

“The Other Woman: The Monstrous Feminine as Feminist Praxis.”

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Summary

The Monstrous Feminine is a liminal and constantly signifying cultural entity: simultaneously a product of and a response to patriarchal fears of the supposed 'Otherness' of women. This thesis examines the role of the Monstrous Feminine as feminist praxis, using case studies of women's performances of 'Otherness' to critique and destabilise boundaries of gendered embodiment. Implicit within this project is an interrogation of the relationship between the Monstrous and contemporary intersectional feminism. The liminality of the Monstrous Feminine refuses distinct and reliable categories of identity, and problematises the stratified hierarchies of power that intersectionality insists upon.

Furthermore, the genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine reveals that her deployment has often been a means of perpetuating – rather than resisting – oppressive norms of gender, race and embodiment. As a result, the Monstrous Feminine cannot be made commensurate with intersectionality's push to be 'safe' and accessible to all women. However, this thesis asserts that the value of the Monstrous does not lie in its capacity to replicate the narratives of modern intersectionality. Rather, the role of the Monstrous is to make evident the limits and weaknesses within a given symbolic order; in this instance, her capacity to do so applies both to patriarchal systems as well as to the social and scholarly ubiquity of intersectionality.

The purpose of this thesis is to position the Monstrous Feminine as a deliberate praxis of 'Otherness' that speaks back to patriarchal gendered and bodily norms in ways that intersectionality cannot. Through case studies of performance art, modern freak-show performers and extreme body modification, I will demonstrate that a critique of normative gender does not need to be 'right' or 'safe' in order to be valuable. Rather, it is through acts of transgression, jouissance and the liminal muddling of discursive and bodily boundaries that the subversive significance of the Monstrous Feminine emerges.

Statement of Originality

This thesis is an original piece of research that has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material that was previously written or published by another author, except where due reference is made within the thesis itself.

Signed: Katharine Hawkins

Date: February 23rd 2018.

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Introduction.

“There's a Monster under your bed. There's a monster at your window. There's a monster anywhere you imagine one. You project your monsters on the world.”

- Welcome To Nightvale¹

I have loved Monsters since childhood. Initially as a ghoulish pre-teen who was given unsupervised access to the horror section at the local video store (“Oh, we have such sights to show you!”)², and later as an undergrad intrigued by the way that these films portray a culture’s manifest fears and insecurities. And now, as a Doctoral scholar I seek to demonstrate why these representations are so important. My assertion that Monsters are important extends beyond a fondness for macabre cinema; it is a firm conviction that the fears that Monsters provoke reveal difficult but important truths about ourselves.

Richard Kearney (2003: 4) maintains that Monsters are ‘...deep down, tokens of fracture within the human psyche. They speak to us of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other.’ Monsters offer an opportunity to examine a culture through its anxieties, fears and taboos; their liminality demonstrates the fragility of discursive and subjective boundaries that separate the familiar from that which is strange and discomforting. As a feminist scholar I am interested in how this process may function as a critique of gendered, sexual and bodily norms: how can Monstrosity – specifically feminine Monstrosity – be turned back upon the cultural contexts that created it?

I entered my doctoral research with the intent of combining feminist and Monster discourses within what I believed could be a consistent and ethical framework, with the Monstrous Feminine emerging as the avatar for a new kind of feminist praxis that was both accessible and accountable. I proposed that the Monstrous Feminine could be wholly re-appropriated from the auspices of patriarchal essentialism, hoping to build upon the work of theorists like Barbara Creed, Margrit Shildrick and Jack Halberstam to demonstrate the viability of the Monstrous Feminine as a contemporary, feminist response to oppressive notions of gender and embodiment.

I was born in the mid 1980’s, so my background as a feminist has been almost entirely grounded within intersectionality; both in terms of my formal education, as well as my interactions with grassroots discourse and activism. Subsequently, it has formed the basis of my academic praxis,

¹ (NightvaleRadio, 2013).

² (Barker & Figg, 1987).

as well as my personal politics, and it was my initial intent that my thesis would subsequently conform to this disciplinary framework as well. To a certain extent it has. Given the emphasis that theorists like Shildrick and Halberstam – as well as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Rosi Braidotti – place upon atypical embodiment and disability, race and sexuality as instances of ‘Othering’, it would be impossible to discuss the Monstrous Feminine without also considering other intersecting systems of marginalisation.

However, the process of constructing my argument revealed that regardless of my own desire to reconcile the Monstrous Feminine with my belief in intersectionality, the two concepts cannot be made to be commensurate. As my research progressed it became apparent that I could not make one conform to the other. Subconsciously, I suppose my intention had really been to argue for a construction of the Monstrous Feminine that was consistent with my own ethical framework. It is particularly ironic that I tried to argue for a re-deployment of the Monstrous Feminine that was specifically curated to fit comfortably within my own politics, especially given Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s (1996: 5) warnings that Monsters can never be contained within discrete discursive or taxonomic categories. Nevertheless, my failed attempt to coerce the Monstrous Feminine into the confines of a ‘safe’ politics of intersectionality revealed an interesting tension between them.

This thesis is an exploration of that tension. It arises between the desire for clear and concise ethical boundaries, and the abject allure of ambiguity and risk. It is the tension between a system of demarcations between intersecting systems of power and identity, and anarchic forms of liminality and categoric transgression that reveal these demarcations to be arbitrary.

Intersectionality exists as a necessary response to the dominance of exclusionary narratives within mainstream feminism; a means of addressing issues of racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia as they intersect with and influence misogyny. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw’s introduction of the term in 1989, intersectionality has reached near hegemonic status within contemporary feminism (Jibrin & Salem, 2015: 7), becoming near ubiquitous as both a scholarly discipline as well as a grassroots political system of praxis – thanks in no small part to social media. The rise of intersectionality as the dominant mode of feminist engagement has led to the integration of movements like Black Lives Matter and the greater visibility of transgender people and those with disabilities into mainstream feminist discourse, expanding to include a greater range of identities, experiences and axes of oppression (Smooth, 2013: 20).

On a personal level, I believe this to be a good thing. Ethically, I am aligned with intersectionality, and that personal system of ethics has become inextricably intertwined with my scholarly praxis. However, as a student I am also drawn to the liminal, transgressive potential of

the Monstrous; a concept that makes a mockery of the ‘safe’ systems of ethics, and boundaries of identity that intersectionality is premised upon. Despite my initial hopes, the Monstrous Feminine cannot be rendered accessible or universally ‘appropriate’ for all women, because it resists definition within the narratives of subjectivity and power that are prescribed by intersectionality. Furthermore, while my initial project was intended to position the Monstrous Feminine as a system of praxis that would resist and destabilise patriarchal norms, I neglected to acknowledge the inherent disloyalty of Monsters: why should my own beliefs be immune from the discomforting disruption that their presence entails?

For me, intersectionality has become familiar and largely taken for granted – a reflection of my own identity as a feminist. Subsequently, it has also become heavily guarded against any transgression or ‘Otherness’. This is not just in terms of my own praxis and politics, but also representative the movement as a whole: ‘My feminism will be intersectional, or it will be bullshit’ declares a much-shared and oft-quoted blogpost by Dutch feminist Flavia Dzodan (2011), angrily decrying the dominance of uncritical ‘white feminism’ that consistently ignores women of colour and immigrants. While I do not disagree with Dzodan’s assertions, the insistent duality of her now-famous mantra speaks to the way in which the ethical and practical boundaries of intersectionality have been established as a new hegemony within mainstream feminism, to the absolute (near punitive) exclusion of all other forms of feminist praxis – including the Monstrous Feminine. Indeed, my discomfort does not lie with intersectionality itself, but rather with smaller elements within it that have become coercive, scrutinising and dismissive of praxes and forms of expression that do not cohere comfortably within its (evidently rigid) boundaries. ‘Feminism, I must warn you: My flame thrower is loaded, and you have disappointed me!’ cries Dzodan (2011), her words an implicit threat to those that traverse the limits of ‘acceptable’ discourse’.

Even allowing for her excesses of hyperbole and catharsis, I am uncomfortable with the implied punitive surveillance of Dzodan’s rhetoric, of ideologies that demand absolute compliance, and subsequently position themselves within a binary of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ - ‘intersectional’ or ‘bullshit’. This anxiety is multiplied considerably when the social surveillance of social media echo chambers is acknowledged as essential to the proliferation of contemporary, grassroots feminist discourse. In a context of unprecedented social scrutiny of feminist politics, identity and praxis, it appears to me that there is an increasing lack of tolerance for that which does not resonate within acceptable rhetorical boundaries. I take umbrage at systems of discourse that punitively patrol expression and praxis to ensure narrowly defined notions of subjective ‘safety’; especially if it is at the cost of exploring the moral ambiguities and ‘vulnerable becomings’

(Shildrick, 2002: 87) that can only occur from pushing boundaries and questioning established notions of what it means to be a 'good' feminist.

Accordingly, the Monstrous Feminine is alluring to me as an academic concept *and* as a personal philosophical praxis because it represents an 'Otherness' to that which I have come to take for granted as 'proper' feminist discourse: a disruptive, messy jouissance that contrasts to the structure and boundaries of intersectionality. Like Kristeva's abject, the presence of the Monstrous (and subsequently the Monstrous Feminine) represents an incursion of that which is 'Not I' into the realm of the familiar, facilitating the break-down of subjective barriers of meaning that constitute the Self (Kristeva, 1982: 4). I want to explore what the Monstrous Feminine can do in terms of producing gendered and bodily meanings that intersectionality cannot, through the examination of specific 'instances' of female performance artists and individuals who engage with extreme bodily performance or modification.

These case studies will be read as examples of how Monstrous Femininity may be deployed as praxes that 'talk back' to existent discourses of gender, embodiment and feminism. This thesis is not intended as a manifesto or proposal of a radically new set of social stratagems, or even a comprehensive guide to 'doing' Monstrous Femininity. Nor is it a refutation of the value of intersectional feminism. Rather, it is a demonstration of some of the ways in which the Monstrous Feminine as a feminist praxis may be utilised as a response to existing conventions of feminist scholarship and activism.

Neither Monsters nor the Monstrous Feminine respect ethical or political boundaries. They represent far riskier ways of being and doing that speak back to, rather than adhering to the discourse and heuristics of contemporary intersectional feminism. While this may not be a popular notion amongst many feminist scholars and advocates who are invested in the singular 'rightness' of intersectionality, my project positions the Monstrous Feminine as valuable precisely *because* it makes evident the weaknesses within these taken-for-granted discourses of social justice. This thesis is not an abandonment of intersectional feminism per se, nor a viable replacement for it. Rather, it is an examination of praxes of alterity that respond critically to the presumption that intersectionality is the only feminism that is legitimate or valuable.

In this way, my positioning of the Monstrous Feminine is more closely aligned with Queer theory than intersectionality, in that it prioritises forms of critique that are grounded in linguistic and conceptual ambiguity rather than intersecting, yet disparate categories of identity and agency

that can (or should) be essentialised (Halberstam, 2011: 127)³. In fact, this thesis posits that the term ‘Monster’ may function as a verb as well as a noun or adjective, much in the same way that ‘Queer’ has been re-appropriated as a means of ‘making-strange’ the boundaries of heteronormative symbolic orders. Here I take my cues from Patricia MacCormack (2004: 33-34) who uses the term ‘Monster’ to imply a process of perversion; a subjective becoming that destabilises the binaries of ‘given’ symbolic orders. She maintains that an embrace of the Monstrous represents another transformation of a noun into a verb: to ‘pervert’ refers to a refusal of the binary between the inviolate Self, and the ‘Other’, stating:

‘To become a Monster is necessarily to begin at a point in repudiation of any anxiety about a loss through Monstrosity (loss of subject, loss of power aligned with subjectivity)’ (MacCormack, 2004: 35).

Therefore, within the parameters of this thesis, to ‘Monster’, implies a deployment of ‘Otherness’ that refuses the anxious protection of borders that accompany subjective autonomy and discursive purity. In this way, to ‘Monster’ suggests a process of ‘making-strange’ the discursive boundaries of both patriarchy *and* intersectionality. In Chapter One I will explain a little more about the interconnected nature of the Monstrous and Monstrous Femininity, as well as my use of these terms to describe the systems of praxis, discourse and expression that exemplify liminal or uncanny critique.

What follows is an examination of the various roles that the Monstrous Feminine may fulfil through readings of case studies that deliberately evoke and deploy the perverse, liminal pleasures and affective emotions of Monstrous Femininity. I propose a feminist praxis of Monstrosity that is messy, impure, and risky - and all the more significant for being so. A deployment of the Monstrous Feminine does not always ‘get it right’, and it cannot be trusted to remain comfortable or unproblematic. This is not a feminism that can promise discursive or subjective safety: this is a feminism that goes bump in the night.

³ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam discusses ‘shadow’ feminisms that refuse coherence within mainstream/colonial discourses of selfhood and liberation in favour of ambiguity and dissolution, quoting the work of Egyptian Feminist Saba Mahmood (2005: 9), ‘Does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power – a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessary encapsulated by the narrative and of subversion and re-inscription of norms?’ I will discuss more of the significance of Halberstam’s work on failure and ‘shadow’ feminisms in Chapters One and Six.

Chapter One:

Introducing Monsters and the Monstrous Feminine.

*“I may be on the side of the angels, but do not for a moment assume that I am one of them.” – BBC’s ‘Sherlock’.*⁴

As cultural entities, Monsters are ubiquitous (Asma, 2009: 7). They may manifest as creatures of abject alterity, or as metaphorical representations of transgression and categoric excess. There is not a human culture in the world that does not have some ghoulish or fantastical entity that is called upon to corral disobedient children or impart moral teachings. Far more than fantastic boogeymen, Monsters are manifestations of a culture’s need to explain the presence of the unknown, to provide catharsis and, most significantly, to delineate ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ (Kearney, 2003: 3-4).

My research specifically relates to the Monstrous Feminine and its potential as an affective form of praxis that reveals the limits of discourses and norms that are taken for granted as normal and ‘right’; both within patriarchal symbolic orders, as well as contemporary intersectional feminism. To begin, I will establish how the Monstrous as a generalised cultural category has been described by theorists like Kearney and Cohen, and more specifically, how feminist and Queer scholars like Shildrick, Creed, Jane Ussher and Jack Halberstam have examined the genealogy and significance of the Monstrous Feminine, as well as its potential future. This thesis is an exploration of one possible future – moving the Monstrous Feminine past its present point in Monster scholarship towards a system of praxis through deliberate deployment of grotesque, parodic and abject signifiers.

This chapter will position my own work within existing scholarship concerning Monsters and the Monstrous Feminine. From here, I will explain how my own project builds upon, or departs from what has already been established within present discourse, providing my own critiques of extant literature as necessary. To do this, I will provide a discussion of the relationship between the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine and will set out what I have observed as the relevant tension that arises between the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality.

My intent for this thesis is to demonstrate that the deployment of the Monstrous Feminine as a feminist praxis is significant precisely because of the friction that it produces alongside intersectionality. I assert that this friction represents more than an academic squabble, but rather speaks to the affective differences and ethical stakes that emerge through a comparison between

⁴(Thompson & Haynes, 2012).

contemporary intersectionality and a deployment of the Monstrous Feminine. I have identified specific examples of these deployments, each of my chapters focussing on specific case studies that show ‘instances’ of the Monstrous Feminine. These instances are valuable not only for their capacity to expose and transgress normative gendered, sexual and bodily boundaries, but also because in so doing they speak to a ‘blind spot’ in the hegemonic ‘rightness’ of intersectional feminism. Here I wish to reiterate quite strongly that I do not suggest that the Monstrous Feminine is a preferable or superior system of feminist praxis that ought to replace intersectionality. I am an intersectional feminist, and yet, I am convinced that there are some things that intersectionality simply cannot do *because* of its necessary emphasis on subjective safety, accessibility and inclusion. Monsters – foolishly or otherwise – may go ‘where angels fear to tread’⁵.

As I shall explain, as scholarly concepts and systems of being and doing, Monstrous Femininity and intersectionality fulfil important, but different functions. While there may be occasional incidents of overlap or parallels in their respective modes of interpretation or deployment, as discursive processes and ethical praxes they are incommensurate. I maintain that their incompatibility arises chiefly because the Monstrous Feminine cannot be consistently relied upon to be universally accessible and accountable, or to avoid the production of harm. In this instance, I use the term ‘harm’ not as an objective description of danger or damage, but rather to refer to the positioning of specific behaviours, praxes, assumptions and discourses that presume or impose essentialising or oppressive attributes onto a person on the basis of their gender, race, ability or sexuality (Smooth, 2013: 21-22).

As the following discussion will demonstrate, the genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine is one that is implicated in such harmful narratives, its capacity for categorical disruption inevitably leads to an ‘escape to the margins’ of any system of ethics: including the ones that we may perceive to be ‘right’ (Cohen, 1996: 6). Monsters of any kind cannot be trusted to remain safely within the boundaries of discourses like intersectionality that seek to destabilise institutional and cultural systems that perpetuate harm. However, this thesis posits that the praxis of Monstrous Femininity is nonetheless valuable because it does what intersectionality cannot: it transgresses rather than preserves discursive and subjective categories and exposes the porous nature of the

⁵ Alexander Pope’s (1709) poem issues a warning against half-formed knowledge, of uncalculated and uninformed risk. I hope that this thesis can counter his assertion and advocate for the value of risk, ambiguity and leaps of faith in lieu of the safety of hegemonic wisdom.

subjective and moral boundaries that segregate them. The specific questions raised by such a praxis will be detailed in the following chapters. But first, some definitions.

Monsters

Given the near ubiquitous use of the term 'Monster' to describe a multitude of strange, frightening or unfamiliar entities (Asma, 2009: 14), it is appropriate to begin with the most generalised set of definitions for the term, which may be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (2018):

A large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature

An inhumanly cruel or wicked person

A rude or badly-behaved person, typically a child.

A thing of extraordinary or daunting size.

A congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant.

Thus, the term 'Monster' encompasses a broad set of definitions with one aspect in common: each defines 'Monster' in terms of its 'Otherness' to a given physical or social norm. From this, one may assume that a Monster is simply anything that is different or unusual to an established standard. Technically speaking, this is not wholly inaccurate. However, as cultural entities Monsters are more than mere aberrations or outliers, but rather are instances of 'Otherness' that signify. Indeed, the word 'Monster' comes from the Latin word for 'portent': *monstrum* (which itself comes from the root *monere* which means 'to warn' (Oxford University Press, 2018)). From this etymology, scholars like Asma position Monsters (whether a symbol or a literal being) as cultural signifiers: 'to be a Monster is to be an omen' (Asma, 2009: 13). At this point it is tempting to provide a description of the Monster that is specific and wholly definitive, so as to have an archetype that can be consistently and reliably referred to throughout this thesis. This is impossible for two reasons. The first and most obvious being that Monsters are not psychological universals, but rather they are created out of the 'negative identity' of particular historical and cultural contexts (Halberstam, 1995: 24). Subsequently, although the concept of Monstrosity is broad, individual iterations of Monstrosity are heterogeneous, and not always interchangeable or analogous to one-another.

For example, Asma's introductory chapter describes a small handful of pertinent incidents of the variance of Monstrosity: the tragically deformed human foetus in a museum (2009: 5), the 'unmanageable' golem of Jewish folklore (2009: 12-13), or the unsettling remnants of Khmer

Rouge torture facilities in Cambodia (2009: 9). Monsters dwell where human notions of reason, familiarity, safety and morality falter, but they do so in ways that demonstrate the limits of subjective, ethical and bodily norms that are typically taken for granted as 'normal'. Therefore, it ought not be surprising that their variety is legion. To quote H.P Lovecraft, "The greatest and strongest human emotion is fear, and the greatest and strongest fear is that of the unknown" (Lovecraft, 1973[1923]: 12).

Secondly, an important element the Monster's capacious nature is its capacity to resist uniform and static classification, its 'Otherness' manifests in its liminality - its ability to slip between established boundaries. Here I defer to Shildrick's (2002: 45) framing of the Monstrous:

'Just as the feminine haunts the margins of Western discourse, always out of place in the paradigms of sameness and difference, so too monsters are liminal creatures which cannot be transcribed within the binary, and whose abjection leaves always the trace within'.

The Monstrous is liminal because it refuses classification within binary systems of legibility. Liminality in this instance represents more than a mongrel mix of oppositional notions of 'Self' and 'Other', but rather it is the ambiguity that arises when the boundaries between them are disrupted. It is not one or the other, but rather it is both - and then something else unrecognisable that arises from this categoric muddling (Shildrick, 2002: 47). That 'something else' lies at the heart of the Monster's significance as a 'harbinger of category crisis' (Cohen, 1996: 6), its liminality is what signals the break-down of dichotomous orders and the suggestion of what lies beyond and between these systems of identity and meaning.

Consequently, the liminal 'slippage' of the Monstrous speaks to the arbitrary nature of established norms of being and doing. Through this positioning, Monsters may be understood as more than the diminished 'half' of a binary system of moral or bodily norms, but rather as a liminal confusion of the borders that define them. They refuse systems of 'us/them' and 'either/or', but rather emerge as 'both/and': their liminality suggesting heterogeneous multiplicity, rather than categorical absolutes. Kearney (2003: 3-4) maintains that the terror of Monsters lies - in part - in their refusal to comply with human norms of categorisation and identification. As Cohen (1996: ix) states in the preface of his essay collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, the Monster is:

'[...] a category that is itself a kind of limit case, an extreme version of marginalisation, an abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and

identity formation. Although the methods vary and the modes of interrogation span a wide range of critical praxes, what unites all of the contributors [to monster theory] (regardless of the spatial boundaries of their discourse) is an insistence that the monster is a *problem* for cultural studies, a code or a pattern or a presence or an absence that unsettles what has been constructed to be received as natural, as human.'

Put more simply, Monsters are problematic for established systems of meaning and identity precisely because they refuse singular and unmoveable systems of classification; and in so doing represent a crisis of discursive and taxonomic categories. There is no one objective, static definition of the Monster, save for a nebulous, fluid collection of often-contradictory elements that when manifested within a given entity (the Monster of Ravenna, for instance); serve 'to unsettle' societal norms, laws and assumptions. Indeed, it is not just individual, subjective norms themselves that are unsettled, but also the subsequent symbolic orders upon which these values are premised (Shildrick, 2002: 71). To paraphrase Kearney, their uncontained heterogeneity, excess and liminality serve as reminders that the Self's ego is 'never wholly sovereign' (Kearney, 2003: 3-4). This threat to hegemonic notions of selfhood are significant not just to the individual, but to the entire symbolic order that is premised upon the arbitrary lines of distinction between 'self' and 'Other' (Cohen, 1996: 12).

Monsters exist simultaneously as significant individuals as well as cultural phenomena that 'demonstrate'; they become significant because their Otherness makes evident the limits of a given society (Asma, 2009:13-14). From antiquity until the sixteenth Century, the appearance of a Monster (typically the birth of a deformed animal or human baby) was viewed as a divine message; proof of God's displeasure at a sinful or corrupt society or heralding the onset of impending doom and disaster (Leroi, 2003: 5-7). One of the most famous incidents of the Monster-as-warning is the case of the Monster of Ravenna, an apocryphal creature described by the Florentine apothecary Lucca Landucci in 1512:

'[...] it had a horn on its head, straight up like a sword, and instead of arms it had two wings like a bat's, and the height of its breasts it had a fio [Y-shaped mark] on one side and a cross on the other, and lower down at the waist, two serpents, and it was a hermaphrodite, and on the right knee it had an eye, and its left foot was like an eagle' (Cited in Leroi, 2003: 3).

Eighteen days after the reported birth of this extraordinary being, the city of Ravenna fell to invading armies; an event that Landucci maintained was foretold by the Monster (Leroi, 2003: 4).

While Landucci's description of the creature is likely based in fancy⁶, the story of the Monster of Ravenna illustrates how 'Otherness' (biological, social or symbolic) has historically been positioned as portentous and significant. The presence of Monsters represents an irruption of alterity into a given symbolic order: they 'menace identity' by making evident apprehensions and arbitrary systems of discursive segregation. With its extraordinary hybrid form, the Monster of Ravenna represented a transgression of the boundaries between human and animal, between male and female – its birth signalled a crisis of taxonomic and biological categories that had hitherto been thought to be inviable (Cohen, 1996: 6). In this way, Monsters function as a means by which a culture may be 'shown to itself'; rendered humble and laid open to the potential for transformation (Kearney, 2003: 4). Monsters represent that which transgresses and confuses social and bodily boundaries, and in so doing begs the question of why such divides ever existed in the first place (Kearney, 2003: 38-39). Consequently, one may tell a good deal about a given culture by examining what it considers to be Monstrous.

The Monstrous Feminine

From this definition, one would assume that the Monstrous Feminine would simply refer to a generalised category that encompasses and denotes Monsters who are female. This is not entirely correct. Here I return to Creed's (1993:3) assertion that simply adding a female pronoun onto pre-existing etymologies of the Monster eschews the significance of prescribed, normative differences that produce specifically gendered iterations of Monstrosity. While it significant to note that female Monsters are 'Othered' in ways that male or non-gendered Monsters are not⁷, Creed asserts that 'The Monstrous Feminine' is not a descriptive category, but rather refers to the ways in which patriarchy and phallocentrism function to position and define womanhood *as* Monstrous in and of itself (ibid). *The Monstrous Feminine* was preceded by a previous article by

⁶ Landucci's description of the Monster of Ravenna was made in 1512, based upon a painting that was displayed in Florence. Given that there are earlier renderings of the creature, his interpretation may have been made up to six years *after* the monster's birth, and thus the supposed foretelling of the fall of Ravenna may have been attributed to it arbitrarily (Eco, 2011: 243). Furthermore, Leroi (2003: 5) notes that the fantastic description of the Monster had undergone several morphological changes over different accounts – a slippery creature indeed!

⁷ In her introduction to *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed (1993: 3-5) observes that many scholarly interpretations of the horror genre by theorists like Gérard Lenne are frequently hamstrung by a failure to acknowledge the significance of gender in the construction of Monstrous. She maintains that these oversights are a by-product of sexist presumptions that femininity is incompatible with the terror of the Monstrous. I would add that a refusal by (mostly male) academics to acknowledge the specifically gendered construction of female Monsters in horror represents a 'doubling' of Luce Irigaray's assertion that woman is 'homeless' within patriarchal systems of representation - even as Monsters on the margins of discourse, women are displaced! (cited in Whitford, 1991: 150).

Creed entitled *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An imaginary abjection*, (1986). In this article, Creed utilizes Kristeva's theory of the abject to describe the framing of female sexuality within the horror genre as an 'Other' to the presumed male viewer.

Creed (1993: 2-3) maintains that it is this 'Otherness' that is supposedly inherent in women's sexual, embodied and subjective 'difference' to men that has rendered them Monstrous, this process being most obvious within representations of women in horror films. Throughout her text, she describes how terrifying spectres such as the grasping 'abject mother'⁸, the devouring 'vagina dentata', and the lesbian vampire represent phallogentric anxieties pertaining to the 'not maleness' of women's reproductive capacities, or the masochistic phantasy of the loss of phallic power through castration (Creed, 1993: 151). These fears, Creed maintains is non-consensually projected onto women, who are subsequently constructed as Monstrous (Creed, 1993: 5-6). Thus, through this important analysis, one may understand the Monstrous Feminine as more than just a Monster who happens to be female, but rather a product of a society deeply affected by phallogentric paranoia and the mistrust - even hatred - of women. To revise my above statement slightly, one may subsequently tell a good deal about the status of women within a given culture by observing the relationship between femininity and 'Otherness'. What follows is an overview of the way that this observation is articulated in present scholarship.

Overview: The existing literature.

Cohen's *'Monster Culture: (Seven Theses)'* may be understood as an introductory manifesto of the Monstrous – a 'Monsters 101' so to speak - that identifies the various roles and functions of the Monster as a discursive 'Other'. He proposes a '*modus legendi*'; a method of reading a culture through its Monsters (Cohen, 1996: 1). Each 'thesis' focuses on a different aspect of Monstrosity as a social/cultural construct that embodies a particular form of 'Otherness', exploring narratives of Monstrosity through ancient mythology and literature, as well as modern history. Cohen establishes the Monster as a cultural necessity, a scapegoat constructed to provide catharsis through its exclusion; functioning simultaneously as a protector and transgressor of social

⁸ Creed's discussion of the abject mother in her analysis of Ridley Scott's *Alien* draws upon Kristeva's (1982) feminist psychoanalytic work 'Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection', as well as Mary Douglas' anthropological work in examining the supposedly 'abject' maternal influence. Kristeva and Creed's work both function simultaneously as extensions and critiques of Freud's account of the fear of castration by the domineering, phallic 'Pre-Oedipal mother'; Creed's second, fourth and tenth chapters relate at length how the phallogentric fear of the maternal and the feminine contributes to the construction of female (or female-coded) monsters within popular culture and film, specifically in their portrayal of motherhood and female reproduction.

boundaries (1996: 13). However, as both Cohen and Shildrick (2002) assert, even from the margins, the Monster is a signifying revenant; eventually following their creators home to ask them why they were made (Cohen, 1996: 20). While his work is less specifically focussed than a theorist like Shildrick or Creed, it is nonetheless a useful overview of the cultural work that the Monstrous does.

Cohen's 'founding theses' of Monstrosity are replicated in greater detail in the work of Asma (2009) and Kearney (2003). Both of these contemporary theorists provide historical, mythological and psychoanalytical accounts of the Monstrous as a broad and multifaceted series of cultural categories and behaviours. Between them, the two authors identify the Monster as typically occurring within two frequently overlapping categories: as a martyr upon which the fears of a community are projected (Kearney, 2003: 37), and/or as an 'Other' whose uncanny difference signifies the instability of normative cultural boundaries (Cohen, 1996: 12). However, Kearney's approach is more introspective; maintaining that the terror of the Monstrous is not simply an encounter with that which is 'Not-Self', but rather with the repressed 'Other' *within* the Self. Here, he quotes Timothy K Beal's analysis of the relationship between Freud's uncanny and the Monstrous:

'The *unheimlich* encounter with the Monstrous is a revelation not of the wholly Other, but of a repressed Otherness within the Self. The Monster, as a personification of the *unheimlich*, stands for that which has broken out of the subterranean basement or the locked closet where it has been hidden and largely forgotten' (cited in Kearney, 2003: 35).

While Asma's work is a broad history of Monsters, Kearney's work reads as more of a philosophical project that examines⁹ how the Monster has come to represent an inescapable human fear of mortality and the unknown, and how that fear resonates within our lives – often manifesting as xenophobia or racism (Kearney, 2003: 38). Ultimately, his goal is to demonstrate that a better consideration of the nature of alterity will ultimately lead to a less fearful and more compassionate culture.

Halberstam has less lofty ambitions for Monsters. Like Creed, his work is grounded in a psychoanalytic critique of the representation of Monsters but is nonetheless critical of systems of

⁹ Kearney (2003: 17) refers to his methodology as '*diacritical hermeneutics*' – a system that operates between the 'radical' de-constructionism of Derrida and Levinas, and the 'romantic' responses to alterity espoused by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer. His work does not advocate for irreducible subjective dissymmetry through 'infinite alterity', nor for the dissolution of Selfhood through appropriation – but rather proposes a 'third' path that prioritises communication between 'distinct, but not incomparable selves' (Kearney, 2003: 18)

analysis that are limited to a singular and segregated realm of inquiry: noting a shift between 19th and 20th Century iterations of Monsters, and the subsequent narrowing of their fields of representation down those of sex and gender (Halberstam, 1995: 23). His text *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* traces the representation of bodily and subjective ‘Others’ within Gothic horror over two centuries, noting the dominance of sex and gender as primary categories of Monstrous interpretation since the beginning of the 20th Century (Halberstam, 1995: 24). His introductory chapter ‘Parasites and Perverts’ charts the constant construction and re-construction of the ‘technologies of subjectivity’¹⁰ that the Monster makes evident from context to context, which establishes a discursive basis by which Creed’s specific theorisation of the Monstrous Feminine may be built upon as a system of praxis (more on this in a moment) (Halberstam, 1995: 26).

Halberstam posits that the semiotics of Monstrosity necessarily shift to reflect transitions between systems of identity (i.e.: race, gender or sexuality), hijacking Foucauldian theory in utilising the term ‘technologies of Monsters’ to describe the fluidity of cultural constructions of the Monstrous. For Halberstam (1995:6) the Technology of Monsters refers to the cultural processes that produce particular iterations of Monstrousness that shift over time and place. Consequently, the figure of the Monster encompasses multiple forms of alterity – not just those pertaining to sex - and thus may be located across multiple genres and modes of interpretation (i.e.: Dracula as a product of 19th Century anti-Semitism *and* sexual repression) (Halberstam, 1995:14). For Halberstam, the ‘perversion’ represented by contemporary Gothic Monsters represents a crisis of category, rather than a mere anomaly; both modern Gothic horror and the Monstrous both signifying categoric excess, and the corruption of normative subjective systems of gender and embodiment (Halberstam, 1995: 2). I will return to Halberstam’s work on the technologies of the Monstrous, as well as his cathartic *Queer Art of Failure* later in this chapter. As my following critiques will show, both will be particularly significant in my response to the current positioning of the Monstrous Feminine within scholarship, as well as to the emerging hegemony of ‘safe’ intersectional feminism.

Within Asma's careful analyses of historical case studies, Kearney's thoughtful considerations of the Monster's role in discourses of selfhood and culture, Halberstam’s shifting subjective

¹⁰ Foucault (1988: 18) described ‘technologies’ of the self as the specific mental and/or physical efforts undertaken by an individual (with or without the help of others) in order to re-shape, improve or change their identities, behavior, appearance and thought processes. He maintained that these technologies represented attempts at agentic self-definition within complex interpersonal and political networks of power; a means of resisting total subjective domination of the Self by others (cited in Mitcheson, 2014: 64).

technologies and Cohen's foundational theses, the Monstrous remains a creature that is mostly discussed in theoretical terms. While all four authors discuss the important and potentially subversive role played by the Monster, each have provided accounts that position it as functioning primarily at the behest of socially powerful agents that exploit its 'Otherness' as a means of social coercion and control¹¹ For the most part, this epistemological distance is replicated within feminist accounts of the Monstrous (specifically the Monstrous Feminine). These discourses examine the ways in which female subjectivity and embodiment have been perceived as Monstrous, grotesque, predatory or abject by phallogentric, patriarchal cultures; leaving little room for examination of the Monstrous Feminine as a source of resistance to these norms. Indeed, Creed (1993: 7) stipulates that the representation of the Monstrous Feminine within the horror genre is 'neither liberated or feminist', but rather reflects male anxieties about female bodies and sexualities.

Much of what was (is?) assumed about the 'inherent' Monstrousness of women and women's bodies lies within their reproductive capability: processes of birth, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause being historically positioned by male intellectuals, including some medical professionals as bodily outliers in need of 'containment' (Shildrick, 2002: 31). Indeed, as Creed's (1993:18-19) observations of gynocentric and birth-related themes in horror films suggest, the fear of castration, of loss of control and the disregard for phallogentric boundaries suggested by the presence of 'uncontrolled' female bodies can be constituted as genuinely horrifying prospects for patriarchal orders. There is a wealth of scholarly literature that discusses the association of femininity and female embodiment with Monstrosity, terror and abjection, and while Creed's work is arguably the best known and most broadly comprehensive work on the Monstrous Feminine as a specific entity within horror, the presence of women as gendered and corporeal 'Others' within horror is well documented.

As Creed (1993: 7) sets out, women in horror are rendered Monstrous by virtue of their sexual and reproductive capacities which constitute the source of their abjection within phallogentric symbolic orders. As such, most literature concerning Monstrous Femininity centres around the horror genre, specifically the processes of puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and sexual desire. The subject of menstruation as a signifier of the onset of Monstrousness is present within films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Ginger Snaps* (2000). Both films depict on-screen portrayals of a teenage girl's first period, accompanied shortly thereafter by

¹¹ This is less the case for Halberstam, as his work in *Skin Shows* and *The Queer Art of Failure* do emphasise the role of the 'Other' as a potentially subversive entity that 'Queers' the limits of heteronormative, phallogentrism (Halberstam, 1995: 143-144).

terrifying and violent ‘curses’ of supernatural power. The term ‘curse’ here is particularly apt, as it suggests the doubling of a sinister supernatural force as well as the ‘punishment’ handed down from woman to woman following Eve’s Promethean transgression (Lindsey, 2011: 284). Indeed, this linguistic doubling is used quite deliberately in *Ginger Snaps*, wherein the main character Ginger complains, ‘I got the curse’ after the discovery of her first period, which occurs just moments before being attacked by a werewolf (Neilsen, 2004: Non-paginated). Ginger’s subsequent lycanthropic transformation is accompanied by excessive growth of body hair, physical aggression and a new-found voracious sexual appetite, much to the horror of her younger sister Brigitte. Bianca Neilsen (2004) observes that *Ginger Snaps* offers a tongue-and-cheek portrayal of the misogyny that surrounds female sexuality, but the film nonetheless positions Ginger’s Monstrous Femininity as deviant, and ultimately punished by death¹². Similarly, Lindsey (2011: 293) remarks that despite Carrie’s sympathetic portrayal, the fantasy of her revenge is paradoxical: her telekinetic powers arise from her feminine difference, and yet because of their origin in sexual ‘Otherness’, they are nonetheless abject and terrifying.

Arguably the most famous depiction of the ‘abject’ nature of pregnancy is Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1969), which recalls not only the uniquely female¹³ processes of pregnancy and childbirth, but also traces the hysterical terror and delusions that have historically been attributed to women (Fischer, 2011: 420). Fischer’s discussion of the pathologisation of female ‘birth traumas’ is given historical contextualisation in Shildrick’s (2002: 28) second chapter *Monsterring the (M)other*, which examines patriarchal anxieties about women’s reproductive capacities, and supposed ability to transfer Monstrousness onto their unborn children unconsciously (2002: 24–25). This concept is taken to extremes in Alice Lowe’s wickedly funny *Prevenge* (2017), in which the newly widowed and heavily pregnant protagonist Ruth begins ‘hearing’ the voice of her unborn daughter urging her to commit murder to avenge her dead husband. Like *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Prevenge* portrays maternal anxieties about the loss of bodily and subjective boundaries that characterise female ‘Otherness’ to the presumed rationality and bodily stability of men (Fischer, 2011: 421; Shildrick, 2002: 36), albeit with a greater degree of sympathy (and less devil worship).

It is important to properly unpack this ‘Monstrous’ portrayal of female sexuality and fecundity. Here Ussher’s (2006) work becomes particularly relevant. Ussher’s text *Managing the Monstrous*

¹² Neilsen (2014) stipulates that *Ginger Snaps* also reflects the kind of internalised misogyny that the ‘Othering’ of female bodies produces, the title of her paper, ‘*Somethings wrong, like more than you being female*’ being a direct quote from the film.

¹³ For cisgender women at least. There is a surprising absence of discourses pertaining to transwomen in the literature surveyed in this chapter.

Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body' examines precisely how phallogentric mistrust of (and thus desire to control) the female body and its functions has historically manifested and evolved and led to female embodiment being simultaneously coveted and feared. Ussher (2006: 4) observes that the Monstrousness thought to be inherent in women is rooted in a cultural mistrust or pathologising of their supposedly 'maddening' reproductive and sexual functions. Ussher's work is heavily comprised of interviews and recollections of women's experiences of puberty, menses, pregnancy, childbirth, post-natal depression, anxiety and menopause, and insists that there must be a greater emphasis on the recognition of how everyday constructions of female bodily experiences may affect how ordinary women understand themselves as embodied subjects (Ussher, 2006: xiii).

The positioning of women's bodies as sites that require containment, treatment and restriction in order to be 'good' echoes Mary Douglas¹⁴ account of bodies that are rendered as either 'pure' or 'contaminating' by virtue of their containment (1966: 4): menstrual blood being observed as a source of such impurity across cultures (Douglas, 1966: 97). Shildrick (2002:49) also discusses the implications of the perceived threat of 'contaminated' bodies in some detail throughout her work, describing the way in which the proximity of 'diseased, damaged or otherwise unwhole' bodies presents a pertinent ontological threat to normative conceptions of the (typically masculine) self as invulnerable, 'clean' and 'proper'. Shildrick's account is largely concerned with issues of disability and the strict, near obsessive bodily and subjective distance maintained by mainstream patriarchal societies between 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies (that is: able-bodied white men and 'everyone else'). She critiques the way in which anomalous bodies are simultaneously held as the objects of wonder and revulsion by an ideology that demands total isolation and autonomy of the embodied self (Shildrick, 2002: 20-22).

Collectively, this body of work is important, as it demonstrates on multiple layers how Monstrosity has historically been utilised as a misogynistic pejorative. While theorists like Creed and Ussher describe the Monstrous Feminine in terms of their arbitrary construction as 'Other' by patriarchal symbolic orders, Shildrick's work builds upon these genealogies to position the Monstrous as facilitating a process of 'vulnerable becoming': the acknowledgement of the instability of the boundaries between 'Self' and the Monstrous 'Other' (Shildrick, 2002: 85-86).

¹⁴ In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Douglas states that '[...] a polluting person is always in the wrong. He [*sic*] has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line that should not be crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone' (Douglas, 1966: 113). The arbitrary positioning of female bodies as inherently 'Other' (and therefore threatening) to phallogentric systems of subjective embodiment thus demands and justifies their containment and restriction, lest their 'pollution' spread.

However, although theorists like Christine Braunberger (2000) and Du Preez (2011) do provide readings of specific instances of women deliberately embodying Monstrous aesthetics or performances (such as the latter's discussion of Die Antwoord's grotesque frontwoman Yolandi Vi\$\$er)(2011: 104-105), there is as yet no substantial body of contemporary scholarly work that specifically examines the ways in which the Monstrous Feminine may be deployed as a feminist praxis.

However, it should be acknowledged that there is a rich history of feminist artists from the second wave onwards who have incorporated elements of Monstrous Femininity into systems of visual representation and performance. Rosemary Betterton (2006) and Rebecca Schneider (1997) and Paula McCloskey (2012) provide invaluable discussions of the works of artists like Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelly, Orlan, Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle, all of whom should be recognised as important forerunners to my proposed use of Monstrous Femininity as a practical response to misogyny and essentialised systems of discourse.

There is not sufficient space in this chapter to provide a full account of the use of the Monstrous Feminine by all five of these artists, although I will discuss the latter two in greater and more specific detail as they relate to the Monstrous Feminine in Chapters Three and Four. However, Sherman's work - particularly her later stills and photographs in *History Portraits* (1988-1990) and *Sex Pictures* (1992) – warrant particular attention, given her evocation of grotesque melodrama. Betterton's *Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity and Maternal Imagination* has been very helpful in establishing the epistemological link between Russo's theoretical observations and Sherman's visual work; describing the grotesque film stills and portraits that – akin to Russo's (1994: 160-161) observations of the role of artifice in spectacular relations - oscillate between simulacra and outright parody in replicating the aesthetics of horror and the Monstrous to interrogate the limits of femininity and the maternal (Betterton, 2006: 93).

Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document – a series of installations created over a six-year period in the 1970's – utilises the 'abject' imagery of mothering in order to track the ephemeral maternal encounters that accompanied the birth of her son (McCloskey, 2012: 3). Kelly displayed a myriad of objects that formed the temporary 'maternal assemblages'¹⁵ that characterised her experiences of motherhood; including baby clothes, children's drawings, diary entries and used nappies; each recalling specific memories, emotions and relational interactions typically hidden from view. *Post-*

¹⁵ Drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Kate Boyer (2018:36 -37) describes the concept of the maternal assemblage, being collections of objects, bodies and subjectivities that combine to produce a particular relational process (. i.e.: breastfeeding).

Partum Document engages with psychoanalytic understandings of motherhood, primarily with ideas relating to the mother-child relationship in the pre-Oedipal stage¹⁶, prior to the boy-child's desire to reject the castrating influence of his mother. Creed (1993: 21-22) describes Kelly's project as recalling the Monstrous Feminine, not only in her display of the 'evidence' of the pre-Oedipal bond (which recalls the fear of castration and the loss of phallic law), but also in that her work exemplified female fetishism, a nostalgic longing for the 'lost' phallus of the child that is commemorated in the documented maternal assemblages (McCloskey, 2012: 6). Kelly herself stated: 'In having the child, in a sense, she [the mother] has the phallus. So, the loss of the child is the loss of that symbolic plenitude – more exactly the ability to represent lack' (Kelly, 1998: 125). By displaying the 'abject' assemblages of the mother-child bond, Kelly presents the emotional and affective documentation of maternity that is positioned as abject and Monstrous within phallogentric symbolic orders (McCloskey, 2012: 6). By utilising imagery that provokes castration anxiety, female fetishism, maternal lack and the transgression of the incest taboo, Kelly obliged her audiences to confront the 'Otherness' of the uncontained, unrepressed presence of the maternal, in so doing affecting conflicting responses of disgust and nostalgia.

Parisian artist Orlan also engaged with very public displays of bodily abjection as a means of critiquing the bodily edicts of patriarchal culture. She is particularly famous for undergoing multiple cosmetic surgeries, which were recorded by video camera. In the case of her seventh surgery - a performance entitled *Omniprésence* - the procedure was broadcast live to 15 galleries around the world. Orlan remained conscious throughout the procedures, and answered questions from her audience (Faber, 2002: 85). Orlan's manipulation of her own flesh as a malleable surface image demonstrated the fragility of material ideals. Through the surgical 'opening up' of her skin, Orlan obliged her audiences to literally look beyond the 'surface image' of normative feminine beauty to see the bodily, abject interior (Clarke, 1999: 188). Her work called into question the boundaries between bodily surface and depth, human and machine, beauty and death, appropriating Judeo-Christian imagery of ritualised suffering to become a demonstrative 'saint' – a martyr whose body has borne the violence of feminine beauty. In deliberately undergoing multiple, painful operations for the viewing public, Orlan became a literal signifier, her body bearing the literal inscriptions of normative femininity demanded by patriarchy (Faber, 2002: 89).

¹⁶ Creed (1993: 25-26) describes the pre-Oedipal mother through Kristeva's (1982: 91) work as the maternal figure that precedes the Oedipal, realm of phallic law. Her presence in the horror genre is two-fold, threatening the return to the devouring womb from where all life originates, and the threat of castration that the Mother's body represents.

Kelly's recollection of Monstrous Femininity utilised the nostalgic ephemera of the pre-Oedipal bond to recall the bodily and emotional processes of maternal fetishism, while both Orlan and Sherman use their bodies as spectacular, signifying sites of de-naturalisation and critique. (Betterton, 2006: 93). In so doing the latter two recall the promise of Haraway's *Monsters* to 'Queer what counts as nature' (1992: 300), while Kelly's work invokes Kristeva (1982: 91) and Creed's (1993: 24-25) observations of the phallogentric terror of the archaic, pre-Oedipal Mother. Chapter Three will provide a more in-depth discussion of the intersection between feminist performance art and the spectacular Monstrous Feminine with specific reference to Sherman and Orlan's work. These discussions will necessarily flow over into Chapter Four in my examination of the role of extreme body modification and Monstrous maternity.

