisions” (Kauffman, 1997, p. 17) and that the abject is “a pre-Oedipal component of the self that is neither subject nor object” (Brayton, 2007, p. 59) and being neither subject nor object, it is abject or a third category of being (Kristeva, 1982). From a psychoanalytic position, the abject is that which must be gotten rid of to become whole, “something that must be rejected for the healthy subject – the “I” – to develop” (Brayton, 2007, p. 59). The abject is both known and unknown, me and not me. It represents binaries and dualisms collapsed into one. McAfee (2004) explains that the entirety of The Powers of Horror is about,

the process by which a child who is still in the imaginary realm begins to expel from itself (physically and psychically) what it decides is not part of its own clean and proper self. This is the way the child begins to develop a sense of a discrete “I,” rather than remaining part of the undifferentiated semiotic chora. Abjection begins in early childhood and continues throughout one’s life. What is abject is never excluded once and for all; it remains on the periphery of consciousness, haunting the ever-tenuous borders of selfhood. (p. 129)

However, some have argued that the abject is not always as violent as this, Goodnow (2009) explains. The abject is that which disturbs systems that could very well refer to, “forms of satire or comedy. It also does not enable us to say whether the emotion that results will be one of horror or one of panic, suspicion, aggression, amazement, or amusement” (p. 33).
However, according to Kristeva (1988), the very term abject has “a much more violent sense” (p.135) in French than it does in English. In an interview she explains that it is,

something disgusting… an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. (p. 135)

Thus, according to Kristeva the abject is a violent disturbance of order, but it is also much more.

**2.04.03 too close for comfort: a reading of Kristeva’s method.** The bulk of my understanding of the abject stems from Kristeva’s first chapter of *Powers of Horror* (1982), which outlines a methodology of the abject, or an explanation of how she defines and will use the abject to interrogate her objects of study, primarily literature. The following is an extended explanation of chapter one, “Approaching Abjection,” which will better situate the Kristevan abject.

**2.04.03.01 neither subject nor object.** The first section of Kristeva’s method, “Neither Subject Nor Object,” defines the abject most notably as neither a subject nor an object, but a third category of being which exists in between the two. Kristeva, like Lacan, uses dense almost poetic language throughout her work, beginning *The Powers of Horror* (1982) with,

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. (p. 1)

This is typical of Kristeva’s prose style, which appeals through the affective
qualities of the language, but also challenges the reader to understand some of the
specifics of her argument. Kristeva explains that the abject is tied to desire through
negation: “Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects” (p. 1). The abject is “the
jettisoned object, [it] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning
collapses” (p. 2); it is the opposite of desire, or rather it is the desire to reject. Abjection
“is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is
founded” (p. 5). Kristeva explains that desire exists before the creation of self and the
division with the mother; desire then exists before language, is even the predication upon
which language is created. Language exists to give form to our wants.

The child experience want before they\textsuperscript{50} know themself as a separate being, while
it is in an undivided state with the mother. Even though the child is not fully separate
from the mother the child engages in the desire for autonomy through the rejection of
certain things, like milk, which will be examined later. “I” want to exist, or at least to

\textsuperscript{50} I am using the singular non-gender specific form of the word they and them in this
work. The Oxford Dictionary had officially accepted the use of they as a singular in
instances when gender is not known, instances where a third gender fluid pronoun is
needed, and in instances of gender neutrality. I will use they and them particularly around
“the child” as a way to denote the lack of a specific gender or gender neutrality
surrounding the ideal subject. For more on the use of gender neutral pronouns, see Oxford
Dictionary (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/he-or-she-versus-they) and
Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog (https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/).
Furthermore, I am using the child and not children to indicate that this is a fictional ideal
child subject, not a real individual. This format is used by other psychoanalytic works
which refer not to mothers, but the mother, not women, but woman, etc.
demonstrate my existence as a separate subject, thus “I” spit out, or reject, and in that rejection make my identity known.

Kristeva, influenced by Lacan’s semiotic approach to psychoanalysis, says that abjection is the sign, a combination of the signified and its signifier, both the concept and what makes the concept known. The sign is predicated upon a recognizable system, or language. It is abjection’s deep ties to structures like language, which forms our experience of the world, that make literature an obvious choice for Kristeva’s explorations of the abject. She argues that literature can best represent abjection, the psychological state of desire, which is made manifest in rejection. This explains Kristeva’s literary analysis in later chapters of *Powers of Horror* (1982). This is related to the pre-lingual roots of the abject. The foundation of abjection occurs at a pre-linguistic time, the first experiences of want that are linked to the abject are experienced before the creation of the subject and the ego; they occur in the Lacanian register of the Imaginary, the phase in which the ego begins to form through misidentification with the Imago, or a false image of cohesion. To access the signifier of abjection, or the form that the signified takes, one must imagine, as literature does. Kristeva is drawn to the imaginative qualities of literature, it’s ability to project backward and forwards, to enter the mind and its ability to articulate or speak the unspeakable, giving imagined voice to both prelingual desires and to experiences of the Lacanian Real, or that which language cannot fully capture but can gesture towards.\(^5\)

She is also interested in contemporary literature’s rejection of the

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5\(^1\) I differ with Kristeva here. While she argues for literature as abjection’s signifier because of the shared imagined qualities, I would argue that the abject is closer in relationship to the image, that Lacan’s Imaginary is in fact based on the Imago, an image, albeit a false one. The role of the image in its direct and often linguistically unmitigated
sacred; it “acknowledges the impossibility of Religion, Morality and Law” (p. 16), which is in a broader sense a challenge to the Lacanian Symbolic order. This leads to writing’s “ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacement of verbal play” (p. 16); for example, language has the ability to both figure and conquer the abject.

2.04.03.02 Lacanian roots. Kristeva’s work is built upon Lacan’s psychoanalysis, particularly his three registers or orders that structure our lives, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Translating and reworking Freud, Lacan (1997) develops the idea of the Mirror Stage, where the child begins to form their own ego. The explanatory metaphor of the Mirror Stage is that when the child sees themself in a mirror for the first time, they identify with the false image of wholeness and plenitude in the mirror, which Lacan labels the imago. During the Mirror Stage, the child develops a false sense of unity. As an infant before the mirror, the child experiences a plethora of sensory stimuli affecting different parts of the body without a sense of wholeness or structure. Until now the child has only seen pieces of themselves, a foot or a hand, but not a whole image. However, between six and eighteen months the child sees themselves in a mirror or another reflective surface. Upon seeing an image of self that is whole, unfragmented and seemingly calm, the child falsely identifies this as the image of unity that they must attain. The imago, or ego ideal, is something that the child will strive for because of the representation of the abject, or at least the abject’s signified, the visual representations of abject and their application in art, analogous to the signifiers (words) relationship to literature, are closer in impact to the actual abject than words could ever be, making art the better home of the abject than literature. My position is also influenced by Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) work where they suggest that metaphors, which are how we understand the world, are predicated on a pre-lingual visual language of metaphors. This indicates that the visual is actually our first structural schema of knowledge and understanding.
image’s unity and apparent calmness, which is in contrast to their experience of fragmentation and emotional unrest. However, this is a false identification, since the human experience is never wholly unified; we are always fragmented, in large part because we are both thinking beings, but also sensory-driven emotional animals. This misrecognition sets up the quest for a single, cohesive and independent self and is the birth of the ego. In Lacanian terms,

The Mirror Stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image. (cited in Evans, 1996, p. 118)

This libidinal relationship with the false image of self, or Lacan’s idealized imago, is a key concept to the Imaginary. The Imaginary is a realm of fantasy, of misrecognition and it precedes the child’s movement into the Symbolic order of paternal law and language. The Imaginary is a realm of narcissism, as the child is invested primarily in themselves and their attempts at an ideal ego, but it is also a time of alienation, since that ideal ego is an unattainable “other.” Lacan (1997) explains, “Alienation is constitutive of the Imaginary order. Alien is the Imaginary as such” (p. 146).

The Mirror Stage is the process by which the child enters into the Imaginary Order. It is not a singular event because one slides into and out of the Imaginary Order throughout life. The hallmark of the Imaginary Order is the creation of the ego, but this is not a singular or stable process. Rather, the ego is threatened and remade or strengthened throughout life, even after one has entered the Symbolic. To become a fully speaking subject in the world, one must enter into the Symbolic Order, even if at times one slides
back into the Imaginary. The Symbolic Order is centered on law and structure, both of which are made possible by language, making the Symbolic primarily the register of language, or more specifically the signifier.\textsuperscript{52} It is the domain of culture, which structures how we see and understand the world. The Symbolic is gendered as male, the Father, with its emphasis in law and discipline and is the Order the subject must proceed into if they are to be seen and understood as a speaking subject. Lacan (2007) links the symbolic to the Oedipal Complex, explaining that the Symbolic role of the Father is a distancing one, interceding between the mother and the child. That distance allows the child to break away from the mother and enter the Symbolic order, which allows for intersubjective communication and gives the child their place in the symbolic system, or their role in culture.

This is in contrast to Lacan’s third register, the Real. The Real is everything that is outside of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, things that exist outside of and cannot be captured or fully described by language and are beyond the scope of imagination because its fantasies are structured by a language system. As Storey (2009) explains, the “Real is like nature before symbolization (i.e., before cultural classification) … before it became mediated by the Symbolic” (p. 101). Storey further explains that what we call a natural disaster is an “irruption of the Real” (p. 102) because the words natural disaster, while they describe the event, do nothing to convey what has actually just happened; they pale

\textsuperscript{52} The Imaginary is also involved in language; it is home to the signified and signification, which involves a certain level of abstract imagining. Lacan (1999) notes that, “…words themselves can suffer symbolic lesions and accomplish imaginary acts whose victim is the subject” (p. 248), explaining languages Imaginary and Symbolic qualities.
in comparison to the event itself. Storey also notes that the Real can be “everything merged into one mass” (p. 102).

Like the abject, the Real is a place where meaning has collapsed. Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008) states, “the Real thus uncovers the gap that is covered over by symbolic representation” (p. 79). If the symbolic makes language appear to be complete, makes the words natural disaster stand in for the event itself, then the Real exposes that these are unsuccessful attempts at true communication and that language is arbitrary and futile in the face of true horror or nature unbound. The Real and the abject find themselves combined in the art world. Whereas reality was once a function of mimetics, there has been a shift, according to Foster (1996), in contemporary art from “reality as an effect of representation to the Lacanian Real as a thing of trauma” (p. 146). Foster links the “Return of the Real” or the proliferation of images of the traumatic Real to the rise in abject art or, “artworks [which] tear the screen so that the object-gaze not only invades the subject-as-picture but also over-whelms it” (p. 66). The screen here acts as a fence, a policed border, but when that screen is torn and there is ambiguity in the borderlands, both the abject and the Real are felt. A brush with the abject may cause a puncture or tear in one’s separation between the Real and the Symbolic. That tear could include a feeling of disgust; however, the effects on the individual are deeper, more fracturing, more violent and undoing than just a feeling of disgust.

Kristeva (1982) explains the interaction between the abject and culture as follows; “On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture,” (p. 2). The abject is what acts as a barrier between ourselves and the Lacanian
Real, which strips culture away and presents only the live experience outside of language. Without language, or a schema with which to approach and make sense of the world, we as subjects would cease to exist. It is the abject that keeps us safe, even as it causes us pain, by perpetually drawing our attention to the Symbolic. The abject reminds us of the laws and language that create our subjectivity and identity; it acts as a barrier between ourselves and pure experience. The abject creates and maintains culture.

2.04.03.03 chora and the maternal meat of the abject. Kristeva borrows the term *chora*, meaning receptacle, from Plato. It refers to the state of the child while they are still considered to be an object to the mother, undifferentiated and in union. The natal subject is at this point an object, an object, which holds drives, drives that have not yet become the desires of a fully formed subject. The ego creates the self as a sign through the Mirror Stage and then moves the self into the symbolic and away from *chora*. To become a subject through the creation of an ego, the child must individuate, which is a narcissistic process. However, the abject is “a kind of narcissistic crisis” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 14) because it points out that narcissism is never a purely reflective process; the waters of the pool in which the narcissist looks are always rippling and muddy. This narcissistic crisis stems from either too much control on the part of the other (read mother) or a lapse in care from the other, either the mother smothers the child refusing separation or ignores the child making the child not want to leave. Both result in an inability to fully divide through narcissism, as well as the inability to remain in *chora* with the mother leading to an ambiguous state that is too close but not unified.

For Kristeva, the time before individuation from the mother is a time of unity and is not unpleasant until the push towards the imaginary and symbolic occurs and demands
that the child develop their own sense of self, divorcing themselves from the maternal. Similarly, Freud discusses this in regards to the death drive, our desire to return to a pre-individuated, pre-subjective state even though it equals our own ego’s death through absorption into the mother (Freud, 1995). As McAfee (2003) explains, “Freud sets up what will become Kristeva’s view: that this phenomenon conjures up a memory of the self prior to its entrance into the symbolic realm, prior to becoming a subject proper” (p. 49).

Kristeva argues for the existence of a maternal language within the *chora*, as opposed to the paternal language of the symbolic, that begins the process of dividing clean from dirty, separating self from other even before the ego has formed. Kristeva (1982) explicates this further saying that,

> Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is a ‘binary logic,’ a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take place. (p. 72)

She places the focus of selfhood back in the maternal, noting that the divisions of the body into binary categories of what is clean/proper and dirty/improper belong to a
language system that exists before literal language, before the transition into the paternal symbolic order, a language system that owes its development to the othering of the maternal body. This primal body language (Jay, 1998) is necessary as a precursor to symbolic language, yet it is thrust aside and pushed back, repressed, only finding an outlet at moments when the abject is present. As McAfee (2003) states, “Recall that abjection first arises when the infant is still in an imaginary union with its mother, before it has recognized its image in a mirror, well before it begins to learn language and enter Lacan’s symbolic realm” (p. 47).

The child exists not only in a state of sensory chaos before the mirror stage, but also lives in a state of undifferentiated chora with the mother and with the world at large. There is no division between self and other, subject and mother. There is a “reluctant struggle to establish a separate corporeal schema” (Young, 1990, p. 207) on the part of the child to leave the, “primal fluidity of maternal jouissance” (p. 207) to interject an “I.” The state of chora with the mother is comforting and comfortable, the child is reluctant to go through the messy and painful process of creating an ego, a separate I, unless there is an element of crisis fueling this division. The emergence of the ego is an uneasy and often traumatic shift, which makes the child anxious. We were objects to our mothers, a piece of her, almost organ-like, lacking subjectivity, individuality and will, even after birth. It is a slow process of individuation and a breaking away from the mother in which our subjectivity is formed as distinct and we lose our status as object. This is a messy progression that also causes anxiety for the mother, since she has gained a place for herself within the Symbolic by having a child and is reluctant to let the child go and lose her symbolic status.
2.04.03.04 monstrous mothers. The anxiety that this division will be incomplete realizes in the figure of the monstrous pre-symbolic feminine seen cross-culturally as mythologist Joseph Campbell’s vagina dentata, (toothed vagina) (Creed, 1993). This monster not only threatens to castrate, but threatens to consume the subject, swallowing it back into the womb. Like Medusa, who threatens to halt Perseus’ journey by freezing him in place, both literally and metaphorically, turning him permanently stiff (Creed, 1993), the monstrous female illustrates the feminine gone wrong and threatens the subject, demonstrating what happens to those who do not finish their journey into the Symbolic. This swallowing up is metaphorically linked to the subject formation process, which is tenuous and emotionally fraught. As Goodnow (2009) explains,

For Kristeva, the progression to the symbolic order and the need for maintained contact with the semiotic contribute to the inherent instability of the imposed symbolic, paternal order. “Language and thus sociality, are defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution and transformation.” Life becomes like “dancing on a volcano:” a state where the carefully constructed borders between meanings of male and female, human and animal, living and dead, clean and unclean, self and other, are continually liable to collapse. (p. 30)

The abject always threatens the subject with a slide backwards but it also allows for a reiteration of that break, a repetition of ego construction, a statement of existence. As Young (1990), explains, “The infant struggles with its own drives in relation to the Other, to attain a sense of body control, but the struggle is reluctant and the separation experienced as a loss, a wound, a want” (p. 207), simultaneously “while rejecting, a re-enclosure by the Other” (p. 207).
As Young (1990) notes, “The concept of the abject theorizes one way that the subject is split between a discursive symbolic mode, on the one hand and pre-symbolic relation to the mother’s body, on the other” (p. 206). The pre-symbolic refers to Kristeva’s semiotic and the abject draws upon Kristeva’s distinction between two worlds, states of being, or forms of experience. One of these is fluid, suffused with feeling and attuned to the physical, to music and - to the extent that it is not wordless - to the rhythm of speech and the ambiguities of poetry. The other (the symbolic rather than the semiotic) is more conventionally ordered. (Goodnow, 2009, p. 30)

Kristeva poses the *chora* as maternal emotional poetry in opposition to the structured paternal and discursive language of the symbolic. This split between *chora* and the symbolic is the split between the child and the mother that the child must move through in their progression into the symbolic. The division between mother and child, *chora* and symbolic, becomes the basis of all later subject-object divisions. However, the production of the subject is not limited to the new relationship between self and other, subject and object, “but rather the moments of separation, the border between the ‘I’ and the other, before an ‘I’ is formed, that makes possible the relation of ego and its objects” (Young, 1990, p. 206). This is to say, it is the actual process of separation, of split, a process that gives birth to the ability to categorize, that creates the ego and objects as the opposite of the ego. Young explains, “The movement of abjection makes signification possible by creating a being capable of dividing, repeating, separating” (p. 207) because abjection keeps the child from returning to the mother-child state. Abjection pushes the child forward into the symbolic. As Oliver puts it, “The not-yet-subject with its not-yet,
or no-longer, object maintains ‘itself’ as the abject. Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost” (cited in McAfee, 2003, p. 48). The abject is then the process and the status between fully formed subject and object to the mother, the liminal space between chora and the symbolic. Kristeva herself links experiences of the abject with the maternal divide. As she explains,

The relation to abjection is finally rooted in the combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one becomes something other. (Guberman, 1996, p. 118)

Kristeva builds upon Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic orders, but repositions the maternal within them. “Kristeva agrees that the mirror stage may bring about a sense of unity, but she thinks that, even before this stage, the infant begins to separate itself from others in order to develop borders between “I” and other” (McAfee, 2003, p. 46). For Kristeva “the semiotic precedes the symbolic, but is never completely overridden by it” (Goodnow, 2009, p. 30). As Kristeva explains in an interview,

The subject-in-process is always in a state of contesting the law, either with the force of violence, of aggressivity, of the death drive, or with the other side of this force: pleasure and jouissance. (cited in Guberman, 1996, p. 26)

Guberman (1996) explains that this supports Kristeva’s idea that the human being is not a theoretical unity but an “open system” (p. 18). Thus the pre-lingual chora and its role in

For Lacan, the law is tied to the symbolic order. Language is the basis for all social institutions; thus, the symbolic order is the arena of language, rules, institutions and laws. It is also associated with the Father because of this. Its existence allows the subject to participate in culture and to communicate; however, it does not account for all of the subject’s nuances, which includes holdovers from the Imaginary (Wright, 1992).
early differentiation and ego formation is significant to Kristeva’s creation of the abject, as is the perpetual eruptions of the semiotic imaginary and threat that these disruptions pose to the symbolic. The abject is both the process that allows us to divide, but it can also pull us back to the time we needed to become abject, to the time of both swirling stimuli and maternal unity, to the liminal and ambiguous state between joy and chaos. The abject can pull us back to a time when we were attempting to divide ourselves from our mother’s body, by othering or degrading the maternal body, as a way to establish the self (Kauffman, 1998; Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008).

The abject maintains the double bind that the child is in, “a longing for narcissistic union with its first love and a need to renounce this union in order to become a subject” (McAfee, 2003, p. 48). The double bind of the abject is furthered because, as noted, the abject is the process of separation; it describes us as we occupy a transitional state between objects to our mothers and full subjects. However, at the same time it describes things that after we have become subjects haunt us, reminding her of her origins in objectness and in undifferentiated fluidity with her mother and the world at large. And these abject hauntings are both painful in the fear of losing the self that they represent, but they are also intriguing in that they seem familiar and remind one of a jouissance that they experienced before subjectivity, making abject hauntings perversely pleasurable.

These contradictory emotions of “horror and fascination” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 147), longing and rejection, manifest in culture in the forms of taboo foods, perverse acts, incest, violence and “religious notions of abomination and sacrilege” (p. 146). Vice (1998) argues, that
“abjection dread” can “explain the incest dread of which Freud speaks”; it protects one from the “temptation” to return to the maternal semiotic. Abjection, [Kristeva] argues, preserves the “immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be”. (p. 173)

Incest then becomes yet another longing to reunite with the mother in a semiotic state and the dread that accompanies those longings.

2.04.03.05 repression. Kristeva (1982) then shifts her emphasis away from the maternal body towards primal repression. Having argued that the mother/child divide is the origin of all subject/object divisions, Kristeva recants somewhat, arguing instead that primal repression predates even this divide. Primal repression is predicated upon Freud’s (1995) idea of the unconscious, or that there are many drives, instincts and ideas that cannot be known by the conscious subject because they are too violent, sexually explicit or transgressive; they are actively repressed, pushed out of the conscious mind. However, these thoughts return, often in pleasurable eruption of what has been pushed out of the conscious realm in dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue and art works. Repression is usually seen as occurring after the formation of the ego. The ego is associated with the conscious mind while the id, is repressed becoming the unconscious. However Kristeva (1982), borrowing from Freud, argues for primal repression “effected prior to the springing forth of the ego, of its objects and representations,” (p. 11) upon which later ego repression is based. Thus the abject reminds us and moves us to a primal space before language, even before the ego, where we discover “an effervescence of object and sign -not of desire but of intolerable significance; they tumble over into non-sense or the impossible real, but they appear even so in spite of “myself” (which is not) as abjection” (Kristeva, 1982, p.
11). Primal repression is the first repression of something too difficult or damaging to allow the conscious mind to know, which is that we are actually divided in two from the start, into the unconscious and the conscious. Our first divide is not from the mother, but the divide within the self between the conscious and the unconscious. Kristeva (1982) says, “As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside. As if such an opposition subsumed the one between Conscious and Unconscious, elaborated on the basis of neuroses” (p. 7). The binary upon which other binaries are to be enacted is the first binary within our world, which is between our conscious and our unconscious minds, a divide onto which later divides are mapped. This explains the early mechanics of the inside/outside binary and the sharp divide between the two that the abject often destabilizes. The instability of the divide between the unconscious and the conscious, as the unconscious often emerges into our conscious realm, also explains the instability that the abject symbolizes within other binary divides. If our first division is unstable, likely to create ambiguous moments, then it is no wonder that other, later divisions, which may, like the conscious minds separation from the unconscious, appear to be a stable divide but are fraught with intrusions, eruptions and ambiguity.

Kristeva (1982) argues that the abject is the object of primal repression, it is what is first repressed, the abject being the ambiguous third space of the lived experience of the conscious and unconscious together. Primal repression is “the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat” (p. 12). The subject, even before individuation from the mother, can reject and thus divide and create self, forming the ego out of the primal repression of the abject as an uneasy binary divide of
the conscious/unconscious. Even before the creation of the ego, the child has begun to practice separation through rejection, “Even before being like, ‘I’ am not but do separate, reject, ab-ject” (p. 13). Even before the ego or “I” is created, the child has begun to practice the type of rejection that will eventually allow them to separate from the mother and firmly establish their ego; this rejection is based in primal repression and the abjection of otherness even before there is a formal “I” for the Other to oppose.

2.04.03.06 superego. The process of rejection as signifier of desire is closely tied into the abject’s refusal of rules and the superego. From the periphery the abject refuses to obey rules and perpetually challenges the subject, particularly in regards to bodily integrity, the subject’s division of inside/outside. Kristeva explains that every ego has an object and every superego has an abject. She says, “A certain ‘ego,’ that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it [the jettisoned object] away. It lies outside, beyond the set and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game” (Kristeva, 1982, p.2).

The superego is the moral center and holds the id in check by reigning in our socially unacceptable desires and fantasies. The superego is based on rules and structures learned from both the individual’s literal father, but also the Father, or the Lacanian Symbolic register, the masculine, disciplining and lawful world of language and culture that must be entered to become a fully functioning subject. Thus an individual who has been consumed by the rule-oriented superego rejects the radically excluded abject object; however, the abject refuses this exclusion. “And yet, from it’s place of banishment the

54 Set refers to the parameters of the game, a metaphor Kristeva is using for culture and the abject’s refusal to ‘play by the rules’.
abject does not cease challenging its master…it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). Not only does the abject refuse rules and exclusion, it haunts from the periphery, demanding a violent acknowledgement of existence. It is “a brutish suffering that ‘I’ put up with, sublime and devastated, … I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other” (p. 2). The abject is suffering, a suffering that the subject endures thinking it is the desire of others for them to do so.

2.04.03.07 food. This suffering and its rejection can be explained in relationship to food. Kristeva (1982) notes, “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (p. 2) and “speaks of food’s potential to ‘penetrate’ the self’s ‘clean and proper body’” (Vice, 1998, p. 169). She explains the abject through an experience of either seeing or touching the surface of milk with a thin skin on it and then the gagging, stomach spasm, bile, dizziness, rapid heartbeat and perspiration that follow its ingestion. Vice (1997) states that “the skin on milk disturbs order, adds an unexpectedly lively element to food and reminds the subject of the fragility of their own clean and proper body, bounded only by the same kind of ‘pitiful’ skin” (p. 163). The skin on the milk signals age, rot and death, as well as the link to our own skin, a border that contains. As it references the self, one is in danger of consuming oneself through consuming the skin. This rejection also signals the system of what is good to eat and “the efforts of clean and proper subjects to avoid excessive contact of the social with the organic represented both by food and by excrement” (p. 163).

The suffering of the abject is made visible because to drink the milk, to endure the skin on the milk that signifies rot, is to do what the other, your parent, wants. This is to bear the suffering that you imagine the other wants from you. The milk becomes a
signifier of the mother, where consuming the milk could amount to “a phobic
disintegration of the taboo barring the mother” (Vice, 1997, p. 163) or a signifier for
parental desire. Kristeva (1982) explains the milk and the nausea it has induced, saying
that the sickness

separate[s] me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that
element, sign of their desire. “I” do not want to listen. “I” do not assimilate it, “I”
expel it. But since food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I
expel myself, I spit myself out. I abject myself within the same motion through
which “I” claim to establish myself: (p. 3)

You spit the milk out, but the milk is not an other, so the other that is jettisoned in the spit
is yourself in opposition to the self that your parents are constructing through giving you
the milk and expecting you to drink it. You refuse to agree to the rules of the superego,
which is built by obedience to parents, thus furthering the creation of your own ego
through rejected desire of the parents and rejected suffering at the hands of the parents.

Kristeva continues,

That detail,\textsuperscript{55} perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they\textsuperscript{56} ferret out,
emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is in this that
they see that ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other…I give birth to myself

\textsuperscript{55} The simultaneous expulsion and establishment of the self.
\textsuperscript{56} Your parent, or another other, see and focus on this moment giving it even more weight
and taking note of it as a rejection of them as well as the milk. Think of a parent talking
to a child who has spit up their milk, questioning them; is it not good? Is it different than
before? Why would you spit it out? Why make such a mess? I drink the same milk, it is
good and good for you, etc. This is less about the milk and the mess and more about a
willful rejection of the parent’s authority and desire.
amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion. (p. 3)

Subjectivity is born in violence and vomit.

2.04.03.08 abject shit, the role of waste. For Kristeva (1982), waste of all kinds: vomit, blood, excreta, sweat, etc, must drop away from us. The excretion of any waste makes us expel ourselves, like the milk-vomit. This expulsion and rejection works as a way to solidify the subject’s sense of self. However, at the same time it threatens the self through the admission that the self is in flux, perpetually threatened by rot, and in need of solidifying. In regards to waste, it is “no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (p. 4). Thus, our adherence, or rejection, to cultural schemas of the clean and proper actually act as a way in which our subjectivity is built. Kauffman (1998) explains that, “Freud speculates: In the nursery... excreta arouse no disgust in children. They seem valuable to them as being a part of their own body which has come away from them” (p. 43). He uses this example as a way of approaching the subject/object relationship of the abject, as the child later learns to find feces abhorrent, but is still plagued by its status as not quite subject, nor object.

Fecal expulsion is needed, not because of a violation of purity taboos, or its literal ability to cause disease, but it must be rejected because of its association with the maternal, as it is the mother who assists the young child in toilet training and sphincter control. Blood produces a similar repulsion. It has a close association with the female body and menstruation, as well as the trauma associated with blood becoming externalized through a breach of the body. Sweat points to the porousness of the body, as does breast milk, which also harkens back to the mother and chora. Kristeva explains...
that, “the subject achieves autonomy through the process of rejecting improper and unclean elements that are reminiscent of his/her initial fusion with the maternal body” (cited in Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 67). Vomit, as seen in the milk, proves bodily orifices work in both directions, expelling a product that was meant to be incorporated into the body – food – but has now turned to waste through its interaction with the inside of the body through mastication and bile. It is also an expulsion of the mother, the other’s desire for you to drink the milk. The only bodily substance that Kristeva leaves out of her discussion of that which is contaminating or dirty is tears, because they look like water and have a historical attachment to religiousness and purity.

2.04.03.09 the corpse. Kristeva (1982) explains “The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably become a cropper, is cesspool and death: it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance” (p. 3). The height of abjection, according to Kristeva, is the corpse as it is, “a border that has encroached upon everything” (p. 3); it “shows me what I must permanently thrust aside in order to live” (p. 3). She goes on to note that, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (p. 4). The corpse is abject because it reminds us of what we must ignore or repress to exist: death, our body’s eventual decay and annihilation, as well as our body’s defilement through the production of shit and fluids. The corpse causes a traumatic brush with what Lacan called the Real, or life as it exists outside the mitigation of language, essentially pure experience, without the screen of religion or science to shield from the horror of what we will eventually become, the most “fundamental pollution” (p. 109): death. In this way, the abject is related to Freud’s uncanny which is promulgated by an “ambiguity about the
extent to which something is, or is not, alive” (Kauffman, 1998, p. 27). Like the uncanny which confuses life and death, the abject’s relationship to the corpse is the cadaver’s refusal of systems, systems which say that human is life, is subjectivity, is permanent, where the corpse reminds us that we die, that subjectivity ends at the death of the body. The abject is, however, deeper than just a feeling of strangeness; it is a shift in how we constitute ourselves because the self, both our bodily dissolution and the end to our unique subjecthood, is what is at stake when touched by the abject.

Death, putrefaction, bodily excreta are all things, which “threaten the subject/object divide, [and] must be expelled if the “I” is to unfold” (Brayton, 2007, p. 59). Moreover, “The abject must not touch me for fear that it will ooze through, obliterating the border between inside and outside, which is necessary for my life, but which arises in the process of expulsion” (Young, 1990, p. 207). The I, or the subject, a fully-fledged identity, is dependent on wholeness in the Western tradition. These fluids represent fragmentation. I am not these fluids; I merely produced them. Thus they are not me (but are more me than a random object) and must be voided to establish an unfragmented self, or a healthy I.

While the abject forms the subject, it simultaneously threatens its own formation, reminding us of our origins in chora. Kristeva (1982) says that the abject, “simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (p. 5) and that this happens the most when the subject turns inward. Turning inward the individual can see that their being is predicated upon abjection, that they are both subjects, speaking personalities and objects, bodies full of substances, and that neither of these formations separately address the totality of the individual’s existence. Rather, the subject “finds that the impossible
constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject” (p. 5). It becomes clear that the individual is abject through their dual being because the individual’s existence is predicated on the abject as humans are uneasy chimeras, difficult mixes of objectness and subjectivity.

2.04.03.10 an exile who asks “where?”: dejects, jouissance and phobia. Kristeva (1982) addresses the spatial and temporal aspect of the abject when she explains that the deject, or the abject subject, inhabits “a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered” (p. 8). Through an apocalyptic-looking scene, Kristeva argues that the abject must have once been a coveted place, but now detritus has turned this land into something aversive. But the covetousness still exists, at the same time as repulsion, paradoxically bringing two opposites together in the same space, two times together at once. As Kristeva notes, “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (p. 9). This seems most easily understood in the binary of the loving mother of the chora versus the devouring mother of the vagina dentata. This is the same mother seen from different points of time in our development, but both of these versions of mother exist simultaneously in the abject through both the allure of home and comfort combined with the fear of destruction.

Kristeva goes on to describe the deject as someone who occupies multiple times, like the figure of the mother who is both loving and frightening based on time. She calls the deject an exile or “stray,” one who wanders off course and doesn’t realize their own abject/deject status. Rather than asking who I am, the abject subject asks where am I, as space and borders, engross them because the deject “places (themself), separates (themself), situates (themself) and therefore strays instead of getting their bearings,
desiring, belonging, or refusing” (p. 8). Kristeva explains that the deject is, “a deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines - for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject - constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh” (p. 8). However, it is straying that saves the deject, because “the more he strays, the more he is saved…. For it is out of such straying on excluded ground that he draws his jouissance” (p. 8). Straying and its accompanying preoccupation with spatial demarcation, is one of the pleasures of the abject, it provides jouissance, a transgressive, excessive pleasure in splitting the self through spatial demarcations. It is in this section that the spatial aspects of the abject become articulated through the deject. This relates to the inside/outside binary of the abject and the idea that the self is spat out into the world, both spatial metaphors that reinforce the power of space.

2.04.03.11 jouissance. Kristeva asserts that the deject engages in the demarcation of space because of jouissance. The term jouissance denotes a pleasure that is also painful and it is another way the “fascinated” victim of the abject is created. The subject is threatened, caused pain, but it is also a pleasurable or generative pain as it helps to form the subject. Kristeva (1982) explains, “Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant” (p. 9). She connects jouissance to the abject to explain why it is that we engage in the abject, why, if the abject is a collapse of meaning, we choose or need to engage with it. It is here that Kristeva argues that the abject is above all ambiguity, stemming from the dual pleasure and pain of jouissance and the need for and fear of the abject.
Accompanying abject *jouissance*, one finds fear and phobia. The subject is threatened by dissolution or fracture in the face of the abject, creating fear of that which can nullify or break our existence. Kristeva (1982) uses another parable of a child to address the role of fear within the abject. This child “who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, ‘all by himself,’ and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him - all gifts, all objects” (pp. 5-6). The child, having rejected everything (including the mother’s body, which had been a comfort for him and an unsteady, if formative, father), experiences fear as “the phobic has no other object than the abject” (p. 6). In other words, phobia’s basis always lies in the abject, the jettisoned that returns and not only causes disgust, but also fear, particularly fear of contamination.

Like the milk, this creates the child’s own self and borders through rejection of the parents and their desires in favor of the child’s own ego. However, fear now takes over because in forming the self, the child has abjected themself, turned themself, and the ego that they spat out, into waste. But the self cannot be waste, it cannot be the other, or rather it cannot continue on as abject. This is a momentary event. Once the child abjects themself, spitting out filth and otherness, they reaffirm themselves because the other to parental desire is the child’s own ego, which has been manifest. The self is produced in the same motion that waste is expelled, creating a strong and frightening connection between ego and abject. The fear that accompanies this process does not simply disappear during the restoration of the self; it diffuses and infects everything around the subject, often creating associations between the abject and things near the child during this process, the phobic objects of abjection. This diffusion simultaneously “bracket[s]”
(Kristeva, 1982, p. 6) fear, which results in discourse seeming “tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject” (p. 6). To dissipate this fear of losing one’s self, the child must engage with the abject and approach the phobic object again and again. Each engagement with the abject provides an opportunity for the child to abject themself, which strengthens their ego, while still leaving a residue of fear that they, and all humans, are simply waste. This becomes part of the appeal or allure of the abject; to dissipate the phobic feeling of the abject, the subject must perpetually engage in the abject, becoming a fascinated victim.

2.04.03.12 from perverse to sublime: the profane and the sacred. According to Kristeva (1982), beyond jouissance and phobia, “the abject is related to perversion” (p. 15). Perversion in this instance stems not from a breaking of laws, but a refusal to acknowledge that laws exist. Corruption is then the socialized form of abjection. Kristeva suggests that early writing on religion, morality and law all attempt to hem in the abject, to contain it and keep it away from society. Related to perversion, is its near opposite: the sacred. Kristeva discusses the abasement of self in relation to Christian mysticism and the notion of humility, as well as self-mutilation in masochism, as abjection. Abasement is making oneself low or dirty. Abasement also means making oneself fall outside the normative systems that prop up the ego and make the self appear beautiful and whole. In short, abasement is a type of abjection. While it seems counter indicative, abasement creates the self through an expulsion of societal desires, in a similar manner to the expulsion of self through the rejection of milk/parental desire. The abject accompanies all
religious structures, texts and laws. Within the context of religion, abjection appears as defilement or pollution and exclusion or taboo.

However, as Kristeva (1982) also notes, “The various means of purifying the abject - the various catharses - make up the history of religions and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art” (p. 17). This passage becomes very important not only in understanding the abject's relationship to religion, but to the role of abjection in art. Kristeva argues that art is part and parcel of religiosity, even in a post-religious era, a statement with which I disagree. Citing a crisis in religion, Kristeva says “abjection elicits more archaic resonances that are culturally prior to sin” (p. 17). The heart of religion is described in the duality of clean/dirty, sacred versus profane and this historically predates not only Christianity, but religion in general, as they are related to innate human drives. New texts that feature the same patterns of the sacred versus the profane, the duality of clean and proper and the defilement that occurs in ambiguity, become Biblical or at least religious in that they instruct us in the foundational binaries.

The sublime, often associated with religious awe, and sublimation, the transformation of unacceptable impulses into socially acceptable actions, are also attached to the abject. Kristeva (1982) explains that the abject exists between bodily systems, bodily responses and sublimation, or the conscious transformation of the unacceptable biological drives into socially acceptable mitigated forms. She says that, “In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime” (p. 11). Exploiting the slippage in

Kristeva neglects to address contemporary art and how its form and function differs radically from art of previous eras.
meaning between sublime and sublimation, Kristeva connects the sublime and the abject, noting that they both expand and overstrain us, they overwhelm, they cause us to exist in two spaces, corporeal and spiritual/psychological. However, the abject is held in check through sublimation; its potential to totally overwhelm or obliterate us is consciously altered into more socially acceptable outlets. The abject is a permanent state that we intentionally direct ourselves away from into socially productive activities to maintain order and the appearance of cleanliness. The sublime, or that which inspires wonder through its immensity, shares its roots with sublimation and maintains the same upward mobility of veneration, but specifies its origins in the low and base human instinct, whereas sublimation is not necessarily born out of the low, but the unacceptable. Kristeva not only labels the abject sublime, but uses the language of the sublime, of thunder and awe, affect and terribleness to address the abject’s unchecked power and the need for conversion through sublimation. This language of thunder and awe and links to the sublime further suggest the abject’s relationship to the Lacanian Real or the place of sublime experiences of life unchecked by culture.

2.04.03.13 Kristeva’s intellectual kin: Douglas’ dirt. One definition of the abject is “a ‘border’ that is ‘above all ambiguity’” (Macedo, 2001, p. 75), a boundary that is unstable, even permeable. Abjection is the transgression of a system’s borders. Much of Kristeva’s work borrows from Douglas’ Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966/2000), which argues that dirt is what defies classification. Douglas’ work was mentioned earlier in regards to disgust, but it is also foundational to much of Kristeva’s work with abjection. Douglas (1966/2000) explains that “taboos depend on a form of communitywide complicity” (p. xii) or that, “There is no such thing
as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit” (p.xvii). Rather systems of hygiene and of convention structure our ideas of dirt, creating a communal schema that calls for participation and condemnation of certain substances. For Douglas, this complicity is assured by an inherent human impulse towards classification and ordering behaviors. In a move, which could be seen as biological essentialism, Douglas asserts that, “this activity of classifying is a human universal” (p. xvii). However, Douglas furthers her argument saying,

> If we can abstract pathogenicity in hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as a matter out of place… Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a linkup with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (p. 44)

Dirt is matter out-of-order. With its cleaning, perfuming and beautifying, society is perpetually reordering the environment and casting out, rejecting and condemning “any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (p. 45).

Douglas sites the need for ordering as a way to make sense of “inherently untidy experiences” (p. 5). Thus, dirt is attached to confusing and difficult experiences like death, menstruation and violence, sickness, physical and psychological aberrations, as well as religious taboos that attempt to explain large-scale trauma like famine and natural disaster. To build a stable worldview out of the shifting chaos of our surroundings, we accept certain ideas and in doing so, in the same motion, we reject others to create a
pattern, a system. Ideologies are easily explained as cultural common sense. They are “the mental frameworks - the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representation - which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall, 1986 p. 30). Ideology can also be understood as the “standardized values of the community, [that] mediate the experience of individuals” (Douglas, 1966/2000, p. 48).

These systems often distance the individual from experiences of dirt by providing a method for approaching different forms of pollution, such as that which warrants wiping your hands on your pants versus washing them thoroughly versus procuring gloves before tackling a mess. Douglas (1966/2000) explains that certain “ambiguous [experiences] tend to be treated as if they harmonized with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected” (p. 45). This can be cognitively difficult, as these experiences exist in between two states at once. In a social context, these experiences cannot exist, but they are tangibly real so they must be rejected, even though they necessarily, even naturally, exist. Shit for example, is a day-to-day necessity of inhabiting a body, it exists and often makes itself known, but also it reminds us that the body is in flux, digesting, changing and ultimately rotting, sloughing off dead cells. To repress the pollution that this realization causes, shit must be handled in particular ways, constrained by different systems for dealing with pollution that often limits where elimination happens, who is present for it and what is done with it afterwards.

Abjection pulls us back to our first sensations of system, a primal system before language and the symbolic; an order that definitions of dirty/danger and clean/sacred are based upon; the mother’s body versus our own body. Foster (1996) and Gutiérrez-Albilla
(2008) support this idea as both see the abject as opposed to culture, or as linked to a pre-symbolic system.

**2.04.03.14 stickiness.** Jean-Paul Sartre addresses this ambiguous zone of dirt and defilement in his inquiry into sticky substances that create a physical quandary, as stickiness exists between two states. Sartre finds sticky substances like honey to be dirty, because they inhabit a space between a solid and a liquid. Douglas (1966/2000) explains Sartre’s concept,

An infant, plunging its hands into a jar of honey, is instantly involved in contemplating the formal properties of solids and liquids and the essential relationship between the subjective experiencing self and experienced world… [it] is like a cross-section in a process of changing. It is unstable, but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. There is no gliding on its surface. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between it and myself. Long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness. Plunging into water gives a different impression. I remain a solid, but to touch stickiness is to risk deluding myself into viscosity. Stickiness is clinging, like a too possessive dog or mistress. (p. 47)

For Sartre, stickiness is dirt because it defies classification, a solid that loses its form, yet not a yielding liquid. The implicit dirtiness of stickiness explains the unease that many feel when encountering it, because while honey may be edible, when on one’s hands it either necessitates washing or licking it off, a disgusting act in itself that still leaves the fingers unclean with saliva.
Encounters with system breakers and outliers cause pollution, dirtiness and impurity. Conversely, pollution and taboos mark the boundaries and margins of the culture. However, “this is not necessarily an unpleasant experience. There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and intensities” (Douglas, 1966/2000, p. 46). Pollution is on a sliding scale of reactions and levels of rejection. Dirt is not only a necessary category, it is desirable, as it provides a way to reassert cultural schemas either through upholding them or transgressing them. Through systems of differentiation between what is pure and dirty a unified experience is created for the subject. Without dirtiness not only would there be no cleanliness, but there would be no system with which to understand the world, since for Douglas, the clean/pure system is what other binary systems are predicated upon.

This supports Kristeva’s work on the abject. For Kristeva and Douglas, it is not bile that is disgusting, but the fact that bile\(^{58}\) breaks down the classifications between pure and impure, self and other, subject and object, inside and outside. Kristeva (1982) explains, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order” (p. 4). It is through its non-adherence to rules of the Symbolic order that the abject is then applied to crime, to liars and to atrocities like Auschwitz. Kristeva explains this in a story of seeing the piles of shoes at the Holocaust Memorial at Auschwitz and experiencing such a strong sense of the uncanny that it transcended the notion of the uncanny through its horror becoming the abject. These

\(^{58}\) Bile becomes an especially good example of the abject. Bile outside the body in the form of vomit breaks down the border of internal and external, while bile inside the body breaks down food stuff in the digestive system so that is can be absorbed by the digestive system, further confusing the divides between self and other, as well as inside/outside and food/waste.
innocent shoes, familiar in other contexts, like under a Christmas tree, become perverse when piled together in this context. The shoes become a semiotic sign of the atrocities that have lead to those shoes being piled there, so that seeing the shoes out of place is to see the horrors that created this confusing, uncanny, pile. Furthermore, the fact that they are children’s shoes makes the experience of the pile more abject because children are the essence of life and everything that combats the terror of death. “The abjection of Nazi crimes reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4).