However, the non-literary representations of female 'Otherness' that these artists explore represent important genealogical forebears of my relocation of the Monstrous Feminine as praxis. Indeed, like Sherman's film's stills or Kelly's maternal, affective installations, the deliberate deployment of Monstrous Femininity through spectacular and/or abject bodily aesthetics, performances and evocations is significant in that it has the capacity to affect emotional and libidinal responses that would otherwise be impossible through abstract theory. However, where my work differs from these forms of artistic critique and expression lies in its active and deliberate embrace of the Monstrous Feminine as ways of being and doing, rather than an exploration of its themes and aesthetics as a response to phallogentrism.

Significantly, this not only implies the adoption of 'Monstrous' aesthetics and performances, but also the gendered baggage that accompanies the notion of 'Monster'; an assignation that feminist Monster scholars have identified as potentially problematic. Indeed, Shildrick is very careful to maintain a critical approach to the way that she uses the term 'Monster', as well as to whom she applies it. She reminds the reader that there are already those for whom the moniker is problematic and likely to remain so without significant etymological and heuristic reconfiguration, the term being forced onto to them on account of their 'irreconcilable difference' to the 'rational' form of the imperialist, able-bodied male so idealised by Enlightenment philosophers (Shildrick, 2002: 19-20). Sheena Vachhani (2014: 657) builds upon Shildrick's work on the danger inherent in the failure to address normative dualities that lurk within genealogies of the Monstrous, noting that regardless of its capacity to destabilise normative categories of selfhood, it is 'always at the risk of exclusion, stigmatisation or marginalisation if we continue to think of Monsters in a dualistic mode of either good or bad'.

Mary Russo (1994: 76-77) also warns of the uncritical adoption of deliberately differential terms like 'freak' or 'Monster' as a means of disassociating oneself from the mainstream; discussing how counter-cultural intent may appropriate the terminology that had hitherto been reserved only for those that lacked the privilege of such a choice. Furthermore, disability scholars Thomson and Robert Bogdan both argue that although the term 'freak' may be re-appropriated (as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Five), this term, like 'Monster' cannot be freed from its historical baggage¹⁷. Similarly, it is evident that the existing corpus of feminist literature concerning the Monstrous Feminine is wary of the fetishisation of difference, and not unreasonably so. If women (particularly queer, transgender, non-white and disabled women) are already assigned as 'Other' within heteronormative, phallocentric culture; why would Monstrosity represent a praxis that one would voluntarily adopt? This is perhaps at least a cursory explanation as to why there is a gap in the literature on the nature of deliberately performed Monstrosity.

Until very recently, feminist scholarship concerning the Monster has hitherto been in 'recovery mode': coming to terms with and understanding how women have been non-consensually branded as Monstrous and creating strategies to respond to these harmful discourses. As Toffoletti (2014: 10) maintains, an emphasis upon oppositional difference only transgresses the boundary between 'Self' and 'Other' – but does not wholly remove it. It is therefore not surprising that while more recent positioning of the Monster by theorists like Halberstam, Kearney and Shildrick introduces newer understandings of the Monstrous as a vulnerable or liminal process of critique and renegotiation of normative subjectivity, the prospect of appropriating the Monstrous Feminine as a form of feminist praxis is, so far absent from feminist theory. As I shall explain, the racist, ableist misogyny that has characterised the genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine cannot be made accountable to the ethical demands of intersectional feminism.

As I briefly described in my introduction, intersectionality initially emerged within legal scholarship as a means of addressing the specific forms of gender and race-based oppression and violence faced by black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's article *De-marginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-racist politics* addresses the erasure of black women from discussions of both sexism and racism, using the specific case study of a discrimination case brought against General Motors (Crenshaw, 1989: 139-140). She observed that black women and women of colour were at a disadvantage in legal

¹⁷ Thomson (1996: 3) notes that the terms 'freak' and 'Monster' share a very similar ontological history; both being used interchangeably to refer to humans with disabilities or atypical morphologies. Chapter Five discusses the relation between these two terms in greater detail.

anti-discrimination cases, as courts would typically recognise discrimination along a single axis – the legal construction of sexism being grounded in the experience of white women (Crenshaw, 1989: 144). While Crenshaw’s article largely concerns legal theory and praxis, her work called for a broader conceptualisation of oppression within feminist theory, that accounts for multiple, intersecting and overlapping experiences of race and gender. Her work has become central to accounting for race and experiences of racism within contemporary feminism and has contributed to the development and proliferation of modern intersectionality (Bliss, 2016: 728).

Jordana Silverstein’s interview with Aboriginal scholars Carolyn D’Cruz, Ruth De Souza, Samia Khatun and Crystal McKinnon in *Intersectionality, Resistance, and History-Making* (2017) offers perspectives on intersectionality that chart its genealogy from Crenshaw to the present. What emerges from this interview is a rich insight into the transformations that this conceptual and analytic approach to identity and power has undergone since the 1980’s. The movement is one that is indebted to Black feminism, specifically American Black feminism, particularly the work of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde¹⁸. Crenshaw later described three distinct approaches of intersectionality in analysing black women’s experiences of sexual violence: structural intersectionality (1991: 1245 -1246), political intersectionality (1991: 1252-1253) and representational intersectionality (1991: 1282). Each approach addresses ways in which racism and misogyny intersect to produce specific disadvantages for women of colour; access to housing and employment and support services, conflicting political allegiances and erasure within feminist and anti-racism movements, and the depiction within mainstream media and popular culture.

Since the publication of Crenshaw’s work nearly thirty years ago, intersectionality has transformed from a critique of race and gender within the American legal system, to include a much broader demographic scope; including disability, class and sexuality, as well as transgender identities. In their discussion of the transformations of intersectionality since the 1980’s, Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays and Tomlinson state that as a methodology and political strategy, intersectionality is ‘always already an analysis in progress’: there is potentially always an emergent issue of power relations and associated identity politics that can be read and addressed through a deployment of intersectionality (2013: 306). Indeed, Leslie McCall’s detailed analysis of the

¹⁸ Carolyn D’Cruz notes that although Crenshaw’s work is widely recognised as the origin of what is now known as intersectional feminism, she wasn’t the black woman to offer critiques of the singular category of womanhood. She asserts that ‘collusions and intersections’ were occurring within women’s movements long before 1989, citing the example of Sojourner Truth’s ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ speech at Seneca Falls in 1851 (Silverstein, 2017: 18).

various methodological approaches within contemporary intersectionality asserts that the consistently shifting boundaries of identity categories necessitate the constant re-evaluation of the methods of intersectional analysis (2005: 1772).

As a system of scholarly analysis, intersectionality has been deployed over a broad range of academic fields. However, as Sirma Bilge (2013:409) points out, the co-option of intersectionality by academic institutions under neo-liberal regimes presents a considerable problem if this process is isolated from the political significance for marginalised demographics that Crenshaw and hooks initially identified. Bilge's observations about the significance of power relations in contemporary intersectionality are raised by Samia Khatun, who makes a particularly important point that within a liberal, colonial understanding intersectionality has historically sought to establish demonstrate how unequal systems of gendered, racial and classed power interact with and influence one another to produce difference. For Khatun, this problematises the telos of intersectionality by 'imprisoning' it within the language of white liberalism (Silverstein, 2017: 15). What she suggests instead is a greater emphasis on how these systems of difference are produced by colonialism and patriarchy that serves to undermine and disrupt normative institutions of power, rather than gaining equal access to them (Silverstein, 2016: 16).

As both a scholarly and grassroots form of feminism, intersectionality seeks to eschew the essentialised boundaries of normative subjectivity that contribute to exclusionary ideologies and behaviours (Smooth, 2013: 21) However, without these boundaries the Monstrous would cease to exist as a 'dialectical 'Other' (Cohen, 1996: 7). Here emerges the first point of tension between intersectionality and the Monstrous Feminine – the latter exists to transgress and mock these boundaries, not to wholly transcend or dismantle them. Furthermore, as later chapters will explain in greater detail, the praxis of Monstrosity is not one that is equally accessible to all women. While an able-bodied white woman may choose to adopt Monstrous Femininity to protest misogyny, the narratives of racism and ableism that Crenshaw (1991: 1252) and Thomson (2002: 8) describe impose a greater risk of danger and further exclusion for women of colour and women with disabilities who engage in the same practices. To deliberately deploy the Monstrous Feminine is to intentionally take up a position of 'Otherness', a process that is rendered riskier because some women are already more 'Othered' to begin with. While I will discuss the complex notion of risk in Chapters Five and Six, this inequality of access to Monstrous praxes is contrary to intersectionality's purpose of facilitating modes of feminist praxis that are inclusive, and considerate of these imbalances of power and privilege (Smooth, 2013: 11).

However, despite its ubiquity within contemporary feminist scholarship and grassroots advocacy, intersectionality is not without its critics. While the movement as theory may initially appear to be a theoretical panacea to problems of racism, ableism and transphobia within mainstream feminism, scholars like Queer theorist Jasbir Puar is highly critical of the way in which difference is ‘flattened out’ by contemporary intersectionality. Puar (2005: 128) maintains that intersectionality ‘colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state – census, demography, racial profiling and surveillance – in that difference is encased within a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid’. Puar’s assertion raises an immediate point of contention between intersectionality and the Monstrous; the impetus of the former to position identity as a fixed, neat and ‘unmessy’ disciplinary structure.

James Bliss (2016: 731) reads intersectionality as having a ‘desire towards enclosure, a carceral logic that does not simply arrest the movement or motion of Black feminist theorising but produces a world in which *any* movement and *any* motion occur within the space of captivity’. While Bliss’ paper is specifically focussed on black feminism (specifically, American black feminism), his statement speaks not only to a broader critique of the (ironic) lack of allowance for ideological diversity within intersectionality, but also to the risk of stagnation that this lack of momentum implies. This is stagnation applies not only to notions of identity themselves, but also to modes of production *about* identity. Indeed, McCall’s in-depth study of the methodologies utilised to study intersectionality asserts that this enclosure of identity within specific categories may also contribute to further marginalisation:

‘Social life is considered too irreducibly complex – overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures – to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences’ (McCall, 2005: 1773).

Finally, as Puar (2005: 122) states, intersectionality cannot facilitate the transformation of established sites of identity away from binarized sites of disciplinary power¹⁹; the structures of power described by intersectionality are premised upon a system whereby identity (rather than context) is privileged, and one is either ‘queer or not queer’ (Puar, 2005: 121-122). While the

¹⁹ It is important to note that Crenshaw’s original theory is often wrongly interpreted within a contemporary context as being about identities themselves, rather than broadly unequal structures of power. Much of the emphasis in contemporary (particularly grassroots) feminist movements are heavily fixated on producing discourse that is premised upon the multiplicity of identity, rather than on acknowledging the specific contexts in which these identities occur (Crenshaw, 2017). Thus, much of the critique of contemporary intersectionality should be understood as applying more to the erroneous interpretation of Crenshaw’s work than to the work itself.

theoretical intent of intersectionality is to be diverse and inclusive, the practicality of accounting for a multiplicity of heterogeneous experience of identity often proves to be its own undoing. As Rekia Jibrim and Sara Salem (2015:10-11) point out in *Revisiting Intersectionality: Reflections on theory and praxis*, intersectionality's demand to be wholly accessible to all may actually render it impractical: resulting in a greater emphasis upon internal differences within specific feminist spaces and discourses rather than adequately addressing larger structures of hegemonic power.

Here McCall (2005: 1787) observes that as scholarly understandings of the intrarelational complexities of identity develop, the scope of what can be produced and published *as* appropriately inclusive and intersectional becomes increasingly more restrictive. If scholars are obliged to consistently account for increasingly complex intersections of identity, experience and marginalisation, the specificity of their research is diminished, and their workload greatly increased. I will explain more about the significance of small-scale and individually focussed modes of resistance later in this chapter, but what does arise from the above critiques of intersectionality is the ubiquity of narratives that police both the boundaries of identity, and the subsequent production and proliferation of discourse.

This emphasis on policing discursive narratives within feminist activism and scholarship has resulted in the proliferation of reactionary slogans amongst grassroots communities such as '*Feminism without Intersectionality is White Supremacy*' (Bartko, 2017) and the aforementioned '*My Feminism will be Intersectional, or it will be Bullshit*' (Dzodan, 2011): implying that critiques of, or distance from intersectionality will be (or should be) met with disdain and exclusion. Of course, these statements and their associated discourses should not be uncritically accepted as universally representative of grassroots intersectionality, but rather understood as reflective of legitimate anger and frustration at the proliferation of uncritical racism within contemporary feminism. However, their reproduction and normalisation within contemporary feminist discourse (particularly throughout social media) suggests a demand for political loyalty and discursive purity that evokes Foucauldian notions of surveillance and self-discipline. Whether Crenshaw intended for this interpretation of intersectionality is largely irrelevant; for better or worse, polemics like Dzodan's are the genealogical descendants of Crenshaw's work, and ought not be dismissed – especially given how widespread her now-famous mantra has become in online spaces.²⁰

²⁰ Here it is also important to concede that the ubiquity of Dzodan's mantra within feminist cyberspace is unfortunately more to do with patterns of appropriative commodification rather than comprehension. The slogan itself has obfuscated the actual argument. Dzodan has since expressed her frustration at seeing the title of her manifesto packaged up into a trendy simulacra of feminist politics (Dzodan, 2016).

Shotwell (2016: 196-197) notes what she describes as a move away from ‘righteous politics’ within progressive, left-wing movements toward ‘a *self*-righteous politics startlingly in-line with conspiracy theories; what matters is whether you, individually, have the correct language, analysis and critique’. The emergence of prohibitive standards of purity and demand for orthodoxy within a minority of feminist/left-wing spaces (particularly online) demonstrates both the incompatibility of the Monstrous Feminine with contemporary intersectionality *and* the necessity of alternative systems of discourse.

Here, Halberstam’s work provides an important theoretical framing for non-disciplinary strategies that allows for uncertainty, rather than demanding discursive purity. In the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*, he (2011: 15-16) sets out the value of what he refers to as low theory, borrowing from Gramsci’s advocacy of ‘open’ praxes of Marxism that were neither prescriptive, nor fixed in their pedagogical aims. For Halberstam, the potential of open and adaptable heuristics of resistance lies in their lack of loyalty to hegemonic systems of belief and political engagement – particularly those that are produced and normalised by elite institutions like universities (Halberstam, 2011: 17). Halberstam (2011: 15) explains that ‘lowness’ is not indicative of dichotomous opposition to orthodox discourse, but rather a means of providing anti-disciplinary alternatives to dominant systems of knowledge production (2011: 17). Low theory makes room for unfixed logics and ‘uncommon-sense’ that offer critiques from ‘below’ (Halberstam, 2011: 11). In this instance, to ‘fail’ at intersectionality is not an act of incompetence or malice, but rather a necessary discursive detour. Accordingly, we may understand the praxis of Monstrous Femininity not as opposition to, but as an undisciplined detour from intersectional orthodoxy. Here arises perhaps the most significant disparity between the two: intersectionality was theorised as a heuristic that succeeds. That gets it ‘right’. The praxis of Monstrosity has no such burden of expectation – it has the room to fail.

By relieving the Monstrous Feminine of the heavy burden of responsibility that intersectionality supports, space is created to accommodate smaller forms of resistance and disruption that are not intended to be broadly applicable or culturally transformative. Here a distinction between the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality arises that is more complementary than conflicting. Silverstein (2017: 21) and Crenshaw (2017) emphasise the fact that intersectionality is not about individual identities or actions, but rather focussed upon the contextually shifting norms of oppression and privilege that are reinforced by cultural institutions of power. However, in his chapter about the oft-overlooked potential

of 'low theory', Halberstam (2011: 21) makes the case for small-scale and individually focussed modes of refusal:

'I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother irritate and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies'.

It is not the purpose of the Monstrous Feminine - or any other kind of Monster for that matter - to be 'right' or universally applicable. Nor does it need be sensible or consistent with an optimistic, linear notion of progress and productivity in order to be significant (Kolářová, 2014: 270-271). The ambiguity of the Monster ensures that it has no objective morality, being an 'uncertain cultural body' (Cohen, 1996: iv). Rather, as its etymology suggests, the Monster's most basic function is to show, to warn. By constantly refusing subjective or moral enclosure, the liminality of the Monster makes evident the weaknesses and limits within a given system of ethics or discourse, and thus signifies the potential for change (Cohen, 1996: 7). This is precisely why the Monstrous is important: its marginality allows it to produce affective responses that intersectionality cannot.

While intersectionality may have the admirable goal of dismantling the boundaries that contribute to oppression, the Monstrous Feminine is under no such moral obligation. Rather, it makes evident the permeability of these boundaries. As subsequent chapters will explain - the Monstrous Feminine provokes abject, libidinal responses, and suggests hidden, marginal pleasures are either prohibited, or unaccounted for within patriarchy *and* intersectional feminism: jouissance, différence, abjection and terror. These affects are not 'safe'; they unsettle, provoke discomfort and suggest 'perverse' pleasures that are 'Other' to typical forms of desire (MacCormack, 2004: 28). These affects, while potentially unsettling are valuable, because they suggest possibilities of ways of being and doing: new forms of subjectivity, embodiment and pleasure that exist in the liminal spaces between established discourses and norms. I do not advocate for Monstrous Femininity as superior, or as a replacement for intersectionality, but rather for an exploration of alternate systems of critique and resistance that speak back to the limits of contemporary feminist discourse.

Although both Russo and Shildrick both warn about uncritical appropriation of alterity, they do provide some ideas of how to critically engage and understand Monsters in less restrictive, dichotomous terms than hegemonic intersectionality and phallocentrism allow. In *Female*

Grotesques, Carnival and Theory (1986) and then in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Russo (1994:61-62) emphasises the egalitarian nature of the grotesque, taking influence from Mikhail Bakhtin's work concerning the medieval carnival and the role of the grotesque and Monstrous as anti-hierarchical social parody. Russo's portrayal of the grotesque as a laughing, heterogeneous mockery of bourgeois society lays some important groundwork in terms of re-conceptualising excessive, spectacular and abject femininity as a productive and possibly even a subversive influence, rather than a dreadful spectre of unfamiliar sexuality.

While her use of the grotesque does not make explicit connections to the Monstrous Feminine, there is considerable overlap between her application of the term and some feminist scholarship pertaining to the Monstrous Feminine. Both refer to uncontained, excessive, even parodic bodies that occupy liminal, signifying roles between discursive borders; and both may function simultaneously as pejorative and augur; affirming and transgressing patriarchal symbolic orders – being 'both' at once, while also suggesting the presence of something else (Russo, 1994: Creed, 1993: Shildrick, 2002: 55-56). Therefore, while grotesquery and Monstrosity are not interchangeable concepts per se, their deployment as strategies to 'speak back' to both patriarchal and intersectional constructions of the embodied subject is crucial for my own project.

Between *The Female Grotesque* and more recent literature concerning subcultural identity and non-normative embodiment (such as the work of Victoria Pitts and Nikki Sullivan), as well as a genealogy of feminist literature descended from Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine*, there has emerged a newer interest in the disruptive potential of the female Monster, particularly within the field of cultural and media studies and (obviously) literature concerning the horror genre. In fact, the horror genre is a very useful source of case-studies in which to examine the evolution of cultural responses to the Monstrous, as well as the role of the Monstrous feminine. As Christopher Sharrett (1996: 253-254) notes in *The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture*, horror films are a useful means of examining how attitudes towards sexual and gendered 'Otherness' are represented, reinforced (or even challenged) by the society that produces them, and how they may be indicative of shifts within the social status quo.

Creed has mapped the Monstrous Feminine as a projection of phallogentric paranoia and castration anxieties. However, in identifying the aspects of female sexuality and embodiment that are positioned as 'Monstrous' in relation to normative patriarchal society within the horror genre, works such as *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Clover, 1992) and *The Dread of Difference* (ed. Grant, 2011) present the opportunity to re-examine the Monstrous Feminine as a more nuanced, even sympathetic figure. Furthermore, these texts also position the Monstrous Feminine as producing

affective difference, rather than existing as a by-product of phallocentrism. For example, in the introduction to her text (a psychoanalytic interpretation of the sexual and gendered politics of slasher/exploitation films), Clover (1992:4) utilises the term 'victim-hero' as a means of describing the multifaceted role of the liminal, Monstrified-protagonist. Referring to the 1976 film *Carrie*, Clover (1992: 4) maintains:

'[...] like Samson, Carrie is all three [monster, hero and victim] in turn. Throughout most of the movie, she is the victim of monstrous schoolmates and a monstrous mother, but when, at the end, she turns the tables, she herself becomes a kind of monstrous hero - hero insofar as she has risen against and defeated the forces of monstrosity, monster insofar as she has become excessive, demonic.'

Clover (1992: 4) continues:

'Her [Carrie's] status in both roles has indeed been enabled by "women's liberation." Feminism, that is, has given language to her victimisation and a new force to the anger that subsidises her own act of horrific revenge.'

Here the shift between the Monstrous Feminine as a theoretical concept and as an instance of praxis and performance can be observed. Carrie becomes a victim/hero on account of her deliberately Monstrous actions; actions that are not easily categorisable as strictly 'good' or 'bad', or wholly accountable within either phallocentric or feminist symbolic orders (who would justify the mass murder of Carrie's school-mates?). Nonetheless, Carrie's Monstrosity provokes significant responses and raises new questions about vengeance, violence and female sexuality.²¹ Thus, Clover's analysis shifts the construction of the Monstrous Feminine towards a more nuanced system of representation and ethics. Clover's text builds upon Creed's psychoanalytic account of the abject Monstrous Feminine to explore the fluidity of gendered signifiers inherent within horror. This is significant, as it represents a shift in the description of the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine towards a more fluid concept of gendered Monstrosity: as well as a means by which the praxis of Monstrosity may affect libidinal responses that are outside the purview of patriarchal binaries *and* intersectional systems of ethical categorisation.

Halberstam's use of Clover's work extends this liminally gendered construction of Monstrosity. In his wonderfully named chapter *Bodies that Splatter: Queens and Chainsaws*, Halberstam expands

²¹ Similarly, one may also observe similar patterns of sympathetic-yet-monstrous heroines in films like *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and *Teeth* (2007). Like *Carrie*, both films position the sexual awakening as literal transformations – the former linking menstruation and puberty with lycanthropy, and the latter portraying the vagina dentata as a framing device for a rape-revenge narrative.

Clover's notion of the masculinised 'final girl'²² survivor to examine how gendered semiotics are 'queered' within slasher films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. Stating '[...] the final girl [...], represents not boyishness or girlishness but monstrous gender, a gender that splatters, rips at the seams and then is sutured together again as something much messier than male or female' (Halberstam, 1995: 143). Monstrous genderfluidity does more for Halberstam than just establishing a nuanced hero/villain dynamic – it takes the tattered shreds of masculinity and femininity, and weaves something entirely new. This is precisely where my own intent lies – to imagine the Monstrous outside of a binary construction of masculinity or femininity, but rather as a disruptive, process that affects this kind of messy, bricolage of embodiment and identity: a genderfucked Bride of Frankenstein, newly stitched together from the old odd-ends of gender and bodily norms, and risen from the slab²³ to terrorise normative symbolic orders with its liminal multiplicity.

The horror and gothic genres contain a wealth of important literature concerning the destabilisation of gendered boundaries through the Monstrous. Both Creed and Clover utilise the theory of the abject as a means of describing the horrifying liminality of the Monstrous Feminine, representing an incursion of the castrating, devouring feminine into the realm of the phallic 'Self' (Creed, 1993: 11). Given the emphasis that Ussher and Creed place on the misogyny inherent within the classification of the female body as abject, its associated role within the praxis of Monstrosity that this thesis posits is not sustainable within an intersectional framework that seeks to distance femininity and female embodiment from patriarchal essentialism and pejoratives.

However, the abject nonetheless remains a valuable means of exploring how the presence of the 'Other' may prove to be a creative, even sublime experience, rather than just a confronting or frightening one on account of its capacity to destabilise normative systems of meaning and subjectivity. Kristeva herself begins *Powers of Horror* by describing the abject as 'the place where meaning collapses..' and as 'a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome.

²² Clover's positions the monstified 'final girl' of slasher films as representative of the projection of 'male' attributes (a unisex name, a lack of sexual interest in men, resourcefulness etc.) onto a female character: all the better to facilitate her bloody survival, and to ensure that the similarly gender-fluid male killer may be defeated (Clover, 1992:48-49)

²³ Susan Stryker (1994: 240) described her own transgender identity as akin to that of Frankenstein's Monster; excluded, but nonetheless seeking to reclaim her own Monstrous identity as a means of reconfiguring the oppressive norms of embodiment and gender that are imposed upon her. In *My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage* she invokes Shelley's work: 'As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be' (Stryker, 1994: 242).

Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A 'something' that I do not recognise as a thing' (Kristeva, 1982: 2). The abject, like the Monster is more than simply 'Other'; rather, in its uncanniness, it functions as a 'threat' to established boundaries that distinguish between 'Self' and 'Not Self'.²⁴ Subsequently, the abject terror that Creed attributes to the Monstrous Feminine emerges as an affective process, rather than a by-product of phallocentric anxiety: a process that facilitates the break-down of the borders that constitute the exclusionary sovereign Self that Shildrick (2002: 81) describes. The abject constitutes more than mere disgust, it represents a deeply intimate, potentially transformative subjective experience. The incursion of the 'Other' into the realm of the familiar constitutes an 'undoing' of the meanings that constitute selfhood, an experience that Kristeva (1990: 182) and Shildrick (2002: 83) assert, reveals opportunities for renegotiation of the boundaries of identity and ethical responses.

In this way, the abjection that the Monstrous Feminine provokes represents a transgression of subjective boundaries that subsequently facilitates a process of vulnerability and a respect for Otherness that does not demand its exclusion. Here, Shildrick's discussion of the Monster as an agent of vulnerability and vulnerable becoming becomes relevant. One may understand Shildrick's use of the term vulnerability as being a 'kinder, gentler' version of Kristeva's abject; being an 'existential state that may belong to any one of us, but which is characterised nonetheless as a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm' (Shildrick, 2002: 1). As stated, normative patriarchal discourses posit rationality as inherently male, white, able-bodied and heterosexual; idealising a wholly self-contained, impermeable subjectivity and corporeality that is sustained by the exclusion of 'Monstrous Others' – female bodies, sick bodies, anomalous bodies, animals (Shildrick, 2002: 5).

However, this 'exclusion' is never complete; it is vulnerability, not stoic impermeability that is a constant within human society; an inescapable 'leakiness' of boundaries that suggests that no one is wholly 'safe' from the imposition of the 'Other'. In this instance, the Monster is a representative of that which is ideally excluded but is never wholly an exteriority – as it is an alterity that originates from within the realm of the normative Self (Shildrick, 2002: 5-6). For

²⁴ It ought to be noted here that there is a distinction between the psychoanalytic framework employed by Kristeva in her discussion of the abject, and the post-structuralist approach that a theorist like Halberstam uses to examine the liminality of the Monstrous. While the former describes the abject as a largely subliminal process, Halberstam positions the 'perverse' nature of the Monstrous as a much more active system of resistance to categoric absolutes. Thus, my own configuration of the Monstrous as abject emerges as a bricolage of both of these approaches; the Monstrous Feminine being an active praxis that provokes the libidinal responses that Kristeva describes through deliberate performances of 'Otherness'.

Shildrick, the danger that the Monster represents to normative notions of Selfhood lies in its ambiguity:

'Simultaneously threat and promise, the Monster, as with the feminine, comes to embody these things which an ordered and limited life must try and finally fail to abject.'

(Shildrick, 2002: 5)

The notion of vulnerability, therefore is the risk of 'harm' to the patriarchal construct of the self-sufficient and excluding body through exposure to the 'Otherness' that is at the heart of the subject yet is repressed through the artificial construction of materiality and subjectivity (Shildrick, 2002: 4). Shildrick's focus is largely upon issues of subjective corporeality; the ways in which the ambiguity of Monstrous bodies (women, those with congenital disabilities, non-white subjects) defines both the limits and vulnerability of post-Enlightenment bodily logos (Shildrick, 2002: 25). This is also made evident in her work *Dangerous discourses of Disability: Subjectivity and Sexuality*, which follows on from *Embodying the Monster* to further bring together the interconnectedness of bodily, sexual and subjective 'Otherness' within the logos of normative able-bodiedness and heteronormativity (Shildrick, 2009: 15-16). This emphasis upon corporeality and the experience of abject vulnerability is particularly relevant to the praxis of Monstrosity, as it establishes a premise by which the deliberate and public display and performance of non-normative bodies may provoke

It is this 'reclamation' of vulnerability that is of interest to me, as it provides a term that succinctly describes the way in which 'Otherness' may serve to destabilise exclusive normativity, rather than perpetuate it. Furthermore, to extend Shildrick's logic further, the incursion of the 'Other' into the realm of the familiar applies not only to white, patriarchal symbolic orders, but also to systems of feminist discourse that have become familiar to the extent that they are hegemonic. This should not suggest a simplistic inversion of Shildrick's theory, implying the incursion of patriarchy into feminism, but rather the presence of a Monstrous 'Otherness' that is unaccountable within both systems of categorisation and discipline. Indeed, here my disagreement with feminist theorists like Ussher becomes most evident. Her assertion that the 'monster is *not* within us' (Ussher, 2006: 174) demonstrates not only that her account of the Monstrous Feminine is limited to (and by) phallogentric essentialism, but also presumes that her account of feminism can wholly exclude the Monstrous 'Other', simply by refusing to believe in it²⁵. Indeed, as has been previously established by theorists such as Shildrick, Kearney, Cohen

²⁵ Ussher (2006: 174) completes her text by stating that the Monstrous Feminine is 'a misogynistic imagination'.

(and to a certain extent, Kristeva²⁶), the Monstrous arises not from some wholly foreign, invading alterity, but rather from within the realm of the Self (Shildrick, 2002: 5). To paraphrase Cohen (1995: 20) 'Monsters are our children'; the 'Other' is already within us. Thus, rather than shunning the Monster altogether, what matters is the means by which it is deployed. As Kearney (2003: 5) states:

'And they [Monsters] remind us that we have a choice: (a) try to understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness, or (b) to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders. All too often, humans have chosen the latter option, allowing paranoid illusions to serve the purpose of making sense of our confused emotions by externalising them into black-and-white scenarios'.

This suggests that Ussher's analysis also fails to account for the Monster's capacity to reflect the arbitrariness of patriarchy back onto itself, as well as to expose the weaknesses within her own familiar realm of feminist discourse. It is true that the Monstrous cannot be made commensurate with a feminism that seeks to wholly eschew the baggage of pejorative, the value of the Monstrous does not lie in erasing oppressive boundaries, but rather in making them evident as arbitrary, porous and perhaps even laughable. Indeed, while Ussher makes important observations about the misogyny inherent in arbitrarily associating feminine subjectivity and fecundity with the abject 'Other', her call for the banishment of the Monstrous Feminine represents a worrying demand for discursive 'purity' within feminist theory.

In his analysis of the role of the Monstrous within the Gothic genre (which frequently intersects with horror), Halberstam argues for the importance of the Monster as an abject, 'perverse' creature that resists definition as a mere antagonist, going so far as to warn his readers of the risk of emphasising 'purity and innocence' and the 'Monster Hunters' that would seek to utterly jettison the abject and impure. Instead, he emphasises the need for Monsters *because* they represent impurity; not because of its inherent evil, but rather because it 'always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries and the presence of impurities - and so we need Monsters, and we need to recognise and celebrate our own monstrosities' (Halberstam, 1995: 27). In so doing, Halberstam has acknowledged the observations of Douglas, Kristeva and Shildrick, and has cast his vote in favour of that which is not invulnerable to Monstrous 'contamination'. It is perhaps unfair to accuse Ussher of being a 'Monster hunter' as Halberstam

²⁶ Kristeva described the abject as marking the borders of selfhood, the borders of 'I' are made evident by that which is 'Not I'. Therefore, the nature of the abject is stipulated by the same boundaries: 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself*' within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*' (Kristeva, 1982: 3).

would have it, but her insistence on the banishment of the Monstrous Feminine speaks to a broader problem within intersectional feminism discussed above: the impetus to always be ‘right’.

I position the Monstrous Feminine as a valuable system of praxis precisely because it has no such imperative. Its potential lies in its liminality and capacity to produce meaning through their transgressions of bodily, subjective and moral boundaries. Monsters and the Monstrous Feminine are unsettling because they refuse to stay still within familiar realms of ethics and praxis; they have no inherent morality, being neither good nor evil, but rather are in a constant state of transformation that ‘overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject’ (Shildrick, 2002: 4). Being confronted with a figure of ‘Otherness’ that exposes the limits of one’s own beliefs is often a disquieting experience, but it is also an essential one.

Russo (1994: 160) describes the experience of witnessing such a spectacle of alterity as a form of social exchange, a ‘meeting place’ where those that see her are obliged to acknowledge the presence of the ‘Other’. She dedicates her chapter to discussing the relationship between the female grotesque and the spectacle²⁷, which she describes as an ongoing social process, a form of relational communication that has the capacity to ‘show’ an audience to themselves through witnessing extraordinary events, creating a public site of discursive convergence and re-negotiation. This notion of the public, spectacular and parodic body of the excessive and uncontainable, grotesque female Monster dovetails nicely into discussions of how practical, performative Monstrosity may be presented as a potentially confronting, yet transformative public display of ‘Otherness’. I am interested in how performance art and public displays of Monstrosity may be positioned as a form of tongue-in-cheek mockery and *jouissance*²⁸, if not outright resistance to patriarchal norms.

At this point, Shildrick begins to discuss the future of Monsters as augurs of the necessity of change. In her concluding chapter *Welcoming the Monstrous Arrivant*, Shildrick (2002: 120) discusses the futures and promises of Monsters, the role of feminism and post-humanist thought in

²⁷ DeBord’s text *The Society of the Spectacle* is grounded within Marxist theory of consumption and capital, and so should not be considered as directly related to the Monstrous. I will provide a more thorough examination of Russo’s linkage of DeBord’s work to the Female Grotesque in Chapter Three.

²⁸ My use of the *jouissance* here is intended to be a hybrid one, drawing simultaneously on Kristeva’s and Cixous’ use of the term. For Kristeva, *jouissance* describes an ecstatic, excessive state of the subject ‘in process’ – caught between the maternal semiotic and the phallogocentric symbolic; a subjective space that is neither fully realized or unified, but constantly displaced – often manifesting within the abject (cited in Fountain, 1994: 194-195). In *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), Cixous and Catherine Clément refer to *jouissance* as a function of *l’écriture féminine* that marks an explosive, limitless and abundant pleasure in being outside of a patriarchal linguistic ‘center’ (cited in Ermath, 1992: 160).

facilitating a reclamation of the vulnerable, material ‘Other’. Seeing the subjective and the material as inseparable and equally unstable, she maintains an interest in how ambiguous bodies can be reconfigured as sites of communication and transformation that de-centre the normative, autonomous masculine subject (Shildrick, 2002: 120-121). She places particular emphasis upon Donna Haraway’s *Promises of Monsters* (1992) and *A Manifesto For Cyborgs* (1984), exploring the potential of the Monstrous through its ability to resist and destabilise phallogentric symbolic orders; not through violence or usurpation – but rather through exposing and rejecting binary systems of gendered and bodily difference (Shildrick, 2002: 127).

The significance of Haraway’s cyborg lies not in its opposition to normative constructions of reality, but rather in its ability to signify the fragility of the borders that constitute it. Being a composite of human and technology, the cyborg is thus a boundary creature, inhabiting the space in-between classifications of species, bodies, technologies and genders, transcending categorisations mired in duality in favour of a ‘powerful infidel heteroglossia’ (Haraway, 1985: 37). It is precisely this ‘in-between-ness’ that problematises the realm of patriarchal absolutes: refusing established taxonomies of difference or familiarity. Shildrick (2002: 124) explains the significance of the ‘in-between’ thusly:

‘What happens at the boundaries, where the leaks and flows across categories signal not so much the breakdown of security as the already impossibility of fixed definition, becomes of crucial importance. They are sites not only of the enhanced policing that accompanies anxiety, but of powerful hopes. Any being occupying the liminal spaces or moving across putative classifications takes on the potential to confound and fracture normative identity.’

Simply put, the cyborg (that Shildrick and I position as analogous to the Monster) (Haraway, 1984: 35) is disturbing because it invalidates the binary system that distinguishes ‘Self’ from the ‘Other’ and demonstrates the possibility of a multiplicity of hybrid subjectivities and materialities, hitherto obfuscated by the façade of patriarchal dualities. In so doing, these liminal beings facilitate the emergence of new forms of communication and alliances that themselves may further confound the monolith of patriarchal western logos (Shildrick, 2002: 125-126). Monsters beget Monsters, each emerging with their own promise of transformation and challenge. Thus, rather than an attempt to eschew difference in favour of an ecstatic embrace of boundary-less synthesis (as envisioned within Baudrillard’s (2001:195) Catastrophic predictions²⁹), or a

²⁹ Baudrillard’s (2001: 194) theory of the Catastrophe posits the loss of subjective boundaries (and therefore, of difference entirely) as the product of an inevitable exponential proliferation of capitalist

form of isolated reactionism, both the Monstrous Feminine and the cyborg are positioned within Shildrick and Haraway's work as arbiters of a kind of difference that fosters communication, rather than dualistic contrarianism.

However, while the cyborg and the Monstrous are certainly discursive siblings, their construction and genealogies differ. Haraway's cyborg rejects specific identity politics that attempt to posit one specific form of oppression (racism, misogyny, classism, homophobia) as a singular and essentialised axis upon-which a revolutionary 'self' must be constructed. Rather, the cyborg has no specific ontology, beyond the chimeric 'bastard race' that is unrooted in any particular political genesis or another, but rather is a hybrid, liminal, transformed being that represents multiplicity over assimilation (Haraway, 1984: 31-32).

By comparison, the Monstrous is often reduced to a singular category of interpretation, despite having the potential for multiplicity (Halberstam, 1995: 7-8). Further, as I have previously discussed, the genealogy of the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine precedes that of the cyborg, and thus carries a significantly more complex, problematic epistemological burden. Nonetheless, Haraway's cyborg has proven critical in informing Shildrick's positioning of the Monstrous as a representative of transformative vulnerability, rather than an oppositional 'Other' that emerges as independent and exterior to the 'Self' (Shildrick, 2002: 129). Instead of valorising difference for difference's sake (and thus regressing to the starting point of 'woman as Other'), both Shildrick and Haraway both emphasise the significance of forms of bodily and subjective difference that refuse binarised categories of exclusion.

Shildrick's positioning of Monstrous liminality and vulnerability as a necessarily disruptive presence has strong parallels with Rosi Braidotti's theories of nomadic subjectivity. While not a work pertaining to Monsters per se, (her chapter *Mothers, Monsters and Machines* notwithstanding), Braidotti's (2011: 57-58) discussions of difference is nonetheless significant, as it seeks to re-imagine alterity beyond normative, binary definitions, manifested as a specifically located and relational process of negotiated ethics, rather than a fixed or inherent trait. Her text *Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* introduces nomadic subjectivity as the result of (and a response to) a modern, globalised iteration of advanced capitalism that perpetuates and emphasises difference-based isolation and exclusion, privileging proximity to a Eurocentric, patriarchal 'centre' as the dominant standard of selfhood. Braidotti's work positions the nomadic subject as a pre-existing entity within a context of increasingly hostile inter-cultural

consumption and the simulacra of meaning. I will provide an in-depth discussion of Baudrillard's work on difference, the posthuman and the Monstrous in Chapter Two.

and intra-cultural political and personal confrontations. Her methodology seeks to utilise the nomadic subject as a productive, creative means of re-negotiating and even transforming the terms of differentiation (Braidotti, 2011: 7-8). Like Shildrick, Braidotti discourages the uncritical reproduction of hegemonic 'sameness', investigating instead the potential of the 'in-between' as a source of social and political resistance, stating:

'The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of the marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of their specification and of our political interaction' (Braidotti, 2011: 7).

Braidotti describes her work as both a creative project and an analytical tool that is accountable and aware of the hegemonic privileges and norms of one's subjective position; a constant process of critical subjective relocation and reflection that constitutes an intervention on the western logos of the dominant masculine (Braidotti, 2011: 14). What is interesting here is her development of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming minoritarian' described by Braidotti (2011: 12) as processes that are 'the affirmative alternative to this phallogocentric vision of the subject'. Deleuze and Guattari themselves discuss these processes as 're-territorialisations'; reconfigurations of the self that constitute a critique of, and divorce from the dominant social majority. In this sense, the term majority does not reference population, but rather hegemonic power and influence majority' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 291). In this instance, I am interested in the notion of 'hegemonic power and influence majority'.

While nomadic subjectivity is primarily positioned as a means of critiquing patriarchal Eurocentrism (Braidotti, 2011: 9), it may also be interpreted more broadly as a means of analysing the limits of dominant forms of counter-cultural and academic responses to misogyny and racism. Given the contemporary ubiquity of intersectional feminism, the Monstrous also emerges in this instance as a minoritarian figure, that which cannot be made commensurate with intersectionality's project of subjective taxonomy, and therefore exteriorised, as theorists like Ussher recommend. By resisting definition of oneself solely through relation to a discursive majority, 'becoming-minoritarian' is a process whereby marginalised or minority populations may seek new 'lines of flight' and methods of becoming and speaking that are resistant to normative 'majoritarian' symbolic orders and discourses (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 292). My research asserts that the use deliberate use of Monstrous aesthetics, embodiment and performance serves

a similar purpose; making evident bodily pleasures and discourses that are unaccounted for within either patriarchy or intersectionality.

This is the present situation (or situations) of the Monster and the Monstrous Feminine within scholarly literature. Braidotti, Haraway, Halberstam and Shildrick have provided blueprints for how the liminality of the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine may be configured in a future that rejects the binary absolutes of 'rational' phallogocentrism, encouraging vulnerability and ambiguity as traits that may decentre pretences of subjective isolation and monolithic constructions of rationality. The same authors have also given fair warning of the dangers of over-valorising or fetishising 'Otherness', regressing back to the voyeuristic exploitation of the Monster as a wondrous being that perpetuates such dualistic isolation through containment and domestication. The way is open to continue investigating the potential of the Monstrous Feminine as and agentic process of praxis.

Although there has been a shift in feminist and queer theory towards re-interpreting the role and significance of the Monstrous Feminine as a potential force for critical resistance, it nonetheless remains a largely theoretical concept within feminist scholarship; a discursive tool or, at the most corporeal, a fictional representation of gendered 'Otherness'. Even within the non-literary representations of Cindy Sherman, Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle, the exploration of Monstrous Femininity remains rooted within questions of female sexuality and reproduction. Even for artists like Orlan whose work extends beyond second-wave politics, her work does not necessarily speak back to or critique the norms within feminist discourse in the way that I position the Monstrous Feminine to do with intersectionality. While counter-cultural identity and aesthetics (i.e.: body modification, punk/goth subcultures, performance art etc) have been obliquely linked to the concept of Monstrosity by theorists like Pitts, Katherine Weese, and Christine Braunberger; the notion of Monster as a praxis rather than pure theory is not one that has yet been discussed in any sufficient academic detail.

Furthermore, while theorists like Shildrick, Haraway and Halberstam have offered tantalising glimpses of the capacity of the Monster to operate beyond discursive binaries, there is not yet a body of academic work that acknowledges the capacity of the Monstrous as a potentially omnidirectional praxis of resistance, critique and provocation. This is where my own work begins – to imagine the Monstrous as a figure of resistance that produces responses and asks questions about gender and embodiment that are beyond the purview of contemporary, intersectional feminism. What is at stake here is the oft-overlooked legitimacy and potential of an

'Otherness' that is intentionally and critically deployed as praxes that may resist, rather than affirm heteronormative, sexist norms of subjectivity and embodiment.

Here, my focus turns from existing scholarship to my own research. Most notably, where it deviates from existing scholarship concerning the Monstrous Feminine. I will begin with my use of language – most notably, the specifics of the term 'The Monstrous Feminine'.

Monstrous Terminology

According to Creed, 'the Monstrous Feminine' is not an umbrella term that should be broadly applied to any and all representations of female Monsters. As stated, in her introduction to *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed (1993: 3) explains that the specificity of the term relates to the distinction between feminist modes of analysis, and generalised terminology that refers to Monsters who happen to be female. This distinction is important, she maintains, as it distinguishes between the arbitrary assignation of woman-as-Monster and critical processes that acknowledge of the significance of gender in this construction of Monstrosity. Put more simply, Creed's text establishes that the term 'Monstrous Feminine' is not a pre-existing, patriarchal phenomenon relating to female Monsters, but specifically as a theoretical response to the filmic 'Othering' of female sexuality, embodiment and reproductive capacities.

This then leads to a second important point about my use of Monstrous terminology, which is the relationship between the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine. As my above discussion of the work of Cohen, Asma and Kearney shows, the category of 'Monster' is enormously broad, encompassing moral, spiritual and corporeal manifestations of 'Otherness'. For Creed's stipulations of the gendered specificity of the Monstrous Feminine to remain, it is necessary to emphasise that the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine are not interchangeable terms or concepts. However, this does not preclude the similarity of their epistemological roots. As systems of representation (in discourse, theory, film, literature or praxis) they are closely related, in as much as they both signify a dominant culture's anxieties pertaining to the threat of the repressed 'Other' (Cohen, 1996: 14-15; Creed, 1993: 7). For Creed, the 'Monstrification' of women within the horror genre speaks to the ways in which phallogentric fears of female sexuality are made manifest: the devouring, abject mother and phallic female vampire representing a return of the 'Other' that Cohen (1996: 20) stipulates to be a property of *all* Monsters. Here, Halberstam's (1995: 6) discussion of the eponymous *Technology of Monsters* becomes particularly relevant, as his conceptualisation of technologies of the Monstrous establishes the link between Creed's specific, critical positioning of the Monstrous Feminine, and Cohen's broad description of category-eluding Monsters.

Skin Shows traces the delineation of multiple forms of ‘Othered’ identities within Gothic horror into the singular interpretive realm of sexuality (Halberstam, 1995: 7-8)³⁰. Consequently, he seeks to provide an account for the Monstrous as multiple, stating “Monsters not only reveal certain material conditions of the production of horror, but they also make strange the categories of beauty, humanity and identities that we still cling to” (Halberstam, 1995: 6). Here, Halberstam makes room for a conception of the Monstrous that is not limited to a single axis of critique at a time, but rather is a ‘meaning machine’ that has the capacity to represent and de-monstrate multiple *or* singular forms of identity, according to its specific application (Halberstam, 1995: 21-22). What this suggests is that the broader cultural category of the Monstrous, and the Monstrous Feminine are not wholly segregated concepts. In fact, I would be so bold as to suggest that the Monstrous Feminine as described by Creed is an exemplar of one specific technology of the Monstrous, albeit one deployed with a very specific scholarly purpose.

To be clear, in positioning Creed’s Monstrous Feminine as a technology of the Monstrous, I am not advocating for its discursive assimilation. Nor do I or suggest that the praxis of Monstrous Femininity that I describe should be understood as a technology in the manner initially envisioned by Foucault. Rather, this thesis locates Creed’s categorisation of the Monstrous Feminine within the broader technological framework that Halberstam describes. For this reason, I maintain that it is necessary to view the Monstrous Feminine as being inextricably connected to and implicated within broader discussions of Monstrosity – such as those articulated by Halberstam, Kearney, Asma and Cohen - while still maintaining its own specific purposes and representations. For this reason, when this thesis refers to ‘The Monster/Monstrous’ as a broader concept, it is not suggesting a discursive dissolution of the Monstrous Feminine into a more generic category, but rather demonstrating the significance of the epistemological link between them.

Furthermore, positioning Monstrous Femininity within the technological genealogy of Monsters that Halberstam describes leaves the way open for a deployment of Monstrous Femininity as praxis, rather than a purely theoretical system of critique. As my subsequent discussion will show, Creed’s important text has laid the groundwork for scholarly responses to misogyny and phallocentrism in horror. However, I maintain that it can and should be expanded beyond theoretical specificity. To reiterate Cohen’s (1996: 4) assertion, the Monster – even in theory - is

³⁰ Halberstam states quite plainly that the ‘narrowing down’ of Monstrous identities in Gothic literature is due to the dominance of psychoanalytic systems of interpretation (particularly Freudian theory) which prioritise sex and gender over issues of race and class (Halberstam, 1995: 24). Perhaps it is pertinent to suggest that Creed’s emphasis on sex and gender is also symptomatic of this representational narrowing?

a master escape artist. In the twenty-five years that have elapsed since the publication of *The Monstrous Feminine*, someone was bound to eventually leave the cage open.

The Monstrous Feminine speaking back to Theory.

Following on from my discussion of terminology and modes of interpretation, my intention is to demonstrate that the Monstrous Feminine may manifest as a deliberate form of feminist praxis, rather than existing solely as a theoretical concept or system of analysis. In so doing, I maintain that such a deployment may exemplify Halberstam's observations of the 'multiple meanings' capable of being produced by the Monstrous – speaking back to both patriarchy *and* extant feminist scholarship. What I am proposing is a specific process of 'Otherness' that borrows from Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity, Halberstam's Queer Art of failure, Shildrick's vulnerability and Haraway's cyborg, that is nonetheless distinct from its constituent parts: a patchwork praxis of affective 'Otherness' that acknowledges its genealogy without being solely defined by it. This bricolage of theory and strategy is not a set system of rules or ethics, but rather a means of deploying bodily and subjective 'Otherness' as a form of resistance, parody and critique.

The praxis of Monstrosity is not one that is wholly dependent upon scholarship but acknowledges its limits. This is relevant not only to intersectionality, as discussed above, but also to the work of 'anti-Monster' theorists like Ussher. A deployment of Monstrous Femininity that evokes grotesque parody, and liminal vulnerability rather than uncritical terror demonstrates a capacity to transgress, rather than conform to phallogentric binaries. My intention is to prove that being a 'Self' is not (or, should not be) dependent upon being distinct from the 'Other'.

Ethical re-appropriation of the Monstrous – a response to Shildrick.

The second pertains to the notion of definition and reclamation; can the Monstrous Feminine be deployed in a manner that does more than perpetuate pre-determined discursive binaries? Here, I defer to Shildrick, whose approach to the potentially problematic nature (and subsequent redefinition) of the Monstrous has been the most useful:

'What I propose is a new form of ethics that answers more fully to the multiplicity of embodied difference, and as such, it is precisely my intention to undo the singular category of monster. In place of a morality of principles and rules that speaks to a clear-cut set of binaries setting out the good and the evil, the self and the other, normal and abnormal, the permissible and the prohibited, I turn away from such normative ethics to embrace instead the ambiguity and unpredictability of an openness towards the monstrous other' (Shildrick, 2002: 3).

It is precisely this ambiguity – the spaces in-between discourse and knowledge – that provide the key to this redefinition. While the practice of Monstrosity is certainly fraught with risk, it may also be a means of giving a name (and therefore a voice) to that which is abjected and excluded from intersectional discussions about gender, sexuality and embodiment. In short, re-appropriating 'The Monstrous Feminine' is not merely an exercise in opposing the 'normal' (whether that 'norm' is patriarchal or the dominance of intersectional feminism), but rather a means of creating a discursive and linguistic space where the unspoken, the abject and the 'Other' may exist as something more than a social scapegoat, domesticated curio or abstract theory.

However, at this point I must also offer a critique of the telos of Shildrick's work on vulnerability. As the previous quote demonstrates, her redeployment of the Monstrous as a process of vulnerability is positioned as 'an ethics for and of the body' (Shildrick, 2002: 129). What emerges from this demarcation of the Monstrous-as-vulnerability as an ethical endeavour is a heuristic that is – for all its emphasis on ambiguity - forward facing, and answerable to feminist dialectics. More simply put, although Shildrick is careful to avoid uncritical or voyeuristic valorisation of the 'Other' (2002: 7), her work in *Embodying the Monster* is concerned with 'positive realignments' of the Monstrous that do not compromise ethical conditions (2002: 8). While I concede that such ethical realignments are - individually – possible, I nonetheless disagree with the implication that Monsters can or *should* be considered valuable only if their presence or deployment fits a given ethical standard. Shildrick's use of Haraway's Cyborg offers a utopian vision of hybrid bodies and liminal subjects, an imagining of the unmaking of patriarchal binaries, colonial sovereignty and even the category of 'human' itself – a veritable Promise of Monsters if you will (Shildrick, 2002: 125-125 ; Haraway, 1990: 223). My thesis can offer no such promise, because unlike Shildrick, I do not believe that the Monstrous or the Monstrous Feminine can be relied upon to 'stay put' within the ethical realignments that she envisions, certainly not to the extent that they can be considered 'our best hope' (Shildrick, 2002: 128). As I have already explained, this is simply not the nature of Monsters. Indeed, if Shildrick (2002: 3) advocates for a radical undecidability – I am curious as to the necessity of it not 'compromising the conditions for an ethics' (Shildrick, 2002: 8).

Furthermore, I also share Halberstam's (2011: 4-5) view that it should not be necessary for strategies of resistance to oppressive norms to be undertaken with a view towards triumph, progress or positivity in order to be valuable. If the Monstrous Feminine arose – as Creed (1993:3) asserts – as a phallogentric response to women's supposed 'Otherness' to the male default, then surely, from a critical, Queer/feminist perspective, a failure to replicate these norms

‘must surely harbour its own productive potential’ (Halberstam, 2011: 125). Halberstam’s work on failure provokes the question as to why it is necessary to seek transcendence through a (supposedly) realigned ethics of Monstrosity, when failure may offer a subaltern³¹ alternative? Indeed, at the time of writing it appears that Haraway’s lofty, illuminated Promise of Monsters, and subsequent hope for ‘liveable worlds’ (Haraway, 1994: 60) seem ever more out of reach; the murky realms of shadow feminisms and Queer failure presently appearing far more contextually viable. Rather than corralling the Monstrous Feminine into an overly-optimistic muzzle of conditional, ethical alterity, I’m keen to unleash a little melancholic chaos.

Impurity and Accountability

As discussed, the Monstrous is significant not only because of its capacity to produce affective responses that intersectionality cannot (jouissance, abject vulnerability etc.); but it is also valuable because - to return to MacCormack (2004: 28) - it serves to ‘pervert’ and question that which is taken for granted as ‘unquestionable’. In a subheading of her first chapter in *Against Purity* entitled “*We*” *Has Never Been Pure*, Shotwell (2016: 13-14) invokes Mary Douglas’ writing about purity and disorder, cautioning against the demand for absolute ideological coherence and purity as ‘productive normative formulations – they make a claim that a certain way of being is aspired to, good or to be pursued’. Shotwell’s work on Queering and the production of normativity will be discussed in more detail in my final chapter; but what is significant at this point is her observation of the normalisation of discursive purity within progressive movements, maintaining that ‘To be against purity is, again, not to be for pollution, harm, sickness or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous’ (Shotwell, 2016: 15).

Shotwell’s warnings may be applied to any political movement. However, the rise of intersectionality has resulted in the formation of new kinds of normativity within intersectional feminism: a small, but significant shift towards hegemonic, coercive tactics (as evidenced by Dzodan’s (2011) aforementioned polemic) that demand uniformity at the risk of exclusion. As

³¹ Halberstam uses the term ‘subaltern’ primarily as a reference to Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Spivak’s essay is highly critical of Western philosophers (Foucault and Deleuze specifically) – as well as Western feminists’ assumption of ideological transparency, and subsequent disregard for their own privileged position of power within ideological debate. She maintains that Western domination of scholarly and philosophical systems of knowledge leaves non-westerners (particularly women) with little capacity for self-representation and subjective freedom within these conventional frameworks, resulting in ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1988: 92-94) Therefore ‘subaltern’ practices (such as *suttee*, the Hindu practice of widow-burning) become ‘unread’ systems of self-representation (Spivak, 1988: 104).

stated in my introduction, the Monstrous cannot be confined within such confining categories or systems of political action and cannot be made compatible with feminist narratives that are premised upon the (impractical) ideal of universally unproblematic discourse. Nonetheless, the value of the Monstrous Feminine lies in the ability to make-evident the weaknesses and limits of a given symbolic order – and this applies as much to intersectional feminism as it does to patriarchy. There is no political or philosophical system in the world that should be immune to critique (or, even parody), and the Monstrous Feminine serves as a harbinger of category crisis that may facilitate precisely such a revelation. Monsters, as Kearney (2003: 4) maintains, keep us humble: ‘Monsters show us that if our aims are celestial, our origins are terrestrial’.

Here I return to Cohen (1996: 6) and Halberstam (1995:27), who remind us that the threat of Monsters lies in their propensity for escapology and elusion. Their capacity to erode or transgress ethical boundaries that are imposed upon them renders Braidotti’s emphasis on accountability ineffectual. This should not suggest that I advocate for a complete abandonment of ethics or accountability in favour of chaotic transgression; rather, I position the Monstrous Feminine as valuable *because* of the possibilities that arise from its capacity to wriggle free from regulating systems of morality. As I will discuss later, this elusiveness makes the deployment of Monstrous Femininity inherently risky – as Shildrick (2002: 128) asserts, ‘Monsters and their kin are always dangerous’ – but this risk comes with transgressive, liminal potential that I maintain cannot be found within the ethical project of intersectionality. Thus, the genealogies of Monsters and of the Monstrous Feminine emerge as contradictory and ironic. Despite the historical positioning of their ‘Otherness’ as a portentous, disciplinary tool (Halberstam, 1995: 72), Monsters themselves cannot be effectively corralled within regulatory systems of ethics or categorisation and make a mockery of attempts to do so. The discursive naughty-step is soon left conspicuously empty as the Monster issues a taunting challenge, ‘Catch me if you can!’

Dark Histories and Failure

As stated above in my discussion of Shotwell’s work, I am cognisant of the problematic genealogical baggage carried by the Monstrous Feminine and am fully aware that this is not a history that can or should be ignored. I must make it clear that I do not intend to position the Monstrous Feminine as having been ‘rescued’ from its epistemological origins, or that these discourses are no longer relevant. As Ussher’s work makes evidently clear – the misogyny inherent in the non-consensual Monstrification of female bodies and subjectivities has ongoing implications for women. This is not a history that is ethical (or possible) to erase or ignore.

Indeed, here Halberstam's observations of the 'dark side' of Queer history become particularly salient. His fifth chapter of *The Queer Art of Failure*, entitled *The Killer in Me Is the Killer in You: Homosexuality and Fascism*' grapples with the uncomfortable and oft-eschewed relationship between male homosexuality and Nazism, exploring the complicity of gay men like Ernst Roehm in Nazi atrocities and the associated homoerotic masculinism present within the idealistic myth-making that perpetuated the supposition of Aryan supremacy (Halberstam, 2011: 155-156). Here, Halberstam asserts that an over-emphasis on histories that position Queer people wholly as victims who survive oppression is a disingenuous form of denial that speaks of 'an unwillingness to grapple with difficult historical antecedents and a desire to impose a certain kind of identity politics on history' (Halberstam, 2011: 158).

While Halberstam's examination of homoeroticism within fascist ideology is not directly analogous to my own project, his frustration at the insistence of a singular, positive and uniformly moral understanding of history and identity speaks to the Monstrous Feminine as a potentially problematic praxis that is incommensurate with the ethics of intersectionality. As Silverstein (2017: 16-17) stipulates, a core concern of modern intersectionality is to provide representation and safety for marginalised demographics, seeking distance from normative systems of identity that arbitrarily designate women, people of colour, people with disabilities and LGBTI individuals as 'Other'. Whereas a deployment of Monstrous Femininity demands an engagement with an 'Otherness' that has its roots in oppression. Even if that deployment is done with the intent of providing resistance to normativity, it nonetheless recalls a genealogy that is defined by it and is always at risk of re-asserting prescriptive narratives of the 'Other' (Vachhani, 2014: 656-657).

This, I assert, is one of the key differences between the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality – the latter is concerned with psychic safety, of transcending the confines of prescriptive categories of 'Self' and 'Other' to forge newer, more ethical understandings of minoritarian identity (Silverstein, 2017: 16). These are actions that may be interpreted as attempts to 'purify discourse' so as to preserve the telos of reform and progress that Halberstam (2011: 4) ascribes to 'more acceptable' forms of feminism. The Monstrous Feminine shares no such lofty goal. Even as a feminist praxis, it is inextricably tied to its genealogy, which consequently must be acknowledged as one that is profoundly unequal and unsafe.

As Alexis Shotwell (2016: 4) states, 'The slate has never been clean, and we can't wipe off the surface to start fresh – there's no 'fresh' to start. [...] All there is, while things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are'. My thesis is a part of that process of 'acting

from where we are': understanding that there is no way to 'start fresh' with a new project of unblemished, moral Monstrosity, but opting instead to find ways to make it useful³² – such as the deployment of a Monstrosity Femininity that speaks back to its own impure history, calling Cohen's (1996: 20) abject revenant angrily demanding an explanation from its creator. These processes may evoke feelings of trauma, despair and negativity that compromise the 'safety' required by intersectionality, recalling Halberstam's (2011: 98-99) use of Heather Love's (2009: 27) 'backwards feelings' as an articulation of Queer failure, and serving as an 'index to the ruined state of the social world'. I maintain that dwelling upon (rather than transcending) the problematic genealogy of the Monstrous is valuable, precisely because it obliges us 'to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections history throws our way' (Halberstam, 2011: 162).

The value of Difference.

Finally, this thesis will explore the value of difference (embodied, expressive, sexual, gendered and aesthetic) as valuable in its own right, rather than fulfilling one side of a duality between 'normal' and 'Other'. In *The Laugh of the Medusa* Hélène Cixous (1976) takes great effort to explain the distinction between gendered and sexual difference that is chosen, and that which is projected onto the 'Other'. As discussed previously, 'Monster' is a term that has already been ascribed to a form of difference that is supposedly irreconcilable with phallogentric rationality; that which is 'ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable the thinkable' as Kristeva (1982:1) would have it. A form of Otherness that is unknown, yet manageable, its supposedly inherent opposition making it easy to categorise and thus to eschew. Cixous (1976: 878-879) uses 'feminine writing' as an example of women redefining their own sexed, embodied and gendered subjectivity outside of the non-consensually predefined male symbolic order; positioning difference as a mode of re-invention, rather than as symptomatic of a 'masculine desire to dominate other forms of subject hood' (Cixous, 1976: 887). I am interested in expanding upon this practice of interrogating narratives of selfhood through performative, embodied Monstrous Femininity.

Following Cixous' example, this thesis will demonstrate how difference (as a deliberate, socially-conscious action) may evolve as a process that 'speaks to one's own self' (Cixous, 1976: 880);

³² In this way, my proposal for the Monstrous Feminine as a form of feminist praxis echoes Michel de Certeau's notion of 'bricolage': the creation of new forms of meaning and praxis from disparate elements of pre-existing discourse as a critique of dominant cultural hegemonies (De Certeau, 1984: 29-30). The hybridity of bricolage makes it an ideal means of mapping systems of Monstrous praxis, as it not only speaks to the liminality of the Monstrous, but also creates space for said praxes to acknowledge and speak back to the troubled history of the Monstrous Feminine.

emerging as a means of re-writing pre-existing definitions of selfhood that illuminate 'the dark spaces' left unnamed by male-discourse. It is precisely these 'dark spaces' that I am interested in, as they represent the gaps in our understanding and in our linguistic and heuristic associations that maintain the discursive boundaries between 'self' and 'Other' within dominant symbolic orders. However, my interest here is not only to examine the 'dark spaces' within patriarchal discourse, but within all scholarship pertaining to the Monstrous Feminine. My work will position the 'Otherness' of the Monstrous Feminine as an example of Derrida's *différance*: the spaces between linguistic meanings that demonstrate the limits of language and our interpretation of it (Derrida, 1982: 279). *Différance* represents the temporal shift between two words that allows us to discern the difference in meaning between them, suggesting an ambiguous space in-between that hints at a further presence of meaning: 'the possible that is presently impossible' (Derrida, 1982: 287).

The deployment of Monstrous Femininity that I propose may be understood as a practical use of *différance*, a praxis without specific or categoric definition that may build upon the spaces between pre-existing language as a means of creating newer (or rather, newly altered) meanings. In this way, Monstrous praxis represents a 'fleshing out' of the dark spaces between discourse that 'makes strange' established hierarchies of meanings and subjectivities – including those that feel familiar and 'right' within contemporary, intersectional feminism. It is from here, this 'opening up' of the self to the Other through the Monstrous, the spectacular, the grotesque and the abject that we may begin to investigate the possibility of new pathways (Shildrick, 2002: 115). In this way, the Monstrous Feminine – like Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity - may be understood as a process of 'doing' that is fragmented and culturally located (Cohen, 1996: 6), rather than a fixed construct of 'inferior' or 'taboo' subjectivity. The distinction between the two being that the former is one that is evolving and most importantly, acknowledges the significance of its own history. Monstrous Femininity- as-praxis is a deliberate deployment of gendered and sexual alterity, rather than an inevitability arising from a supposedly inherent inferiority. The difference of the Monstrous Feminine should not function solely as a threat or as a reactionary re-affirmation of existing binaries. Rather, it has greater potential as evolving and aware systems of praxis; for questioning, for exploring, for playing, for parodying, for communicating and possibly even as a means of solace and community.

At the beginning of this chapter I explained the etymological basis of 'Monster' as portent, a means of speaking back to a culture through the incursion of the 'Other' into the realm of the everyday. I propose that Monster-as-praxis may be thought of as a literal, performative means of this 'de-monstration'. Shildrick and Kearney both emphasise that the 'Otherness' of the Monster

is one that cannot be completely or adequately exteriorised or extracted; the self is never wholly autonomous or immune from 'contamination'. Given the apparent futility of attempting to ignore or exclude our own Monsters, I suggest instead that we learn how to explore their potential as lived subjects. As Kearney succinctly (2003: 18) states:

'We have too often demonised the 'Other' in Western culture out of fear. But if we can become more mindful of who the other is – and is it not a primary task of philosophy to foster such mindfulness? – we will, I am convinced, be less likely to live in horror of the dark. For the dark is all too frequently a mask for the alterity of our own death and a screen against the advent of strangers unbeknownst and still unknown to us'.

Chapter Two:

The Value of the Monstrous.

‘..But if there is one universal, it cannot be inclusive of difference’³³.

Having established the present state of Monster scholarship, and my own work’s place within it; it is important to also locate the Monstrous Feminine within a broader contemporary cultural setting. This is not only to provide contexts of discourses of gender and difference that are pertinent to the present moment, but also to acknowledge what late modernity does to difference. While the previous chapter established the genealogical past of the Monstrous Feminine, my concern for this chapter is how it is situated within a neo-liberal context of appropriation, assimilation and simulacra. As technologies of mass communication grow ever more accessible and all encompassing, the increased visibility of marginalised communities has made political and cultural boundaries of race, class, gender and sexuality all the more evident. Social media has facilitated the potential for multiple, enormously visible instances of various Monstrous deployments, and in so doing has created new social spaces in which the heterogeneity and liminality of subjective ‘Otherness’ can proliferate. The way in which contemporary Monsters and Monstrous Femininities manifest has changed, therefore, the things that they do and say has as well. Within a cultural setting that seeks to commodify and domesticate ‘Otherness’, the modern role and value of the Monstrous and Monstrous Feminine needs to be explained.

The unprecedented level of access to information and to other individuals that the internet has provided has been instrumental in shaping new avenues of identity, expression and discourse outside of normative structures of gender, sexuality and embodiment. This is particularly evident through visual social media sites like Instagram, that allow for a sharing of counter-cultural/Queer/Monstrous aesthetics and expression that has historically been limited to face-to-face encounters³⁴. The implications for resistant identities and movements go beyond mere aesthetics – the success of grassroots campaigns like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have been largely dependent upon online spaces. This has significantly changed the way in which contemporary society has come to relate to social justice movements and non-normative embodiment and subjectivities. While this opens-up many opportunities for carnivalesque

³³ (Spivak, 1992: 75, cited in Shildrick, 2002: 99).

³⁴ In fact, I was able to locate one of my case studies, Marry Bleeds through her Instagram account, and follow and write about her spectacular performances in ways that I would be incapable of doing without access to social media.

creativity and the exploration of Monstrous desires, the co-option and commodification of ‘Otherness’ for the benefit of dominant symbolic orders is also a risk that must be acknowledged.

This chapter will examine how ‘Otherness’ is managed by contemporary neo-liberal culture. In his text, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era*, disability scholar Lennard J. Davis (2013: 1) asserts that as marginalised identities and demographics gain greater cultural visibility, the concept of a ‘normal’ identity has been effectively decommissioned. This is not because oppressive boundaries of race, gender and ability have been dismantled or overcome, but because their demarcations have been obfuscated, and therefore assumed to simply not exist at all. Further, ‘crip’ scholar Katerina Kolářová (2014: 258) observes that the development of (or transition to) modern neo-liberalism carries with it the narrowing of social belongings that reduce notions of freedom to ‘the freedom of the market’, subsequently eschewing bodies and identities that cannot be recuperated within the telos of late-stage capitalism.

As identity politics and social justice movements have become more integrated into mainstream society modern systems of normativity have adapted. For the most part³⁵, overt narratives of patriarchy, white-supremacy, homophobia and ableism have been replaced with placating appropriations of diversity that covertly preserve the status quo (Davis, 2013: 3). Concurrently, within an increasingly individualistic consumer culture, differences of race, gender and sexuality are diminished to surface-level superficialities, and thus disconnected from critical narratives of power (Davis, 2013 :10). This reduction of identity and alterity to a consumer lifestyle choice not only attempts to reduce ‘Otherness’ to a non-threatening, marketable commodity, it presents a façade of equality that privileges coercive sameness through the of neo-liberal foreclosure of bodily and subjective morality (Kolářová, 2014: 259).

This chapter will explore instances of what I refer to as ‘egalitarian sameness’: the emergence of newer, subtler forms of coercion that promise inclusion and justice on the condition of conformity to hegemonic selfhood and expression. I theorise ‘egalitarian sameness’ along similar epistemological lines as Lauren Berlant’s theory of ‘cruel optimism’, a socio-political relational process in which ‘something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant, 2011: 2). Kolářová (2014: 259) adapts Berlant’s term to demonstrate the deleterious effect of dominant neo-liberal ideals of success, subjectivity and health on social and corporeal ‘Others’, charting the

³⁵ This particular passage was written in early 2015. At the time of making final edits (mid November 2018) I acknowledge that this statement was perhaps a little over-optimistic, even if the overall point about neo-liberal diversity remains the same. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

marginalisation of sick and disabled bodies and Queer desires as a consequence of the transition from socialism to neo-liberalism. Kolářová's analysis echoes Davis' (2013: 3-4) concerns about the contemporary meaninglessness of 'diversity', asserting that 'crip-ness' is rendered unintelligible within neo-liberal narratives that privilege assimilation via attempts to 'cure' or 'rehabilitate' non-normative bodies. Accordingly, I also position 'egalitarian sameness' as a distinctly neo-liberal phenomenon. It is the cynical co-option of progressive social justice narratives as a means of alleviating the threat of the 'Other' through assimilation and commodification.

To explain this phenomenon as it relates to the value of the Monstrous and Monstrous Feminine, I borrow extensively from the work of Davis, Iris Marion Young, Katerina Kolářová and Michael Warner. This chapter interrogates the relationship between neo-liberal individualism and the 'toxic attachment to optimism' (Kolářová, 2014: 258) that precludes forms of 'Otherness' that cannot be recuperated within hegemonic orders. To follow Davis (2013: 10), the reduction of interconnected citizens to individual 'choice-driven' consumers contributes to the de-valuation of the 'Other' as a cultural signifier because it repositions difference as superficial and irrelevant. Indeed, the politically (and economically attractive) nature of 'diversity'³⁶ perpetuates a culture of 'egalitarian sameness' by presenting an idealised vision of modernity in which discrimination and social injustice have been wholly overcome, and therefore no longer present a pressing concern to institutions of social, economic and political power (McRobbie, 2011: 180-181). The combined work of these theorists makes evident that normative co-options of 'diversity' and 'equality', are - ironically - premised on the preservation (rather than critique) of the status-quo. It is within this context that this chapter asserts the importance of the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine³⁷ as exemplars of 'Otherness' that resist categoric enclosure.

In *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* Davis (2013) discusses several examples of how deviation from the normative status-quo is now utilised as a means of reinforcing (rather than destabilising) social hegemony. His introduction provides a critique of the pitfalls of contemporary understandings of 'diversity', examining the intersection between neo-liberalism

³⁶ Discussed in this manner, I deliberately use this term within quotation marks to indicate a specific use of a concept that is often superficial and over-used within political and social discourse; more as a tool of populist opportunism than a genuine strategy for political change.

³⁷ Here it is worth noting that although this chapter does focus primarily on issues of gendered 'Otherness' that are most applicable to the Monstrous Feminine, there is associated discourse that also concerns the Monstrous as a broader category of social and bodily difference. Therefore, for this chapter I will alternate between the two terms as the specific discussion requires.

and mainstream representation of marginalised demographics. His first chapter illustrates how non-normative bodies and identities - particularly those of people with disabilities - are excluded so as to be non-threatening to the abled mainstream (Davis, 2013: 3-4). He maintains that modern socio-political discourse has shifted away from a singular, idealised 'norm' towards a more democratic understanding of human subjectivity and embodiment (2013: 1-2). In this newer, more 'diverse' culture, unitary notions of 'normality' are largely dismantled in favour of the individual:

'Diversity is well suited to the core beliefs of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is premised on a deregulated global economy that replaces governments with markets and reconfigures the citizen into the consumer. The essence of this transformation of citizen into consumer is that identity is seen as a correlate of markets, and culture becomes lifestyle' (Davis, 2013: 3).

If 'diversity' is premised upon the presumption of the commonality of all humans *despite* their race, gender, sexuality etc.; then it stands to reason that within a free-market environment, such issues are rendered largely irrelevant, given the (supposedly) universal nature of consumption (Davis, 2013: 3). The conditions of neo-liberalism that Davis describes do not value difference as important in and of itself, but rather reconfigure its worth based on its perceived irrelevance, and therefore its marketability as a consumer product. Davis uses the examples of advertisements for Dove soap and United Colours of Benetton to demonstrate the profitability of marketable 'diversity'. In these mainstream representations of difference, a person's body-shape, sexuality, race and gender are presented as non-issues; the marketable melting-pot of human identity and embodiment emphasise feel-good messages that despite our 'diverse' bodies, we are all the same³⁸ (Davis, 2013: 3-4).

Here Davis echoes Iris Marion Young's (1990:157) work on the social implications of dismissing difference. She maintains that an egalitarianism that is dependent upon the erasure of gendered, sexual, racial and bodily differences functions to keep inequalities intact. The advertisement for Dove soap that Davis describes is an apt illustration of Kolářová's (2014: 263-264) concerns about the toxicity of neo-liberal optimism. They present a sanitised vision of utopian 'diversity' that is intended to be a declaration of their own progressiveness. By incorporating women of

³⁸ In his footnotes for his first chapter *The End of Normal*, Davis (2013: 137) adds that neo-liberal advertising advocates modern tribalism over the superiority of a given product – the supposed capacity of a commodity to confer the association of niche-identity and belonging. Again, the crux of the issue here is the linkage of individual identity to consumer choice, wherein difference and community are rendered significant only because of capitalist investment in a particular brand.

colour, older women and ‘acceptably’ plump women (Davis, 2013: 4), the advert declares to their audience that the corporeal and racial differences that these ‘diverse’ women represent are now no longer causes for concern.

However, in this instance ‘diversity’ isn’t actually very diverse: difference is only marketable if it is considered attractive to a mainstream audience, and therefore, it must be contained.

Advertisements like those used by Dove and United Colours of Benetton present a ‘cherry-picked’ representation of difference; the distinctions between the subjects displayed being within ‘acceptable’ ideological and aesthetic parameters of mainstream society. As Davis (2013: 4) notes:

‘[...] the ads nowhere show us women with disabilities, obese, anorexic, depressed, cognitively or affectively disabled. The concept of diversity currently is rendered operative largely by excluding groups that might be thought of as abject or hyper-marginalised’.

This exclusion of abject bodies extends beyond the sale of soap. It is symptomatic of what Kolářová (2014: 264) describes as ‘compulsory, curative positivity’. The absence of the abject suggests its rehabilitation within (or exclusion from) the bright new dawn of neo-liberal horizons. When read through Kolářová’s critique of the ‘post-socialist moment’³⁹, the Dove advertisement maps a blueprint for a moral trajectory away from abjection and deficiency (Kolářová, 2014: 263) through the ‘progressive’ rehabilitation of difference within capitalist consumption and biomedical pathologisation (2014: 261).

Kolářová’s (2014: 259-260) exploration of the ‘inarticulate crip’ positions bodily and sexual ‘Otherness’ as unintelligible within normative symbolic orders, constituting a failure to replicate the optimism of capitalist horizons. The obvious parallels to Halberstam’s work will be further explored in greater detail later in Chapters Five and Six, but at this point what is significant is her observation of the ‘moral insufficiency’ attributed to non-rehabilitated bodies that recall’s Shildrick’s (2009: 19-20) remarks in *Dangerous Discourses of Disability* that the ill or disabled corporeal ‘Other’ represents a threat to the stability and consistency of the sovereign self. The lack of bodily autonomy (either real or perceived) that is associated with disability contradicts the neo-liberal ideal of individualism *and* the security of normative bodily boundaries, thus the failure

³⁹ Kolářová’s (2014: 263) work is specifically situated within the context of the former Soviet-controlled Czech Republic, wherein the transition to the ‘post socialist moment’ represents a shift from illness, ambiguity and deficiency towards the optimistic future of neo-liberalism.

of 'crip' bodies is articulated through their loss of sovereignty as capitalist consumers *and* embodied subjects (Kolářová, 2014: 263-264; Shildrick, 2009: 23).

The association of 'incurable' corporeality with moral degeneracy is illustrated succinctly through Davis' use of Giorgio Agamben's notions of 'bios' and 'zoe'. The latter term refers to 'bare life' - lives that are 'not worth living', a concept that Davis (2013:5) uses to describe the positioning of people with non-photogenic, non-marketable disabilities, and Kolářová (2014: 263) applies more broadly to disabled, sick and Queer subjects. Davis asserts that lives defined as 'zoe' is a cannot be successfully reclaimed as 'bios' (lives within the political and social sphere) within contemporary capitalist culture, and thus must be excluded. Agamben (1998: 8) himself speaks to the necessity of exclusion of such 'unbearable' lives in order to participate within society, stating: 'The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it [the polis], even as it dwells in the polis, by letting its own bare life be excluded as an exception within it' (Agamben, 1998: 8).

One has value as a social being by rejecting that which is 'zoe' within oneself. A feat that Davis maintains is impossible for those with certain disabilities⁴⁰. The relationship that Agamben identifies between 'bios' and 'zoe' is analogous to Shildrick's (2002: 49-50) observations: that which is antithetical to normative notions of the 'Self' must be wholly eschewed in order to maintain the sovereign subject *and* the social hierarchy in which it is located. Bodies marked as 'Monstrous' or 'zoe' are excluded because they cannot be fully appropriated by neo-liberal notions of 'diversity' (Davis, 2013: 4-5). Consequently, the limits of 'diversity' demonstrate its own internal contradiction: a system that perpetuates the marginalisation of 'abject/zoe'⁴¹ bodies and identities on such a flimsy premise of inclusivity cannot be sustainable, as Shildrick (2002: 22) points out, the Monstrous cannot be wholly excluded. The gap between demographics who may be coerced (or marketed) into sameness and those that cannot is interesting, as it reveals the demarcation between 'Self' and 'Other' that must be maintained in order to preserve the stability

⁴⁰ While I am specifically interested in his analysis of neo-liberal appropriation of diversity and difference, the main telos of Davis' work as a whole is concerned with what he refers to as the 'biocultural' - the way in which the physicality of embodiment is intertwined with more complex, shifting notions of identity. For Davis, disability does not function as a system of identity in the same manner that gender does, but rather remains 'fixed' within biomedical discourse, and thus cannot be reconfigured or represented within the logos of consumer 'diversity' (Davis, 2013: 5).

⁴¹ Here a link may be observed between Davis' use of Agamben's work and Kristeva's (1982: 5) assertion that the Self is simultaneously constituted and pulverised by the (failed) exclusion of the abject. Indeed, an examination of Creed's (1993:12-13) use of Kristeva's theories to explore the 'horror' of the abject female/maternal body demonstrates that the sovereignty of the phallic subject is maintained only by the containment and exteriorization of the abject feminine. Therefore, while Davis is primarily concerned with the positioning of disabled bodies and subjectivities, it is evident that the neo-liberal consumer citizen and the able-bodied, phallocentric subject are inextricably connected.

and invulnerability of the ideal, autonomous subject (Shildrick, 2002: 49-50) and – by extension – the individualistic promise of neo-liberal futurity (Kolářová, 2014: 262).

This brings me to my second critique of ‘diversity’, which relates to the purpose of this chapter overall; the social importance of difference. Davis’ observation of the ‘cherry-picked’ bodies and identities within mainstream advertising speaks not only to issues of neo-liberal marketability, but also to the ignored or unacknowledged histories of ‘Otherness’. Obese, disabled and other ‘abjected’ bodies are not absent from conventional media solely because they are considered unprofitable, but because they are – to return to Kolářová (2014: 259) – dislocated from and inconceivable within the telos of neo-liberal optimism. More simply put, they cannot replicate ‘normal’ human corporeality⁴². In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Thomson coined the neologism ‘normate’ to describe the unstigmatised subject that serves as the basis through which one may present themselves as ‘definitive human beings’ (Thomson, 1997: 8). The significance of the normate is that rather than being marked themselves, their privileged position is upheld by the marked status of ‘Others’ as deviant - Monstrous. This is precisely illustrated by Davis’ case-studies of ‘diversity’ within advertising; the subjects (while within the realms of normative/normate comfort) are still marked as being diverse *from* the normate standard of whiteness, able-bodiedness and maleness – the central locus from which all other subjectivities and bodies are thought to deviate (Thomson, 1997: 5).

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the sovereign primacy of the normate subject is premised upon the putative exclusion of ‘Others’: women, people of colour, people with disabilities and so on (Shildrick, 2002: 5). Historically, the cost of non-conformity to dominant discourses has been high; and yet, due to the machinations that accompany privilege, the significance of these histories remains largely unacknowledged. By reducing people to the status of ‘consumer citizen’, neoliberalism obfuscates these histories of oppression, presenting difference as incidental, rather than socially produced (Davis, 2013: 3; Duggan, 2003: 3-5)⁴³.

⁴² Thomson notes that the genealogy of ‘freak’ discourse (that is, the way in which non-normate bodies are positioned within normative cultures) reflects the development of modernity: ‘what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment’ (Thomson, 1996: 3). As Chapter Five will explore, disabled/‘extraordinary’ bodies have historically been exploited as sites of wonder, but more recently, their profitability has lain in their capacity to affirm the ‘rightness’ of normate bodies, hardly an attractive angle for a ‘diverse’ advertising campaign, as Davis (2013: 5-6) observes.

⁴³ Again, Davis’ (2013: 7) notion of the biocultural is relevant here. Given that disability has historically been constructed as a medical rather than subjective category, it follows that disabled identities will typically be obscured within discourses that acknowledge the socio-political consequences of normative subject-positions.

Thus, it is preferable (and more profitable) for capitalist institutions like Dove or the United Colours of Benetton to privilege the marketability of ‘diversity’ over ‘irrecuperable’ Otherness.

I assert that this is effectively an attempt to ‘kill’ the Monstrous. Rather than the outright refusal of the Monstrous Feminine by scholars like Ussher (2006: 174), or the failed abjection of the ‘Other’ described by Shildrick (2002: 5); what Davis is describing here is all the more sinister, as it presents the fallacy of a utopian ideal where the misogyny, racism and ableism that have contributed to the Monster’s genealogy are no longer present. Here, Thomson’s normate has shifted from a position of positive social space (with lines of demarcation being immediate, apparent and punitive) to a negative social space; remaining unmarked and maintained by an absence of the traits of ‘Otherness’ (Thomson, 1997: 8). Although the exact nature of what constitutes ‘normal’ may have very slightly (and superficially) widened to reflect an incrementally more socially aware consumer base, Davis’ observations demonstrate how harmful and exclusionary notions of ‘normality’ may present themselves in the sheep’s clothing of ‘diversity’. Here I turn to Shildrick for an examination of how normativity may thrive within the co-option of difference:

‘The normative subject exercises moral agency by taking itself as the model to which others must be made analogous. Removed, then, from its alterity, difference is put to the service of the same and becomes lost in the totalisation of being (Shildrick, 2002: 89).

If difference cannot be wholly excluded, then it must be contained, domesticated, and put to work in serving the interests of the supposedly ‘normal’ majority. Indeed, following Davis, it is arguable that the successes of counter-cultural social justice movements have been both countered *and* co-opted by the auspices of neo-liberalism as an exercise in appropriative brand-building.⁴⁴ The ‘difference’ of the models used in Davis’ examples are non-threatening to existing social norms and are presented in such a manner as to render their ‘Otherness’ both non-threatening and financially lucrative. Here the irony of neo-liberal appropriations of diversity is made evident: it is not intended to be socially challenging or difficult, recalling Vachhani’s (2014: 656) observation that ‘the visibility of Monstrous difference (whether it is constructed through disability, race, sexuality or class, for example) is always already available for co-option by organisations, and highlights the limits of diversity management’ (Vachhani, 2014: 656).

A 2017 Pepsi advert featuring reality television star Kendall Jenner demonstrates this phenomenon succinctly. The advert shows a protest, but it is not clear for what – the placards

are ambiguous. The participants are predictably young, happy and attractive and very multicultural. Jenner – having spontaneously ditched a glamorous photoshoot to join the protest – breaks the tension between the crowd and the line of police by offering one officer a can of Pepsi. The tagline features the words ‘Be Bolder, Be Louder, Live For Now’ beneath the Pepsi logo (Kendall and Kylie, 2017). The appropriation of protest imagery and the deliberate inclusion of people of colour (including a photographer wearing a hijab) is an acknowledgement of the tense political climate in America, but it is a climate that is imagined as ‘fixed’ through the availability of a commodity. Much like Davis’ example of the Dove adverts, the Pepsi advert leans on non-threatening aesthetics of heterogeneity, once again with the notable absence of visibly disabled protesters. Within this imagining, identity more closely associated with the consumer product (Pepsi) than race or gender (Davis, 2013: 6). The culmination of the happy, soda-drinking crowd combined with the vague, yet (apparently) inspiring tag line at the end of the advert encourages aspiration and hope, exemplifying Kolářová’s (2014: 265) discussion of the cruel optimism inherent in neo-liberal promises of the future. The ad ‘upholds fantasies of ‘the good life’ that is made possible through capitalism’ (2014: 269), simultaneously domesticating the signifiers of protest and revolt, while making evident the exclusion of the hyper-marginalised and the Monstrous.

While my focus for this chapter is predominantly upon the appropriation, assimilation or erasure of ‘Otherness’ by patriarchal neo-liberalism, the narrowing of ‘acceptable’ difference is not limited solely to this particular symbolic order. Indeed, to refer again to the work of Jasbir Puar, the categorisation of systems of identity inherent within intersectional feminism may also establish similarly strict limits for the expression of ‘Otherness’. Puar’s work situates the emphasis on identity within intersectionality as an extension of neo-liberalism and US exceptionalism, which seeks to divide the body of the ‘normal’ white Queer from the supposed homophobia and backwardness of Arab/Non-Western cultures (Puar, 2005: 122-123). For Puar, intersectionality emerges as a means of ‘managing’ heterogeneity within normative taxonomies. Intersectionality, ‘privileges naming, visibility, epistemology, representation, and meaning’ (Puar, 2005: 128) emerging as a form of disciplinarity that ‘fixes’ race and sexuality within static categories and thus rendering them more vulnerable to state surveillance.

Here a link emerges between the Puar and Shotwell’s work: specifically, in terms of how the demand for purity within progressive discourses and praxes generates new norms and systems of normativity within feminist and Queer activist communities (Shotwell, 2016: 143). Shotwell maintains that, within these spaces, terms like ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ are often

premised upon a binary system of 'Queer' and 'Normative' – where the former is understood as antithetical and resistant to the latter, which is poorly defined (Shotwell, 2016: 142). Thus, just as 'diversity' demarcates acceptable variance from the abject and 'zoe', intersectionality polices the boundaries of 'acceptable' difference within arbitrary systems of legibility and representation (Puar, 2005: 128). While Puar's work is more reflective of contemporary articulations of intersectionality than Crenshaw's (1989: 159) original work, (which sought to end the erasure of black women's experience of violence), it does reflect my discussion in my previous chapter: the hegemonic status of intersectionality within feminist discourse is arguably maintained as such by the strict policing of how bodily, gendered and sexual 'difference' is able to manifest.

But how did we get here? The disingenuous 'diversity' that Davis describes is not a cause, but rather a symptom of a broader cultural problem that devalues or jettisons difference that cannot be easily recuperated, 'cured' or commodified. Davis' observations concerning the fashionable market-allure of 'diversity' are strengthened in conjunction with Angela McRobbie's discussion of the pre-emptive assertions of the post-feminist movement. In addition to Young's work, McRobbie and Rosalind Gill discuss the relationship between neo-liberalism and post-feminism, particularly with regards to social conceptions of sexism and the disingenuous notion of equality through sameness. McRobbie situates the emergence of post-feminism in the 1980's and 1990's. Following the radical achievements of the second-wave, much of the rhetoric of the emerging neo-liberal era emphasised the redundancy of feminism. Now that women had achieved 'equality' with men, the movement was understood to have reached its goals, and thus, had rendered itself obsolete. Following significant victories in the battles for equal pay, bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom since the second wave⁴⁵, the popular social understanding appears to be that sexism no longer exists in our newer, modern egalitarian age; the 'success' of feminism simultaneously suggesting the necessity of its demise - even repudiation (McRobbie, 2004: 255-256). Now, observes McRobbie, young women are encouraged to relax, and not engage in the 'joyless' polemic of previous, more radical generations. Anti-feminist backlash continues to operate in a perplexing double bind that simultaneously acknowledges the significance of women's hard-won liberation, while discouraging further collective protest or resistance to the current status-quo (McRobbie, 2011: 180-181). This valourisation of 'post-feminist femininity' recalls Ussher's (2006: 4) assertion that femininity is binarised by patriarchal norms; good femininity is compliant and sexually alluring, whereas 'bad/Monstrous' femininity is angry, irrational and abject.

⁴⁵ On paper, at least.

McRobbie's observations of a growing culture of complacency towards sexism are not confined to the end of the 20th century: the contemporary proliferation of 'egalitarian sameness' renders them relevant in the here and now. This is exemplified by the ongoing backlash against modern feminism and increasingly individualistic trends within contemporary popular culture (McRobbie, 2011:180). The emergence of 'post-feminism' during the 1980's and 1990's coincided with the rise of Western neo-liberalism, created a cultural perfect storm that McRobbie posits as the nascence of what she refers to as 'choice feminism'; a newer, 'sexier' form of feminism that sought to shrug off the 'unglamorous', 'severe' edifice of the previous waves in favour of notions of female empowerment through individualistic sexuality and market-driven success within a burgeoning capitalist economy (McRobbie, 2011: 182; McRobbie, 2009: 260).

Referring to McRobbie's work, Kate Gleeson (2014: 75) describes post-feminism as inherently anti-feminist and premised upon the (false) presumption that the goals of feminism have already been achieved, while simultaneously rebuking its continued existence. McRobbie (2011: 182-183) also observes that this modern hostility towards feminism has coincided with the belief that since sexism and misogyny are now things of the past, the responsibility for gendered inequality, sexual exploitation and objectification are now placed back onto women themselves, constituting a newer, more marketable 'sexual contract' that governed the limits of 'acceptable' womanhood. Women may climb the corporate ladder, 'reclaim' traditional femininity and access a degree of sexual and reproductive freedom – provided that their behaviour remains within established male-defined social parameters. The auspices of neo-liberalism reduce the citizen to the most individualistic, isolated level; working in tandem with post-feminist presumptions that misogyny is a thing of the past, and that social hierarchies are premised upon merit and responsibility, rather than gender (McRobbie, 2009: 258; Gill, 2014: 511).

Echoing Kolářová (2014: 259) and Halberstam's (2011: 106 -107) observations of the unintelligibility and dislocation of 'failed' subject positions within normative symbolic orders, Gill (2014: 511) describes modern sexism as 'unspeakable'; a social phenomenon that is now increasingly difficult to identify outside the realm of legal discrimination, and requiring a focus on the socio-cultural norms that are less easy to exemplify within a post-feminist context. This 'unspeakable' nature of sexism renders a praxis of the Monstrous Feminine riskier, as the boundaries that demarcate misogyny are deliberately obscured in favour of a co-option of difference that operates within neo-liberal notions of choice – rendering those women that cannot (or will not) conform to a post-feminist femininity as already non-consensually 'Othered'.