Abjection sits on the margins, close, haunting from “just the other side of the border. So the abject is not opposed to and facing the subject, but next to it, too close for comfort” (Young, 1990, p. 208). Binary systems create a line, a border that splits the two opposites from one another and the abject sits near this border. Thus, the abject causes us anxiety and discomfort as “the subject is ‘thrown down,’ towards a boundary its existence is premised on forgetting” (Vice, 1998, p. 164). The boundary then is every border - when a finger is pricked we are made violently aware of the thinness of our own border, our skin. The image of an immigrant causes some to be reminded of the border of the nation, which is unconsciously visualize as solid, even though it is actually open uninterrupted space. The border is in fact fictive or at least abstract. The abject, then, is any rupture in the symbolic code, “Any border ambiguity may become for the subject a threat to its own borders, a revelation that the separation between self and Other is the product of a violent break, an irretrievable loss, a lack without name or reference” (Young, 1990, p. 208). The abject is “the negative side where the semiotic or imaginary
realm seems to threaten to disrupt the orderly symbolic realm” (McAfee, 2003, p. 45). As Grosz (1990) further explains,

> Abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain. The symbolic requires that a border separate or protect the subject from the abyss, whichbeckons and haunts it: the abject entices and attracts the subject ever closer to its edge. (p. 89)

However, while a disruption of the symbolic causes anxiety, there is also a necessity for the imaginary within the symbolic. The abject performs a necessary function pulling us back from the edge and a plummet into ambiguous entropy. If one were to embrace the abject entirely, one would lose their subjectivity, ceasing to understand the border between themselves and everything else, resulting in a state of formlessness (Bois & Krauss, 2000).

> Interiority versus exteriority as a system, particularly in relation to the body, is important to the abject because it is from both the inside and outside that the abject threatens. As Grosz (1989) writes, abjection involves examining the ways in which the inside and outside of the body are constituted, the spaces between the self and the other and the means by which the child’s body comes to be a bounded, unified whole [and] gains access to symbolization. (p. 169)

Others beyond Grosz have focused on the inter/external binaries of the abject. Goodnow (2009) for example, offers a qualitative difference in the abject based on the abject within the body and the abject outside the body. She explains that,

> The distinctions have to do with the abject without as against within the
body, with the abject that is recognizable as against the abject which presents
with a clean, false face and with the abject in the form both of the collapse of
differences between male and female and of reminders of some particular
differences between them. (p. 28)

Whenever there is tension surrounding a collapse of difference, there is also tension
around the difference itself. This stems from the abject’s perpetual state as a signifier that
identity itself is unstable and artificial. The abject is a fear of identity collapsing.

With an assault on the boundaries of order in mind, it is no wonder that the abject
“carries with it an element of crisis” (Meagher, 2003, p. 33) and trauma and “calls
attention to the fundamental instability upon which psychic realities are constituted” (p.
33). The experience of abjection is described as that of bodily disgust “a feeling, a
visceral suspicion that one is or could easily become out of bounds, unruly, disgusting”
(p. 33). This emotional response, the feeling of disgust, “raises the subject’s suspicion
that psychically established boundaries - as well as those that are socially constructed -
are not in fact secure” (p. 33).

Insecurity surrounding our selves leads to constant self-surveillance for the abject,
which “haunts” (Cooklin cited in Brayton, 2007, p. 59) our identity with ambiguity.
Specifically the abject manifests itself in blood, gore, vomit, urine, feces, saliva, sweat,
tears, but also finds a home in the maternal body (Creed, 1993), the aging body, the
menstrual body, or the body which is turned inside out (Kauffman, 1998; Hughes, 2009).
In looking at abject art, like the works of Cindy Sherman or Robert Gober, Foster (1996)
explains that such “images evoke the body turned inside out, the subject literally
abjected, thrown out. But they also evoke the outside turned in, the subject-as-picture
invaded by the object-gaze’’ (p. 149). Bodily fluids, which make evident the abject, do so because they are not just objects, they were once a part of the body, the self, the subject. However, they are not truly the subject either; they do not live, they do not have identity. They occupy a space in between, a space that alludes to subjection and objecthood, but also is neither. They embody abjecthood. It is this liminal, third space, to reference Bhabha’s (2004) work or what Anzaldúa (2007) calls the borderlands. The abject refuses neat definitions; rather, it sits on the crest between asking us to question those “cherished classifications” through an insertion of ambiguity and disorder.

2.04.03.16 if Freud and Kristeva had a baby: the uncanny. When encounters with the abject do not wound, when the abject haunts rather than attacks, these experiences can best be described as uncanny, or the feeling of both foreignness and familiarity at once. The uncanny’s relationship to abjection has much to do with the confusion of boundaries, as the uncanny is the feared confusion between whether an animate being is truly alive and conversely whether a lifeless object might be animate. The uncanny is also something familiar that feels strange and foreign or vice versa. Freud explained that the uncanny is “something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (cited in McAfee, 2003, p. 49). This confusion over what is and is not alive, what is or is not known, what is or is not familiar, causes cognitive dissonance, or both an attraction and repulsion to the same object. This cognitive dissonance often leads to a rejection of the troublesome object. It is easier to reject something than to rationalize the pleasure experienced from what is also discomforting or peculiar (Storey, 2009).
According to McAfee (2003), “Freud traces this feeling of uncanniness back to ‘particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people’” (p. 49). The uncanny is a repression of our origins in the maternal body. The feeling of the uncanny, in German *das Unheimliche* (un-home-like), is in opposition to *das Heimliche* (the home-like) and becomes a metaphor for being subsumed back into the mother’s womb, or to lose our unique identity (Bishop, 2006). The uncanny then is the return of the repressed; as Freud notes, “We can understand why linguistic usage has extended into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind” (cited in McAfee, 2003, p. 48). Freud (2003) also explains that, “Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym Unheimlich. The uncanny (das Unheimliche, ‘the unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar (das Heimliche, ‘the homely’)” (p.134). The uncanny is ambiguous, a hybrid of both homely and unhomely, that is not new, but is newly returned from repression. This return disturbs in its pleasurable and alluring home qualities, while disturbing with its foreignness.

Kristeva (1982) notes that, “the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I” (p. 1), thus to be neither object nor subject, is to be abject and to cause uncanniness within this third subject position, which breaks the binary. While this formation is usually noted as neither subject nor object, in light of the uncanny, the abject is better understood as both subject and object, both homely yet unfamiliar. This then explains the abject’s dissonant qualities of attraction and repulsion. Kristeva describes the quality of abject as being, “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.
It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (p. 1). Again, like the uncanny, the abject is close, it is similar to the “I,” yet not a subject. The uncanny and the abject are both object-like, but with more meaning, having a type of partial life of their own.

According to art historian Hall Foster (1996), in “the canonical definition of Kristeva, … [abject] is what I must get rid of in order to be an I… a fantastic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it” (p. 153).

2.04.03.17 the uncanny and the corpse. The uncanny is also found in the specter of death that further links the uncanny and the abject. Like our origins, we repress that we will die, even though it is an obvious and familiar fact, until we are confronted with a corpse and that which was familiar (Heimlich), a human being, a loved one, becomes unfamiliar or foreign (Unheimlich). The experience of the uncanny is a sense of unease at whether the corpse is truly dead and conversely whether the viewer of the corpse is wholly alive, as death is a constant process (Bishop, 2006; Clark, 2006; Freud, 2003).

Images of the corpse, “anticipate the culminating moment when the total body becomes waste through its transforming into a corpse” (Jay, 1998, p. 146). The fact that our bodies (something familiar) house these precursors of death (something foreign) creates the cognitive dissonance of the uncanny and yet there is something appealing about abjection, something that, “points back to a time before individuation, just as it signifies the time after when the body becomes a mere corpse” (p. 147). Thus abjection becomes, as Kristeva (1982) says, a “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness” (p. 2). These moments of uncanniness, of confusion between life and death, self and other, familiar and unfamiliar, point to the border instability that is abjection. As Macedo (2001) explains of
Kristeva’s work, the abject is, “what ‘disturbs identity, system, order’. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (p. 75).

The uncanny becomes abject and loathsome because it is not radically excluded, the subject recognizes the abject as “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). This “not nothing either” is the familiar of the uncanny, familiar because of its attachments to the self, because it once inhabited or was attached to us. However, it is also foreign since it has been rejected through the process of abjection. The abject is then both meaningless and meaningful. The abject is meaningless because it exists outside of our ordering system and before language. The abject is meaningful because as Kristeva (1982) notes, “there is nothing insignificant” (p. 2) about the abject. This meaning comes from the overdetermined nature of abject substances and the structuring effects of abjection.

2.04.03.18 recapping Kristeva. Kristeva’s configuration of the abject labels certain substances as the excluded and jettisoned: blood, vomit, rotten food, death and putrefaction. The process by which these substances are excluded, but haunt us from the margins, is abjection, a seemingly failed method that human beings use to mark out what is clean and proper. The failure here stems from the inability to radically and totally exclude these substances. This also applies to non-substances like borders, since borders cannot be radically excluded either; they are necessary demarcations between here and there, us and them, so they menace us like bodily substances. Abjection begins in early childhood as the child tries to differentiate themselves from their unified existence with their mothers. The split from the mother, which is actually predicated upon an even earlier split between the conscious and unconscious, is the division that forms all other
divisions between subjecthood and objects. Kristeva’s use of the abject is deeply embedded in psychoanalysis, borrowing heavily from Lacan and Freud. It begins with food loathing and moves on to death, religion, other bodily substances, but never goes beyond the individual. It engages with ambiguity and borders, but doesn’t directly engage with the literature of the third space or liminality. While understanding Kristeva’s seminal text is necessary to understanding the abject, other scholars have taken Kristeva’s ideas and either transformed them or applied them to things far beyond the scope of Kristeva’s original text.

2.04.04 new directions in abjection. Kristeva’s work has been both criticized and altered by later scholars. While some critics like Bois and Krauss59 (2000) have dismissed the abject in favor of other theoretical approaches to the liminal, like formlessness, others have reconfigured the abject to make it work better in a contemporary context and to be used for more than literary analysis. In the next section I will cover authors who have either built upon Kristeva’s abject, creating their own particular approaches to the abject, or have applied the abject to subject matter far beyond Kristeva’s original literary sites. These more recent scholars have often politicized the abject, looking at how it effects political and social formation in ways that Kristeva did not. Much of this scholarship has influenced my understanding of the potential of the abject and has been foundational to my own abject visual methodology.

59 It would be hard to discuss art and abjection without looking closely at the work of Bois and Krauss (2000) on formlessness. However, their work theoretically has not inspired my own work, while their methodological structure has been influential. With this in mind, a more thorough account of formlessness as articulated by Bois and Krauss is included in my methodology chapter.
**2.04.04.01 abjection as waste production.** Chanter (2008) reconceptualizes abjection as the process by which waste is created and excluded. All systems create waste and byproducts, and that waste is abjected or jettisoned out. Chanter argues that, “Any discourse that claims for itself a foundational status by exempting from its orbit those it designates as other at the same time as appropriating what it can from them conforms to the logic of abjection” (p. 3). Thus any system in which there is exclusion falls under the logic of abjection. Chanter explains, “there is a systematic production of waste, of that which is useless, unproductive, of that which does not conform to the logic of patriarchy, capitalism, or colonialism” (p. 3). Waste is the other to the logic of hegemony and the systematic production of waste through othering is combined with “a usurpation, exploitation and appropriation of precisely that which is only admitted in so far as it is capable of conforming to such logics” (pp. 3-4).

**2.04.04.01.01 abject waste and hegemony.** Abjection is the process by which waste is created and excluded, but it also entails the coopting of anything that will conform to the dominant, making abjection the way in which hegemony is both formed and a way in which it can be challenged. Anything that does not conform to the logics of the dominant discourse, is labeled as nonsensical. To exceed the terms of this logic, is to be labeled inferior. As Chanter (2008) notes, “Anything that cannot be converted into assets from this point of view is discarded as incoherent, insane, nonsensical, outside the bounds of reason, as defined by a logic that is taken to be universal” (p. 5).

Chanter discusses the process of assimilation and exclusion in-depth in regards to women. Chanter (2008) explains,
The production of the feminine as a site of excess by a masculine imaginary allows for the inclusion of those aspects that prove useful for inclusion and incorporation by a masculinist and ostensibly universalist logic. The feminine is admitted only insofar as it constitutes the raw material to be worked over and made to conform to a logic that will not admit it as excessive or different, but that requires its otherness or alterity to subsist as inferior and contained. Thus, both at the material level of the reproduction of the species and at the level of signification, the feminine is admitted only insofar as it can contribute productively to the society, or the state, the ends of which are defined by an invisibly white, patriarchal capitalism. (pp. 4-5)

Chanter (2008) links her revision of abjection to a larger process of identification, explaining that,

subjects are abjected by identificatory regimes that preclude them or render them unintelligible. Striving to establish or maintain their integrity, subjects abandon others to abject states, often in an attempt to consolidate boundaries that are threatened. Yet abjection can also be taken up as a political strategy, given shape as a way of protesting and disrupting imaginaries that are sustained through the systematic exclusion of certain others. (p. 2)

2.04.04.01.02 abject peoples. The abject can be deployed to either make further invisible an already deject group, or to shore up the dominant group’s identity. More than defining the parameters of identity, the abject makes “available for reflection and interrogation the imaginary operations that we usually take to be indicative of who we are, of our identities and the identity of others” (Chanter, 2008, p. 3). This means that the
abject is one of the few ways in which we can step out of our ideological practices of identification and can question the ways in which our identity and others are constituted, the ways in which we are hailed as subjects, or shut out of the identificatory process.

2.04.04.01.03 possible problems. Chanter’s project allows for more nuance than Kristeva’s project. Chanter (2008) is conscious of the systematic nature of the abject and that all systems produce waste of one sort or another. She explains,

The very process of rendering determinate this indeterminacy leads to possibilities of reifying or fetishizing those marginal excluded others who have played a constitutive role in the configuration of gender or race discourses, but whose role has not been acknowledged as such, or has only been acknowledged in exclusionary ways. Not only is there a danger of fetishizing previously excluded others, but in the process of bringing to light their abjection, in the process of giving shape to, or specifying the contours of their history and experience, as often as not new others are abjected. (p. 6)

In using the abject as a tool to undo systemic oppression, one must be conscious that the system does not simply create new abjects, or further abjects, further jettisons, those who are already marginalized. Chanter (2008) further explains,

The tendency of radical politics to reproduce at another level and in a new guise the exclusionary gestures against which they are protesting and thus to invent a new series of others in their attempt to combat the processes that have in turn hypostasized them as other, demands theoretical reflection. (p. 5)

The systemic quality of the abject which is predicated on the perpetual replication of the abject, demands a reflection; why the abject at all? In trying to effect political change,
why use something that replicates itself in further marginalization? This is an important point to Chanter’s argument about the negative and positive political ramifications of the abject. The abject is deployed to trouble dominant borders, but is also used to secure them. For Chanter, the politics of the abject can be progressive through a redistribution of agency to those labeled waste, but can be equally conservative as it stabilizes borders that protect hegemonic dominion.

2.04.04.01.04 benefits of an abject systemic critique. Because the abject in Chanter’s (2008) reformulation is applied to systems, it can be applied to a far broader series of cultural productions than Kristeva’s original work. While Kristeva’s site of study is literature, Chanter’s work can be applied to the critique of any system. Chanter’s abject addresses both identity formation as a system, looking towards the exclusion of women from the phallic order of psychoanalysis and the racialized body as other, as well as systems of capital, imperialism and even environmental degradation. Chanter explains, “The environment is reduced to the wasteland of slag heaps, while the natives of colonized lands either are not recognized as properly human, or only become so through forced practices of assimilation” (p. 3). There are systems at play in these events,

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60 Chanter is not the only scholar to link the abject to environmental degradation. Bert Olivier is his work “Nature as ‘abject,’ critical psychology and ‘revolt’: The pertinence of Kristeva,” in South African Journal of Psychology, 2007, 37(3), pp. 443-469, explores the ways in which nature is constructed as the devouring mother and the other that needs to be dominated. Nature is the opposite of culture and often gendered as feminine versus society and civilization, which is constructed as masculine. The environment then becomes a marginalized other, exploited by the dominant, in this instance capitalism, like low-income workers and racialized or immigrant bodies. The treatment of the environment as an other that by the logic of abjection needs to be excluded and can be exploited without censure has led to our current environmental crisis.
primarily mechanics of rejection, exclusion, and exploitation that can be understood through abjection.

Returning to the earlier question as to the importance of the abject and its usefulness, the answer lies in how an understanding of the abject can uncover the unconscious and imaginary role of disgust and waste in the creation, use and maintenance of systems. Chanter (2008) argues, “At the same time as threatening the current symbolic order, abjection provides the opportunity for its reworking, precisely insofar as it represents a crisis in meaning” (p. 6). Waste, while a natural byproduct, also has the element of crisis, of ambiguity, of danger to the established borders that Kristeva (1982) establishes in her own work. But Chanter expands the abject to apply to a broader range of systems than that of the body, providing the logic for which minorities of all types are excluded and attaching the abject not just to the symbolic, but to capitalism and patriarchy. Thus, Chanter infuses the abject with a political agency that Kristeva’s work lacked.

2.04.04.02 abject embodiments.

2.04.04.02.01 the mechanics of desire in abject embodiments. Picking up on an under developed theme in *Power of Horrors* (1982), Grosz (1994) emphasizes that as well as loathing, there is desire within the abject. While Kristeva addresses a fascination that can be understood as desire, she does not emphasize this point. Grosz (1994) explains in regards to objects that were once closely connected to us, like vomit, that they retain something of the cathexis and value of a body part even when they are separated from the body. There is still something of the subject bound up with
them—which is why they are objects of disgust, loathing and repulsion as well as envy and desire. (p. 81)

Grosz explains that jettisoned substances contain something of ourselves that fascinate us and call to us; we desire a reunion with this lost piece of ourselves, but the excluded nature of this not-quite subject disgusts us as foreign. The abject is in tune with the ebb and flow of the body, a necessary absorption and expulsion that is a necessary desire to transcend flesh but the impossibility of leaving the body, that marks the abject as closer to the subject than its third position might appear. Grosz (cited in Weiss, 1998) expands on abjection and the fascination associated with abject experiences, noting,

> Abjection involves the paradoxically necessary but impossible desire to transcend corporeality. It is a refusal of the defiling, impure, uncontrollable materiality of the subject’s embodied existence. It is a response to the various bodily cycles of incorporation, absorption, depletion, expulsion, the cycles of material rejuvenation and consumption necessary to sustain itself yet incapable of social recognition and representation. (p. 90)

For Grosz, the abject is centered in the corporeality of our flesh and the dissonance between our bodies made of tissue (what has been called our “meat suit” in horror films\(^\text{61}\)) and the psychic nature of the subject, which exists primarily within the Symbolic Order. With this in mind, I see the abject as pointing to the failure of the Cartesian divide between the mind and the body. As the abject returns, the body reasserts

\(^{61}\) This term has been used so frequently in the horror genre that it has gained its own entry in urbandictionary.com, a crowd sourced online dictionary for urban and contemporary slang. The entry defines meat suit as, “The human body, especially one’s flesh, suggesting the burdens of corporeality for otherwise ethereal being” (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=meat%20suit).
itself as the primary means of ego development, denying the mind its seat as the sole progenitor of the self.

2.04.02.04 haunting. As Weiss (1998) explains, we are haunted by the abject through its rejected territories as,

This abject specter, which continually haunts the ego and seeks to disrupt the continuity of the body image, is all the more terrifying because it is a ghost incarnated in flesh, blood, spit, mucus, feces, vomit, urine, pus and other bodily fluids. (p. 90)

Weiss, drawing on Kristeva (1982) and Grosz (1994), emphasizes the bodily and corporeal nature of the abject in its relationship to the imago, or imagined body image, explaining that the abject must “be understood as a corporeal refusal of corporeality” (pg. 90). The fleshy specter of the abject is a corporeal reminder that we must refuse corporeality or else become abject ourselves through rot, death or contamination.

2.04.02.03 fatness. This emphasis on the abject’s connection to flesh resonates with other scholars who say that “fat people constitute society’s ‘haunting abject’” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 28) as their bodies transgress the norms of size, literally growing out of the bounds of the ideal body image. With this transgression of boundaries and space in mind, Meagher (2003) notes, using, “language inspired by Michel Foucault (1995), the representation of the abject body speaks to the ways in which women experience social and cultural imperatives through self-surveillance, self-denial and constant control” (p. 38). The policing of the body responds to a constant fear of slipping into the realm of the disgusting and the abject, a fear of failing to inhabit the imagined sealed body, the haunting of corporeality and fracturing of identity between material existence and
Symbolic subjectivity that the abject represents. Weight is policed because it expands the limits of the body, stretching, threatening to burst our cherished borders. It becomes an instance of growth out of bounds, of too much life and of excessive corporeality. Those who fit the category of fat are characterized as disgusting, slovenly, lazy, sick and ultimately abnormal (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009).

LeBesco (2004) relies extensively on the abject to understand the position of the fat body within culture, as well as “examining strategies for transforming (widening) the fat body” (p. 5) through an understanding of the abject. Other fat studies scholars have noted that the fat body, is an abject body. Mendoza (2009) explains in her analysis of films using fat suits,72 arguing that they are a type of revenge fantasy predicated upon seeing the “idealized body buried, even temporarily, under the folds of abject fat” (p. 282). Asbill (2009) argues, in her study of fat burlesque dancers, that through the sensuous performance of the striptease, “performers invoke, inhabit and challenge limiting cultural conceptions about fat women’s sexuality, purposefully creating social commentaries about their “abject” bodies” (p. 300).

2.04.04.02.04 dearth. Warin (2010) uses the abject as a tool to understand anorexics who often see fats and certain foods as irrationally contaminating. Battersby (1998), also approaching anorexia and other extreme forms of body management through the abject, is interested in the abject’s relationship to space, mapping and borders in relation to women’s bodies. She argues that because women employ, occupy, and

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72 Fat suits are bodysuits with padding that are worn by actors and actresses to change their forms into obese characters.
experience space differently that they may well experience the abject differently. She explains,

There is a good deal of work by psychologists, artists and theorists of opposing political persuasions that shows that females in our society employ space differently – even whilst young – and that this can be detected by observing their games, their bodily movements and the projects that they devise for themselves.

(p. 46)

This spatial difference can become an obsession since “Via anorexia, slimming, cosmetic surgery, the fashion industry and simply the way they stand, move or play, women discipline their body boundaries intensively” (Battersby, 1998, p. 47). It is this obsession with space and policing a closed and sealed body that many anorexics site as reasons for their rejection of foods. Battersby (1998) explains,

The female anorexic … – and ninety percent of all anorexics are female – knows that the normalized female body is permeable; penetrable, with the potential of becoming more-than-one body through a gradual process of growth and the labour of separation. The boundaries of the female anorexic’s body - in so far as they are establishable at all - are insecure and thus require careful policing. (p. 46)

Anorexia is then related to the abject’s obsessive marking out, management and protection of borders; to the deject who asks “where?” as a way to sound out identity in relation to spatial position, a reminder of the border and space’s role in identity formation. Anorexia is also about excess and dirth, and a fragile imago that mistakes the two, as well as an obsession with cleanliness and a fear of the dirtiness of fats and sugars, which will contaminate the body if consumed.
While Battersby (1998) emphasizes the need to understand the abject in relationship to ideas about Foucaultian biopower, the policing of the body and even performativity, Warin (2010) argues for a modification to the abject, adding ideas of relatedness to its framework. Warin explains that “[r]elatedness is at the very core of abjection for, in being cast out, one moves away from relationships with people, oneself and objects and creates a different kind of relatedness” (p. 5) which “moves beyond Kristeva’s location [of the abject] in the imaginary psyche and language to the everyday practices and terms of sociality” (p. 5). Warin’s approach to the abject is materialist, interested in the lived experience of anorexics, particularly as patients who are often pathologized and conflated with their illness. This leads in her work to a complex piecing apart of causation where the abject is both the rationale of anorexics for their disorder and, conversely, anorexia causes feelings of abjection.

Warin’s reformation of the abject as a social process of relatedness that has real material qualities and consequences, like isolation, is something other scholars have tried to bring into conversation with the abject. The abject can be found in disruptions in size, shape, color, sex and gender. Through rejection, the abject is not only a corporeal reminder to refuse our corporeality in general, but it is a reminder that certain corporeal, material existences are even less desirable than that of the norm. And, where one body… takes on the function of model or idea, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, or other kinds of bodies and subjectivities. (Grosz cited in LeBesco, 2004, p. 5)
In this way, the abject body can become a political defiance of the hegemonic and an affirmation of multiplicity.

**2.04.04.03 homosexual horrors: Butler’s abject.**

2.04.04.03.01 *abject homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality.* Butler’s expansion of Kristeva’s ideas to specifically address socially marginalized bodies is probably the most well-known attempt to address materiality in the abject and explore “the possibilities of reworking abjection into political agency” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 5).

Butler is interested in applying the abject to bodies, to real life and to identity. Benjamin Buchloh (1994) explains in a conversation about the *informe* versus the abject with other art historians, that Butler’s work is a materialist approach to the abject that still engages with the recuperative nature of Kristeva’s work. Buchloh says,

> Judith Butler’s modification of the notion of abjection, clearly derived from Kristeva, to theorize heterosexuality as a principle that needs to position homosexuality in the abject in order to constitute itself. That is, on the one hand, a structural model because it describes a process of differentiation and identification. Yet, on the other it never pretends that all those differentials take place within language or the semiotic system alone. They also take place in the enacting of homophobia, in the material reality of day-to-day social behavior. (p. 5)

Butler’s reformation of the abject as a material, as well as a psychic, a linguistic and a semiotic experience adds “a complex actuality that a merely structural insistence on the notion cannot” (Buchloh, 1994, p. 5). In Butler the abject becomes a “productive expansion of the model to recognize that psychosexual and social behavior, even if it is
structured around such principles, is enacted in material ways” (p. 5). While Kristeva may expound on the imagined mechanisms of the abject at length, Butler attaches the abject to lived experiences and material practices of exclusion. Buchloch continues to argue for the power of the abject particularly in Butler’s configuration as it has the power to address the irrational formation of certain ideologies in a way that Marxist theory has not. Buchloch (1994) explains,

One has to recognize there is a stake in her argument and this is the attempt to clarify ideology formation on the level of the unconscious. It is not about creating new oppositions called heterosexuality and homosexuality; it is about describing an unconscious formation called homophobia, its origins and functions. And the use of the process of abjection with regards to that formation, as well as to that of racism, seems to me productive. (p. 6)

Oftentimes ideologies are irrational and contradictory. The rhetoric of freedom is deployed regularly in America, often within progressive and conservative circles at the same time. The freedom of religion is currently espoused as rational to deny the freedom for homosexuals to marry. Because the abject can address unconscious or pre-lingual schemas of dirt that are often mapped onto the real bodies of human beings, a continued exploration of the abject is justifiable.

Theoretically, the abject is perhaps not the most popular of theoretical paradigms at the moment, even as visual culture is filled with both lowbrow and high culture examples of the abject and abjection. Kristeva’s work dates from the 1980’s and Butler’s from the 1990’s, and with an emphasis in academia on new ideas, or new reconfigurations and applications of ideas, it seems to me that the abject has been
absorbed into many academic discourses in the same way it has been absorbed into the artworld, as an uncomplicated and stripped down term that simply means disgust or difference. However, it is the expansion of the abject to deal with social issues of exclusion and its violence, as well as the abject’s continued and expanding popularity visually, that call for a reconsideration of the abject in all its facets.

Butler’s work with the abject begins by looking at the system or matrix that creates the abject. Butler (1993) writes,

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which - and by virtue of which - the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (p. 3)
Butler describes abjection as a process through which certain bodies are marginalized and pushed to uninhabitable zones of existence. These marginal abject subjectivities are denied so that the dominant subject may exist more fully intact. In this way the abject functions on a broader social level, moving from the body and the symbolic order, to the social body’s role in the symbolic. The material consequences of exclusion are important to include in theorizing the abject, because, as earlier noted by Hekman (1998), “bodies are cultural texts, [where] some texts are more important than others and the hegemonic texts that sculpt female bodies cause pain and suffering for ‘real,’ ‘material’ women” (p.69).

The material suffering of those denied subjectivity and labeled abject is a component that has often been missing and is something that Butler is conscious of in her work. Material suffering can not only negate life to the point that it is unlivable, even ungrievable (Butler, 2006, Butler 2010), but some have argued that what Foucault (1995) had labeled biopower, or the sovereign’s ability to make live or let die, should be further understood as necropower. Informed heavily by the field of postcolonialism and writers like Foucault, Agamben and Bataille, the theoretical concept of necropower is “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 14). In necropower, “sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). Necropower deals with social death, which comes to

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63 Uninhabitable zones describe lives that are deemed by dominant discourse as not worth living, even unworthy of mourning. Uninhabitable zones also describe a type of precariousness that Butler discusses at length in Frames of War: When is Life Grievable (2010), Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (2006) and Dispossession: The Performative in the Political (2013) with Athena Athanasiou.
mean an “expulsion from humanity” (p. 21). One is no longer subject to social death as a human being, but rather one’s status as human is revoked; the subject is expelled from humanity, making social and physical death easier for the government and dominant culture to enact. This work, like Butler’s, places an emphasis on lived experience as crucial to ideas of psychic exclusion.

Rather than simply adopting Kristeva’s framework, Butler (1993) takes care to define the abject through her own engagement with psychoanalytic materials and lived experience. She explains,

Abjections (in Latin, ab-jicere) literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated. Here the casting away resonates with the psychoanalytic notion of Verwerfung, implying a foreclosure which founds the subject and which accordingly, establishes that foundation as tenuous. Whereas the psychoanalytic notion of Verwerfung, translated as “foreclosure,” produces sociality through a repudiation of a primary signifier which produces an unconscious or, in Lacan’s theory, the register of the real, the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality. Indeed, what is foreclosed or repudiated within psychoanalytic terms is precisely what may not reenter the field of the social without threatening psychosis, that is, the dissolution of the subject itself. I want to propose that certain abject zones within sociality also deliver this threat, constituting zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution (“I would rather die than do or be that!”). (p. 243)
What Butler describes above is the logic of abject exclusion that is foundational to genocide, as well ethnic and religious cleansing like the Holocaust.

2.04.04.03.02 Butler on systems and bodies. Butler maintains the abject’s jettisoned status, but connects it not to bodily substances, but to entire bodies and to matrixes or systems of the clean and proper enacted in a social dimension. Butler is primarily concerned with homosexuality as abject, as the excluded other whose exclusion is necessary for the creation of the norm. Butler explains,

How, then, can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the formation of what qualifies as a viable body? How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (p. 16)

The hegemonic norm is heterosexuality; its abject, homosexuality. However, as its abject, homosexuality haunts and fascinates and, moreover, actually constitutes heterosexuality through its exclusion. As with the expulsion of milk, the expulsion of homosexuality also creates and makes visible the distinct category of heterosexuality.

This is the same binary configuration of life/death or inner/outer which are central to Kristeva’s abject, simply shifted to figure the hetero subject as life and the inner while establishing the homo as a non-subject related to death and the outer, and relegated to an
uninhabitable life. However, inner and outer are just words, a spatial metaphor used to theorize desire, fear and fantasies. Thus, “‘Inner’ and ‘Outer’ make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject” (Butler, 2006, p. 182). This is to say that binaries work as a way to stabilize the boundary between two sides, and this stabilization supports the normal subject which must then inhabit one or the other. Butler (2006) continues,

“inner” and “outer” constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the “inner world” no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect. (pp. 182-183)

Destabilization of the border between inner and outer constitutes larger concerns about the formation of identity, particularly for Butler, that identity is not an inner expression of some core essence; rather identity is external, or “outer,” to the subject and composed of learned behaviors that are adopted and repeated in a process she calls performativity. Shildrick and Price (1999) explain that, “The precariousness of all bodies is exposed by paying attention to their ‘constitutive outside,’ from which they are alienated and yet on which they are dependent” (p. 9). This dependency is linked also to identifactory practices, or ways in which the body can be read. Butler (1993) explains,

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex” and this identification takes place through repudiation which produces a
domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation, which creates the valence of “abjection” and it’s status for the subject as a threatening specter. Further, the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumption of the sex subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control. (p. 3)

Becoming subjects must involve an attempt to identify with a vision of the normative body, which automatically includes the repudiation and rejection of the other and this process creates a domain of abjection. However, the very domains of abjection - the homosexual, the fat, the anorexic, the person of color, the immigrant, the disabled - threaten the binary norm, which they have co-created through their incomplete rejection. The norm is dependent upon the ‘constitutive outside’, which both creates the norm and disrupts it. Shildrick and Price (1999) continue,

As Butler sees it, a wide range of normative binaries that are used to characterize embodiment - male/female, health/ill-health, heterosexual/homosexual, black/white and so on - may be exposed in their instability - but also paradoxically confirmed - by the performativity of abject bodies. (p. 9)

To identify with the abject is to be continually disavowed, denied being, because of the threat that the identification with the other poses to hegemony. Butler (1993) continues,
The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. (p. 3)

I would argue, that even when the stability of the norm is undermined, the abject’s performance of itself as created by the norm, the performance of rejection, paradoxically seems to stabilize the norm again. However, while the status, or performance, of the abject will be perpetually disavowed, this doesn’t mean that the abject is failing in regards to challenging social norms. Rather, the struggle to be visible, to be identified even as abject, continually challenges and reveals the co-constitutive, thus constructed, nature of the norm, which becomes a political tool.

I find the “performativity of the abject” to be similar to ideas of internalized racism, put forth in work like Fanon’s *Black Mask, White Skin* (2008), which will be discussed further in a later section. Since performativity is based in the unconscious repetition of cultural schemas about race, class, gender, and so on, abject performativity is then performing the rejected, the other, the jettisoned. The script for this performance has been provided by hegemony itself, as the cultural script of exclusion is drafted in the same ink as the performance of the hegemonic norm. Even when the dominant is unstable or transitory, it has already provided for its consolidation through the abject’s performance of otherness.

2.04.04.03.03 benefits of Butler. However, Butler argues that we must embrace the abject, the excluded, as a site of the possibility of refiguring the hegemonic symbolic, imagining a future horizon that values bodies differently, even if there is failure attached
Hekman (1998) looks at how Bordo’s work can be read as an example of the type of re-inscription that Butler suggests and how it might work in practice. Hekmans explains,

Bordo takes the excluded identities of the anorexic and the bulimic as sites of resistance, as places where critiques of hegemonic subjectivity are enacted. The anorexic and the bulimic exaggerate the contradictions and exclusion of the hegemonic construction of subjectivity that feminists seek to displace. They do so not by appealing to the real or material, but by magnifying key aspects of that construction, turning them into grotesques. In both Bordo and Butler's theories the critical construction of exclusion is deployed to resignify the symbolic that constructs that exclusion. (p. 69)

While Butler and Bordo have emphasized the female body, the anorexic and the homosexual as the excluded and explained their interest in these abjects as challenges to hegemonic ideals, others have taken the reformations of the abject and applied it to other marginal bodies.

2.04.04.04 social abjection. While the previous scholars all engage with real material bodies at some level and acknowledge the role of abjection in the creation of marginal subjects, many (e.g. Butler and Chanter) are still primarily concerned with the abject as a theoretical structure. These scholars’ work is primarily in reformulating the theoretical with the idea that it may have material benefits, but they themselves do not explore the material lives of real people. The following scholars use the abject in application, to understand the creation of marginalized bodies outside of the rather
narrow focus heretofore on women and homosexuals. These scholars also explore more of the lived experiences of abject subjects, or people at the margins.

2.04.04.04.01 social abjection and poverty. In Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain (2013) Imogen Tyler uses a metaphoric double of revolting as disgusting and revolting as in to rise against authority to describe the role of marginal figures in neoliberalism. Tyler’s main project is to use social abjection “as a theory of power, subjugation and resistance” (p. 4). Tyler employs abjection “as a lived social process” (p. 4) to redress a lack in the literature on the abject which takes into account “what it means to be (made) abject, to be one who repeatedly finds herself the object of the other’s violent objectifying disgust” (p. 4). While Tyler’s work is deeply imbedded in Kristeva’s account of the abject, it is expanded to address the political and the material. Tyler clearly links the status of the abjected with violence, particularly the violent physical reaction of disgust.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, disgust has been used as a tool of violence in the oppression of the disabled, the mentally ill and the criminal. Tyler explores what it means to have disgust leveled against one’s body on a regular basis, what it means to perpetually be abjected, to be turned into as Chanter (2008) would says, social waste. Drawing on Fannon and Bhabha, Tyler argues that “National Abjects” are the social insecurities of the state personified. The insecurities are made manifest through the abject’s ability to create subjects through expulsion, but what is “spat out” of the national body are the criminal and the degenerate. Tyler argues that neoliberal governance rules in part through generating insecurities in the body politic, fears about terror threats and border control, which are channeled towards groups that are constructed as drains on
national resources, like the poor, the unemployed and the undocumented immigrant. However, these figure’s abject status is overblown, constructed and conflated with larger social threats “in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (Bhabha, cited in Tyler, 2013, p. 9).

2.04.04.04.02 Young’s abject racism. In looking at oppressed peoples, Young (1990) looks to abjection’s role in the creation of the ego and how the abject constitutes the subject through division and differentiation. With this in mind, she applies the ego creating division from the mother to a separation between groups of people, based largely on their perceived differences. This separation ends in marginalization and creates the categories of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism. On a similar note, Buchloch (1994) argues that the abject could be beneficial in understanding “the historical pervasiveness of racism and homophobia [and] might justify treating them as though they were natural phenomena” (p. 6). The naturalness that Buchloch speaks of is not meant to make this practice acceptable; he specifically calls on the abject to help to dismantle these oppressions. He is attempting to understand their pervasiveness and its possible link to abjection., The abject involves a natural and even necessary rejection of the mother and of the other to constitute the self; however racism and other forms of oppression seem to be the abject run amok in an attempt to perpetually solidify the ego by violently abjecting others.

Similarly, Young (1990) attempts to understand social exclusion through the abject explaining that,

[although a certain cultural space is reserved for revering feminine beauty, for example, in part that very cameo ideal renders most women’s bodies]
drab, ugly, fleshy, loathsome by comparison. Old people, gay men and lesbians, disabled people and fat people are other groups perceived to have ugly, fearful, or loathsome bodies. (p. 201)

The abject can be applied to more than bodily substances, like non-normative bodies based either on aesthetics or on deeper differences that contradict not only the visual normal, but embody what is considered aberrant within symbolic law. Those who possess abject bodies are feared, avoided and considered loathsome. Young (1990) further explains,

Xenophobia as abjection is present throughout the history of modern consciousness, structured by a medicalized Reason that categorizes some bodies as degenerate. I suggest that the role of abjection increases, however, with the shift from a discursive consciousness of group superiority to such group superiority lived primarily at the level of practical consciousness and the unconscious. (p. 208-209)

Young purposes that since society has explicitly embraced equality in our discursive world, racism and sexism have begun to emerge in non-discursive and habitual behaviors, which are not often interrogated to the same extent as law or language. The practical commonsense that Young (1990) mentions is analogous to ideology, or a “general sense of characterizing ideas, ideals, beliefs and values” (Duncum, 2008, p. 225) or as van Dijk (1998) explains, “ideologies are…socially shared ideas.” (p. 15). Hall (2011) explains that ideologies of racism and sexism then appear implicitly through ideological apparatuses like the media, which continue to rely on and perpetuate the abject status of the other. Abjection’s attachment to the imaginary and the pre-discursive mark it as a
way to interrogate our habituated attitudes of oppression that continue to exist in the imaginary register, even when they have been formally rejected by the symbolic through civil rights laws, for example. Discursive oppression has in the past cast the oppressed as objects; however, “Now the Other is not so different from me as an object – indeed, discursive consciousness asserts that the Blacks, women, homosexuals, disabled people are like me. But at the level of practical consciousness they are affectively marked as different” (Young, 1990, p. 209). Young is attempting to address racism and sexism in a society that claims to be “postracial” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) and “postfeminist” (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Structural policies like affirmative action announce that difference is over and equality reigns; however, inequality persists, even grows (Tasker & Negra, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Young’s logic is that if a shift in the symbolic, in laws and structures, towards equality has not rendered equality, then there must be something at work on the level of the imaginary. Something at the level of the unconscious perpetually marks difference as abject, even if the law explicitly argues for parity. While this argument neglects a structural critique of the legal system that asks whether laws surrounding equality are actually carried out, which many times they are not, Young effectively argues for the usefulness of abjection in addressing the complicated relationship between oppressed and oppressor, as well as why equality laws and civil rights have not ended domination.

2.04.04.03 abject racism in South Africa. Continuing in the vein of social abjection and the attachment to living marginal bodies, Hook (2006) explains, “the abject is that intolerable contaminating thing, that historically – variable ‘entity of threat’ that can include ‘other people … [and] an infinite number of phenomena’” (p. 219). Hook is
interested in the abject as a material condition of marginal bodies, drawing not only on Kristeva but also on Bataille’s abject, which was “concerned with the exclusionary forces that operate within modern state systems in order to strip the laboring masses of their human dignity and reduce them to dehumanized social waste” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 69). The connection between the abject and marginalized bodies, those who are not granted full subjectivity (or full citizenship), becomes more clear through these scholars. Bodies classified as deviant, or abnormal, because they do not fit the classification systems of the state become sites of anxiety. In Kristeva the process of abjection creates anxiety for the individual. On a larger scale, the failed exclusion of the other or the abject of society, creates socio-political anxiety.

Similar to Young’s work, but with a specific critique of post-apartheid South Africa, Hook (2006) utilizes Kristeva’s abject, to “explore racism as a mode of reactivity that has been routed through the dreads, aversions and nausea of the body” (p. 208). In the work ‘Pre-discursive’ Racism, Hook argues that the abject can help explain the continuance of racism in places where discursive institutions have articulated a tolerance or anti-racist policy, as in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Hook looks towards an “embodied form of racism that is played through and substantiated by, the body’s economy of separations and distinctions” (p. 208). This bodily, pre-discursive, reaction becomes an affective response to a violation of order. Pile (2010) suggests that affect is the quality of life that is beyond cognition, beyond expression and “unable to be brought into representation” (p. 8) but manifest in the body’s reaction. Affect shares common ground with the Real, as it is beyond representation and abjection and it implicates the body. Racism then becomes an embodied affective response to a violation of a
prediscursive bodily schema of order that determines what is dirty and what belongs. It is in part due to affect and embodiment that racism continues, even grows, “in societies where equality and democracy have become enshrined ideals” (Hook, 2006, p. 213).

While some have argued that psychoanalysis is unfit for use in critical race or gender studies (e.g., Hoad, 2000), Winnubst contends that psychoanalysis, provides opportunities to “articulate how race is historically and socially constructed and yet, nevertheless, individually embodied” (cited in Hook, 2006, p. 212). Hook (2006) agrees and argues that an understanding of the abject is necessary,

Based as it is on such a prioritization of the body, the theory of abjection offers an extraordinary set of insights not only into the ‘physicality’ of the phenomena of racism - its bodily fascinations and anxieties, the visceral quality of its most primal reactions—but also into the linked qualities of psychological and indeed symbolic survival that seems to underwrite its affects. (p. 216)

Hook doesn’t ignore the discursive components of racism, but argues that “we cannot properly apprehend racism if we fail to adequately understand what sustains it, what lends it its potent affective qualities, what supports its most visceral aspects” (p. 209).

With a focus on the body and affect, Hooks analyzes abjection on a pre-discursive level to understand the crisis and anxiety that difference causes as it disrupts and haunts our systems of self and the world.

2.04.04.04 abjection, racism and Scott. Hook is not alone in locating the abject in proximity to the black body. Scott (2010) links the abject to black subjectivity in America with a particular reconfiguration of the abject as,
a lowering historical cloud, a judgment animating arguments and rhetoric in both currents in which the history of people in the African diaspora - having been conquered and enslaved and then, post-Emancipation, being dominated by colonial powers or by homegrown white supremacists - is a history of humiliating defeat, a useless history which must be in some way overturned or overcome. (p. 4)

Building his definition of black abjection based on Kristeva and Fannon, Scott argues that those involved in the African diaspora have had a pervasive experience of abjection. Scott’s argument is based on the radical exclusion of the diasporic African, an exclusion through slavery, Jim Crow, and the prison industrial complex that was so complete that they had no subjectivity, only defeat. The abjection of the black figure is not only a racial exclusion, but is also based in the black body as inherently queer. Queer in this instance stands in broadly for abnormal sexuality. The black body is shown as queer through stereotypes of hypersexuality like the “black buck” or the “hottentot” (Gilman, 2002). It is also made queer through emasculating stereotypes that are read as “gay”, which as Butler (1993) explains, is abject. Scott (2010) explains that his use of abjection is, in part, to investigate the ways that “blackness is rendered by the various cultural, social and economic processes of white supremacist domination as the exemplar of non-normative genders and sexualities” (p. 10). While Scott is interested in abjection as the material experience of absolute defeat, like the other authors writing on the abject,

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64 Although, Fannon doesn’t use the term abject, Scott persuasively links the two authors, discussing Fannon’s writings on the experience of othering, being othered, and the deep dissonance this can cause in one’s subjectivity as abject.
he sees a possibility for reinscriptions of power through the embodiment of alienation
that the abject can effect. Scott explains,

But the alienation of an embodied consciousness is common to all humans.

Blackness is nonetheless in the Americas one (but only one, among the brethren
of racially marked bodies) of the primary means to access that alienation and its
(Perhaps surprising) powers. (p. 13)

Scott (2010) continues, explaining that “abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors
with a form of counterintuitive power” (p. 9), a power, or freedom, that is found at the
point of where ego protection breaks down and collapses into abjection. Stockton (2006)
also uses the abject’s emphasis on borders as a way to approach the intersections of
blackness and queerness and the concordant experience of shame.