This is the precarious status of gender equality within neo-liberal political spheres: women may be regarded as equal ‘consumer citizens’ alongside their male-peers - provided that they remain wholly independent, un-reliant upon government welfare or assistance and distant from the perceived prudish radicalism of feminist discourse (McRobbie, 2011: 182-183). This construction of the ‘empowered’, post-feminist woman mirrors the rationalistic status of the autonomous male subject first idealised by Enlightenment thinkers, and now by advocates of neo-liberalism: for women to gain equality with men, they must do so via the pre-ordained means of free-market individualism, and phallogentric constructions of ‘acceptable’ femininity (McRobbie, 2009: 259-260).

This is akin to Foucault’s theories of the ‘technologies/techniques of the self’, in which the governed (in this case, women) are required to integrate their own systems of self-governance into the practices of the state; essentially, self-defining through extant systems of governance (cited in Gleeson, 2014: 75). In her discussion of the intersection between neo-liberalism and women’s reproductive rights, Gleeson (2014: 74-75) introduces the term ‘entrepreneurial woman’ to describe the idealisation of the self-reliant, ‘responsible’ woman, who oversees her own reproductive choices and sexual pleasure in entirely ‘rational’⁴⁶ ways; a stark contrast to those women who - lacking self-control and ‘good sense’ – require assistance from the state due to unplanned pregnancies (Gleeson, 2014: 75-76). This stigmatisation of single or teenage mothers is representative of the dismissal of issues of social inequalities in favour of championing individual choice and social autonomy within neo-liberal discourse: we are all the same, therefore failure to cope by oneself signifies a failure of character.

The combined work of Young, Thomson and Davis show that the emergence of ‘egalitarian sameness’ is a direct result of the presumption of the universality of the phallogentric/Eurocentric, rational subject that is located at the heart of neo-liberal discourse. As stated, the demand for individual consumer-citizens to remain wholly autonomous (both from government welfare, historic inequalities and from other citizens) is indicative of an evolution

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note the historical relationship between the supposed inherent ‘rationality’ of men and phallogentrism as it relates to ideals of femininity. Shildrick examines the juxtaposition of the ‘determinate bodyliness’ (Shildrick, 2002: 36) of the ‘monstrous’ female body, and the rational male philosopher – uninclined to the constant bodily changes thought to be the root of women’s inherent unreason. Ussher’s chapter *Pathologising Premenstrual Change* tracks the positioning of the menstrual body as ‘not me/not self’ – a presumed ‘failure’ to remain in an ideally singular, non-abject state during menstruation (Ussher, 2006: 48-49). Gleeson’s observations of the ‘responsible’ woman allude to the perceived ‘success’ of women to replicate phallogentric ideals of rationality: the exercise of individualistic subjectivity, and bodies that remain properly contained and ‘non-abject’.

from the Enlightenment ideal of the invulnerable, sovereign male subject (Shildrick, 2002: 1-2) toward a modern disinclination to acknowledge the boundaries that contribute to such a subject in lieu of a façade of egalitarianism. When sexism becomes ‘unspeakable’, the gold-standard upon which egalitarianism and equality are premised are reliant on ubiquitous and universal phallogentric selfhood, and participation within the free-market, and the presence of the Monster – as a gendered, bodily and racial ‘Other – is diminished⁴⁷.

As Shildrick (2002: 48-49) observes: ‘as the masculinist subject surveys his world, he sees only that which reflects his own self-presence, the confirmation of his own wholeness and completion’. That which does not reflect this narcissistic subjectivity, is subsequently constructed as not wholly a ‘Self’, and therefore deficient. Here Warner’s work provides a useful link between this neo-liberal presumption of sameness, and the erasure of marginalised identities. In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, he maintains that the assimilation of LGBTI identities and relationships into heteronormative, mainstream culture constitutes a form of homophobic violence on behalf of the state, and disempowering those that do not attempt to reproduce heteronormative ideals of relationships or expressions (Warner, 1999: 121).

Warner’s primary target of critique is the primacy of same-sex marriage debates within LGBTI advocacy circles; a situation that he finds surprising. Warner levels his critique of campaigns for same-sex marriage by asking for whom such an institution would be beneficial? Who it would exclude, and, moreover – why it is marriage in particular that has become so prevalent with LGBTI activists, so much so, as to eclipse almost every other relevant issue? (Warner, 1999: 121-122). He maintains that current social emphasis upon same-sex marriage (within and without Queer communities) is indicative of a more sinister trend of appropriation and assimilation by an increasingly conservative political status-quo that seeks to de-politicise Queerness through the imposition of sameness made possible through the ‘amnesia’ of past activism (Warner, 1999: 124). Warner describes the impulse towards historically heteronormative institutions like marriage as an attempt to impose those normative standards of ‘respectability’ and paternalistic, state-sanctioned control onto sexual and gendered demographics that would otherwise be shamed and excluded; thus further stigmatising sexual practices and relationships that cannot or will not replicate monogamous, capitalist heteronormativity (Warner, 1999: 125), echoing Audre Lorde’s warning of the efficacy of the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house⁴⁸. At this

⁴⁷ Diminished, but not successfully jettisoned (Shildrick, 2002: 1-2).

⁴⁸ ‘What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of the same patriarchy? It means that only the narrowest perimeters of change are possible and allowable’ (Lorde, 1984: 110-111).

point a link between Warner and Puar's work on 'queer liberalism' becomes evident: the term being used by the latter to denote a typically white, centrist tolerance of homosexuality that has its origins in the consumerism of the 1980's. Puar examines the rise to the queer-consumer-citizen under queer liberalism: a subject defined less by their expressions of queer desire than their participation within capitalist markets. The emphasis on wealth and neo-liberal respectability that Puar and Warner describe explains the distinct lack of 'queering' within many mainstream gay rights campaigns; the conditional privilege accorded to queer-consumer-citizens is dependent upon remaining 'unburdened by kinship' (Puar, 2005: 122).

Warner is not alone in his concerns about the increasingly oppressive standards of 'queer respectability'; in her analysis of British same-sex surrogacy and IVF legislation, Garwood (2008) states that the increasing influence of neo-liberal conservatism upon modern gay and lesbian rights movements has had a profound and negative impact upon the representation of LGBTI communities. Garwood makes use of Lisa Duggan's theory of *homonormativity*, which describes the way in which Queer culture, identities and relationships become assimilated within heteronormative structures of power and discourse – same-gender relationships that are rendered 'respectable' by virtue of their replication of heteronormative behaviours, roles and institutions (Garwood, 2016: 6). It is precisely this attempt at 'replication' that so vexes Warner – the desire by non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals to define themselves and their relationships in a manner that replicates the same social norms that have contributed to their own exclusion.

Warner's critique raises two important themes that are reflected in Gill and McRobbie's observations concerning post-feminism: the benchmark for success⁴⁹ under neo-liberalism is premised upon sameness. Sameness to monogamous heterosexual relationships, sameness to capitalistic indicators of financial status, sameness to straight/male-defined sexual morality and sameness to cisnormative, patriarchal standards of embodiment and expression. If 'Otherness' cannot be managed, either by containment within the narrow confines of 'diversity' discussed by Davis (2013), or by assimilation into dominant social orders (like monogamous legal marriages), then it must be destroyed or rendered socially invisible.

Here again I link Davis' work to other feminist discourses in the matter of the obfuscation of undesirable or unmanageable 'Otherness': with the subject of disability, and 'object' bodies. Shildrick (2002) discusses this invisibility and exclusion in terms of Monstrous, non-normative

⁴⁹ Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* poses a particularly salient critique of heteronormative constructions of 'success' and will be discussed at greater length in my final chapter.

morphology and disabled bodies – forms that cannot be neatly assimilated into the norm, and therefore must remain hidden, or else reduced to objects of curated shock and awe. Much of Davis’ work on the false premise of diversity discusses the conspicuous absence of disabled bodies and identities from mainstream media; the terminally ill, amputees and those with ‘unsightly’ deformities or severe intellectual disabilities are not seen to befit the marketable ideal (Davis, 2013: 6). These bodies cannot be associated with the upbeat optimism of neo-liberal ‘diversity’, because – as Shildrick maintains – they represent too much of the threat of the ‘Other’. It would not do for a consumer audience to be reminded of their own vulnerability: of the possibility that their own flesh may be similarly disfigured, or that their own privileged status as ‘normal’ could possibly be under siege. Old bodies, fat bodies, ambiguously sexed/gendered bodies, deformed or mutilated bodies, bodies that are diseased or ugly – it is essential that these Monstrous forms to remain unseen (Davis, 2013: 4-5). In her chapter ‘*Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk*’ Shildrick examines how bodies deemed to be unsightly, unclean, diseased, have historically been perceived as failures of both form and function, their proximity to ‘proper’ bodies discouraged for fear of contamination (psychological or physical) (Shildrick, 2002: 71). The Monstrosity associated with anomalous, uncontained, dependent bodies signifies a breach in the boundary that separates the clean and proper ‘self’, and that which must be abjected; the presence of non-normative morphologies represents an unwelcome and frightening encounter with vulnerability (Shildrick, 2002: 72). Thus, it remains necessary for such bodies to remain on the periphery of society, or safely contained within the domesticating cages of the freak-show, and the sterile confines of specimen jars⁵⁰.

McRuer utilises strategies typically employed by Queer theorists to examine how this marginalisation of disabled bodies and subjectivities is analogous to the exclusion of non-heterosexual/cisgendered identities and expressions; coining the term ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ to demonstrate how disability – like Queerness, is either excluded, censored or domesticated within heteronormative/ableist paradigms (McRuer, 2006: 301). McRuer points out that compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality are both inextricably interwoven to the extent that one actually reinforces the other, and vice-versa; the pathologisation that has historically viewed homosexuality and transgender identities as ‘diseased’ renders queer bodies as defective, and the inevitability of disability (through old age, accident or illness) are similarly

⁵⁰ Shildrick (2002: 68-69) uses the instance of a photographic exhibition of portraits of congenitally deformed natal or neo-natal human specimens as an example of the ‘contagious Monstrosity’ of non-normative bodies.

marked as 'queer' due to their perceived inability to perform heterosexuality ideally (McRuer, 2006: 304-305). The 'deficiency' associated with homosexuality and disability is, Shildrick (2002: 53) asserts, a vestige of a long history positioning marginalised identities as inherently Monstrous. She uses the example of HIV/AIDS victims as an instance of the 'signifying' power of the Queer/Disabled Monster: a debilitating illness that manifested as the result of moral and bodily transgression – an illness that 'normal' heterosexuals were (wrongly) thought to be immune to. When Warner and McRuer's work is viewed in tandem, we may observe instances of Queer/Bodily identity that are necessarily abjected from neo-liberal 'diversity' - as MacCormack (2004: 34) asserts 'perversion has a strong relationship with the naming of social/sexual Monsters'.

What is significant here is not just the invisibility of non-normative bodies and identities, but also what their imposed exile from mainstream media and discourse reveals about the category of 'normal'. Shildrick uses the above examples of the invisibility and categorical containment of disabled (as well as female) forms not just to demonstrate how they have been historically 'Othered', but also to explain *why* they have been 'Othered'. Once again, it is an issue of vulnerability: the 'leakiness of boundaries' represented by non-normative morphologies challenges the 'taken-for-granted stability and autonomy' of the idealised, able-bodied (typically male) subject (2002:48). To be confronted with bodily 'Otherness' is, asserts Shildrick, a disturbing reminder that one cannot be wholly autonomous, nor can we ever achieve the total distinction from the body imagined by Descartes. The 'Monstrousness' of extraordinary bodies oblige us to recognise that as subjects we are embodied, and therefore, we are vulnerable: to illness, to death and to the 'Other' (Shildrick, 2009: 20-21; Davis, 2013: 6). As Davis notes, mainstream representations of disability are yet to emerge from outside pathologising medicalisation, reduced to objects of pathetic abjection, and 'lives not worth living' (2013:6). For any advertising executive wanting to promote a wholesome, consumable image of diversity and opportunity; existential threats are hardly the most viable marketing option; therefore, Davis' assertion that popular, consumer diversity is yet to wholly encompass disability is not surprising.

From here two things may be observed: The first being that neo-liberal constructions of diversity are maintained by a simultaneous need to be perceived as modern, progressive and keeping up with the times, while simultaneously ensuring that the symbolic order that preserves systems of privilege is not threatened. The second is that the desire to preserve these systems of privilege exists largely out of fear of becoming vulnerable to that which is unknown. If Shildrick's claim that the desire to eschew the Monstrous 'Other' is predicated on a psychic need to preserve the

autonomy of the idealised self (2002: 4-5), then it follows that the motivation behind the 'diversity' described by Davis as a form of placating and neutralising the threat of the 'Other'.

If the 'Monstrousness' afforded to disabled, female and non-white bodies and subjectivities, as well as queer relationships and identities may be restricted only to 'safe' and contained representations within the confines of neo-liberalism, then the process of normalisation has been successful, and difference has been stripped of its power. What once had the potential to disrupt or to challenge, to remain distinct despite marginalisation has been stripped down to a simulacrum of difference that superficially appeases a desire for social justice and progress. Referencing Thomson (1996:12), Shildrick (2002: 22) remarks that the standardisation that has accompanied neo-liberal, patriarchal modernity has saturated the routines of everyday life to the extent that the 'unmarked, normative body' has become 'the dominant subject of democracy' – the basis to which all other bodies and subjectivities are compared, and thus rendered 'diverse' (Davis, 2013: 9). The invisibility of disabled bodies, the domestication of LGBTI identities and relationships within heteronormative discourses and the dismissal of the continued significance of cultural misogyny and racism are all different aspects of this coercive, normalising force. Sameness that wears the mask of egalitarianism is the wolf in sheep's clothing that coerces conformity at the risk of total exclusion. Difference, is most certainly under threat, and diversity has been robbed of its meaning. Perhaps it is time to consider alternative measures. What if difference could simply not exist at all?

As observed by Davis (2013), there can be no 'Other' without the pre-determined ideal of 'normal', a point that Baudrillard (2001) sought to critique in his examination of the proliferation of meaning in *Fatal Strategies*. Thus, the question arises – instead of emphasising the differences between normal and 'other' (which, as we have already established: are largely lacking in essential ontology), why not do away with both altogether? Let us enter the realm of the hypothetical for a moment, and suppose that it would be possible to wholly eradicate the arbitrary borders of linguistic and social meaning that distinguish 'normal' from 'other' – would this not be an easier, and less painful solution to privilege and marginalisation than the painful demarcations of difference? Here I introduce the work of Jean Baudrillard, and the Catastrophic implications of the loss of boundaries.

Toffoletti (2004) provides a link between Baudrillard and the Monster through a discussion of the 'post-human'. Initially, the two concepts may appear to be very similar; both emphasise the transgression of boundaries, and both 'make strange' that which is taken for granted as normal. But while the Monsters of Creed and Russo represent a supposition of inherent (yet arbitrarily

imposed) 'Otherness', the post-human instead suggests the total dissolution of the boundaries that create and maintain 'Otherness' (Toffoletti, 2004: 2). Rather than simply occupying a liminal position at the borders of normalcy, the post-human renders these borders as redundant and meaningless. Within Russo and Creed's work, the Monster's role is relegated to the mockery of social boundaries, and the exposure of their permeability and arbitrariness through her liminal transgressions (Creed, 1993: 11; Russo, 1994: 62). But her abilities are limited – she cannot destroy boundaries altogether. Indeed, the Monster is nothing without boundaries, for without them, what does it mean to be liminal? (Toffoletti, 2004: 3). Conversely, the post-human, offers a significant and enticing distinction from the Monstrous in its (supposed) ability to dissolve, rather than simply defy borders. Using Marilyn Manson's 1998 album *Mechanical Animals* as a case study to demonstrate the distinction between the two concepts, Toffoletti is mindful of the significance of the Monstrous Feminine within feminist discourses – particularly as it plays out in the work of Braidotti and Haraway. However, she is also sceptical of reliance upon a system that privileges difference over the transcendence of binary dialectics of selfhood:

'By rendering all difference obsolete, this catastrophic subject threatens a politics of identity dependent on self/Other relations, disturbing feminist readings of the ideological construction of the monster and cyborg as strategic Others in the service of a feminist identity politic. Figuring Manson as a catastrophic subject offers a mode of engaging with post-human figurations beyond the limits of monster theory' (Toffoletti, 2004: 3).

This represents a significant distance between the Monstrous and the post-human, and a more than a significant headache for researchers like myself who advocate for the continued relevance of the Monstrous Feminine. Toffoletti has raised an important point – even within recent feminist discourse, the emphasis upon Monstrosity has been largely one of opposing phallogentric symbolic orders and exploring how a culture of misogyny has relegated women to the status of 'Other' (Toffoletti, 2004: 2). Theorists like Russo do explore the ways in which the female Monster may destabilise and disrupt patriarchal norms, and Shildrick's (2002: 124) extension of Haraway's cyborg theory does extend this work into potential for productive for feminist strategies that are premised upon challenging gendered binaries, the emphasis upon 'Otherness' remains. Granted, this is an 'Otherness' to systems of identity, embodiment and culture that are inherently harmful, but Toffoletti's assertion that the Monster cannot wholly eschew the boundaries that create these systems in the first place is consistent with existent Monster theory: Cohen (1996: 13) maintaining that every Monster is a 'double narrative' – being defined as much by their cultural context that created them, as by the boundaries that they make

evident. Without boundaries, the Monster ceases to exist. The post-human has no such linguistic or discursive restrictions: the transcendence of boundaries gives way to its potential. Toffoletti describes the post-human in terms of this potential: the opening-up of new possibilities that are unlimited by the shackles of identity dialectics. The post human does not shift from one polarity of meaning to another, or even occupy a liminal space between them; but rather exists on a continuum that has no clear demarcation, distinction or discernible discursive origin to which it can be contrasted (Toffoletti, 2004: 4). Meaning is not lost, *per se*, but rather is broken down as the markers of identity and subjective difference are passed on. Toffoletti describes a discursive link between the post-human and the fatalistic finality of Baudrillard's *Catastrophe* – the end of all meaning (Toffoletti, 2004: 3).

The *Catastrophe* was envisioned by Baudrillard as an inevitability of a rapidly expanding, narcissistic consumer market obsessed with the aesthetic signifiers of identity and selfhood (Baudrillard, 2001: 190). As technologies of communication (vectors to convey more identity signifiers) become ever more accessible and expansive, the individual signifiers of identity and dialectics become so numerous and so rapidly consumed, that the meanings attached to them become less relevant than their signifiers. (Sweetman, 1999: 52). Subsequently, the mass proliferation of empty signifiers eschews meaning entirely, only the superficial, 'ecstatic' simulacra of ideas and significance (Toffoletti, 2004: 3). Baudrillard (2001: 192) coined the term 'hypertelic' to describe that which imitates without possessing actual function or meaning. Inevitably, the growth of the hypertelic, hyperreal miasma of selfhood, identity, aesthetics, commodities and ideas within a modern, capitalist market will eventually reach a 'dead point' – the advent of the *Catastrophe* (Baudrillard, 2001: 193). This 'dead point' marks the discursive point of no return whereby the vertiginous growth of hyperreal meaning and subjective dialectics reach such a point of saturation that they reach an implosive critical mass - a 'maximal raw event' (Baudrillard, 2001: 195) that renders all difference, all conflict and all ideological exchange as null and void. The *Catastrophe* is the ecstatic 'orbital' place where boundaries have been utterly eschewed – a singularity wherein difference, and therefore the monster has been rendered utterly obsolete (Baudrillard, 2001: 194; Toffoletti, 2004: 4).

While the *Catastrophe* itself may not be a realistic option outside of theory, Toffoletti offers an alternative to the Monstrous. The 'Catastrophic subject' as she describes it an opportunity for removal of boundaries that facilitate patriarchy in the first place, facilitating a form of subjectivity that is un-reliant upon opposition:

‘Baudrillard’s notion of the Catastrophe allows us to re-conceive the relations of reality against representation, and subject versus object, upon which a politics of identity depends. [...] configuring the subject as catastrophic contests a Marxist-inspired model of the resisting subject. Understanding the subject as resistant to popular culture is a strategy that secures identity counter to particular aspects of culture. In this schema, subjects and objects remain firmly opposed. Catastrophe, on the other hand, operates to ensure identity’s disappearance within the acceleration and proliferation of popular cultural signs and artefacts’ (Toffoletti, 2004: 8).

Initially, it may appear that the Catastrophic subject emerges as the preferable, if not the least problematic option, over the Monstrous – were it not for what I perceive to be an over-generalisation on Toffoletti’s part concerning the Monster. This is a little, unusual, given her analysis of the erasure of difference that is implicated within some elements of the post-human – particularly her use of Vivian Sobchack’s work on reversibility.⁵¹ While her critique of the Monstrous Feminine as a figure of opposition is an important one, her discussion does not wholly account for the diversity of representations of the Monster within feminist or Queer literature. For example, while Braidotti’s (2011: 234) Monster operates largely as an ‘Otherness’ that necessarily demonstrates the limits of patriarchal, colonial norms – the work of Shildrick, Kearny and Halberstam constructs the Monster with a good deal more nuance and fluidity than Toffoletti allows. Indeed, the vulnerability of the Monster within Shildrick’s writing demonstrates the need for the deconstruction of boundaries between self and ‘Other’, reminding us that the total autonomy of the two concepts is effectively impossible. This is echoed in Kearney’s (2003:4-5) work, who goes further by maintaining that it is actually the action of projecting ‘Otherness’ upon marginalised populations that is inherently dualistic and oppositional; while it is the Monsters themselves that are pre-disposed to an alterity that is fluid, rather than pre-ordained. Shildrick goes to significant length in the introduction of *Embodying the Monster* to propose a reconfiguration of the Monstrous that ‘answers more fully to the multiplicity of embodied difference’ and thus, responds to the singular and monolithic construction of the Monster as occupying an oppositional role within a pre-prescribed binary (Shildrick, 2002: 3). Furthermore, following both Kearney and Shildrick’s leads, Toffoletti’s

⁵¹ Toffoletti explores Vivian Sobchack’s examination of the art of ‘morphing’: the seamless, digital transition of one individual into another. In her chapter *At the Still Point of the Turning World*, Sobchack (2000: 141-142) is critical of use of the ‘morph’ as a means of implying a supposedly seamless ‘morph’ of one subjectivity into another – implying absolute subjective equivalence, reversibility and the assimilation of one identity into another; ‘ignoring the temporality of lived existence in which difference operates’ (Toffoletti, 2004: 9).

positioning of the Monster as an essentialised, binary character is more reminiscent of the symbolic orders that would seek to use her as a scapegoat; the 'sacrificial monster' being an important element in maintaining 'irreducible' notions of the self and of morality that characterises normative systems of control (Kearney, 2003: 34). Therefore, while the Monstrous Feminine may be in need of further reconfiguration, I disagree with Toffoletti's assertion that the Catastrophic subject should replace the Monstrous as a figure of ambiguity and disruption.

As for the Catastrophe itself, I am a good deal more critical. Not solely because the practical impossibility of the Catastrophic, but because it implies that a lack of subjective distinction is preferable to the potential conflicts that arise as the result of difference; a point that Shildrick (2002: 95-96) asserts, stating that 'the self only becomes a subject through proximity to and by substitution for the Other'. In other words, processes of vulnerable and ethical becoming are dependent upon the Self's interaction with alterity (Shildrick, 2002: 102). While there is theoretical distance between the 'dead-point' of the Catastrophe and Toffoletti's Catastrophic subjectivity, Baudrillard's is distinguished by a similarity to the problematic notions of 'egalitarian sameness' articulated by Young. While Baudrillard (2001: 194) may have intended the Catastrophe to be a theoretical solution to the threat of conflict and destruction⁵², his advocacy of the total loss of boundaries is not only non-viable, but potentially dangerous. *Fatal Solutions* does not, for instance, consider the significance of identity politics and dialectics for marginalised or excluded demographics. While discussions as to the nature of subjectivity and identity may exist solely in the realm of the abstract for theorists like Baudrillard, they are nonetheless significant for those who have only recently had the discursive space to be able to resist arbitrary classification within white, heteronormative, patriarchal social orders. Indeed, much of Shildrick's work on the Monster is concerned with re-examining identities that have hitherto been arbitrarily consigned to the label of 'Other', signifying a shift in the way in which Monstrousness is perceived, but also as 'a move that speaks inevitably to the imperative to reformulate the relations of self and other' (Shildrick, 2002: 47). As an 'ethical project', the Monster of Shildrick's work seeks to redress systems of arbitrary social taxonomies and hierarchies; a project that cannot afford the 'luxury' of taking subjectivity for granted (Shildrick, 2002: 9-10). Furthermore, Shildrick consistently maintains that the total dissolution of difference, and therefore of the concept of the 'Other' is largely impossible. Echoing Kristeva's (1982: 2-3)

⁵² Baudrillard envisioned the inevitable escalation of the Cold War arms race as being similarly susceptible to the hyperreal; the ecstatic growth and proliferation of meaning would eventually render warfare an impossibility. Without a 'history' to refer to, without an 'Other' as an antagonist, the Catastrophe would paradoxically render the end-product of nuclear escalation 'an absence of events' (Baudrillard, 1982: 193-194).

exploration of the abject as manifesting as the inevitable 'anti-self' in conjunction with one's own construction of 'I' ('I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out'), Shildrick (2002: 83; 2002: 17) is adamant as to the impossibility of the total eradication of the subjectivity that represents difference. Monsters are, after all, inherently human creatures that are defined by predetermined cultural ideals of the norm. We create our own Monsters; therefore, they are a part of us, and cannot be easily or ethically eschewed in favour of a chasing an impossible goal of the dissolution of 'Otherness' (Kearney, 2003: 4).

By prioritising the removal of subjective difference over re-negotiating the terms of their epistemology and praxis, the discourses of the powerful remain unchecked. The very idea of the Catastrophe, while emphasising egalitarianism, serves only to whitewash over social inequalities, rather than understanding their significance. Thus, at present, the Catastrophe remains a realm of the privileged (Toffoletti, 2004: 5-6). This corresponds directly with Young's work, which examines how the privileging of one form of subjective embodiment leads to the eventual presumption of its normalness, and consequently of the normalisation of the exclusion of all others (Young, 1990: 158). Monguilod (2001: 189) takes a more conciliatory interpretation of Baudrillard's Catastrophe, suggesting instead that his wariness of difference-as-identity is not borne out of cynicism, but rather out of a concern for the over-commodification of 'Otherness', warning of its absorption into a consumer-driven marketplace of meaningless signs. Here, perhaps lies the heart of the argument for the continued significance of difference: that it must be cherished as a process (not a fixed state) of re-evaluation, communication and deconstruction, rather than placed upon a pedestal as an object of mysterious, abject desire – or misused as a defensive means of fixing subjectivity within a pre-established, oppositional binary (MacCormack, 2003: 30). Accordingly, it is here that Toffoletti's (2004: 9) critique of the 'homogenising of the heterogeneity of difference' overlaps with Davis' work, (she even uses the same case study of the United Colours of Benneton advertisement). While her writing is critical of Baudrillard's advocacy for the total loss of subjective meaning and difference, her emphasis upon the post-human as an agent of disruption to dualistic modes of thinking as a preferable alternative to the Monster does not reflect contemporary efforts to reconfigure the Monstrous outside of phallogentric binaries. In fact, I propose that, while certainly not interchangeable with the Monstrous, the post-human subjects that Toffoletti describes are not wholly dissimilar to constructions of the Monstrous/nomadic subjects within the work of Shildrick (2002: 131), Haraway (1985: 1990) and Braidotti (2011: 191): fluid, ambiguous, self-aware hybrids that represent processes of subjective evolution, disruption and vulnerability.

Indeed, it is that ability to represent, to show, to de-monstrate that makes the Monster so critical within contemporary society. As Cohen (1996:4) states; etymologically the Monster is a creature of revelation; of warning; 'the Monster signifies something other than itself'. Ever occupying the cross-roads of society, the Monstrous reflects the fears, desires and anxieties of a given society – and demonstrates to us that the moral categories upon which these fears are premised are largely arbitrary, and delicate (Cohen, 1996:6). Unlike the post-human, the Monster cannot transcend categories, or render them irrelevant, but rather exists as a cultural signpost that critiques them by showing a culture to itself. It is not the transcendent creature envisaged by Toffoletti, because it is still needed to not be. As Kearney (2003: 4) maintains, 'Monsters show us that if our aims are celestial, our origins are terrestrial'. As long as the boundaries of race, embodiment and gender contribute to misogyny, racism and ableism, the Monster's ability to disrupt them remains important. While limited in comparison to the post-human, it remains as a reminder of the importance of vulnerability, and of the existence of boundaries that are not yet overcome (Kearney, 2003: 18; Shildrick, 2002: 5).

So, how might the Monstrous be recuperated from the domesticating clutches of 'egalitarian-sameness'? Young's chapter *Social Movements and the Politics of Difference* lays the groundwork for a self-reflexive system of justice that makes evident that a society that transcends difference is not only impossible, but also deeply flawed. Like Shildrick (2002) Young is deeply critical of the reduction of selfhood down to specific values that are defined by those historically occupying positions of privilege – questioning the value of this universal conception of subjectivity that has been defined solely for and by white, heterosexual, able-bodied men (Young, 1990: 157). This universal notion of the Self influences discourses and practices of justice and equality, to the extent that those outside of normative standards of subjectivity and citizenship remain unaccounted for, and thus remain unrepresented. Young maintains that this uniform, normative standard of justice has a detrimental influence upon any subsequent movements for equality; if the 'gold standard' of how a fair and egalitarian society ought to function is defined by those within positions of social power, then that equality is premised upon the condition of conformity and sameness. This, Young maintains, is not equality (Young, 1990: 157-158).

Young proposes an approach that is similar to my own: an emancipatory politics of process that recognises the significance of difference and the precedent of oppression as a means of redress and recuperation. Although not herself a Monster theorist, her work points to a culture that simultaneously contextualises and legitimises the role of the Monstrous Feminine: within a culture still dominated by patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist norms – difference still matters. The Monstrous Feminine is the amalgam of that difference – and as such, is the site of

significant contention amongst feminist and Queer theorists as to its efficacy as a site of resistance to patriarchal norms.

Here I take my cues from Braidotti. Her work is ideal for my own emphasis on difference, as her mapping of nomadic subjectivity references the Monster regarding feminist reconfiguration of difference. Braidotti (2011: 216) refers to the monster as a ‘ubiquitous yet perennially negative preoccupation’ – a creature that exemplifies the binary-logic of oppositions within Western phallocentrism. Superficially this may appear to be an affirmation of Ussher and Creed’s observations of the Monstrous Feminine as a symptom of cultural misogyny – however, accompanied by theorists such as Shildrick, Braidotti’s project of nomadism sets out to reconfigure the Monster’s difference away from oppressive connotations, into a discursive process of multiple, liminal potential (Braidotti, 2011: 216 -217). Nomadism, then is more than merely a method of critiquing one’s own subject position, but as an inherently feminist undertaking; one that acknowledges the significance of women’s sexual difference, while also remaining critical of the polarities imposed upon gender – that is, practicing difference *through* the critique of normative gendered symbolic orders maintained by phallocentric powers (Braidotti, 2011: 215).

While she acknowledges the need to expose the falsehood of the binary differences of gender, Braidotti (2011: 141) also expresses concern over more recent discursive tendencies within the field of gender studies to attempt to reduce the significance of difference altogether: positioning gendered differences largely as arbitrary and socially constructed, and thereby insinuating a ‘new symmetry between the sexes’ that erases the history of marginalisation and violence that has established ‘woman’ as a Monstrous subject (Braidotti, 2011: 143). Her warnings against the dissolution of gendered and sexual difference down to ‘a new androgyny’ (2011: 145) are analogous to the significance of the Monstrous Feminine; a concept that was initially defined by a culture of misogyny, ableism and racism – but not necessarily permanently defined by it. Braidotti (2011:161-162) insists that she will not relinquish her ties to the representation of ‘woman’ as different to men, for it is this difference (arbitrarily imposed or otherwise) that has been so influential in shaping both the perceptions of female subjectivity, as well as subsequent feminist and Queer responses to it. Braidotti argues that through acknowledging *how* women have been ‘Othered’ against their will, they may better equip themselves to re-define sexual difference on their own terms. Thus, I propose a middle ground, a compromise so to speak, between the discursive polarities that Braidotti (2011: 141) identifies in her chapter. While I am inclined to agree with Butler’s insistence of the socially constructed nature of gender, it is also possible to acknowledge that the polarity between genders (while artificially imposed) is still

relevant. To put it more simply, gender may lack essential, objective ontology, but the imposed binary between normative constructions of masculinity and femininity is nonetheless socially significant, as it enforces the difference that is (wrongly) supposed to be natural and inevitable. The differences between genders may lack tangibility, but the historical and subjective consequences of these differences are, nonetheless important. It is only through the recognition and ‘unpacking’ of the history of dualistic constructions of masculinity and femininity, Braidotti argues, that we may begin changing the rules for ourselves (Braidotti, 2011: 162), stating:

‘The factual element that founds the project of sexual difference, namely the critique of woman as a sign of de-valorised ‘Otherness’ is not biological – it is biocultural. That is to say - historical’⁵³ (Braidotti, 2011: 162).

By applying Braidotti’s assertion to the Monstrous Feminine, the difference that she represents may be understood not as one that is innate, natural or ‘God-given’, but rather as a reflection of histories that must be understood and learned from, rather than dismissed as wholly arbitrary, or as inevitable and static. In other words, differences between subjectivities (men and women, in Braidotti’s case – but this may be expanded upon) reflects long-standing dominant cultural norms that arbitrarily assign ‘Otherness’ to some, and ‘normal’ to others. We are different because our histories (personal and communal) have made us thus, and this difference – although often the result of trauma - is nonetheless valuable if harnessed as a means of critique (Young, 1990: 164-165).

It is true that the difference that the Monster represents has historically been attributed to the ‘insufficiency, madness, pathology and abjection’ supposed by phallocentrism to be intrinsic to femaleness (Ussher, 2006: 17). However, it is precisely this construction of the Monstrous along binary discourses of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ that makes evident the ‘weak points’ of its own undoing; as well as the potential (and necessity) of its reconstruction. As Shildrick (2002: 11)

⁵³ Both Braidotti and Davis refer to the normative interplay of biological and cultural norms. As mentioned, Davis (2013: 7) uses the term ‘biocultural’ to refer to the complex relationship between embodiment and identity – wherein disability is configured within a difficult discursive space between fixity and fluidity, and thus understood differently to identifiers such as gender. Similarly, Braidotti critiques Foucault’s project of understanding the ‘biopolitical’ as a means of disciplining of the subject *through* the body as a libidinal surface; troubling the status of the body as purely the biological sum of its parts as well as the notion of the subject as wholly embodied (Braidotti, 2011:178-179). In both instances, female and disabled bodies occupy problematic discursive spaces within established philosophies of embodiment – given that the epistemological history of selfhood and ‘normal’ materiality has been dominated by phallogentric and ableist norms. Where do female and disabled bodies – and the discourses of difference that accompany them – fit within Foucault’s analyses of the ‘disciplined’ body?

maintains, the construction of a form of Monstrosity that demands total distinction from an arbitrary norm is already a self-defeating fallacy (phallusy?):

‘The point is that Monsters can signify both the binary opposition the natural and the non-natural, where the primary term confers value, and also the disruption within that destabilises the standard of the same. [...] The issue is not so much that Monsters threaten to overrun or the boundaries of the proper, as that they promise to dissolve them’ (Shildrick, 2002: 11).

Whether a boundary may be eschewed entirely by Monsters is not the issue here. Rather, it is the unsustainability of social and bodily binaries between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ that may facilitate a more critical construction of the Monstrous Feminine (and the difference that she represents) away from the essentialising auspices of patriarchy. So, how is this to be done?

In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti (2011:150) asserts that it is only through the reconfiguration of difference and female subjectivity that feminist theory and activism may proceed beyond hierarchies and exclusion. Her second chapter *Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project* outlines a three ‘tiered’ process of feminist nomadism that relates to sexual difference. The first ‘level’ examines the epistemological project of reconfiguring female difference outside of patriarchal symbolic realms and encourages a move away from the dualistic definition of ‘woman as a non-man’ (Braidotti, 2011: 153). The second takes an intersectional approach, and accounts for the differences between women. Braidotti (2011: 157) is concerned with the configuration of ‘woman’ as, broad and heterogenous: a notion that allows for the multiplicity of female experiences, identities and struggles. The third-tier accounts for the specific, individualised and embodied structure of the feminist subject themselves (Braidotti, 2011: 158). This relates not only to the specific experiences of the woman as an individual, but also to the question of a multi-faceted, often contradictory identity: a ‘collection of differing layers’ that relates to (or against) feminist politics (Braidotti, 2011: 159). How does one’s existence as a woman correlate or refute the state of ‘being’ a feminist, and how might we reconcile this relationship between the self’s desire and politics?

Taken together, Braidotti’s system for examining and asserting sexual difference provides a useful template upon which we may differentiate between forms of ‘Otherness’ that are constructive and resistant, and those that have been arbitrarily defined for us. It is from this system that I base my own project of Monstrous praxis; a process of ‘doing’ difference that is critical of prescriptive, patriarchal essentialism, and singular categories of ‘womanhood’. The term ‘process’ here is significant, as it implies a consistent and ongoing effort to redefine feminist

(and Monstrous) praxis beyond binary dualisms, rather than a singular event that is fixed within specific social and political contexts. When I propose that the Monster remains a useful contemporary presence (as well as a viable form of expression and resistance) I am doing so upon the discursive shoulders of Braidotti, Shildrick and Young in that I recognise the potential of difference as more than a reactive product of a binary system. Given the Monster's fluidity and resistance to prescriptive definitions (Cohen, 1996: 6) this emphasis upon process is crucial. Difference can only constitute a viable tool of resistance if it is co-opted within a system that is constantly self-reflective, accountable and subject to evolution.

On this note, I turn again to Shildrick and Kearney, whose vision of vulnerable, compassionate Monstrosity exhibits a much-needed element of compassion that is needed to permeate the Self/Other boundaries that reinforce dualistic constructions of the Monster.

'The challenge now is to acknowledge a difference between self and other without separating them so schismatically that *no* relation at all is possible. [...] The attempt to build hermeneutic bridges between us and 'others' (human, divine or whatever) should not, I will argue, be denounced as ontology, ontotheology or logocentrism – that is to say, as some form of totalising reduction bordering on violence' (Kearney, 2003: 9).

Like any other valuable attribute, difference is constantly at risk of becoming over-commodified and fetishised, to the extent that its real value and significance becomes secondary to its market value. This chapter has examined how difference has been co-opted by contemporary neo-liberal culture, and stripped of its unpalatable, unmarketable aspects; rendering it both exploitable and unthreatening to dominant social orders. Lennard Davis' discussion of the limits of neo-liberal appropriation of diversity makes evident the dangers of domesticating difference, as well as the desire to exclude bodies and subjectivities that cannot be comfortably commodified. Feminist theorists such as Young and Kate Gleeson have echoed Shildrick's work in critiquing the presumed universality of the autonomous, rational male subject and Michael Warner reminds his readers of the harmful, exclusionary implications of 'homonormative respectability'. Each of these scholars have identified how neo-liberal appropriations of 'diversity' and the privileging of sameness represents a coercive means of subjugating gendered, sexual, bodily and racial 'Others' in order to maintain the status-quo. This status-quo is premised and dependent on the pretence that there are no longer any subjective or bodily boundaries that contribute to inequality and

oppression. Consequently, the Monster - a concept (or, in my case, a praxis) that occupies and makes-evident the discursive border-lands of culture⁵⁴ - is more important than ever.

Thus, difference, and the difference that the Monster herself embodies is valuable, because she represents the culmination of multiple intersecting histories of exclusion that cannot be forgotten; old bodies, disabled or sick bodies, menstruating bodies, non-whiteness, bodies and identities that do not conform to gendered or sexual binaries - all have been subject to non-consensual Monstrification due to their 'distance' from phallogentric ideals (Shildrick, 2002: 28). The Monster speaks to the broad scope of racist, patriarchal, ableist and heteronormative oppressions, but (as the following chapters will demonstrate) also speaks to the potentiality of avenues of resistance to them. Thus, to practice Monstrosity as a function of Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity is to acknowledge and utilise that genealogy as a means of speaking back to the cultures that facilitated it. We cannot ignore boundaries, or the differences that they imply. To do so would be to ignore the significance of our social and cultural pasts, and therefore to neglect the opportunity to adequately address issues of racism, misogyny, homophobia and ableism (Young, 1990: 165). Addressing (and possibly overcoming) these problems should not require the renunciation or sublimation of subjectivities and praxes that may prove resilient to oppression. To paraphrase Iris Marion Young – universal humanity should not require humanity to be universal (1990: 158).

⁵⁴ '[...] the disruptive, irruptive manifestation of the monstrous is not just an inventive trope of post-modernism, but a transhistorical site of challenge to the rational, autonomous masculine subject, and to the category of the human itself' (Shildrick, 2002: 121).

Chapter Three:

The Monstrous Feminine as Spectacle: Making a Glass of Oneself.

The previous two chapters established the genealogies and continued significance of the Monstrous Feminine, and argued for Monstrosity as a disruptive, liminal praxis of feminism. For the next three chapters, I will examine the case studies of three different women *as* demonstrative of a Monstrous Femininity that resists, critiques, parodies and eludes the categories of gendered subjectivity, embodiment and expression defined by norms of both patriarchy and contemporary intersectional feminism. My case study for this chapter is *4 minutes of Pure Bliss*, a filmed performance by American side-show entertainer Marry Bleeds, now hosted on the streaming site *Vimeo*. Shot in 2014, the footage depicts Marry in performing in what appears to be a large warehouse. Her performance is a suspension show⁵⁵ – she hangs nude from metal hooks inserted through multiple anchor points in her skin inside a gyroscope, which completes dozens of rotations before finishing to loud applause from the live audience that has gathered to watch (Bleeds, 2014). I will be using Marry's confronting performance as an instance of the Monstrous Feminine as spectacle: an extraordinary, excessive performance of deliberate alterity that may affect sympathy, horror, abjection and perverse pleasure all at once.

This chapter examines the intersection between the Monstrous Feminine and the varied scholarly interpretations of the spectacle, drawing chiefly upon Russo's chapter *Revamping Spectacle*. Russo maintains that the spectacle is not simply an accumulation of signs or a source of unusual entertainment; rather, it refers more to the loss of boundaries that occurs when women 'make spectacles of themselves' through vulgar excessiveness (Russo, 1994: 53). Here, the gendered and bodily possibilities of the spectacle become evident; constituting a departure from Guy Debord's Marxist logos towards an understanding of the spectacle as a heterogeneous site that produces affective, libidinal and potentially sympathetic responses from those that witness it. To do this, I will examine the relationship between the Monstrous Spectacle and Russo's analysis of Bakhtin's carnival: the medieval tradition being as a form of critique as well as a space of equality, 'making

⁵⁵ Suspension involves temporary, large-gauge piercings being made through the skin - often on the back and shoulders (although other body parts like the knees are sometimes used). These piercings are then connected to ropes or hooks that stretch the skin when the subject is 'hung' from them. As a Western praxis, suspension is most frequently associated with extreme body modification communities, and occasionally as a part of BDSM/Fetish play and performance. However, suspension has its origins as a Native American initiation ritual called 'Oh-Kee-Pa', as well as other Indigenous spiritual practices such as Indian hook-swinging (Pitts, 2003: 140).

strange' the cultural hegemonies and oppressions made evident by its liminal status (Gardiner, 1992: 32).

4 Minutes of Pure Bliss is a recent addition to a long history of female artists engaging in deliberate, spectacular acts that 'open up' the body through injury, surgery or explicit performance. Consequently, I will also explain the ways that the spectacle and Monstrous Feminine have already been incorporated into the genealogy of feminist performance art. Alongside the aforementioned work of Orlan and Cindy Sherman, I will also discuss how Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle pushed the boundaries between art, embodiment and obscenity with their art. I am interested in how bodies that are intentionally 'Othered' by means of extraordinary or unusual performative acts may function as a significant act of communication; a discussion with the end-goal of encouraging introspection and empathy, rather than simplistic confrontation or shock.

As well as demonstrating how Marry Bleeds' spectacular performance transgresses phallogentric norms of idealised femininity, I am also interested in the way in which her performance – and those of other performance artists that aestheticise abjection and injury - produces liminal affects and ideas that cannot be accounted for within intersectional feminism. What are the responses that Marry's spectacular, Monstrous performance provokes, that an intersectional praxis could not, and why is this significant? Here I wish to reiterate my intentions for the praxis of Monstrosity to speak-back to established discursive norms of bodily and gendered propriety. This chapter argues that the potential of the Monstrous Feminine as Spectacle lies in her ability to combine the visceral fear or revulsion provoked by abject public displays with the vulnerability that Shildrick characterises as ensuing from a breach of subjective boundaries. Like the carnival hall of mirrors, this iteration of the spectacle reflects a form of embodiment and femininity that is intentionally distorted, and unrecognisable by either patriarchy or dominant praxes of feminism.

I shall begin my initial discussion of the spectacle with an observation of its etymology: the term deriving from the Latin *spectare*, meaning 'to behold' (Hart, 1989: 1-2). The significance of this is made more apparent within the present context, given that the word 'Monster' suggests a warning or a portent, an extraordinary thing to be beheld (Asma, 2009: 13). Indeed, the Latin *speculum* (which originates from the same root as spectacle) translates as *mirror* (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2018). The spectacle implies more than an unusual sight, but one that is significant, in that it facilitates reflection on behalf of those who see it. From their etymologies alone, both

the Monstrous and the spectacle emerge as provocative sites or praxes that provoke discursive transformation through 'showing' a viewer to themselves.

Both the spectacle and the Monstrous as a broad cultural category are bound up in cultural processes of seeing and being seen. The subsequent renewal of communication discursive shifts that arise from their combined presence holds significant potential for the Monstrous *and* Monstrous Feminine as communicative, disruptive creative praxes. As mentioned, the spectacle is most commonly associated with Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, as well as Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Precession of Simulacra* (Mendoza, 2010: 47). Both theorists discuss the spectacle in terms of production and consumption; not necessarily as a single image or specific public scene, but rather as a relationship between individuals within consumer society that is given meaning and mediated by the proliferation of consumer signs (Mendoza, 2010:54). Baudrillard referred to 'consumer signs' as the empty, floating signifiers that serve as vectors for social communication and consumption in lieu of actual meaning or materiality (Baudrillard, 1996: 217). Debord and Baudrillard both conceptualised the spectacle as a manifestation of the hyperreal; a concept defined by Baudrillard (1982: 191) as 'the more real than real'; the simulation of truth and meaning that serves to benefit only the imaginary, and thus conflates the distinction between the real and its simulation. As Mendoza (2010: 53) demonstrates, both theorists use the spectacle as an example of the inevitable collapse of meaning in the proliferation of meaningless consumer signs within a contemporary consumer society. Thus, here the need arises to reconcile the loss of meaning resultant from rampant consumerism with the emergence of newer systems of praxis and discourse within feminist theory. Fortunately, the link between these seemingly disparate modes of inquiry has already been established.

In the sixth chapter of her work on the female grotesque, Russo takes the character 'Fevvers' from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* as a case study of the significance of the parodic spectacle of grotesque female performance. *Revamping Spectacle* begins with an acknowledgement of Debord's work, wherein the spectacle is described as a site of unification: a public space where disparate social signs, aesthetics and discourses converge and confront one another, creating both conflict and discourse simultaneously (Russo, 1994: 160-161; Debord, 1967: 6-7). In both Russo and Debord's work, the spectacle is positioned as a source of constant social production, a relational process of negotiating the differing ideologies that converge around it. The spectacle represents a 'meeting point' of social narratives that are displayed outward, opening avenues of communication between the spectacle itself and those that witness it. It is this communication that is key, as it represents the point of departure between the two theorists.

While Debord's (1967: 7) account of the spectacle is anchored within discourses of class, production and consumption, Russo maintains that the spectacle is more than a mere accumulation of signs or a source of bizarre entertainment. Rather, Russo describes the spectacle in terms of the destabilisation of normative boundaries that occurs when women 'make spectacles of themselves' through impropriety, vulgarity, artifice or excessiveness (Russo, 1994: 53). Russo uses the term 'spectacle' throughout her work, typically to refer to extraordinary displays or feats that transgress the boundaries of 'appropriate' femininity; functioning in a similar fashion as the Monstrous Feminine by making these boundaries evident. Thus, the grotesque-as-spectacle has the capacity to 'show' the inner machinations (normally hidden) of a culture to itself through the obvious display of contradiction, inconsistency and heterogeneity (Russo, 1994: 177). It is through this understanding that the intersection of the Monstrous Feminine and the spectacle may be observed: both being unusual, 'speaking' sites of supposedly oppositional discourses that hold up a mirror to a given society.

The Monstrous Feminine as spectacle occupies a similar role to that of the Russo's female grotesque: a speaking and potentially reciprocal form, capable of producing meaning through excessive, fluid, carnivalesque performances and displays of 'untidy' and 'uncontained' bodies typically censored by patriarchal norms of gendered and sexual propriety (Russo, 1994: 62-63). Russo is not alone in her description of the significance of the intersection between the grotesque and the spectacle, Asma's (2009:13) interpretation of the etymology of the term 'Monster' as 'omen' also connotes the state of being shown, which – given the cultural and temporal ubiquity of Monsters – suggests an ongoing process, rather than a singular event. If Monsters are imbued with the 'Otherness' that is specific to their particular time and place as Cohen (1996: 4) asserts, then newer spectacles, and newer Monsters will emerge as their contexts change. Thus, the spectacle of the Monstrous is never static - its fluidity is suggestive of the need for transformation. It is this ongoing process of showing, seeing and being seen that holds significant promise for my work. As I stated in my first chapter, the praxis of Monstrous Femininity is also a process that is akin to Braidotti's (2011:10-11) nomadic subjectivity, which incorporates methods of being and doing that are subject to a constant, relational process of active renegotiation (rather than a singular event or static system of belief) to as to reflect the changing contextual paradigm.

Accordingly, I posit that the Monstrous Feminine as a specifically gendered technology of the Monstrous is similarly a non-static site of liminal and converging subjectivities. As a 'creature of the crossroads' (Braunberger, 2000: 12), the ambiguity of the Monstrous Feminine serves as a reminder of the porous nature of social laws and assumptions, thus encouraging their re-

examination. When viewed in stereo, the two concepts of the Monstrous Feminine and the spectacle appear to be two sides of the same coin; both being unusual, 'speaking' sites of supposedly oppositional discourses (male and female, lewd and proper, animal and human, blasphemous and holy, and so on) that have the capacity to hold up a discursive mirror to a given culture. Through the presentation of the extraordinary, the excessive and the unusual, the spectacle of Monstrous Femininity reflects a skewed image of patriarchal culture back upon itself; instigating further communication and representing the need for (and sometimes the inevitability of) change. The spectacular is not necessarily always Monstrous, but it is arguable that all forms of the Monstrous are spectacular. According to Creed (1993: 11), the presence of the Monstrous Feminine (real or imagined) constitutes a confrontation with marginal subjectivities or bodies that is always outwardly projected, ambiguous and (therefore) threatening to phallogentric symbolic orders.

The communicative and liminal site of lewd, signifying excess that Russo (1994: 53-54) describes is exemplified by Texas-based side-show performer Marry Bleeds. Marry's Facebook page describes her as a 'glass-eating, sword swallowing, spider-licking, side-show sweetheart' (Bleeds, 2018). The description is dramatic but accurate: her many photographs and videos show her variety of highly unusual skills in action⁵⁶. Any of the above activities would certainly qualify as Monstrous spectacles in and of themselves, however, this text is concerned with one specific piece of footage hosted on the streaming site 'Vimeo', entitled '*4 Minutes of Pure Bliss NSFW*'. The footage begins with Marry Bleeds blindfolded and naked inside a large metal framework that forms a sphere. She stands on a small platform in the middle of the sphere suspended off the ground, held in place by dozens of metal hooks attached to the outer rim of the framework. The metal hooks pierce and stretch her flesh, anchoring her to the inner-most part of the frame. The structure she is inside is a gyroscope, and it begins to move. Marry moves with it, the flesh-hooks are taught and hold her firmly in position so that her body follows that of the inner sphere. The frames begin to move faster, and the crowd around her applauds, Marry loudly encourages them. The framing of the footage consistently changes from outside the sphere to inside: a camera fixed on the inside of the gyroscope allows us to see her up close, also affording a closer glimpse at the hooks penetrating her flesh and her facial expressions. She is visibly bleeding, the motion of the gyroscope pulling at the wounds so that the surface of her entire body acquires a strange topography, the sections that are pierced are stretched, extending outwards to the edge of the sphere. Soon, it is possible to hear as well as see Marry; what begins as faint whimpers and gasps

⁵⁶ True to her bio, these skills do indeed include placing a large tarantula where large tarantulas should not go.

become full-blown erotic moans and eventually screams, it is evident that she is enjoying herself (the title of the video requires little extrapolation). Eventually the gyroscopes stop. Marry has made – to quote Russo (1994: 53) – ‘a spectacle of herself’. The audience applauds wildly (Bleeds, 2014) and the footage ends.

Here a crossroads is reached. What does Marry’s performance *do* in terms of producing or perpetuating narratives of gender and embodiment? From an intersectional perspective, Marry’s performance would raise questions of how overlapping systems of power and privilege affect the way in which Marry and her actions may be perceived, and subsequently how risky her performance is. Marry is young, white, conventionally pretty and able-bodied – all aspects that mark her as privileged within intersectional hierarchies of cultural power (Smooth, 2013: 20-21). As such, within an intersectional analysis, Marry’s performance is more than a confronting or unusual display, but also represents the uneven access to the capacity to publicly enact such a performance without incurring derision, harm or even violence. Indeed, Shildrick’s (2002: 30-31) early chapters examine how race as well as gender has played into the cultural construction of Monsters; non-whiteness and non-maleness both being positioned against the ‘civilised’ ideal subject. However, there is little in her work that examines how these processes of ‘Othering’ overlap to produce narratives of racialized Monstrous Femininity.⁵⁷ Indeed, much of the feminist literature concerning the Monstrous Feminine does not consider how the Monstrosity of women of colour is distinct from that of white women, typically analysing race and gender as distinct forms of alterity within white, patriarchal symbolic orders⁵⁸.

This echoes Crenshaw’s (1991: 1242) observations of the failure of identity politics to acknowledge differences *within* groups, constructing racism and gender as ‘either/or propositions’. Consequently, any discussion of the praxis of Monstrosity is hamstrung by the absence of narratives of women of colour *as* Monstrous. Indeed, as Mowatt and French (2013: 647) point out, the stereotyping of black women as inherently more lascivious and animalistic

⁵⁷ Shildrick (2002: 135) does briefly mention the case of Saartje Bartmann, otherwise pejoratively known as ‘The Hottentot Venus’, who was exhibited in European freak-shows at the beginning of the 19th Century. As an enslaved Khoikhoi woman, Bartmann represented both a racial and suppositions of excessive female sexuality (on account of her enlarged hips and buttocks). Her exhibition demonstrates a confluence of racism and misogyny that characterises the way that women of colour are Monstrified

⁵⁸ Here I return to Halberstam’s (1995: 7) observation that narratives of sexuality and gender obfuscate issues of race in contemporary readings of the Monstrous and the Gothic. One might interpret the comparative lack of focus on race in scholarship concerning the Monstrous Feminine as exemplifying Crenshaw’s (1989:144) assertion that the social construction of marginalisation was (and arguably still is) confined to discrete narratives of singular kinds of oppression – one may be discriminated against for being black *or* for being female, but not both. Sexism is constructed through the experience of white women.

than white women renders the performance of excessive sexuality and vulgarity as inherently more dangerous, as it risks worsening pre-existing racism, stating: 'Black women do not have the privilege to play on destructive representations'. Within this analysis, bell hooks' (1981:55) observations of the history of de-feminisation of black women is also relevant: unlike black women, within a racist cultural context, Marry's femininity is not initially in question⁵⁹ until she deliberately behaves in an 'unfeminine' manner (vis-à-vis' Ussher's (2006: 4-6) assertions concerning purity and womanhood).

Similarly, Thomson's (2002:17)'s work reveals a greater depth of inquiry into the specific 'Otherness' of disabled women that replicates elements of hooks' work, asserting that normative constructions of 'good' femininity are dependent on the elimination of any other forms of alterity. To be a woman of colour and/or a woman with disabilities – or indeed any other form of identity or experience unaccounted for within normative symbolic orders – is to be 'doubly Monstrous'. Therefore, to deliberately perform Monstrosity implies a greater level of 'Othering' that carries with it greater risk of further exclusion and violence than that faced by a woman like Marry. From an intersectional perspective, Marry's performance exemplifies the uneven systems of privilege and power that govern social processes of 'Othering'. She has the capacity to 'opt-into Otherness' in a way that disabled women and women of colour cannot, thus her performance represents a form of alterity that is inaccessible, and potentially even dangerous for other women. This analysis demonstrates not only the varied and unequal ways that Monstrosity may be projected onto social 'Others', but also the incommensurability of intersectionality with praxes of Monstrosity Femininity.

As stated, the spectacle functions as a discursive 'meeting point' of disparate ideas, a heterogeneous conversion of discourses and signifiers that produces new affective responses. It is not the purpose of this chapter to argue for one interpretation (Monstrous or intersectional) over another, but rather to demonstrate that a reading which privileges the Monstrous Feminine provokes responses and creates meaning where intersectionality cannot. It is therefore appropriate that the spectacle is, by its nature a site where multiple, heterogeneous (and occasionally contradictory) meanings and signifiers meet (Debord, 1967: 6-7). Marry's performance demonstrates this multiplicity, being an extraordinary, public site of discursive convergence that speaks back to those that see it of newer

⁵⁹ bell hooks (1981: 31-33) describes the way in which black women were positioned as 'Other' in relation to the idealised status of white women as sexually 'pure' during the 19th Century. The labelling of black women as temptresses and 'Jezebels' functioned not only as a means of elevating white women within a racist society, but also as a means of catharsis for the misogyny of white men.

possibilities. This 'meeting' of disparate discourses (in this case, the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality) facilitated by the grotesque spectacle is recalled in Russo's examination of the significance of the carnival, and its disruptive responses to normative social stratification through parody and 'low culture'.

The latter term is particularly significant in this instance, as the classed stratification that it describes is present within narratives of grotesquery and the Monstrous, as well as within feminist critiques of idealised femininity raised by theorists like Douglas. 'Low-culture' was initially a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu to describe the way in which specific forms of media and consumption were assigned value as a means of class-based segregation. Notions of 'high culture' and 'good taste' pertain more to wealth and privilege, rather than objective value; both referring to preferences for forms of art, literature or discourse that require a high level of education or training to properly appreciate (Loiselle, 2013: 50). Bourdieu used the term 'cultural capital' to describe the social prestige and privileges necessary to influence popular notions of 'good' taste and 'high culture', as well as the power to maintain given standards of social respectability – power typically granted by whiteness, maleness, able-bodiedness and economic privilege (Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropolous & Kirkby, 2003: 207). Here the parallels to Halberstam's use of low theory become apparent: the privileging of that which arises from the marginal spaces 'below' (Halberstam, 2011: 11); and resistance through the patched-together eccentricities of discourse that refuse to cohere within the confines of orthodoxy (2011: 17).

In this way, Russo's⁶⁰ use of the carnival in her construction of the female grotesque as a form of social parody is significant, in that it allows for the reception of the 'lowness' of the grotesque (as well as the Monstrous) within a more communicative, light-hearted, egalitarian context that parodies boundaries of class, gender and embodiment (Russo, 1994: 62-63). Like the eponymous medieval tradition from which Bahktin took his influence, the carnival exists as a heterogenous, topsy-turvy meeting and redeployment of cultural norms that coincides with spectacular parodies, and the uncertainty of low theory. Consequently, the carnival – as an instance of low theory and low culture functions

⁶⁰ It should be noted that Russo's deployment of Bahktin's work is not intended as a historical study of the precise medieval tradition, but rather focusses more on the discursive potential of the carnival as a site of utopian/egalitarian ideals as they relate to the subject of the female grotesque. Thus, neither Russo's nor my own work will focus on the history or precise nature of the medieval practice itself, but rather the theory that it inspired (See also, (Gardiner, 1992)).

simultaneously as a site of refuge, as well as a disruptive thorn in the side of dominant hierarchies and hegemonies (Russo, 1994: 62; Halberstam, 2011: 16-17).

Both Bahktin (1965) and Russo assert that 'lowness' be understood as a form of resistance, of social parody and a mockery of the elite by the 'unwashed' masses (Russo, 1994: 64). Russo (1994: 61) refers to Bahktin's observations of the relationship between the grotesque and the carnivalesque in terms of 'low' culture. She observes that although the two terms are distinct⁶¹, the good-natured vulgarity of the grotesque is an important element of Bahktin's carnival; excessive, uncontrollable, animal and irregular. Much like the Monstrous, the significance of grotesquery as a site of resistance lies in its 'Otherness' to the monolithic, transcendent 'rationality' of 'high' culture (Russo, 1994: 8). Within the parodic, laughter of the carnival, Russo identifies the role of the grotesque body, which she describes as follows:

'The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreted body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body, which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism: the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world' (Russo, 1994: 62-63).

Here, Russo provides a link between Bahktin's work, and that of feminist Monster theorists like Shildrick, in her positioning of the grotesque body as liminally 'Other' to the static autonomy envisioned of the idealised, white male subject (Shildrick, 2002: 1-2).

While Bahktin's account of the carnival and the 'low culture' of the grotesque is one grounded in analyses of class, Russo extends this idea to one that also acknowledges the social and gendered relations that his 'laughing pregnant hags' represent within patriarchal culture (1994: 63).

Marry Bleeds exemplifies the grotesque body. In her spinning gyroscope, her performance evokes a carnivalesque confusion of signifiers (flesh and metal, pleasure and pain, vulnerability and laughter etc.), all of which converge in a single, performative site that 'speaks' to its audience of heterogeneity and the unity of disparate signs. Marry unashamedly revels in her own excess: a mere show of 'tasteless' and vulgar flesh becomes what Russo (1994:159) refers to as a 'deliberate production of unnaturalness and prosthetic grotesquery'. The female grotesque is not shy about

⁶¹ Bahktin referred to the carnival specifically as an egalitarian, heterogenous space that replicated the 'topsy-turvy' social chaos and laughter of medieval tradition, whereas the grotesque (while being a significant element of the carnival) refers more generally to that which is vulgar, ugly and in excess of classed divides of taste and culture (Russo, 1994: 62-63).

her vulgarity or her 'unnaturalness', rather, they function as a part of a reciprocal dialogue between audience and spectator, a dialogue that uses 'low' humour and parody in a manner that is deliberately theatrical and Marry's bloodied bawdiness would rival that of the Grand-Guignol.

Her nude body pinioned within the huge, revolving metal frame is pierced and distorted into 'unnatural' shapes, artificial limbs of metal hooks and wires extending from her flesh, confusing the boundaries between organic and inorganic. Her screams and grunts of pain and pleasure are unrestrained - nearly to the point of melodrama - and her encouragement of the audience to join in her vocal rejoicing speaks of reciprocity. Indeed, this may be observed within the first two minutes of Marry's stunt: after a moan of pleasure, she exclaims "Fuck! Scream!" to her audience, who respond enthusiastically. Unsatisfied, Marry shouts: 'You can do better than that! Scream LOUDER!', prompting an even greater cheer, drawing those watching into the performance (Bleeds, 2014). It is this pantomime-like call and response, and melodramatic heightening of Marry's communication with her audience that makes her performance indicative of the Spectacular Monstrous Feminine: a sight that stands out from the mundane, appearing to the spectator as an extraordinary 'perceptual aberration' that disrupts the ordinary, the everyday and the banal through communicative 'Otherness' (Loiselle, 2013: 47). Loiselle (2013: 48) refers to a 'moment' at which a narrative display switches from performative to deliberately, even ridiculously melodramatic, abandoning all pretence of the rational or natural, and moves to a carnal and ostentatious spectacle that disrupts and disturbs conventional notions of ordinary or proper bodies. This awareness, even embrace of artifice and 'vulgar' excess marks the Monstrous spectacle as a site of 'showing', of critiquing bourgeois notions of bodily propriety. This moment may be seen in Marry's call to her audience – it is from this point that the applause begins, and those watching her become a communicative part of the act, rather than puzzled onlookers. As Loiselle (referring in this case to the spectacular monster in horror cinema) states:

'In the irrational domain of the supernatural, the most conspicuous figure is the one who is at once best informed, sexiest and most gory: she embodies buxom monstrosity, where abundant female charms and destabilising knowledge are treated as part and parcel of the monstrous spectacle that challenges patriarchal normality' (Loiselle, 2013: 51).

Marry is at once sexually alluring and grotesque; displaying the simultaneous vulnerability and camp bawdiness of splayed nakedness, the artifice of her bodily contortion and movements and her unabashed enjoyment of being watched while so displayed being simultaneously extraordinary and disturbing. Her performance speaks of the limits of the human body, showing her audiences (both live and online) the forbidden joy of unnatural and verboten bodily pleasures

that gleefully acknowledge and rejects what Shildrick and Russo identify as the static, self-contained 'rationality' of the normative body.

While the connection between the grotesque/Monstrous spectacle and feminist discourse is made apparent by Russo, Marry's performance also calls into question the relationship between art, female embodiment and obscenity. Of course, Marry is not the first performance artist to do so. In the first chapter of *'The explicit body in performance'* Rebecca Schneider uses the example of pornographer, feminist scholar and sex-work advocate Annie Sprinkle as an individual who 'places a question mark' at the intersection between art and obscenity (Schneider, 1997: 53). Her chapter *'Logic of the twister, eye of the storm'* includes a memoir of Schneider attending a 1989 performance of *'Post Porn Modernism'* in which Sprinkle inserted a speculum (another spectacle pun?) into her vagina. With the help of assistants holding torches, she invited audience members to queue up to view her cervix (Schneider, 1997: 54-55). *'Post Porn Modernism'* constitutes a linguistic and performative 'doubling': the speculum functioning as a mirror not only in the literal sense, but also (like the spectacle itself) as a means of 'reflecting' ideas of female sexuality back at the gathered audience through the spectacle of Sprinkle's performance.

Schneider's recollection invokes the presence of both the obscene and the sacred; Sprinkle's performance blurring the lines between interactive artistic performance, hardcore pornography and religious ritual simultaneously - the assembled crowd being comprised of art critics and connoisseurs, new-agers, porn fans and scholars (Schneider, 1997: 53-54). While likely differently motivated, Sprinkle's performance functions in a similar fashion to that of Marry Bleeds: both 'open up' their bodies in explicit ways in order to provoke a sympathetic, intrigued response from an audience that may otherwise feel revulsion at witnessing the transgression of such intimate boundaries (transgression of skin/vagina by metal, sexually charged voyeurism, unusual sources of libidinal pleasure etc.). The liminality of Sprinkle and Marry Bleeds' performances and the deliberate provocation of different spectators (as well as their subsequent responses) speaks to the communicative and discursive value of the spectacle: in performing an extraordinary, 'obscene' act in a public setting, both women brought together disparate and occasionally oppositional subject positions in order to produce responses that contribute to a renewal of social discourse, recalling Debord's (1967: 6) initial description of the spectacle.

Similarly, Carolee Schneemann's performance of *'Eye/Body'* (1963) also fostered a communicative, transgressive relationship with her audience by establishing Schneemann's own body as a 'visual territory' within the artwork, incorporating her own naked body into the chaotic images. Smeared in paint, her flesh becoming integrated into the painted panels, toy snakes and

broken glass that comprised the chaotic black and white film images – her gaze never leaving the camera. Schneemann's painted, performative nudity constitutes what Schneider (1997: 35) describes as an 'overt doubling': the female form as both seer and seen, blurring the lines between subject and object, artist and art and passive and active (Schneider, 1997: 36).⁶² This 'doubling' of female identity as both viewed object and active agent is significant in terms of the border between the 'good woman' and the 'unclean whore' described by Douglas (1966: 2-4). In her discussion of the initial reception of Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* (as well as Schneemann's re-creation of the piece a century later), Schneider (1997:29) describes the crossing of gendered boundaries that such spectacles imply:

'When the whore attempts to cross the border as artist versus artist's object, the sacred divide between porn and art is thrown immediately into relief. When Olympia defies the validating signature of the male artist and steps out of his frame to authorise her own framing, perhaps stretching out live in the museum or gallery and claiming space as art *and* artist, she not only directly challenges the terms of demarcation between high and low but unearths the gendered dynamics in that relation.'

This crossing constitutes a significant act of gendered resistance, both in terms of art and performance praxis. Indeed, the arbitrary construction of female subjectivity by patriarchal orders is described by Elisabeth Lenk (cited in Hart, 1989: 5) as a recollection of:

'those terrible moments when woman searches for herself in the mirror and cannot find herself. The mirror image has got lost somewhere, the gaze of men does not reflect it back to women'.

Thus, the spectacle of feminist performance art is not only an act of turning a mirror onto an audience, but of turning a *stolen* mirror back against those that had sought to control the way in which women are reflected. The instances of Sprinkle's pornography-as-art and Schneemann's artist-as-art (as well as Marry Bleeds as a combination of both) may be understood as simultaneously spectacular *and* Monstrous. All three being acts of public, uncontained and 'distasteful' displays of nudity and sexuality that 'speak' to an audience about the tenuous boundaries between art and vulgarity. They represent a site where supposedly divergent

⁶² To a contemporary audience, the incorporation of the artist's own nude body within a performance would not typically be considered shocking. However, Schneemann's work was accused by critics as being little more than narcissistic exhibitionism, and her success due only to her conventionally attractive figure and sex appeal to men (Schneider, 1997: 37). According to Schneider (1997: 37-38), these responses to female artists using their own bodies as art were typical from the male-dominated art establishment, despite a precedent of male artists such as Yves Klein using women's bodies as canvasses or brushes.

discourses meet, and in so doing constitute a form of embodied communication. Thus, the work of Schneemann and Sprinkle demonstrates a meeting between the unapologetically 'low' nature of the nude, pornographic or uncontained woman and the realm of 'high' art that prompts a critique of the borders between the two classed and gendered realms. Through the same reading Marry Bleeds' performance is similarly liminal: her performance deploys bodily 'lowness', both by virtue of her unabashed nudity and sexuality as well as the deliberate artifice and 'barbarism'⁶³ of her suspension. Yet, this deliberate production of 'lowness' facilitates what Halberstam (2011: 25) would describe as a 'detour around proper knowledge': subsequently bypassing the common-sense realm of bodily orderliness that segregates the spectatorial subject from the spectacular object.

While her critics accused her of catering towards a male gaze, Schneemann's performances problematized the relationship between woman-as-viewed-object and woman-as-artistic-agent, being simultaneously image, and image maker – seeking to become a 'self' within the gaze of a viewer that had the capacity to return the look (Schneider, 1997: 34-35). Creed also touches upon the subject of spectatorship with regards to the Monstrous Feminine. Why is it, she asks, that existing feminist theory has not made sufficient room for the role of women as an active, Monstrous site of spectacle, rather than simply as objects of male viewing pleasure?⁶⁴ (Creed, 1993: 152). Creed describes the role of the Monstrous Feminine within contemporary horror films as a creature that invokes a gaze that is not one of sadistic phallocentrism, but rather of sympathetic, masochistic male desire. The exploration of the more 'perverse' aspects of the masochistic gaze that Creed identifies within modern horror dovetails into a discussion of the vulnerability of the abject spectacle, which I will discuss in more depth later in this chapter. But firstly, it is significant to acknowledge the discursive shift (or, rather, the need for a discursive shift) that Creed is identifying within feminist scholarship concerning the Monstrous Feminine; the need for greater agency and power within the relationship between the Monstrous/Grotesque spectacle, and those that see her (Creed, 1993: 153). While acknowledging

⁶³ I use the term 'barbarism' quite deliberately, as a reference to the way that non-traditional body modifications (particularly those traditionally employed by non-Western and Indigenous cultures) have been juxtaposed with the 'civilised', non-modified ideal of the (typically European) rational subject. Pitts (2003: 37-38) examines the relationship between the 'Othering' of colonized subjects and European women – both of whom she maintains are positioned against the supposedly inherently civilised Enlightenment ideal of white masculinity. The 'lowness' of the modified form thus speaks back to this dichotomous notion of rationality.

⁶⁴In any discussion of the male gaze, it would be remiss to not mention the significance of Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). While Creed does acknowledge the importance of this work, her concern in this specific instance pertains to the lack of agency granted to the monster-as-viewed-subject, rather than the object of a voyeuristic/sadistic male gaze (Creed, 1993: 152-153). The next chapter will examine Mulvey's work in greater detail in relation to body modification.

that more work must be undertaken in this particular line of inquiry, Creed makes an important observation about the power dynamics present within the spectacle of the Monstrous Feminine:

‘The presence of the monstrous feminine [...] undermines the view that the male spectator invariably takes up a sadistic position, because the monster is always male. [...]

Furthermore, male victims are frequently placed in a masochistic position via the female monster’ (Creed, 1993: 156).

While Creed’s work is largely focussed on the role of the Monstrous Feminine within horror cinema, her observations regarding the gendered response to the spectacle of the Monster becomes more broadly applicable in a when considering the relationship between the female spectacular and the male spectator. More importantly, these assertions present an opportunity to consider the reception and response of the Monstrous Feminine as a more complex set of relations than is allowed within the conception of the male gaze as inherently sadistic (Creed, 1993: 155-156).

It follows that the way in which the Monster is ‘looked upon’ will determine the meanings that are derived from it, and how these meanings are understood in relation to their contexts and specific visual signifiers (or, in this following instance, simulacra). It is within the carnivalesque, camp theatricality of Marry’s performance that further connections between the Monstrous Feminine and the spectacle may be found, most notably through Russo’s emphasis upon artifice as it intersects with Baudrillard’s notion of transaesthetics. In relation to the spectacle, transaesthetics may be understood as a phenomenon of presenting the simulacra of art or meaning, (rather than the art or meaning itself), as a means of abrogating the barrier between subject and seer whereby art is used to represent its own demise, but in so doing, it exposes the post-modernist desire for ontological renewal (Radia, 2014: 196). Put more simply, and within the context of Russo’s grotesque spectacle, transaesthetics as deliberate artifice – such as that displayed by Marry Bleeds - may be understood as a deliberate burlesque that utilises the performance of pain and bodily distortion as a means of reproducing meaning, and thereby facilitating avenues of communication.

Here, Cindy Sherman’s exploration of masquerade and prosthesis becomes relevant, specifically one piece featured within the 1992 series of Untitled photographs, *Untitled #250*. Unlike her previous work in *Untitled Film Stills*, this particular photograph does not appear to depict Sherman at all. Instead it shows a collection of mannequin parts, arranged with ghoulish carelessness on a couch to emulate a woman giving birth. Two jointed arms, a torso complete

with large, painted nipples and a legless crotch bearing a hairy, gaping vulva expelling a phallic⁶⁵ string of sausages, and a blankly staring witch-mask comprise the grotesque approximation of the maternal moment (Betterton, 2006: 94). Unlike the careful, cinematic attention to detail that characterised her prior film stills, *Untitled #250* presents childbirth and female fecundity as fetishised simulacra, a deliberate fakery that joins together the contradictory aesthetics of old age, sexuality and childbirth. The use of the witch mask⁶⁶ is particularly significant to this chapter, as it specifically recalls Russo's use of Bakhtin's description of pregnant hags, an impossible, abject doubling; the 'death that gives birth' (cited in Russo, 1994: 63). Betterton (2006: 95) describes Sherman's merging of the grotesque and the maternal as ambivalent and risky; does it perpetuate the misogyny that Ussher (2006: 87) associates with the fecund Monstrous Feminine, or does it – through the parodic artifice – expose those same patriarchal processes as they are enacted upon pregnant and aging bodies? (Betterton, 2005: 95).

Such risky ambivalence is replicated in Marry's deliberate simulation of degradation, a parodic pantomime of suffering that simultaneously repels and draws her audience in (Betterton, 2006: 96). While her 'stunt'⁶⁷ is real – the torture that her act appears to replicate is not: her pinioned body emulating crucifixion and the degradation of spreadeagled, public nudity through spectacular visuals of hooks, metal and pieced flesh. Her cries could be mistaken for those of pain, were it not immediately apparent that she is very much enjoying herself. Marry presents to us a simulacrum of pain, an exquisite aestheticisation of agony that makes no effort to mask its deception, this being precisely the point of her performance. Her body is deliberately pulled and

⁶⁵ Upon closer inspection, it is unclear whether or not the phallic sausages – themselves simulacra of penises – are being expelled, inserted or devoured. The stationary nature of the photograph freezes this process, making it impossible to ascertain whether this depicts childbirth, intercourse or phallic loss through maternal absorption. This uncertainty recalls Creed's (1993: 63) observation that the terror of the Monstrous Feminine in horror films is dependent on the merging together of all aspects of the maternal into one: the archaic mother, the phallic woman and the castrated/castratrice becoming fused into a single, spectacular entity.

⁶⁶ Sherman's use of a mask in lieu of her own face may also be interpreted through Russo as a subtle mockery of Lacan's description of the feminine as a mask for the absence of identity (Cited in Russo, 1994: 69). The witch mask – already positioned by Sherman as a deliberate simulacrum of femininity – becomes a parodic 'double negative' of constructed womanhood, a simulacrum of the masquerade that Irigaray might refer to as mimetic (Cited in Russo, 1994: 68).

⁶⁷ Russo described 'stunts' in terms of 'risk'. Her first chapter '*Up there, Out There*' describes the daring aerial acrobatics of circus performers or of female pilots such as Amelia Earhart as entering risky, liminal space that, akin to De Certeau's notion of 'bricolage' (1984: 31) constitutes a 'flight' into uncharted discursive and bodily territories undertaken by those outside of the normative realm of embodiment or subjectivity. To quote Russo (1994: 22) directly, a stunt is 'a tactic for groups or individuals in a risky situation in which a strategy is not possible'.

distorted into unnatural shapes, the sight of her stretched skin making a mockery of how 'natural' bodies should appear.⁶⁸

However, Marry's burlesque of torment is more than a grotesque act, it also opens up possibilities for subjective and discursive renewal. As Radia (2014: 195) maintains, the authenticity of the spectacular subject is 'paradoxically reasserted through a kind of *singeing* of the image[...] a kind of *memento mori* dance where the symbolic extinction of the meaningful subject simultaneously stages its own renewal'. The artifice of Marry's performance recalls the absence of meaning inherent in the simulacra that are deployed (i.e.: the appearance of pain, degradation, suffering); signs that, by virtue of their artistic simulation, become hyper-aestheticised. Marry's bleeding body thus recalls not pain itself, but the *aesthetics* of pain. This prioritisation of image over substance is discussed by Baudrillard in '*Transaesthetics*'; describing how art becomes 'obliged to mime its own disappearance' (Baudrillard, 1993: 18). Put more simply, Radia (2014: 195 -196) asserts that the deliberate reproduction of hyperreal signifiers and aesthetics within performance art actually produces (rather than eschews) newer discourses and interpretations; the excessive artifice inherent within Marry's grotesque parody of abject torment encourages a renewal of meaningful dialogue, facilitated by the blurring of boundaries between the spectacle and the spectator. Therefore, consistent with Russo's (1994: 162-264) assertions, the grotesquery and artifice of the Monstrous spectacle presents an image that not only makes evident the fragility of arbitrary boundaries between 'self' and 'Other' but does so in a manner that demonstrates how this newly exposed arbitrariness provokes ongoing discursive regeneration.

At this point, I must contradict myself a little by conceding that the role of the simulacra within the spectacle is a paradoxical one: simultaneously speaking to the significance of the renewal of subjective/artistic discourse, as well as demonstrating a desire on behalf of the spectator to witness imagery that best appeals to their own desires – whether grounded in objective reality or not. In his essay '*Travels in Hyperreality*' (1983), Umberto Eco discusses the appeal of the 'fake' over the real: 'It is not so much because it wouldn't be possible to have a real equivalent, but because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake, and its obedience to the program (Eco, 1983: 44). Eco continues, asserting that the social privileging of the 'fake' is (supposedly) justified by the consistent unreliability and imperfection of the 'real'; that which is

⁶⁸ Russo's examination of *Nights at the Circus* mentions Carter's deliberate detailing of the 'falseness' of Fevvers' aerial performance: the unbelievability of the Amazonian woman flying through the air is a part of the joke. The deliberately self-evident artifice of Fevvers' act (as well as her gaudy make-up and obviously dyed hair) is positioned as a form of challenge to the audience - a mockery of the 'naturalness' of femininity (Fevvers was rumoured to have been 'hatched', not born) (Russo, 1994: 164), as well as an acknowledgement of the 'masquerade' of feminine performance (Russo, 1994: 168).

intentionally constructed as simulacra may always be relied upon to reflect that which a viewer wishes to see: a living crocodile in a zoo may be dozing or obscured from view, but an animatronic one at Disneyland will always be colourful, animated and entertaining (Eco, 1983: 44). We prefer the artificial, because it presents only the parts of the real that are interesting, beautiful or engaging to us. One may notice the disparity between seeking 'perfection' or a particular 'ideal' in the deliberately artificial; particularly in performances like Marry's, where artifice functions to demonstrate the fragility of the subjective boundaries that constitute what is conventionally understood to be 'real'. However, here I return to Creed, and suggest that rather than a pristine notion of 'perfection', the allure of the grotesque, Monstrous spectacle lies in seeing that which is forbidden, yet desired, the allure of the 'Real' as described by Kristeva (Levina & Bui, 2013: 3) always present in within the presence of the 'Other'. Marry's performance allows us to experience the abject fascination of pain, without actually having to witness a real instance of torture or mutilation. Therefore, in this instance, Eco's assertion that the fake is always preferable to the real rings abundantly true.

But, 'fake' or not – the responses provoked by Marry's bleeding, spinning body are significant. It is to these responses that my attention now turns, specifically to Kristeva's abject, as represented by the intentionally 'injured', bleeding body, and its relevance to performative use of body modification. Marry's performance is one of many within recent decades to utilise the punctured flesh of the artist as a form of communication, hers being a more recent incarnation of practices that stretch (pun intended) back decades within the Westernised world. Within a Western context, the tradition of performative body modification has a rich history within BDSM, body modification and Queer communities as a form of subversion of restrictive bodily, sexual and gendered norms (Pitts, 2003: 86). UK artist Ron Athey is arguably the most famous artist to use his body in such a 'grotesque manner': deliberately undergoing painful, performative rites of penetration, piercing and cutting as a publicly defiant display of the homosexual, HIV positive body, forcing his audiences to confront a body that was 'abject' and 'sick' – while still defiantly, unapologetically pleased and uncensored (Pitts, 2003: 87-89).

Over the last decade, the use of performative body modifications such as hook swinging, suspension and temporary ('play') piercings in public or semi-public forums have become increasingly popular outside of Queer and Fetish communities as a means of expression and deliberate display - although they remain popular within these subcultures as a form of exploring 'taboo' pleasure and bodily sensation – as well as an effective way of thrilling an audience (Pitts, 2003: 12). The sight of voluntarily punctured and misshapen flesh unashamedly presented for public viewing has the potential to do more than merely shock; it also raises an important

question about the perceived 'naturalness' of the unmodified, static and non-spectacular body that dominates normative patriarchal discourse. The spectacle demonstrates that the distinction between the 'unnatural' and the 'natural' body is not based in any objective truth, blurring the lines between a perceived 'authentic self' and artifice (Russo, 1994: 164). The next chapter will deal with the subject of non-normative body modification as a response to the male-gaze, however at this point I shall be discussing body modification more in terms of its use within performance and public play.

The demonstration of the fragility of discursive and bodily borders that the spectacle represents suggests an important relation between the experience of horror, and those of compassion and vulnerability. The initial lack of commonality between these emotions speaks to the liminal, seemingly paradoxical nature of the Monster, and the broad potential of the spectacle. The horror of the bleeding, 'suffering' form of Marry Bleeds as a means of communicating sympathy and connection speaks to the significance of the intersection of feminist Monster scholarship, and Kristeva's theories of the nature of the abject. As I have already explained in the first chapter of this thesis, the Monster – in any guise – represents a form of abjection; of an 'Other' that cannot be wholly jettisoned or excluded from the realm of the (supposedly) independent Self (Creed, 1993: 10-11; Shildrick, 2002: 45). In her role as Monstrous Spectacle, Marry Bleeds presents us an ideal subject for exploring this intersection further; her performance combining the Monstrous, bleeding excess that threatens (as Shildrick (2002: 68) would say) to 'contaminate' the viewing subject, and the subsequent, fascinated desire that characterises the abject (Kristeva, 1982: 9-10).

Both Shildrick (2002: 68) and Creed (1993: 153) discuss the nature of the gaze in relation to the spectacle, both explaining that the presence of the abject 'Other' has the capacity to threaten or distort gendered and bodily dynamics of power. As mentioned previously, Creed maintains that these power relations are fluid, and not wholly restricted to binary notions that equate the male gaze as inherently powerful and/or sadistic (or, conversely; the performative feminine as perpetually under oppressive phallocentric scrutiny). The shift in these power relations between the spectator and the spectacle can be viewed in part as a function of the abject; the exposure of the fragility of subjective boundaries that results from an incursion by an 'Other' destabilises the primacy of normative phallocentrism and allows for more fluidity between the roles of the seer and the seen. Put more simply: the presence of the abject within the Monstrous spectacle destabilises the strict relational binary of male as empowered, sadistic voyeur, and female as consumed victim (Creed, 1993: 153). The abject is thus tinged with ambiguity and hybridity; it exposes the 'in-between' places of established discourse and obliges subjective reconfiguration of

a given symbolic order by exposing its inherent fragility (Kristeva, 1982: 10). It is this process - often sickening, repulsive, or strange - that is a key element in the Monstrous spectacle: the public display of excessive, unusual and uncontained bodies that oblige an audience to acknowledge the tenuous boundaries between the familiar and the other (Toffoletti, 2004: 2).

Marry Bleeds' performance provides an excellent example of how the Monstrous spectacle may constitute such an ambiguous experience of abjection. There are few things about her suspension that would not induce a slight sense of squeamishness for those unfamiliar with performative body modification (and perhaps even for those who are). The large metal hooks that pierce her skin in multiple places evoke a scene from a Clive Barker novel, stretching and distorting the topography of her body into a field of grotesquely extended peaks of skin, straining against the taut metal wires holding her in place. Blood drips from the dozens of entry and exit wounds on her skin, and her constant gyrations are inconsistent - the whorls and loops of the metal frames following no discernible pattern that evokes a touch of motion sickness simply by watching. She is neither flying nor grounded, neither whole nor dismembered; metal intersecting with flesh and extending its reach. Blood transgresses the physical boundary of the skin as 'inside' emerges outward⁶⁹. Her screams, ever increasing in volume and frequency, evoke both the sensation of agony and erotic bliss. As mentioned, it is likely that she is experiencing both simultaneously. The whole performance is viewed as a pleasurable form of entertainment by the audience (live and digital), and yet, this is evidently a two-way process - Marry enjoys being watched. The performance is a hybrid space between pleasure, pain, object and subject, nature and machine, sky and earth, of liminal, ambiguous and leaking boundaries (Bleeds, 2014). The audience watching her may be filled with simultaneous feelings of awe, desire, disgust, fear and horror; their hybridised emotions eliciting the fear and vulnerability within spectatorship that Creed (1993: 152-153) observes within her critique of the uniformly sadistic male gaze. Their responses constitute an important part of the performance; blurring the boundary between the 'watched' subject and the (supposedly) invulnerable 'watcher'.

A cursory reading of Marry's performance may provoke horror or revulsion, her over-extended, naked and bleeding body exemplifies Kristeva's abject; the wounded, 'tortured' body defying laws

⁶⁹ Shildrick (2002: 51) actually discussed the significance of the skin within the vulnerable, abject encounter: 'as the most visible boundary of all, the skin is both the limit of the embodied self and the site of potentially transgressive psychic investments. In consequence, any compromise of the organic unity and self-completion of the skin may signal monstrosity'. While her assertion in this instance was referring more to congenital conditions than to deliberate performances, the positioning of the skin as a 'barrier' between the inviolate self and the abject 'Other' becomes all the more significant when it is deliberately and publicly punctured, as in Marry's performance. Her intentional piercing of her 'barrier of Self' suggesting an intentional invocation of vulnerability.

of bodily integrity recalling the corpse, proof of the absence of life (and therefore absence of self) (Kristeva, 1982: 3). It is the outward display of bodily 'mutilation' and distortion that recalls our own delicate mortality, the fragility of the human form and the closeness of death (the ultimate 'Other') that encroaches upon the spectator in the 'corpse-like' guise of Marry Bleeds. Clarke (1999:188) describes how the Orlan's public, surgical performances oblige audiences to witness the 'opening up' of the body and the face – the bodily sites where image (and therefore identity) are constructed within contemporary media technologies⁷⁰. She positions the literal cutting up of Orlan's body through live cosmetic surgeries as a revelation of the bloody, subcutaneous layers beneath the surface image; not only as a commentary on the plasticity of corporeal and subjective boundaries, but also as an abject reminder of mortality. She quotes historian Jonathan Sawday's (1995: 12) work in *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*:

'The body interior speaks directly of our own mortality. Hence the sight of these hidden contours has traditionally been denied us since they are usually encountered only at the risk of enduring great pain, and quite possibly, death'.

Sawday's work is largely concerned with the history and cultural significance of the anatomical studies of cadavers, so Clarke's use of his work is significant, in that it bridges the gap between the stinking, unsanitary dissecting rooms of the Renaissance and the image-oriented technologies that inform the sterile operating theatres that house Orlan's cosmetic transformations. Orlan's procedures demonstrate the grotesque 'underside' of the idealised image of womanhood, making the abjection inherent in aesthetic transformation spectacularly public – feminine beauty as *memento mori* (Clarke, 1999: 188-189). Through this interpretation, Marry – like Orlan – confronts her audience through a jarring confluence of aesthetically pleasing feminine imagery with abject glimpses of bodily interiority and the promise of mortality; a shrieking, spectacular anatomical Venus⁷¹, finally able to speak back to her audiences.

⁷⁰ In the instance of Clarke's focus on technological imagery and shifting boundaries of identity (1999: 187), the term 'technologies' can double as both a reference to literal technologies that manipulate and alter bodies (physically or culturally) *and* to Foucauldian notions of distributed power and discourse.

⁷¹ Anatomical Venuses (also known as 'Slashed beauties') were wax figures that could be used in lieu of real corpses for teaching and medical research in the 18th Century. These exquisite, life-size and anatomically accurate female models were – according to Joanna Ebenstein – 'uncannily beautiful', troubling the boundaries between sex and death, art and science, faith and reason (Ebenstein, 2012: 347). The models (some made with real human hair or crowned with pearls) juxtapose sensuously parted lips and arched backs with open chest cavities and removable viscera; a serene, feminine surface opened to reveal an abject interior (Ebenstein, 2012: 349).

Marry's juxtaposition of femininity and injury recalls William Miller's observations in *The Anatomy of Disgust* that human skin – particularly immodest, female skin - has as much capacity to repulse as to titillate (Miller, 1997: 53). He notes that, 'There is nothing quite like skin gone bad, it is in fact the marrings of skin which make up much of the substance of the ugly and the monstrous' (Miller, 1997: 52). The disgust provoked by 'marred' skin, Miller asserts, is similarly produced by orifices of the body – marked discontinuations of corporeal consistency, and potential sites of boundary transgressions and violations. The mouth, genitals and anus, eye, ear and nasal cavities, and the thousands of tiny porous openings in the skin speak to a myriad of opportunities for violation and invasion skin that endanger and confuse the physical and subjective boundaries of autonomous selfhood (Miller, 1997: 50). Marry's nude, immodest body is 'opened up' and explicitly shown to her audience; both in terms of her nudity, as well as the multiple, open wounds that expose breaks in her 'marred' skin. Here, skin itself emerges as a significant boundary between 'self' and 'Other' that is deliberately transgressed by the spectacle of Marry's grotesque performance. Both Halberstam and Shildrick discuss skin as a boundary that must be preserved and protected against the piercing incursion of the 'Other', but, as has emerged from my research, the two theorists imagine such an incursion quite differently. Shildrick – ever the optimist – imagines skin simultaneously as a fragile 'envelope for the self' and as a 'site of transgressive and psychic investments' (Shildrick, 2002: 51). For Halberstam (1995: 159) skin represents more than a protective boundary, it is a metaphor for that which covers over a barely concealed 'mess of identity and subjectivity underneath'. Given both Shildrick and Halberstam's positioning of the dermal boundary as the distinguishing barrier between the ordered realm of normative 'Selfhood' and the abject, the question arises of what should happen if that protective covering – like the seal of a lifejacket – is punctured?⁷²

In watching Marry, we are confronted by the 'puncturing' of the boundary between corporeal and subjective sovereignty, her pierced, bloodied open body unashamedly announcing our own susceptibility to wounding, and by extension the inevitability of our own bodily destruction (Kristeva, 1982: 3). The abject is more than just a reminder of imminent mortality, it is also a violation of established 'laws'; social boundaries and prohibitions that maintain a given symbolic order or status quo. This violation of a given law goes beyond simple disobedience or opposition; rather, it is a process of corruption, of distortion – a means by which the familiar and the conventional are warped and tinged with the chaos of the other, their boundaries porous and seeping (Kristeva, 1982: 15). Creed uses Kristeva's abject extensively in her description of the

⁷²I will discuss more of this 'punctive' threat of piercing in my discussion of body modification in the next chapter.

existential terror invoked by the presence of the Monstrous: 'Confronted by the sight of the Monstrous, the viewing subject is put into crisis – boundaries, designed to keep the abject at bay, threaten to disintegrate, collapse. [...] Fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity, and separateness over sameness' (Creed, 1993: 29). By observing the Monstrous spectacle, the viewer is obliged to literally face their fears of suffering, bleeding, open bodies and - by extension - the threat of non-existence through death; representing not only the total loss of a selfhood that is premised upon invulnerability and autonomy, but the entire normative symbolic order in which it exists (Shildrick, 2002: 55-56; Kristeva, 1982: 4).