2.04.04.04.05 Racism, abject death, and Holland. Holland (2000) is another
author who looks at the relationship between the black body and abjection. While
Holland doesn’t use the term abject specifically, the language of the abject abounds in her
work on the role of the dead in African American fiction. She is interested in the
construction of African Americans as haunting figures that menace from beyond. Holland
(2000) explains that, “it is important to conceive of death and discourse as linked to and
comprising ideas about nationhood and nationality, about belonging and
disenfranchisement” (p. 23) and that “the dead and their relations are perhaps the most
lawless, unruly and potentially revolutionary inhabitants of any imagined territory,
national or otherwise” (p. 23). Holland links the construction of national identity to
notions of death, using a slippage between social and literal death, noting the deep
connections between the two in light of slavery and colonialism. This in and of itself
sounds like the abject, haunting from the margins, particularly with the abject’s connection to death through the corpse.

Holland is also interested in the figure of the undead, the zombie. Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility. (bell hooks, cited in Holland, 2000, p. 15)

Zombies are discussed in terms of the uncanny and the abject within the genre of horror (Bishop, 2006; Clark; 2006; Creed, 1993). For Holland the black body of the slave is a metaphoric revenant, where the body lives, while subjectivity is denied and rendered “dead”, creating an abject figure. Holland borrows heavily from Butler, arguing a similarly co-constitutive creation of white hegemonic culture upon the back of the slave and black body built as a non-entity and perpetually denied full subjecthood, even after emancipation. Holland asks, “What if some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the “living?” What if these subjects merely haunt the periphery of the encountering person’s vision, …seldom recognized…often unnamed?” (Holland, 2000, p. 15). Holland is interested in who occupies the space of national social death and why. She describes her project as an investigation into authors who are raising the dead, allowing them to speak and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story of a death-in-life. Perhaps the most revolutionary intervention into conversations at the margins of race, gender and sexuality is to let the dead - those already denied sustainable subjectivity - speak
from the place that is familiar to them. Moreover, speaking from the site of familiarity, from the place reserved for the dead, disturbs the static categories of black/white, oppressor/oppressed, creating a plethora of tensions within and without existing cultures. (p. 4)

Holland (2000), like Hook (2006) and other authors (Chanter, 2008; Scott, 2010; Fleetwood, 2011; Tyler, 2013;), is interested in the political agency and redress that an investigation can yield into the marginal figures through the abject and a focus on death and haunting.65

2.04.04.04.06 immigration. The abject is further linked to the political in Moruzzi’s (1993) examination of Kristeva’s subsequent works in National Abjects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-Identification. Kristeva’s later works are contextually influenced by some of the recent changes in European nations like non-European immigration, the reunification of Germany and the formation of the European Union. Moruzzi (1993) argues that Kristeva’s later work still focuses on the abject, but in the broader political context of the nation-state. Kristeva’s later works, while not on the abject per se, concentrates on the experiences of a stranger who is not simply an other, but who is defined as an exile, an immigrant, or foreigner; one who is other by virtue of the laws of the soil and of blood (which are sometimes placed in opposition),

65 It is worth noting that while I have focused on African Americans as the racialized others of the abject, which is the most obvious example in the United States, that abject otherness could be applied to any group that was not constructed as the norm. Not only are brown bodies the abjected other to whiteness, but whiteness, in a different context, could be equally othered, becoming a spectral pale haunting to the solidity and normalcy of the dark body.
disoriented in place and time. (Moruzzi, 1993, p. 137)

More than just examining the experience of the immigrant or stranger, Kristeva’s later work looks at how the two are mutually constitutive of each other and the nation. Moruzzi sees this as abjection and explains, “The process of national consolidation is also a process of ongoing (international and intranational) estrangement” (p. 142). Moruzzi further explains, that, “the subject abjects itself and discovers itself in its own abjection; historically, the nation-state establishes itself, defined as other or excess, whose rejected alterity then engenders the consolidation of a national identity” (p. 143). Abjection creates the self, so national abjection, exclusion of certain types of bodies, creates the nation itself. In this way, the abject becomes a geopolitical tool of the nation state that sheers up unstable borders and solidifies national identity often through an imagined threat (Anderson, 2006). This focus on borders and specifically border attacks connects Kristeva’s later work on the nation (Kristeva, 2001; 2011) with her earlier work in Powers of Horror (1982) and the abject as representing a border crisis for the body in the form of substances and the nation in the form of undocumented immigrants and other non-citizens. As Smith (1998) notes, the abject is “closely bound up with questions of identity, boundary crossing, exile and displacement” (p. 29). The system that is in crisis is not only our personal bodily borders, but the borders of the state, of nationality and its stakes are a continuity of national belonging, as well as safety in the face of a perceived threat.

2.05 Gooey Ends and Revolting Beginnings. As this literature review has demonstrated, disgust and abject are intimately linked. While disgust itself is a multifaceted affective phenomenon, many of its causes, food, waste, death, overlap with
the abject. However, the abject is more expansive, implicating psychological states and depths that surpass disgust. In the end disgust is the primary affective response of the abject, combined with both horror and the uncanny. The noun *abject* describes both the general body of ideas stemming from Kristeva’s work, expanded by later scholars, as well as, the actual excluded substances and categories of people. The verb *abjection* describes the process of exclusion and the jettisoning of the waste. While abjection in Kristeva’s formulation deals mostly with the exclusion of bodily substances and a following recuperation, this same process is applied by later scholars to lived experiences and material bodies. These later authors politicize the abject beyond a reification of binary inversion, emphasizing the abject’s potential to challenge the very hegemony it has co-created.

This chapter has served to delve into the foundations of Kristeva’s abject and provide a review of the new avenues that the idea has taken more recently. What has been lacking in the works on the abject is its application to and use in the visual realm, since Kristeva, as well as later authors, emphasized the abject as a tool for literary analysis (Holland, 2000; Scott, 2010). Having laid this groundwork, the following chapters will explore the abject in application to visuals, creating an abject methodology for visual analysis that is both indebted to Kristeva but attuned to the more political implications of later ideas on the abject.
3.0: Meta-Methodologies: Or, What to do When your Methodology Doesn’t Exist Yet.

3.01 In a Slimy Nutshell…The Journey Until Now.

In the previous chapters, I have described both my own interest as an artist and scholar in the abject. I have also elucidated a broader context to understand visual expressions of excreta and other disgust inducing images. I have discussed the theoretical basis for disgust and the abject; looking at both the abject’s original context within psychoanalysis, as well as its broader application within social theory through scholars like Butler (1993; 2006), Scott (2010), and Chanter (2008). In the course of studying these ideas and their application to art, I discovered that not only are there theoretical slippages that conflate the abject and disgust, but that these concepts had not been applied to the visual arena in any consistent or in-depth manner. Secondly, the ways in which these concepts are applied to contemporary visual and material culture are not well documented. Third, where disgust and the abject overlap and diverge is flattened into an overly simplified response of gross. The nature of these slippages is important to address. Disgust is a retrograde emotion with a history of being used as a faulty rationale in both law and other structural forces for the creation and consolidation of borders, which further marginalizes certain behaviors characterized as aberrant, and where particular segments of the population are constructed as deviant or criminal. On its own, disgust, while a component of the abject, lacks the abject’s liberatory associations. The abject has the ability to empower the marginalized with its challenge to hegemony through a multiplicity of othernesses that constitute the abject. With this in mind, visual culture needs a method for approaching disgust as the rationale for what is rejected and the abject
as the mechanism of rejection and its haunting return. In common discussions, anything that is gross is overly simplified and flattened out as simply being anathema to the aesthetic and it thereby loses its nuances. A deep critical understanding of visuals as complicated and more than a binary of either enacting the hegemonic norm or challenging the status quo is also lost. My methodology can make sense of art depicting foul materials and the political implications of these works by exploring slippery substances and the equally complex theoretical ideas needed to comprehend their meaning.

3.02 The Problem with Studying Ambiguity: Or, Why is There No Abject Methodology?

The short answer to the question of why is there no abject methodology is that there is. Methodology is the larger body of knowledge, which dictates the system of discreet methods or techniques used to study a given artifact. The abject, as articulated by Kristeva, is itself a methodology. She creates a body of knowledge from which to understand the psyche and its responses to certain substances, particularly the psyche made accessible through the study of literature.

The first chapter of the *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva, 1982), entitled *Approaching Abjection*, describes the features and functions of the abject. After establishing her object of study, the abject and abjection, Kristeva looks to literature to try and demonstrate the existence and function of her newly explicated abject. For Kristeva the abject is found most prominently in modern literature. According to her “the abject is related to perversion” (p. 15). Perversion in this instance stems not from a breaking of laws, but from a refusal to acknowledge the existence of those laws. Kristeva suggests that early
writing on religion, morality and law attempts to control the abject, to either purify it or to thrust it away. However, she explains, contemporary literature does not follow suit; rather, it “… acknowledges the impossibility of Religion, Morality and Law” (p. 16).

Contemporary writing is not devoted to the creation of laws like earlier texts were, rather, contemporary, postmodern literature is informed by existentialism and the demise of grand narratives like that of truth, the primacy of the author and God. Literature now focuses on deconstruction, on the breaking of rules and the transgressing of propriety and morality.

Contemporary writing is thematically the home of the abject. However, for Kristeva, the abject belongs to the realm of writing not only because of thematics, but also because of language and the imaginary. Kristeva explains that literature has the “ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacement of verbal play” (p. 16). Literature not only allows for readers to imagine themselves in the place of the abject, but it allows for its resolution.

Freudian displacement is an unconscious defense mechanism wherein the mind substitutes something new for something dangerous or unacceptable. Lacanian displacement is predicated on the unconscious having the structure of a language. Then displacement is a metonymy, where the object is not called by its name but called something with which it is associated or a fragment of the whole. It is a slippage of meaning that the unconscious uses to foil censorship (Lacan, 2004). Take for instance an old movie in which the camera pans away from an amorous couple on the beach to focus on the crashing waves. The ocean waves are a metonymy for sexual intercourse, a slippage that censors the literal, but acknowledges the act. In regards to the abject, verbal
play, like metonymy, allows for displacement, or a way for the unconscious to make itself known, but not in such a way that is damaging. The displacement of verbal play allows for playing with abjection rather than just rejection. That play allows for rejection and acknowledgment, a literary dipping of one’s toe into the cesspool that allows for both the pleasure of a squish between the toes and the accompanying rejecting “Ewe”.

For Kristeva the par excellence of the abject in literature is Louis-Ferdinand Celine’s *Journey to the End of Night* (1934), a nightmarish account of war, written in jarring rhythms with the vulgar language of a soldier. Vice (1997) comments, “The fact that Kristeva chooses Louis-Ferdinand Celine to function as a literary exemplar of the abject, as Bakhtin chooses Rabelais for the grotesque, shows how much more obviously dark the transgressive realm has become” (p. 169-170). Kristeva, having noticed a trend in modern writing towards the transgressive, used her background as a psychoanalyst to try to understand the roots of this shift, its uses in literature and the implications of these developments for society.

Similarly, when Butler (1996; 1993) and Chanter (2008) articulate their different visions of the abject, they too are creating methodologies, or bodies of knowledge that form a way of researching or a system of knowing, based on Kristeva’s original methodology, that are then applied to social arrangements in the case of Butler and to film in the case of Chanter. They may not articulate their works as a methodology, but they are creating, or at least modifying, the body of knowledge that is the abject and using it as a tool for analysis. However, what is still lacking in this expansion of the abject is an application to the visual arts. A methodology is needed that like Kristeva’s
(1982), Butler’s (1996; 1993) and Chanter’s (2008) takes into account the abject and this scholar’s chosen object of study; that is, visual culture. It is this need that my work fills.

3.03 How Can a Methodology be Abject? Or Methodologies that Make Your Stomach Turn

An abject visual methodology may sound strange; how is a methodology abject? A methodology is a body of knowledge that informs research methods. However, the body of knowledge in question is the abject and the abject is that which refuses orders and disgusts from the periphery. Even reading Kristeva, one is contaminated by a close contact with bodily fluids and the jettisoned wastes of society. The abject, even when printed in text on the clean white pages, defiles through the imagination.

An abject visual methodology asks the researcher to engage with abject images, allowing the abject images to penetrate the viewer’s senses. The researcher must see the artwork, but must also smell, or imagine the scent that would accompany the image or

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66 The artist Peter De Cupere is a scent artist who creates installations that smell. In his 2010 performance, *Olfactory Dance: Sweat*, De Cupere created sweat capturing suits that five dancers wore while performing to gather the scent of the performance (http://www.peterdecupere.net/). There are many other examples like Tom Friedman’s *Untitled* (1989), which is a square of Crest toothpaste on the wall which smells minty when the viewer approaches. I have been told that Damien Hirst’s works smell even if they are sealed. For example, *A Thousand Years* (1990) features rotting meat and *Isolated Elements Swimming In The Same Direction For The Purpose Of Understanding* (1991) features formaldehyde, both of which have a strong odor that apparently lingers in the gallery.

67 Vanitas images of food, famous for their inclusion of rotting fruits and flowers that symbolize the temporal nature of life, are so realistic as to induce the imagining of scents. For example, Abraham van Beijeren’s *Banquet Still Life* from 1655-1665. Similarly, Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) convincingly portrays the rotting corpses of a shipwreck so that one can imagine the stench coming from the beleaguered vessel. While there are idealized elements in this work to be sure; the deathly palor of many of the figures, the bodies that are truncated referencing the cannibalism that supposedly took
the taste, the touch, even the sound. The abject is sensorial, even haptic. It is a full-bodied experience. This methodology not only asks its user to engage with abject art, but to sit with the abject, to investigate the abject and its attending emotion - disgust. By digging into these substances and the structures that form our responses to these substances, the researcher is contaminated through their close association with the polluting dirt, whether that filth is literally some grimy substance or the systematically jettisoned peoples of society. While this type of contamination is different than the literal contagion of handling dead flesh, there is nonetheless an othering process in place that marks out the researcher of the abject using an abject visual methodology as defiled.

I can attest to this myself through the sheer number of disdainful looks and disgusted faces I have seen upon telling people what I study, even more so upon showing them. At times my lectures have almost been drowned out by the knee-jerk reaction of loud groans from the audience upon viewing my objects of study. While this is not the systemic or chronic othering that many minority peoples face, it is an insightful place, and dead bodies left to float partially off the raft, create a beautiful but nightmarish mixture that is painted deftly enough to be both alluring and disgusting.

Hyper realistic painters like Tom Martin (http://www.tommartinpaintings.com/) and Tjalf Sparnaay (http://www.tjalfsparnaay.nl/actueel.html) paint food so believably that it makes your mouth water like a food commercial. In a slightly different vein, Jennifer Rubell makes installations that feature food and drink that the audience is welcomed to consume. Her Pissing Gnome (Biker) 2011, is a commercial garden gnome that urinates beer.

The Touch Art Fair in 2013 celebrated tactile and haptic art (http://www.touchartfair.com/). Many works now ask for audience participation like Jennifer Rubell’s piece Portrait of the Artist (2013) which, is a 25 foot long nude pregnant sculpture of herself with her belly hollowed out for the audience to climb into and take the position of the fetus.

Paintings of battle like Vroom’s Battle of Gibraltar (1621) or images of music making like Carvaggio’s Concert of Youths (1595) ask us to imagine either the clang of weapons or the soft strumming of instruments. There are also artworks with sound components like the artist Bobby Bird’s sound installations (http://bobbybirds.wordpress.com/).
experience to be judged by students as disgusting or perverse and to have that judgment made known. To think that there are no stakes in studying the abject would be wrong. Being in close contact with disgust through investigating the generative possibility in these sites and position is often met with resistance, particularly when there is no desire to disinfect or sanitize the disgusting elements. Furthermore, the resistance that the researcher is apt to experience is itself a visceral, almost violent, reaction in the audience fueled by the threat to their own cherished borders that the research represents. As a researcher of the abject, one’s own scholastic productions become abject themselves, and then, in turn, threaten with contamination those exposed to their research. This threat asks the average audience to patrol or contain the pollution, to show displeasure and to distance themselves, and then to judge or try to shame others, like the researcher, who have violated the taboo of dirt and disgust.

This is not to say that everyone responds this way to the abject, or feels the fear of pollution when an actual pollutant is not present. I have had wonderful experiences at conferences where like-minded individuals found the abject liberatory and responded to my research with affirmations. However, the average response has been at best confused as to why anyone would look at or better yet make something that evokes revulsion, and, at worst, outright disgust and border patrolling through grimaces and disgusted expressions. I have even been told my work was terrible. It is a prolonged exposure to that which is considered polluting, even if it is only in representational form and not reality, that makes this methodology an abject methodology. While this is an abject visual methodology, the ethnographic, self-reflexive, and immersive nature of this methodology as well as the expanded views on the abject could be applied to other non-visual abject
material, like literature. However, the visual nature of this abject methodology compounds the polluting factors. When reading one must digest, or translate the written word. There is a mitigating process between seeing the words on the page and being affected by them. The visual nature of this methodology makes it all the more contaminating since the imagining of literature is made visible instantly to the viewer.

3.04 Sanguine Snippets: A Brief Outline of my Own Methodology

My abject visual methodology is predicated on viewing these works in person to experience the embodied nature of our reactions to disgust and the abject, but also about questioning one’s own reactions to the work and comparing them to other’s reactions to try to undercover what precisely is disgusting and why. This is about creating an autobiographical account of viewing the abject and being disgusted. My methodology emphasizes the need for contextualization in the face of disgust because as discussed in the literature review, disgust and the abject are culturally specific. This creates an ethnographic account of the abject art that has been experienced, which addresses the many facets of the cultural phenomena known as disgust and the abject.

Moving on from these broad approaches to disgusting images, this methodology outlines categories of images that are disgusting or abject, why and how they are considered abject, as well as some of the factors which may impact how the abject functions within these works, like whether the works use real disgusting substances or depict disgusting things. By outlining how to approach these images and what images are best suited for an abject visual methodology, I explore disgusting and abject images while providing a way for others to do the same.
The visual materials that I have chosen have not always been characterized as abject and when they have been, they have not been thoroughly explored through the abject. An investigation of how these images use the abject can expand the discourse and understanding of the term, and in a reciprocal relationship, produce new ideas about the visual material. By connecting these images to the abject and through that to other bodies of literature that help explain the abject, like crip theory (McRuer, 2006) or monster theory (Cohen, 1996), theorists not only deepen and expand the abject, but also uncover new visual ways of knowing and understanding. In the following sections, I will discuss how I arrived at and understand the visual in my abject visual methodology. What follows is a documentation of my process creating my own methodology, with special attention paid to other methodologies that have influenced the creation of my own, and why the creation of an abject methodology was necessary.

3.05 Methodological Delimitations

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71 Crip theory is a disability analytic and an identity practice articulated by McRuer (2006) and others (e.g. Kafer, 2013; McRuer & Mallows, 2012) that is focused on disabled cultural productions. It emphasizes the exploration of difference and individuals interested in the ownership of an anomalous body. It positions itself outside of the rights-based Eurocentric model of most of disability studies, where the end goal is often mainstreaming, which creates “compulsory ablebodiedness” even within the disabled community. The inclusion of crip theory, particularly instead of disability rights advocacy, expands the abject as the disabled body is a marginal body, but the crip body is a marginal body that is empowered in and through its marginality and difference.

72 Monster theory has been articulated by Cohen (1996) and others (e.g. Kearney, 2002) as a “…method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (Cohen, 1996, p. 3). Cohen lays out seven theses about monsters, many of which overlap with the abject, like the monster’s body is a crisis of categories and monsters police the borders of the possible. Since many disgusting images feature “monsters” or at least monstrousness, and the monstrous maternal body is the home of the abject, the inclusion of Cohen’s work helps to further expand and explain abject art.
3.05.01 the visual in an abject visual methodology. While Kristeva sees literature as the home of the abject, I find the abject to be more closely related to the visual for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, the visual has a more direct and immediate somatic response than reading does; the cliché idiom “a picture is worth a thousand words” comes to mind. Pictures instantly convey mass amounts of information, which is interpreted as with any other form of communication but is done so instantly. As Feng and O’Halloran (2013) explain, “visual images, like language, fulfill the metafunctions of representing the experiential world (representational meaning), interacting with viewers (interactive meaning) and arranging the visual resources (compositional meaning)” (p. 322). This is to say that images convey complex experiences of the world and that “abstract concepts can also be metaphorically represented in visual images” (p. 323). Metaphor is a key aspect here as Serig (2006) explains, “Metaphor… is foremost a mapping of concepts and only secondarily takes form in language, image, or other forms of human expression.” (p. 231). Metaphor is, then, a mapping of our cognitive, sensorial and emotional experiences into a pattern or network that can be accessed again, understood and reorganized or blended into new knowledge and adapted to new experiences. Some (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) have suggested that long-term memories are structured metaphorically because of the interconnectedness of our minds and bodies, combining sensory, emotion and cognitive data to create a more complete or richer representation.

Art plays a role in the metaphorical storage of memories. Serig continues, “In efforts to bridge an experiential, sensorial world with an abstract conceptual world, artworks become the vehicles and the embodiment of meanings” (p. 233). Art often
represents one thing while explaining something else through it, like a larger or more abstract concept. According to Lakoff and Johnson many ideas are explained through other ideas. This creates a conceptual metaphor of A is B (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Others, like Aldrich, envision a different arrangement for art, where A, understood as the material and B, the subject matter represented, combine to create C, the content of the work (Serig, 2008; 2006). Visual metaphors are powerful representations of more than what is physically depicted and seem related to both the cognitive mapping system that define metaphors for Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Serig, 2006; Serig, 2008), but one also related to iconography. Iconography, articulated by the art historian Panofsky (1983), argues for an emphasis on the interpretation of the subject matter or the meaning of the work over the form or formal qualities. Meaning can be determined through an understanding of the signs and symbols used in the works through intertextual knowledge. While Panofsky’s work is far more systematized than this, what matters is that an iconographic understanding of an artwork is achieved through metaphoric mapping. Metaphor works visually, as seen not only in iconography, but also in representations of the abject where bodily fluids are metaphoric stand-ins for the abject itself.

Moreover, visual materials activate multiple areas of the brain. This is backed up by neuroscience’s theory of mirror neurons, in what has been called by some an “embodied simulation” (Jeffers, 2009, p. 4). Mirror neurons act in such a way that when we see an image of an action, the same part of our brain activates as if we were doing that action or even thinking about doing that action (Jeffers, 2009; Rokonitz, 2008). As Gallese notes, “we don’t just perceive with the visual system, we perceive also with the
motor system” (cited in Jeffers, 2009, p. 4). This “allows human beings to experience their own actions and those of others at an abstract level of representation” (Jeffers, 2009, p. 4). As Rokonitz (2008) explains in his look at the role of mirror neurons in the perception of disgust in theater and film,

> When we observe an action we perceive to be intentional, or meaningful, our mirror neurons activate both the visual areas that observe the action and, concurrently, recruit the motor circuits used to perform that action - the circuits that we would use were we to perform that action ourselves. (p. 411)

Mirror neurons’ role in human cognition extends to what has been dubbed “tactile empathy” (p. 412), or the fact that mirror neurons are “activated by the sight of touch” (p. 412), which reflects a “systematic tendency of our brain to transform visual stimulus of touch into an activation of brain areas involved in the processing of our own experience of touch” (Keysers, et al., cited in Rokonitz, 2008, p. 412-413). This creates empathy, which is defined as “an intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another” (dictionary.com).

Empathy has long played a role in art, as the first use of the root word for empathy, *einfühlung*, “describe[d] the projection of human feelings into art objects” (Jeffers, 2009, p. 3). The German philosopher Vischer developed the concept of empathy in 1873 and explained it as “transpos[ing] myself into the inner being of an object and explor[ing] its formal character from within” (cited in Jeffers, 2009, p. 3). Vischer’s work has in recent years been validated by neuroscience’s claims about mirror neurons. The intersubjectivity created by mirror neurons with both other people and even objects “show that we are not alone, but are biologically and evolutionarily designed to be deeply
interconnected with one another” (Iacoboni cited in Jeffers, 2009, p. 7) and “that connectivity is at the heart of all human understanding” (Rokotnitz, 2008, p. 412). This means that to see disgust is to feel disgust both emotionally and physically. As Rokotnitz (2008) explains in regards to the representation of Rochester in *The Libertine*, a play by Thomas Shadwell, that twists “Rochester’s own disgust with humanity into an embodiment of disgust itself: causing audiences to feel disgusted by him” (p. 402).

Through the work of mirror neurons and empathy, disgust can be not only represented but also embodied, “just as our sympathy, curiosity and perhaps even libido are pleasantly aroused, Jeffreys and Dunmore co-opt our mirror-matching networks in order to elicit disgust” (Rokonitz, 2008, p. 413). This instant and embodied empathetic response to visuals seems to make art a more natural place for an expression of disgust and the abject, which are similarly tied to the body.

Another reason that the abject is more related to the visual realm than the literary has to do with the changing nature of media and imagery. Many visual culture scholars have argued that the world is increasingly visual (Mirzoeff, 2012, 2009; Freedman, 2003; Duncum, 2006). Visual Culture seeks to understand what Mitchell (2006) calls “the visual construction of the social field” (p. 345). Visual culture scholars argue that our social field is increasingly created and replicated through the visual. We no longer read;

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73 Jeffers (2009) connects mirror neurons to the early self-other relationship between mother and child. Mirror neurons activate the intersubjectivity that is displayed between a child and parent. As the mother/child relationship is the fundamental site of the abject, it is worth noting that mirror neurons may play a role in the difficulty that the child experiences in dividing from the mother. This relationship is the child’s first use of mirror neurons, which are associated with memory making and connectivity to larger neural networks and the development of cognition through pattern. Empathy is a “biological drive” (p. 7), which then makes the mother-child division, or a break in intersubjectivity, difficult.
instead, we watch. Our home is no longer the page, but the screen, where data streams to us 24/7 on hundreds, even thousands of channels, websites and on multiple handheld devices.

Mirzoeff (2009) explains, “We live in a world saturated with screens, images and objects, all demanding that we look at them” (p.1). Video is the means of communication by both professional news and media networks, and from user-uploaded content shot on cell phones, iPods, tablets and cameras. He continues, “Visual culture is everywhere: all around us are screens on computers, game consoles, iPods, handheld devices and televisions, far outnumbering those used by the still-healthy cinema industry” (p. 2). Still and moving images proliferate around us, demanding our already overburdened attention. This expansion of images and image technology has allowed for the globalization of images and the ideas behind them as they circulate to anywhere with a Wi-Fi signal or a modem (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). This expansion of images, image technology and image practices call for new ways to make sense of the visuals around us, what Sturken and Cartwright (2009) call “practices of looking”.

My abject visual methodology is indebted to Sturken and Cartwright’s assertion that there are new visuals produced by our ever expanding and changing culture and that those visuals call for new approaches, new lenses, to understand them and the culture that produces them. While abject images have existed for millennia, their current proliferation, their intersection with technology and popular media, as well as their current commodification, all call for a new methodology that can address these emergent moments. The abject is digital, Wi-Fi, and in HD now. My abject visual methodology is a way to try and understand the expansion and popularity of gross and disgusting imagery.
Many have tried to understand the allures of violence (eg. Duncum, 2006a; 2009a), horror (eg. Hutchings, 2004; Clover, 1993), sexuality (eg. Duncum, 2009b; Langman, 2008), and even just the gross things that one finds on television like the antics of the creators of Jackass (Jonze, Knoxville, Tremaine, Miller, 2000-2002) that feature massive amounts of nudity and violence (Brayton, 2007). It has been argued that many of these things appeal because of their transgressive nature (Richardson, 2010; Duncum, 2009b; Owen, Stein, & Berg, 2007; Stallybrass & White, 1986): they break rules. However, the mechanics of transgression and the taboo, which are glossed over in many texts, are imbedded in the abject. While many texts rely on the transgressive as an explanation or look at particular examples of transgression, few dig down all the way to the mechanics that construct the abnormal and the process of abjection, which creates the very borders that are crossed during transgression. My abject visual methodology is designed to dig deep and explore these early mechanics that so much of our culture’s rules and pleasures are based upon.

Furthermore, the screen nature of much digital abjection, or the material presence of abject art for that matter, is often glossed over in favor of the narrative or pictorial elements that can dominate an abject image. My abject visual methodology takes into account the medium. It takes into account whether the abject is mitigated by a screen or other recording process; whether the abject was ever really present but is no longer, as in the case of film or photography; whether the abject is gestured to through abstraction; or whether it is literally present in front of the viewer. These levels or degrees of mitigation alter the abject, particularly in the digital age, but they have not been addressed in other literature on the abject.
Commodity items, including fine art that exists in the blue chip or museum market, must have a certain amount of appeal to ensure their viewing or purchase. However, many works of art, both fine and popular, depict things, which are broadly defined as gross and undesirable. The paradoxical appeal and repulsion of these objects fits best within Kristeva’s (1982) configuration of the abject. Art that addresses social issues, like the marginal position of certain bodies, engages in the expanded application of the abject reconfigured by Butler (1996; 1993), Chanter (2004) and others as dealing with social waste and the construction of hegemony. I have focused on the art world, but the contemporary trend towards the proliferation of disgusting images can be seen in television, movies, media, even designer vinyl toys.

The abject becomes shorthand for waste, a shorthand visually represented most often in the forms of blood and vomit. And while blood and vomit are abject, without a guide to the application of the theory of the abject to visual imagery, a more complex analysis of these visuals and other more nuanced, less outwardly disgusting visuals seems difficult. It is easy to understand the abject when it is represented in vomit, but it is much harder to see the abject in an image of the fence that delineates the US/Mexico border, even though that fence is the border of the national body and creates abject, or marginal figures through its exclusions. The perpetual conflation of the abject with disgust and the lack of careful and rigorous attention to the subtleties of the abject is one of the main forces prompting my own project. Beyond this general conflation, the lack of a careful analysis of the abject in regards to the visual is the other main reason for my project.

While Kristeva’s work has been applied extensively and with subtle nuance to literature, the conflation of the abject and disgust seems most present in regard to art. However, it is
in the arts that the abject needs its own special attention and methodology to understand
the mechanics of disgust and the abject in complex and intersecting ways. This is because
of art’s unique ability to make present the imaginative world in a literal and physical way,
which evokes an embodied and visceral reaction that is closer to reality and more
immediate than the literary. This immediate physical reaction has the ability, like reality,
to override our ability to think and act critically. Contemporary art has, since the
postmodern turn, shifted towards both analytic viewership and theoretical creation of art.
However, disgust and the abject often override the analytical parts of our brain with a
knee-jerk, or instant, reaction. We need tools for the exploration of visual culture in all its
facets; particularly those aspects that would have us leave our critical faculties behind.
Disgust and the abject then call out particularly strongly for a methodology that allows
for intervention and critique.

What is particularly lacking in visual analyses of the abject are the more recent
developments in the theory of the abject (Butler, 1993; Chanter, 2008; Tyler, 2013; Scott,
2010) that link the abject to marginal bodies and political potential. While the abject as
blood and vomit is well established in the visual arena, the abject as the marginal figure
or the ambiguous border is not well understood. This confusion seems to result from the
lack of a methodology that is adapted to both visuals and the abject in its full and
complex nature. With the intent of exposing the limitations in the methodologies
currently used to interpret marginalized communities and abject visual imagery, I am
creating a new, more inclusive abject visual methodology that can be applied to the study
of a myriad of images, resulting in a more sophisticated understanding of these often
rejected bodies of work.
3.05.02 women of color feminist reading practice. In the course of studying disgusting art, I thought through many metaphors and theories in trying to find the appropriate methodology that suited this project. I thought about using the idea of an abject reading practice, borrowed from Women of Color feminism and particularly from the work of Hong (2006). In her work *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, Hong (2006) outlines a reading practice which focuses on the need to “read”, or to apprehend and to find meaning, not only in text, but in cultural productions and identity. This practice asks how an individual is read in different spaces, stressing the mobile and circulating nature of identity. Both Women of Color feminism and the reading practice associated with it appealed because of their intersectional critique, which accounted for multiple, often conflicting, identity categories, their deconstruction of the state and structural forces and interest in social justice. Hong (2006) explains,

> Women of Color feminist practice emerged to name the contradictions of the racialized nation-state by deploying tactics that exceeded nationalism’s scope: intersectional analysis, an attention to difference and a critique of identification with the normative race, gender and sexual institutions of the state. (p. xix)

While an intersectional critique of the structures that have continued to divide the country into racialized sectors and have often coopted difference to negate radicalism is a

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74 For those unfamiliar with Hong’s (2006) work or Women of Color feminism as an analytic, let me offer an example of the types of cooption that Hong is critiquing. Homonormativity is a term used to describe the ways in which homosexuality has been absorbed into discourses of normativity through marriage equality, economic station, and cisgendered status. (Note: Cisgendered refers to those whose gender matches their biological sex). Homonormativity assumes that queer individuals can and want to be like
strategic tactic that I embrace, a reading practice seemed at odds with a visual project that seeks to redress the emphasis on the abject in text. While intersectionality is at times a necessary method for an abject visual methodology, both intersectionality and Women of Color feminism as methodologies do not address the embodied nature of an abject visual methodology. Moreover, disgust and abjection are often a composite of multiple identity categories, and while an intersectional approach can help to understand the specifics of individuals with multiple conflicting identities, it is not equipped to look at the broader categories of disgust and abjection. My own abject visual methodology is heavily indebted to feminist methodologies like Women of Color feminism, but is its own specific methodology with different emphases.

3.05.03 Wilson and lenses. I considered employing an abject lens, borrowing from Wilson (1997), who argues that by adopting different lenses one can see more of an image. This stems from the idea that different lenses bring different areas of the artifact into focus and “provide important insight into their meaning” (p. 93). Wilson notes, “when these lenses are used, the physical art object, at different times and for different individuals, reveals works of art differently” (p. 89). Lenses are diverse, including lenses heteronormative people. As Duggan (2002) explains, homonormativity is, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.” (p. 179). Hegemony has coopted the radical potential of queer into the discourse of heteronormativity. A careful intersectional analysis of identity categories can help to unpack homonormativity in relationship to class, gender, and race to reveal an often white, affluent cisgender male at the center of this particular inclusion debate. Women of Color feminism and intersectionality also point out the further exclusions that happen when homosexuality is coopted into the norm and further disenfranchising poor, queer, people of color. Further divisions within the queer community make organizing for political effect difficult and threaten to depoliticize sexuality.
of formal analysis based in the elements and principles of art, theoretical lenses that approach the work through bodies of knowledge like feminism or the abject, personal lenses, even ideological lenses. As Gude (2009) explains, habits of viewership create lenses, “habits of mind… can be used as lenses through which to view and re-view art” (p. 9). Ideology is often explained in shorthand as common sense, the habit or way we are acculturated to think (Hall, 1981). We can similarly become acculturated to a particular lens and view things in a way that seems normal and natural but often leaves part of the image uncovered or ignored. An abject lens could perhaps disrupt this habitus of viewership. However, lenses can be taken on and off. They do not necessarily lead to permanent change or implicate the body, beyond the eyes, in the way the abject does.

Lenses are designed to see what is there, while much of the abject is based in the unconscious, or what is not expressly present. While this may be a slide from the metaphoric to the literal, it is worth noting, as these metaphors structure the use and understanding of these tools. In the end, lenses with their focus on vision seem to lack a key component to the abject, embodiment.

3.05.04 ways of seeing and practices of looking. I have considered an abject way of seeing, based on Berger’s foundational work Ways of Seeing (1972). The Western scopic regime is predicated on European male dominance and has created a “habit” of seeing that many disgusting works challenge. As Ways of Seeing criticizes some of the basic assumptions of that scopic regime, primarily its supremacy and singular legitimacy, it is an attractive approach as a methodology.

However, one of the major detractors to Berger’s work that Sturken and Cartwright (2009) discuss is that “the terrain of images and their trajectories has become
significantly more complex since Berger” (p. 6). Berger’s work, while innovative at the time, does not have the complexity to address contemporary images that exist in a thoroughly technologically saturated world. Another issue with Berger’s work, which is somewhat related to the somatic experience of technology, is that he is singularly concerned with vision. Berger explains, "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (Berger, 1972, p. 7). While I agree with him to a point, his neglect of the other senses puts his work at odds with the abject, which invokes, either literally or figuratively, a wide breadth of the sensorium from pungent smells, to foul tastes, even slimy touches. Also, the abject is streamed to computers and television sets, is downloaded and appears in video games, all technologies that Berger does not address.

Later scholars like Sturken and Cartwright (2009) are also influenced by Berger (1972) but recognize that technology and “the economic context of postindustrial capitalism has enabled a blurring of many previously understood boundaries between cultural and social realms” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 6). With this in mind, Sturken and Cartwright design new practices of looking that can approach the complexity of contemporary images that go beyond Berger. In their work, Sturken and Cartwright use interdisciplinary practices rooted in culture studies, feminism, and media analysis to understand the multiple technologies that inform and create our images. They focus on how images can carry multiple meanings depending on inter and intracultural contexts. Sturken and Cartwright’s text Practices of Looking (2009) inspired me to consider an “abject practice of looking” as a methodology.

While valuable as an influence and a point of departure, Sturken and Cartwright’s
work seemed equally limited as a primary methodology insofar as the abject is about much more than looking because it involves a physical, as well as social and psychological component. With Sturken and Cartwright’s model in mind, an abject visual methodology would be more in line with practices of feeling and the interrogation of immediate emotional responses to the visual. Moreover, while the abject can be found in the contemporary scopic field, the abject is also historical, whereas Sturken and Cartwright’s (2009) work is geared more towards contemporary multimedia viewing practices. Finally, Sturken and Cartwright offer numerous “practices” of looking, or multiple methodologies ranging from Marxism to feminism, and semiotics to psychoanalysis. Their work lacks a unified approach beyond the desire to understand contemporary images, and while my own project is an attempt to do the same, it is unified under, an albeit broad, heading of disgusting and abject images. Sturken and Cartwright’s “practices” could have been applied to my objects of study, but their analytic frameworks are broad and varied to uncover the specifics that an abject visual methodology was designed to reveal.

3.05.05 psychoanalysis. An abject visual methodology is directly related to psychoanalysis as a methodology. Psychoanalysis as a practice lends itself to methodology. As Brown and Heggs (2011) state, “Freud’s psychoanalytic sessions were predicated on a supposed cure achieved through ‘helping the subject to overcome the distortions that are the source of self-misunderstanding’ (Ricoeur, 1981: 265)” (p. 297). However, “what he [Freud] was in effect doing was constructing a method for the renewal of self identity” (Giddens, 1999 cited in Brown & Heggs, 2011, p. 297). This
method can be adjusted to understand the roots of miscommunication and
misidentification, in the individual and within a broader societal context.

Psychoanalysis as a methodology is concerned with stories that are “haunted by
the bits that she [the researcher] chooses not to see or is unable to see” (Brown & Heggs,
2011, p. 298). However, these stories might be “a cover story for things the researcher is
finding difficult to address …. But more broadly these cover stories might pertain to a
wider community, specific forms of common sense or ideologies that govern ways of
life” (p. 298). Psychoanalysis not only uncovers the unconscious of the individual
researcher, but also the unconscious ideologies of the society that the researcher lives
within.

Within psychoanalytic methodologies there have been few attempts to
systematically address the multiple facets of the abject, particularly in regards to visual
culture. There are some scholars that endeavor to provide a deeper understanding of the
abject in application to artists like Jenny Saville (Meager, 2003) and Cindy Sherman
(Foster, 1996; Mulvey, 1991). There are scholars like Shimakawa (2002) who have taken
Kristeva and reformulated the abject into a methodology for understanding theater,
arguing for a connection between national identity formation and the Asian body in
theater as understood through the abject. But within these examples and others (e.g.
Houser, Jones, Taylor & Ben-Levi, 1993; English & Spurlock, 2008; Welchman, 2001),
the abject is not fully explored, suffering a conflation with disgust that obscures the
works’ nuances.

Psychoanalysis and thus the use of an abject visual methodology, is an
excavation-like process that delves into the self/society divide and attempts to uncover
the larger social workings through the individual’s experience, particularly experiences of
disgust. As Rose (2006) notes, “psychoanalysis consists of a range of theories that deal
most centrally with human subjectivity, sexuality and the unconscious” (p. 107), all of
which take time and energy to understand as they are often buried in repression,
displacement and metonymy. The psychoanalytic methodology in application to images
is, according to Rose (2006), “centrally concerned with their social effects: the ways they
produce particular spectating positions that are differentially sexualized and empowered”
(p. 107). Mulvey’s thoughts have been influential in regards to the usefulness of
psychoanalytic methodologies to look at social issues manifested primarily in film.
Mulvey explains, “psychoanalytic theory is … appropriated here as a political weapon,
demonstrating the way in which the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film
form” (cited in Rose, 2006, p. 137). Psychoanalytic methodologies, pluralized because
there is no one body of literature that all of these methodologies draw from, when applied
to issues beyond those concerned with the self, offer a way to address broader social
justice issues and connect to critical culture studies and its relationship to power and
oppression. Similarly, an abject visual methodology seeks to understand the appeals of
the abject on more than a personal level, broadening out to understand social trends
towards disgusting images and the questions that come with that trend, like what does
this development say about our current culture?

While psychoanalysis as a method can be applied to art, putting the work “on the
couch” so to speak, and also to artists,75 it is not specifically or singularly designed for art

75 A well-known and contentious example of this is the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who
famously put Cézanne and his apples “on the couch”, arguing that the works depicted a
and is open to multiple approaches beyond the abject (Rose, 2006; Adams; 2009). Moreover, some have criticized the use of psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Hoad, 2000) in general. This stems from a lack of consensus as to what psychoanalysis is and what it does. Hoad (2000) has argued that psychoanalysis is not truly political, and that it is too sexist and antiquated to be useful. Hoad has maintained that psychoanalysis naturalizes sexual and racial difference and acts as a colonizing force from the West. However, “Juliet Mitchell (1974: xv), insists that ‘psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one’” (Hoad, cited in Rose, 2006, p. 113).

In a similar vein, Oliver (2004) suggests that psychoanalysis can be a tool for understanding oppression as a social phenomenon, through an acceptance of the notion that the individual and thus the psyche are “thoroughly social” (p. xiii). The idea that the psyche is social, or a cultural production whose function and form is based on particular commonly shared representation of self and mental health, stems from Freud and his work on trauma after World War I (Freud, 1995). Psychic trauma and pain have real world effects and documentable consequences for both the individual and the larger community and social order. Oliver (2004) explains that subjectivity and the psyche are built in a social context and that one cannot “explain the dynamics of oppression without considering its psychic dimension” (p. xiv). Psychoanalysis is then, with certain modifications, suited to understanding social operations. While Oliver doesn’t focus on the abject per se, she instead develops a theory of alienation positioned within the notion of the abject arguing that alienation as a core experience of both the social and the

“latent erotic sense” (Schapiro cited in Erwin, 2002, p. 121). While exalted in the field of art history as someone who opened the field up to new possibilities of analysis, there has been much criticism of Schapiro and this type of use of psychoanalysis (Erwin, 2002).
psychic is an abject experience. Alienation is the excluded position of the “Other”: it is the place of the rejected from which the abject haunts, excluded but not completely. Psychoanalytic methodologies are a political and social tool as well as bodies of knowledge. They can be, and have been, applied to projects beyond the field of psychoanalysis itself and its therapeutic goals. While this methodology could be used for my own work, it is not specific enough to address the abject, particularly abject visuals, which need a deep understanding of how visuals work as well as how the abject works as a psychoanalytic methodology.

Psychoanalytic methodologies are inline with my own work as I envision my methodology as a political and social tool with applications beyond psychoanalysis and art. However, the existing psychoanalytic methods, even the abject one formulated by Kristeva, have not covered either an expansive view of the abject or the visual arena. I view my own abject visual methodology as a type of psychoanalytic methodology, one specifically attuned to both the abject and the visual and expanded beyond the model of putting either the art or artist on the couch, to include audience responses.

3.05.06 further inspirations. I investigated more traditional methodologies and found that some were helpful, but none completely filled the bill, so to speak. An abject visual methodology should be a tool that aids in exploration. The abject as a body of knowledge prescribes techniques of investigation that can be simultaneously a panoramic view that allows one to see broad trends, a macroscopic view that is attuned to the fine detail directly in front of the viewer, and a microscopic view that allows the viewer to see past the surface to uncover hidden depths and obfuscated structures. Following this visual exploration, an abject methodology deals with the somatic, the haptic and the sensorial as
disgust activates the whole body, particularly the digestive system. This methodology engages in what is both literally present, as well as what is hidden in the unconscious. The preceding section has been a delimitation of the many methodological approaches that I have considered using to understand abject visuals because of their compelling aspects, but are lacking in enough ways to call for the creation of my own methodology. Next, I turn to works that have had a more fundamental impact on the construction of my own abject visual methodology.

3.05.06.01 informé. It is with a lengthy quest to find an appropriate methodology for my project in mind that I turned to Bois and Krauss’s work *Formlessness: A User’s Guide* (1997) and Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) for inspiration. These two works, which are outside of the predominant theoretical works on the abject and disgust that are contained in my literature review, have been most influential in the production of my abject visual methodology. As mentioned in the literature review, Bataille first theorized the abject and called it *l’informe* or formlessness. *L’Informe* originates from Bataille’s unpublished papers and is known primarily through the work of Bois and Krauss, particularly their book *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997). Formless is a theoretical text that interprets and reformulates Bataille’s work while mapping his ideas onto modern art. Simultaneously, *Formless* is a catalogue from the exhibition *L’Informe: Mode d’emploi*, which occurred May 21 to August 26, 1996 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Bois and Krauss believed that the exhibition, which they curated, “operationalized” their theoretical work and demonstrated their understanding of Bataille. Both the show and their book, which offer a methodology of the formless, outline categories with which to understand formlessness. Within each of these broader
categories Bois and Krauss offer subcategories that help to explain and expand the broader categories and situate works of art within both the more specific and more general categories of the *informe*. For example, under base materialism, they discuss ideas surrounding the cadaver, entropy and dialecticism and pair images with their discussion of these categorical explorations. Bois and Krauss (1997) explain the motivation for their work, arguing that certain artistic practices with which Georges Bataille's name had never been associated – the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti from the late 1920s and early 1930s on the one hand and the repertory of surrealist photography on the other – could only be characterized adequately through the operations of Bataille's *l’informe*. (p. 9)

It is with the application of Bataille’s work to a broader set of artistic practices in mind that they develop four key categories from Bataille’s work to demonstrate the process of formlessness: base materialism, horizontality, pulse, and entropy.

Bois and Krauss approach some of the same works that I have labeled as abject through formlessness, specifically rejecting the abject and its trend in the art world. For example, Bois and Krauss categorize some of Cindy Sherman’s works as dealing with horizontality and include them in their show and catalogue. Her centerfold series is included because the series has an elongated format that challenges the traditionally vertical orientation and form of portrait images. Her Old Master’s series is included because while the format is that of traditional portraits, the prosthetics that Sherman uses are pulled downward by gravity, signaling not only that they are faux, but that the work is about debasement through putting into a prone and horizontal position that which is
meant to be upright, heroic, and at eye level; the traditional portrait (Bois & Krauss, 1997). Bois and Krauss also discuss Mulvey’s (1991) reading of Sherman’s work in relationship to the abject. However, in the end they renounce the use of the abject in favor of their own categorical system and frame, formlessness, explaining, “that ‘abjection,’ in producing a thematics of essences and substances, stands in absolute contradiction to the idea of the formless” (Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 238).

Bois and Krauss argue for using the term formlessness rather than the abject because of its relationship to sublimation, or an intentional move in Bataille’s writings to raise up the lowered and lower the high; the informe is an operation, not a theme or substance, whereas for them the abject is not operational, but rather thematic. This becomes clearer in Bois and Krauss’ definition of horizontality, which is not simply works that are horizontal, but is rather a change in the viewer’s relationship to the art object that is traditionally vertical on the wall and most closely related to the viewers eyes and sense of sight. By placing the work on the floor, or in a different mode of viewing other than the vertical which is ennobling and hierarchical, the artist enacts the process of horizontality and changes the viewers relationship to art. Bois and Krauss (1997) have championed the formless as opposed to the abject because formlessness is an operation, a “performative ‘force’ of the ‘formless’” (p. 9). Formlessness is not about the object itself, per se, but what the object does, the operation it performs, which is usually a leveling or inverting of hierarchies, often through denigration.

They also argue that formlessness is a more appropriate term than the abject as it has the ability to pick apart the categories of form and content and upend the very divide between the two. Formlessness is a type of operation
that brush[es] modernism against the grain, and of doing so without countering modernism’s formal certainties by means of the more reassuring and naïve certainties of meaning. On the contrary, these operations split off from modernism, insulting the very opposition of form and content - which is itself formal, arising as it does from a binary logic - declaring it null and void. (Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 16)

For Krauss, it is the performative and structural nature of the formless that separates Bataille’s ideas from Kristeva, especially since Kristeva is more interested in the content, or “certainties of meaning”, which Krauss finds naïve. Bataille’s idea, according to Krauss, “is about attacking the very imposition of categories…But Kristeva’s project is all about recuperating certain objects as abject” (Foster, et al., 1994, p. 3). Kraus is willing to acknowledge that Butler’s work with the abject perhaps has potential to move beyond the simple inversion that Krauss argues is characteristic of Kristeva, but repeatedly rejects Kristeva’s views as juvenile. Kraus explains *informe* as “structural. I take it to be a way for Bataille to group a variety of strategies for knocking form off its pedestal” (Foster, et al., 1994, p. 4). Kraus acknowledges that Kristeva’s work is grounded in Bataille, but calls Kristeva’s abject “merely a way to characterize bodily substances so that the formerly disprivileged becomes the privileged” (p. 4) and claims this is “childish” (p. 4). While I think this is a fundamental misreading of the abject, which seems to ignore the ambiguity and complicated nature of Kristeva’s work, it is worth noting that there is a difference between how Bois and Krauss theorize

76 This text is a round table discussion between the authors on the popularity, problems and possibilities of the abject.
formlessness and the abject, even as there are deep connections between Kristeva and
Bataille’s work. Bois and Krauss’s use of formlessness is quite their own and is a single
interpretation of Bataille’s work. It is an interpretation that aligns with Bois and Krauss’s
own work within modernist art history. Kristeva herself is influenced by Bataille and
formlessness, which inspired her own project on the abject. While Bois and Krauss and
Kristeva are influenced by some of the same source material, they end up with very
different products. It would seem that Krauss’s dislike of the way Kristeva handled
Bataille, is part of the reason for her and Bois’s own project on formlessness.

Krauss is particularly upset with Kristeva’s abject for the literalization of filth and
the body and the direct depiction of waste that has accompanied the rise of the abject. She
even goes so far as to say she has a “horror of literalization” (Foster, et al., 1994, p. 12).
Krauss explains, “The ‘body’ – as it has increasingly surfaced in current theoretical work
– is rapidly becoming my phobic object” (Foster, et al., 1994, p. 12). Krauss is distressed
by the literal representations of shit and the body, something she admits to avoiding in
her own analysis of artists like Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly, in part because
literalness forecloses open signification and sublimation, but also because the literalness
seems distasteful.\textsuperscript{77} For numerous reasons, Krauss and her work with Bois in

\textsuperscript{77} Labeling Krauss’ reaction as distaste comes from a number of comments she makes in
the article. She admits to her own phobia of bodies and substances. She makes derisive
comment about how “awful” Art Brut (Foster, et al., 1994, p. 18) is because of its
literalness and sexual content. When fellow critic Buchloch asks about the sexual
explicitness of Twombly’s work, Krauss responds that she didn’t see it, and seems to find
it disgusting in retrospect. She also refuses to discuss Pollock famously pissing in Peggy
Gugenheim’s fireplace. It would seem that she is quite phobic of filth. Finally, her label
of Kristeva’s work as childish and her own championing of Bataille marks her work as
modernist and points towards her distain for championing low substances and her
adherence to modernist hierarchies.
formlessness is less than helpful in regards to understanding the abject; however, it is very useful as a model for the creation of a visual methodology that is based in psychoanalytic thought.

There is a difference between Bois and Krauss’ project and my own, as their work is self-referentially embedded in the art world. They are not trying to draw larger conclusions about society, nor are they interested in any area of visual culture beyond the art world’s avant-garde. They also do not infuse their work with any broader cultural critique like feminism or critical race studies. My own project is interested in a broader range of imagery, particularly emergent genres and lowbrow art. It is also infused with a larger goal based on providing a voice and consideration to the margins through an analysis of images of and from the margin. However, Bois and Krauss’ project is helpful in its construction of a methodology, which attempts to provide form and a map to that which, by definition, lacks form. An examination of formlessness is important for two reasons: one being the need to differentiate between the abject and formlessness as being separate projects with different approaches and goals that necessitate the creation of both Bois and Krauss’s work, as well as my own; and two, because my own work has been influenced by the ways in which Bois and Krauss have used Bataille’s ideas in application to the interpretation of art.

3.05.06: methodology of the oppressed. Another work that has been influential in the creation of my own methodology is Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000). Sandoval begins by arguing that a number of thinkers, including Derrida, Barthes, and Fannon, have reached a critical mass in regards to postcolonial and postmodern thinking. They each approach the problem of social oppression through similar types of
critique, citing the role of capitalism, of empire and of media in the unequal distribution of resources. This shift in culture has been identified in many ways: globalization, post-industrialism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, transnationalism, technological, and consumerism. While these are each different concepts, they each describe a similar manner of breaking with the past. Sandoval (2000) notes that “the rationality of Western thought can be said to have found its limits” (p. 8) and that, “The twentieth-century season of reproachment shook the Western will to know in all its settling points, permitting a release of new knowledges in the sciences, arts and humanities” (p. 8). These new knowledges have lead to the creation of new academic disciplines, like ethnic and feminist studies, that “defied and transgressed the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines” (p. 8). At the center of these new fields were scholars like Jameson, Harraway, Anzaldua, Lorde, and Foucault. These theorists discuss how to address the problematic moment of what bell hooks (1994) has called “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”, although to this I would add ableist, sizist, mentalist and imperialist. Sandoval (2000) explains that,

The goal here is to consolidate and extend what might be called manifestos for liberation in order to better identify and specify a mode of emancipation that is effective within first world neocolonizing global conditions during the twenty-first century. (p. 2)

78 For more on ableism, see Davis (2010).
79 For more on sizism, see Rothblum & Solovay (Eds.) (2009).
80 For more on mentalism and the rise of mad pride, see Dellar, Curtis, & Leslie (Eds.) (2000).
81 For more on imperialism, see Said (1994).
Sandoval’s project is based in the review of these scholar’s work, uncovering linkages and overall themes, particularly that many of these thinkers have argued that love is the best way to counter the new cultural shifts. Sandoval (2000) notes that,

a diverse array of thinkers are agitating for similarly conceived and unprecedented forms of identity, politics, aesthetic production and coalitional consciousness through their shared practice of a hermeneutics of love in the postmodern world and it demonstrates that the apartheid of theoretical domains dividing academic endeavors by race, sex, class, gender and identity is annulled when this fundamental linkage is discerned. (p. 4)

Taking this critical mass of scholarship on both the cultural turn and possible antidotes to its oppressive structures, Sandoval creates a methodology to redress oppression, a plan of action to follow not only for scholarship and critique, but also for possible social change. Sandoval outlines ten discussions that are the ideological basis of her methodology including,

the principal of primal love and desire, love as a political apparatus, the end of academic apartheid, the bases for creating interdisciplinary knowledge, radical *mestizaje*\(^{82}\), *différence*, the grammatical position of subjugation, the middle voice as the third voice, technoscience politics\(^ {83}\) and decolonizing cyberspace. (p. 4)

\(^{82}\) *Mestizaje* means mixture, and usually refers to the cultural and biological blending of pre-colonial South Americans and Europeans (dictionary.com). The inclusion of Spanish and other languages is a strategy that Anzaldúa often uses to gesture towards the experience of living in between, on the edges, and in a culturally blended world. Like *différence*, *mestizaje* means more than its literal definition of blending and encompasses something for which the English language has no equal.

\(^{83}\) Knowing Sandoval’s background I believe that she is using technoscience politics in the ways outlined by Donna Harraway. Harraway explains that “Technoscience
The form and content of these conversations, which according to Sandoval (2000) are happening throughout both the university and activist organizations, led her to create her methodology “of emancipation” (p. 2) which is comprised of five “skills” or methods to help enact those conversations. These skills include semiotics, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, democracies and differential consciousness. Much of Sandoval’s text focuses on an expansion of Barthes *Mythologies* (2013), the aim of which Sandoval (2000) explains as, “how to go about describing the methodology that permitted the colonized to see, hear and interpret what appeared to be natural to the colonizer as the cultural and historical productions that they were” (p. 87). Sandoval borrows from Barthes in creating a decolonizing methodology. She explains that,

> Barthes hoped to locate what he called the “ethical” and “political” sensibilities, that is, the specific methodologies, that might lead to the emancipation of extravagant...
consciousness from its slavery in and to the dominant order and for everyone, in the same way that feminist theorist Nancy Hartstock hoped, some twenty years later, that the “feminist” standpoint could liberate consciousness from its strictures in masculinist order, or in the way Donna Harraway hoped that “cyborg feminism” would free citizen-subjects from every order. (p. 88)

Furthermore, Sandoval pulls even more scholars into her formulation of the methodology of the oppressed, citing particularly Third World feminist scholars like Moraga and Anzaldua (1984).

U.S. peoples of color have long acted, spoken, intellectualized and lived out what Cherrie Moraga calls a ‘theory in the flesh,’ a theory that allows survival and more, that allows practitioners to live with faith, hope and moral vision in spite of all else. (Sandoval, 2000, p. 7)

Sandoval’s inclusion of Third World feminists stems from these scholars’ argument that many oppressed people have cultivated a unique ability to survive in the midst of domination. Third World people survive by relying on the skills that Sandoval turns into methods and through a politics of love. Moraga and Anzaldua (1984) explain,

The vision of radical Third World feminism necessitates our willingness to work with those people who would feel at home in El Mundo Zurdo, the left-handed world: – the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged. From our blood and spirit connections with these groups, we women on the bottom throughout the world can form an international feminism. For separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution. Autonomy, however, is not separatism. We recognize the right and necessity of colonized people
throughout the world, including Third World women in the United States, to form independent movements towards self-government. But ultimately, we must struggle together. Together we form a new vision which spans from the self-love of our colored skins to the respect of our foremothers who kept the embers of revolution burning, to our reverence for the trees—the final reminder of our rightful place on this planet. (p. 196)

Third World feminist scholars connect the theoretical ideas of Foucault and Derrida and, in turn, connect them to the material existence of colonized and disempowered people. Sandoval (2000) includes Third World feminism for a number of reasons including their material reality as people who “live and are gendered, sexed, raced and classed ‘between and among’ the lines” (p. 46) as opposed to being defined within the dominant spaces. This existence leads to both a split consciousness and a tactical subjectivity, or an identity that is predicated not on the individual ego, but on the super ego and survival. This bifurcated and survivalist subjectivity can be employed to shift and mobilize power despite conflicting with other Third World feminist ideas, even contradicting themselves at times. Sandoval includes Third World feminists because of the political implications of their work, particularly the concept of self-love, as well as community and coalition that challenge traditional modernist forms of opposition through an embodied understanding of contradiction and levels of complicity within the system. Sandoval argues that the methodology of the oppressed articulates and operationalizes the existing skills of the oppressed, “the skills necessary for accomplishing sign reading across cultures; identifying and consciously constructing ideology; decoding languages of resistance
and/or domination; and for writing and speaking a neorhetoric\textsuperscript{84} of love\textsuperscript{85} in the postmodern world” (p. 3).

My own interest in Sandoval’s text is multifold. It is appealing because of its political aims, its project of methodology construction (it is methodology of the oppressed), its response to aggregate knowledge, and its sources and metaphors.

Sandoval’s theory is appealing because the aim of the theoretical project is to create a framework that encourages social justice. While it seems narcissistic to envision my own work to be as transformative as Sandoval’s intentions, my own project is aimed at politicizing the abject in its application to art and with instilling the abject with the potential for social justice, specifically through an expansion of voices and images from the margins. Similar to Sandoval’s aggregate or collective approach to contemporary ideas, I have culled together many scholars discussing the abject, some of which do not discuss the abject per se, but rather deal with issues tangentially linked to the abject, such

\textsuperscript{84} Sandoval is referring to the field of New Rhetorics, which has sought to restore rhetoric after a perceived cooption into political misdirection and a marginalization due to a patriarchal and modernist emphasis on Greek and Roman terms. Another way of phrasing this is the emphasis on postmodern analysis within rhetoric (Enos & Brown, 1992; Donsbach, 2008).

\textsuperscript{85} Sandoval is gesturing towards an expanded view of love which includes, but is not limited to eros (sexual love), storge (familial love), philia (“brotherly” love or deep friendship), and agape (non-sexual or religious love and unconditional love). This neorhetoric of postmodern love includes non-traditional, polyamorous, and queer love, as well as, a love of, and found in, community that goes beyond philia. Sandoval addresses this as a hermeneutics of love in \textit{Methodology of the Oppressed} (2000), relying heavily on Barthes writings about love. Lourdes (2000), herself a Women of Color and Third World feminist, suggests a return to erotics in everyday life as an antidote to systemic racism and patriarchy. Erotics is expanded and redefined as a female centered sensual practice of power achieved through embracing the everyday with a type of love that the West has primarily reserved for a particular narrative of romance and sexual union. I will return to both erotics and a hermeneutic of love in my conclusion as I offer possible conclusions and further ways to utilize my abject visual methodology.
as liminality, ambiguity, death (both social and material), borders and transgression from the margins. I am creating a methodology by pulling together these diverse scholars and works that are circling disgust, the abject and the marginal and applying these ideas to a different context: art. Many of the same sources and scholars influence my work and Sandoval’s, even if they have not been singularly articulated. Sandoval’s work is predicated on the cultural turn, or post-modernity, with its interest in poly-vocality, Derridean différance and rhizomatic leveling. Both Sandoval’s and my own work seek to address emergent trends. Sandoval is interested in the new global terrain, where it is neocolonial and where it can be occupied for decolonial emancipation. Sandoval (2000) explains,

> With the transnationalization of capitalism, when elected officials are no longer leaders of singular nation-states but nexuses for multinational interests, it also becomes possible for citizen-subjects to become activists for a new decolonizing global terrain, a psychic terrain that can unite them with similarly positioned citizen-subjects within and across national borders into new, post-Western-empire alliances. (p. 184)

I am interested in the proliferation of disgusting visuals in the same landscape as Sandoval, the globalized, postmodern, media saturated contemporary sphere. I am concerned, but hopeful, about what the emergence of disgust and the abject signals for art, aesthetics and culture at large. My own methodology has a more narrow focus than Sandoval’s, but it takes place in the same cultural atmosphere of neoliberal and neocolonial policy seen in the expansion of privatization, national deregulation, the rise
in the rhetoric of individualism and meritocracy and imperialist war incursions around the globe.

Finally, I borrow some of Sandoval’s metaphors for my own methodology, particularly her reliance on the idea of topography as the metaphor for the exploration and charting of a broad expanse of theory, authors and cultural sites. Sandoval specifically outlines her use of topography as originating in the Greek topos, meaning place, but applies that place to both a material and psychic space in which oppression and liberation can occur. Sandoval (2000) says, “These orientations can be thought of as repositories within which subjugated citizens can either occupy or throw off subjectivities in a process that at once enacts and decolonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence” (p. 54). My own project is conceived of, beyond a methodology for approaching abject images, as a map to those images and considers where they are found, who makes them and what they mean beyond a more conventional analysis.

Sandoval’s interest in psychic spaces is also pertinent to my own topography and methodology as the abject initiates in the unconscious. While there are very real material and physical consequences, the drama of disgust and the abject takes place largely within the psychic. It is a psychic border that is transgressed more often than a literal border when looking at abject art. In addition to the unconscious and the psychic, the abject deals with early childhood traumas of differentiation. When those moments are recalled, they take the individual back to their childhood, to a still lurking fear that their ego will be lost. The drama of the abject then takes place within the unconscious, within memories, and within psychic spaces. It is within the broader discourses of
psychoanalytic methodologies, as well as the more specific ideas presented by Bois and Krauss (1999) and Sandoval (2000), that I construct my own abject visual methodology.

The following chapter will explore the taxonomy of abject visuals, expanding on the specific ways to approach art using an abject visual methodology. It will provide an extensive map of the aforementioned abject taxonomy, surveying what qualifies as abject art, how it is abject, and the factors that influence how the work is read and understood as abject.
4.0: An Abject Visual Methodology: Drafting A Map & A Key to Things We May Not Want to Find

4.01 What an Abject Visual Methodology Entails: Or is that Entrails?

In the previous chapter I laid out both a brief explanation of my abject visual methodology and the materials that influenced its construction. Many of these materials are other methodological approaches that, while attuned towards art, psychoanalysis, and social justice, seemed insufficient alone. They did not address the embodiment or the visceral implication of the body that often accompanies experiences of disgust and the abject, nor did they fully address the visual nature of my sites of analysis or the specific psychoanalytic dimensions of the abject. This chapter, I further develop my own abject visual methodology, laying out key analytic steps, and then use my methodology to create a taxonomy of the world of the visually abject.

4.01.01 identifying the abject: what’s abject and what’s just gross: a fine distinction. The first and most obvious step in using an abject visual methodology is to identify what the abject is specifically. This is an early and critical step as understanding what is abject allows for more specific classification and further analysis. Notions of both the abject and disgust are very similar, as chapter two’s literature review reveals. However, there are, what I consider to be, some key distinctions, which are also elucidated in the literature review. Disgust is the emotional response that demands that we thrust waste away. We feel the need to enact clean and proper in a multitude of ways, from hygiene, to cleaning, to thrusting away what is considered improper.

When we do not or cannot enact this “cleanliness”, we experience disgust at what is making us, or our space, dirty, unruly, or non-normative. Upon the experience of
disgust, we then reject the “dirty” elements from our lives. However, the abject is more than just a disgusting thing we need to eliminate. In fact, the abject, by definition, can never be totally excluded. The abject is necessary for the perpetual reinforcement of our ego, and so while it is the harbinger of crisis and chaos, it is also necessary for the maintenance of our egos, a maintenance that is pleasurable. Feeling disgust and being able to enact total rejection is a complete circuit, it ends in the radical exclusion of the thing that is disgusting to us. If it is truly excluded, completely gone, if it never returns from repression in any form, never haunts, never fascinates, then it is not abjection. It is just disgust. Some like Miller (1997) see disgust as having a fascinating or appealing component, rather than just repulsion. However, I theorize that this connection between disgust and fascination is demonstrating another slip between the tenuous borders between the abject and disgust. That is to say, I believe what Miller and others who similarly find pleasurable or fascinating elements in disgust (e.g. Herz, 2012; Kelly, 2011) are responding to is not disgust, but rather the abject and its deeper paradoxical dimensions of pleasurable disorder.

The abject is a complex psychological phenomenon that includes a thrusting away what is polluting in order to maintain a clean and proper self. However, in the thrusting away, we are never able to truly exclude or eliminate what we have deemed to be “waste”. We are forever haunted by it and this haunting, this failed exclusion, creates a fascination for that “waste”. This fascination and haunting create a type of desire, a complicated desire that is both a yearning to reclaim the waste as a part of the self, and a desire to exclude the waste entirely, neither of which can be fulfilled.
Disgust is a component of the abject, but there needs to be more than just disgust for abjection to occur. An object is not abject unless we are both horrified and drawn to it. There must be some pleasure, some fascination, some unpleasant but seemingly compulsory attraction that makes a work of art abject and not just disgusting. This is the “fascinated victimhood” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9) which Kristeva claims is the state of the abject, a state in which the individual is both horrified and violated, but is also constituted, which is gratifying. Fascinated victimhood seems analogous to the practice of “rubber necking” or of looking at an accident as one drives past. The “rubber necker” peers with trepidation at a grisly scene of mangled flesh, blood and cars, knowing that there is a probability that serious injury or death was a result of the accident yet they are compelled to look anyway. Disgust must be joined with fascination or attraction to be the abject and not just a reaction of disgust. Disgust is the knee-jerk reaction to turn away, but the abject is a covert, sometimes even unabashed, glance back at the crash site.

This is one difference between the experience of disgust and what constitutes the abject, the addition of desire. This desire signals that the abject involves deeper psychoanalytic dimensions than disgust. Abjection is more than an emotion, it is a process which includes multiple contradictory emotions, as well as an overall shift in subjectivity. When one encounters an abject object, one abjects oneself, enacting abjection, which includes the emotional experience of disgust, combined with a sense of pleasure, or pleasant familiarity combined with the unknown foreign uncanny. This abject object is abject because it causes this dual complicated experience and causes the viewer to abject themselves. If one were to experience a disgusting object, one would reject it and that would be the end. There is no interwoven pleasure in disgust. The
pleasure in encountering dirt stems from the generative nature of the abject, which explains the formation of ego in the face of dirt, which is a satisfying and necessary activity. The experience of disgust is never discussed as being creative in regards to the ego; that is singularly the realm of the abject. Experiences of disgust simply threaten the ego, while the abject is actually involved in the process of ego creation through individuation and the rejection of parental desire in favor of one’s own self. Disgust’s role seems solely defensive, whereas the abject threatens and menaces, but also creates and solidifies the self. As Barrett (2011) explains, “abjection is a process that can collapse meaning, but which is nevertheless fundamental to the constitution of identity and renewal of meaning” (p. 94).

Dirt is matter out of place, a break in the system that establishes clean and proper from dirty and disorder. Experiencing a break in that system causes the experience of disgust. However, that system is already in place, it already exists and disgust serves as a way to solidify those existing borders. Disgust does not make new systems or new borders, it simply enforces what already exists. The abject seems more productive because of its role in the production of the ego and is the foundation of all systems that mark out self and other, because of the role abjection plays in the mother/child divide. The “deject”, or abject subject, is a marker of borders, a creator of divisions, but the deject must already know the systems upon which those divides are predicated.

The above divisions between abjection and disgust offer new territories, new systems and new borderlands, which can be productively explored with an abject visual

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86 This is explained in depth on pages 103-106 in the section on expelling spoiled milk, as an abjection of self that is also ego formation.
methodology. This is not to say that the abject and abjection are never destructive or are solely positive, rather that the abject has the potential to be creative in a way that is outside the purview of disgust. This productive value of the abject maybe as simple as switching the hierarchy of privilege, as Krauss has suggested (Foster, Buchloch, Krauss, Bois, Hollier, & Molesworth, 1994), so that the disprivileged and the disenfranchised becomes enshrined rather than the normative. With this in mind, the abject puts shit on a pedestal, while disgust simply sees shit as a lowly substance. This is tricky as abjection is a waste system, which means that new abjection forms new types of marginal figures, new wastes, but maintains a hierarchical regime. However, even the imagining of this reversal when applied to marginal bodies instead of marginal fluids has exciting possibilities for broadening and altering the hegemonic. However, disgust lacks this shift in privilege. Disgust simply debases, while the abject can appear to enshrine debasement. Moreover, reading abjection as simple inversion, while an easy interpretation, is counter to Kristeva’s intent. While there is much about binaries and a sense of reversal in Kristeva, it is not truly a reversal; it is not just about making the low high. Rather, it is about the in-between, the liminal; abjection is not opposition. Kristeva (1982) explains, “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them ” (p. 15). Abjection doesn’t break rules by doing the opposite, but by simply refusing the law through a side step. Understanding rule breaking and violation of the law as opposites is easy and commonplace in the Western world where binary distinctions are upheld, like black/white, good/bad, right/wrong. However, abjection is not about making what was bad now good, but rather refusing to accept bad and good as
the only categories, or even as opposite categories. Categories, rules, and binaries are all too simple and too safe to be the focus of the abject, although they are tools that the abject may utilize, or take advantage of, as a way to demonstrate the overall impossibility of laws. Kristeva (1982) explains, “abjection is above all ambiguity. . . it does not cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (p. 9). While the abject relies on the binary that is found in disgust, the abject offers a third space or identity that is beyond the duality of disgust.

Disgust has a different political valence as well. Disgust has been used as a rather conservative and moralistic rationale for laws (Nussbaum, 2006) and some researchers have demonstrated a link between high disgust receptivity and conservative Republican political leanings (Inbar, Pizzaro, & Bloom, 2009). Disgust has been deployed in propaganda against the marginalized (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). However, the abject, with its attachment to non-normative and marginal bodies is not necessarily a conservative notion. Society perpetually demarcates others to its ideal state body, abject others that while rejected cannot be fully excluded. Butler (1993) has demonstrated this, explaining that to fully exclude these individuals actually undoes the work that they do in defining the ideal state body through opposition. There is always a conservative element to the political abjection, since disgust is used to maintain the status quo through leveling it against the marginalized as a way to control the oppressed. However, political abjects, those who are the political systems metaphoric wastes, represent a radical position that questions the normative state body, even while building it through opposition. While Audre Lourdes (2007) has argued that the master tools will never bring down the master’s house, the abject seems to have both the constructive and destructive forces of
hegemony coded into its very existence, making the liminal space between construction and destruction a place for change.

As previously discussed, disgust and the abject appear to overlap, particularly in regards to how they are visualized. Bodily waste, for example, can be just disgusting or both disgusting and abject. The difference between whether we consider a reaction to waste one of simple disgust or the abject depends on whether or not one totally rejects the material or if the denouncement is haunted and incomplete. However, there are also theoretical categories like the maternal, borderlands, and childhood, that have much stronger associations with the abject than disgust. Disgust is not connected to the maternal, the mother-child divide, or childhood, beyond the sense that childhood is a time when disgust prohibitions are taught. The abject, on the other hand, is predicated upon the mother-child divide and an even earlier pre-symbolic female language described as chora. This means that most images of the maternal, particularly ones depicting the mother as monstrous, devouring and threatening, are abject.

Much of the literature surrounding disgust seeks to define it as a universal biological trait that everyone experiences as a protective emotion that is activated to protect our species from pathogens in things that are rotten (Ray, 2012; Rozin, Haight, & McCauley, 1993; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Many have argued for the cultural specificity of disgust (e.g., Miller, 1997; Meagher, 2003). But the discourse of disgust still circulates around the biological cause or evolutionary rationale for disgust. In opposition to the way we theorize disgust, the abject is firmly situated as a challenge to the symbolic order, that is, as a transgression of culture. While Kristeva similarly approaches the abject as universal, in no way does she link it to a common biological imperative. For her, it is a
psychological imperative that drives the formation of the ego and the child’s development into the symbolic realm of dominant culture. This is something everyone must go through to become a healthy “I,” but again, it is not linked to a biological or evolutionary imperative.

With this in mind then, an abject visual methodology asks us to do more than simply find disgusting or unsettling imagery. One must stop and reflect on the images and ask oneself, is there something else here? Why am I disgusted? If I am disgusted then why am I interested in looking at this image? What makes it appealing? Is it appealing because of the transgression of disgust taboos or in spite of it? Many of these questions call for a self-reflexive inquiry regarding the visceral responses to disgust and the embodied viewership of the abject.

**4.01.02 embodied looking: or, abjection is in the gut of the beholder.**

4.01.02.01 knowing your own gut. A further step in an abject visual methodology is an interrogation of visceral bodily reactions. Because the abject happens within the body, not just the mind, determining whether an image is abject involves self-reflection on the embodied experience of viewing the work. Because of the way the body is implicated by the abject, it is important to view abject art in person whenever possible. As many have noted (e.g. Danko-McGhee, 2006; Ministry of Education, 1986), viewing artwork in person is a profoundly different experience than looking at it in books or prints. This is particularly important for the abject because it works on a visceral, phenomenological level. The way disgust is manifested in the body has been demonstrated by recent work in mapping emotions on the body. A Finnish research group asked participants to self-report areas of the body that changed in response to emotional
stimuli. When mapped onto an image of the body, this study showed that the emotion of disgust activates the digestive system including the mouth, throat, esophagus, and stomach (Nummenmaa, Glerean, Hari, & Hietanen, 2013). Disgust, which can be an end reaction in and of itself, but can also be part of the phenomenological experience of the abject, manifests in the body, particularly in the regions associated with consumption. Abjection would then share some of the same physical overlap within the body, similarly activating the digestive track, since disgust is a part of abject experiences.

Art moves us through both emotional impact and the neurobiological response of mirror neurons to sensory data (Jeffers, 2009; Rokonitz, 2008). But being physically moved is not enough when using an abject visual methodology. One must be physically moved, as well as conscious and self-reflective. Disgust is characterized as the knee-jerk emotion because it causes us to react without thought, which means that the abject will similarly effect us, making us react to the disgusting components without clear and rational thought. However, the user of an abject visual methodology must be reflexive in these instances, staying suspended in the embodied reaction so as to interrogate the reaction. The researcher must look towards the causes of such a reaction, both the obvious and the unconscious. For example, is the popular British dish blood pudding disgusting because the individual has had blood pudding before and finds the taste unappealing, because it is made of blood, because it is “foreign”, or for some other yet undiscovered reason. Furthermore, if the individual likes blood pudding, is it fair to say it is not disgusting, particularly in light of many others finding it distasteful. The researcher must be self-reflexive, looking at their own reactions, but also cognizant of other’s reactions, which can be both similar and contrary to one’s own response, and from where
those reactions stem. Disgust asks the body to short circuit clear and rational thought, to become conservative and overly protective, so the researcher must overcome this embodied reaction to conduct their research. The researcher, suspended in the embodied reaction of disgust, must ask if there are other emotions present, particularly some form of desire or pleasure. When out and out disgust or violent repulsion is not present, the researcher must still be attuned to other responses like a feeling of unease or creepiness, perhaps a sense of the uncanny. These other formations of disgust like distaste or aversion, must be interrogated concomitantly for secret desires and pleasures that signal a form of the abject. The researcher must ultimately determine whether the object of inquiry is disgusting or abject, and this is before the researcher even has the opportunity to delve into the object or really use the abject visual methodology fully.

4.01.02.02 listening to others’ retching. An attunement to trends that constitute cultural characteristics versus individual preferences is why an abject visual methodology must pay attention not only to one’s own experience of disgust, but to what others profess to find disgusting and yet enjoyable, or at least intriguing. Being in the presence of the works allows for an unmitigated experience of the work and what it does to the viewer, both bodily and cognitively. An abject visual methodology combines a deeply analytical approach – which attempts to dig through the individual and cultural unconscious – with an embodied component that honors and analyzes the body’s reactions and knowledge in the face of these works. Thus exposure to the actual physical presence of the artwork is the preferred approach for an abject visual methodology whenever possible.

4.01.03 cloying contexts
While one’s own personal experiences are a dynamic and necessary component of an abject visual methodology, other areas of analysis must be considered as well. An abject visual methodology calls for a deeply contextual approach to uncover where the abject lies within complex emotional encounters. Psychoanalysis has been criticized as ahistorical and culturally myopic, focusing only on the Western experience (Rose, 2006). However, psychoanalysis’ argument of universality can be contextualized. By understanding that the abject may look different in different places and may be experienced differently by different people, we can attempt a less hegemonic psychoanalytic practice, which takes context, historicism, and culture into account.

It has been argued that disgust is a universal emotion, however, the specifics of disgust and abjection are culturally determined. While it could be argued that everyone feels disgust, not everyone is disgusted by the same things, and those parameters are determined both by the individual and by the individual’s culture. The cultural specifics of disgust can be seen quite easily in television shows like Andrew Zimmern’s *Bizarre Foods* (Steward, 2006-present) or Anthony Bourdain’s *No Reservations* (Aga, 2005-2012) (Figure 4).
These and other shows feature the hosts eating foods that are considered disgusting by average American standards, but are quite common or rare and desirable in another culture, like raw worms, beating hearts, and intentionally rotten, fermented tofu. The hosts argue for the cultural specificity of gustatory preferences while chowing down on things that make the audience at home squirm and gag, occasionally even causing a shudder in the host. These are popular examples of the cultural nature of disgust, which, has also been established by scholars of disgust (Miller, 1997; Kolnai, 2001; Mennighaus, 2003; Korsmeyer, 2006, 2011). As disgust is the affective component of the abject, it seems then that the abject would also be culturally specific. Kristeva’s (1982) emphasis is obviously Western, since the works she analyzes and uses to establish the abject are primarily Western authors: Céline, but also Dostoyevsky, Artaud, Kafka, Proust, and Joyce. But like disgust, Kristeva’s methodological structure of the abject which Kirsteva develops in *The Powers of Horror* (1982), if not her specific examples, can be applied cross-culturally. She discusses food prohibition as many individual’s first
encounter with the abject, specifically the skim on milk. Milk may or may not disgust; however, understanding that food prohibitions is central to the abject, and that food prohibitions are widely practiced and quite common. It demonstrates both the social construction of taste and with it disgust, as well as its relationship to early ego formations because even if it isn’t milk that is offered by the parent but another food, parental desire and its rejection is present. In particular, children often have different food preferences than adults because of developmental reasons that make many foods literally unappealing and metaphorically gross because of their newness and foreignness. Pantley (2011) notes that children have more taste buds than adults, an evolutionary mechanic that keeps them from ingesting things with strong flavors, which could be rancid or spoiled. However, this rejection of foods, according to Kristeva, (1982) has an impact on ego formation as well. In short, gustatory taste, with its connections to the broader experiences of disgust and the abject, is personally and culturally flexible, but universally present.

4.01.03.02 historical context. As the abject is impacted by the individual and by culture, so it is historically dependent. What is considered disgusting now, has not only been considered commonplace, but even desirable at other points in time. While fat has become a dirty word in the West, standing in for ill health, gluttony, and moral failure, one needs only look to the art of Peter Paul Ruben’s to see that voluptuous curves were a sign of health, abundance, and fertility at other points in time (Figure 5).
Another example is Maurer and Sobel’s book, *Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness* (1999). It is an example of the field of fat studies, which is in part dedicated to understanding the changing social norms around body size. Another example of shifting historical perspective comes from the field of mental illness. While mental illness is still stigmatized, it is no longer linked to supernatural beliefs about witchcraft and demons. Its current stigmatization is more related to its non-adherence to the normal able-bodied ideal and our tendency to pathologize the individual, than the idea that people are transgressing religious or otherworldly domains (Porter, 2003). Similarly, ideas about what is clean and proper versus what is dirty and
contaminating and the threat posed by that dirt, shifts throughout time. Take for example an edict disseminated by King Francois of France in 1539 that decried the filthy state of the city of Paris and forbade all emptying or tossing out into the streets and squares of the aforementioned city and its surroundings of refuse, offals, or putrefactions, as well as all waters whatever their nature, and…[the King] command[s] you to delay and retain any and all stagnant and sullied waters and urines inside the confines of your home.

(as cited in Laporte, 2002, p. 4)

This edict provides a concrete instance of a shift in ideas about waste and waste management that modified the idea of waste from a public, even social, occurrence to a private act to be sequestered within the home (Mohr, 2013). Historical factors such as the edict and overall shifts in ideologies must then be taken into account in an abject visual methodology to better analyze the objects of study. If one were to use an abject visual methodology on a historical piece of art, one must interrogate the ways in which the creator and original viewers of the work would understand the piece. Take for instance, an image of defecation, like the anonymous Flemish *Satirical Diptych* (1520) in the Université de Liège collection in Belgium, which features a man on one side, and his up-turned and bared buttocks on the other side with a thistle plant growing from it (Figure 6). The diptych is accompanied by a textual joke: the front says do not open, while the inside says, I warned you. To understand the work one must understand that the image was naughty, or carnivalesque. It’s diptych form is a reference to religious art, but it’s combination with the excremental was not the deep kind of sacrilege we might consider the same action today (Hyman & Malbert, 2000). As ideas about waste are somewhat
culturally dependent, so they are historical as well. The researcher cannot assume that how they or even other contemporaries feel, is how people felt at another time or place. They must instead look at the reactions to the work, which were recorded at the time to use as personal reflection.

Figure 6. Flemish Diptych, Artist Unknown (1520)

4.01.03.03 institutional contexts. Similarly, other types of context impact the understanding of the abject and should be considered as well. In looking at art and visual materials, context can mean the art movement that work is situated within, where the work is displayed, the other objects it is surrounded by, who owns the work or who made it, geographic location of creation and exhibition, time of creation and exhibition, as well as critical reception and general popularity. As context can impact what is considered abject, it must be addressed early in the application of an abject visual methodology to determine whether this methodology is best suited for the object of study.
The visually abject is a complex arena. With text, the reader often knows what the protagonist is thinking or feeling; they can say I feel abject, or describe the paradoxical push/pull of abjection. With art, there is no protagonist, but rather a subject. Critics are often left guessing what the artist’s choice of subjects is meant to convey, as well as the impact of that subject upon the general population. Even when the artist is alive and can be interviewed, they are not always aware, or even that concerned, with what their art does to other people. Andre Serrano received death threats because of his work *Piss Christ*, which has been vandalized repeatedly (Kammen, 2007) (Figure 7). While some find the work blasphemous, art historian and TV personality Sister Wendy Beckett said in an interview with Bill Moyers “I thought he [Serrano] was saying, in a rather simplistic, magazine-y type of way, that this is what we are doing to Christ, we are not treating him with reverence” (Beckett as cited in Simek, 2011). Art is a subjective field. Disgust is similarly subjective, or culturally conditioned and by proxy so is the abject.
Art objects are created to cause emotional and cognitive impact, often one more than the other based on artistic intent. However aesthetic style, disgust and the abject, are all subjective responses, making it difficult to pull apart whether the artwork is disgusting, or depicts something disgusting, and if that makes a difference. It’s also difficult to piece apart the role of material in abject art, since some works are literally...
made of abject substances like shit, while others are made of traditional materials but represent abject substances using beautiful pigments or bronzes.

There are multiple discourses concerning the role of the museum to consider, which can instruct the viewer to look at abject art even if their first response is to turn away or ignore. The museum or gallery can authenticate that the work is something worth viewing, proving through cultural capital that it is art and belongs somewhere higher up on the hierarchy of good taste, even when it looks like waste. Similarly, work created outside the fine art domain is often labeled popular and lowbrow and, if lucky, amateur, subcultural, or at the worst, not art at all. For example, returning to Serrano, photographing a jar of urine in the context of the art world is perfectly acceptable, even desirable as it can lead to controversial art, which in the current art world climate can translate into critical success and high prices. However, if the average person were to collect their urine and photograph it they could be labeled deviant, or even perverted, or, at the very least, weird. The context of creation and of the institutional art world must be considered when using an abject visual methodology, especially as these contextual elements are often in conversation with one another, or are intersecting. Looking at these intersections can uncover how abject substances can be made less abject by existing in a codified space of beauty and art, or how formal qualities of material may make an image even more abject than just the subject itself through a thick application of paint that simulates a viscous bodily fluid. Multiple layers of context must be sifted through to understand the nuances of abject images.

4.01.03.04 egocentrism? maybe.: ideal viewership and the context of this study.

All of this being said, while I consider other voices in the following taxonomy, this
chapter, this dissertation as a whole, is predicated on my own responses to abject images. I have taken myself as the ideal viewer, someone who is both fascinated but also uncomfortable with the abject. The following analyses of the different categories that create this taxonomy of abject art are prefaced on my own reactions, both embodied and reflective. I have followed my own methodology and it’s call for embodied viewing and contextual emphasis, noting my own reaction to the works, looking at historical and critical texts about the artworks, and finding other scholars who substantiate my own analysis. However, for the sake of ethical efficacy and the acknowledgement of bias, it is only fair to clearly spell out that not everyone comes to these images with the same knowledge of the abject, or same interest in it. The guide that I am providing is largely based on what I have found personally useful in understanding the abject and is deeply embedded in the scholarship of the abject.

4.02 Abject Visual Types: But what does it look like already?

4.02.01 what the abject looks like in literature. Having established the need to be contextual when using an abject visual methodology and having argued for the necessity of approaching the abject objects physically to address the visceral nature of their impact, there is still the matter of what does the abject look like? Kristeva is interested in language, her par excellence of the abject being the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline both because of his scabrous language and his violent subject matter. Céline (1934) writes in Journey to the End of the Night:

This body of ours, this disguise put on by common jumping molecules, is in constant revolt against the abominable farce of having to endure. Our molecules, the dears, want to get lost in the universe as fast as they can! It makes them
miserable to be nothing but "us," the jerks of infinity. We’d burst if we had the courage, day after day we come very close to it. The atomic torture we love so is locked up inside us with our pride. (p. 291)

It is no wonder that Kristeva focuses on Céline, as in this passage alone we see the nihilism that the abject is often associated with, combined with an intense attraction or affinity towards revulsion and a dissolution of being. Céline (1934) also writes,

in Topo the raw, stifling heat, so perfectly concentrated in that sand pit between the conjugated mirrors of the sea and the river, would have made you swear by your bleeding buttocks that you were being forced to sit on a chunk of the sun that had just fallen off. (p. 129)

Here the body bleeds and is forced open. The oppressive atmosphere is made palpable, implicating the body through sweat, and stickiness; they are all abject moments. Céline’s texts, those featured above and others that depict syphilitic whores and the broken bodies of war, give us textual examples of the abject beyond Kristeva’s own characterization.

Kristeva argues that abject literature acts as a type of catharsis, a necessary release of repressed psychological and emotional impulses. Literature allows the author and the reader a way to “work through some of the maladies that afflict their souls” (McAfee, 2004, p. 50) including abjection. This allows the subject to work through these conflicts psychologically, so they are not forced to act them out in real life to achieve resolution.

While Kristeva looks for this catharsis in literature, she acknowledges catharsis in all art (McAfee, 2004; Barrett, 2011).
4.02.02 abject categories. The above text demonstrates Kristeva’s categories in literature. Céline’s text emphasizes the body under stress, feelings of discomfort both psychic and physical, and the idea of the body’s borders breaking down, opening up, or dissolving. Visual art deals with similar concepts, but approaches them in different ways. While abject art deals with the abject in different ways than literature, I am using many of the same categorical groupings that Kristeva lays out in *The Powers of Horror* (1982): namely bodily substances, the corpse and the maternal. The idea of excess and dearth stems from Kolnai’s (2001) classifications of disgust, but are also discussed by Kristeva (1982) just not as explicitly as I describe them in this chapter. Kristeva never clearly discusses the social dimensions of the abject; rather the sections on gender and queerness stem from later scholars like Butler (1993), the particular emphasis on the monstrous mother comes from Creed (1993), and the link between disability and the abject comes from Clarke (2004). Regarding disability, its connection to excess and dearth are my own mapping of Kristeva (1982) and the literature of disability studies (Millet-Gallant, 2013), onto Kolnai (2001). Finally, the section within excess and dearth on the animal is also my own mapping of Kristeva’s brief mention of animality as abject and the literature of animal studies (Fudge, 2004) as understood through Kolnai’s excess of the swarm.

4.03 An Abject Taxonomy.

The chapter up to now has focused on how to enact an abject visual methodology: the need to consider context, viewing the work in person, and being self-reflexive in the face of difficult and uncomfortable emotions. I have also discussed a series of categories used by Kristeva in her work and categories developed by later scholars of the abject that I have adopted and adapted in places to best understand abject art. These categories stem
from scholarship on the abject, but also they, as well as the subcategories that I have labeled in the following taxonomy, come from my own-grounded observations of a large breadth of abject art. The subcategories in particular are predicated upon divisions and differences in abject art that I have found useful in understanding the works and act as a meta-analysis of the categories pulled from other scholars. These categories are the basis of the taxonomy of abject art that follows.