To take pleasure, or even solace in such an 'unnatural' form may be considered perverse – but as Kristeva reminds us, perversion is related to the abject, and 'makes sport' of that which is lawful, oppressive and ordered (Kristeva, 1982: 15-16). Indeed, in *'Perverse Sexuality and Becoming Monster'* Patricia MacCormack (2004: 30-31) positions perversity as series of processes of differentiation and becoming, rather than an objectively inferior or 'deviant' social category or spatial position. In terms of desire and embodiment, she asserts that the Monster *as* a perverse entity reconfigures desire outside of the auspices of patriarchal heteronormativity: suggesting that the perverse, Monstrous Spectacle as a communicative site of bodily reconfigurations, may speak to her audiences of newer forms of 'unlawful' desire and pleasure (MacCormack, 2004: 28-29). Indeed, to revise my previous statements, perhaps Marry *is* in pain, but is enjoying it anyway? If this is so, then this represents another liminal transgression, as MacCormack (2004: 32) explains:

'Through the destabilising effects of pleasure and perversion, subjectivity shifts away from being defined through what it is [...] and is more appropriately addressed through what it does, and what is done to it'.

Marry's act is a perverse form of pleasure that speaks to shifting subjectivities, transgressing the boundaries between pain and pleasure, fake and real. It is a deliberately public appropriation of 'degrading' (Betterton, 2006: 96) instruments of pain as a form of female sexual pleasure, a pleasure that is unaccounted for within mainstream feminism and phallocentrism – a praxis that speaks back to the limits of subjectivity that both offer. Halberstam paraphrases Queer theorist Leo Bersani, in stipulating that 'the erotic is an equal opportunity archive; it borrows just as easily, possibly more easily from politically problematic imagery than from politically palatable material' (Halberstam, 2011: 149). Marry's abject pleasure speaks instead to a jouissance, a spectacular, grotesque eroticism that transgresses patriarchal confines of feminine subjectivity (Ermath, 1992: 160-161). Marry's obvious, perverse pleasure speaks to more than just 'deviant'

sexual and bodily proclivities, but rather acts as a spectacular site where both converge to produce a rapturous series of subjective and bodily transgressions that cannot be confined within prescriptive categories of ethics.

From a Western perspective, a lawful body is an unmarked one; unpierced, undamaged and unsullied. Ostentatiously open, bleeding bodies like Marry's are thus far from a lawful ideal – one may say that a wholesome body is antithetical to a 'hole-some' one (Richards, 2008: 109). Indeed, here I return to Miller's work, specifically his observations of the intersection between 'disgusting' bodies and normative systems of morality and comportment. The body that is (or perceived to be) in violation of cultural norms of modesty, good health and moral acquiesce is rendered disgusting, not only on account of its immediately visible corporeal 'Otherness' (such as wounds, nudity or disease) but also because of 'those bodily failings which indicate insufficient attention to the body to make the social order as uneventful as it can be' (Miller, 1997: 205).⁷³ Typically, a pierced, bleeding, wounded form represents weakness, ill-health and (more recently), dangerous contagion. Yet, the use of bleeding bodies in the spectacular, visceral performances of Gina Pane, Ron Athey and Marry Bleeds herself portray bleeding, punctured and apparently 'tortured bodies' as vehicles of compassion and empathy, rather than mere revulsion or distrust. These performances forge lines of sympathetic communication between the spectacle and spectator by drawing attention to the latter's own sense of bodily vulnerability (Richards, 2008: 117). Indeed, it is hard to watch Marry's performance without feeling at least a little concern for the perceived pain that her experience must entail. As the containing boundary of the skin is transgressed, the performer draws attention to the inherent fragility of the human form, questioning the permanence and superiority of bodily 'wholeness'.

Here both Kristeva and Richards' work returns us to Shildrick's discussions of the importance of vulnerability. In her chapter *Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk*, Shildrick, examines the notion of contamination: the supposed danger the 'Otherness' of the Monstrous body 'spreading its own confusion of identity' by proximity to the normative subject (Shildrick, 2002: 68).

Shildrick uses the specific example of visiting a photographic exhibition of portraits portraying

⁷³ Here may be observed a specific symptom of a broader problem of cultural ableism that positions illness, disability and atypical embodiment as indicative of moral failure, as well as corporeal inferiority. In her genealogy of Freak discourse, Garland-Thomson (1996: 11-12) describes the modern shift towards a pathologising rationalism that re-positioned the bodily 'Other' from portentous marvel, to 'corporeal error'. Subsequently, the inability of those with disabilities to assimilate into and participate normative capitalist modernity was viewed as a departure from decent democratic values. This will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Five.

preserved foetal specimens, all with some degree of congenital deformity.⁷⁴ The significance of these spectacles, she asserts is that '[...] they may elicit the contradictory responses both of horrified disengagement, and of fascination and recognition' (Shildrick, 2002: 73). This recognition is key here – both in terms of Shildrick's use of vulnerability (as an inability to wholly distinguish the 'Self' from the 'Other') and in her recognition of Kristeva's abject as a crucial element in this process: '..the abject never leaves the subject-body, but remains as both reminder of, and threat to, the precarious status of the closed and unified self' (Shildrick, 2002: 81).

Thus, the certainty of the whole, static and invulnerable body is cast into doubt, as is the supposed separation between the Monstrous Spectacle (typically held at an arm's length) and the judging audience. As the boundary between bodily interior and public exterior is publicly destabilised, so too are the borders between the subjectivities of the observed, and the observer. The public, bleeding body is abject, but in its abjection, it is communicative; shattering the representative distinctions between 'self' and 'Other'. As Kristeva (1982: 15) herself states, 'Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death'. In the instance of the bleeding body, 'death' may be interpreted simultaneously as the ego (self), and as the literal loss of life force and bodily wholeness through blood-letting.

Through this process of abject vulnerability, Shildrick maintains that the terror of the 'contamination' of the 'Other' may be overcome. Her use of the work philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests that rather than a desire to reject or overpower the other or render it impotent through stripping away its alterity (Shildrick, 2002: 91), an encounter with the Monstrous Spectacle offers the opportunity instead to ethically reconstruct the self through the *deconstruction* of the self. Similarly, Douglas envisioned the different ways that we may respond to anomalies (Otherness): either by ignoring or suppressing them, or (in acknowledging 'Otherness') we may pass poor judgement. However, as Marry's performance demonstrates, the Monstrous Spectacle offers a third option: we may confront and acknowledge the anomaly, and subsequently create a new social framework and a new 'pattern of reality' in which it may exist as something more than a mere 'other' (Douglas, 1966: 39). In 'Purity and Danger' she states:

⁷⁴ While there is a significant distinction between congenital bodily deformity and disability and the deliberate performance of Marry Bleeds, it is important to note that Shildrick's work emphasises the fact that historically, all bodies that fall outside of the (supposedly) self-contained, 'clean and proper' body of the able-bodied, heterosexual white male are subject to various degrees of non-consensual monstification, especially if they are uncontained or unsuppressed (Shildrick, 2002: 4-5).

‘Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of losing confidence. That is why, I suggest we find in any culture worth the name, various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events’ (Douglas, 1966: 40).

Thus, presence of the bleeding body represents more than an experience of abject horror. It evokes feelings of vulnerability and fear, but in so doing, it establishes a relationship between bleeding spectacle and spectator; the emotional, punctive impact of bleeding, wounded bodies like Marry’s encourages viewers to engage sensually with the spectacle, made Christ-like through stigmatic suffering and public depiction of pain as a transcendent and ultimately divine process (Richards, 2008: 109).

While the appropriation of Christian crucifixion and stigmatic imagery may be interpreted as a blasphemous parody of religious sentiment when applied to Marry Bleeds, it also evokes notions of redemption through shared suffering. Indeed, Pane herself describes her deliberately masochistic performances as a form of communal, egalitarian process, stating ‘If I open my body so that you can see your blood, it is out of love for you – the Other’ (quoted in Richards, 2008: 111-112). Thus, even the seeping, vulgar form of the Monstrous Spectacle may be ‘tinged with the sublime’ (Kristeva, 1982: 11)⁷⁵.

So, how are we to respond to Marry and the Spectacle of Monstrous Femininity that she presents to us? This is part of a broader question concerning the way in which ‘Otherness’ is understood as either a threat or an opportunity. The spectacle may be thought of as a mirror that shows two different reflections: the first is the spectacle itself: in this case, Mary Bleeds and her revolting, revolving, grotesquery. The second (and most significantly) reflects the audience that believe themselves only to be spectators. It is a point at which all points of social consciousness, discord and discourse meet and are publicly projected outwards, ‘showing’ a given audience to themselves through the reflection of another (Russo, 1994: 165-166).

This chapter has examined the spectacle as a process whereby heterogeneous signs and subjectivities may publicly confront one another, re-emerging through abjection in a form that, like the Monstrous, serves to de-stabilise, rather than maintain normative hierarchies of class and

⁷⁵ Kristeva actually utilised the Monster as an example of somatic symptom of abjection, and the sublime as a process of naming, of keeping such a non-objectal symptom under control. It is not the antidote to abjection, but rather it is a form of comprehension, of acceptance of the disturbance of a given symbolic order, and thus an opportunity for transcendence (Kristeva, 1982: 11-12).

gender. Marry Bleeds represents the confluence of abjection and vulnerability: her ecstatic, bleeding, vulgar performance evoking multiple discursive signifiers within a public performance of bodily 'Otherness' that is simultaneously communicative and challenging. An audience confronted with such a challenge must reflect upon their own relationship with otherness and their place within a given social and symbolic hierarchy; the abject sight before them constituting a nudging reminder of the tenuous nature of what had been thought to have been objective meaning begins to collapse (Kristeva, 1982: 2). The Spectacular Monstrous Feminine does not seek to pacify or antagonise conflicting difference; rather, it facilitates the confrontation between the 'pure' and 'impure', between 'anomaly' and 'norm', between 'outsider' and 'self'. Marry did not intend for her performance to make a specific political statement. Instead, she wanted to be seen, and in being seen, to provoke a response.

Marry's performance cannot be located within any discrete system of political or ethical belief – it is far too liminal and elusive. Consequently, as a spectacular instance of the Monstrous Feminine, she cannot be located within the auspices of intersectional feminism; her grotesque, abject performance carrying a significantly greater risk of danger and exclusion for women that lack her particular racial and bodily privileges. As Russo (1994: 60) maintains in her discussion of the history of the carnival: 'In the everyday, indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive – dangerous, and in danger'. Marry's performance – as an instance of Spectacular Monstrous Femininity – is not intended to be safe or inclusive. This is not because Marry ought to remain immune to external critique, but because her performance is not one that can cohere within the ethical framework of intersectionality. Rather, the relevant significance of Marry's spectacle lies in its capacity to unearth newer sensations, relations and discourses, to make-strange the taken-for-granted boundaries of embodiment and gender, to provoke and to speak back to the audience that witnesses it.

Like Angela Carter's 'Fevvers' Marry is one of many kinds of spectacle; but is significant in that she is more than woman-as-spectacle: she is woman *making* spectacle (Russo, 1994: 165). Her deployment Monstrous Femininity speaks of horror and abjection; her body unnaturally distorted, corpse-like and disgusting, injured and bleeding, shamelessly nude and displaying vulgar disregard for ladylike modesty and good taste. But still, it speaks, and in so doing, brings together disparate signs and discourses to find newer, more liminal meanings, and fosters a liminal dialogue between the Self and the 'Other' that would not be found within dominant systems of discourse. Marry is simultaneously abject and sublime, object and subject, tortured and ecstatic, beautiful and monstrous – to watch her is to unmake distinctions between them. In

being watched Marry holds up her own mirror and begs the question of what we will do about its reflection.

Chapter Four.

The Modern Medusa: Body Modification and the Gorgoneion.

*"I came naked as any little fish,
Prepared to be hooked, gutted, caught;
But I saw you, Medusa, made my wish,
And when I left you I was clothed in thought..."*⁷⁶

The previous chapter examined the Monstrous Spectacle as speaking site of liminal jouissance, a deliberately excessive performance of 'Otherness' that facilitates carnivalesque communication through the transgression of subjective and bodily boundaries. Through extraordinary public performances, the Spectacular Monster demands the gaze of her audience, and in so doing, facilitates a dialogue between viewer and viewed. This process, as Russo (1994: 162) describes it, is one of parody and artifice. But what of a deployment of Monstrosity that is more challenging to prying eyes? This chapter is also concerned with the relationship between the viewer and the viewed: specifically, the imbalances of power inherent within the male gaze, and how the Monstrous Feminine (or, as before – one instance of Monstrous Femininity) may be understood as a means of challenging these dynamics. I will examine how the creation of 'Monstrous' bodily aesthetics through extreme body modification may constitute a form of apotropaic⁷⁷, abject beauty that challenges patriarchal standards of femininity. Furthermore, I will examine the tension that is provoked between this instance of Monstrosity and intersectional feminism; specifically, the notion of the Monstrous Mother and abject femininity. Further to my discussion in my previous chapters, I am unconvinced by theorists like Ussher that abjection represents a universally misogynistic pejorative that must be wholly eschewed from feminist discourse; nor that the association of maternity with the Monstrous is always the purview of phallogentrism. Instead, this chapter examines the dual role of Medusa as *both* a symbol of abject female rage, as well as maternal protection.

My case study for this chapter is Maria Jose Cristerna; a former attorney and mother of four turned artist and women's rights activist from Guadalajara, Mexico, and the current holder of the Guinness World Record for the most body modifications on a female (Guinness World Records,

⁷⁶ From May Sarton's poem *The Muse as Medusa* (Sarton, 1971).

⁷⁷ 'Apotropaic: Supposedly having the power to avert evil influences and repel bad luck' (Oxford University Press, 2018).

2018). Although Cristerna is colloquially known as ‘The Mexican Vampire Woman’, I will be discussing her life and modifications as exemplifying a modern embodiment of the mythical Medusa: positioning her extraordinary appearance as analogous to the Gorgon’s deadly stare. I am interested in how Medusa’s petrifying power may be replicated within extreme body modification practices, and how Maria Cristerna - as an avatar of this potential – constitutes an exemplar of Monstrosity as feminist praxis. Thus, my discussion will focus upon what makes Medusa so threatening to the patriarchal society that created her, and how this terror doubles as a source of protection that may be deployed by bodies like Cristerna’s. How does the act of permanently marking one’s body in unusual or ‘Monstrous’ ways replicate Medusa’s deadly stare, and why is this significant in terms of the potential of the Monstrous Feminine as a feminist praxis? To investigate the links between feminist theory and extreme body modification I will be drawing upon the work of scholars such as Pitts (2003) and Nikki Sullivan (2001: 2009), as well as Christine Braunberger (2000). This discussion will intersect with an examination of the significance of Medusa within feminist scholarship to demonstrate how deliberately ‘Othered’ bodies like Maria Cristerna’s may be understood as possessed of a liminal, gorgon-like potential that simultaneously protects, and terrifies.

Accordingly, this chapter also examines the significance of Medusa-as-Mother. Although Medusa’s mythological lineage descends from pre-Olympian Mother-Earth Goddess Gaia, (Leeming, 2013: 9), her role as a maternal figure is often eclipsed by her figuration as a creature of abject terror. In examining Medusa’s liminality, I will also address her dual role of Mother and Monster, a task that will once again bring me back to both Shildrick and Creed, but also to Ussher’s criticism of the ‘Monstrous’ maternal. As both Mothers and Monsters, Cristerna and Medusa embody elements of both the abject and the maternal in a manner that eschews the phallocentric misogyny of Freudian analyses, but also speaks to ‘dangerous’ territory within contemporary feminism, that has hitherto sought to distance female sexuality and reproduction away from the Monstrous.

I begin with the Modern Medusa herself. Maria José Cristerna is a former attorney, tattooist, artist and mother of four. She has undergone 49 separate modifications, which include near total coverage of her body in tattoos, dozens of piercings in her brows, lips, nose, tongue, bellybutton and nipples, subdermal titanium implants in her forehead and arms, large gauged ear tunnels, as well as dental work to give the appearance of fangs (Guinness, 2018). Cristerna’s appearance is startling. In addition to her extensive modifications, she also has long red dreadlocks, claw-like black fingernails and typically dresses in black Goth/punk clothing, favouring spiked collars, studded belts and corsets, as well as coloured contact lenses that give

her a demonic appearance. She began her remarkable transformation after escaping her physically abusive first marriage, stating that the modifications represented her way of freeing herself, and healing from her trauma (Cristerna, 2012). She now uses her platform as the ‘Vampire Woman’ to campaign for survivors of domestic violence. Despite her fearsome appearance, she maintains that she is no different to any other wife and mother, describing herself as a ‘traditional Mexican woman’ (Acosta, 2012). While Cristerna is a world record holder, it is not solely her unusual appearance that makes her a ‘Modern Medusa’. Rather, it is the way in which her appearance and her experience of male-perpetrated violence coalesce to produce narratives of apotropaic Monstrosity akin to the mythical gorgon. It is through an analysis of the significance of Medusa within feminist scholarship that parallels between Cristerna and Medusa become apparent.

There are several different versions of the Medusa story, some of which can be traced back as early as 750BCE. Accounts of Medusa differ in her origins; the earliest of which position her not as a single entity, but rather as the sole mortal within a trinity of gorgon sisters descended from the early primordial Goddess Gaia (Leeming, 2013: 9)⁷⁸. She also appears as a single character (rather than part of a triad) in the fifth book of Homer’s *Iliad* as the Gorgon, ‘whose head is a thing of fear and horror’ (cited in Leeming, 2013: 10). However, it is the later version chronicled by the Roman poet Ovid in his epic *Metamorphoses* that is one of the better known and is significant in that it positions Medusa as transformed by an act of sexual violence⁷⁹. While there are many variations of Medusa’s origins, Ovid’s account of her death has become the definitive version of the myth: the heroic Perseus (himself descended from Zeus) being aided by the gods to destroy a terrifying Monster, and subsequently rescue the Princess Andromeda with her severed head. But what precisely was it that made Medusa such a threat? Here we reach the crux of Medusa’s significance within feminist discourse: the terror that Medusa represented (and, arguably – continues to represent) to patriarchal symbolic orders is the same terror that makes Maria Cristerna a similarly disruptive figure today: a woman whose ‘Monstrous’ body can disrupt the male gaze.

⁷⁸ Katherine Olivetti (2016: 38) maintains that the early incarnations of Medusa as a part of a triad represents a last edifice of a vanishing matriarchal worship of a goddess figure in a triple aspect (maiden, mother and crone) which would later be eschewed by the patriarchal Gods of Olympus.

⁷⁹ In Book IV of *Metamorphoses*, it is revealed that Medusa was once a beautiful human woman, who was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena, violating the sacred space. However, it was Medusa (rather than Poseidon) who was punished for this ‘transgression’, being cursed by Athena, who turned her into a hideous gorgon with writhing serpents for hair, whose gaze could turn a man to stone. Ovid’s account of the myth maintains that Medusa’s fate was well deserved (Cited in Leeming, 2013: 31).

Charlotte Currie's (2016: 170) observations of the transformative nature of Medusa demonstrate that while her myth and origins have undergone many changes over the millennia, the power and significance of her deadly gaze is the one aspect that has remained the same, thus, so too has patriarchal insistence upon its destruction. The ability to turn her enemies to stone simply by looking at them is what makes Medusa so significant within feminist discourse, her petrifying stare represents both a culmination of, and a response to, patriarchal fear of women and their bodies. The opening paragraphs of Creed's introduction to *The Monstrous Feminine* make specific reference to Freud's essay *Medusa's Head* (1922), in which he refers to the 'horrifying' sight of the mother's genitals as akin to the petrifying gaze of the gorgon – curling pubic hair resembling Medusa's snakes and hiding the mother's phallic 'lack' (Freud, 1922). It is precisely this 'lack' that Freud proposes as the source of such terror for the little boy who sees his mother's genitals: anxiously presuming that he too may be castrated, and thus robbed of his phallic potential and prestige⁸⁰. In this way, Medusa (or, more specifically her genital-fetish head) represents both female 'lack', and the presence of the maternal phallus; the capability of the mother to potentially 'steal' phallic power away from her son, as well as the 'threat' of her inherent 'lack' (Creed, 1993: 110-111). According to theorists like Creed and Mulvey, this fear of phallic 'theft' has influenced the ways in which women's bodies and subjectivities are constructed within male-dominated discourses. Creed (1993: 162) maintains that phallogocentric paranoia pertaining to castration (and the subsequent loss of power that this entails) contributes to the patriarchal symbolic orders that seek to control and restrict women's bodies. Subsequently, if the castrating power of the mother (and, by extension, all women) represents a threat to patriarchal/phallogocentric dominance, then it is imperative that 'Medusa's head' is safely contained within the (theoretically) jettisoned realm of the abject and Monstrous.

It is this desire to diminish the castration anxieties provoked by female bodies that feminist psychoanalytic theorists like Creed and Mulvey maintain is rooted in the way in which women are constructed as 'viewed objects' within phallogocentric symbolic orders. Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* describes the 'default' of the male gaze, which frames women as objects to be viewed (and men as the viewers), thus ultimately being defining women solely in terms of visual pleasure, thus solidifying male power and diminishing female subjectivity (Mulvey, 1975: 840). The 'sadism' of the male gaze, Mulvey states, is pleasurable not only because it renders

⁸⁰ Freud understood the phallus as representing more than physical flesh or individual male/paternal authority, but rather as a sexed/gendered socio-symbolic attribute that was associated with rationality and social power. The 'phallus' in the context of Freudian analyses can thus be understood as referring simultaneously to the penis, as well as to the primary signifier of paternalistic social privileges and authority that the possession of phallic power conveys (Creed, 1993: 160-161).

women as passive objects to be viewed, but also satisfies a fetishistic, phallocentric desire to contain their inherent 'lack'; thereby nullifying the threat of castration suggested by viewing of women's bodies (Mulvey, 1975: 840-841). Both Creed (1993: 162) and Ussher (2006: 7-8) assert that it is these misogynistic anxieties, and the 'threat' that women are supposed to present to male authority, that contribute to oppressive norms of feminine embodiment and comportment. Consequently, as a woman whose gaze has the capacity to return and punish male objectification of women, Medusa represents a disruption to the phallocentric need for feminine containment and restriction (Leeming, 2013: 72-73).

As the destroyer of Medusa, Perseus may thus be understood as more than an individual, heroic protagonist, but a representative of the drive to remove the threat of Medusa's stare and restore the primacy of phallocentrism. This corresponds to Mulvey's discussion of how the male gaze functions as a form of voyeuristic pleasure as well as a means of reassurance: simultaneously nullifying the threat of castration, while also confirming the subject (rather than object) status of the 'default' male viewer (Mulvey, 1975: 14). The significance of the controlling nature of the male gaze becomes even more apparent when one considers Karen Horney's (1967: 196) assertion that 'man's original dread of women is not castration anxiety at all, but a reaction to the menace of his self-respect [...] to the dread of being rejected and derided is a typical ingredient in the analysis of every man'. Therefore, in order for women to remain pleasurable, viewed subjects they must remain unthreatening and contained; attributes that Ussher (2006: 2) describes as 'inoculations' against the 'polluting, dangerous' female body. Phantasies of Madonna-like maternal chastity and the demure, wholesomeness of the air-brushed screen Goddess convey onto women a beauty that is 'safe' for men's consumption, without the fear of inadequacy or challenge (Horney, 1967: 136). Indeed – Amy Adler (2009: 228) maintains that the necessity for Perseus to behead Medusa was due to her ability to return the male gaze and render men accountable for it, stating that when Medusa died, her 'Monstrous threat' of her direct stare was removed, leaving Perseus (and, by extension, the patriarchal culture that he represents) free to look upon her without fear of reprisal.

The story of Medusa's death at the hands of Perseus may be understood in two ways: the first being a means of soothing phallocentric castration anxieties. The second, as a warning of the 'dangers' of femininity that resists patriarchal edicts of purity and containment. Indeed, later portrayals of Medusa during the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance portrayed Medusa as an alluring femme fatale, a 'Jezebel' whose beauty – as with all women's beauty – is dangerous by its supposed capacity to enthrall and manipulate men. Here, the Medusa narrative shifts from an emphasis on a specific, Monstrous woman to the implication that Medusa's gaze represents the

inherent lasciviousness and evil of all women that is antithetical to Perseus - a paragon of reason and Christian virtue (Leeming, 2013: 34). This theme, Leeming (2013: 40) maintains continues today, as revealed in art historian Susan Koslow's suggestion that:

'When Perseus beheads Medusa, he not only vanquishes her, but gains control over her deadly weaponry. Yet, though now commanding it, Perseus cannot contain the creatures Medusa's corrupted body generates. They proliferate unchecked, disseminating evil throughout the world. They are a reminder that the capacity to engender evil is not unique to Medusa, but inherent in all women' (Koslow, 1991: 147).

It is, therefore understandable why the myth and cultural constructions of Medusa may be interpreted as inherently misogynistic by some feminists. Indeed, Ussher's work reveals the construction of Medusa as a totem of phallocentric fear or disgust for uncontained female rage and fecundity, an 'archetype of malevolent femininity at its worst' (Ussher, 2006: 2). Her examination of the pathologisation of women and girls' bodily and subjective experiences reveal the extent to which patriarchy's association of femininity with polluting, castrating 'Otherness' have coalesced to position Medusa as the embodiment of hideous Monstrosity. Indeed, Ussher references Medusa several times throughout her work, but only ever as a referent to misogynistic pejoratives: the 'devil's gateway' or the vagina-dentata (2006: 2-3) (2006: 109), the aging crone (2006: 126) and, most significantly as the 'devil mummy' – the angry mother (2006: 52). Ussher's references to Medusa are only ever in terms of how she is perceived within patriarchal societies. Such descriptors are a little selective, but are nonetheless relevant, given that Ussher's text concerns the association of fecund femininity and female sexuality (puberty, pregnancy, birth and motherhood) with the Monstrous. Ussher's work critiques the patriarchal 'Madonna/Whore' dichotomy that delineates the idealised fantasy of pure, fulfilled and 'coping' motherhood from the (much more realistic, yet 'shameful') image of the depressed, angry or domineering mother – represented by the uncontrolled rage of Medusa as 'devil Mummy' (2006: 100-101). For Ussher, Medusa represents the latter half of this misogynistic binary – the irredeemably angry, threatening and uncontained woman, the abject, maternal Monstrosity that Creed (1993: 23-24) refers to as the 'cannibalistic, archaic mother'. In both Creed and Ussher's work, the association of women and castrating Monstrosity is the result of phallocentric anxieties about female bodies and fecundity – there is very little space for re-imagining Medusa as a protective or maternal figure that subverts these patriarchal narratives. This is especially true for Ussher; given her previously discussed disavowal of the Monstrous Feminine, it is evident that Medusa exists as a part of the same 'misogynistic imagination' (2006: 174) as any other representative of female Monstrosity. However, as I have already stated in previous chapters, Ussher's total refusal of the

Monstrous Feminine not only represents a denial of its inherent liminality, but also of its potential for disruption of the phallogentric orders that created it.

To repeat, Ussher's insistence absolute discursive distancing of feminist discourse away from the Monstrous Feminine recalls Shotwell's (2016: 4-5) observations of the need within contemporary feminist and progressive scholarship for 'purity'; the attempt to create and maintain systems of discursive classification that are free from 'polluting' or 'problematic' influences. Ussher's monolithic positioning of Medusa as merely a symptom of misogyny suggests a desire to similarly demarcate her feminism – and associated constructions of Motherhood and femininity – away from any suggestions of unknowability. This attempt by Ussher to exteriorise the Monstrous Feminine is precisely an attempt to separate femininity – particularly motherhood and fertility – away from 'Otherness', without regard for the subversive potential that such unknowns may imply. Indeed, here Mary Douglas' assertion about such processes of demarcation becomes salient: 'I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (cited in Shotwell, 2016: 13).

While Ussher's insistence upon distancing the maternal, fecund feminine from misogynistic imaginings is rooted in a desire to imagine discourses of motherhood and feminine embodiment away from abjection and phallogentrism; her particular narrative of feminism denies any possibility that the Monstrous Feminine may present hitherto unrealised subversive potential. The remainder of this chapter will examine this potential through Maria Cristerna: a Monstrous Mother that resists both patriarchal *and* feminist demands for discursive and bodily 'purity'. As I will explain, her excessively modified, unsettling appearance is not one that can ever be reconciled within patriarchal ideals of beauty or 'chaste' motherhood (Ussher, 2006: 101), nor within discourses of feminism that seek to eschew the 'messy' narratives of bodily 'Otherness' and abjection that Cristerna's transformation implies. Instead, as a 'modern Medusa', Maria Cristerna suggests a Monstrous praxis of feminism that suggests alternate, liminal configurations of femininity, beauty and maternity.

While the original myth of Medusa may represent phallogentric anxieties, the capacity of Medusa to return – even punish – objectifying male scrutiny gives voice to female subjectivities and emotions in ways not accounted for within phallogentric symbolic orders. As Mulvey (1975: 841-842) herself stipulates, the gaze insinuates more than mere viewing; it conveys upon the viewer the ability to define and create meaning in accordance with one's own ego, and simultaneously derive pleasure from the subsequent gendered hierarchy of power. Viewed within the discursive

'lens' of phallocentrism, women become a surface onto which external meanings are projected, with no opportunity to create their own forms of subjectivity or pleasure (Mulvey 1975: 837-838). Once the fetishistic/sadistic desires for pleasure and control inherent within Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze are either returned or destroyed by Medusa's deadly gaze, women may begin to see themselves *as* themselves, rather than through the voyeuristic lens of phallocentric symbolic orders. It is here that Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) becomes most relevant – her re-framing of Medusa as a beautiful, laughing woman (rather than abject, castrating terror) represents the possibility of women learning to determine their own *écriture féminine*⁸¹: their own ability to determine womanhood for themselves, outside of patriarchal definitions.

The subjective freedom that this entails suggests not only the opportunity for self-representation, but also the possibility of response to patriarchal abuse. Here, Medusa becomes emerges as an avatar of collective female anger. Medusa's gaze represents more than the punitive feminist fantasy as described by Adler, but rather manifests as a representation of the grief and rage resultant from misogyny, rape and abuse at the hands of a patriarchal society (Culpepper, 2003: 239). Emily Erwin Culpepper's *Experiencing My Gorgon Self* recalls Medusa's theorised origins as the 'Destroyer' aspect of the triple goddess; the enraged terror of the Gorgoneion (Medusa's severed head) representing a protective manifestation of female rage. Culpepper's description of Medusa's apotropaic anger was inspired in part by her own experience fighting off a would-be attacker; catching her own contorted, fearsome face in a mirror as she did so (cited in Leeming, 2013: 75). "Daily outrages against women" she wrote "necessitates women learning to manifest a visage that will repel men when necessary" (Culpepper, 2003: 239). It is precisely this 'cultivation' that interests me, as it presents an opportunity to explore forms of Monstrous praxis that women may utilise to resist phallocentric violence and objectification. Maria Cristerna being an obvious example of this.

Cristerna's transformation, like that of Medusa's, followed the experience of violation and abuse. Now, her Monstrified body grants her the capacity to 'look back' to a culture that had allowed her to be victimised. Cristerna's role as an advocate for victims of domestic violence recalls the ancient tradition of the Gorgoneion, an image of a snarling, fanged, staring face that was intended to frighten and stupefy enemies (the term 'gorgon' coming from the Greek *gorgo*, meaning 'terrifying') (Leeming, 2013: 21). Traditionally, Gorgoneia functioned in much the same

⁸¹ While Cixous used this term specifically in terms of women's writing, the term is significant in that it represents expressions of female creativity and selfhood that are not determined by male-defined symbolic orders; womanhood that is different, but not 'Other' (Cixous, 1976).

way as Grotesques on Gothic cathedrals – to ward off enemies (Leeming, 2013: 21)⁸².

Furthermore, Katherine Olivetti (2016: 38) suggests that the some of the early origins of the Gorgoneia were in their use by priestesses in matriarchal Goddess worship, the terrifying masks being used to scare intruders away from temples.

This capacity to terrify is significant, as it speaks back to the value of terror as a function of the abject. As my discussion in my previous chapter demonstrated, the experience of abjection emerges as more than disgust or fear of the unknown, it is a process through which familiar systems of identity and are disrupted through an incursion of ‘Otherness’ (Kristeva, 1982: 4). As Shildrick (2002: 81) maintains, the ‘terror’ of Monsters is not their inherent alterity, but rather that they represent ‘an external threat’ that menaces the borders of autonomous self-identity. As an avatar of female rage, the terror Medusa’s punitive stare thus emerges as an abject ‘Other’ that must be externalised by phallogentric symbolic orders (Adler, 2009: 228), the snarling, gorgoneion giving voice to the anger and aggression that Culpepper (2003: 241) asserts is essential for women to defend themselves against patriarchal violence. Indeed, Ussher (2006: 110-110) acknowledges the way in which female rage – particularly maternal rage – is dismissed by male-dominated medicine and psychiatry as aberrant, or in need of treatment and containment. Her discussion demonstrates the necessity of recognising the legitimacy and causes of women’s pain without pathologising it (Ussher, 2006: 124). However, her argument is premised on the inherent *unmonstrousness* of anger (Ussher, 2006: 110), a discursive position that isolates women from their connection to the apotropaic history of the Medusa myth. Here the subjects of abject, feminine rage and the significance of Monstrous genealogies meet. In order for women’s rage – as exemplified by the terror of the gorgoneion – to be understood as a tool for women’s survival, it is necessary to acknowledge how the genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine has rendered that rage abject, and why this is nonetheless valuable. If the threat to phallogentric orders that Medusa’s abject rage represents is a product of those orders, then it stands to reason that it ought to be turned back onto the culture that created it. To follow Culpepper’s (2003: 244): ‘To know my rage fully is the key to not turning it on myself in the form of self-blame, doubts, depression.’ Thus, when the Monstrous genealogy of Medusa is viewed in tandem with her recent transformation by feminist scholars such as Culpepper and Sarton, women’s anger emerges as a vital element to the praxis of Monstrous Femininity. This

⁸² It is possible that the myth of Medusa arose from the use of masks and Gorgon-like heads as protective symbols, rather than the other way around: feminist anthropologist Jane Harrison stated in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* that Medusa was ‘nothing more than a mask with a body later appended’ (cited in Leeming, 2013: 22).

abject rage that represents more than inherent female 'Otherness', but rather a process by which rage as abjection facilitates the destabilisation of exclusionary constructions of female identity and praxis and, in so doing, presents the self as vulnerable, and open to the possibility of transformation (Shildrick, 2002:130-131).

This manifestation of female rage and terror as a response to sexual violence and misogyny is significant, as it represents not only the legitimisation of female anger, but also the acknowledgement of a genealogy that accompanies such a praxis of Monstrosity. While Shildrick (2002: 3) is careful to state that her project of vulnerable becoming represents a new form of ethics that more open to multiplicity – suggesting a move forward, rather than a look back. However, in positioning feminine rage as a legitimate and important expression of resistance, I am fascinated by the subversive potential of Halberstam's *Shadow Feminisms*. Here Halberstam explores a subversive, subaltern alternative to the mainstream feminist telos of 'liberty or death' through what he refers to as an 'anti-social feminism' of negation, masochism and the deliberate failure to cohere within normative systems of gender (Halberstam, 2011: 125). I find his description of Nao Bustamante's performance art particularly apt for this chapter, as her positioning of her own vulnerable body as a site marked by violence and exclusion presents analogies to the way in which Cristerna has inscribed her own traumatic history onto her skin through her extensive modifications. In so doing, the gorgon's rage is not abated, but quietly seethes through tattooed battle-scars, replicating Sullivan's (2001:17) assertion that body modifications represent a literal inscription of subjective experience onto a person's skin.

The genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine is one that has been marred by misogyny and violence – it is for precisely this reason that Ussher so stridently objects to the association of women with the Monstrous (Ussher, 2006: 17). However, this history and the trauma that has accompanied it is nonetheless one that must be acknowledged, because it facilitates the process whereby rage and trauma may be legitimised, and thereby transformed into resilience. Indeed, as Currie (2011: 177-178) explains in her examination of the feminist Medusa, the protection implied by Medusa is not limited simply to the symbol of the Gorgoneion, but to the transformative power that it may convey onto women themselves. For example, Sarton's poem *The Muse as Medusa* (1971), the author is surprised that, upon encountering Medusa, she is not turned to stone, until she realises that she is actually looking at herself: 'That frozen rage is what I must explore' (cited in Currie, 2011: 178). Here Medusa embodies not only the trauma of sexual violence, but also the capacity to resist it by becoming the Gorgon oneself, channelling rage and grief into resilience. Cristerna's gradual transformation into the Vampire Woman

following her escape from a violent marriage provides a literal example of Sartre's realisation – the transformation of fear into apotropaic power through the Monstrous.

Similarly, for Pitts (2003: 51), the significance of feminist body projects⁸³ is inextricably linked to a history of misogyny that extreme transformations like Cristerna's recall. The economic, political and social pressures that dictate female bodily comportment, reproduction, sexuality and aesthetic; and the subsequent surveillance and discipline that result from these avenues of bodily control⁸⁴. Her chapter *Reclaiming the Female Body: Women Body Modifiers and Feminist Debates* concerns the epistemology of female embodiment, and the significance of its subsequent modification. Here the term 'modification' requires some clarification, as Pitts points out, modern women have already been modifying their bodies (or, rather, expected to modify their bodies) for years through a strict regimen of diet, exercise, make-up and cosmetic surgery in the hope of maintaining normative ideals of female beauty (i.e.: thinness, whiteness, hairlessness etc) (Pitts, 2003: 51). Pitts employs Elizabeth Grosz' (1993: 16) observation that women's bodily projects have historically been tied to methods of patriarchal control; the pressure to remain aesthetically pleasing through extreme restriction and scrutiny constituting the implementation of a mind, as well as a body that is 'docile' and socially trained. Thus, it is necessary to understand that women's bodies are already, constantly modified. What is relevant then, is both a question of *how* and *why* women may choose to modify them, and how does this shift the narrative of patriarchal discipline and control?

Pitts utilises interviews with six female body modifiers to examine their own motivations for altering their bodies. In one instance, a respondent explains her decision to tattoo a dragon onto her breast as a way of confronting the trauma and fear that had been imposed upon her body by a sexually abusive male relative. This strategy, she said, was not only a therapeutic means of working through the experience of abuse, but also a literal marking of her breasts (which had frequently been 'ogled' by men since adolescence) as belonging solely to her (Pitts, 2003: 59). Following Ovid's account of the original Medusa myth, some parallels emerge between this woman and Medusa (as well as Cristerna-as-Medusa): similarly abused, objectified and transformed as a result. While the experiences of each of the women interviewed by Pitts differ,

⁸³ Paul Atkinson (2003: 26-27) refers to 'redesigning body projects' as long-term creative endeavours to literally re-shape, re-design or decorate the body in permanent and often invasive ways. These body projects are distinguished from everyday body modifications that seek to conform to normative standards of youth, beauty and cleanliness, but rather seek to create newer forms of bodily aesthetics and pleasure.

⁸⁴ Pitts utilises the work of feminist body-theorist Elizabeth Grosz, who coined the phrase 'the grammar of body language' to describe the practices that 'render bodies appropriate' for their gender and cultural context (Pitts, 2003: 39).

there is one common theme that unites them, and ties back to Maria Cristerna's own experience: the desire to mark their bodies in such a way that challenge conventional gendered bodily norms, as well as marking their bodies as their own; symbolically rejecting patriarchy's corporeal 'training' (Pitts, 2003: 56-57).

This is significant, not only because it suggests a means of feminist resistance to oppressive bodily norms and control, but also that female bodies may be re-imagined outside of normative patriarchal binaries in ways that do not seek to eschew 'Otherness', producing 'Monstrous' bodies that transgress strict taxonomic and bodily categories. Thus, Cristerna's body is more than a colourful canvas⁸⁵; it tells the story of her progress from abuse survivor to Vampire Woman (or, in this instance: A Modern Medusa). Her modifications are a means by which she may allow her 'inside self' to be translated onto her 'outside self' – thus providing a lived example of De Mello's (2000: 10) assertions as to the potential for bodily modifications to communicate narratives of embodied subjectivity. In terms of gender, Butler's positioning of the body as fluid and non-essential is significant here, as it not only rejects the ontologically static, and invulnerable form historically idealised by patriarchal rationalism (Shildrick, 2002: 29-30), but also makes evident the possibility of new avenues of subjective re-definition and expression that expose the latter as largely arbitrary. Thus, body modification emerges within feminist scholarship as a means of exploring and re-determining female identity and embodiment outside of the auspices of the male gaze, as well as a potential opportunity to construct bodies that actively reject it.

While there is presently very little literature that examines the connection between feminist accounts of body modification and the Monstrous Feminine (Christine Braunberger's *Revolting Women: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women* (2000) being a rare exception), these two concepts share many commonalities. As Braunberger (2000: 7) points out, the discursive history of tattooed women is one that is characterised by a transgression that evokes the Monstrous. The deliberate and agentic display of female bodies that are purposefully and permanently modified in ways that are outside of patriarchal norms constitute the same spectacular 'Otherness' that

⁸⁵ Pitts refers to Judith Butler's notion of the body as a discursive canvas to demonstrate the link between body modification and the formation of communicable, visible identity. Butler built upon Foucault's notion of the body as a 'tabula rasa', maintaining that instead of constituting a mere 'blank space' upon which a person's lives were imposed, the body itself functions as a communicative entity with its own significance, being a fluid entity that is interactive rather than static. Thus, the ways in which a given body moves through a given social space, and the way in which it 'performs' its various roles become significant on a somatic level; being inscribed upon the body and subsequently incorporated into one's performance of self (Butler 1990: 177)

make the Monstrous Feminine so significant. While Braunberger's work is largely concerned with older case studies of the 'revolting' bodies of modified women⁸⁶, she utilises a very useful term to describe their particular means of corporeal transgression: 'Monster Beauty', a term coined by performance artist Joanna Frueh (Braunberger, 2000: 3). Braunberger's use of 'Monster Beauty' in relation to body modification is significant.

The use of the term 'Beauty' implies a positive aesthetic value, one that is (as the prefix 'Monster' would suggest) 'Other' to conventional, patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty and comportment: a form of beauty that is outside the auspices of the male gaze. However, what makes Braunberger's article particularly relevant to the praxis of Monstrous Femininity is her assertion that the value of 'Monster Beauty' lies not in its adherence to existent feminist/Queer theorists like Butler (who suggest that all bodily adornment is mere performativity), or to the austere, radical feminism of the 2nd wave theorists like Catherine MacKinnon (who described body modification as 'self-mutilation' (cited in Pitts, 2003: 53). Rather, Braunberger (2000: 3) asserts that Monster Beauty represents a 'new politics of performance, a third term that addresses the need for aesthetics and anger': a means of transgressing the 'either/or' options presented by Butler and MacKinnon, by acknowledging the need to 'decolonise' patriarchal beauty norms, while also allowing for liminal exploration of bodily possibilities and expressions (Braunberger, 2000: 3-4).

Braunberger's proposed response to what she perceives as a 'polarisation' within feminist responses to bodily adornment and modification speaks to this thesis' broader purpose: the ability to propose a process of feminist praxis that does not advocate for an absolute subject position ('either/or') or strict categorisation of identity and power (as is the case with intersectional feminism), but rather opts for what Russo (1994: 100-101) aptly refers to as bodies that are 'Monstrified'⁸⁷ – representing a transgression of existing bodily and discursive boundaries. In this way, the use of extreme or unusual forms of body modification also presents an alternative (if not a direct challenge) to normative moral restrictions placed upon the experience of bodily sensation, pleasure and pain (Pitts, 2003: 55-56), as well as to feminist

⁸⁶ Much of Braunberger's (2000: 13) emphasis is on the significance of tattooed women entering mainstream beauty pageants in the 1950's. Thus, while her theory of 'Monster Beauty' remains very relevant to my work, the contexts of our case studies differ considerably.

⁸⁷ The original term 'Monstrified' was coined by art critic John Ruskin to describe the architectural practice of marking the borders of buildings with gargoyles, a literal instance of Monsters 'showing' boundaries and limits Braunberger (2000: 20). This is acknowledged by both Russo (1994: 100) and Braunberger, who appropriate the term to imply bodies that mark the boundaries between material and discursive norms.

scholars like Ussher (2006: 173-174), who insist upon eschewing the potential of 'Monstrified' bodies.

Braunberger positions the potential Monster Beauty as akin to Sandra Bartky's (1990: 47) call for a 'revolutionary female aesthetic': an agentic and self-gratifying redetermination of female beauty that allows for exploration of embodiment that is not limited by valuing one ideal of womanhood over another. Bartky's theory represents more than an alternative system of aesthetic values, it is the suggestion of a way of understanding and viewing the female body in a manner that is not determined by or for male pleasure. Therefore - to recall Grosz's observations of the 'docile' female body - a female body that has been deliberately altered in such a manner that it disregards or transgresses patriarchal ideals of bodily containment, beauty or function also constitutes a body that simultaneously disregards or resists patriarchal control (cited in Thomas, 2012: 9).