However beyond simply categorizing art, another element that I am including in an effort to fill in some of the gaps in the research surrounding abject art is an in-depth explanation of how the works are abject through the application of abject scholarship from Kristeva and other scholars. This taxonomy goes beyond labeling work as abject; it delves deeply into why and how the works of art are abject in regards to subject matter, material and stylistic choices, as well as other contextual influences like the work’s setting or the artist’s biography. This classification system, with its emphasis on the how, pays particular attention to what makes these works more than just disgusting, what captivates the viewer and refuses the complete circuit of rejection that I believe marks one of the key distinctions between disgust and abjection. In the end, the following taxonomy uses the abject visual methodology I have created to both classify and analyze the followings works, creating both a well-developed exploration of abject art and demonstrating how to use an abject visual methodology, as well as, its advantages.

4.03.01 bodily substances: gooey, leaky, fleshy bits. The first, and easiest qualifiers of the abject are bodily substances. A user of an abject visual methodology must be looking for blood, vomit, piss, shit and any number of substances that were once inside the body, which now seen outside the body become abject and threatening.
Kristeva (1982) specifically addresses only a limited number of substances, particularly vomit and shit. However, what makes them abject is the fact that they were once in the body and are now outside, yet still carry with them a part or quality of the self. This notion can be applied to a broad range of bodily substances. In fact, the only bodily substances that Kristeva marks out as not wholly abject are tears, because of a perceived purity, and semen because of it’s generative role in procreation, “Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value.” (p. 71).  

The presence of these substances indicates that the body, which we imagine as sealed tightly and impermeable, is actually porous and vulnerable to leakage. Visuals that feature bodily substances, or art that is made from these substances, often enters the realm of the abject because, while threatening, these substances are able to draw us to them through familiarity and a desire to recuperate.

4.03.02 literal substances. The most easily identifiable abject art is art that features literal or concrete bodily fluid including shit,  

piss,  

actual skin,  

hair,  

blood,  

and vomit to name the most obvious.

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87 I would disagree with Kristeva on the account of semen, which I think in contemporary contexts of disease activates disgust. I think this is particularly evident in Serrano’s ejaculation photos, which have caused controversy for their content, which is simply a slightly blurred whitish streak, which is only recognized as seminal ejaculate through the wall text.

88 The Sprinkle Brigade is a group of artists who design small dioramas around found animal droppings and then document their creations like the Poodolph (2006), which is a turd dressed in antlers and a bright red-nose (http://sprinklebrigade.com/gallery-main.html).

89 The Brazilian artist Vinicius Quesada makes bright graphic collaged paintings that include his own blood and urine (http://sobadsogood.com/2013/01/22/vinicius-quesada-creates-his-imagery-using-his-own-blood/).

90 Belgian artist Wim Delvoye tattooed live pigs, using them in an exhibition entitled Art Farm (2008), before having some of them mounted as taxidermy pieces (http://www.
shit. Shit is a substance that is closely tied to the abject because of toilet training and waste. Shit appears often in contemporary art as a literal substance. While this section is devoted to exploring shit as a taxonomical category of the abject, I would also like to demonstrate an extended use of my abject visual methodology. By moving through the steps of analyzing artwork using an abject methodology, I demonstrate the process and show the roots of analysis for later works within the taxonomy.

I begin with the work of Keith Boadwee (Figure 8), who inserts paint in his rectum and then defecates the paint, along with any anal remnants, onto canvas. Boadwee literally performs abjection, jettisoning paint as if it was shit. The finished paintings most likely contain some fecal material and saving those fluids on canvas means that they are never thoroughly excluded, but haunt from the edges of the frame. I begin with Ariane Page Russel is a photographer who used her skin as a canvas. She has a condition called dermatographia, which means that her skin is extra sensitive and small scratches or light abrasions become swollen red imprints. To combat the stigma of her skin disease, she started pressing a blunt knitting needle into her skin to create delicate and personal drawings over her body (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2402987/Dermatographia-sufferer-Ariana-Page-Russell-creates-body-art-using-skin-canvas.html).

Zhu Tian’s work Babe (2014) is a pair of flesh colored stilettos with human hair implanted into them. Loren Schwerd’s series Mourning Portraits (2007-2009) are a series of sculptural reliefs of houses destroyed by hurricane Katrina that are made in part from human hair (http://www.lorenschwerd.com/mourning/work_ms_1317.htm).


Millie Brown makes Jackson Pollock inspired splash paintings by consuming colored soy milk and then vomiting it up onto canvases. She sells the paintings and also records the creation of the pieces through videos and photographs. She has been featured in one of Lady Gaga’s music videos (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2549351/Its-like-cleanse-body-mind-Vomit-Painter-throws-canvas-create-Jackson-Pollock-style-splatter-paintings-Lady-Gaga-loves.html).
Boadwee’s work because it appears fairly straightforward, but actually demonstrates many of the complexities of an abject visual methodology. While I have not seen Boadwee’s paintings or performance documents in person, which is most desirable, this piece, in fact many abject art works, are spectacular enough to move the viewer, even if not witnessed in person.

Figure 8. Photo documentation of Keith Boadwee’s process/performance, including Blue Squirts (1996).

It is also worth noting that the paintings (which look like fairly traditional abstract expressionist paintings), the performance through which the works were created, the
documentation of those performances, and the photographs of Boadwee “squirting” paint out of his rectum, each operate in different ways. The painting alone, without knowledge or visual documents of its creation, is rather unremarkable and would most likely not fall within the realm of the abject. While there is fecal matter is within the paint, it appears to be unnoticeable in the overall paintings. They do not “scream” literal shit.

There is much discussion of the embodied nature of abstract expressionism, such as how Pollock’s drip paintings operate as metaphoric masturbation with the white paint standing in for semen (Jones, 1998), but there is little in the visuals of most abstract expressionist works that reads immediately as abject or disgusting. However, Boadwee’s performance and the documentation of the performance absolutely activates disgust.

When I say that disgust is activated, I am speaking from my own original impressions of seeing the work. As both the ideal viewer of this study, and as the first step in an abject visual methodology, I record my own initial responses to the work, which was that of squeamish interest, both disgusted on one hand, but curious on the other. Watching Boadwee shoot paint out of his rectum stimulates disgust most obviously through the use of an orifice of the body that is mapped as improper and unclean; the anus. Abjection is performed in the act of defecation. As something that was once part of you, cells and digested food, are ejected from the body and turned into another substance that is more than just an ordinary object, but far less than a fully formed subject. Abjection may be performed with paint, rather than feces, but the abject ejection is similar. My feelings of disgust are further activated while viewing this work through tactile empathy, as when I view this work, I think about the act of inserting paint into my own body and the act of defecation (albeit in this instance, a bright and colorful.
excretion). Seeing an artist literally defecate paint onto a canvas is a sensational act that captures my attention. The shock makes me want to look at it longer – as that is a transgressive act – but also turn away – since the work is unclean and improper. As the performances are documented through photographs rather than video, I am left to imagine the sounds of him painting, particularly in light of the title “Blue Squirts” (1996), which is an onomatopoeia, as well as a descriptor of the action. According to Rokonitz (2008) watching a disgusting actions elicits more of a response than seeing a disgusting object, meaning a video can create more of an embodied connection between the viewer and the actions on the screen. That means that Boadwee’s performance videos would disgust more than the still documentation photos of the same performance. In fact, the still documents become more abject and less singularly disgusting. Watching Boadwee defecate on the screen might be too disgusting, resulting in simple exclusion and turning away. But the still photographs, while they show him ejecting paint from his anus, do not show the actual process in motion, which may help to disrupt sheer disgust and rejection, making the photos more abject since they fascinate, as well as disgust.

The documentation of the performance is second to the performance itself in terms of its abject quality, since it depicts abjection at a distance through photography, rather than witnessing the work in person. The paintings, outside of the performance and documentation of the performance, do not activate disgust until I am aware of how they were made. Once I am aware of how they were made, I am disgusted by how the painting was made and I am also disgusted by the painting itself. It surely contains fecal matter of some kind, bits of sloughed off Boadwee in the form of intestinal cells mixed in with the paint, in an artwork that appears to be about the beauty and materiality of paint. I wonder
if perhaps the painting smells, or smells of something more than paint. The painted
canvases remain as souvenirs of Boadwee’s abject performances, the porousness of the
body and our fascination with things that were once inside of us, either naturally formed
or placed there.

I am disgusted, but I am also rather fascinated by the whole thing: a clear marker
of the abject is fascinated victimhood, which I now embody. This fascination is based on
notions of the practical: how did he get the paint inside of himself? What about the
material? Is that lead-free acrylic or are his bowels soaking up toxins as he poisons
himself for art? Even the idea and meaning of inserting paint into your body, particularly
your rectum, is fascinating. The work also includes a certain level of embodied eroticism.
It is somewhat titillating to imagine inserting things into your body, particularly a part of
the body that is demarcated as both erotic and improper.

Several things push the work towards the abject, not just disgust. This push/pull
of desire and repulsion, the familiarity with the medium, an abstract painting, and
unfamiliarity with the process, pushes the work towards the abject and not just disgust.
While the work is absolutely disgusting it is not so disgusting as to complete the circuit of
rejection and radical exclusion that disgust alone entails. Rather, disgust is interrupted
and mitigated. Like shit, Boadwee’s expulsions are both dirty, but also contain something
of the artist, rather literally, making them more than an object but something abject.

On a personal level, disgust is interrupted by my interest in wanting to know more
about the process and also about the experience that the work represents. If it were
completely disgusting, I would not want to imagine what it must feel like to be Boadwee,
I would be too overcome with repulsion. Disgust is also interrupted through other means,
which represent other aspects of an abject methodology. While my own experience and interest in the work foregrounds later inquiry in my dissertation, it is still important to see what others have said about Boadwee’s work. Previous critiques of Boadwee’s work serve not only as another voice through which to understand the work, but also act as interrupters themselves to straight rejection. For example, if I were not fascinated by the work myself, but read the institutional critiques of Boadwee that argue that the artwork is abject and worthy of discussion for its intentional transgressions not just of decorum, but of the paradigm of modern abstract expressionism. Using and responding to this research would be I would be “listening to other’s retching”. For example, Jones (1998) notes that Boadwee’s art functions by

Reiterating the Pollockian trope of masculinized action painting, but through a body explicitly performed as abject, anal and homosexual. Boadwee exposes the homoerotic as the hidden threat… The anus – not the penis/phallus – becomes the site through which male creativity takes places; and yet, far from being phallic and so ‘transcendent’, this site itself is an orifice (and one connected in mainstream culture with the most debased aspects of human functioning, as well as with homosexual erotics). (p. 100; italics in original)

The inclusion of others scholar’s thoughts on Boadwee’s work is crucial since feelings of disgust can be very personal and can also be determined by historical and cultural norms. In regards to personal norms, I find the insertion of something in the rectum “abnormal” in the sense that it is not an everyday aspect of my life. However, some may not see the insertion of something into the rectum as anything but normal, for example a gay man may not read the work as transgressive the same way I do. Similarly, cultural norms
pertaining to bodies, sexuality and privacy may impact the way in which Boadwee’s work is understood. Listening to other opinions about the work, including the artist’s own commentary, as well as those of art historians, art critics, and even those from the general population, allows you to vet your own reactions of disgust and to gain the ability to interrogate your own responses and well as other people’s reactions. While I personally identified a certain eroticism in Boadwee’s work, I would not have understood the combination of homoerotics with abstract expressionism as a critique of the masculinity associated with modernism. I have also supported my own initial feelings and thoughts by verifying that others find the work to be abject, debase and transgressive.

In regards to Boadwee’s work, we must examine it within the history of art in order to fully understand its satirical and subversive nature. While shit is a nearly universal taboo and a qualifier of the abject, Boadwee’s work make the most impact in a contemporary Western context, as he is a Western artist who is playing with and satirizing Western art canons through a contemporary use of the abject. Boadwee defecates paint, which has been in intimate contact with his bowels, performing abject exclusion. He uses the abject to make the homosexual male body into a site of generative potential as a creative tool in art making. It is this generative potential of the abject that is of particular interest to me. Jones verifies my own initial thoughts on the power of the abject, through the idea that a site of dirt and abjection, the rectum, is not “a grave” to quote Bersani (1987), but instead is the seat of male creativity. This is an important part of my larger project: demonstrating the power and generative potential of the abject and a need for an abject visual methodology that can be used to fully uncover the abject’s potential. This somewhat extended interrogation of Boadwee’s work done through
following the steps of my abject visual methodology is demonstrative of what I will do with many of the later works in this taxonomy in a more streamlined fashion. Having explicated the use of an abject visual methodology, I return now to the taxonomy of abject art and a further investigation of artists who employ bodily waste as a medium. For example, Tom Friedman’s *True Love* (2004) (Figure 9) provides a literal encounter with an abject substance as the work features a butterfly resting on a pile of shit. While shit can be fascinating because of its attachment to the body, it is also disgusting, making us turn away in a protective gesture.

Figure 9. Friedman, *True Love* (2004).

However, the inclusion of the butterfly seems to ensure that the work is not fully rejected, that there is something beautiful to captivate the viewer and defer rejection.  

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Butterflies may be considered the height of ethereal beauty, but many species of butterfly are drawn to urine, dung and carrion as a source of moisture rich in salts and amino acids (Stokes, Stokes, & Williams, 1991).
Friedman is no stranger to disgust: his work *Untitled* (1999) (Figure 10) features a bar of soap with his own pubic hair arranged in concentric circles and *Untitled* (1990) (Figure 11) is a large ball of masticated chewing gum which has been smoothed into a sphere and stuck to the gallery wall, allegedly through its own stickiness (Hainley, 2001). Through their association with bodily refuse, shit, hair and salvia, these works disgust. Yet other elements, impeccably arranged concentric circles, a beautiful butterfly, even the curiosity of how the ball of gum sticks to the wall, draw the viewer in and fascinate or allure, making the work more abject than just disgusting.

Figure 10. Friedman, *Untitled* (1999).
Blood is another substance tied to the abject through menstruation and violent openings of the body and is a substance that appears literally in art in a number of ways. Vincent Castiglia is a painter who mixes his own blood with water to create a type of sanguine watercolor (Figure 12).\footnote{Castiglia’s website offers a wonderful explanation of his process and a gallery of his works (http://vincentcastigliaart.com/).} His works are incredibly detailed and often large-scale, sometimes up to seven feet tall, created entirely from his own blood. The iron content in the blood becomes a permanent rust tone, and through
careful layering, Castiglia renders hyper-realistic portraits of pregnant women, religious scenes, anatomical figures and symbols of death. The works become doubly abject as their subject matter – pregnancy and death – are abject signs, as well as the material of their creation. While blood is disgusting, symbolizing a tear in our cherished skin border and the threat of sickness, wounding and death, Castiglia’s work mitigates this response through a hyper realistic execution. The sheer aesthetic beauty of the works, as well as the marvel of their execution, combined with the curiosity of how Castiglia collects the blood that he uses, lessens the rejection and pulls the viewer in closer to examine the skillfully wrought paintings.
Barton Lidice Benes is another artist who uses blood in his art works. His series Lethal Weapons (1993) (Figure 13), featured a collection of 30 vessels, including a water gun, a perfume atomizer, and a molotov cocktail, filled with his own HIV positive blood (Vitello, 2012). Benes’ work is disgusting because it features contaminated blood. Disgust is primarily a mechanism to defend against pathogenic harm; however, its playful handling by Benes mitigates some of the reaction, pushing his work into the abject. This mitigation may not have been as complete as other abject art works that have been wildly popular. Benes had a difficult time finding galleries willing to show his work, especially
during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Vitello (2012) argues that it was “the raw approach to death” that made it difficult to find a gallery, rather than the materials that symbolized contagion. Foley (2011) explains though, that Swedish health officials “forced Benes to heat the artworks at a temperature of 160 degrees in a hospital oven to make them safe for public viewing” (para. 5). Although misplaced, the fear of HIV contamination at the height of the AIDS epidemic was extreme. And AIDS itself is abject. Sandoval-Sanchez (2005) explains in his work on politicizing the abject in relationship to his identity as a queer, Latino, AIDS patient,

I am fascinated with the abject body: if I were not, how would I be able to keep on living with AIDS? *EL SIDA* is the ultimate embodiment of abjection, as George Whitmore accurately observed in 1988, AIDS is all “about shit and blood” (24), *mierda y sangre*. How much more abject can you get when you are *un Latino maricón con SIDA*. All in one package. What does it mean to have the monster under your skin? (p. 544)

Moreover, this work becomes abject not only because of the blood, or the threat of pollution because it is a water gun filled with blood that has been infected with a fatal disease, but also because of the blood’s proximity to an icon of the innocence of childhood. Like the children’s shoes of Auschwitz, the work becomes abject because something that symbolizes life and childhood, is contextually linked to death.  

Moreover, this work becomes abject not only because of the blood, or the threat of pollution because it is a water gun filled with blood that has been infected with a fatal disease, but also because of the blood’s proximity to an icon of the innocence of childhood. Like the children’s shoes of Auschwitz, the work becomes abject because something that symbolizes life and childhood, is contextually linked to death.

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96 Many of Benes’ other works are also abject, including his work *Brenda*, a wall relief consisting of 192 red AIDS awareness ribbons shellacked in a gray paste made from the cremated remains of a young woman who had died from AIDS, or a three foot hourglass that holds the cremated remains of Noel McBean and his partner James Borden mixed together (Groff, 1999).
While abjection is moved to the forefront through bodily fluids, sickness, AIDS, and transgression, *Lethal Weapons* is also humorous and darkly funny. This activates something more than rejection, pushing the work towards the abject with an uncomfortable titter.

**4.03.02.03 menstrual blood and menstruala.** *Menstrala* is a genre of art that uses menstrual blood as its medium. Coined by the menstrual artist Vanessa Tiegs (Figure 14), *Menstrala* can include paintings, photographs, and installations, all of which focus

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97 Lani Beloso’s *The Period Piece* (2010) is a series of paintings using a years worth of menstrual blood and was inspired by the artist’s battle with menorrhagia and dysmenorrhea, extremely heavy, painful, periods. Vannessa Tiegs’ painting series,
on the use of menstrual blood as a material. These artists deny that their work is abject or disgusting, instead arguing for either an exploration and celebration of womanhood or a sociopolitical commentary on feminist issues like rape, the gendered nature of domestic violence, and women’s health. As menstrual artist Beloso (Figure 15) explains, “Damien Hirst has preserved animals in formaldehyde. Do we say ‘ew’ when someone has a cut or wound? It’s not like it’s human waste, like urine or feces” (cited in Dickson, 2013, para. 12). Beloso brings up a good point. Not everyone has the same reaction to the body, and women in particular may have a different relationship to blood because of menstruation. However, I would note that blood outside the body is a form of waste, except in medical contexts like blood donation. Also, many people say “ew” or even faint at the sight of blood. Researchers believe that all people have some degree of fainting reflex when seeing blood and guts, and that it might have even helped our ancestors survive (Lewis, 2013). Jaeger explains,

If you're a caveman and another caveman comes over and cuts your arm off, the

Menstrala (2003) features incredibly delicate paintings of slightly abstract birds, plants, and patterns all in the artist’s menstrual fluids (http://www. VanessaTiegs.com/creations/menstrala/).


99 Judy Chicago’s installation Menstruation Bathroom (1972) is a bathroom spotted with blood, overflowing with feminine hygiene products, and a trashcan bursting with bloodied tampons and napkins (Vartanian, 2013). Charon Luebber's installation Menstrual Hut (1996) was a pyramid, the inside of which was decorated with canvases of her face pressed into her own menstrual fluids (Dickson, 2013). Carina Úbeda Chacana’s installation, Cloths (2013) featured five years of her menstrual fluids recorded on white cloths. Each was stretched into an embroidery hoop with the words “production,” “discard,” and “destroyed” stitched below the stains. These were hung from the ceiling of the gallery (Vartanian, 2013).
sight of blood or injury may cause you to faint. So when you're laying there on the ground, you'll look like you're dead to the other cavemen and he won't cut your head off. (cited in Lewis, 2013)

Furthermore, the drop in blood pressure and heart rate associated with fainting is believed to be beneficial in slowing blood loss (Lewis, 2013).

However, more than just blood, these works use menstrual blood, activating not only the discomfort associated with blood and its breach of the closed body, but also the

Figure 15. Beloso, *The Period Piece, Series Two* (Detail) (2010). Menstrual blood sandwiched between two pieces of plexiglass and lit so that it casts a red shadow on the wall behind the piece.
The above artists all use bodily fluids or taboo body parts like the anus, to make their works and these aspects are very obvious in their use. Boadwee records a video of his process and the art of *menstrala* advertises in its name that it uses menstrual blood. The conspicuousness of these inclusions makes the work obviously transgressive and obviously abject. However, there are many pieces of art that cause a feeling of the
uncanny, which is abject, or engage with the abject in ways that are mitigated or contained and effect the ways in which the work is abject. If something were fully disgusting, a complete circuit of rejection would occur and the object or artwork would be excluded completely. However, the mitigation (through the injection of attractive elements) and containment (through the distance that artworks can provide through representation) that occur in artwork fosters the fascinated victimhood of the abject and haunting sensation that abjection causes.

4.03.02.04 literal substances that are protected, which protect us.

The humor of Barton Lindice Benes’ work creates a space for abjection, a space that mitigates and diverts the pure rejection of full blown disgust into something that is also appealing, alluring, or fascinating. However, there are other ways that works divert disgust and create abjection. One example of the abject which may not immediately activate a disgust response, but becomes abject upon longer viewing or learning more about the work is Chris Ofli’s The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) (Figure 16 and Figure 17) and its use of shit. Chris Ofli uses abject substances in his works, although these substances have a very different valence or contextual understanding for Ofli. While shit in Friedman’s work is immediately discernible as such, without the aid of wall text, the viewer may not know that Ofli’s painting contains elephant dung. Some may be familiar with Ofli’s use of dung in his painting The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) because of the controversy his work and other pieces in the show Sensation inspired when it was exhibited at the Brooklyn Art Museum from October 1999 to January 2000. The show was first met with protests, then mayor Giuliani filed a lawsuit against the museum and its director for using government funds to show “sick stuff” (Kammen, 2007, p. 294).
However, Ofli, a devout Catholic and British citizen, argued that the work was not intended to offend, rather the use of dung was meant with reverence as elephant dung is sacred and considered curative in Malawi, a part of Africa that relates to Ofli’s own heritage and the diasporic African experience (Kammen, 2007; Nesbitt, 2010). This is an example of the need for a cultural and contextual approach when using an abject visual methodology, as disgust is often about specific cultural contexts. As in this example, Ofli’s cultural, national and religious backgrounds impact his use of what many consider an offending substance. However, there are other factors that impact the understanding of Ofli’s work. For example, shit is not highlighted in the work’s execution: the painting does not depict shit, the dung does not maintain a recognizable fecal shape, nor is the work covered in thick semiotic brown smears. The manure forms one of the virgin’s bared breasts and there are two spheres made of dung on the floor that prop up the painting, but the manure is shellacked over and sealed in resin so it does not smell or look much different than paint. Resin in Ofli’s work acts as a way to diminish disgust.

Figure 16. Ofili, The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) Detail of one of three elephant dung balls and pornographic collage elements.
The popularity of resin sealed tarantulas, scorpions, and other both threatening and gross things as paperweights, jewelry, and specimens is a testament to resin’s ability to freeze time (Olalquiaga, 2002). I see these as wonderful abject objects where the disgust factor is still present, but it is diminished enough by the resin to allow for
engagement, contemplation and even pleasure. Similarly, the shellac on Ofli’s work acts to freeze and contain the polluting elements of the dung, and thereby protect the viewer. This is a psychic protection, as dried elephant dung on a wall is not going to infect the viewer literally, so the majority of the threats that activate disgust for us now are psychic. Modern medicine guarantees that most infections will not kill us and science’s mastery of germ theory has explained that most pathogens can be taken care of with some soap and water. We may know that elephant dung on a wall will not harm us, especially since one can buy products made from elephant dung. However, the disgust reaction can still occur in Ofli’s work and other sites because the concept or the idea of poop being present and near by is offensive and threatening. But the response is mitigated by resin and the sacred religious content of the work and that alleviation opens the door to the abject. While the use of resin as a protective agent when it comes to disgust is not discussed in the literature surrounding Ofli or disgust (Kammen, 2007; Nesbitt, 2010; Miller, 1997), I argue that it does the same work in art as it does in jewelry, of freezing our emotional responses.

Other factors make Ofli’s work abject beyond the presence of shit, like the cherubim’s surrounding the Virgin Mary that are actually collaged photos of genitals and posteriors from pornographic magazines. The collaged elements create another type of abject response, not to substances, but to dismembered pieces of the body, which represent a rupture of the body similar to the one that fluids signal. The fact that all of

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100 PooPooPaper™ is a company that makes paper products from elephant dung, as well as from panda, donkey, horse, and moose dung and any other animal whose dung is fibrous. The fibrous quality of the dung means that it can be transformed into paper. They advertise their work as recycled and odorless (http://new.poopoopaper.com/).
these dismembered genitals are female activates yet another type of the abject, the threatening mother, which I will discuss later. The abject is also activated through the work’s religious subject matter and its close proximity to bodily substances.

Although, I argue that Ofli’s work becomes abject through a mitigation of disgust, not everyone felt that the work’s offensiveness was lessened, while others were never offended in the first place. Ofli argued that the work was beautiful and that the inclusion of dung was not only symbolically not offensive in his home country, but that the idea had come to him from a group of Malawian nuns, who made a healing poultice from elephant dung that was applied to women’s swollen breasts and that allowed new mothers to nurse (Kammen, 2007). One particularly devout Catholic man, Dennis Heiner, was so offended by the work that he defaced it by covering it in white paint. This, fortunately, did not damage the work. The defacement took the form of a purification ritual, the white paint covering the virgins bare breast, her dark skin, and the elephant dung (Rothfield, 2001). The need of a purification ritual to make the work “clean and proper” points to the abject nature of the work, which without purification is law violating and filled with substances.

Damien Hirst is another artist whose work often features disgust elicitors like eviscerated animals, medical waste, and insects. But like Ofli’s work, Hirst separates the viewer from the offensive materials through the use of clear glass tanks. This mitigates disgust and activates abjection in two ways: first, the tank protects the viewer, containing death and rot while limiting any possible pathogenic contamination. Second,

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101 Mother and Child Divided (1993) or This Little Piggy Went (1996) (Figure 18); Waste (1994); Whose Afraid of the Dark? (2002)
the tanks provide a psychic protection because they reference scientific specimens and put the viewer in mind of the realm of science, which diffuses death, giving the body an eternal purpose in the pursuit of the end of death (Mennighaus, 2003).

Figure 18. Hirst, *This Little Piggy Went* (1996).

One of Hirst’s most famous pieces, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) (Figure 19), is a large glass tank filled with formaldehyde and a preserved tiger shark. Kristeva (1982) explains that the corpse, seen outside the realm of religion and science as discourses, is the epitome of the abject. Like other bodily substances, dead bodies stand in for both the cessation of life, but also the rotting that occurs postmortem and the substances produced as the body breaks down. Rotting, while post-mortem, is a moment of life out of bounds, an excess of bacterial life digesting the body and turning us into execrable microbial sludge.
The discourses of religion and science explain the presence of death and aid in its sanitation. They ease the discomfort associated with demise by offering the possibility of an afterlife. For religion, death is only material, it is not a spiritual cessation. Science staves off death through the pathologization of the body. The individual didn’t just die but, rather cancer killed them, and the individual’s death can now serve the larger narrative of scientific exploration through autopsy, preservation and study.


The dead are still disgusting, and still dead, but that disgust is mitigated through the intersection of the religious and/or scientific. Without these alleviating discourses, the corpse becomes a “cropper” (Kristeva, 1982, p.3), or a failure; a failure of life to succeed. It becomes an image of pure death in the form of rot.
The glass tank in Hirst’s work recalls science, taxonomy and taxidermy. Weidemann and Finger (2011) note, “The brutal honesty of these works questioned certain practices of industrial society—from livestock confinement on large scale “factory” farms to animal testing in research laboratories. The images also raised issues surrounding human mortality” (p. 111). The glass, which separates us from the dead body, and the formaldehyde, which slows the effects of decay, both act as physical and psychological barriers that keep the work from overwhelming us in disgust. In a similar manner to the way in which science offers a way to allay disgust, the discourse of contemporary art also lessens the experience of disgust in Hirst’s work. The alteration of disgust into the abject occurs through the discourse of contemporary art by assertions that these objects are art and are meant to be engaged with, even appreciated, in spite of their unorthodox materials that incite disgust. Hirst’s work combines the discourses of science and art to powerful effect, stimulating long associations between art museums and the scientific through the reference to wünderkammern, or Cabinets of Curiosity (Figure 20).
These early forerunners to modern-day museums often conflated natural curiosities with artworks, all as demonstrations of God’s wonder. These collections would often include medical anomalies, pieces of human anatomy like carved gall stones or fetal skeletons, and taxidermied animals (Bennet, 1995). Thus, while there are deeply disgusting moments in Hirst’s work, the disgust is alleviated at least enough to activate the fascination of the abject, particularly curiosity through Hirst’s references to scientific display and a culture of curiosity.
The artistic process entailing the production of something visual engaging or attractive, even when constructed from abject substances, seems to sterilize the experience to a certain degree. The attractiveness of the visuals and/or the conceptual ideas behind the work keep it from becoming overwhelmingly disgusting, but maintains a push and pull of attraction and repulsion, which characterizes the abject. This can be seen in Friedman’s work as firstly, the pubic hair is not recognized as pubic hair until one reads the wall text. And secondly, following that discovery, the hair’s placement in concentric circles and on soap (which is coded as a cleaning agent), counters the abject sensations of encountering someone else’s pubic hair, making the work approachable, albeit still disgusting. There is a liminal space opened up between disgust and its rejection embedded in the work and in the appeal of the design, the unusual materials of the piece, and its placement within the museum setting. This liminal space breeds a sense of abjection, of wanting to thrust the piece away but being unable to fully do so. In all of these examples, the abject is present visually in the form of substances. It may be present literally within the space; it may be a representation of its literal existence in another space, or it may ask the viewer to imagine its existence.

4.03.02.05 interacting with bodily substances or watching it happen: tactile empathy and the abject. Another category of bodily fluids in art falls under the category of interaction with those substances, which creates what Rokonitz (2008) calls a tactile empathy. Rokonitz (2008) argues that “the viewers’ embodied resonance” or tactile empathy is based on mirror neuron matching, particularly mirror neuron responses that take visual stimulation and transfer it into touch sensation (p. 410). Rokonitz argues that this accounts for the strong empathetic feelings of disgust when watching movies or
plays. For an example of the power of the imagined response to disgust through tactile empathy, I return to shows like *Bizarre Foods* (Steward, 2006-present), where viewers at home may shudder while watching the host eat something “bizarre” in an imagined response to the same experience. However, the imagined response is not the same as literally eating stinky tofu. Even more pertinent to imagined disgust is the viewer response to television gore, where some people turn away or feel ill, even though they know it’s a movie and is fabricated. Even those who feel ill in the face of televised crime drama gore would feel more disgusted if they were to encounter that same gore for real, in part because it would involve sense beyond the visual like smell. I argue that tactile empathy explains a large part of our reactions to realistically rendered disgust, because to see realistic substances or individuals touching that gore is to imagine interacting with those substances ourselves.

To see someone interacting with rotting or disgusting elements causes an even more believable and embodied reaction through tactile empathy. The work of Paul McCarthy is an example of the role of tactile empathy in art. As Weidemann and Finger (2011) explain, “For Paul McCarthy, the body is a primary tool for making art and a primary means for exploring ideas” (p. 29). McCarthy established his reputation in the art world “his uniquely subversive videos [that] exposed the carnal nature of the artistic process” (p. 29). McCarthy’s performance works like *Hot Dog* (1974) (Figure 21 & Figure 22), feature the use of condiments as stand ins for various bodily fluids. Levine (2010) explains,

In performances such as *Class Fool* (1976), *Grand Pop* (1977), *Doctor* (1978),

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102 I discuss this at length in chapter 2, p. 24-26.
Contemporary Cure All (1979), and Monkey Man (1980), McCarthy systematically soiled plastic dolls with a variety of condiments that stood for “dirty” body fluids. In Baby Boy, Baby Magic (1982), he dressed in a diaper and a giant baby-head mask and performed a host of infantile activities—spinning around until dizzy, banging his head into a wall and table, playing with dolls, rubbing his penis—as well as smashing his face in his food, eating with his hands, and “defecating” hamburger meat, all while limiting his vocabulary to grunts, groans, and gags. In Mother Pig (1983), he simulated urination on a cuddly, bright-orange lion (squirting it with a ketchup bottle held at his crotch). In Popeye, Judge and Jury (1983), he fondled a floppy stuffed bunny, rubbing various food products into its increasingly grubby fur. (p. 52)

Figure 21. McCarthy, Photo documentation of the performance Hot Dog (1974).

McCarthy is known for disgusting performances that have even been stopped by the authorities because of their near pornographic content. Levine notes that,
In her survey of 1970s performance art, Linda Frye Burnham noted the abundance of frank sexuality, violence, death, cruelty, repulsion, masochism and masturbation, feces and dead fetuses; yet she singled out McCarthy’s misuse of condiments and meat as being “impossible for many performance audiences to watch.” (cited in Levine, 2010, p. 51-52)

Part of the “impossible” response stems from the fact that these food stuffs often end up looking like bodily fluids and watching someone figuratively play with their poo stimulates our mirror neurons and tactile empathy, eliciting an even more embodied disgust response than if we were to just see an image of these products mixed together. Seeing the act of touch and interaction does something different than just seeing an object (Figure 23).
There are, of course, other elements in McCarthy’s work that make it abject. Some of our first experiences of abjection are tied to food and Kristeva explains that food prohibition is possibly our earliest form of abjection. Levine (2010) explains that McCarthy’s
performances politicized both ingestion and the ingested. Or, more precisely, they exposed the already-present politics of food and food rules—the naturalized protocols that we instinctively follow, but which must be kept invisible in order to operate effectively. Self-restraint, especially with regard to food, is a hallmark of modern Western civilization. From the rites and prohibitions of Leviticus to modern standards of etiquette, food regulations have allowed individuals to distinguish themselves from the “primitive,” while basic table manners—maintaining control, not throwing food, using utensils, sitting properly—serve as important landmarks on the path from infancy to adulthood. (pp. 52-53)

Figure 23. McCarthy, Photo documentation of the performance Baby Boy (1982).

McCarthy’s work then becomes abject through its attachment to food prohibitions, but also in regards to its questioning of the symbolic order through a beastliness that strips away culture and returns us to our animal nature (Figure 24). Levine says in regards to McCarthy’s work, “Abjection is not only an end in and of itself, but a means of
facilitating critique” (p. 54). The critique here is larger than just the pleasures of transgression, as McCarthy explore[d] the ways in which American ideals of the body are instilled from infancy by social institutions, and how these ideals are reinforced through routine behavior, food became his medium, and a blatant, often childlike disregard for food rules became his primary tactic of subversion. (p. 52)

Figure 24. McCarthy, Spaghetti Man (1993).
But more than attacking the American ideal of the body, McCarthy also questions capitalism’s role in this ideal body and its drive to consume through the very substances that disgust. Ketchup, barbeque sauce, mustard and hot dog buns all signal the quintessential American barbeque, a favorite pastime of the American nuclear family. Levine (2010) points out, “like Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup can, the common foods that McCarthy features are emblematic of broad cultural values, edible icons of Americana that are not only mass produced, but symbolic of mass production and consumption themselves” (p. 54).

The abjection of Americana then becomes a way to critique “mass production and consumption [which] are here seen as generators of extreme homogenization, of uniformity and social control under the guise of democratization—what George Ritzer has called the “McDonaldization of society” (Levine, 2010, p. 55-56). While McCarthy’s work is difficult to watch, especially since the work is sometimes so extreme as to be threatening to McCarthy’s safety, it still fascinates, in part because of the extremes that McCarthy puts his body through, at times endangering his own health. The work also fascinates through its intense attack on consumption and the subsequent homogenization of American culture, a consumption that McCarthy bastardizes and conflates with a child-like pseudo-sexual abjection of food. Levine notes that,

food is especially suited to explore the darker aspects of consumerism, since not only is eating a universal, mundane, and polyvalent activity, but unlike the kinds of purchases typically marked with social significance—cars, clothes, and so on—food consumption is largely inconspicuous. And yet, as sociologist Alan Warde
explains, “it concerns physical and emotional needs, is a site of domestic conflict and a key aspect of family formation”. (p. 56)

In this context, McCarthy vomits his identity out, as Kristeva explains with the milk, but in the process his vomit is filled with the desires of the symbolic other; overconsumption and superficial populist images of nationhood are cast out while reiterating the self in opposition to those signs. This can be seen particularly well in McCarthy’s performance *Pinocchio 2* (1994). In the work McCarthy “dressed up as a Disney version of the famous wooden boy. Yet McCarthy played Pinocchio as a maniacal father figure, one that force-fed liquid through the tube-nose of a defenseless ‘child’ Pinocchio puppet” (Weidemann & Finger, 2011, p. 29) (Figure 25). The work addresses the abject’s challenge to the paternal symbolic order. The id is crystallized in parental desire, which is acted out through force-feeding the child milk that has turned slightly. The child has yet to form an ego, because abjection, or the spitting out of the milk and the self, has yet to occur.

Figure 25. McCarthy, Photo documentation of the performance *Pinocchio 2* (1994).
Ego formation in the form of abjection is derailed in McCarthy’s work as the father figure refuses to let the child vomit themself out. While some (e.g., Weidemann & Finger, 2011) see this performance as being about child-abuse, it seems to me to be much more of a broader critique of our culture’s crushing handling of childhood and adolescence in regards to self-determination. Foster (1996) notes that McCarthy’s self-denigration is usually part of a broader critique, Foster explains,

individual degradation is pushed to the point of social indictment, …whereby the subject accepts this degradation for protection and/or profit. The principle avatar of contemporary infantilism is the obscene clown that appears in Bruce Nauman, Kelley, McCarthy, Blake, and others; a hybrid figure… part psychotic inmate, part circus performer. (p. 160)

Another artist who approaches the abject through performative works that activate Rokonitz’s tactile empathy is the artist Carolee Schneemann, who describes her artist practice as such: “Not only am I an image-maker… I explore image values of flesh as material I choose to work with” (Schneeman, 1991, p. 28). Schneeman’s early performance and film Meat Joy (1964) (Figure 26) featured eight partially nude dancers playing with wet paint and “biting” raw fish, chicken, and sausage. Schneeman (1991) called the work an “erotic rite” (p. 29),

whose shameless eroticism emerged from within a culture that has lost and denied its sensory connections to dream, myth, and the female powers. The very fact that these works remain active in the cultural imagination has to do with latent content
that the culture is still eager to suppress. (p. 31)

Others, including the police and a number of morality and decency groups, disagreed with the shamelessness of the performance and disrupted the work. Schneeman herself was even attacked and strangled on stage by an audience member (Schneeman, 1991). Princenthal (1997) notes that as with other works of Schneeman’s like Snows (1967) and Water Needle (1966), “the tape of Meat Joy unsettled viewers…in ways that are unexpected and revealing. In the three decades since these performances, public squeamishness has actually increased about some things Schneeman couldn’t have predicted—biting raw chickens, for one” (p. 108).
While *Meat Joy* seems to be a conceptual mother, so to speak, to McCarthy’s later forays into sexual and scatological performances with food, Schneeman’s most famous performance and film is *Interior Scroll* (1975) (Figure 27). In this performance she disrobed, struck poses like those from a life-drawing class, read from her book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*, and then slowly pulled a scroll from her vagina from which she read as a “sacred text”. Schneeman (1991) explains the work, saying:
The need to see, to confront sexual shibboleths was also an underlying motive for my performance *Interior Scroll*...I didn’t want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture’s terror of my making overt what it wishes to suppress fueled the image; it was essential to demonstrate this lived action about “vulvic space” against the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meanings. (p. 32)

Morgan (1997) notes that Schneeman’s “*Interior Scroll* should be considered one of the most fundamental works not only in Schneemann’s career but also in the history of feminist art in the 1970s” (p. 100). The significance of her work is tied to the fact that her work mixes the personal and the political, Morgan explains, “what is erotic has political significance, and what is political is transformed into the erotic” (p. 100). Morgan further explains that to understand *Interior Scroll* is

> to understand the artist’s feminism as being about the body, in contrast to the insular protectiveness of the masculine brain. By pulling the scroll from her sex and reading it aloud, the artist is stating that what is inscribed on or within the sexual body is a discourse inseparable from that body. (p. 100)
Morgan praises Schneeman’s work for its feminist critique, for its deconstruction of the modernist Cartesian divide in the overwhelmingly male art world, for its return to the body, particularly the female body, and its location of the “source of power and intellect within the female sexual organs—the intuitive as opposed to the rationalistic concept of artistic creativity” (Morgan, 1997, p. 100). However, many find Schneeman’s work offensive. I recently showed *Interior Scroll* to a group of freshman in an introductory level women’s studies course and was greeted by many with the typical scrunched face of disgust, while other’s mouths hung ajar in shock.  

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103 One of my students asked me how Schneeman’s work was possible, since he was convinced that the vagina ended somewhere near the chest, and feared that she would
tactile empathy outside performance and video. When the above mentioned works are viewed in video or photographic form they function differently than seeing the works in person, as the offending substances are not actually present. However, this is when tactile empathy comes into play. However, tactile empathy is also activated when viewing videos, photographs and, I would argue, paintings of people interacting with offending substances. For example, a strong tactile empathy is activated in the way that Rokonitz (2008) first envisioned it in the realm of theater in live performance works of artists like McCarthy or Schneeman. Furthering this, mirror neurons still work while looking at images of actions, not just static images (Jeffers, 2009; Rokonitz, 2008), thus video documentations of performances where the artist touches disgusting things also activates tactile empathy. This is a moderated form of tactile empathy, since the offending substances are absent. Nevertheless, watching the interaction still elicits a disgust response, which can be seen not only in performance artists’ work, but in gory films and television shows. Programs like Bizarre Foods (Steward, 2006-present) disgust us through our watching of other people eating insects, organs, and other “bizarre” foods. This is tactile empathy at work, triggering our mirror neurons as we watch, triggering our own bodies through watching the actions, although not to the same intensity as witnessing the offending thing in person. The distance provided by the screen in these instances may actually allow the abject to reemerge more than just disgust because of the distance that screens, videos, and documentation provide. In real life, the disgusting elements of a performance may overwhelm, may disgust to the lose the scroll somewhere in her abdomen. I reformatted the next class to include a much-needed lecture on human sexuality and reproduction.
point that there is only rejection. However, the distance provided by the forms of
documentation may provide a mitigating force that opens the up abject.

4.03.02.05.02 tactile empathy: photography. Images like Andre Serrano’s photo
Piss Christ (1987) (Figure 7) ask us to engage with bodily substances in an imagined
space that replicates the real. Viewers of the photograph know that the cloudy yellow
orange fluid that surrounds the crucifix in the photo is urine, the title indicates this even if
the viewer is unfamiliar with the controversial image. The indexical quality of
photography (van Alphen, 2015) tells us that somewhere, out in the world, there is a jar
of dark urine into which a crucifix has been submerged.104 Once the materials of the
work are known and the indexical quality is activated; the viewer is able to imagine the
smell of piss, acrid and sharp, hear the steady stream splashing into the container, even
feel the warmth of the jar when it was freshly filled. For most of us, these thoughts are
disgusting, especially outside the context of a hospital or medical lab, and may make the
viewer want to reject the photo. Something that is appealing to many, the savior Jesus
Christ, who is usually framed with reverence, is now combined with a fluid that elicits
disgust. This describes Kristeva’s concept of the fascinated victim. You are meant to look
at Christ, yet you are not meant to contemplate your own physical by-products. This
image engages in the abject not only through bodily fluids, but also through its
association with religion. Religion is a screen or shield, a protection from the chaos of
death and disintegration. Remember, for Kristeva, the corpse, seen outside of science and

104 Indexical or indexicality is a term that refers to the supposedly truthful relationship
between a photo and what it is a photo of, or the idea within traditional photography that
photos are truthful, accurate and real depictions of objects, people and events (van
religion, is the most abject object as both science and religion offer redemption for the corpse, a continued life and purpose that combats the fear and disgust that a corpse causes. Yet, in the photo our shield of religious sanctity is immersed, drowned in the waste of the mortal body. Serrano’s photo creates a paradox where the viewer can’t look, but can’t not look. Serrano has further insured the viewer’s gaze through other aesthetic lures, the bright color of the urine, the central placement of the crucifix, and the slight haziness to the image, which galvanizes the viewer’s curiosity to look harder. These elements invite the viewer’s gaze, but the knowledge of the substance pushes the average viewer away.

Photos, like screens and canvases, offer a measure of protection from disgust. Unlike being in the presence of one of McCarthy’s performances or in the presence of other works that literally feature bodily fluids, like Tom Friedman’s work, photography offers a space to contemplate the work because the actual substances that elicit disgust are not present, at least not literally. We are not presented with a jar of urine or with the physical denigration of a crucifix in person. We are also protected by the lack of an individual interacting with these offensive substances that would trigger tactile empathy. This distance allows us to get closer to the image, study it longer without the fear of ‘real’ contamination. Photography and video, unlike a canvas, have the aforementioned indexical quality, these substances were present to the artist, which may activate a deferred tactile empathy. However, the substances are not currently present, providing a space to enjoy or gawk at those things that we have been instructed not to play with or enjoy.
4.03.02.05.03 tactile empathy: paintings. Another type of abject images are paintings that depict substances or even interaction with substances, but lack actual substances and the indexical qualities that photography, video and performance do, meaning the works are fictitious. For example, paintings like Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614-1620) (Figure 28), engage a strong sense of disgust through empathizing with the protagonist’s interaction with blood, as the biblical hero Judith grabs Holofernes roughly and slices his throat open.

Figure 28. Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614-1620).
One could argue for an empathetic connection with Holofernes, especially for someone looking at the painting without a knowledge of the Biblical narrative. However, Holofernes is the villain, which structures him as deserving of this retribution, which I believe is also present in the painting through a complex deployment of gender norms that mark Holofernes as immasculated by the women who violate him, making him a difficult character to empathize with without threatening normative heterosexual cisgendered masculinity. Visual material that realistically depict bodily substances ask us to imagine those fluids, interacting with them, viewing them in person, touching them, smelling them, and even tasting them. Representations of abject substances without the element of interaction or touch still disgust and haunt, but their elicitation of disgust does not rely primarily on tactile empathy as the viewer’s body is not implicated in the work..

Another example of painted substances that engage with the sense of tactile empathy are Dutch still-life paintings. These paintings are highly detailed and are designed to make us believe that the flowers in front of us could emit a smell if we were only to lean in to experience it; they implicate the viewer through their sensory allure. Importantly, though, some of those flowers (or the often accompanying fruit) seem as though they are starting to rot in front of us (Figure 29).\footnote{I personally think Dutch still-life painting and vanitas imagery are an outstanding example of the abject as a subtle but powerful force. Vanitas images are full of outstanding beauty and meticulous detail, but also insects, rot, and death. These complicated pairings cause a mild sense of unease along with the pleasure and are subtle but decisively abject. Even the flowers that feature so prominently in Dutch still-life paintings, the striped tulips that caused “tulip mania” in Holland, are diseased; infected with what is called tulip breaking virus (Dash, 2001). Disease and death are related to the}
are not real. However, representational work asks us, with varying stretches of the
imagination that are dependent upon the style and execution of the piece, to imagine the
painted subject as somehow real. If we are to believe the flowers are real, then the threat
of contamination from the rotting elements is also real.

Figure 29. Example of a Dutch Still life with withered flowers and insects. Van der Ast,
*Still Life of Flowers, Shells and Insects* (1635).

Returning to the broader category of bodily fluids, beyond vomit, and the idea of
tactile empathy, paintings like Victoria Reynolds’ *Reindeer Slope* (2008-2010) (Figure
30) with incredibly beautiful and believably rendered sinews of meat, ask us to imagine
the tactile presence of sliced flesh through oil paint. While Reynolds does not depict
anyone touching the meat, the flesh is convincing enough to recall previous interactions
that the viewer may have had with meat. Voynovskaya (2012) explains,

abject, marking another connection between the abject and Dutch still-lives. See Schama,
(1997).
Victoria Reynolds’ oil paintings and drawings of raw meat deconstruct the idea of preparing flesh for the purpose of consumption. The meat stops being pieces of meat and become biological masses, alluring in their regular, almost crystal-like structure. The works elicit a visceral reaction of disgust, but after the initial shock, they pull the viewer in for a closer inspection of their meticulously painted details.

(para. 1)

Figure 30. Reynolds, *Reindeer Slope* (2008-2010).

While canvas and paint can act as a screen and provides a certain measure of distance in comparison to real bleeding flesh, the imagined experience of flesh still has the capacity to disgust and fascinate the viewer, triggering the abject (Figure 31). Voynovskaya’s point that the beauty of the painting draws the viewer in, despite the initial reaction of disgust, describes a mechanic that is common for the abject; while there may be a knee-
jerk disgust reaction to many abject works, there is something else present that fascinates and mediates the rejection of disgust, drawing the viewer back in for further contemplation. In Reynolds’ work there are a number of lures that counter the initial disgust including luxurious Rococo frames, the beautiful hues of the oils as they depict flesh, as well as a representational trick that turns simple pieces of meat into flowing fleshy anemones of pulp.

Figure 31. Reynolds, *Reindeer Vision* (2008).
The initial reason to investigate Reynolds’ work through the abject is her use of the body rendered as meat, flesh taken outside its normal context and bodily envelope, but an abject visual methodology will also look at what mitigates disgust and allows the abject to surface, in this instance, a type of beauty.

Another example of art that often becomes abject because of the presence of bodily substances mitigated, in this instance, by cute, colorful, and sleek design, is the genre of Pop Surrealism. Whether in the form of paintings, sculpture, or designer vinyl toys, Pop Surrealist works often depict characters interacting with substances or engaging in abject activities, like transgressing bodily borders. For example, Ray Caesar’s digital paintings, and, in particular, *Coming Undone* (2007) (Figure 32), features a pretty young girl whose back is opening up and blood colored tentacles and a figure are emerging from her spine. This work is obviously fictitious, impossible and surreal, but that does not mean that the work is not unsettling or disgusting. The presence of bodily fluids, even fictitious ones cause us to react. The work is beautiful; the girl is doll-like, the room and her clothing is lush, and the scene is highly reminiscent of Rococo painting. However, the presences of bodily fluids, even fictitious ones, cause us to react. The girl’s body opening up and bloody tissue emerging is a fantasy. The imaginary dream elements of the work may heighten the sense of abjection, as they offer a space of refuge in knowing it is not real, that helps to defer disgust enough to connect more fully to the work.
4.03.03 metaphoric substances: when yuck hides in plain sight. Another instance in which an abject methodological approach is beneficial is in the case of metaphorical bodily substances. While some art leaves no question about the fact that bodily substances are the subject of the work, at times even the material, other art depicts abstractions of bodily substances. Rather than a very clear photograph of what can really only be blood, a red splash across a canvas can be understood to represent blood in an abstracted form. These abstractions become visual metaphors of the body and its fluids where stretched latex is like skin and strands of beads flow like menstrual blood.

Eva Hesse’s sculptures and installations are excellent examples of abject visual metaphors. Hesse was known for her use of latex and fiberglass, mixing rigid geometric shapes with organic soft forms that Robert Smithson called “psychic models” (cited in Lippard, 1992, p. 6) of her interior awareness of her gender and it’s impact on her art.
Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) notes that Hesse’s work, “can be seen to be politically significant for subversive gender and sexual politics” (p. 76).

In Hesse’s *Untitled, or Not Yet*, (1966) (Figure 33) pendulous forms are made from wire mesh, filled out and made heavy by translucent, shimmering spheres. It is the metaphoric body in works like *Untitled or Not Yet* that make it ideal for an abject visual methodology. The form of the work references sagging breasts or dangling flesh and challenge the tradition of verticality in art, particularly in portraiture which focuses on the upright body, with horizontality and debasement. A horizontal body is fallen, dead or wounded. As Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) explains, “Hesse’s bodily sculpture pulls downward, thus challenging our dominant culture’s concern with the notions of verticality and opticality, which are associated with sublimation and vision” (p. 76). Leslie Jones explains that “vision has often been privileged as the superior sense in modernism and therefore constitutive of the male subject.
The experience of the other senses of the body has been denigrated and relegated to the realm of the feminine” (Jones cited in Gutierrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 76). This debasement through flesh reasserts the feminine, particularly the monstrous feminine, in opposition to the vertical and optically driven art of men. The embodied nature of the abject challenges the opticalness of male modernist art in favor of a sense of the body and a preferencing of other senses like touch. This critique of scopophilia and opticality as a cultural privilege has been called by Margaret Iversen, the “deflationary impulse” (cited in Gutierrez-
Albilla, 2008, p. 76) and fits both Hesse’s work and much abject art in general which focuses on the ugly, the base and the anti-heroic.

If not sagging breasts, then Hesse’s work resembles spittle or pus dripping slowly and viscously down in gooey droplets. In this way, the abject is activated in thinking about touching those metaphoric substances. The hesitance to touch Hesse’s work lies not in its literal materiality, the latex or the metal, but in what those materials are meant to represent: lactating breasts or saliva, perhaps semen, dripping. Hesse’s work and the disgust response it can produce is then a form of the previously mentioned tactile empathy. The works disgust through an implication that one will touch the work and that to touch the work would be to come into contact with something that is both physically disgusting; it looks as if it could be sticky or gooey, and psychologically off-putting, since it is like touching a bodily substance. The work also seems to reference egg sacks, a female production, rendered in industrial materials that are coded as male, making the works a hermaphroditic mélange of semiotic sexes.

More than the feminine or bodily fluids, the work speaks to aging flesh, bodies that are moving towards disintegration. More than the formal elements of the work, the material itself becomes a metaphor for abject age. Hesse’s use of refuse or lowly materials, plastics and abandoned factory materials, speak to the aging body as abject, as they are marginalized materials, castoffs that refuse to disappear, detritus waste from our consumer society. As Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) explains, “As an industrial material, latex is a fragile medium which decays over time” (p. 76). Both the reclaimed elements and the material elements speak to deterioration or rot of the metaphoric body. Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) notes that, “Many of Hesse’s works have in fact become discoloured and have
disintegrated due to their susceptibility to light and heat, thereby becoming an art whose ontology is based on its dematerialization and final disappearance” (p. 76). While Hesse’s work refuses literal representation of bodily substances, it does abstractly reference bodily substances removed from the body and the sense that the body has become desiccated or is deteriorating through drooping forms and rusting materials. Her works become “abstract prosthetic extension[s]” (Gutierrez-Albilla, 2008, p. 76) of the body.

Hesse’s *Untitled (Rope Pieces)* (1970) (Figure 34) has a similar sense of the body abjected and abstracted.

![Figure 34. Hesse, *Untitled (Rope Pieces)* (1970).](image)

The cordage, hung in tangled drooping knots, is the color of oxidized blood and resembles the arterial system or ligaments pulled from the body, or perhaps intestines hung like sausage casings. Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) explains,
Hesse’s desublimatory sculpture is a fallen body which escapes from logicality and lodges itself within the bodily and the obsessional, thereby emphasizing our reaction to the sculpture on a corporeal, organic and perceptual level. Desire is thus not proposed here as the desire for form and thus for sublimation. Rather, desire is defined in terms of transgression against form. (p. 76)

Hesse’s symbolic abject bodies transgress the sealed body, crossing uncomfortable borders as they are turned inside out while their material and conceptual nature stimulates an embodied disgust. However, her work becomes further abject in regards to the minimalist modern art of her male contemporaries and of the formal qualities they held in esteem as her work debases sculpture and art through a corporeal feminine alternative.

A deeper abject analysis of Hesse’s work would delve into her past, looking at her escape from Nazi Germany, her mother’s suicide, and her own failed marriage and how these moments of chaos become manifest in the abstract abject bodies of her sculptures, particularly in regards to their sexual and maternal content (Lippard, 1992). Delving further into Hesse’s biography would be important in a longer analysis of her work. An important part of a visual abject methodology is to consider history and biography as contextual elements that can lead to a better understanding of abject art, particularly since the abject is deeply tied to childhood and the maternal. However, in this taxonomy I focus on Hesse’s metaphorical engagement with the abject body through abstraction and how those abstractions call for the use of an abject visual methodology to explain her works’ haunting explorations of sex, the body, and death.

**4.03.04 gender and the maternal.** Gender is crucial to the abject primarily because of the maternal, but also in gender-nonconformity. Because this category is so
important and is theorized very briefly by Kristeva, but expanded upon much more by later scholars, I will discuss briefly how the abject relates to gender non-conformity, the maternal and particularly the monstrous mother. As Chanter (2008) explains, “Women are rendered unthinkable by patriarchy except as reproductive vessels or maternal caretakers” (p. 3). Chanter argues that the abject is the system’s waste, therefore patriarchy’s waste, its binary opposition and exclusion, is woman. Cisgendered heteronormativity builds itself against and then incompletely excludes its other: queer, transgendered, and non-normative bodies and gender performances (Butler, 1993). An abject visual methodology recognizes instances in which gender and the maternal are made frightening or disgusting in their difference.

4.03.04.01 abjectly queer: images of gender non-conformity. Many artists have used the abject to challenge normativity like James P. James (Figure 35), a photographer who shoots penises that have been covered so thoroughly in glitter that the male members look deformed or covered in sparkly legions. The now infamous Robert Mapplethorpe photographed scenes from the gay S&M subculture in New York City in the 1970’s and 1980’s, which were both disgusting in their violations of the body, like Self Portrait with Whip (1978) (Figure 36), where the artist breaches his own borders with a bull whip.

106 James P. James works also include the documentation of drag queens, another abject subject (http://www.jamespjames.com/html%20site/glittercocks.html).
Figure 35. James, *Glitter Cock* (2013).

Figure 36. Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait with Whip* (1978).
However, the photographs are also tonally beautiful, well composed and captivating.
Many of Mapplethorpe’s works activate the abject not only literally through the violation of bodies or the presence of bodily substances, but also in the Butlerian sense of the representation of bodies on the borders of societies, the social rejects to which the normal is constructed in response. This is present in Mapplethorpe’s work as he documents queer life, making social abjacts, the subjects of his photography.

Similarly, the photographer Catherine Opie has documented her own queer sexual practices and queer lives, turning queer abjection into the subject of art. Opie’s work is complicated in its abject content, as she carves into her back childlike drawings of two girls holding hands deep enough to draw blood (Self-Portrait/Cutting, 1993), or breastfeeds her child topless (Self-Portrait/Nursing, 1994) so that one can see the faint scars from another performance photograph where Opie dressed in a gimp mask, pierced her arms with needles, and carved pervert into her chest (Self-Portrait/Pervert, 1994) (Figure 37).

The inclusion of cutting and sadomasochistic sexual practices with maternal and bodily fluids easily mark the work as disgusting and abject. These images challenge gender norms and expectations through abjection, both through the inclusion of bodily substances and breaks in the borders of the body, but also in the very inclusion of female and queer sexuality, which challenges cisgendered heteronormativity and stereotypical gender constructions.
If the normal ego is what is expelled from the child through abjection, then one could see the works of Mapplethorpe and Opie as the birth of the aberrant through social abjection. Their queer bodies are spat out of the larger social body and, while abjection creates the norm, it also forms *othered* egos that then trouble the norm, in the reciprocal circuit that Butler (1993) describes.

4.03.04.02: the maternal: visions of the threatening mother As with both sexual difference and gender difference, particularly in regard to the female, the abject is closely related to the maternal. While I have discussed this briefly in the literature review, I will revisit some of the main points on the maternal and its connection to the abject here. The maternal threat stems from the power of difference, which is at the heart of psychoanalysis and its relationship to women: castration anxiety. The female is frightening because of her genital difference and lack of a phallus. The assumption that the female is a castrated male points to the impermanence and unnecessary status of the phallus, and through it the patriarchal system as a whole.

This is an aberrant and horrifying premise in a phallocentric world. Creed (1986)
explains that, “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (p. 44). In his paper *Fetishism* (1927), Freud notes, “Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals” (as cited in Creed, 1986, p. 44). Freud further calls the archaic mother, a figure of the early mother goddess and the ultimate female, a “shadowy” figure, while Lacan later refers to the archaic mother, the opposition to the phallic father, as “the abyss of the female organ from which all life comes forth” (as cited in Creed, 1993, p. 25).

Creed (1986) explains,

> It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallo-centric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration. (p. 44)

The figure of Medusa freezes men, turning them to stone, a double entendre for the hardness of erection. The man is both fascinated and aroused by the woman, while her difference serves as a point of deep-seated anxiety, based in castration fear and in a suspicion of the doubled embodiment of pregnancy, in which two entities inhabit one body.

Simone De Beauvoir discusses the connection of monstrosity to the female gender in her seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949/2011). In her text, Beauvoir explores femaleness in other species, noting that the very word female calls to mind images of an enormous round egg snatching and castrating the agile sperm; monstrous and stuffed, the queen termite reigning over the servile male; the praying mantis and
the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up; the dog in heat running through back alleys, leaving perverse smells in her wake; the monkey showing herself off brazenly, sneaking away with flirtatious hypocrisy. And the most splendid wildcats, the tigress, lioness and panther, lie down slavishly under the male’s imperial embrace, inert, impatient, shrewd, stupid, insensitive, lewd, fierce, and humiliated. Man projects all females at once onto woman. (p. 21)

In her reflections on lower organisms, Beauvoir ruminates:

The organism is reduced to barely more than the reproductive apparatus; in this case, the ovum-and therefore the female-takes precedence over everything else, since it is above all the ovum that is dedicated to the sheer repetition of life; but it is barely more than an abdomen, and its existence is entirely devoured by the work of a monstrous ovulation. (pp. 31-32)

In these passages Beauvoir captures many of the anxieties surrounding generative capacities that the male projects upon the female: anxieties that are projected onto the entirety of the female gender, not simply human women.

Much of the power of the female is tied to the maternal, both in regard to access to the symbolic order and in terms of her ability to disrupt through difference. Mother is the site in which male anxiety is born, according to Freud; it is the mother’s genitals that the child first glimpses in horror, marking the mother as the monstrous Other. As Chanter (2008) notes, “The feminine comes to stand for a mythical past, relegated to a time that predates the Oedipal narratives, the terms of which are formulated in a way that precludes the entry of the feminine, other than as masquerade” (p. 4). For Kristeva (1982), this
early time is known as “chora,” a pre-lingual but not pre-discursive stage characterized by a boundaryless existence of sensation and need. The maternal association with chora, with the child’s almost symbiotic existence with the mother before the Oedipal drama, is a part of a shared mythic past when we all experienced life as a extension of the feminine. This type of union is often considered monstrous because the chora represents a threat to the patriarchal Symbolic. Chora is a time, a language, and perhaps even a culture that exists outside the Symbolic. The chora predates and even acts as the foundations for the language of the father, and represents an alternative to patriarchy.

The fragility of the patriarchal system is hidden by projecting inadequacy and fault onto the female, as she is always considered maternal, whether she is a mother or not. Inadequacy is projected not only on to women, but onto all other subjects that appear to lack not only the “correct” genitals, but also the hegemonic skin color, sexual preference, gender performance, or class. There is a reciprocal relationship between woman being the first Other, in the form of the mother, and the subsequent feminization of subalterns who are often characterized in the same way as women: weaker, less intelligent, more connected to nature, more emotional, and ultimately less worthy. Creed (1986, 1993) links the abject to the maternal, the vaginal, the excremental, and the menstrual. As Kristeva (1982) lays out and as Creed (1986, 1993) expands upon, the maternal is the domain of the abject, as the maternal is what the child builds itself against in its first identity formation, and it is the mother that the child fears will consume them and destroy their first attempts at individuation. Abjection is a precondition of narcissism and ego since, before one solidifies the self, one rejects that which does not belong. However, there is a fear that one will lose those demarcations of selfhood and be
swallowed back up into the Other/mother. This fear becomes materialized in images of the *vagina dentata*, or vagina with teeth, the consuming mother which will suck the individual back into the womb, destroying their identity.

According to Kristeva (1982) this is demonstrated through defilement rituals. Kristeva traces a history of matriarchal power by explaining the rise of a preoccupation with purity and defilement through the shift from paganism to patriarchy in religion. Defilement is always linked to the female through blood and shit. Menstruation is an internal defilement that woman must bear as compensation or as punishment for sex and child bearing, and excrement is associated with the woman as an external threat of pollution that stems from her role in taking care of the infant, cleaning their filth and toilet training them. Defilement is understood as animal-like, marking women as wild and uncivilized. It relates to the body by marking woman as counter to the culture and civilization of man. However, dirt is also understood as matter out of place, or disorder, meaning that women are considered dirty and disordered. This helps to explain the historic connection between women and madness, as mental illness is often understood as disorder, or an inability to follow rules, observe laws, or clearly use language. It is worth noting that hysteria, the early name for female mental illness, is derived from the Greek for womb, which was thought to be the cause of hysteria.

The transgression of borders between nature and civilization, between sanity and madness, between clean and dirty, is a way to further mark the mother as monstrous. As Cohen (1996) notes, the monster is a figure on the border that occupies an ambiguous space between culture and the Lacanian Real. Understanding the mother as monstrous is part of what then drives ego formation in the child. The child’s struggle to break away
from the mother is made easier by understanding the mother as a monstrous figure. Through the child’s rejection, the mother becomes the child’s first abjected, or jettisoned, waste. Creed (1986) sums up this complicated relationship between bodily fluids, the maternal, the paternal, and disgust as follows:

Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father. On the one hand, these images of bodily wastes threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as “whole and proper.” Consequently, they fill the subject – both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema – with disgust and loathing. On the other hand, they also point back to a time when a “fusion between mother and nature” existed; when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame. (p. 55)

An example of the monstrous mother in contemporary art is the painter Jenny Saville’s work *The Mothers* (2011) (Figure 38), which depicts a woman with a seemingly pregnant belly holding two squirming children. The execution of the work is sketchy in places and refined in others, rendered in such a way that the distinction between the bodies of the figures is blurred. The work depicts a monstrous mother whose body re-envelops her children, becoming a three-headed, multi-limbed chimera.
Another contemporary images of the monstrous mother can be found in Takashi Murakami’s sculpture *Hiropon* (1997) (Figures 39 & 40), which represents a life-sized female character reminiscent of *manga*, or Japanese comics, clothed only in a skimpy bikini top. Her top fails to conceal impossibly large breasts that spew a torrent of breast milk, with which she engages in a game of jump rope. The work conflates sexuality and childhood in the form of a comic-book character caught in the act of transgressive self-pleasure, as she, quite literally, plays with her own bodily fluids. The figure is infantilized.
through the use of the *manga* style, the bright plastic colors of the sculpture, and the schoolgirl activity of jumping rope. The figure is also that of the monstrous mother, as her monstrously engorged (or surgically enhanced) breasts, replete with breast milk, unmistakably signal childbearing.

Milk does not drip from her, it sprays from her udder-like nipples, appearing to curdle into thick dense cordage that encircles her tiny pre-teen waist, narrow hips and smooth genitals. An uncomfortable hybrid of blatant sexuality, underaged innocence, and maternal symbolism, the figure and its impossible milk rope become uncanny and abject through transgressively eliciting contradictory emotions of pleasure and disgust.

Murakami is himself well aware of the political and social transgression his work enacts, as he attests in his *Super Flat Manifesto* (2000) and his exhibition and book entitled *Little Boy* (2005), which discuss the rise of the *kawaii* (super-cute) aesthetic in Japan as a child-like response to the paternalistic relationship enforced on Japan by America after World
War II. As Ivy (2006) explains, “*Little Boy*, of course, refers to the code name for the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and it is this American bomb and the explosive trauma it unleashed that become the source for the infantilization of postwar Japanese culture” (p. 500). In this context, the figure of *Hiropon* becomes a doppelganger of the amazing “50-Foot Woman” of 1950’s B-movie fame. *Hiropon* is an atomic monster on the border, sexualized but infantilized through a cute aesthetic, styled on lowbrow comics but shown in fine art contexts. She is the mother and child combined into one uncomfortable body.

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Figure 40. Murakami, *Hiropon* (1997).
I have noted that an abject visual methodology can be used in regard to historical works as well. A similar maternal abjection can be seen in the art-historical example of lactation in *The Miracle of Lactation* (1650) by Alonso Cano (Figure 41), which depicts the Virgin Mary squirting milk from her breast into the waiting mouth of Saint Bernard.
de Clairvaux. During the Renaissance, breast milk was thought to be a product of heat and blood; an abject substance, blood, created another abject substance, breast milk, which carried the essence of the producer with it. So in the case of the Virgin, breast milk also contained mystical powers (Yalom, 1998). During the Middle Ages, works such as these representing breastfeeding were a metaphor for the church’s ability to provide spiritual sustenance (Miles & Lyons, 2008).

But as the use of wet nurses spread, the image of the Virgin nursing either Jesus or another figure also came to be understood as a political critique of foreigners. This type of image is viewed as a cautionary tale about the possible contamination that foreign wet nurses could transmit to children through their milk and an instructional for “good mothers” to emulate the Virgin and nurse their own children for the sake of the child and the state (Yalom, 1998; Miles & Lyons, 2008). Thus breast milk, lactation, and the breast itself, became loaded symbols that conflated spiritual nourishment, secular eroticism, and the abject.

While the lactating Virgin remains a sacred subject for many, images of milk shooting from a woman’s breast into another’s mouth causes contemporary viewers to feel anxiety about the transmission of bodily fluids, and the power of the maternal manifest in the action of lactation. The fact that Kristeva cites milk as the substance that causes revolt and the jettisoning of oneself through ego formation is no coincidence, as it is a sign of the mother: a once-nourishing figure who turns sour during the course of ego development. Here the defilement of the milk and bodily fluids is purified by the Virgin’s religious sacredness--or at least we can assume that this was the intent of the Christian painter: the profane becoming sacred, or cleansed through sacredness. However, in a
contemporary and more secular context, this cleansing is incomplete or unconvincing. Confronting the Cano painting now, we are presented with an abject, absurd, or uncomfortable mythic narrative about the transmission of fluids from the maternal body.

4.03.04.02.01: Bourgeois and abject subjects. Having illustrated examples of the monstrous or abject maternal as art, I now turn to the artist Louise Bourgeois for an extended investigation into the mechanics of the abject in conjunction with gender and the maternal. Bourgeois is a feminist sculptor who utilizes metaphor in her work referencing bodily substances, gender, and the maternal. In 1982 Bourgeois was the first living woman to get her own retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Walker, 2010). While Bourgeois has rejected claims that she is a Surrealist, she has discussed her work in terms of early childhood traumas, often citing her father’s long-standing affair with Bourgeois’ live-in teacher, thus making the work, in some respects, psychobiographical in nature.

Her piece The Destruction of the Father (1974) (Figure 42) features large forms clustered together, protruding from the base like pustules and suspended from the ceiling like breasts. As in Hesse’s work, these bulbous forms become a type of abject metaphor of the feminine and the maternal, as they represent abstractions of egg sacks or pregnant bellies. Pieces such as Cumul (1968), Avenza (1969), even a wearable soft sculpture from the performance piece A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts (1978) (Figure 43), feature Bourgeois’ characteristic bulging furuncles.

One critic complains, “The problem I have with Bourgeois’ work is its literalness, the indexical symbolism that has given her interpreters material for their academic frenzy” (as cited in Walker, 2010, p. 4). I would argue instead that these explicit features,
which some see as problematic in her work, enable the activation of disgust and a deeper interest in content and form, encouraging an abject response. It is the ability to read these works as metaphoric representations of bodily fluids and maternal bodies that make them abject. Bourgeois installs these egg sacks in cave forms or nooks that are filled with swelling tumefactions that reference the body straining at its borders through the weight of fat or fecundity.

Figure 42. Bourgeois, *The Destruction of the Father* (1974).
Figures of eggs, spheres of fetal development, or egg sacks reference disembodied or traveling wombs and become abstractions of the mother and maternal threat. They represent the body ready to break open and spill out, or at least beginning to drip from fullness, like lactating mammilla-stalactites. Any sense that this work was simply formal and was not meant to represent a symbolic body is countered by Bourgeois’ succinct statement: “For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture” (as cited in Walker, 2010, p. 6). Walker notes that the frequency with which this quote appears in literature surrounding Bourgeois is a testimony to the “crucial place which the body occupies in Bourgeois’ art” (p. 6). The body in Bourgeois’ work is rarely whole or fully figurative, rather it “is always either fragmented, deformed, or completely metaphorical” (p. 6). The fragmented body, the deformed figure, and the metaphoric representation of gender all inhabit the space of the abject.

107 The figure of the traveling uterus is not new; rather, it is the root of the concept of hysteria. Greeks and Romans believed that the uterus moved around a woman’s body, creating different tempers and moods. This idea led to the notion of women as overly emotional, or hysterical, because of their uteruses (Wolf, 2013).
Returning to *The Destruction of the Father* (Figure 39), if one considers that the lumps might look less like abscesses or egg sacks and more like breasts that have been severed from their bodies, this would make the work akin to a contemporary image of Saint Agatha,¹⁰⁸ whose breasts, after having been ripped from her body, were placed on the floor and ceiling, instead of the martyr’s platter (Delaney, 2005). Images of Saint Agatha can be understood as both an historical and a literal representation of the abject. *The Destruction of the Father* is an example of the metaphoric abject, in which physical abjection is made more complex when a viewer’s response to a fragmented body is compounded by a narrative of religious martyrdom.

Bourgeois’ forms are abstractions and visual metaphors which, very ambiguously in this instance, reference the maternal abject in the form of giant egg sacks or dismembered breasts. However, other works by Bourgeois are more obviously metaphoric, less liminal, and less open-ended. Examples include *The Woven Child* (2002), a fiber sculpture of a limbless female torso pregnant with a child enclosed in a transparent mesh womb, or *Nature* (1912-2010), which features the body of a hound with multiple human breasts instead of teats (an image Bourgeois returned to repeatedly), or her pink fabric piece *Fragile Goddess* (2002) (Figure 44), in which a pregnant limbless torso’s neck stretches into a phallic form. These pieces are also metaphors for the maternal. The sculptures function visually as deviant pregnancies; the mother is denied

¹⁰⁸ Saint Agatha is depicted in art as a woman carrying a platter bearing two mounds, representing her dismembered breasts. This imagery refers to the way in which Saint Agatha was martyred; her breasts were torn from her body with hot tongs (Delaney, 2005).
subjectivity through the lack of a face, or is rendered monstrous and bestial through animal bodies and hermaphroditic references.

Figure 44. Bourgeois: (left), The Woven Child (2002); (center), Fragile Goddess (2002); (right), Nature (1912-2010).

These works directly evoke the category of the maternal abject, but other works like The Destruction of the Father (1974) (Figure 42), Janus Fleuri (1968) (Figure 45) or Fillette (1968) (Figure 46) also function as abject metaphors. While Janus Fleuri is not obviously depicting the maternal form, in the way The Woven Child does, it does resemble the disembodied lower torso of a female seeming to rupture or split apart revealing organ-like forms. Schultz (2012) explains, “The bronze sculpture Janus Fleuri is a ambiguous form with connotations of sexuality, metamorphosis, and struggle” (para. 5).
This is a work that Bourgeois often referred to as a self-portrait. The title refers both to the past and the future, manifested in the form of Janus, the god of transitions and doorways. Michele Schultz has argued that the work “embodies the artist’s Oedipal deadlock – an unresolvable struggle between Bourgeois, her father and her mother, stalemated by her mother’s death” (2012, para. 5). The vagina is a locus of anxiety, as it is the site of woman’s supposed castration, and also the mouth of the birth canal. Because it is an opening, the vagina is a point of vulnerability in the bodily envelope as well as a complex space of abjection, as it both expels through the sloughing off of internal fluids during menstruation, takes in seminal fluids that are used to create life, and then eventually expels fluids during childbirth.
Figure 46. Bourgeois, *Fillette* (1968) (left), and *Fillete* (1968) installed (right).

*Fillette* (1968), like *Janus Fleuri*, is a vague visual metaphor, unlike *Seven in Bed* (2001) (Figure 47), in which the human form may be deformed but is literally represented. *Fillette*, however, is no less legible as abject, since it resembles a castrated phallus. It is a column form surrounded by fleshy rolls, with two spheres at its base and pierced through the “head” with a ring. It suggests a horrific vision of the fear of difference in the form of the castrated member. But more than simple castration, the work references the female body in its title, which plays on the idea of a cut of meat, a fillet, but also a young girl—*fillette* in French.
Figure 47. Bourgeois, *Seven in Bed* (2001).

However, *Fillette* is not the color of flesh (it doesn’t bleed), nor is it hyper-realistic, like Ron Mueck’s sculptures. It is a sculptural metaphor for a castrated penis. This metaphoric deferral may provide distance for the viewer, and the abstraction may allow the viewer to come closer, to engage more deeply, because the trauma is less obvious. This does not fully remove the abject from the viewing experience though, as the work elicits a reaction of disgust and a sense of the uncanny. An abject visual methodology must look not only for literal examples of the body’s insides turned out, but must also interrogate abstractions, metaphors, and metonyms that reference bodies and their byproducts.

4.03.04.02.02: Bourgeois and abject materiality. Like Hesse’s use of latex as symbolic skin, Bourgeois’ sculptures also use material metaphors that activate the abject, particularly in regard to gender and the maternal. Bourgeois uses many different
sculptural materials, from marble to latex to secondhand fabrics. However, her uses of those materials often act as a metaphor, or further complicate the work’s relationship to the abject. In his recent article, “Sexing the Canvas: Calling on the Medium.” Chare (2009) posits:

Medium is never gender neutral. Both the artist’s and the art historian’s relationship to the substances out of which art objects are crafted is, and probably always has been, mediated by values and assumptions about the sexes. (p. 667)

If medium is gendered, and gender is central to the abject, then material too becomes abject in a number of ways.

Marble is a beautiful sculptural material whose hardness and durability is traditionally coded as masculine. However, when Bourgeois uses it she makes truncated and debased forms that reference the feminine. Walker (2010) points out that marble, when used by Bourgeois, possesses its own meaning. Bourgeois specifically uses marble from Carrera, Italy in most of her works, including Sleep II (1959) (Figure 48), a piece that resembles a post-coital penis in retreat. Famous male sculptors like Michelangelo, Bernini, Canova, and even Praxelities, whose works set the standard for Western beauty, used Carrera marble for less subversive and abject purposes. Walker (2010) explains,

To represent a ‘limp penis’ out of such a ‘noble’ material which we have come to associate with some of the great (male) masters of sculpture can be understood as a provocation in itself. Secondly, relationship between form and matter has often been characterized as one of gendered opposition, where form is related to the male and exists prior to its feminized complement, matter…. Placed within this context, Bourgeois’ Sleep II emerges, not as a ‘tender portrayal’ of a retreating
phallus, but as a radical reversal of the Pygmalion fantasy: in Bourgeois’ hands, the woman/artist becomes the creator of the phallus/man. (pp. 17-18)

Bourgeois is obviously very aware of the impact and role of material in her works. Not only does her radical gender reversal suggest a hybrid, a mixture of the male and the female in a single work, but it also becomes another type of castration image, with a female artist holding power over the phallus. That power creates the phallus, but also displays it separated from its host, suggesting castration. Moreover, while Walker sees this as a metaphor of a complete man, the work itself appears to me to only be the tip (the head of the penis), referencing perhaps a circumcision gone awry.

Figure 48. Bourgeois, *Sleep II* (1959).

In another material metaphor, Bourgeois uses latex as a reference to skin. Fer (1999) asserts, “In Bourgeois, latex does not so much bear the mark of touch – it is not
modeled – as act out its previous liquidity, of wetness, of bodily secretions which make the skin [or] surface bulge and almost leak or seep out” (p. 32). The latex acts as a reference to the wet, seeping body. Michael Kelly (1998) notes that Bourgeois’ work Portrait (1963), “in its glistening viscosity and shapelessness, evoke[s] not the architecture of a body but the fluidity of its internal matrix” (p. 306). The body that is referenced in these material metaphors is the inside of the body, the hidden wet depths. In his work on psychoanalytic strategies in modern art, Kuspit (2000) asserts,

The body and skin – separately or together – are clearly the ultimate avant-garde medium, and avant-garde art increasingly becomes an attempt to resurrect a body that is experienced as damaged if not dead, and give it a new skin that will function as a boundary keeping the outside world out, once and for all. (p. 141)

It is no wonder then that Bourgeois’ materials, as well as her artistic content, reference the debased body. Potts (1999) discusses the difference between Bourgeois’ use of material metaphors in a comparison between Fillette and one of Brancusi’s polished bronze pieces. He points out: “By contrast …[Fillette] does not have a reassuringly smooth surface – the latex in certain areas coagulates in awkward lumps, in places even peels away from its core, as if its skin might stick to one rather than glide under one’s touch” (p. 45). The latex skin is not the perfect skin to which marble is likened, but instead a rough, even disfigured skin that is in flux, peeling and thus dying.

Similarly, materials like pink fabric and old clothing, used in Bourgeois’ soft sculptures, transgress borders between fine art and craft, mixing not only high and low connotations, but also gender assumptions. Fibers and craft techniques are coded as female, while traditional sculpture materials like bronze and marble are coded as fine art
and masculine. To infuse craft materials with formal and conceptual content, and move fibers out of the decorative arena into the realm of fine art, is an act of border crossing, a key element of the abject. Walker (2010), referencing *Old Mistresses*, Pollock and Parker’s 1981 feminist critique of art history, notes that

...the art and craft division can appear on different levels: it can be read on class lines, but crucially for the present study, there is an important connection between the new hierarchy of the arts and sexual categorization, male-female. The ‘specter of domestic art’ is menacing for women because ‘high art and the fine artist have come to mean the direct antithesis for all that is defined by the ‘feminine stereotype’. Art which is made of materials like thread and textiles and which uses processes like weaving and stitching which have long been associated with the domestic sphere face the danger of being relegated to the domain of craft. (p. 20)

Similarly, Bernier (1986) observes: “in the modern Western ideology, an association with women, the working class or non-Western cultures is almost invariably accompanied by a fall in the status of the art form” (p. 41). To understand that materials are gendered, classed, and raced broadens the ways in which materials can be abject beyond their metaphorically abject appearance; one must focus on the operation of the materials and how they are transgressive. Bernadac (2006) sees Bourgeois’ use of fabric as a “return to childhood” (p. 158) which is fraught with the attempt to free oneself from the mother through abjection.

These transgressions can also extend to issues of aging, defying an aesthetic of permanence with materials that decay. Some have characterized her use of fabric as a geriatric or morbid gesture (Walker, 2010). In regard to Bourgeois’ use of fabrics, Walker
notes that recycled bits of cloth and old tapestries are far more perishable than marble or bronze, meaning that these works, like the bodies they depict, will age and eventually decompose, enacting an abject disintegration.

This prolonged investigation into Bourgeois’s work illustrates the multiple ways in which an abject visual methodology can interrogate an artist’s productions, from subject matter to materials. It also demonstrates an important subsection of the taxonomy of abject art: works that engage with gender and the maternal by depicting a monstrous, fragmented, or difficult vision of difference.

4.03.05: excess and dearth: life out of bounds and lack.

4.03.05.01: disability and pregnancy. Another way the abject is made visible is through images of excess and scarcity, too much or too little. The ideas of excess and lack as relating to the abject stems from Kolnai’s description of disgust (2001), in which he emphasizes that disgust can be elicited by a sense of either “too much” or “too little.” Excess denotes excessive growth, or life run amok through over-production. Mold, tumors, and swarms of insects are all life out of bounds. Similarly, sickness can be understood as excess. Disease is not just a lack of health, but an overproduction of germs and viruses. Cancer is the rampant growth of mutated and sick cells, which sometimes kills the patient by crushing healthy organs with malignant tumor production; cancer embodies abjection through both its boundless growth and its transformation of the body from a subject into an unruly object (Waskul & van der Riet, 2002). Siamese twins or individuals born with surplus parts like vestigial tails or too many toes have too much life in one body. These individuals exceed the normal. The excessive production of life, like a rat infestation, in which waves of milling bodies create a unitary mass entity out of
individual rats, becomes disgusting because there is too much life, too much existence bursting forth.

Correspondingly, shortage and insufficient life are abject. Death, or the absolute lack of life, is obviously abject, but there are also less extreme forms of lack. The emaciated child with too little flesh and too little healthy fat is abject because she lacks the features of a normative body. Kristeva (1982) explains the body seen as a corpse is the most abject, in part because it is both excessive and lacking. The dead body lacks human life and is ready to slip into decomposition. Yet the state of decomposition is teeming with life: microbial bacteria, maggots, and parasites. It is an abundance of life, but life in the wrong places. The corpse is both excessive and lacking, contributing to its archetypal abject status.

The relationship of dearth and excess to the abject, when the abject is understood as monstrous difference, is also visualized in the disabled body. Kristeva (1982) and other abject scholars (e.g., Chanter, 2008; Butler, 1993) do not discuss disability, and while other authors make the connection (e.g., Millet-Gallant, 2010; Clarke, 2008; Betterton, 2006; Hughes, 2009), they do not explain in depth how images of disability depict abjection, or what it could mean in lived experience to be seen as abject. To understand the intersection of disability and the abject, a brief discussion of disability and crip studies is necessary. Physical disabilities represent the binary other to the physically normal-abled body. Summarizing the work of Davis (1995), which traces the historical concept of normal, Millet-Gallant (2010) says that “normal is a culturally specific social construct that privileges homogeneity and stigmatizes those with physical differences” (p.
Disability is constructed as a failure to achieve the normative body (Goodley, 2011), particularly in a world that stresses compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006).

Unsurprisingly, the way in which disability does not meet or adhere to the normative body is often constructed as both a lack and an excess. According to Goodley (2011):

Life is lack for Lacanian theory and this can have major impacts on the lives of disabled people. All of us are born into the real with fragmented bodies that then lack the imaginary wholeness of the original imago. The cultural prerogative is to refute those who remind us of our own fragmentation (e.g. impaired bodies) and disability, by definition, implies ‘lacking’ or ‘flaw.’ (p. 130)

Simultaneously, disability can also imply excess, requiring moderation (Davis, 2002).

The quality of disability as an open symbol signifying both lack and excess allows for varied and plentiful projections of alienation and otherness onto the disabled body. Clarke (2008), says that to be female and disabled is to be “doubly monstrous” by inhabiting two marginalized subject positions. Garland-Thomson (2002) claims, “Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard” (p. 6). The link between the feminine and disability has a long history. According to Samuel (2011),

[W]e must at least take account of the fact that Western thought has historically claimed, not a difference, but a correspondence between disability and femininity, which Garland-Thomson traces to the Aristotelian assertion that “‘the female is as it were a deformed male’ . . . not only does this definition of the female as a ‘mutilated male’ inform later depictions of woman as diminished man, but it also
arranges somatic diversity into a hierarchy of value that assigns completeness to some bodies and deficiency to others.” (p. 55)

The abject is predicated not only on the maternal, but feminine difference, gendered through castration. With this in mind, the equivalence between the female and the abject is mapped onto the disabled body. This also relates to Butler’s understanding of the abject as queer. Many within disability studies have taken Butler’s idea that gender and sexuality are co-constitutive of physical norms, and applied this idea to disability. Butler (1997) asks:

How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulating of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life," lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (p. 15)

Remember it is Butler who links queerness to the abject, as homosexuality is the socially-excluded behavior and identity that demarcates the normative category of heterosexuality. Disability studies scholars then insert disability into the excluded and uninhabitable zones of life either through the feminization of the disabled (Garland-Thomson, 1997; 2005) or through connections between queerness and disability (McRuer, 2006).

Scholars like Cho (1997) argue that “freakish” or disabled bodies provide the answer to Butler’s question of what bodies are necessary for the normal to exist. This connection expands the “‘regulatory schemas’ which serve to materialize the abject
body” (Samuels, 2002, p. 63), broadening the abject beyond its early Kristevan ideas surrounding the borderline “deject” figure and maternal figure, and even further extending the abject beyond Butler’s abject analysis of queerness. Cho (1997) insists that, “far from being agentless objects of the norm which regulates the articulation of normal ‘bodies’ as such, these abject bodies inform those very norms” (p. 19). The freak is not simply the shunned outsider, but holds a certain amount of power through being constructed in opposition. Garland-Thomson (1997), like Butler and Cho, sees the normal, or “normate” as a figure “outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries” (p. 8).

Freakishly disabled bodies then are so absolutely abject that their jettisoning establishes the bounded norm. Garland-Thomson and Cho conflate the difference of disability with gender difference, as well as sexual difference, an analogy that is used by later disability scholars like McRuer (2006), who borrows heavily from the idea of compulsory heteronormativity in the construction of his own ideas around compulsory able-bodiedness.

In further support of this point, Garland-Thomson (1997) observes that, Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. (p. 19)

While Garland-Thomson and other disability scholars may not use the actual term abject, they are describing the disabled body in similar terms, with a norm created through
difference. The abject is then deviant and inferior by virtue of its relationship to a figure marginalized through race, sex, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and so on. Representations of the disabled body, rendered abject through a visual excess or dearth, then become deviant.

The sculptor Marc Quinn’s work is often abject. His piece *Self* (2006) (Figure 49) belongs to a series of sculptures made of Quinn’s own blood, which is poured into a mold of his head and frozen, to then be preserved and presented in a clear climate-controlled vitrine. Millet-Gallant (2010) elaborates:

Quinn has a certain reputation as a “bad boy” among art critics, a precedence set by the inclusion of his work in the controversial *Sensation* exhibit of 1991. In this exhibit, most famously lambasted by the New York Major Rudy Giuliani, when it traveled to the United States, Quinn debuted one of his most famous pieces, *Self* (1991), a self-portrait bust made from 9 pints of Quinn’s frozen and preserved blood. (p. 64)

Figure 49. Quinn, *Self* (2006-ongoing).
For portraits of his sons, Quinn used the placenta and umbilical cord from each birth, blended and frozen to cast *Lucas* (2001) and *Sky* (2006) (Figure 50). Quinn states that his use of unusual materials is attributable to his "preoccupation with the mutability of the body and the dualisms that define human life" (as cited in Frank, 2012, para. 2). On the relationship between these works and disgust, Frank (2012) warns that “your first reaction to the concept might involve re-tasting your breakfast” (para. 2). These works are abject in their use of bodily substances, which provoke disgust, and yet are beautiful because of their deep burgundy color and icy crystalline finish.

Figure 50. Quinn, *Lucas* (2001) (left) and *Sky* (2006) (right).