Braunberger begins her article with an observation of the categorical 'slippage' of tattooed women that do not conform to conventional stereotypes ('They make me think of prostitutes and biker chicks' 'But I've never been on a bike!')(Braunberger, 2000: 1). Braunberger is not the only theorist to observe the nonsensical, harmful nature of these stereotypes, in *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics and Pleasure*, Nikki Sullivan warns of the risk inherent in the uncritical pathological categorisation of body modification practices, issuing a warning against a reliance upon binary systems of social/somatic classification, in which one may exist as either 'normal' (i.e.: unmodified) or, as a 'freak' (modified) (Sullivan, 2001: 16).⁸⁸

Given the historical significance of the Enlightenment ideal of the unmarked, static body that is distinct from the 'self' (as observed by both Shildrick (2002: 50) and Pitts (2003: 26), it is unsurprising that the practice of deliberately and non-normatively modifying one's body for aesthetic purposes would be considered as an aberration, or a symptom of illness. Sullivan notes that such a simplistic system of classification relies not only on the arbitrary assignation of 'normal' to unmodified flesh (Sullivan, 2001: 16-17; Sullivan, 2009: 131), but also presupposes that there can be no alternative means of identification or categorisation. Because of this, Braunberger asserts that tattooed/modified women like Cristerna are (to borrow a phrase from

⁸⁸ It is important to note that this 'freak'/'normal' binary that Sullivan examines is not a unidirectional concept. Her work is also concerned with the way in which body modification practices may affect subjectivity in such a way as to privilege modified, 'Othered' bodies over those that are not similarly altered, thus perpetuating a binary system of somatic classification (Sullivan, 2001: 17).

Irigaray), ‘homeless’⁸⁹ within the dominant social order; their inability to wholly conform to either gendered stereotype puts them at risk of misrecognition, because there is no place for them within the categories dictated by patriarchal symbolic orders. Thus, women that are modified in ways that do not conform either to normative, ‘docile’ femininity, or to the convenient social scapegoat of sex worker⁹⁰ or ‘biker chick’, constitute a form of categorical crises for patriarchal symbolic orders. The socially transgressive power of Monster Beauty, maintains Braunberger, lies in its ability confuse categorical boundaries by unapologetically occupying the discursive crossroads (Braunberger, 2000: 11-12).

Here, Braunberger’s descriptions of the liminality of ‘Monster beauty’ coincides with Cixous’ observations of the value of *écriture féminine* – the capacity of women to ‘write’ new definitions of female subjectivity and embodiment that have been hitherto unaccounted for within patriarchal symbolic orders; ‘by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her’ (Cixous, 1976: 880). Following DeMello (2000: 10) and Pitts’ (2003: 91) discussions of body modification and subjectivity, Maria Cristerna’s transformation into the Vampire Woman may be thought of as a literal inscription upon the body; a Monstrous form of ‘feminine writing’ that reclaims the female form; her freedom from patriarchal abuse literally written on her skin. Maria Cristerna embodies Braunberger’s notion of ‘Monster Beauty’ well; not only on account of her more commonly known moniker of ‘Vampire Woman’, but primarily because she does not fit into pre-ordained social categories typically reserved for women – modified or otherwise. Her body is extreme, even by more generous, modern standards that ‘allow’ for women to be tattooed in certain ways,⁹¹ and cannot be hidden by clothing or make-up.

Furthermore, Braunberger’s theory of ‘Monster Beauty’ provides the significant discursive link between body modification practices and Medusa’s petrifying power: the ability to ‘look back’ at their male viewers: ‘They [tattooed women in freak shows] look at their audience with a tacit demand that it recognises itself as *their* other; pale, quotidian, bland, normal (Braunberger, 2000:

⁸⁹ Irigaray referred to women as ‘homeless’ within patriarchal systems of subjectivity and discourse; being ‘Other’ to the default, masculine ideal. Women are ‘in exile, unhoused in male sexuality, male discourse and male society’ (cited in Whitford, 1991: 150).

⁹⁰ The association of female sex workers with tattoos stems from the belief that only sexually promiscuous ‘loose’ women would have a desire to mark their bodies in such a way (Braunberger, 2000: 4).

⁹¹ Given the growing popularity and normalisation of tattooing for women, there have been shifts in what are ‘acceptable’ forms of body modification for women. Pitts (2003: 80-81) warns of the limits of feminist body modification practices, and the risk of their eventual appropriation by patriarchal culture. She discusses how the increased fashionable nature of tattooing and piercing practices in the West within recent decades has contributed to the fetishisation of what had been subversive or counter-cultural practices (i.e.: the usage of body modification practices within mainstream, male-oriented pornography).

14 – emphasis mine). In Braunberger's example, the 'freakishly' modified bodies of tattooed women represent not only an ability to acknowledge and return the male gaze, but in so doing question the validity of the phallogentric status-quo as 'bland': questioning both its legitimacy and value, as well as mocking it as arbitrary. Furthermore, the returned scrutiny of the audience by the Monstrous 'excess' of tattooed female bodies in this instance serves to flip the dynamic of subjective power inherent within the male gaze, assigning the audience as an 'Other' to the primacy of the viewed-viewing woman. The term 'excessive' is certainly an appropriate to describe Cristerna; hers is a body that speaks to exaggeration, to proportions and features rendered almost cartoonish by their extraneous adornment. Even the apparel and accessories that Cristerna wears is designed to enhance her demon-like image; spiked jewellery (often featuring bat or demon motifs), heavy, dramatic make-up and black clothing, often featuring heavy metal or satanic imagery (Cristerna, 2012); there is nothing about her that is subtle or understated. Here I extend Braunberger's observations of the 'Monster Beauty' of mid-Century tattooed beauty queens to Cristerna's Vampire Woman persona; both constituting a form of grotesque, spectacular beauty that is both a means of protection, as well as mockery.

However, this is not the same carnivalesque exchange that Marry Bleeds presents. When Cristerna poses for the camera, fangs beared and horns prominent, it is both a defense mechanism, and a means of critique: a snarling, angry gorgoneion issuing a challenge to the symbolic orders that demand the punitive containment of the female body. Thus, the significance of Braunberger's work emerges within the context of the definitive, subjective power of the gaze: demonstrating the potential of 'Monstrously Beautiful' modified female bodies to resist (and even mock) patriarchal scrutiny. Maria Cristerna's extensively tattooed, pierced and re-shaped body exemplifies an extreme 'Otherness' to conventional norms of femininity that reveals the double meaning inherent in the title *Revolting Bodies*: her body is Monstrous in its startling, even frightening appearance, but it is also Monstrous because it *revolts*. The Monster Beauty of tattooed women like Cristerna thus constitutes a rebellion; a rejection of a gaze that demands docility, accessibility and submission.

However, despite her Monstrous appearance, as a qualified attorney, doting wife and mother, successful business owner, artist and respected community advocate, Cristerna does not fit neatly into the 'undesirable', 'Other' category of 'prostitute or biker chick' either. Indeed, it is not possible to wholly situate Cristerna within pre-ordained, patriarchal symbolic orders, nor within Ussher's construction of the Monstrous Feminine as a uniformly wrathful pejorative. Her existence as Monster *and* Mother is not the archaic, castrating horror described by Creed (1993: 29-30). Indeed, much of the available footage of her features her with her children: in the

playpark, walking to school or shopping (Cristerna, 2012). Ordinarily, this portrayal of domestic life would be routine and dull, were it not for the fact that a gorgon is preparing dinner. The subsequent cognitive dissonance that Cristerna recalls confounds the delineation between the (supposedly) mutually exclusive realms of the Monstrous and the anti-abjection feminism that Ussher (2006: 7-8) advocates. Indeed, here Cristerna makes evident a strange irony inherent within Ussher's work: her absolute rejection of the Monstrous Feminine is reliant upon the same dualism that is inherent in the phallocentrism that she rejects. Cristerna's liminality recalls Shildrick's comments at the end of her chapter *Monsterring the M(Other)*, which examines the relationship between the Monstrous and phallocentric constructions of pregnancy and motherhood:

‘The complicity of the normal and abnormal, the pure and the impure, and above all the self and the Other, is a theme that must haunt any postconventional understanding of the Monstrous. The assignation of the term to all those who are devalued in Western society speaks to a determination to hold in place a precarious system of binary difference that is always undermined by *différance*’ (Shildrick, 2002: 46).

Cristerna represents this *différance* that undermines both normative patriarchal binaries, as well as Ussher's very restrictive account of the Monstrous Feminine. By exhibiting a maternal, feminine ‘Otherness’ that cannot be contained within these uniform definitions of the Monstrous, Cristerna exemplifies both Braunberger's notion of Monster beauty as well as Cixous' *écriture féminine*, and in so doing, demonstrates these binaries to be entirely arbitrary: her heavily ‘inscribed’ body speaks of a femininity that is Monstrous, and a Monstrosity that is her own.

Given the ‘revolting’ promise of Braunberger's Monster Beauty and the threat to patriarchal symbolic orders represented by her gaze, it may be difficult to also imagine Medusa – or indeed her fearsome modern counterpart Cristerna – as nurturing, protective or maternal figures. However, an often-overlooked part of the original myth stipulates that Medusa was pregnant at the time of her death. After being decapitated by Perseus, the winged horse Pegasus and the Giant Crysaor were born from her headless body (Leeming, 2013;14). The necessity of killing Medusa *before* she ‘gave birth’ speaks to the problematic relationship between Monstrousness and maternity that Ussher and Creed raise. In her final chapter (aptly named *The Medusa's Gaze*), Creed discusses how motherhood, sexuality and pregnancy become the source of castration anxieties and gendered terror within the horror genre: abject devouring mothers and ravenous wombs abound, threatening to re-absorb the post-Oedipal male in order to regain his phallic power

(Creed 1993: 156-157). Despite my disagreement with Ussher about the future viability of the Monstrous Feminine, her work is important in that it demonstrates the necessity of establishing discursive distance from the notion of woman-as-Monstrous (rather than woman *doing* Monstrosity). Furthermore, while the biological processes of birth and motherhood may be subject to pathological 'Othering' – the *institution* of motherhood is subject to similar social surveillance – albeit in a different way. The Western ideal of motherhood as pure, domestic, nurturing, chaste and comforting is one that demands the total elimination of sexuality, aggression and the unknown: to be a 'good'⁹² Mother is to eschew the 'Other'. Ussher (2006: 87) utilises the Virgin Mary as an obvious example to demonstrate this desire; the ideal of the submissive, quiet and wholly de-sexed Madonna figure represents a phantasy of the 'best of both worlds' – maternal nurturance without the 'horror' of female sexuality.

When viewed together, these two concepts reveal a trend in patriarchal constructions of Motherhood: a fear of the abject, maternal body. If women (and their bodies) are an innate 'Other' that threaten male symbolic orders, it is necessary to separate their reproductive, sexual capabilities from conventional notions of 'good' motherhood (Ussher, 2006: 101) Neither Medusa nor Cisterna with their Monstrous Beauty and reflective gaze fit within these narrow confines of Motherhood, thus within Ovid's account of the original myth, the gorgon may only be permitted to 'give birth' posthumously, through unnatural means that deny her any opportunity for nurturance or maternal authority. As Creed's observations of phallocentrism demonstrate, the Monstrous Feminine may be a mother, but only if the manifestations of that motherhood are inherently abject: murderous femme castratrices and maternal phalluses represent the 'horrors' of the mother as a figure of power⁹³, and therefore must be segregated from the more comforting notion of the Mother as a wholly de-sexed and de-sensualised being (Creed 1993: 162).

Furthermore, the myth of Medusa also exemplifies how the processes of birth and reproduction are subject to patriarchal appropriation. Following her death, Medusa's head was placed into a bag to be transported, several drops of blood falling into the Red sea and forming coral reefs

⁹² Ussher dedicates part of her chapter *The Pregnant and Post-Natal Body* to discussion of the idealised construction of pregnancy and motherhood, describing the shame of supposed failure to live up to normative standards of motherhood. The experience of post-natal depression or psychosis, displays of anger, aggression or uncontained emotion or sexual desire being wholly verboten within Westernised models of ideal Motherhood (Ussher, 2006: 101-110).

⁹³ Creed examines Freudian theory closely in her final chapter, explaining that the horror of the 'phallic mother' or 'phallic woman' (typically as castrator) represents a fear of a feminine 'parodying or perversion of "masculine characteristics"' (Creed, 1993: 157). Essentially, the fear of female/matriarchal authority precisely as a demotion of the law of the father.

(Olivetti, 2016: 43). This posthumous creation of new life by the auspices of male action speaks to a phantasy of patriarchal culture to control, even ‘steal’ the capacity to give birth. Indeed, Ussher (2006:7) argues that the positioning of the fertile female body as ‘Monstrous’ may also be the result of patriarchal envy; the disgust afforded to menstruation, as well as the ‘splitting of woman into Madonna or whore’ represents an attempt to regulate the way in which women’s reproductive power is limited and appropriated. Therefore, Cristerna’s Maternal Monstrousness becomes doubly significant – in that her body is neither a devouring or castrating one; nor wholly a site of comforting, domesticated, contained feminine familiarity. Ussher’s work does not account for women like Cristerna, who is both maternal *and* Monstrous. This is not because of an inherent trait of female anatomy; but because she has deliberately made it so, outside of the pathologising auspices of the Monstrous Feminine that both Ussher and Creed identify.

Given the potential of modified ‘Monster Beauty’ proposed by Braunberger, it is important that practices of such extreme forms of bodily alteration are understood as processes of bodily resistance, but not of transcendence. Indeed, these practices are still located within the phallocentric cultural paradigms that Monster Beauty speaks back to, and therefore are given meaning by their ‘Otherness’ to a given norm of subjectivity (Pitts, 2003: 35). As Pitts asserts:

‘In subversion, the normative categories cannot be permanently dispersed; their remains are necessary for the purposes of juxtaposition and inversion’ (Pitts, 2003: 79).

Here the incommensurability between intersectionality and the Monstrous Feminine emerges once again. As Pitts (2003: 34) points out, even extreme forms of body modification like that undertaken by Maria Cristerna are not without limits. Like the Monstrous, practices of body modification are still located within their given cultural and historical contexts, and thus cannot transcend the systems of bodily, gendered and racial power that are imposed upon them. While the practice of body modification is not in and of itself problematised within intersectional feminism, adoption of Monster Beauty is a deeply personal process of transformation that is premised on individual subjectivities and identities (Braunberger, 2000: 3-4). As Crenshaw (2017) herself stipulates: intersectionality is not about how one individual navigates subjective marginalisation, or even about identity itself. Rather as (Silverstein, 2017:17) re-iterates, the movement is concerned with the contextual systems of power that marginalise or privilege specific identities on multiple axes, and destabilise maleness, whiteness, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as the default locus of subjectivity. Thus, in this instance the emergent tension between the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality is not so much an issue of ethics, risk or discursive purity – but rather is simply one of different scope and function. As mentioned, the

value of intersectionality lies in the identification of overarching systems of power and privilege that are as-yet unrecognised within ‘naturalised’ systems of power (Smooth, 2013: 17). As should be evident, this is far beyond the purview of the Monstrous Feminine.

The deliberate process of bodily transformation that Monster Beauty as a praxis of Monstrous Femininity entails is a process of personal, embodied transformation that acknowledges and makes space for the trauma and rage that accompanies sexual trauma and misogynistic abuse. Maria Cristerna’s platform as the Vampire Woman will not bring down the patriarchy, nor end the scourge of gendered abuse. But that is not where her value as a Modern Medusa lies. Rather, Cristerna represents a Monstrosity that speaks back to, rather than transcends phallogentric narratives of embodiment, maternity and femininity; occupying a marginal space that encompasses both Monstrosity and Motherhood. While she cannot prevent or wholly overcome her experiences of patriarchal abuse through her body projects, her transformation into The Vampire Woman represents a process of apotropaic resistance to them, her remarkable body bearing the inscriptions that legitimise, rather than pathologise her gorgoneion rage.

Thus, Medusa, as embodied by Maria Cristerna, represents the liminality of the Monstrous Feminine. Her bodily ‘Otherness’ does not conform to arbitrary, phallogentric definitions of Monstrosity, but also does not demand the discursive ‘purity’ that haunts the work of feminist theorists like Ussher, who insist upon the incommensurability of feminism with Monstrosity. As a Modern Medusa Cristerna demonstrates a form of feminine ‘Monster Beauty’ that facilitates fluidity between discursive boundaries and speaks to liminality and *différance*; encompassing both gorgoneion rage, and maternal protection. Through the process of her grotesque, gorgoneion transformations, Maria Cristerna embodies a praxis of Monstrous Femininity that recalls both Culpepper’s (2003: 241) feminine rage and Cixous’ (1976: 13) feminine *différance*. As a modern Medusa, Cristerna is both laughing *and* dangerous.

Chapter Five.

One of us? Extraordinary bodies and the Freak-show.

The previous two chapters focussed on two specific case studies of female bodies deliberately rendered Monstrous by their spectacular displays and gorgon-like modifications. Hitherto, my research has been concerned with a feminist praxis of Monstrosity that is based upon a deliberately constructed performance of Monstrousness, rather than ‘Monster’ as an inherent trait. Shildrick (2002: 5-6) is careful to stipulate the distinction between a minoritarian valourisation of difference, and the uncritical assignation of the label ‘Monster’ onto marginalised bodies or identities. This distinction is complicated by the nature of ‘freak’ identity, and the phenomenon of the display of unusual bodies for entertainment. This chapter concerns the genealogy of the freak-show and its relation to the Monstrous as a site of complex and often contradictory discourses of embodiment, identity and agency.

While contemporary meanings and associations of ‘Freak’ and ‘Monster’ have recently become divergent, their shared history (etymological and epistemological) is one that is important, as it illustrates how disabled and ‘freakish’ bodies function to simultaneously uphold *and* disrupt normative bodily ideals. Both terms represent problematic, complicated pasts and interpretations, and both (as my case studies will attest) also present opportunities for re-appropriation and self-identification that complicate the ethical boundaries of representation for people with disabilities and atypical bodies.

This chapter is a point of departure away from bodies that have been rendered ‘Monstrous’ by choice (i.e.: by extensive modification, cosmetic surgery or grotesque adornment and performance), towards examining how the work that non-normative ‘freak’ morphologies – particularly disabled bodies – can do may be understood as a deployment of the Monstrous Feminine. This is a particularly risky avenue of inquiry, as historically the freak-show has been associated with the exploitation and abuse of those with ‘unusual’ bodies, a genealogy that is impossible to wholly reconcile with an intersectional praxis of feminism that includes disabled women. However, as my main case-study Sarah Birdgirl makes evident, the deliberate embrace of freakish terminologies, histories and aesthetics by disabled performers themselves represents a far more nuanced and liminal praxis than is accounted for within the more rigid understandings of power and privilege prevalent within intersectionality.

This chapter asks what can be learned from the deliberate display of disabled and/or non-normative bodies within the freak-show that make no effort to conceal, camouflage or ‘cure’ their ‘Otherness’. This question will require a comparison of pre-existing discourses of the

Monstrous Feminine and the Monstrous body with Queer/feminist accounts of disability and embodiment, as raised by theorists such as McRuer, Bogdan, Kolářová and Thomson.

Furthermore, as with the previous chapters – this collected research will also utilise real-life case studies of female performers that have visible disabilities or non-normative bodies. My primary focus will be upon Sydney-based performance and disability rights advocate Artist Sarah Birdgirl, but I will also refer to Paralympian and model Aimee Mullins and Seattle performer Little Bear the Bearded Lady to explore narratives of the ‘Othered’ body as a resistance to normative ideas, rather than merely stigmatised aberrance from them. The purpose of this discussion is not to suggest that disabled or non-normative bodies are inherently Monstrous, but rather to explore how their deliberate positioning within contemporary freak shows represents the kind of affective, Monstrosity that critiques, rather than affirms normative understandings of freak identities and bodies.

In June of 2017 I attended the *Oyster Club: Glamdrogynous Freakshow* at the Knox Street bar in Chippendale. The event was a cabaret-style variety show featuring Queer/LGBTI performers: particularly drag, burlesque and side-show style performances. One of whom was Sarah Houbolt, otherwise known as Sarah Birdgirl: a sideshow/circus performer, former swimming Paralympian, disability advocate and self-described freak. Sarah’s performance was in the middle of the main bar, on a large steel table surrounded by the Oyster Club patrons. Her routine consisted of a combination of hula-hooping and burlesque that culminated in Sarah, clad in lingerie, manipulating her hoop with her feet while lying on a bed of nails, her show accompanied by Die Antwoord’s *‘I FINK U FREEKY’*⁹⁴. The performance itself was impressive but was made all the more so by the fact that Sarah is legally blind. Sarah was born with Hallerman-Streiff Syndrome, a very rare congenital condition characterised by short stature, lack of hair growth and impaired vision (Houbolt, 2016). Sarah’s performances are significant because they are a modern recollection of a long history of disabled bodies being presented as forms of ‘freakish’ entertainment in museums and side-shows. It is this history that Sarah seeks to acknowledge and critique, and consequently to encourage her audiences to do so as well. What is important to this chapter is the way in which Sarah’s deliberate recollection of freak histories makes evident the

⁹⁴ South African hip-hop duo Die Antwoord are themselves interesting case studies of carnivalesque freakery. Amanda Du Preez (2011: 107) examines the band’s multiply liminal, confronting personas and art in contexts use of ‘zef’ (trash) imagery and lyrics. Using a crass blend of English and Afrikaans (itself a hybrid language that has become associated with ‘purity’) and simultaneously childish and obscene aesthetics, Die Antwoord is multiply hybrid – representing a carnivalesque ‘coming together’ of racial, gendered and linguistic transgressions. The band’s frontwoman, Yolandi Vi\$\$er could be considered as an instance of Monstrous Femininity herself: her diminutive, ‘Lolita-like’ appearance wholly at odds with her foul mouth, bizarre onstage antics and dangerous sexuality (Du Preez, 2011: 105).

uneven dynamics of bodily power that they represent, as well as the increased risk inherent within Sarah's performative use of bodily 'Otherness' (as opposed to that of an able-bodied performer like Marry Bleeds).

In an interview with SBS program *'The Feed'*, Sarah explains the significance of 'freak' identity, stating: 'I am a natural born freak, it's a really positive identification. It's an identification that really only people with disabilities can use, because 'natural born freak' means being born unique, it's being born different, visibly different, sensually different, and it comes from the old freak shows from two hundred years ago' (Houbolt, 2016). Sarah makes a passionate defence of freak-shows and the circus, describing both as havens for those with disabilities, especially during eras when physical deformities and disabilities were thought to be indications of inferiority or sub-humanity (Shildrick, 2002: 21-22). Sarah's identification with freakery is most immediately evident in her stage-name, which is an homage to Minnie Woolsey (AKA Kookoo, Minnie Ha Ha and Koo Koo the Blind girl from Mars) an American side-show entertainer from the early 20th Century⁹⁵ (Bain, 2017). Sarah's emulation of Woolsey recalls a long history of performance and community-building by disabled individuals within circus freak-shows that is often overlooked by contemporary, able-bodied viewers. This is a history that Sarah has called upon in her work as a disability and accessibility advocate and performer and is made evident in her own deliberate identification as a natural-born freak. Indeed, without a knowledge of this history, the term 'freak' loses a good deal of its significance as a term denoting bodily 'Otherness'⁹⁶. Thus, before the significance of its reclamation can be examined, it is necessary to discuss some of the history of the cultural phenomenon that preceded the moniker that Sarah so vehemently defends.

Bogdan defines 'freak-show' as 'the formally organised exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioural abnormalities for amusement and profit' (Bogdan, 1988: 10). However, the travelling freak-show as it is now known has its roots in antiquity. Thomson's *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996: 6-7) provides an in-depth account of the history and evolution of freak-shows and the shifting role of freaks as Monstrous 'wonders' in Renaissance menageries to teratological specimens in museums and 'cabinets of curiosity'. These

⁹⁵Woolsey played herself (under the stage-name KooKoo the Birdgirl) in Todd Browning's infamous 1932 film *Freaks*. While she has no dialogue, her distinctive feathered and bird-footed costume worn in the film can be seen replicated by Sarah Birdgirl's one woman show 'KooKoo', which was inspired by Woolsey (Bain, 2017).

were the precursors to the circuses and museums that hosted freak-shows, such as the one established by Phineas Taylor Barnum (Bogdan, 1988: 32). While there is no single foundation date for its inception, Bogdan specifies 1840 as the ‘beginning’ of the freak-show as it is now known. This date, he maintains, signifies the end of the transition from private ‘freak menageries’ to the ‘museum exhibit’ style that came to prominence after Barnum’s establishment of *The American Museum* (Bogdan, 1988: 10). The transition between the two marks an epistemological shift in the way in which anomalous bodies were understood culturally; changing from objects of divine wonder, to medical oddities and specimens that could be scientifically studied (Thomson, 1996: 2-3)⁹⁷. Shildrick (2009: 51) remarks that this shift in the social construction of non-normative bodies reflects the emergence of the Enlightenment ideals of rational, bodily sovereignty, and the subsequent ‘claiming’ of non-normative bodies by the disciplinary auspices of biomedicine.

Sarah’s explanation of her use of the moniker ‘natural born freak’ indicates that there exists something of a ‘taxonomy’ of freaks that is determined primarily by whether or not one’s ‘freakishness’ is voluntarily adopted or not. In *Freakshow: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988) Bogdan examines the varied roles played by freak-show performers, and found that the term may be used to describe several different ‘types’ of freak, distinguished by their specific performances and the nature of their ‘freakishness’⁹⁸, most typically defined as ‘born freaks’ (or, as Sarah refers to herself, ‘natural born freaks’) or as ‘made freaks’. As the term suggests, a ‘born freak’ is an individual who was born with their ‘freakish’ qualities – either in the form of congenital deformity (such as conjoined twins or ectrodactyly) or as the result of a genetic condition or syndrome (such as dwarfism, or, in Sarah’s case, Hallerman-Streiff Syndrome) (Bogdan, 1988: 8). However, ‘self-made freak’ typically refers to able-bodied (or, at

⁹⁷ ‘As modernity develops in Western culture, freak discourse logs the change: the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata; what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment; what aroused awe now inspires horror; what was taken as a portent shifts to a site of progress. In brief, wonder becomes error’ (Thomson, 1996:3). In terms of disability and atypical bodies, this statement reflects more than just the evolution of freak discourse, but also gains significance when viewed in conjunction with present-day cultural narratives surrounding illness and disability. The shift in freak discourse described by Thomson towards medicalised pathology is, according to Shildrick, reflective of a desire to control, contain and ultimately segregate the ‘Othered’ body from the realm of the ‘Self’: an impulse to protect the stability of the normative, phallogocentric, able-bodied subject, thereby containing the anxieties provoked by the presence of corporeal anomaly (Shildrick, 2009: 53).

⁹⁸ In the introduction of his work, Bogdan (1988: 6) notes that many of the performers in historical freak-shows (particularly those from before the 20th Century) would no longer be considered freaks, on account of both changing demographics and improved public understanding of disability. Indeed, as Werner (2008: 14-15) points out, many early side-shows exhibited people of colour (most often captured slaves) as examples of ‘savage Natives’ for the amusement of paying audiences.

least, not visibly disabled) individuals who deliberately and radically alter their bodies in extreme or unusual ways; most often with heavy tattooing, piercings, brandings and other forms of bodily adornment (Maria Cristerna, the case study from the previous chapter, would fit within this particular category) (Bogdan, 1988: 8). There is also a third category of ‘freak’ who is not often overlooked in this system of taxonomy, which is the performance freak, an otherwise ‘ordinary’ member of the side-show who performs ‘freakish’ acts (such as contortion, sword swallowing, snake-charming routines and so on – Marry Bleeds would fit into this category). While it is possible for a performer to fit within all three categories of ‘freak’ (many ‘born freaks’ performed unusual, dangerous or strange acts in order to best display their unusual bodies), the emphasis for this chapter is primarily upon those within the first category, as it is the social positioning of these ‘natural born freaks’ that best exemplifies the nature and the limits of cultural narratives of ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ bodies.

Bogdan (1988: 3) explains that the term ‘freak’ does not have a specific or fixed definition, but rather is a socially constructed term that is dependent upon how a given society understands and perceives differences. This echoes Thompson (2002: 5) asserts that disability is not an inherent, fixed state, but rather is contingent upon contexts of accessibility; a person is only ‘disabled’ if their social and physical environment do not permit full and active participation. Put more simply, ‘freak’ is a broad and multifaceted category that is more indicative of how a person is perceived by society, than their inherent nature; an imposed title or a role, rather than a definition. As Bogdan (1988: 3) states, “Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylised presentation’. This is significant, as it not only speaks to the potential reclamation and disruptive performativity of ‘freak’ within a contemporary context by people like Sarah Birdgirl, but it also establishes that the ‘Otherness’ upon which natural-born freaks and freak-shows (both contemporary and historical) are premised is arbitrary, and subject to shifting social constructions of what it means to be ‘normal’ (Bogdan, 1988: 10). Here the first of several parallels between Bogdan’s description of the fluidity of ‘freak’ and the liminal nature of the Monster emerges. Both occupy positions of ‘Otherness’ (as determined by prevalent cultural norms of behaviour, embodiment and identity), but it is actually within the history of the freak-show and the display of ‘extraordinary’ or ‘unusual’ bodies that the twin epistemologies of Monstrosity and Freakery intertwine (Thomson, 1996: 3).

Thomson and Bogdan’s work highlights an important intersection between the historical freak-show and currently evolving cultural narratives of disability and embodiment; specifically, what the freak-show, ‘freak bodies’ and ‘freak discourse’ tells us about the construction of the

normative human subject. The latter term is utilised by Thomson to describe cultural ideologies of the atypical body at a given time: not just in terms of how ‘freaks’ themselves are perceived by dominant social orders, but more significantly, what these beliefs reveal about the cultures in which they are located (Thomson, 1996: 2-3). Consequently, the histories of the Monstrous and the freak-show continue to inform the ways in which disability and atypical bodies are positioned in relation to ‘normal’, able-bodied ones (Shildrick, 2009: 51). While the conditions that characterised historical freak-shows would likely be considered abhorrent and unacceptable within the modern era, the presence of the normative, ableist gaze that Shildrick describes are still present, albeit in less obvious forms (Thomson, 2002: 5-6). Indeed, ‘abnormal’ bodies that contribute to the social epistemology of freakishness could not exist without the normative, able-bodied ideal. As Shildrick (2009: 19) reminds us, the pervasive notion of the singular, autonomous subject idealised by normative symbolic orders is maintained only by the (unsuccessful) exclusion of the bodily and subjective ‘Other’. The patriarchal, able-bodied ‘Self’ is legitimised through its opposition to the perceived ‘defects’ of femininity, illness and disability.

Thomson (2002: 12) observes that the same narratives of normative, gendered aesthetics that serve to ‘discipline’ female bodies exist in parallel to notions of bodily ‘normalcy’, health and function that marginalise those with disabilities. The ‘twin ideologies’ of ableism and normative femininity subsequently interact to produce bodily narratives that render corporeality as ‘cultural plastic’⁹⁹: shaped, sculpted and manipulated to produce physical forms that replicate (or, at the very least, appease) ableist, patriarchal bodily ideals. Thus, bodies that are insufficiently contained or ‘fixed’ are, as both positioned as ‘Other’: sick, abnormal, Monstrous (Shildrick 2009: 43; Thomson, 2002: 8-9). Thomson points out that the term ‘Monster’ (as a moniker for human subjects) was first utilised as a pejorative term to describe individuals with disabilities or congenital impairments (Thomson, 2002: 8). Shildrick (2002: 72) explains how the non-consensual Monstrification of disabled or deformed individuals is also implicated in the ‘Othering’ of women, as both represent an aberration of the ideal, male form; being constructed as defective or deficient and, in some instances, contaminating (Shildrick, 2002: 72). It is this supposition that ‘Monstrous’ bodies represent an ontological threat to the normative subject that demands their exclusion and containment. At this point that a disparity emerges between Sarah Birdgirl’s enthusiasm for freak-shows, and Shildrick’s remarks about the regulating power of bodily and subjective boundaries. This disparity is not so much a contradiction of Sarah’s

⁹⁹ Bordo (1993: 246) used this term to demonstrate how the influence of disciplining measures such as dieting, body building and cosmetic surgery renders the female body as ‘docile’: women deliberately made passive through the obligation to conform to patriarchal beauty norms.

assertions (as continued discussion of Shildrick's work within this chapter will reveal), but rather presents an opportunity to observe the instance of the historical freak-show as a productive site of multiple, often contradictory discourses pertaining to the supposed 'normalness' of bodies (either those on display, or those watching).

These contradictions can be observed within the second of Sarah's performance that I observed. This one occurred several months later in September of 2017, also an *Oyster Club* event. The event was an interactive haunted house – with guests walking through rooms of an art gallery; each room featuring a different performance artist. Like before, Sarah performed while lying on a bed of nails, but this time she did not interact with or even acknowledge the presence of the steady stream of curious visitors filing past her, her attention being completely focussed on manipulating a hula-hoop with her feet and wrists. It was hard to ascertain what she was wearing, as her performance was obscured by the film that was being projected onto the wall behind her: Todd Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, rendered even stranger by its lack of sound and slight distortion of the video.

Sarah's choice to incorporate Browning's film into her performance provides more than an aesthetic background to an already unusual performance; it is a deliberate evocation of the traditional freak-show and the histories that it carries with it – good and bad. A reading of these histories as they are projected (literally) onto the body of a contemporary freak-show performer reveal the deep complexities and unresolved tensions of bodily power and oppression that freak-shows have come to represent. Similarly, *Freaks* itself similarly exemplifies the uneasy relationship between disability and narratives of bodily subversion in film, Russo (1994: 87-89) characterises the film's framing and dialogue as a means of 're-positioning' the audience: facilitating a visual shift from the perspective of the audience (assumed to be 'normal') to the freaks, a reminder that typical rules of proportion, symmetry and social order do not appear to apply in this space. The film portrays the freaks in a surprisingly positive light (given the era): their community rendered egalitarian and carnivalesque by virtue of its heterogeneity – a trait that is shown to be absent from the two 'normal' antagonists (Russo, 1994: 90-91).

However, Russo (1994: 91-92) maintains that regardless of its sympathetic portrayal of freak-show performers, within a distinctly hierarchical social context the success of *Freaks* as a carnivalesque narrative, still functions as a means by which the 'Othered' body is positioned against the bodily ideal of the non-freak; maintaining, rather than transgressing material dichotomies of 'Us' and 'Them'. The Freaks, while framed as deserving of sympathy, are still objects of abject fascination and fear – their retributive violence is intended to instil terror, rather

than solidarity. Indeed, the duality between the freak and non-freak is exemplified in the terrible punishment of the aerialist Cleopatra; her display as a mutilated ‘chick-woman’ serves as a reminder to the ‘normal’ audience of the horrifying possibility of becoming freakish too (“No one knows how she came to be this way[.], but believe it or not – there she is!” (Browning, 1932) (Russo, 1994: 92-93).

The allure of the freak-show is dependent on the spectacle of the viewed ‘Other’, of the dichotomy between normal and abnormal. This is not a history that can be effectively or ethically disregarded in favour of a more modern incarnation of freakery. Indeed, here David A. Gerber’s work concerning consent and the ways in which freakishness is socially constructed become particularly salient. *The “Careers” of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorisation* contends with Bogdan’s (1988: 3) claim that ‘Freakishness’ is socially constructed, and therefore, the freak-show represents a show-business venture that is premised upon the willing participation of consenting freaks who were able to find meaning and autonomy as disabled individuals in their roles (Gerber, 1996: 39). Gerber critiques Bogdan’s assertions that the display of ‘freaks’ could be entirely consensual, insisting instead that rather than a consent model that privileges libertarian, sovereign individualism, the traditional freak-show should be analysed through a ‘historically grounded minority group model’ that acknowledges the unequal relations of power between ‘freaks’ and their audiences (as well as able-bodied entrepreneurs like P.T Barnum) (Gerber, 1996: 41). While his essay does not account for the politics of bodily power and agency within contemporary freak-shows, he nonetheless raises an important point about the exploitative history of the freak-show, and how broader systems of power and oppression problematise the notion of consent and volition. Gerber is very critical of theorists like Bogdan, whose work (he maintains) has negatively influenced subsequent scholarly discourse, maintaining that notions of ‘choice’ and ‘consent’ are not sufficiently interrogated within extant literature pertaining to the social significance of the freak-show (Gerber, 1996: 52). Gerber’s assertions expose an uncomfortable inconsistency within modern narratives that seek to retroactively valorise freak-shows.

Thus, Sarah’s use of this film as a visual signifier of freakishness recalls a genealogy that is dependent upon the duality between an able-bodied ‘Self’ and a freakish ‘Other’; a recollection that, within this particular context, transgresses the ethical boundaries of representation of disability that are prevalent within contemporary intersectional feminism. While Gerber is not specifically a feminist theorist, his advocacy of a minority group model as a means of examining the unequal relations of power that he maintains is inherent in freak-shows is analogous to the

way in which narratives of representation and power are understood within contemporary intersectionality. Intersectionality posits that the influence of unequal, inter-group systems of social power (in this instance, able-bodiedness, gender and race) affects processes of discourse production and naming (Smooth, 2013: 12-13). Thus, the representation of an individual or demographic within dominant cultural narratives will be dependent upon the context of power in which they are located – their status being determined both by their own self-representation, but also by their reception from those around them (Sevvers, Calis & Erzeel, 2016: 351-352). This identification of shifting, interactive power differentials within the production of knowledge and social norms lends credence to Gerber's insistence that the capacity of marginalised 'freaks' to fully and consensually represent themselves was greatly limited. This then problematises the way in which this history is recalled and deployed within contemporary performances, as it re-iterates narratives of bodily, racial and gendered disempowerment that intersectionality seeks to ameliorate. Indeed, even Sarah Birdgirl's modern depictions of freakery are reliant on the uneven systems of power and representation that Gerber (1996: 48-49) maintains popularised freak-shows. The deliberate, literal projection of these uneven narratives of freakery onto the surface of her body positions Sarah as a bodily 'Other' within normative systems of power and discourse.

Subsequently, Sarah's recollections and performances of the troubled history of the freak-show cannot be located within a consistent praxis of intersectionality. Even within a contemporary setting, the narratives of bodily 'Otherness' that the freak-show is dependent upon cannot be upheld within intersectionality's project of acknowledging and dismantling marginalising discourses of embodiment and identity. Here Kolářová (2014) and Halberstam's (2011) work on failure and 'crip-signing' become relevant, particularly as they relate to problematic histories and the abject semiotics associated with their representation. Sarah's deliberate use of *Freaks* as a backdrop to her performance not only recollects a fraught history, it also associates her with the semiotics of Browning's Film – abject, 'Othered' bodies that provoke ontological anxieties of corporeal vulnerability (Shildrick, 2009: 20-21). But, perhaps this is deliberate? Kolářová (2014: 260) refers to 'crip signing' as critical gestures towards something that is 'not fully articulated' with normative symbolic orders or languages of identity. If disabled/freak bodies are rendered 'unintelligible' by pathologising auspices of normative culture, then it becomes necessary for them to seek out 'moments of recognition within ambivalences. Less a moment of solidarity, but rather a mutuality, desire tinged with shame, recognition with objection' (Kolářová, 2014: 260-261). In this instance, Sarah's reference to *Freaks* is a means of locating recognition within a problematic past, and therefore locating a subject position for herself within a biomedical

symbolic order that has historically denied her and other ‘freaks’ the privilege of full subjecthood. To be a ‘Self’ within these paradigms, Kolářová (2014: 269) asserts, one must reject the ‘social illness’ of an abject, freakish past. Therefore, by locating herself within the past, Sarah replicates Kolářová’s (2014: 263-264) description of crip-signing as a refusal of the rehabilitative, assimilationist agenda of optimistic, neo-liberal futures. Her performance speaks to Halberstam’s (2011: 126) advocacy of the Queer art of refusal, of ‘backwards thinking’ and of failure to ‘succeed’ within a pathologising, ableist society. In her deliberate performance of freakish failure Sarah Birdgirl exemplifies the subjective and bodily dislocation of the Monstrous Feminine within normative symbolic realms.

However, such refusal comes with risk. As mentioned in my third chapter, these marginalising discourses also impose a far greater element of risk. By labelling herself as a ‘freak’ and engaging in aesthetics and actions that deliberately invoke the exclusionary gendered and bodily narratives that they imply, Sarah risks being assigned by her audiences to the ableist associations that she as a disability rights advocate opposes. And yet, Sarah’s performance represents more than a pejorative pantomime of an oppressive past, or a risk that is so great as to be without potential reward. While my prior discussions of risk concerned the potential of danger and exclusion that arises unequally from a praxis of Monstrous Femininity, Russo (1994: 10-11) suggests an ‘opening up’ of the notion of risk to imply exploration and curiosity, rather than inherent harm and negativity, maintaining that: ‘[...] risk is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather a condition of possibility produced, in effect, by the normalisation of the body across disciplines in the modern era’ (Russo, 1994: 10-11). Here, risk emerges not as a threat of imminent danger, but rather as a kind of gamble (Russo, 1994: 86): an explorative foray into unknown territory that lacks the safety of established rules and boundaries, but nonetheless, offers the reward of newer systems of being and doing. In this way, risk may be understood as stepping outside of the familiarity afforded by normative culture and intersectionality in order to explore the potential of new possibilities: a bodily and discursive leap of faith.

Sarah’s performance is risky because there is no guarantee that her evocation of crip-signing, failure and of the troubled past of freak-shows will not serve to further reinforce harmful stereotypes or ableist pejoratives. However, her recollection of the past is one that is intended as a means of re-interrogation, not reinforcement. Russo (1994: 85-86) acknowledges the desire of some feminists to ‘straighten out’ the image of the grotesque and the freakish, for the sake of establishing histories that are not premised upon binary ‘Otherness’ and narratives of oppression, echoing Ussher’s (2006) desire to eschew the Monstrous Feminine. However, she also suggests that a ‘riskier gambit by far’ lies in the image that is liminal, that eschews the

boundaries of the respectable and safe, opting instead for creating an image of oneself that ‘makes strange’ that which is already present within the status-quo. In so doing, Russo interrogates the imperative to eschew the genealogy of the freak, arguing instead for the possibilities that lie within the playful ‘posing and parading in the funhouse mirrors’ (Russo, 1994: 86).

Sarah Birdgirl’s performances would involve far less risk, were she to avoid associations with the freak-show, and the subsequent ‘failure to cohere’ (Kolářová, 2014: 259) that they represent. However, instead, she acknowledges the value of the freak-show as a part of an important cultural heritage, and redeploys its aesthetics as a means of counter-producing, rather than reinforcing oppressive bodily norms, representing a ‘resistance from within’ that Russo describes as:

‘These subjects are imbued with transgressive potential, not because they are essential victims [...] but because they have been produced and positioned as such within the mechanisms of power’ (Russo, 1994: 94).

In this way, both freaks and Monsters demonstrate their liminal capacity to simultaneously perpetuate *and* subvert the status-quo. As Shildrick (2002: 11) asserts, Monsters are capable of signifying both binarised ‘Otherness’ (upon which normative systems of selfhood are premised) *and* category disruption simultaneously. This liminality recalls Bogdan’s (1988: 3) observations that the body of the freak is socially constituted against the normate body, which in turn is stabilised by the exclusion of the freakish/Monstrous ‘Other’. Shildrick (2009: 2) asserts that the insistence upon dichotomous systems of definition ought to make evident the instability of the boundaries that maintain those definitions.

Sarah’s emphatic use of the term freak demonstrates a desire to simultaneously parody and resist normativity through an ‘Otherness’ that acknowledges freak history, while redeploying its associated aesthetics and performances. Her specific introduction to the crowd by the MC as a ‘natural born freak’, and particularly relevant choice of accompanying music both were at her own instruction. Her delight at the audience’s squeamish response to her lying on a bed of nails instigates a reciprocal dialogue with those that watched her, a dialogue that complicates the normative dynamics of power between those whose bodies are understood to be ordinary, and those deemed ‘extraordinary’. Thomson (1997) uses the term ‘extraordinary’ to refer to any bodies that are ‘Othered’ in a manner that renders them as distinct from the social norm, and therefore significant. Whether ‘freaks’ in a circus, or patients being exhibited by medical

professionals, her use of the term extraordinary implies that these ‘Othered’ bodies are granted *superordinate* status: rendered as exotic objects of curiosity or study, rather than *subordinate* bodies to be discarded, excluded or rejected, as Susan Wendell maintains (cited in Linton, 2000: 587).

The distinction here is significant, as it speaks to a demarcation in the way in which disabled individuals have historically been treated within normative symbolic orders: either as entertaining oddities and curious specimens, or as defective entities that must be ‘cured’ or kept away from the general populous¹⁰⁰ (Shildrick, 2009: 51). While both categories are the products of an ableist status-quo, Thomson’s description of ‘extraordinary’ bodies within freak-shows is nonetheless optimistic, given the liminality that she maintains these bodies represent in these contexts. In fact, her opening statements in the introduction to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* bely an interesting re-positioning of privileged subject positions: ‘Those of us who have been known since antiquity as ‘Monsters’, and more recently as ‘freaks’ defy the ordinary and mock the predictable, exciting both anxiety and speculation among our more banal brethren’ (Thomson, 1996: 1). Thomson’s language may be deliberately provocative here, but her statement is nonetheless relevant, in that it presents an important shift in the typical perspective of bodily discourse; positioning able-bodied individuals as bland and unremarkable, as opposed to those that are special, extraordinary.

While this small discursive shift does not have the capacity to radically alter the oppressive power dynamics inherent within existing bodily edicts (remarkable bodies remain exploitable oddities within the current status-quo), but what is pertinent here is the agency of bodily language. Those of us that are able-bodied may have the privilege of uncritically considering ourselves to be ‘normal’ – however, it is nonetheless an admittedly unpleasant surprise to be labelled as ‘bland’. Just desserts perhaps, for reaping the benefits of a history that has degraded and fetishized those

¹⁰⁰ Susan Schweik (2009) describes ugly laws as provisions or decrees within local ordinances that demand the exclusion or expulsion of individuals deemed to be ‘unsightly’ or ‘disturbing’ by virtue of their deformity or disability. These laws enforced rigid standards of bodily ‘wholesomeness’; the exclusion of those with physical appearances deemed to be offensive intended as a means of preserving public safety, comfort and decency. Shildrick’s text specifically refers to a provision of the Chicago Municipal code that states: ‘No person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other places in this city, (or) shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view’ (cited in Shildrick, 2002: 74). The provisions of this specific piece of law exemplify what Shildrick refers to as the fear of ‘contamination’: the belief that able-bodied individuals may be influenced or sickened by the presence of those with undesirable features – their ‘Otherness’ representing a threat to the stability of the normative body-politic (Shildrick, 2002: 74).

that we have non-consensually designated as Monstrous. Indeed, my own temporarily hurt feelings at Thomson's jibe demonstrate her point precisely; the capacity for the extraordinary, freakish body to – at least temporarily – disturb the taken-for-grantedness of the able-body. Thomson identifies an important aspect of freaks – their capacity to provide a corporeal point of departure for able-bodied individuals as an 'Other' by which they may affirm their own suppositions of normality (Thomson, 1996: 10). While this positioning of freakish/extraordinary/disabled bodies may typically be understood as an expression of ableist power dynamics, it also exposes the weaknesses inherent within normative corporeal symbolic orders. That is, the ability of freak bodies to confuse the boundaries that are supposed to segregate the 'Monstrous' from the 'Self'. It is this disruption and repositioning that Sarah Birdgirl identifies as so significant about the freak-show; the ability to confront an audience with bodies that are extraordinary, and therefore signifying. To return to the etymology of 'Monster'; Sarah's performance is a deliberate, visual portent, a warning of the tenuous nature of our conceptions of corporeal 'normality'. Appearing onstage as an unapologetic freak in front of a largely able-bodied audience, Sarah asserts her right to exist *because* of her freakishness, not despite it. By refusing to hide or censor her extraordinary 'Otherness', Sarah challenges the primacy of the normative body as a singularly natural, or valuable entity.