According to Millet-Gallant:

> These materials represent for Quinn larger interests in self/other social dynamics, for they are often associated with abjection, the materiality of the body, and the vulnerability of flesh.
These works promise that one day the power will fail, the cooling element of the refrigeration unit will break, and in that moment these works will melt, turning back into an unidentifiable pool of bodily sludge.

Millet-Gallant cites Mark Gisbourne, who “states that Self and Quinn’s other works in this vein are concerned with what constitutes acceptance, desire/repulsion, and rejection of body forms and processes, and that these themes continue in his marble amputees” (p. 65). Quinn offers a compounded vision of abjection by presenting a mother who is disabled in his sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant (8 months)* (2005) (Figure 51 & Figure 52). Placed on a plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square, the “marble amputee” represents a nude pregnant figure. The figure represented is Alison Lapper, an artist diagnosed with phocomelia, a congenital malformation that has shortened her arms and legs. Quinn has argued that the work is intended to overcome prejudice with beauty (Betterton, 2006).
However, the work was considered jarring by many, and met resistance when placed in the square (Lyall, 2005). Lapper herself has called the work a "modern tribute to femininity, disability and motherhood" (as cited in Betterton, 2006, p. 86). But one critic called it simply “ugly,” and Robert Simon argued that it was "just a repellant [sic] artifact" (Lyall, 2005, para. 8). According to Betterton (2006) one London headline even read, “So, is this really what we want on Trafalgar Square’s empty plinth?” (p. 86).
Serlin (2012) argues that the sculpture is about foregrounding disability within the public conversation on the role of the state. Quinn’s sculpture of Lapper is so important, he claims, because it… forever transformed the historical space of Trafalgar Square (and all of its
past and future contexts) into an intentionally public referendum on bodies subjected to British imperial power. In a space recognized for displaying statues of male royalty and military heroes—most notably Admiral Nelson’s Column, the traditional focal point of the square—as well as a famous site for tourism and Christmas and New Year’s Eve celebrations, the exhibition of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* confronted citizens who identify Trafalgar Square as a place that consolidates national pride and achievement with a body that seems both unrecognizable and to a large degree even impossible. (p. 22)

While the placement of the piece in Trafalgar Square is important, and represents a transgression in and of itself, the work and its popular rejection deals with more than disability studies alone can uncover. Rather, the work’s complex deployment of context through the space and place surrounding an intersectional subject like Lapper can be understood best through an abject visual methodology.

This work literally depicts motherhood in the form of Lapper’s rounded belly, which can be seen as intrinsically abject. In her work *Promising Monsters*, Betterton (2006) notes that “the trope of the monstrous has had close connections with pregnancy as one of the most embodied, and least rational, of experiences” (p. 81). More than an overproduction of hormones and hysteria that challenge rationality, pregnancy involves a more literal excess. Betterton continues: “The embodied pregnant woman, like the monster, …destabilizes the concept of the singular self, threatening to spill over the boundaries of the unified subject” (p. 85). Betterton cites Hiller who describes monstrosity thusly,
The category of the “other” includes the inhabitants of the realm of supernatural beings and monsters, the territories of real and imagined enemies, and the lands of the dead—places far from the center of the world, where one’s own land is, and one’s own reality. The other is always distant as well as different, and against this difference the characteristics of self and society are formed and clarified. (pp. 80-81)

More than the growth of a baby bump, the excess of pregnancy is the excess of subjectivity, the dualism of a body which houses more than one person and, therefore, more than one subject. This is in part what the public is responding to with discomfort; the image of ‘mother’ comes preloaded as an image that borders inherently on the monstrous.

As previously asserted, mother is the original other, the first abject to be rejected in the formation of the self—never truly granted full entry into the Symbolic, but always seen as biological pieces, organs that behave like Beauvoir’s “reproductive apparatus” (1949/2011, p. 31). Kristeva explains pregnancy as just such a threat to the coherence of the abstract subject:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism. (as cited in Zerilli, 1992, p. 111)
This passage points out that when there are multiple subjectivities, multiple bodies within one form, the sense of self as a rational free-acting agent in the world is lost, and a sense of alienation sets in. This is the impossible logic of motherhood: the mother needs a child to register within the Symbolic, but the same child threatens her subjectivity with duality and alienation. Her own identity must be put in jeopardy, even lost, to gain recognition in the world through performing her identity as mother.

Following her reflections on motherhood in the animal kingdom, Beauvoir comments in regard to humanity, “Often it no longer seems marvelous but rather horrible that a parasitic body should proliferate within her body; the very idea of this monstrous swelling frightens her…pictures of swelling, tearing, hemorrhage, will haunt her” (as cited in Zerilli, 1992, p. 111). While the dominant image of motherhood may be one of joy and naturalness, feminist scholars like Kristeva and Beauvoir counter this argument with one that articulates an “existentialist anxiety about the loss of individual agency and autonomy” (p. 112), highlighting an alienation predicated on one’s body behaving unlike itself for the benefit of the other being housed inside, one who “challenge[s] the humanist idea of a stable, masterful subject” (p. 111). Betterton describes the sense of alienation associated with pregnancy:

But what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood? Such monstrous imaginings are the stuff of fairy tales and horror films, and yet, an ontological awareness of the body’s alienation from itself and an emergent new relationship with an unfamiliar being is familiar to many pregnant women. (p. 81)
The alienating, uncomfortable, and even monstrous aspects of motherhood are all part of what audiences are responding to with disgust when viewing Quinn’s sculpture of Lapper. Moreover, they are responding to the merging of Lapper’s disability and her motherhood; the work seems to enact a double abjection through both the dearth of disability and the excess of a monstrous (or at least deviant) motherhood.

Beyond merely viewing the work as monstrously female through its portrayal of pregnancy, the deviancy and abjection attached to the disabled body inform the many negative reviews and accounts of Quinn’s sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant*. Clarke (2008) analyzes Quinn’s statue in depth, commenting:

> Whilst this sculpture appears to transgress normative standards attributed to the female nude, because it dares to show a disabled naked woman, it nevertheless conforms to the shape of many sculptures from antiquity that through time or accidental damage are rendered partial. (p. 6)

Clarke is alluding to the famous *Venus de Milo* and her missing arms, but also to a host of other works from antiquity, such as *Nike of Samothrace*. The image of fragmentation represented by damaged classical art, which is regarded as the root of Western beauty despite the damage, becomes an ideal for disabled artists like Lapper or like Mary Duffy, a disabled Irish performance artist who appears nude on stage, posed like the *Venus De Milo* (Figure 53). Lapper has in her own studio practice cast herself as the *Venus de Milo*, explaining that she saw herself in the broken sculpture (Millet-Gallant, 2013) (Figure 54). The sculpture of Lapper, which is part of a series of disabled individuals sculpted in marble by Quinn, can be read as conforming to one of the oldest standards of fragmented female beauty.
Garland-Thomson (2000) opines in regard to Duffy’s autobiographical performances:
Like gawking at a fatal traffic accident or the primal scene, looking at Duffy is at once compelling and illicit. But Duffy’s body also evokes the familiar contours of beauty. Duffy’s simultaneously starkly disabled and classically beautiful body elicits a confusing combination of the rapt gaze and the intrusive stare. (p. 336)

This passage speaks directly to the abject category of “fascinated victimhood” projected by viewers of both Duffy’s performances and Quinn’s statues, largely able-bodied witnesses caught up in the allure of the “familiar contours of beauty” (Garland-Thomson, 2000, p. 336), but simultaneously jettisoned and made to experience disgust through difference. Garland-Thomson says that “disability performance art foregrounds the body as an object both to be viewed and to be explained” (p. 334); in this sense, explanation is a type of intimate excavation into the person’s body and history (Figure 52). But what interests me instead is the use of “object” to describe a disabled subject whose body affects their very subjectivity. As they do not inhabit an ideal body, they also are denied an ideal subjectivity, which makes them closer to an object. Yet, they are clearly more than an object; they are the abject of ableism.

While Clarke (2008) points out that the Lapper sculpture is traditionally beautiful in many ways, from Lapper’s self assured stare, to the lovely materiality of the translucent marble, to the figure’s nudity and classical referentiality, understanding the work as simply beautiful does not explain the aggressive and disgusted reactions many had towards the work. Clarke herself dismisses this reading as too easy:

However, if it was just feminine beauty that Quinn was emphasizing then he could have covered her shortened legs with drapery. Instead he represents her abnormal body in antithesis to hegemonic notions of beauty, defined by Aristotle
as that which has ‘…order…symmetry and definiteness…’. Obviously Lapper’s limbs do not conform to the usual scale and shape of the classical body, and since we are aware of her bodily difference we cannot, nor should we, imagine her with normative limbs. (p. 7).

Figure 55. Flanagan, *Super Masochist* (1993). Another example of a disabled artist using their body in the performance of abjection is the artist Bob Flanagan. Born with cystic fibrosis, Flanagan turned his personal explorations in sadomasochism, which he practiced as a way to manage his disability, into large-scale performances.

The beauty of the work comes in large part through its resuscitation of neoclassical
sculpture. As Millet (2008) explains in her book *Performing Amputation*, “Neoclassicism and its classical heritage communicate philosophical and political ideals through constructed body aesthetics” (p. 14). Millet notes that Quinn’s specifically quotes 18th and 19th century works that narrated the stories of great men, and their heroic and moral deeds. He further explains that “Quinn subverts the signification of neoclassical form as the ideal ‘whole’ in this work and in his series of life-size marble sculptures of real amputees, *The Complete Marbles* (2002)” (p. 14) (Figure 56).
This subversion is achieved partially through the use of widely-known models like Lapper, and also the disabled punk rock musician Matt Fraser. The very recognizability of the personalities represented in Quinn’s sculptures counters the “objectness” that visual representations of disability and abject subject matter signal. These sculptures then act as a performance of amputation, in the same manner as Joel Peter Witkin’s notorious
photographs of disabled individuals and vivisected corpses (Figure 57), Lapper’s self-portraits displaying her abbreviated extremities, and even Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits of her broken body (Figure 58) similarly perform disability, dearth, and deviancy.

Figure 57. Witkin, *Satirio, Mexico* (1992).
Millet (2008) states that “these works challenge how the viewer perceives the body in art, as well as in everyday life” (p. 14). I believe that one of the ways that these works challenge perceptions of the body is through the display of bodies that are upsetting and disquieting, while also beautiful and engaging.

Clarke (2008) delves more deeply into the abject as she considers Lapper’s pregnant body in conjunction with disability, noting that the work displays what is considered a normal aberration, (the bodily changes of pregnancy), next to an abnormal aberration (the disabled body). Lapper’s lacking body with its shortened limbs is the antithesis of the excessiveness of pregnancy. The sculpture can be read as either pregnancy filling Lapper’s original lack with its excess, or as an exaggeration of Lapper’s original aberration (Clarke, 2008). The sculpture’s ambiguous status rivets the viewer’s attention and prevents the utter rejection of the work, which might have resulted from a
more shocking image of disability, excess and lack, or monstrous motherhood.

Lapper’s form is already doubly non-normative. As a woman lacking a phallus, her deformed body, truncated like a second castration, marks her as abject through layers of difference. Adding her pregnancy to her already female and disabled body causes complicated intersections with other indicators of abjection, making the deficiencies of her deformed body collide with the excess of her maternity. But rather than canceling each other out, as Clarke supposes they could, these dichotomies seem to further marginalize her status, making her figure even more abject. Clarke argues that the sculpture’s aberrations become grotesque, as Lapper’s “body evokes mythological creatures…the grotesque corporality of giants [and] ‘…manifests metamorphosis, an ambiguous state of being’” (p. 7). Like that of the abject. Lapper’s pregnant form “is imbued with the anxieties, for many, that surround reproduction, pharmaceuticals and the possibility of producing a child with birth defects” (p. 7).

However, as the abject is both horrific and fascinating, I believe that part of what captivates viewers in Quinn’s work is its beauty: its neoclassical references, its material sensuality, and the West’s most ubiquitous artistic image of beautiful and joyful motherhood, the Virgin Mary. If the sculpture had been too radically repugnant and horrific, it would have caused a response of utter rejection. Viewers who see the work as beautiful and as a brave portrayal of motherhood (Millet-Gallant, 2013) may not have responded in the same manner had the work been too disgusting. Perhaps, the evocation of the maternal, which can be abject, actually defuses the experience of disgust in this work, allowing a space for the viewer to enjoy the heroic scale and placement of the work, or the heroic figure of the serene mother. However, Lapper defies normative
convention of motherhood yet again, as she is a single mother on government disability aid (Millet-Gallant, 2013), indicating another socially monstrous mother figure. Even when analyzed using an abject visual methodology, this ambiguous sculpture retains its liminal readings.

**4.03.05.02: excess, dearth, disease and freakery.** Expansion beyond the normative body is seen as disgusting, and continued growth is horrifying. An image that deals with this type of excessive abjection, figured through disability, is Joe Coleman’s painting of Joseph Merrick, *Portrait of the Elephant Man* (1993) (Figure 59). Merrick is portrayed nude in the center of the work, his body deformed by hugely oversized and gnarled growths, caused by either neurofibromatosis or Proteus syndrome (Ford & Howell, 2010). Outside of the full nudity, the central figure is reminiscent of sideshow banners: brightly painted and shocking in the open display of his malformed body. However, in this case, the exotic settings or the large typeface that would normally be advertising Merrick as a performer are replaced by images from Merrick’s life, such as the doctors who attempted to cure his illness, the ringmaster who displayed him as a freak, the hospital where he lived, and threads of tiny narrative text that circle around Merrick. The painting almost buzzes with this frenzied field of words and images.

In Coleman’s painting it is the large and fibrous body, grown out of its bounds, that causes alarm and disgust. Merrick’s malformations push the boundaries of what can still be called human. For example, his head was so large from these continually developing growths that he eventually suffocated under the weight of his own head while trying to sleep on his back, instead of sleeping propped up as he had been forced to do for many years (Jarmusch & Schechter, 1998).
Millet (2008) notes that disabled bodies have been objectified through the practices of medical pathologization and public display in freak shows. Medical images are some of the most common images of disability, particularly photographs from the 19th century. These images ignored the individual, focusing instead on pathology, but through a very strict set of visual conventions, including a sense of detachment achieved through
the use of a blank background, and by depicting the subject as naked or partially clothed. Millet explains: “This kind of voided background, like a natural history illustration, symbolizes a void of context or lack of personal information about the subject portrayed” (p. 19). This void served to objectify the individual’s body, stripping away subjecthood through detached convention, and turning all disabled bodies into objects. Similarly, the spectacle of the freak show turned humans into objects of curiosity and entertainment, not only through live performances but also through souvenir photographs of the entertainers (Garland-Thomson, 1996). Although radically different in convention, both medical photos and promotional freak show photos objectify the subject, representing the liminal space of a being that is more-than-object, yet not-quite-subject: the space of the abject.

Many of Coleman’s works deal with the abject, such as his series of paintings depicting serial murders. These are rendered in the manner of the Portrait of the Elephant Man, insofar as representations of the depicted murderer’s crimes float around the image of the killer. Even in self-portraits, Coleman’s work approaches the abject, with tiny Bosch-like devils surrounding his own image. In one scene from his self-portrait, My Birth (1987) (Figure 60), he emphasizes the bodily fluids and monstrosity of reproduction by depicting himself centrally in the canvas as a zygote in utero. Whereas many artists portray themselves in a glorified or idealized manner, Coleman acknowledges the necessary and inescapable presence of abject fluids, even in his own birth. In Portrait of the Elephant Man (1993), Coleman shows Merrick as human, albeit a visibly abject human. Merrick’s figure disgusts through its excess and difference, but, unlike in medical photos, his life and uniqueness are fully present in the scenes around him. Similarly, the showmanship and exoticism displayed in the images on the collectible freak cards is also
lacking in Coleman’s painting, as Merrick is shown naked, exposed and vulnerable.

Figure 60. Coleman, *My Birth* (1987).

This work becomes ambiguous insofar as it refuses the modes of display that we most associate with disabled bodies. While it is abject in its depiction of the excessive skin growths, it also humanizes Merrick, offering the viewer an entry into the work and, though this portal, a way to make an empathetic connection with the subject portrayed.
The image both horrifies, in the figure of the body out of bounds, but also fascinates through the text and images that surround his image.

**4.03.05.03: excessive bodies, fat abjection.** The abject image of excess and overabundance can be depicted through a disabled body like Merrick’s, but also more commonly through a fat body. “Viewed, then, as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as revolting-- they are agents of abhorrence and disgust,” argues LeBesco in her 2004 book *Revolting Bodies?* (p. 1). In their analysis of news reports on fatness, Braziel (2001) argues that “the implicit message is that least is best. The established binarism opposes a contained to an intractable, transgressive corporeality that will (through its very excess) induce illness and death” (p. 235). Here the violation of arbitrary norms, established by medical discourse and distributed through the ideological apparatus of the media, makes excess a transgression of the normal body which will ultimately lead to death, and in the interim to social ostracism. The body out of bounds then becomes a threatening body because of “the association of corporeity with fluidity—indeed, a polluting, contaminating, and viscous liquidity…posited as noxious, venomous and virulent” (p. 243). Fat, because of its transgressive, fluid, anxiety-ridden nature, becomes abjection manifested in excess.

This can be seen quite clearly in the works of Jenny Saville, as in her painting *Propped* (1992) (Figure 61), in which the female figure’s corpulent body seems to swallow the stool beneath her. The figure in *Propped* relates the fat body to the grotesque and the monstrous. The figure’s hands are oversized and fat beyond the proportions of a real body, and they become claw-like, digging into and almost subsuming the figure’s
huge fleshy thighs. Meagher argues that Saville’s work employs a feminist aesthetic of disgust, which understands what it means to embody a fat and disgusting form.

Figure 61. Saville, *Propped* (1992).

When discussing *Propped*, Meagher (2003) notes its “disturbed proportions” (p. 25), while another critic said that *Propped* “conjured up every woman’s worst nightmare of how she might look with no clothes on: huge expanses of quivering milky blubber filled
with watery blue veins and scored by stretch-marks bore down on spectators like some life-sucking blancmange” (as cited in Meagher, p. 25).\(^{109}\) Using the same phrase, Clare Henry describes Saville’s images as “every woman’s nightmare: vast mountains of obesity, flesh run riot, enormous repellent creatures who make even Rubens’s chubby femme fatales look positively gaunt” (as cited in Meagher, p. 27).

Many feel this way about Saville’s images: that they are simply disgusting, unbeautiful and thus unworthy of execution.

Citing Butler’s politicized adaptation of the abject, Meagher (2003) suggests that, by materializing the abject female body, Saville reveals what lurks in the feminine imagination. That is to say, by representing a specific idea of femininity, she speaks to the disparity between the way that many women feel about their bodies and the reality of how those bodies are perceived by others. (p. 34)

Saville has herself said that her work engages with diet culture and western standards of beauty, which means that “the paintings are made to serve the interests of politics of fat pride and fat liberation, which have as central goals not only reclaiming the word ‘fat,’ but also transforming cultural representations of fat bodies” (Meagher, p. 27). However, Saville and others reject the idea that the politics of fat liberation is simply equivalent to promoting a larger canon of bodies perceived as beautiful, thereby pandering to a politics of respectability in which a fat body can be beautiful, but only if it adheres to other conventions of beauty like pale skin, good hair, or expensive clothing. Linda Nochlin explains that Saville’s work exhibits “her brilliant and relentless embodiment of our

\(^{109}\) Blancmange is a British sweet. It is a creamy gelatin similar to panna cotta or vanilla pudding.
worst anxieties about our own corporeality and gender” (as cited in Meagher, p. 34).

It is that horror at corporeality that Saville uses to broaden the discourse, beyond a simple politics of inclusion to an interrogation of what structures the inhabitation of fat bodies: an investigation of the abject. The abject speaks to the nature of living in a corporeal form, and the perpetual rejection that must occur in order to continue feeling whole while inhabiting an object that is slowly breaking down and decomposing. While this rejection is universal, it is structured differently based on culture and context, making the female body more abject, more disgusting, more rejected. Yet, that rejection has a certain power to create dramatic, embodied reactions in viewers. Meagher (2003) explains that Saville’s paintings “not only… provoke the excitement and interest of the artworld, they also elicit sensual—even visceral—reactions” (p. 23).

This visceral response is related to the abject nature of Saville’s work, insofar as viewing abject works of art causes the viewer to feel and respond with abjection. Like the skin on old milk, which causes the subject to abject themself in response, the abject infects; like disgust, it contaminates. To view abject objects, like Saville’s paintings, causes abjection in the viewer, or an incomplete rejection of the offending abject object. Reminded by the paintings of their own corporeality and what must be rejected to remain clean, proper, and whole, the viewer shudders or sneers, a bodily sign of disgust. The viewer must reject the painting, like they must reject things like excrement, but it is an incomplete rejection that simultaneously leads many viewers to continue interacting with the paintings through fascinated victimhood. The fascination stems from the corporeal abject body, as the abject always already has a component of the fascinated victim within it. But fascinated victimhood is strengthened through the sumptuous application of paint,
the impressive, almost overwhelming scale of the work, and the impulse to look at the female nude, even if it is grotesque.

This is to say that artistic intervention in the form of style, materiality, and subject choice all acts as ways of mitigating the outright rejection of disgust, making the work both desirable and disquieting. Because Saville’s work entices viewers in ways that refuse radical and complete repudiation, the work seems to suspend the viewer in abjection, trapping them in fascinated victimhood. While this snare is painful because it reminds us of our eventual messy end in dissolution, it is also enjoyable, as it allows us to continually shore up the borders of our egos. We create ourselves through the menace of eventual destruction.

This haunting rejection occurs in Saville’s depictions of bodies in general, but particularly through her conflation of fatness and monstrousness in pieces like *Fulcrum* (1999) (Figure 62).

Figure 62. Saville, *Fulcrum* (1999).
This work depicts fat female bodies that are layered or stacked on each other, almost merging together to create a single mass of flesh. Another work that mixes fleshiness and monstrousness is *Hyphen* (1999) (Figure 63), which shows two full-faced, jowl-heavy heads attached to a single wide-shouldered body.

Saville paints other abject subject matter, such as meat, broken and beaten bodies, and even hermaphrodites. But her paintings of fat bodies are more successful at representing the excess of flesh as abject, not only through the subject matter (fleshy bodies), but also through her technique. Saville uses a thick, luscious application of paint that physically resembles and becomes a sign for cellulite. Saville’s fat bodies are so excessive that they become monstrous, drawing an intuitive connection between fat, flesh out of bounds, and the abject.

Figure 63. Saville, *Hyphen* (1999).
Regardless, artworks do not have to merge into monstrosity to stimulate an abject response to excessive or fat bodies. Lucian Freud’s paintings of flesh, particularly works like *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) (Figure 64), engage with the abject at a manageable level of excess. Freud’s interest in excess becomes uncanny, foreign yet familiar. He describes being fascinated by “all kinds of spectacular things to do with [his model’s] size, like amazing craters...sores and chafes made by weight and heat...It’s flesh without muscle and it has developed a different kind of texture through being such a weight-bearing thing” (as cited in Hoban, 2014, p. 126). Freud’s description suggests the abject body stretched, cratered and rubbed raw. Freud’s fat bodies are large and morbidly obese, but their enormity is not taken to a nearly unrecognizable extreme. These are fat women that look like women, whereas Saville’s women, as in *Fulcrum*, become monstrous through their fecundity.

Figure 64. Freud, *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995).
In fact, Freud’s *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* sold for $33 million at a Christie’s auction (Associated Press, 2008), proving that the work is quite desirable, at least to someone. Freud’s thick, paste-like paint application turns bodies into well-kneaded dough, their flesh pulled on heavily by gravity as it lists towards the ground. Even in works that depict thinner, more “ideal” bodies, like *Two Women* (1992) (Figure 65) or *Nude with Leg Up* (1992) (Figure 66), the depicted bodies act like mounds of flesh, and do not seem completely human.

![Figure 65. Freud, Two Women (1992).](image)

In *Nude with Leg Up*, the model’s soft penis lays flaccid against his propped-up leg as he reclines. In *Two Women*, one of the model’s thighs sags backwards, causing her buttocks to jut outwards, while the other model’s small yet fleshy breasts flatten indistinguishably against her chest. These bodies are not the blown glass vessels filled with the breath of God that were the ideal of 17th-century Europe (Mennighaus, 2003),
and on which our own ideal body image is still based, as discussed in the literature review. Rather, these bodies seem lumpy, filled with bones, organs and fat cells.

Figure 66. Freud, *Nude with Leg Up* (1992).

**4.03.05.04: thinness or anorexic abjection.** While fatness is an expression of excess, an overt lack of body weight can also demonstrate abjection. While Quinn’s figure of Lapper deals with excess through the monstrous maternal, as well as dearth through disability, Quinn’s piece (*Sphinx* Road to Enlightenment* (2007) (Figure 67) deals with another form of dearth, the dearth of the too-thin body. The sculpture depicts the skeletal figure of a woman seated in meditation like the Buddha, her ribs and bones jutting out painfully, her stomach so concave that it merges with her back. Warin (2010) and Battersby (1998) link anorexia to the abject through the obsession with managing the body’s borders by controlling what is consumed, and managing the space that the body
inhabits. Depictions of overly thin bodies is a visual form of lack that often evokes religious connotations, as with the reference to the Buddha’s six years of fasting and bodily austerity in Quinn’s sculpture, or the mysticism surrounding Fasting Women.

Figure 67. Quinn, (Sphinx) Road to Enlightenment (2007).

Images of the inordinately thin body, starved through control, still hold currency within contemporary beauty ideals, observable in the proliferation of “Thinspiration” internet memes. These memes juxtapose images of gaunt girls with messages like, “once you control your mind you control your body,” “sweat is just fat crying,” or “what you eat in private, you wear in public.” But when the thin body becomes the anorexic body,

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110 Fasting Women, like their male counterparts, freak show performers known as Hunger Artists or Living Skeletons, were individuals with incredibly low body weight who claimed to survive without eating. These women starved themselves for weeks, some reports say years, arguing that divine or miraculous intervention kept them alive. For more on this phenomenon and a Foucauldian analysis of these acts as extreme forms of self-discipline, see Gooldin’s 2003 article, “Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists: Spectacles of Body and Miracles at the Turn of a Century.”
its skeletal form becomes monstrous, as it reminds the viewer of sickness, death and the corpse. Whether it is in the form of excess or in the form of lack, when the norm is violated, we react in disgust. And when sheer rejection of an image is deflected by gilded surfaces, religious devotion, or discordant images of beauty, the image becomes abject.

**4.03.05.05: excess, dearth, and the animal inside.** Another manifestation of excess and dearth which holds particular significance to the abject is the bestial. The abject emerges in images of humanity sliding into savagery, displaying too much of our animal origins and too little civilization. The animal represents a negation of the human. Rather than seeing animals as our close biological kin, we construct ourselves and society to oppose animalistic behavior. Animals are carnal, illogical, driven by instinct, and lacking rationality. This lack of rationality is often represented as a significant distinction between humanity and beasts, as consciousness and rational actions define humanity. The cry of the Enlightenment was the Cartesian motto: *cogito ergo sum*, ”I think therefore I am.” As animals cannot think rationally in the same way as humans, they could not attain the same level of being. Previous to the Enlightenment, animals were rejected for their lack of a soul or for their dirtiness, which linked them to the earth and the devil through a fusion of physical and moral filth.

For Kristeva (1982), animals and animalism are linked to sex and murder, and explain some of the food prohibitions found in religion. Kristeva explains, citing Leviticus, that eating herbivores instead of carnivores steers man away from the irrationality of animals, because to eat carnivores would be to consume and possess their murderous instincts, thereby making one less human. While the logic of this particular prohibition is culturally specific, the cross-cultural phenomenon of food prohibitions,
often directed at meat, demonstrates our fractious relationship with animals. Kristeva states: “The abject confronts us… with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal” (p. 12).

The animal and the wild are categories that humanity has abjected in the move towards culture, stability and order. Another feature of animal behavior that triggers abject associations for humans is the animal’s diminished repugnance in regard to waste. That is to say, some animals do not jettison their wastes, but roll in feces, or even rotted corpses. We shudder at such scenes, and so animality must be continually denied. As May (2014) notes in his study on the abject nature of human-to-animal transitions in narrative and performance, “in the moments when we entertain the possibility of traversing the divide between humanity and animality we become acutely aware of the ontological distinction at issue” (p. 72).

Kristeva (1982) continues, “Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.” (pp. 12-13). The rejection of the animal and the animalistic are then part of the marking out of what is clean and proper, part of the divide between the sacred and profane. The wild woods beyond the borders of civilization are inhabited by animals; lurking close by and reminding us of our own evolutionary history as primitive creatures in those woods.

When animal and man are combined, the result is too little humanity and too much animality, too little logic and too much passion. Citing Kafka’s story *The Metamorphosis* (1915/2000), in which the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, turns into a giant insect, May comments: “My suggestion is that Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis is rather
like the change that one encounters in aging, disease and disability” (p. 75). May argues that animal transitions, like other abjections, are dehumanizing because of the rejection that the individual feels from society, as well as the fact that animality reminds us of “the disease of being finite” (p. 76), or of humanity’s corporeal and temporal end. Like death, our mammalian ancestry must be denied in order to enact a clean and proper society. The bestial, like the maternal, threatens society with a regression into an earlier state. Both for individuals and for the larger society, it conjures memories of the tiny little uncivilized animals that we are at birth. It provokes fears of sliding back into the mode of life of tribal cultures believed to be less civilized. Animalistic monstrosity is depicted through zoological monsters like werewolves, vampires, garuda, yehti, sirens, harpies and a whole host of other mythical beasts that occupy a space between human and animal.

Cohen explains in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) that cultures can be understood based on the monsters that they produce. In his seven theses on the role of monsters in society, Cohen explains that “the monster is a harbinger of category crisis” (p. 6), meaning that monsters cannot be contained in our classificatory regimes. Through this resistance to taxonomy, they disrupt the “natural” order of things. While Creed (1986; 1993) links the monstrous specifically to maternal abjection, Cohen describes how the monstrous is generally synonymous with the abject, as when the feral human refuses or is unable to participate in a bounded society. Monsters, Cohen says, “are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (p. 6). He expands on this, proposing that “because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes – as ‘that which questions binary thinking
and introduces a crisis” (p. 6). The beastly human occupies a place between rigid civilization and wild nature, a third space of liminal and ambiguous hybridity, the space of the abject. The blending, then, of the human with the inhuman, or the less-than-human, causes anxiety over boundaries, creating the sensation of the abject.

Art that depicts animal-human hybridity often veers into abjection. For instance, the mix of human and animal qualities in the Australian artist Patricia Piccinini’s parahuman sculptures often arouse an abject reaction. *Litter* (2010) (Figure 68 & Figure 69) apparently depicts three infants, huddled close together like a litter of kittens.

![Figure 68. Piccinini, Litter (2010).](image)

But upon closer inspection, these creatures actually display a combination of human and animal features. Piccinini’s sculptures are highly realistic, similar to the hyper-realistic works of Ron Mueck or Sam Jinks; her pieces could easily trigger a feeling of the uncanny, and result in a sense of confusion regarding what is real. The infants have
humanlike skin and the general phenotype of a (Caucasian) baby, features which draw the
viewer in with an impulse to coo over cute newborns. A closer examination reveals hair
where there should be none, culminating in a soft downy pelt on the little ones’ backs.
The babies have overly large, even slightly bat-like ears, opposable toes, and noses that
are a little too squished and a little too upturned to be strictly human.

Figure 69. Piccinini, Detail of *Litter* (2010).

These cute chimeras provoke an abject response because we are drawn biologically to
move towards them and care for them because of neoteny – the exaggerated features that
make them seem helpless and in need. We are also drawn to the sculpture because of its
hyperrealism; the infants seem so real in their form, color, and texture that their needs
feel almost palpable. The viewer wants to reach out and care for these creatures. Yet their
animal characteristics interrupt that response. The animalistic babies, while perhaps cute
in their own way, become frighteningly abnormal, a throwback to a repressed animal
past. Moreover, the hybridity of these creatures borders on mutation or malformation, stimulating new abject responses. The furry humanoids in Litter elicit an abject response because we both want and do not want to reach out to these newborns. Their hybridity becomes a potent symbol of ambiguity, the area of the abject.

Most of Piccinini’s other work similarly manifests the idea of the abject hybrid in the form of hyperrealistic sculptures. Another example is her piece Big Mother (2005) (Figure 70). This piece depicts a nude female figure who, with her heavy ape-like face and reddish baboon-like buttocks, appears to resemble “Lucy,” an early Australopithecine ancestor of Homo sapiens, often referred to as an evolutionary “missing link.” The figure is nursing a human baby while a designer diaper bag is sitting at her feet.
Figure 70. Piccinini, *Big Mother* (2005).

*Big Mother* disturbs the viewer, not only through the hybridity of the adult figure, but also through depicting the act of nursing a child of our species. The human baby consumes this monstrous figure’s essence, making the scene both a tender moment of maternal care and an instance of pollution.
Piccinini’s other works, like *Doubting Thomas* (2008) (Figure 71), are far less recognizable, but still occupy an abject liminal space between beast and human. In *Doubting Thomas*, the figure of a young human boy reaches his hand out to probe a monstrous creature, seemingly dog-like or porcine in shape, but with what appears to be human skin, replete with age spots and soft hairs. The creature has no discernible face, only a wrinkled, fleshy mouth, or vaginal opening, from which a wet head and clawed feet emerges. The work not only represents a hybrid monster, but a maternal beast birthing a slick, dangerous creature that seems to be threatening the human boy. The viewer is meant to empathize with the human boy, not the featureless gaping monster, and thus to experience a fear of pollution and physical malice on his behalf.

Piccinini’s work successfully engages in the abject through the depiction of bodily fluids, the monstrous maternal, and hybrid animality. However, she is not alone in this endeavor, as many artists’ works engage in the liminal space between human and animal, yielding abject results. For example, Kate Clark’s *Manimals* (Figure 72) are
taxidermied animals with sculpted human faces, while Jane Alexander’s work merges human bodies with animalistic heads, as in her piece *The Butcher Boys* (1986) (Figure 73), where she used abject hybridity to address politics in South Africa during apartheid (Mercer, 2011).

Figure 72. Clark, *Manimals: Sharp Tongue* (2008).

The blending of the inhuman with the human causes anxiety over boundaries, which in turn creates an abject object. The viewer, upon seeing these works, attempts to reject the imagery because of its surplus of animality. However, the viewer cannot completely reject the imagery, because the human figures included in relation to the monstrous animal hybrids, and the human qualities those hybrids exhibit, ensure that the viewer sees themself in the piece. While the combined intimacy and disgust these pieces evoke compels an abject response, that same attraction and repulsion reminds us of our primitive past.
4.04 Conclusions: The Problem of Categorizing the Uncategorizable

The abject is difficult to categorize, as it is ambiguous and deviant by definition. However, in her own methodology, Kristeva lays out a series of categories of abject manifestations: bodily fluids, gender, the maternal, excess and dearth, monstrosity and the bestial. There are other manifestations of abjection that Kristeva outlines, such as food (1982). There are types of bodies that the abject can attach to, beyond the queer body (Butler, 1993) or the disabled body (Betterton, 2006), like the poor body (Tyler, 2013) or the body of color (Scott, 2010). While these are valid observations that deserve further exploration, I find the categories of race and poverty to be less visibly constructed as abject within the art world.

I have in this chapter confined my comments to the categories addressed by visual artists, and some artworks that illustrate these categories, enacting an analysis enabled by an abject visual methodology. It becomes abundantly clear in the above analysis that the
abject straddles multiple categories, moving between and juxtaposing the monstrous and the maternal, animality and bodily fluids, excess and gender. Even when using the categories prescribed by Kristeva, definitions of the abject are still in flux. The abject, even when carefully articulated, seems to abject itself, haunting boundaries from multiple places of exclusion, making an intersectional approach necessary to understanding the ways in which different types of abjection interact.

The above work not only identifies the abject impulse in art, but also offers visual examples of its multiple categories, something that has not yet been done systematically. By expanding our understanding of abject art through an exploration and investigation of evocative objects, this taxonomy of abject art adds to the body of knowledge surrounding the abject. The abject is diffuse and difficult to understand, even when Kristeva uses literature to illustrate her concepts. More than text, imagery induces a visceral reaction in the viewer, making it a more direct means of experiencing the abject. Art is an ideal conduit for the abject, because it provides a space for the emotion of disgust to be partially deferred through aesthetic intervention, creating the fascinated victimhood of the abject, instead of the full rejection associated with disgust. The above analyses offer a way to understand our complex reactions to abject artwork, and through understanding our reactions, we can better understand the complex nature of abjection. In Chapter Five, I will explore further implications of this taxonomy of abject categories for art education in particular, and the humanities more generally. I will also offer some ideas about the future direction of this research.
5.0: Further Directions and Implications for An Abject Visual Methodology

5.01 The Road Ahead, or, Where I Plan to Take my Abject Visual Methodology

When one studies ambiguity, it’s a bit misguided to say that there is a definite conclusion to the study, since endings and beginnings in liminal spaces are rather subjective. Instead, I offer some directions in which I would like to take this work and some concluding thoughts on the implications of this study, knowing that this is the first step in a longer journey. The abject, though intimately connected with death, still resists a final limit; killing the abject only leads to being haunted by it.

5.01.01 more categories. The previous chapter laid out a topography of abject art and a way to critically approach these artworks. I have focused on a limited number of categories, indebted primarily to Kristeva (1982), as well as to Kolnai (2001) and Butler (1993). Considering the limited scope of a dissertation, I have tried to thoroughly explicate these particular categories. However, there are still other categories related to the visually abject that I have not explored in depth, such as food and religion (although I have touched on the former in relation to Paul McCarthy). As regards future exploration on the intersection of religion and the abject, I am interested in studying the contemporary work of sculptor Kiki Smith, who has grounded much of her work in the iconography of Christianity and other religious mythologies (Close, 1994; Munro, 2000). Additionally, works like the Issenheim Altarpiece, which features a rotting Christ figure, influence my appraisal of the abject in Medieval and Renaissance religious art (Santing, 2009; Hayum, 1989).

The next major iteration of my work will be a more in-depth look at the original categories of Kristeva’s notion of the abject, the later application of her ideas to social...
marginalization, and how this dialogue has been represented in art. The goal of my project has been to create a framework for an abject visual methodology, while laying out the groundwork for the next stage of my inquiry. The art I have chosen to discuss will reference categories discussed in earlier chapters. It is easy to see why some are disgusted or made uncomfortable by this art. However, other categories of the abject, such as marginalized populations, which I began to touch upon in regard to disability, are also areas that need to be explored through an abject visual methodology. This is because these complicated areas of abjection often result in slippages of meaning, leading to subjects being treated with generalized repugnance, and understood in a context of disgust.

However, categories such as marginalized groups of people are outside the purview of this study. This is because they often generate far more subtle instantiations of the abject that do not always engage a fully visceral reaction of outright disgust, but rather activate an aura of the uncanny, or a sense of disease. My work thus far has looked at how art depicts the marginalized body, as well as other less well-defined categories within the abject, such as ambiguous social borders and new visual discourses of childhood. But I am now interested in extending my political analysis through expanding my research on depictions of marginalized bodies. For example, I am interested in the relationship to ‘the animal’ in works such as Jane Alexander’s the Butcher Boys (1985), which examines and critiques the marginalization of black Africans in South Africa during apartheid through a conflation of animal monstrosity and social exclusion. I am also interested in the grotesque world that Kara Walker creates in her silhouetted vignettes, such as I’ll Be a Monkey’s Uncle (1996). These works haunt the viewer like a
two dimensional ghost from an antebellum past, based less on historical reality than on romanticized fictional accounts of slavery, such as those portrayed in Roots (1977) or Gone with the Wind (1939) (Vergne, Gilman, McEvilley, et al, 2007). The stories told by these silhouettes feature racist stereotypes and disgusting scenes of violence which would cause us to turn away, were it not for a visual appeal created through the use of icons from a dramatic and decadent historical period. A blend of rejection and attraction mark these works as abject.

5.01.02 more sites.

5.01.02.01 Pop Surrealism.

The categorical expansion I have suggested would go beyond established theoretical definitions of the abject. These categories have not been widely described in relation to visual art, and therefore are outside of the scope of this study. However, I would also like to take the approach I have already undertaken in analyzing imagery of gender, motherhood, and bodily substances, and apply this approach to other areas of art, such as the genre of Pop Surrealism (Figure 74) (Anderson, 2004; Jordan; 2005; Klein, Schaffner & Nahas, 1999), and to areas of popular visual culture outside of the fine art world, like designer vinyl toys (Vartanian, 2007; Budnitz, 2006).
I began this dissertation with a reflection on Garbage Pail Kids, a series of delightfully disgusting collectible cards from the 1980s. The resurgent popularity of these cards seems largely tied to the rising popularity of Pop Surrealism, a genre of art that combines dream-like explorations of desire and fear with a postmodern fine-art interest in popular visual culture. These works often feature absurd exaggerations of the body, fluids in abundance, and grotesque mutations, mitigated by the appeal of bright colors, commercial icons, and dexterous painting skills. Considering the complicated deployment of disgust and the abject in Pop Surrealist objects, an abject methodology is the best way to understand them.

**5.01.02 designer vinyl toys.** Many Pop Surrealist artists also participate in the subculture of designer vinyl toys (Figure 75), which are made in limited numbers and sold in specialty shops.

Figure 74. Schorr, *Five O’clock Shadows in Disney-Dali Land* (1996).
These toys are highly sought after and rather expensive, and they enjoy a robust aftermarket. There is even a convention devoted to these toys: Designer Con, boasting over 7,000 attendees in 2014 (Designer Con, 2014). These toys often represent zombies, hybrid creatures, and bodily fluids, making them prime objects for analysis through the lens of the abject.

Prices for these works vary radically based on size, rarity and artist, but a standard 3” or 4” blindboxed (unknown) figure is $10 to $15, while a rare toy of the same scale could easily sell for over $100 on eBay, as of April 2015. See Kidrobot or Rotofugi’s websites (http://www.kidrobot.com/ or http://www.rotofugi.com/home/).
5.01.02.03 children’s toys. Additionally, I would like to look at toys in general, not just designer vinyl toys, which are a niche market for specific collectors. Even in the broader world of toys, the abject makes a regular appearance, as demonstrated with Garbage Pail Kids cards, originally intended for children. Many toys from the 1980s featured what Cross (2004) has called a “cool” aesthetic, featuring acid colors, offensive characters, and an aggressive “street” style. However, this trend in abject toys continues today. I have already commented on toys that mix cute and disgusting elements, like Monster High dolls, which are basically discordant Barbies (Figure 76); while thin and beautiful, they also sport scars and fangs. Their equally abject tagline declares, “Be yourself. Be unique. Be a monster” (Mattel, 2014). Another example of disgusting toys are Skelanimals, which are skeletal stuffed animals, advertised with the slogan, “Dead animals need love too” (Skelanimals, 2014) (Figure 77). These toys’ aesthetics are mitigated by both the discourses of cuteness (Ngai, 2012) and the “ket aesthetic.” Thompson (2006) describes the latter as a style of junk culture that employs garish coloring and deliberately provocative names for candy brands such as Nerds or Sour Patch Kids. Nevertheless, these children’s toys are still disgusting (or at least disturbing), and call for an abject methodology in order to understand their seemingly dissonant visual deployments of sweetness, coolness and creepiness.
Figure 76. Mattel, *Monster High: Draculaura* doll (2010).
5.01.03 more theory.

5.01.03.01 border studies. I am also interested in exploring new directions in the theory of the abject. The abject deals with the transgression of bodily borders, and much work has already pointed to the correlation between bodily borders as metaphors for state borders (e.g., Casanova & Jafar, 2013). I believe that abject studies could benefit greatly
from an infusion of concepts discussed in border studies, particularly those found in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2007). Anzaldúa discusses borders as alien territories, where differences grate against each other to produce wounds. Building upon this metaphor, the abject could be applied to transnational politics and global movements, while also helping to interpret images that deal with borders and border crossings.

Many artists analyze and critique borders, which are both symbolic and geopolitical. Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a Chicano multimedia performance artist and a founder of the artist collective Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo. His work often deals with the U.S./Mexico border, and borderlands in general. He states in his book *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000), “I want to reveal what lies behind and beneath the making of performance art, particularly when crossing extremely volatile geographic and cultural borders” (p. 7). Alan Michelson, a Mohawk artist, also uses the idea of borders in his work. For example, his piece *Third Bank of the River* (2008) is a 6 x 40-foot image digitally sandblasted onto glass. The image is a composite of multiple photographs of the banks of the Saint Lawrence River, at the border between Canada and the United States. Michelson shot these images from a boat “in order to capture the river and its banks from many perspectives and to convey the complexity of the cultural and geographic landscape of the border zone” (Morris, 2011, p. 553). Michelson’s work hangs in the lobby of a U.S. border crossing station, and is intended to interrogate the fabricated nature of borders, particularly the U.S./Canadian border: a charged space for native peoples who historically occupied lands in both countries, but are now subject to the limits on movement imposed by immigration and citizenship.
While these images do not feature the literal bodily substances readily associated with the abject, they do deal with borders and ambiguity, both hallmarks of the abject. I believe that a consideration of the role of the abject through the lens of border studies could play an important role in understanding some dynamics of globalization.

**5.01.03.02 discourses of childhood.** Another area of the abject that I feel could be generatively elaborated upon is the intersection of the abject with the concept of childhood. While the abject is born during the formation of the ego during childhood, very little literature on the abject discusses the lived experience of childhood or how the changing discourses surrounding childhood might impact the notion of the abject. Childhood is a time full of disgusting explorations, the pleasures of transgression, and the shame that accompanies defilement. While ripe for exploration through an abject visual methodology, little research in the field of childhood studies has focused on disgusting images in relation to products of and for children. Nor have I read any literature on the abject that looks at children as a marginalized co-constitutive Other to adults.

I hypothesize that much of this silence stems from contemporary discourses on childhood that consider children to be either little angels or little devils, both of whom must be kept away from disgust and contamination, albeit for different reasons. I would like to use an abject visual methodology infused with the historical discourses of childhood to analyze the artwork of both Sally Mann and Jock Sturges, whose respective images have been alternately labeled as pornographic, or as moving portraits about the beauty of youth (Rubin, 2002; Kammen, 2007). An abject methodology could enlarge upon the dual interpretations of these works as both obscene yet beautiful, due to their
depiction of childhood, a vulnerable and terrifying time of life, both disgusting and filled with wonder.

The groundwork I have laid out in this dissertation could be built upon to pursue a variety of projects. The supplemental research I have proposed lies in a number of areas; some ideas point toward the expansion of theoretical ideas on the abject, while others focus on different sites for interpretation, but all fit within the purview of the abject. The abject occupies a contested but promising discursive space between nature and culture, biology and psychoanalysis. In the future, I look forward to expanding my preliminary interests and research in a multitude of new directions. I want to further pursue my primary research goal for this dissertation, which was to find out why things that disgust us also appeal to us, and how we culturally and symbolically interpret the physical paradox of rejection and enjoyment that we experience when confronted with the abject.

5.02 Implications in Art, Art Education and Social Justice

5.02.01 enacting revolt through abject art. This study has a number of implications for the creation and study of art, the field of art education, and can even be applied to social justice issues. In regard to art, this study offers a way to apprehend difficult or disgusting art. Foster (1999) has noted that contemporary art practice is obsessed with trauma and fascinated by abjection. He surmises that “a special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies,” and he goes on to note that the violated body is “often the evidentiary basis of important witnessings of truth, of necessary testimonials to power” (p. 254). Foster proposes a new or specific type of ‘the return of the real,’ the repetition of a traumatic experience outside of language.
Barrett (2011) explains that the abject, like the Lacanian Real, is unrepresentable and thus unknowable. She says,

As a symptom, abjection appears as affect--fear, loathing, and aggressivity directed towards an unnameable other. Artistic practice is able to harness and mediate these impulses by translating them into aesthetic form. (p. 106)

For Kristeva, whether in literature or other forms of expression, art is a catharsis, a release of repressed emotions. Barrett argues: “The structure of artwork… has the capacity to effect a transference of affect that underpins the renewing and cathartic impact of aesthetic experience” (p. 93). I agree with her claim that visual art, which provokes the emotion of disgust, offers an immediate experience of the abject. In my dissertation I have expanded on this premise by using the theory of mirror neurons (Jeffers, 2009; Rokonitz, 2008), to explain how viewers can vicariously experience actions depicted in an artwork. Because abject art instantly activates the body, abject art can often overwhelm our sense of logic, pushing us to obey our reflexive physical reactions. These reactions often prompt a ‘yuck’ response, causing the viewer to immediately flee the scene.

Feelings of catharsis and happiness usually come at the price of feelings of revulsion and discomfort. Kristeva (2001) reflects on this using her notion of the revolt. She observes,

(H)appiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle.
Furthermore, on the social level, the normalizing order is far from perfect and fails to support the excluded: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with regressive ideologies, with shows and entertainment that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become rioters. (p. 7)

What is revolting causes us to turn away in disgust. But “revolt” is the root of the words “revolting” and “revolution,” making Kristeva’s revolt about motion and action as much as aversion. This may be reminiscent of one’s reaction to something abject, which can be understood as a process or movement that “turns aside” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10), “turns me away” (p. 11), and “turns me inside out” (p. 12).

Oliver (2004) explains the nature of revolt:

Kristeva’s prescription for depression and melancholy is what she calls intimate, or psychic, revolt. Intimate revolt is a challenge to authority and tradition analogous to political revolt that takes place within an individual and is essential to psychic development. It is a revolt in the psyche that enables us to live as individuals connected to others. (p. 143)

Revolt is vital and necessary; it keeps an individual and a society from stagnating. Many of the great moments of culture and art from the 20th century can be described as acts of revolt, predicated on criticism that opposes unfounded emotional affect (Kristeva, 2001). Kristeva (2001) expounds:

The European tradition, where this phenomenon is most manifest, has an experience of culture that is at once inherent in the social fact and active as
its critical conscience. Europeans are cultured in the sense that culture is their critical conscience; it suffices to think of Cartesian doubt, the freethinking of the Enlightenment, Hegelian negativity, Marx’s thought, Freud’s unconscious, not to mention Zola’s *J’accuse* and formal revolts such as Bauhaus and surrealism, Artaud and Stockhausen, Picasso, Pollock, and Francis Bacon. (p. 6)

Abject art links many of these cultural figures, all of whom have caused revolt by stoking a feeling of abjection in the viewer. This happens primarily when disgust is mitigated by skill or aesthetic appeal, and thereby the initial drive to flee is deferred long enough for the viewer to confront the work, and thus experience a profound feeling of abhorrence.

Oliver explains that in regard to psychic development, a child becomes an individual through questioning, making this act one of the initial forms of revolt. Questions are a form of revolt insofar as they challenge social codes and meanings, placing the ability to create signification in the hands of the individual. Oliver elaborates:

Questioning reopens the realm of words or signification through a challenge to signification itself that operates as an invitation to the depressive to refind lost bodies within words. Through the question, signification turns back on itself in the movement of a double negation that negates representations’ negation of things. (p. 145)

Like the abject, revolt challenges authority and the symbolic and deals with borders. Oliver claims:

Without psychic revolt, which enables and authorizes sublimation and creativity, individuals suffer from various forms of borderline states in which negotiating the frontiers of relationships to self and others is precisely what
is at stake. Intimate revolt is an ongoing process through which the borders of self and others are constantly renegotiated. (p. 143)

The dejected subject is similarly obsessed with borders, constantly renegotiating frontiers, devising territories, and “demarcating his universe” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8).

My abject visual methodology offers a questioning strategy, a way to engage with works of art that enact their own type of revolt. A strategy of revolt for dealing with abject images that encourage revolt is not only desirable in the world of art criticism and art history, but very important to the field of art education as well. Art educators are not preparing students to be artists, as, statistically speaking, few students will become professional artists. However, art educators can still demonstrate the value of art and visual literacy. The benefits of art include the ability to feel catharsis, emotional development through making and viewing art, and an understanding of the political power of images. Art education must expand, to look not only at images that appeal to their audiences through beauty alone, but also images that seduce and instruct through disgust.

5.02.02 revolting classrooms. The institutional art world has embraced the abject with the valorization of shows like Sensation and artists like Damien Hirst and Chris Ofili. However, the field of art education often avoids “difficult” art, usually meaning contemporary art. This is in large part because firstly, the target audience for art educators is children, and secondly, the modernist tradition of art education shuns contemporary artistic styles and conceptual practices because of their conceptual complexity. Burgess (2003) explains this reticence towards contemporary practices:
In secondary education teachers often shy away from most contemporary art because they consider it too difficult, an art ‘full of monsters, replete with vulgarity and coarseness…[monsters] formed in relation to the inability of knowledgeable, patient and contemplative practice to express the experiences of the actual existing subjectivities of young artists.’ (p. 108)

This shying away is not only seen in education, but also within the sensibilities of the public at large. While the institutional art world may have embraced many abject artists, as well as conceptual artists, performance artists, and other types of contemporary practitioners, many laypeople have been excluded from engaging with these artworks because they have not been given the tools to understand them.

Burgess cites Becker, who “claims that art that appears complex, which deals with subjective or psychological concerns, is often considered obscure and inaccessible to those outside the art world” (pp. 113-114). And without a guide it is easy to see why obscure and psychologically demanding works can seem daunting, as they are predicated on revealing the problems of the dominant culture. Instruction in how to approach difficult images should begin in the K-12 art room, and thus so should the discussion of the potential value of wrestling with these images. But in this context, attractive finished products and artists who have been thoroughly enshrined in the art historical canon are widely preferred.

Rose and Kincheloe (2003) contend, “Controversial or sensational art has traditionally been grounded on an artist’s perception of what he or she sees as the pathology of the status quo or the insanity of the dominant culture” (p. 14). Acknowledging the flaws and inequality of the hegemonic order, through which schools
operate as institutional apparatuses, and critically discussing and attempting to change unjust norms, are pedagogical tasks well beyond the agenda of most schoolteachers. But apprehending the disordered nature of the dominant regime can be a revelation similar to “a special truth [that] seems to reside in traumatic states” (Foster, 1999, p. 254). Such a revelation constitutes a revolt, the abject being a revolt that reveals the most hidden and pertinent concepts about ourselves and our relationships to death and difference.

However, there are more practical and immediate reasons to bring the abject into the classroom. The association of the abject with marginalized subject positions reflects the firsthand experiences of many students. Contemporary classrooms are diverse spaces that include immigrants and refugees, racial minorities, and varied gender performances and sexual identities, all subject positions from which the abject nature of experiences of marginalization can be appreciated.

5.02.03 abject students and a need for revolt. Oliver (2004) addresses marginalized positions through her development of a social theory directed towards using psychoanalysis as a way to diagnose and potentially treat the ills of society. Oliver posits her theory as revolutionary, although Kristeva (1982; 2001) and other psychoanalysts (e.g. Freud, 1916) have long placed the use of psychoanalysis in a broader cultural context. Nevertheless, Oliver’s work has much to offer in terms of applying psychoanalytic ideas on a large scale, weaving her formulations together with the ideas of Fanon, Butler, and other theorists of marginalization. Oliver’s interest in the social application of psychoanalysis to diagnose and analyze society appeals to me because of its broad applications to the study of culture and social justice.

Oliver declares that,
to explain the effects of oppression on the psyche - why so many people suffer at the core of their subjectivity and its concomitant sense of agency when they are abjected, excluded, or oppressed - we need a psychoanalytic social theory that reformulates psychoanalytic concepts as social and considers how subjectivity is formed and deformed within particular types of social contexts. (p. xvi)

All students in elementary and secondary art classes belong to one or more abjected categories, if for no other reason than that they are young. Moreover, we tend to treat children as non-knowing and asexual beings (Burgess, 2003), while we simultaneously try to shield them from anything that we fear might make them “grow up too quickly,” like sexual or violent content. However, as Duncum (2000) states, “Aestheticizing childhood creates fantasies of children that have little to do with actual children…To aestheticize children is to offer a Peter Pan world where children never grow up” (p. 31). This is a fantasy of the highest order, since childhood is anything but excluded from the forms of social oppression affecting adults. Children too experience racism, homophobia, and misogyny, often in brutally abusive ways.

Clark (1988) famously demonstrated this in the 1940s with his “doll test,” a psychological experiment that asked children several questions in relation to two dolls, one white and one black. He asked them which doll was better, which one they preferred to play with, and which one looked most like them. African-American children overwhelmingly said that the white doll was the better and the more desirable doll, illustrating children’s early and deep indoctrination into racist hierarchies. This test was used as evidence in the Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, in which the majority decision argued against the legal doctrine of “separate but equal” established in
Plessy v. Ferguson (Clark, 1988). The “doll test” has since been re-administered, and it still shows a marked preference towards white or light skin among even very young children (Davis, 2005; Berry & Duke, 2011). Age acts as an additional oppressive limitation on the agency of children, who comprise a marginalized group. Due to the fact that many students belong to other socially marginalized groups because of their race, gender, and early demonstrations of sexual and gender identity, there needs to be a way for them to critically assess their lived experiences of alienation and minority status.

Oliver proposes that the recent rise in depression and an overall cultural fixation on melancholia and violence, are causally related to forms of alienation produced through hierarchical systems of value where some bodies, particularly female bodies and bodies of color, are abjected, jettisoned, and devalued. In a racist, imperialist, misogynist, homophobic culture, there is no way for the abjected to find value in themselves, as they are denied access to positive images and models of the self because of who and what they are. Oliver argues:

Those excluded or abjected by dominant values are made to feel ashamed not about something that they have done but about who they are. Shame is directed at the very being of the marginalized subject. Several psychologists postulate that shame is a “keystone affect” in identity formation insofar as it appears very early in infancy before any notion of prohibition. (p. 114)

With this in mind, the very identity of the abject subject is predicated on and structured by shame. Oliver continues:

Social melancholy is the result of losing a lovable self. While classical melancholy is the result of losing a loved other that produces feelings of guilt
in the self for aggressive or hostile thoughts toward that other, social melancholy is the result of losing a lovable self that produces feelings of shame in the face of aggressive or hostile thoughts from others. Shame affects one’s sense of self-identity as lovable. (p.115)

Without positive images of themselves in the world, abject subjects have no positive core sense of self. Rather than feeling guilty about their actions, they feel shame that, unlike guilt, cannot be alleviated.

Discussing the ramifications of this social abjection, Foster (1999) maintains: “This is a politics of difference pushed beyond indifference, a politics of alterity pushed to nihilility” (p. 254). Society offers only nihilism to those who are truly othered and different. Oliver argues that when people are denied lovable images of themselves through constant denigration and abjection, they experience a lack of core self worth. Oliver suggests that the answer to this denigration, to the abject subject’s loss of a lovable self, and consequently of their agency or their ability to act in the world, is a space to mourn the loss of loved others and to mourn the lack of loveable images of the self. She elaborates,

The lack of social support for the negative affects of oppression, the silencing of those affects within mainstream culture, creates a type of double, or even triple, bind for those othered by that culture. On the one hand, dominant values within mainstream culture do not provide positive self-images for those othered and excluded, oppressed or repressed, which leads to the colonization of psychic space by abject self images. This abjection is compounded by the lack of social space, or even social taboos, for talking about the truly painful affects and shame
caused by racism, sexism, and homophobia. The result is that those othered are shamed and forced to carry the burden of shame for privileged subjects, who project their own shame for benefiting from the oppression of others onto those very others. The privilege of those empowered within mainstream culture is maintained through a taboo on speaking of the negative affects of oppression.

(p. 129)

Oliver highlights the need for positive alternative images from society, which provide what she calls “social support” (p. 129). When one’s psychic space has been colonized by the hegemonic discourse, a decolonizing process must occur. This process includes mourning for what is absent, but also the reconstruction of something positive.

5.02.04 abject and revolt in art education. I noted at the very beginning of this dissertation that my interest in disgust and the abject marked me as an outlier, particularly in my home discipline of art education. However, this does not mean that no one else has discussed abject art, how to incorporate it into curricula, and the potentials it offers to art education. Many facets of an abject visual methodology have applications within education. An understanding of the abject offers a way to empower the marginalized, who constitute the majority population of many schools—of all schools, if we consider childhood itself to be a marginalized status. If using an abject visual methodology can decolonize psychic space, opening up a place early on for children to understand difficult images and discuss a lack of their own images in the mainstream, then perhaps some of the suffering Oliver discusses can be avoided.

Moreover, while the emotion of disgust is something that, some say, children do not experience (Miller, 1997), it nevertheless seems to me that children are indeed
involved in and negotiate disgust on a regular basis. Children are engaged in ego formation as they attempt to differentiate themselves from their parents, in order to create an autonomous self. This is often accomplished through disgusting acts. Think of the child who wipes their runny nose on their sleeve, or uses their straw to froth their milk into bubbles that run over the sides of the glass. These are disgusting acts, and they are also acts of rebellion. The child abjects themself, analogizing the frothing milk to the act of vomiting, or through a wiped nose that pollutes the fabric of a sleeve with interior moisture. Children are dealing with bodies that are perpetually erupting and changing.

Moreover, children have yet to be fully indoctrinated into the Lacanian Symbolic order, the register of laws which act as a protective barrier to seal off disgusting things. Their incomplete adoption of these prohibitions and protections makes children closer to the abject.

The rise of visual culture art education as a pedagogical movement also creates space for an abject visual methodology. The practice of visual culture art education encourages the use of popular culture images in the classroom for a number of reasons; adherents advocate a student-centered approach that validates the student’s own interests and culture (Keifer-Boyd, 2010; Duncum, 2010, 2006, 2001; Freedman, 2003), a need for media literacy in a highly visual and screen-based world (Mirzoeff, 2009, 2012; Taylor & Carpenter, 2011), and an analytic that demonstrates the intersections of power, ideology,

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112 In my personal experience, a teacher only needs to work with children and clay to see that kids, from kindergarteners all the way through high school, have strong disgust responses. While working at a local elementary school as a visiting ceramics artist, there was not a day that went by where the children didn’t squeal, whine, giggle transgressively, or shout “ew” in disgust at the wetness, coldness, sliminess, smell, color and shape of wet brown terracotta clay.
and representation (Duncum, 2008). Many popular culture sites (images, movies, television, video games, etc.) are disgusting, from computer generated effects that follow bullets through bodies in the crime drama *C.S.I. (2010)*, to buckets of corn syrup-based blood in horror films, to images of genocide on the news.

There must be a way to discuss these images and not simply reject them, particularly since they are part of the lived experience of children, who are not the innocent angels portrayed in popular discourses of childhood (Ritter, 2001). Nor are children the asexual, naïve beings represented in dominant mass culture. Burgess (2003) observes that “‘monsters,’ although forbidden entry to the classroom, roam freely in the playgrounds, where students confront ‘real’ life experiences” (p. 108). Burgess uses the term “monsters” loosely, meaning anything that is uncomfortable, disgusting, or dangerous; such entities are familiar to viewers of contemporary abject art.

When teaching controversial subjects, teachers often underestimate their students’ ability to understand these topics. Rose and Kincheloe (2003) argue for the benefits of teaching with and through controversial images, asserting:

> In an era of rationalistic curriculum development, top-down standards, edicts against controversial issues and the deskilling of teachers at all levels of education, teachers need to think carefully about interpretive schemata and offending images” (p. 14).

Burgess notes that when difficult subject matter is incorporated into the classroom, it is often done with an emphasis on prohibition and the status quo. For example, when sex education is provided, it is offered with prevention in mind, instead of curiosity, pleasure and diversity. Such prudishness is often mimicked in art. As Burgess argues,
Art educators do young people a disservice if they confine contemporary art’s ‘monsters’ to the playground. Rather they should coax them into the classroom, where young people can confront them and allow them to enrich their developing subjectivities and inform their art production. (p. 120)

Burgess’s argument is further supported by Barrett’s work (2000) observing students’ reactions to the controversial photographer Sally Mann. While some of the public has called Mann’s work child pornography (Kammen, 2007), responses cited by Barrett show that students see Mann’s photos as documents of children’s and adolescents’ lived experiences. This demonstrates young students’ abilities to both look at and understand complex and “dangerous” images. Comparing student understandings of popular visual culture to viewing strategies advocated by formal art education, Burgess claims that “research also identifies that when encouraged to make ‘intergraphical’ links between different forms of visual imagery (fine art and popular culture), students reveal a… sophisticated understanding of images and their power to influence” (p. 113). To view children as naïve, perpetually innocent, and incapable not only does them a disservice, but limits their agency as individuals and art makers.

Rose and Kincheloe (2003) argue for the necessity of confronting abject images, as well as interrogating society’s project of sweeping the abject under the rug. They base their argument on their own experiences of teaching about the 1997 show Sensation during its run at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, continuing on through the subsequent backlash against the show, the museum, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Reflecting on these experiences, they opine as follows.
In all [the show’s] pieces “protective” taboos are broken in a way that forces the viewer to deal with the abject. Only when individuals engage with that which repulses them, Kristeva and the “Sensation” artists maintain, can they begin the process of self-understanding. Thus, in this context, “Sensation” promotes an aesthetic of “exposure therapy” where viewers encounter that which frightens them the most in order to overcome the phobia. Kristeva argues that avant-garde art burns the veil that hides the abject, thus rupturing the power of religious, moral and rationalistic domination. In this interpretive schema, critics such as Mayor Giuliani do not grasp the confrontation with abjection playing out in the exhibition of such work. Their anger is not an unpredictable reaction to a portrayal of realms of human existence that they strive to deny. They object to the abject. (pp. 13-14)

The idea of exposure therapy is to create catharsis, to release the repressed and pent-up fears and anxieties that plague us. However, catharsis can only come through the expulsion of surplus affect, often enacted through the creative process. Similarly, in viewing objects created from and through catharsis, including art objects, the viewer is presented with evidence of difficult and abject experiences that can support growth. In considering the effects of revolt, Kristeva (2001) notes that happiness, and arguably wholeness, are only found through confrontation with authority, a taboo, or an obstacle. Abject art can cause both revolt and catharsis; however, there needs to be a structure for teaching and learning about these difficult images and for guiding emotional responses to abject art. Thus I identify a need for an abject visual methodology.
Art educators should reconsider the purpose of art, and go beyond considering the work of art to be simply a pleasing object that matches one’s couch, in order to move toward recognizing true art as political, thought-provoking, gut-wrenching, and ultimately transformative. While more robust notions of art are normal in the art world, this view of art has yet to filter out to the general public, in large part due to the reliance of art educators who teach in K-12 settings on traditional art and art education strategies. Burgess (2003) quotes Becker, who claims: “Art is a location – a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced.” He goes on to declare that, 

art must dislocate the viewer by its refusal and inability to become part of the reality principle, in other words it is not the function of art to enable viewers to become assimilated in society; art should challenge its assumptions through ‘the demands of intellectual and visual rigor and the heightened recognition of pain and pleasure.’ (p. 114)

Art teachers, she contends, are “notorious for being atheoretical” (p. 115), but nonetheless, “(a)rt is unavoidably political and it is without doubt one of the roles of artists today to highlight social, cultural and political issues and concerns” (p. 120). If art is unavoidably political, a sentiment that I agree with wholeheartedly, we need to equip students with tools to understand the conceptual and political aspects of these artworks. Not only do we need to include difficult and controversial artworks in the classroom, and to model ways to approach these artworks, but also, if we believe that we are training young artists, we must prepare them for an art world that is engaged with these types of images.
“Something’s stirring in the unkempt undergrowth of art,” Hutchinson (as cited in Burgess, p. 108) portends, “(y)oung artists seem to be abandoning the manicured lawns and bridleways, and diving into the bushes to partake of dark and lurid activities.” This stirring is what Foster (1999) has called the art world’s “fascination with trauma, [and] envy of abjection” (p. 166). In teaching young artists, we must teach them how contemporary artists make art, or we deprive them by not preparing them to appreciate contemporary art. Burgess notes: “These issues are as relevant to the developing subjectivities of students as they are to the ‘actual, existing subjectivities’ of artists” (p. 108). In teaching art, we are teaching students not only to make, but to think like artists who are engaged in creating difficult images and embodying devalued and abjected subjectivities.

5.02.05 implications for social justice. The implications of an abject visual methodology for art and art education have been discussed, but I believe that a focus on what disgusts, how it disgusts, and the slippage between physical and social abjection is important in a broader social context. While the emphasis of this study has been on the application of an abject visual methodology, the work that I have done in explicating current uses of the abject, as well as in emphasizing potential connections to social justice, has implications beyond art.

5.02.05.01 revolting remedies: social support, or an embrace of abject solidarity? To feel disgusted and abjected by viewing abject art may be the closest many people will ever come to the experience of being socially abjected through objectification and marginalization. This becomes a powerful site for empathetic connections--not through a shared humanness, but in fact through a shared monstrousness. In Pedagogy of
the Oppressed (1970/2005), one of the primary texts that influenced both Sandoval’s writing (2000) and my own project, Freire explains that we live in a time when concerns about humanization must be paramount. In discussing humanization, we must acknowledge the extent to which dehumanization runs rampant, and structures ideas of humanization. Dehumanization of both the oppressed and the oppressor is in fact so expansive that humanization may not seem like a viable possibility. However, dehumanization, “although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny” (Freire, p. 44). It is the task of the oppressed, Freire argues, to free both themselves and their oppressors: not by a simple reversal of power arrangements, but through a struggle toward self-determination and freedom. Freire proclaims: “Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 44).

Oliver (2004) argues that there is a need for positive media images of those who are marginalized, as a current lack of these images contributes to their continued abjection and disempowerment. There is evidence that positive images of those once completely jettisoned by society are increasingly prevalent. Take, for instance, the proliferation of racially diverse figures in the media (Luther, Lepre, & Clark, 2011), or most recently, the inclusion of the first runway model with Down Syndrome, Jamie Brewer, at New York’s Fashion Week in 2015 (Stampler, 2015).

Nonetheless, I must admit that I am dubious about society’s ability to create positive images of everyone. As McRuer (2006a; 2006b) points out in regard to “compulsory able-bodiedness,” each time a marginal group is brought into the dominant discourse, another group is further disenfranchised. He explains that, while many people with disabilities have entered into the media and popular culture, appearing to advance
the goals of inclusivity, this inclusion is concurrent with a further subjugation of those who are profoundly mentally and physically disabled. Freire (1970/2005) echoes these concerns, explaining that the first step that most take in liberation is to adopt the role of their oppressors, becoming “sub-oppressors” (p. 45). Freire expands upon this idea, stating:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibly. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea, which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (p. 47)

In their first step towards liberation, the oppressed are still bound up in the system of oppression, which has not been changed simply through expanded inclusion. The revolution cannot be private or singular, but must be broad, addressing systems of oppression and not just existing for those served by those systems.

Freedom, like revolt, is the movement towards completion, not the completion itself. It is liminal and transient; it is a constant pursuit, not a stagnant condition. Like the abject, freedom requires “ejection,” or the radical exclusion of the oppressor who maintains the hegemonic norm that the oppressed have internalized as an image of freedom. In fact, the oppressor is not free either, but trapped within the same system of dehumanization. Thus, a positive image would have to be a continually evolving image that was generated by the oppressed, and not just a reversal of power dynamics that placed the oppressed in the same position as their former oppressors. For example, the
Vanity Fair cover story on Caitlyn Jenner in June 2015, in which a mainstream magazine referenced the misogynistic tradition of pinup models in presenting the image of a transgender woman, is not an illustration of authentic freedom as it continues to perpetuate sexism. Rather, this cover offers “the security of conformity” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 48) that protects the system of oppression.

Kristeva (1991) offers an alternative to Oliver’s perhaps rather naïve suggestion that marginalization can be fixed through positive images of self. Kristeva proposes:

To discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that "demon," that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid, "us." By recognizing our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside.... The ethics of psychoanalysis implies a politics: it would involve a cosmopolitanism of a new sort that ... might work for a mankind whose solidarity is founded on the consciousness of its unconscious--desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible. (p. 192)

This is to say that the strangeness of the Other is a powerful currency that belongs to the oppressed, a currency that offers a mode of solidarity based in alterity and a conscious understanding of the abject unconscious. Edmunds (2009) argues that solidarity through alterity is a kind of political consensus that would involve a “constant analysis of the forms of rejection that must take place for the ‘us’ to be formed” (p. 217). This solidarity and its accompanying analysis have much to offer, he insists, as it calls, for a curiosity toward what had been rejected, destructive in that it could not possibly fully articulate the loss of those rejected, fearful in that it would have to
confront the reasons why it had rejected the others, empty in that it would be a mere sublimation or representation of the loss, and impossible in that for all of the above reasons, the lost or repressed other would surely return. (p. 218)

While this may appear to be a strange form of political solidarity, it does offer common ground for communion and support. This political solidarity carries with it an "ethics of analysis." Founded "on a working out or working through of forms of social unity and exclusion, the unity [this political solidarity] provides is not theoretical, but one of practice" (Edmunds, 2009, p. 218). Furthermore, *apropos* of Freire, it is grounded in the experiences of the oppressed, a necessity for the movement towards freedom.

Kristeva's argument, explicated by Edmunds, is, in short, that through an analysis and interrogation of difference we can build solidarity and communion, regardless of anyone’s status as abjected or other. I would take this a step further and say that it is because of the stigmas of monstrosity and abjection attached to the oppressed, as well as to those who through their solidarity with the oppressed have become similarly "contaminated," that radical political change can be created. The abject is strong enough to impact both the oppressed and the oppressor. No one can escape the othering power of the abject through association, nor the ability of a politics of psychoanalysis to reveal the other in us all.

5.02.05.02 we’re all monsters here: decentering and difference. With an “ethics of analysis” in mind (Edmunds, 2009, p. 218), in relation to the abject, I would suggest a strategy other than simply expanding the parameters of inclusion. In contrast with Oliver, I propose instead to affirm the monstrous through analysis, rather than just denying the monster in favor of positive images. Freire (1970/2005) writes, “Liberation is thus a
childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerged is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people” (p. 49). Outside of the obvious connections between the abject-mother and Freire’s childbirth metaphor, what I draw from this is a need to move beyond the binaries that Oliver continues to uphold, favoring instead a different, more inclusive, possibility.

The monstrous and the abject are taboo subjects, and often they cannot be discussed or represented without an overwhelming sense of disgust. Taboo involves the avoidance of things that are too dangerous, too abhorrent, too powerful. When Oliver (2004) argues that there needs to be a space to mourn, she means that there must be a space for the discussion of taboo subjects, such as the abject. Whereas for Oliver the space for conversation is one of mourning, I posit instead that this space should be used for a dialogue about the generative power of the oppressed, and the non-traditional agency that abject bodies and subjects possess, rather than as a space for melancholic brooding. Much of the conversation surrounding the abject seems to end in a reification of binaries, although that is not the intent expressed by Kristeva (1982), who repeatedly insists that the abject is ambiguous and not a clear opposition of sides. The opposite of disempowerment is the empowerment that Oliver (2004) seeks for the disenfranchised in her social theory of psychoanalysis. However, empowerment is not the goal of the abject. The abject is a sideways step that offers a different vision of what power can look like, through forms that unleash the power of horror.

On a similar note, Oliver (2004) argues that the current obsession with self-validation and ego fortification issues from mainstream culture, which does not offer affirming visual reflections to most members of society. Most of us are abjected to some
degree and suffer from that rejection. All humans exist on the peripheries of the normative in some way, because the normative is an ideal, an ideal whose closed and static edges are challenged by the abject on a multitude of fronts. While Oliver does not say this explicitly, it seems that her answer would be to expand the center, thus allowing a more diversity-conscious hegemony to emerge. However, if we rely instead on the ideas of Narayan and Harding (2000), who take for granted the proposition that the majority of people already exist on the margins and outside the mainstream, then why not decenter the normative instead of expanding the center? Since the monstrous is always on the border, it makes sense that the abjected are border crossers, opening paths for us so that we may move away from the restrictive center and towards images of ourselves on the periphery.

Some have argued (Foster, Buchloch, Krauss, Bois, Hollier, & Molesworth, 1994; Bois & Krauss, 1997) that the abject simply reifies whatever is regarded as low. My intentions with respect to the abject and abject art are not to uphold the abject in the traditional sense, or to somehow turn disgust into sweetness; rather, I would value the latent potential power in the monstrous other, power that we are all connected to in varying degrees at different points in our lives. I do not simply advocate putting a monster on a pedestal, but would emphasize the monster’s ability to overturn pedestals. Audre Lorde announces: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences” (as cited in Samuels, 2014, p. 8). An abject visual methodology is a way to approach difference that can be disturbing and difficult, but crucial both for society and for the field of education.
Reappropriating the power of abjection. The strategy of reappropriating and reclaiming the abjected and monstrous can be seen very clearly in the work of many feminist artists. Meskimmon suggests that “the monster becomes an empowering trope for women artists precisely because it cannot be fixed: it is always ‘becoming,’ poised on the borders….They exist in a state of becoming rather than a false marker of fixity” (as cited in Burgess, 2003, p.118). This outlook can be seen in the work of artists like Jenny Saville and Patricia Piccinini, but also in many other forms of popular culture. According to Warner,

Former misogynist commonplaces are now being seized by women; in rock music, in films, in fiction, even in pornography, women are grappling the she-beast of demonology for themselves. The girl is the heroine of our times, and transgression a staple entertainment. (as cited in Burgess, 2003)

From the Riot Grrl scene\footnote{Riot Grrls are followers of an underground feminist hardcore punk movement started in the early 1990s. See Marcus, S. (2010). \textit{Girls to the front: The true story of the Riot Grrl revolution}. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.} to the “final girl” phenomenon\footnote{“Final girl” refers to the horror movie phenomenon where the final survivor, who kills the monster and arguably saves the day, is most often a woman. See Clover, C. (1993). \textit{Men, women and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film}. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.}, women have reclaimed a space for themselves in popular culture through refusing normative demands, focusing instead on reappropriating slurs and obscenities.

Reappropriation is the cultural process by which a group reclaims terms or artifacts that were previously used to disparage that group. This is most obviously seen in the reappropriation of derogatory language. Galinsky et al. (2013) explain: “Derogatory labels express contempt and derision and, as carriers of stigma, they represent
mechanisms of social control that reinforce a group’s disempowered state” (p. 2020).
However, the authors go on to counter that “self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label may facilitate reappropriation, the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group’s lesser status” (p. 2020). Reappropriation is a form of reclamation, as laid out by Godrej (2011):

To reclaim literally means to make one’s own, to regain, retrieve, recover, repossess, salvage, or rescue. We reclaim terms, words, specific phrases, so that we refashion their meanings to correspond to our particular goals, we rescue or salvage them from their earlier, often derogatory, meanings we repossess them so that we make the our own, so that their meanings have the authority of our ownership behind them. (p. 1)

Godrej goes on to say that “reclamation is usually a tool for disarming the power of a dominant group to control one’s own and others’ views of oneself. The point… is to reshape the social landscape” (p. 1).

Critical to reappropriation is a shift in power and agency. This is particularly important in conversations surrounding the abject because of the tendency to reduce it to binary oppositions. Foster (1999) raises a concern that the politically abject may end up being oversimplified into the categories of the abjected and the abjector, the victim and the aggressor, the dominant and the marginal. This is a dualistic description of power that has been put into question in many fields, particularly in post-colonialism studies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013). Moreover, this binary and hierarchical understanding of power is antithetical to the ambiguity and fluidity of the abject, which acknowledges binary poles, but operates in the in-between spaces.
Returning to the importance of the abject in the classroom, the aforementioned reappropriation strategies of female artists who have embraced social abjection by using monstrous representations of themselves, both in the fine art world and in popular culture, offer us a guide to the usefulness of the abject. Rose and Kincheloe (2003) describe this strategy:

That which the dominant culture deems offensive often opens a window to cognitive development, to new levels of insight that produce new modes of consciousness of the way the world operates, the way identity is produced. In this context aesthetic experience can lead to a new level of insight not only about art but about the world at large and ourselves in relation to it. Such an enhanced awareness and the empowerment that can be drawn from it cannot be omitted from a commentary on educational purpose. (p. 14)

These windows to cognitive development are exactly what we, as teachers, want for our students, as these windows provide opportunities for personal growth, empathetic development, and learning. The role of the arts in education continues to be questioned because of shifts in education towards quantitative results, the promotion of STEM fields, and a general trend toward teaching for testable outcomes. It falls on the arts not only to teach discrete disciplinary lessons, but also to broaden the scope of lessons to include building empathy and other social and emotional skills. In the past, art pedagogy has focused on personal expression, as promoted in the work of Cizek (Day & Hurwitz, 2011) or on discipline-based arts education, which emphasizes art history, aesthetics, critique, and the process of making art (Greer, 1984). However, as other educational disciplines have shifted towards curricula that makes assessing students’ understanding
and progress easier and more quantifiable, the arts have become one of the last fields to encourage difficult classroom conversations that can lead to personal development, student agency, and in the end, the type of happiness that is found in revolt.

While such dialogue may seem incongruous with art education, because of the discourses of innocence and vigilance that surround children, the abject is in fact a vital component to visual culture, and can be crucial to a postmodern and student-centered art education. This is even more evident when one embraces art education as a field whose overall goal or project is one of social justice. The authors of *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons* (2011) all argue in one way or another for a deep connection between art education and social justice. This is not an isolated trend; indeed, many have considered the relationship between art, social justice, and education. Sánchez, a Los-Angeles-based artist and art educator, argued in a 2014 *HuffPost* article: “(A)s an arts educator, I have a role and responsibility to engage students and their community through the arts” (para. 3). A culturally relevant and community-based art education program that is steeped in anti-racism and gender equality is a first step towards a model of art education committed to social justice.

Inspired by Freire, Hanley (2013) stresses the need for collective engagement and the pursuit of humanness through a social justice-focused art education practice, saying:

To get to this place of our fullest humanity, consciously and unconsciously, we all engage in a never-ending push-me-pull-you dance along the continuum of social justice, looking for ways to assert our individual and collective desires and needs. (p. 2)
While also discussing the role of social justice in art education, Quinn, Ploof, and Hochtritt (2011) cite the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who muses, “Art hurts. Art urges voyages - and it is easier to stay at home” (p. xviii). Art is an integral part of social justice advocacy, testified to by the work that many artists make addressing issues of equity and disparity (Dewhurst, 2014). Keeping the welfare of our diverse students in mind, social justice needs to be an integral part of art education in the 21st century, so that art can support and promote movements of revolt that can enact positive change. Art is vital, not despite its provocations, but precisely because of the pain and disgust art can induce. These emotions can break down walls that keep oppression in the realm of abstract ideas, allowing a visceral appreciation of suffering that affects real people.

5.02.06 some final thoughts on love. In Anatomy of Disgust, Miller (1997) suggests that one of the very few things that can help us to overcome utter disgust is love. He reflects: “One way of describing intimacy (and/or love) is as the state in which various disgust rules are relaxed or suspended” (p. 132). Through love, he says, one develops a “tolerance for bodies and a willingness to excuse their foibles as well as to indulge their dangerous and polluting qualities” (p. 132). As a way of explaining these claims, Miller looks to the examples of diaper changing and bad breath. The ultimate sign of parental love for their child is the changing of dirty diapers, the willingness to possibly become contaminated by potentially touching feces. Shit is meant to make us turn away, but love, and its concomitant loyalty and humility, ensure that the diaper is changed. Similarly, care for the elderly, which involves many of the same disgusting substances that are experienced during child-rearing, is guaranteed by love, manifested in the type of disgust management that happens in reciprocal loving relationships. It also can be seen in
the example of bad breath, which we may consider vile or vomitous from a stranger, but from a loved one it is often overlooked or ignored. Love mitigates disgust.

I pause here to discuss love and disgust because love has been at the center of a number of theoretical texts and frameworks surrounding my own project. Another example of this suspension or mitigation of disgust is kissing. When Rozin and his fellow researchers asked individuals if they would drink their own spit from a glass, for the most part, they refused (Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haight, & McCauley, 1993). The saliva, even though it was their own, had left their bodies and become foreign. However, we willingly exchange and ingest other people’s saliva when we kiss. Similarly, intimacy, which is predicated upon love in some form, ensures that a touch, which would be perceived as unwanted and violating from a stranger, is pleasurable when it comes from a loved one. To be sure, Miller’s argument that love is the answer to overcoming taboos of disgust is not without its own problems. He conflates sexual desire with love, which may arguably be a type of love, but is not the same as love that is experienced in intergenerational care.

Oliver (2004), whom I rely upon heavily for my own broader understanding of psychoanalysis as a social theory, argues that, as a culture, we are melancholic due to a lack of lovable images of ourselves. The abject subject is in need of a lovable self-image in order to combat the internalized shame of being the “deject” of society. Oliver is borrowing a great deal from Kristeva (1992, 2001, 2003) in this formulation, not only in regard to the abject, but also in terms of her notions of melancholia and love. Barrett offers that, for Kristeva, “melancholia and love emerge as two sides of psychic functioning that constitute the subject’s relation to language, to self and to the social
other” (2011, p. 61). Kristeva (2001), like Oliver, believes that the ubiquity of the media and the dominance of consumerism have created a perpetual state of melancholia, as we are all alienated from ourselves and from each other through the power of popular imagery. However, as Barrett goes on to say:

> The amatory discourses of psychoanalysis and art have the capacity to engender self-love and love of others. Kristeva’s account of melancholia and love are thus fundamental to understanding artistic production as a set of ethical practices that serve a crucial function in society. (p. 62)

Art provides a way to overcome depersonalization and alienation; it creates a psychic space of self-love and engenders empathetic connections with others who participate in a community of support, solidarity, and love.

I now return to one of the inspirations for my own abject visual methodology, Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000). For me, the major outcome of reading this book has been to motivate me to create a systematic methodological approach to the abject in visual imagery. Additionally, Sandoval’s goal of emancipation from hegemonic disempowerment has also influenced my project. Sandoval is seeking to codify a way to create change. Similarly, I am seeking to systematize an approach to the abject that privileges deep investigation and empathetic embodied connections in confronting disgusting and difficult images. With practice, this method would mitigate, alleviate, and mutate some of the reflexive discomfort that abject images often cause. My abject visual methodology and the type of study that it encourages seeks a final goal of emancipation from the hegemonic and tyrannical normalcy that disempowers so many individuals. An abject visual methodology is meant to provide a means of access to abject images that
normally cause revolt, and to redirect that impulse towards transformation instead of expulsion and rejection.

Sandoval ends her book with an argument for a powerful “neorhetoric” of love. Her argument for love builds on the work of other authors who have argued that love is the only thing that can overcome otherness, disgust, and alienation, as when Frantz Fanon announces: “Today I believe in the possibility of love, that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfection, its perversions” (as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p.156). Sandoval looks also to Che Guevara, who proclaims, “The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love” (as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p.156). And Sandoval cites feminist scholar bell hooks, who insists: “Love . . . is an important source of empowerment when we struggle to confront issues of sex, race and class” (as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p.156). For many scholars, love is the only possible answer to oppression. As much as oppression is founded on a misunderstanding of otherness, or on feelings of disgust, or on alienation from the other, it makes sense that love can in turn overcome reactions of disgust.

Sandoval’s neorhetoric of love is informed by her reading of Roland Barthes’ ideas on love, and particularly his description of prophetic love. She tells us:

Romantic love provided one kind of entry to a form of being that breaks the citizen-subject free from the ties that bind being, to thus enter the differential modes of consciousness, or to enter what Barthes perhaps better describes as “the gentleness of the abyss.” (p. 158)

It is the freeing of the subject from the authoritarian rules of the symbolic order, of governance, or even of consciousness as we know it, that draws so many to love as the antidote to the oppressive forces of the hegemonic order. The gentle abyss is frightening
in its lack of structure, but liberating in its possibilities for reformulation. Sandoval’s neorhetoric of love, or postmodern love, is not just romantic. Neorhetoric is postmodern in its focus on polyvocality and multiple truths. As Cole (1995) puts it, “the neorhetorician’s single text with many meanings take[s] the place of the rhetoricians’s single meaning with many texts” (p. 22). Sandoval’s neorhetoric of love represents a multitude of love in many forms, from the solidarity that supports communities, to parental love, to romantic love. It is love in any form that accomplishes the goal of freedom through submission.

Sandoval argues, relying again on Barthes: “To fall in love means that one must submit, however temporarily, to what is ‘intractable,’ to a state of being not subject to control or governance” (p. 159). In this model, falling in love is an ambiguous state of being that is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness; rather, it is another type of consciousness that Barthes calls “prophetic love.” Prophetic love can best be understood through the love we already have and share, forms of love that make us transgress boundaries, not with anxiety but with joy, and without the realization that a border has even been crossed.

Sandoval’s interest in love is no wonder, considering the strong influence of Freire on her writing, who also sides in the end with love as the antidote to violence and oppression. Freire (1970/2005) asks:

Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?...They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the
oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence. (p. 45)

Dehumanization is predicated on a lack of love and an inability to see the oppressed as humans who have been exploited. By enacting the fight for freedom, the oppressed not only free themselves, but also free their oppressors. This constitutes an act of great love, because while it is attractive to reverse the roles of domination, true freedom liberates everyone. “True solidarity,” Freire declares, “is found only in the plenitude of this act of love” (p. 50). “This act of love” denotes the moment when the oppressor truly joins the oppressed in solidarity by abandoning oppression as an abstract category and embracing those who have been deprived, cheated, and exploited. Love, in the end, is the key to true revolution and liberation.

5.02.06.01 loving monsters. As I suggested before, rather than putting the monster on a pedestal – which reinforces the binary divisions that sustain hierarchical oppression – we should sidestep that temptation, and instead value the monster and explore the diversity and power that comes from difference. With this in mind, I would like to offer a final thought: in order to truly break down the barriers that create difference and mark the monster as the excluded, we should attempt to love the monster, rather than vilify it. Love is not about objectification; it is instead an ultimate form of familiarization with the subject. Furthermore, if love can help us overcome disgust, and if it is the truly radical element that can offer us a new way of being in the world, and nurture our awareness of prophetic love, then any opportunity we have to practice love must be pursued.
My goal for an abject visual methodology is to aid in the promulgation of prophetic love, after Barthes’ description, with the hope that my methodology promotes the creation of a space and a mindset conducive to accepting, even loving, the abject. Empathy, or the psychological identification with the feelings or thoughts of another, has been previously discussed in this study, primarily in regard to the embodied empathy created by mirror neurons. But I have also treated empathy in general as part of an abject visual methodology, in order to explore the mindset of creators and subjects of the abject. At the very least, I believe that an abject visual methodology can help in the development of empathy, or a deeper understanding of the experience of otherness. In a traditional paradigm, otherness and its associations with disgust, weakness, disempowerment and invalidation would, like those who are constructed as other, be jettisoned to the periphery. Yet art, often pushed to the side in K-12 curricula by standardization regimes such as Common Core, still occupies a place to explore the love of monsters. The infamous graffiti artist Banksy borrows from Christian sermons (Best, 1992), when he writes (on a public wall, of course), “Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable” (2007). It is my hope that an abject visual methodology can provide a way to create generative disturbances, and that through revolt and love we may all become more comfortable with our monsters.
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