Similarly, the freak body may also be understood as a means of querying (or, in this instance, Queering) the limits of 'normal' femininity. Based in Seattle, Little Bear Schwartz, better known as Little Bear the Bearded Lady is a singer, former burlesque dancer and freak-show performer. As her name suggests, she also has a full, natural beard – a physical symptom of Poly Cystic Ovarian Syndrome (Weiss, 2016). Bearded ladies have been a staple of freak-shows since their inception, with Bogdan (1988: 323) describing them as 'sexual riddles', their femininity problematised (but never wholly eschewed) by the presence of a typically masculine feature. Like Sarah, Little Bear falls into the category of a 'natural-born' freak, her theatrical performances premised upon the enticing 'Otherness' of her body in its natural state. While she has a variety of talents (including singing opera while stamping barefoot on broken glass), there is one filmed performance from the *Highbline* club in Seattle that showcases Russo's description of the carnivalesque body. Dressed in a pink bra and black mini-skirt, with a pink and white flower-crown replete with pink antlers, Little Bear has styled her make-up to resemble a deer – the whole ensemble recalling an intentionally strange animal-human hybrid¹⁰¹. As she sings, she

¹⁰¹ Bogden's discussion of freakish femininity and feminism describes how patriarchy has used the threat of hybridity as a coercive means of policing the boundaries of 'proper' womanhood (Bogden, 1988: 294).

begins to strip – revealing tattoos, hairy armpits and a plump belly. Her movements are dramatic, but deliberately indelicate – the performance appears simultaneously serious and parodic. The performance ends with Little Bear topless, save for a tiny pair of pasties. She punctuates her final notes by raising a glass of dark liquid to the audience and pouring it slowly across her chest. The small but enthusiastic crowd applauds (Schwartz, 2016).

In her performance, Little Bear simultaneously evokes and repudiates conventional femininity – her operatically trained voice is clear and sweet, and speaks to ‘high culture’ and romance, her body is curvaceous and titillatingly displayed. But, while bearded, Little Bear’s body speaks of a ‘slippage’ between gendered and sexed boundaries; an ‘excess’ of dark hair that is deliberately, ostentatiously, displayed in conjunction with the typical markers of femininity to the extent that both categories become confused. It is likely that Russo (1994: 62) would describe her as excessive, not simply in terms of her generous proportions and gleeful nudity, but because her means of self-display exceed the limitations of conventional femininity: deliberately and exuberantly so. Such a confusion of masculine and feminine markers represents a body and an identity that does not sit still within its assigned place – the grotesque body and the Monstrous Feminine both being ‘Other’ to the static, tidy body of Enlightenment ideals (Russo, 1994: 63). Little Bear’s performance is a performative refusal to reside within pre-determined social and bodily notions of gender that reveals the marginal space between them. Even when not performing, Little Bear’s body is liminal. But, when she takes the stage and renders this liminality theatrically evident, it emerges as a deliberate, de-monstration of a Monstrous Femininity that has been thoroughly subverted – a one-woman carnival.

Accordingly, the term ‘carnavalesque’ could easily apply to both Sarah Birdgirl and Little Bear. Russo refers to the carnivalesque body as a site of recombination, redeployment and counter-production of conventional social norms and aesthetics – not by means of direct opposition, but rather a ‘topsy-turvy’ reconfiguration of cultural tools and signifiers (Russo, 1994: 62). Likewise, neither Sarah nor Little Bear’s performances are reactionary or oppositional – there is no malice of intent inherent in their displays, and they still deploy elements of normative femininity (make-up, costume, the sexualised revelation of nude or nearly nude female flesh). The chaotic nature of their deployment, however, is significant in that they function to re-arrange and re-deploy cultural signifiers in heterogenous fashions: excessive female hirsuteness, visible, sexualised disability; both re-order the elements of normative representation and render them

Little Bear is deliberately invoking that hybridity; her costume being simultaneously male and female, animal and human.

heterogeneous and open to new possibilities (Russo, 1994: 62-63). While Russo's distinctions between 'grotesque' and 'carnavalesque'¹⁰² are important, both Sarah and Little Bear occupy the discursive spaces between them that are also identified by Russo (1994: 79). By utilising 'freak' bodies to produce carnivalesque performances Sarah and Little Bear create productive and playful methods of re-ordering and re-deploying bodily signifiers, aesthetics and norms, thereby questioning the legitimacy of arbitrary bodily and gendered boundaries through the deployment of Monstrous Femininity.

Thomson explains that it is the 'Otherness' of freak bodies that establishes them as weak points in the construction of the normative body: 'Because such bodies are rare, unique, material and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions and needs at any given moment' (Thomson, 1996: 2). More simply put, because able-bodiedness is taken for granted as 'normal', extraordinary bodies, (like the Monstrous and Monstrous Feminine), make evident the limits of the symbolic orders upon which this 'normality' is premised (Shildrick, 2002: 11).

This argument is best exemplified by Katherine Weese (2000) in her review of Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love*, which tells the story of the corrupt, cult-like family of side-show freaks. Dunn's novel explores a setting wherein Bakhtin's carnival has gone horribly wrong: the patriarch Arty encouraging his followers to amputate limbs and swallow radiation tablets so that they may be more like him, assembling an exclusive, isolationist cult of freaks (Weese, 2000: 350). However, the freakish setting of *Geek Love* also allows for the closer inspection and de-naturalisation of normative gender roles. For example, Weese points to an instance where Dunn's protagonist is made profoundly uncomfortable after witnessing the day-to-day domestic interactions of a family of little people. The 'strangeness' of witnessing heteronormative, patriarchal family dynamics played out in such an unusual setting makes evident the arbitrary construction of the nuclear family (Weese, 2000: 353). This, Weese maintains, speaks to the social value of grotesquery and the Freak: their 'Otherness' serves as a means by which an audience may be removed from their own discursive realm, and subsequently look upon their cultural institutions and norms from a new perspective, her discussion citing Tim Libretti's assertion that the grotesque '...makes real

¹⁰² While the open, excessive and transforming grotesque is positioned as the opposite of the ordered, static ideal of classical embodiment and subjectivity (Russo, 1994: 63), the carnivalesque represents a parodic redeployment of the entirety of 'high-culture'; 'a site of insurgency, rather than withdrawal' (Russo, 1994: 62).

and perceptible the ‘ominous and sinister’ aspects of the familiar world ‘obscured by the veil of familiarity” (cited in Weese, 2000: 353).

The ability of freak-shows to demonstrate the limits of normative cultural practices (hitherto presumed to be natural rather than socially constructed) recalls Donna Haraway’s assertion in *Promises of Monsters* that the Monstrous and the Monstrous Feminine ‘queers what counts as nature’ (1992: 300). Sarah’s performance operates in a similar fashion, presenting her audience with an instance of female sexuality hitherto unaccounted for within normative systems of representation. Mainstream audiences are not typically accustomed to seeing disabled bodies presented in a sexualised manner, particularly female ones, and particularly female ones that deliberately emphasise their bodily ‘Otherness’. As Thomson (2002: 17) points out, stereotypes of bodily ability, function and aesthetics frequently rob disabled people – particularly women – of their sexuality. Because they are not typically seen as capable of fulfilling conventional standards of feminine beauty, they are denied the privileges afforded to those that are able to conform to normative femininity. The bodily norms that govern femininity render disabled women as ‘lesser-women’ – their inability to fully replicate conventional standards of able-bodied aesthetics that denote normative womanhood, describing disability as ‘one such identity vector that disrupts the unity of the classification of womanhood, and challenges the primacy of gender as a monolithic entity’ (Thomson, 2002: 17).

For the category of ‘woman’ to remain stable within patriarchal symbolic orders, it is necessary to eschew any other intersecting identity – such as disability, effectively stripping disabled women of their femininity. By extension, Bogdan’s chapter *Freaking Feminism* speaks to the nature of ableist, patriarchal body logic; stating that to be “unsexed’ is to inhabit the realm of the freak’ (Bogdan, 1988: 292). Within a normative context, women’s erotic performances (including burlesque or strip shows) are typically confined within strict boundaries of what is typically considered sexually valuable and attractive to a male, heterosexual viewer; as Thomson states: ‘If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified, framing her body as an icon of deviance’ (Thomson, 1997: 26).

Through this framing of the disabled female body, normative sexuality cannot exist, as to express desire towards such a form would, by its own logic be rendered perverse (Solvang, 2007: 54). Thus, we may understand Sarah’s performance to function as a critique of this objectifying gaze in that it represents that which is unrepresentable within normative symbolic orders: the sexualised, disabled female body. While Sarah’s performance replicates many aspects of

normative female ‘sexiness’ (risqué costuming such as lingerie, performing on a tabletop in a bar, songs with suggestive lyrics etc.), it may also be understood as a form of parody; by removing the sexualised performance from its normative parameters, Sarah’s performance challenges her audiences’ preconceived notions of what bodies are ‘appropriately’ sexual, and which are not. Within normative symbolic orders, Sarah’s femininity and sexuality are rendered ‘unthinkable’ (Kolářová, 2004: 260-261). However, through the freakish deployment of a Monstrous/Freak Femininity, Sarah relocates herself, and in so doing turns the scrutinising gaze back onto her audiences. Much like Weese’s (2000: 350-352) prior example of ‘misplaced’ instances of traditional gender roles, Sarah’s performance is significant, not only in terms of lampooning expectations of how sex and sexuality are typically portrayed for mainstream audiences, but also in demonstrating the bodily limits and norms of femininity and sexuality. If Sarah is rendered asexual (and therefore ‘freakish’) because of her disability, then it follows that her overtly sexualised performance occupies a discursive, subjective space hitherto unaccounted for within normative taxonomies of desire and sexuality. Sarah’s performance represents ‘freak sexuality’ not simply because who is performing it, but also because it points to a ‘blind spot’ in how sex and sexuality are conventionally perceived. Again, the Monstrous Feminine always signifies.

Furthermore, heteronormative, patriarchal standards that govern the socialised processes of sex, intimacy and relationships preclude the involvement of bodies that cannot have sex in ‘normal’ ways due to differences of embodiment and mobility. While the moniker ‘disabled’ covers a wide spectrum of differently-abled bodies and neurological conditions; McRuer (2006: 91) points out that both sexuality and the physical acts of sexual relations are governed by pervasive ideologies that actively and passively work to exclude bodies and identities that cannot replicate heteronormative, ableist and patriarchal sexual ideals (i.e.: vaginally penetrative sex between able-bodied, heterosexual, monogamous cisgender partners). Conversely, there also exist harmful social narratives that seek to deliberately fetishise disabled bodies – situating non-normative bodies as sites of exotic, ‘kinky’ pleasures that are objectified because their exciting ‘not-normalness’. Solvang (2007: 59) discusses how the fetishisation of specific kinds of disabled bodies (i.e.: amputees or wheelchair users) contributes to their marginalisation; rendering them as passive objects of desire on the basis of their ‘Otherness’¹⁰³. The presentation of disabled or ‘freakish’ bodies within a sexualised setting or performance is to occupy a risky, liminal space

¹⁰³ Solvang’s research on the subject of ‘devotees’ (men who are sexually attracted to female amputees) highlights the tenuous nature between sexual appreciation of disabled bodies, and objectifying fetishisation. His study (one of only a few existing) demonstrated that attitudes towards devotees by disabled women is split between disgust, and increased feelings of self-esteem and desirability (Solvang, 2007: 59-60).

between enforced asexualisation, and exploitative, de-humanising fetishisation. Thus, Sarah's performance occupies multiple discursive positions simultaneously, evoking the disruptive capacity of the Monstrous Feminine to consistently slip between and evade the confines of absolute corporeal and sexual definitions (Shildrick, 2002: 3).

While individual reception of Sarah's performance at *Oyster Club* is largely subjective, her self-presentation was designed. Her costume was deliberately revealing, and her choice of music and choreography emphasised the suggestive nature of the routine. In any other performance at a burlesque/cabaret night, this would not be at all unusual (even with the bed of nails), but Sarah's presence in this context as a visibly disabled woman adds an additional level of significance to her show. By presenting herself in a sexualised display of her own devising, Sarah's performance represents a declaration of sexuality from a culture that would typically seek to de-sexualise her. Scantly clad, grinning and gyrating with her hoop on a bar table before a crowd of applauding onlookers: Sarah is neither passive nor demurely asexual, as would best comfort the arbiters of ableist sexual norms. Rather, she presents a display of sexuality that obliges her audience to reconsider their own notions of how a properly 'sexy' or 'disabled' body is supposed to appear. 'Freak sexuality', according to Sarah, is quite capable of being both simultaneously.

Thus, given the signifying nature of both Sarah Birdgirl and Little Bear's performances, it becomes evident that human embodiment is neither predictable, nor can it be wholly or adequately contained within culturally-constructed systems of taxonomy; especially those purposed to maintain exclusionary categories of 'human'. 'What would it mean [..]' asks Shildrick (2002: 78) '...to address the issue of vulnerability not *without* recourse to normative standards, but with a critique that exposed not simply the limits set by the cultural specificity of normativity – as opposed to the claim of a general if not universal validity – but more radically yet that the dichotomous structure is itself unstable?' Here Shildrick advocates for a system of critique that acknowledges the extent and effect of normativity by means of rejecting (rather than perpetuating) a binary system of classification. This is significant in terms of corporeal norms, disability and health: how might the social discourses of the freak-show (historical or contemporary) be altered if disabled/freakish bodily performance is not premised on a basis of abjection, but simply of difference? In this instance, I use the term 'difference' to suggest a subject position that speaks to multiplicity, or what Derrida would refer to as *différance*¹⁰⁴: in this instance, the 'in-betweenness' of Monstrously Feminine/freakish bodies (Shildrick, 2002: 67).

¹⁰⁴ Shildrick uses Derrida's term to imply an 'Otherness' that is simultaneously exteriorised, yet still remaining within the Self: liminal and existing within linguistic spaces of definition (Shildrick, 2002: 28).

Neither Sarah Birdgirl nor Little Bear exist in opposition to normative femininity, but rather occupy a liminal space between gendered and bodily boundaries: Sarah on account of her sexualisation of a the supposedly 'asexual' disabled female body, whereas Little Bear's voluptuous femininity exists in tandem with (rather than despite) her hirsuteness. Both suggest carnivalesque forms of Monstrous Femininity that cannot be located within discrete, oppositional categories (Russo, 1994: 78).

In this instance, disabled and atypical bodies cease to exist as jettisoned beings on one side of a subjective binary, but rather as forms that exist in their own right, rather than as defective 'versions' of an exclusive, corporeal norm, their non-conformance to ableist ideals speaking to the unsustainability of dualistic constructions of the body, and to the vast diversity and potentiality of human embodiment and identity, recalling Shildrick's (2002: 118-119) non-binary vision of the vulnerable self. In this instance, 'freak', like 'Monster' and 'Monstrous Feminine' becomes a term that denotes multiplicity; that disrupts, rather than reinforces ableist binaries of 'proper' embodiment, and thus loses its exclusively pejorative nature. Through Sarah and Little Bear's redeployment of freakishness, the freak-show re-emerges as more than an exploitative enterprise that is reliant on arbitrary binaries, but rather as the site of carnivalesque potential that Russo (1994: 78) describes: an encounter that facilitates vulnerability and egalitarian communication through an acknowledgement of human variety.

Furthermore, the recognition of the non-universality of the human form also provides an opportunity for imagining more inclusive, accessible futures. As Sarah herself states in a TEDx talk given in June of 2017, 'innovation may lead to accessibility, but accessibility will always lead to innovation' (Houbolt, 2017). In this instance, Sarah's use of 'innovation' ought to be considered as distinct from neo-liberal co-options of the term, implying an accessibility that emerges from the broadening of subjectivity, rather than consumer choice. This notion of innovation through accessibility (rather than consumer choice) speaks back to the way in which disability is positioned as a perpetual 'Other' within neo-liberal notions of 'diversity' (Davis, 2013: 13-14)(Kolářová, 2014: 258-259). The acknowledgement and legitimisation of disabled bodies and identities that is inherent within projects of accessibility erodes the boundaries that preserve ableist privileges and norms.

An example of this may be observed within Aimee Mullins' TEDx talk '*It's not fair having 12 pairs of legs*'. Like Sarah Birdgirl, Mullins is also a former athlete-turned-disability rights advocate, as

well as a fashion model¹⁰⁵, the title of her talk referring to her multiple pairs of prosthetic legs that accompany her onstage. Mullins points out that each pair of legs is different – carbon-fibre ‘cheetah legs’ for running, carved mahogany legs designed by Alexander McQueen for a fashion show, and other pairs that allow Mullins to vary her height. Mullins points out that her prosthetics give her an advantage over able-bodied individuals: the ability to radically change the appearance and even function of her limbs at will. The title of her talk is a reference to a friend’s observation that Mullins’ capacity to change her height gave her capabilities that able-bodied people lack (Mullins, 2009). In this way, Mullins asserts, her body supersedes the ability of able-bodied people, and does so in a manner that does not camouflage or hide her disability, but rather creates new functions and aesthetics that are ‘more than human’ (Mullins, 2009).

The significance here, Mullins argues, is that it should not be necessary for disabled bodies to replicate able-bodied norms: implying a future where disabled bodies are not socially constructed as defective or deficient, but simply as different. The significant implication here being both the ‘extraordinary’ (Thomson, 1997) potential of disabled bodies, as well as the subsequent destabilisation of the able-body as the social ‘default’. It is Mullins’ emphasis on the value of bodily difference that speaks back to the significance of the freak-show: as a cultural phenomenon and a site of ‘freakish’ spectacle, the freak-show’s purpose is to display bodies that exemplify this digression from ableist norms. In so doing, the freak-show and its performers are literal, living exemplars of a liminality that instigates what Shildrick refers to as ‘a vulnerable becoming’, the acknowledgement of the instability of the boundaries between ‘clean and proper’ bodies, and those designated as ‘Monstrous’ (Shildrick, 2002: 85-86).

In this way, Mullins, Little Bear and Sarah Birdgirl fulfil a similar cultural role as the Monstrous Feminine. While their means of performance and presentation are quite different, all three women engage in deliberately curated displays of ‘Othered’ bodies that, historically, have been obliged to remain either hidden or camouflaged, and yet, when viewed publicly, function as

¹⁰⁵ Thomson actually utilises Mullins in her discussion of disability activism, using her fashion photoshoot in *Dazed and Confused* magazine as an example. On the cover of the magazine, Mullins’ glamorous, semi-nude portrait features her in the cheetah legs, making no effort to conceal her disability, nor to present it in a de-sexualised manner (Thomson, 2002: 25). As mentioned previously, this is significant in that it affords Mullins the opportunity to be both feminine and sexual *and* disabled. This, Thomson notes, is a stark contrast to a *Playboy* spread featuring Paralympian Ellen Stohl, which appeared to wholly eschew any evidence of her disability from any of the sexualised photographs and removing any sexual imagery from shots featuring her wheelchair. This, Thomson asserts, suggests that Stohl’s image is divided – as *either* disabled, or sexual. Not both (Thomson, 2002: 20).

meaningful sites of resistance and critique. Like the Monstrous Feminine, their simultaneous portrayals of sexuality and disability speaks to the weakness of discursive boundaries, refusing to remain confined to singular, arbitrary classifications of normative femininity and embodiment.

The contemporary, freakish performances of Sarah Birdgirl and Little Bear the Bearded Lady operate within wildly different social contexts to the original travelling freak-shows and museums popularised by P.T Barnum in the 19th Century. Both actively seek out the opportunity to perform, to speak; and to do so with a capacity for authentic self-representation that would have been impossible a century ago. Furthermore, while both have gained audiences because of their atypical bodies, they do so by critiquing ableist ideals of ‘normal’ embodiment that have historically relegated disability and corporeal ‘Otherness’ to the margins of society. Their modern audiences are afforded an extraordinary show, but they are also confronted with the questionable and complex history that such a performance recalls. Sarah Birdgirl’s risky recollections acknowledge the heritage of a problematic past, while exploring newer, liminal potentials that would be otherwise unaccounted for within mainstream feminist discourses.

Like the Monstrous Feminine, the genealogy of the freak and of freak-shows is nuanced and problematic – these were sites of horrendous exploitation, but also of refuge for those that would likely have not found employment or community elsewhere (Russo, 1994: 76-77).

Consequently, the cultural figure of the ‘Freak’ is a liminal one; simultaneously a symptom of an oppressive, binary system of subjectivity, as well as a transgressive figure that disrupts the very classifications that seek to define it. This chapter has argued that the performances of contemporary ‘freak’ entertainers (and the histories that they recall) constitute more than a vulgar re-imagining of a by-gone tradition, but rather constitute a de-monstrative counter-production of the bodily narratives that these traditions represent. Through carnivalesque parody, gleeful grotesquery and a deliberate display of bodies that ‘should’ remain behind the discursive glass, Sarah Birdgirl and Little Bear the Bearded Lady embody the twin histories and transgressive power of the Freak and the Monstrous Feminine.

Chapter Six

The Problem with Monsters

*La procreation des monstres ne se voit pas: elles' imagine.*¹⁰⁶

So far I have established my case for the Monstrous Feminine as a transgressive praxis of feminism that inspires parodic humour, jouissance, vulnerability, spectacle and abject terror. However, it is also a heuristic that is weighed down with misogynistic, racist and ableist baggage, meaning that the ability to appropriate and perform Monstrous Femininity is not afforded equally to all women. Further, as Ussher, Shildrick and Creed have written, there are some elements of Monstrosity Femininity that cannot escape their pejorative histories and cannot be reconciled with a system of ethics that is premised upon discursive loyalty or subjective safety.

Cohen (1996: 5-6) asserts that the transgressive nature of the Monstrous makes it a 'master escape artist', resisting and confusing discrete discursive and taxonomic categories with each new incarnation: 'Each time the grave opens and the unquiet slumberer strides forth ("come from the dead, /Come back to tell you all"), the message proclaimed is transformed by the air that gives its speaker new life". The subsequent 'crisis of categories' that Monsters imply for any given system of thinking speaks to an ethical ambiguity that is not accounted for within the boundaries of identity and power that intersectional feminism imposes. To make the praxis of Monstrous Femininity commensurate with intersectionality is to unmake the Monstrous Feminine itself.

Furthermore, the boundaries that it threatens are not solely the categories of the oppressor: The Monstrous Feminine will not always remain solely on 'our'¹⁰⁷ side. As Ussher consistently asserts, the Monstrous Feminine has been and continues to be deployed as a mechanism of phallocentrism and misogyny – the creature that she describes is no less of a Monster than the case studies that I have described in previous chapters. To extend Cohen's (1996: 5) work a little further, 'our' symbolic orders are as constantly haunted by the threat of invasion by the discursive 'Other' as 'Theirs' are. Subsequently, neither the Monstrous, nor the Monstrous Feminine can ever be entities that are - to use Shotwell's term - 'pure'.

¹⁰⁶ "The creation of monsters cannot be seen, it can only be imagined" – Pierre Darmon (cited in Braidotti, 2011: 217).

¹⁰⁷ The entire notion of 'our' side is exposed as entirely without meaning, made evident by the capacity of the Monstrous to transgress any ethical, bodily or political boundaries that are imposed upon it (Cohen, 1996: 5).

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Initially, I will provide a closer examination of the ways in which the Monstrous Feminine fails to account for the broad, unproblematic and wholly inclusive feminism demanded by intersectionality – particularly on account of the uneven social risk that any iteration of the Monstrous represents. I will revisit my prior case studies to examine how the praxes of Monstrous Femininity that I describe are not equally accessible for all women, and how some instances that I have discussed actually run the risk of perpetuating harmful norms of gender, race and embodiment that intersectionality seeks to dismantle. Secondly, I will explain why these risks should nonetheless *not* preclude the praxis of Monstrous Femininity as one of many possible methods of gendered and bodily resistance and critique.

Indeed, the crux of the conclusion to this thesis is thus: the purpose of Monstrous Femininity is not to solve problems of misogyny, gender essentialism, ableism or racism, but to provoke affective responses that engender new possibilities. As its etymology suggests, the transgressions of the Monstrous Feminine are significant because they expose the limits of discourse and ‘make-strange’ that which is taken for granted, warning of the need for introspection and change: ‘the Monster exists only to be read’ (Cohen, 1996: 4). Broadly speaking, the role of the Monstrous – in any incarnation – is to be an augur, not a saviour. This chapter does not propose Monstrous Femininity as preferable to intersectionality as a praxis of feminism. Rather, in illustrating the differences between them, it argues for the Monstrous Feminine as significant because it does things that intersectionality cannot.

At this point, failure is once again relevant; how might the Monster’s failure to conform to the auspices of intersectionality be understood as a system of critique *through* failure, rage, anti-sociality and risk? In addition to Shotwell’s rejection of dialectical purity, I will draw upon Halberstam’s work ‘*The Queer Art of Failure*’ as a tactic of resistance that may be utilised in configuring deployments of Monstrous Femininity: constituting a praxis that refuses confinement within the ‘safe’ boundaries of intersectional feminist discourses. I will examine this Queer repositioning of failure as analogous to the project of Monstrous Femininity as praxis; exploring the possibilities of ‘shadow feminisms’ and the rejection of discursive orthodoxy as a Monstrous response to patriarchy *and* normalised forms of feminism.

Creed, Ussher, Thomson and Shildrick have already established a very broad body of work that exemplifies the problematic genealogies of the Monstrous as it relates to female embodiment, fecundity and sexuality, as well as race and non-normative morphologies. To deliberately deploy Monstrous Femininity (rather than it being arbitrarily imposed), one must navigate this genealogy of ‘Otherness’: a process that is not uniform for all women. Indeed, to paraphrase Orwell, within

phallogocentric symbolic orders, all women are Monstrous, but some women are more Monstrous than others. Both Shildrick's (2002: 20-21) and Thomson's (1996: 3) work trace the histories of the disabled/atypical body as simultaneously a site of wonder and pathologising 'Otherness', and Halberstam (1995: 16) examines the way in which the Monstrous has been constructed as a racialized entity. From these analyses of Monstrous epistemologies, it is evident that the ways in which women of colour and women with disabilities negotiate 'Otherness' is fraught with risk that does not affect white/able-bodied women.

For example, the previous chapter examined the way in which the deployment of Monstrosity by women with disabilities is influenced by narratives of both ableism *and* misogyny, and thus incurs a greater burden of social 'Othering'. The art of performers like Sarah Birdgirl evokes dual histories of oppression that Thomson maintains are intertwined: within normative, patriarchal orders, women are *already* positioned as disordered (Thomson, 2002: 6-8). However, she also notes that able-bodied women have access to privileges that are denied to women with disabilities. While the confines of normative femininity require constant disciplining and restriction, disabled women are often excluded from the category of 'feminine' entirely, being stripped of both female identity and sexuality (Thomson, 2002: 17). Consequently, what might a comparison between the performances of Sarah Birdgirl and an able-bodied artist like Marry Bleeds reveal about the ways in which unequal systems of power and representation are made manifest within a praxis of Monstrous Femininity?

Both performers express a strong identification with 'freak' aesthetics and the side-show (Marry Bleeds, 2018: Houbolt, 2016). However, being able-bodied, Marry has the capacity to 'opt out' of her 'freakishness' at will, her 'Otherness' is one that may be voluntarily removed or adopted. The same cannot be said of Sarah Birdgirl. While both women deploy a Monstrous Femininity that is contingent on transgressing patriarchal norms of 'ladylike' comportment and restrained sexuality, their evocations of freakery are marked by distinct experiences of bodily 'Otherness'. Russo (1994: 75-76) begins her chapter about freaks and the history of the freak-show, by demonstrating the difference between people that she and Sarah Birdgirl (Houbolt, 2016) refer to as 'natural born freaks', and those that appropriate freakishness as a means of rebellion against mainstream culture. She describes how the adoption of the term 'freak' by able-bodied individuals during the emergence of counter-cultural movements in the 1960's rendered 'natural born freaks' invisible (1994: 76). By appropriating 'freak' as a term that was open to even the 'white collared conservative on the street' (Russo, 1994: 75), the spectularity that had provided community and employment for natural-born freaks was greatly diminished; prompting many to

become deeply defensive about preserving their status as true freaks, lest they be totally erased (Russo, 1994: 76-77).

Given the history, Marry's appropriation of freak and side-show aesthetics and performances recalls a form of erasure and domestication of the 'Other' that Davis describes in *The End of Normal*. Marry is better able to 'get away with' her deployment of Monstrous Femininity than Sarah Birdgirl, because *her* femininity is less likely to be diminished for it. Within normative systems of embodiment, Marry still falls within Agamben's category of 'bios': life that is worth living by the exclusion of zoe – bare life (Agamben, 1998: 8). As Davis (2013: 4-5) points out, 'diversity' within neo-liberal systems of representation is tenable only because it excludes bodies and identities that are considered zoe – including forms of disability that cannot be hidden or rendered photogenic. When the gyroscope stops and the metal hooks are removed, Marry may put her clothes back on and return to bios. Should she decide not to perform, she will not encounter the stigma and exclusion that her spectacular (but temporary) performance of 'Otherness' may entail.

This is not a privilege that is accessible to Sarah Birdgirl. While it is evident that her self-identification with the term 'freak', and with the complex history that accompanies it is exuberant and purposeful, disability scholars like David Gerber argue that the imbalance of power inherent within a profoundly unequal, ableist cultural paradigm problematises such a choice (Gerber, 1996: 47). While Gerber's work concerns historical freak-shows rather than contemporary ones, his work nonetheless recalls McRuer's (2010: 91) assertion that disabled bodies are positioned as inherently 'Other' within normative systems of embodiment; one either has a 'normal' body, or one does not. Within such a dualistic system, McRuer asserts that able-bodiedness becomes 'compulsory'.¹⁰⁸ and therefore coercive, stating:

'Like compulsory heterosexuality then, compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering-over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there is actually no choice' (McRuer, 2010: 92).

Thus, while Sarah's individual decision to embrace the category of 'freak' is her own, McRuer and Gerber's work argues that within the broader social context of ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness, Sarah's 'freakishness' has already been imposed onto her by a culture in which her performances are situated. Her deployment of Monstrous Femininity must negotiate a dualistic

¹⁰⁸ McRuer's theory of 'compulsory able-bodiedness' is premised on Adrienne Rich's initial theory of 'compulsory heterosexuality', which asserted that within heteronormative, patriarchal societies, heterosexuality was the 'foundational sexual identity for women' (cited in McRuer, 2010: 89).

process of ‘Othering’ that McRuer (2010: 97) asserts is necessary for the preservation of compulsory able-bodiedness. Indeed, Sarah’s stage-name ‘Birdgirl’ is a homage to a freak-show performer from the 1930’s (Bogdan, 1988: 4), a reference to a history that was premised upon the preservation of such bodily boundaries. If there is no ‘normal’, then there can be no ‘freaks’. Therefore, to locate oneself within this history is to acknowledge the necessity of these boundaries and consequently, the dynamics of power and representation that they engender. To follow Gerber (1988:43), this is a genealogy that is premised upon exclusionary systems of bodily privilege and power, one that renders Sarah’s performance as already risky. These readings of disability and power position Sarah’s deployment of Monstrous Femininity as one that is accompanied by ableist binaries that are absent within Marry Bleeds’ performance.

Indeed, Marry’s capacity to ‘opt-into’ performances of Monstrosity without incurring as great a risk of marginalisation as Sarah Birdgirl reflects both ableist *and* racist norms of femininity (Thomson, 2002: 7). As briefly discussed in my third chapter, Crenshaw (1989: 140) asserts that within white-normative culture, womanhood is constructed as a uniformly white experience (as evidenced by the uniform positioning of victims of sexism as white women). Against this exclusionary standard, black women are stripped of their femininity, and thus subject to a greater risk of violence and stigma as a result. This is demonstrated by hooks’ (1981: 31-33) discussion of the specific forms of racist misogyny that black women have historically endured as the result of their ‘Otherness’ to the idealised standard of white womanhood. Thus, a woman with access to privileged, able-bodied/white femininity that hooks and Thomson describe, may choose to engage with a praxis of Monstrous Femininity without the associated histories of racism and ableism that already ‘Othered’ women of colour and women with disabilities must contend with. An example of this risk is illustrated by Bilge (2013: 406) in her critique of the de-politicisation of intersectionality, and the co-option of radical politics by white feminists. She describes the criticism levied towards the SlutWalk movement by Black feminists, quoting the Black Women’s Blueprint, (2011) statement:

‘As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves ‘slut’ without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned into our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations” (Cited in Bilge, 2013: 406).

Consequently, the capacity to play on destructive representations like the Monstrous Feminine is not an equal or fair process. An intersectional analysis of such a deployment reveals that the

already existing racial and bodily inequalities between women queries the possibility of such a venture being universally voluntary. How can the choice to adopt Monstrous Femininity be wholly uncoerced, when one has already been non-consensually assigned to such a category?

As Halberstam (1995: 19) asserts, the Monstrous manifests as a product of culturally and historically specific anxieties of the 'Other', the precise nature of a particular Monster reflecting the structures of racial, bodily and gendered power in which it is situated. Shildrick's (2002: 5) work positions the Monstrous as a perceived threat to Eurocentric narratives of the sovereign self (exemplified by the autonomous, able-bodied white male); an ideal that she asserts remains engrained within normative Western society. Our modern relationship with difference has shifted from absolute exclusion to more subtle forms of erasure: 'diversity', 'toxic optimism' and 'egalitarian sameness'. Despite the neo-liberal promises of bright new futures, the primacy of whiteness, maleness and able-bodiedness remain (Davis, 2013: 6-7; Kolářová, 2014: 259; Shildrick, 2009: 20). Consequently, the racist, misogynistic and ableist genealogies of the Monstrous and Monstrous Feminine also remain and will continue to influence the way in which a given deployment of the Monstrous Feminine will be understood within the context of those histories. Even Thomson (who is otherwise 'pro-freak') is critical of a 'metaphorical' positioning of Monsters, grotesques and cyborgs that does not acknowledge the way in which disabled bodies and subjectivities are already positioned as 'Other'. Speaking back to theorists like Russo and Haraway, Thomson maintains that their work does not consider the lived experiences of women with disabilities, but nonetheless utilises their semiotic associations to argue for transgressive politics (Thomson, 2002: 9).

However, a failure to consistently and wholly conform to the edicts of what has become the dominant mode of feminism should not necessitate the total abandonment or disavowal of the Monstrous Feminine. Indeed, it is within this ambiguous realm of failure and risk that the potential of the Monstrous emerges. To refer back to my argument in the second chapter, an attempt to coerce the Monstrous Feminine into compliance with intersectional feminism represents the same 'flattening out' of difference that Davis (2013: 4) describes in *The End of Normal*, resulting in a simulacrum of Monstrosity that merely appropriates the image of the carnivalesque 'Other' without actually transgressing the boundaries that demarcate and define intersectionality. As already stated, the Monstrous Feminine is valuable precisely *because* it operates outside of the boundaries of contemporary feminist discourse, offering newer and different things. While intersectionality has achieved near-hegemonic status within contemporary feminism (Bliss, 2016: 728), it is not the only praxis of feminism and resistance that is legitimate

or productive, a conviction that Mary Russo iterates in her preface to *The Female Grotesque*, describing her project as an exploration of modes of feminism that resists what she saw as increasing ‘normalisation’¹⁰⁹ of feminism within the 1990’s that has: ‘[...] lead to a cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed and the alien’ (Russo, 1994: vii).

Here, Russo positions the grotesque in terms of its capacity to critique the encroaching tide of sanitising discourse within feminism. In so doing she asks, what can the excessive, carnivalesque body of the female grotesque can *do* for a feminism that, she maintains, is becoming increasingly aligned with prescriptive categories of behaviour and identity? In this way Russo’s intentions for the grotesque are analogous to my own positioning of the Monstrous Feminine as a praxis that is informed by heterogeneity, risk, liminality and jouissance. While Thomson’s (2002:9) critique of Russo’s work highlights the problematic gaps between grotesque as theory and the lived reality of women with non-normative morphologies, Russo’s discussion of risk represents a move towards understanding the role of freakish and grotesque femininity: a leap of faith away from ‘normalised’ modes of feminism.

For Russo, grotesquery – like the Monstrous Feminine - is an inherently risky concept. It is only possible when one has deliberately adopted a minoritarian approach. To be an ‘Other’ there must be an established system of normative selfhood that demarcate the points of transgression that make the Monstrous Feminine and the grotesque so significant (Russo, 1994: 11). Through Russo’s work, risk acknowledges the inequalities implicit within the construction of the ‘Other’, but also hints at the possibilities of ‘making room for chance’ (Russo, 1994: 11). Risk-taking allows for mistakes, for playfulness and an exploration of discursive and bodily boundaries that elicits liminal pleasures and hitherto unknown potentialities for being and doing. Understood in this way, risk becomes less about the potential for harm than an opportunity to understand mistakes and missteps as productive in and of themselves, recalling Russo’s (1994: 65) description of ‘semiotic delinquency’ within carnival theory. In other words, risk implies the space for transgressions to affect and to signify liminal possibilities.

¹⁰⁹ In this instance Russo (1994: vii) distinguishes ‘normalised’ feminism from ‘ordinary feminism’. The latter, she maintains, would be heterogeneous and incomplete, rather than aligned with dominant standards of respectability and normality within that system of discourse.

Here Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (as well as Kolářová's corresponding discussion) helps to inform the deployment of Monstrous Femininity. He positions failure as a Queer tactic,¹¹⁰ an alternative to the 'toxic positivity of contemporary life' (2011: 3) and a way of resisting the patriarchal, heteronormative demand for order, predictability and material success. In this instance, 'success' is positioned not as the result of individual labor or ingenuity, but rather as the capacity to replicate normative ideals of gender, sexuality and class that Kolářová (2014: 259) describes through her experiences of the cruel-optimism of post-socialist neo-liberalism. Thus, for both Halberstam and Kolářová, failure represents a process of critique through negativity and unbecoming; allowing the freedom to explore shadowy, subaltern possibilities that arise from the inability or refusal to achieve gendered and corporeal 'success', and instead seek survival and solidarity within the realm of the unintelligible (Halberstam, 2011: 4-5; Kolářová, 2014: 272). For Halberstam, 'failed' behaviours (anti-sociality, refusal, repetition etc.) all represent a point of departure away from normative, 'disciplined'¹¹¹ systems of knowledge, rationality and 'common-sense' (Halberstam, 2011: 11-12) towards an exploration of the potential of the ridiculous, the forgetful and the childish. In this way, Halberstam's (2011: 16) 'low theory' of failure corresponds to that which is positioned as unrefined, vulgar or lacking in consistent structure or form; a detour¹¹² away from discursive linearity and orthodoxy towards the ambiguous and subaltern systems of what Foucault refers to as 'subjugated knowledge'¹¹³.

In this way the 'art' of failure corresponds to the liminality and excess of the Monstrous Feminine as praxis; both representing forms of knowledge, identity and expression that haunt the margins of mainstream scholarship and rationality. Indeed, *The Queer Art of Failure* not only speaks back to heteronormative patriarchy and global capitalism, but also to accepted 'legible' systems of feminist critique and resistance, particularly within elite academic institutions. His

¹¹⁰ I use the term 'tactic' here deliberately, as opposed to a 'strategy'. De Certeau (1984: 31) described the two terms as being contingent upon differing levels of power; a tactic being means of political action undertaken by those without access to power or institutions as a means of affecting change. It suggests systems of resistance that are defined by a lack of prestige, authority or resources that is particularly fitting for the 'subaltern' systems of Queer failure and 'shadow feminisms' that Halberstam (2011: 4) describes.

¹¹¹ Halberstam uses the term 'disciplined' in such a manner that it functions as a pun. The most obvious meaning being of Foucauldian notions of social control and self-surveillance, but also doubles to imply the discipline of scholarship; the specific de-lineation between differing forms of knowledge and discourse that are similarly subject to surveillance and segregation as 'high' or 'low'.

¹¹² Halberstam borrows the term 'detour' to refer to Stuart Hall's statement that 'theory is not an end unto itself but "a detour en route to something else' (Cited in Halberstam, 2011: 15).

¹¹³ Foucault (1980: 81-82) referred to subjugated knowledges as systems of discourse that 'have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition'. These forms of knowledge are associated oppressed or marginalised groups, whose experiences, identities and meanings are typically excluded from dominant hierarchies of knowledge and power, but nonetheless, through their exclusion, represent a potential source of critique from the margins.

chapter *Shadow Feminisms: Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity* examines deployments of femininity that are located within a telos of refusal rather than triumphant emancipation (Halberstam, 2011: 124). In this chapter ‘shadow feminisms’ represent subaltern praxes of gendered resistance, ‘unbecomings of womanhood’ that are displaced from the prescriptive notions of liberation that Halberstam identifies with Western, academic feminism. Rather than seeking to recreate or re-locate femininity outside of the auspices of patriarchy and phallocentrism, Halberstam (2011: 125) examines the potential of femininity *as* a failure of masculinity: critiquing what it means to ‘fail’ to conform to phallocentrism, rather than seeking to establish contrary, responsive discourses. Again, here the parallels to Kolářová’s work on queer/crip-signing become evident: if one cannot be located within normative symbolic orders as a full and equal subject, then perhaps it is better to simply refuse location altogether?

This exploration of ‘failure’ allows for a feminism that refuses definition within what Halberstam maintains is a typically white, middle-class liberal feminism, a feminism that insists upon productivity, self-knowledge and agentic power (Halberstam, 2011: 126). Subsequently, a similarly dis-located deployment of Monstrous Femininity also responds to anti-Monster theorists like Ussher. Instead of insisting upon a femininity that has been scrubbed clean of any trace of its genealogical abjection, the art of ‘failing’ to be a ‘good’ woman revels in its own Monstrousness and deviant *différance*. It is a femininity that is unrecognisable within either feminist discourse or patriarchal symbolic orders. Monstrous Femininity is a femininity that ‘fails’, and in so doing demonstrates the possibility of identification outside of the either/or options proffered by hegemonic feminism¹¹⁴ and patriarchal normativity.

The potential of such ‘failures’ offer an alternative to Ussher’s desire to eschew the Monstrous Feminine, as well as to attempts to domesticate ‘Otherness’ within neo-liberal confines of ‘diversity’ that Davis (2013: 8) describes. Halberstam dedicates a chapter to what he refers to as ‘shadow feminism’, which explores forms of feminist and queer responses that are premised upon such a system of refusal and negation. The significance of shadow feminisms to the praxis of Monstrous Femininity lies in the deliberate shift away from prescriptive forms of institutionalised feminism that insist upon the ‘matrilineal’¹¹⁵ transfer of knowledge, and the

¹¹⁴ Particularly relevant to this notion of ‘failed’ femininity is the subject of transwomen, a topic that has been regrettably absent from my thesis. Although contemporary intersectional feminism is becoming increasingly more inclusive of transwomen, exclusionary narratives of femininity espoused by prominent feminists (Germaine Greer’s comments about ‘smelly vaginas’ come to mind) remain embedded within dominant feminist discourses (Stryker, 2006: 5-6).

¹¹⁵ A significant element that Halberstam recognises as the ‘failure’ of shadow feminisms is the severance of genealogical ties from older, established systems of feminist discourse. The refusal to carry on

prescriptive essentialising of 'liberation' that Halberstam identifies as being present within dominant forms of progressive Western scholarship (Halberstam, 2011: 124-125).

Halberstam (2011: 129) positions failure as an alternate option for resistance, one that is typically overlooked in the arbitrarily binarised divide between patriarchy and the overwhelming (and occasionally saccharine) promises of mainstream, liberal feminism. A refusal to participate within dualistic notions of selfhood and political engagement thus constitutes a minoritarian response:

'I am proposing that feminists refuse the choices as offered – freedom in liberal terms or death – in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. This could be called an *anti-social feminism* [original emphasis]' (Halberstam, 2011: 129).

These processes of refusal, of masochism and unbecoming described by Halberstam as part of the 'failure' of shadow feminisms demonstrate Shildrick's (2002: 6) observations as to the unsustainability of the subject as a self-defined, autonomous being – giving over instead to the 'unbecoming' of the normative self (Halberstam, 2011: 138-139). While Halberstam and Shildrick's aims are certainly not uniform¹¹⁶, both deploy the 'Other' (the feminine and the failed feminine) as a means of examining the role of alterity as a disruption of (or response to) patriarchal constructions of selfhood and embodiment. Through this understanding of the vulnerable/failed feminist subject as defined by both Halberstam and Shildrick, the processes of passivity, unbecoming and masochism take on a Monstrous aspect – functioning to 'show' the vulnerable/failed subject as the site of patriarchal violence. Halberstam uses the example of a performance by Nao Bustamante, who performs a series of acts wearing high-heels and a blonde wig atop a ladder. Through her pantomiming of normative femininity and precarious positioning, Bustamante's body is rendered vulnerable – becoming a 'meeting point for violent discourses of beauty, profit, coherence, race, success' (Halberstam, 2011: 143). This deliberate, risky act of vulnerability, advertises her 'failure' to cohere to normative, racialized ideals of womanhood, thereby positioning Bustamante as less of a subject, and more of a canvas upon

generational modes of knowledge in favour of newer, 'anti-social' forms of gendered resistance constitutes a 'broken mother-daughter bond' (Halberstam, 2011: 124).

¹¹⁶ Shildrick's work on vulnerability lacks Halberstam's deliberate, tongue-in-cheek pessimism; examining the process of vulnerability and the loss of the normative self as a process of ethical *becoming*, rather than un-becoming (Shildrick, 2002: 92). The 'loss' of selfhood for Shildrick (2002: 8) speaks more to the optimistic, progressive potential inherent within the ambiguity arising from vulnerability and the Monstrous, rather than the deliberate refusal of positively feminist 'selves' that Halberstam (2011: 130-131) suggests in *Shadow Feminisms*.

which the consequences of patriarchy and racism are made evident. Through pain, precariousness and the refusal of self-defined subjectivity and autonomy, failed femininity becomes a Monstrous Femininity in its capacity to show, and to demonstrate the consequences of patriarchy (Halberstam, 2011: 144).

These consequences constitute a part of the history of the Monstrous Feminine. The vulnerable ‘unbecoming’ of Bustamante speaks to an acknowledgement of that genealogy, and of its ongoing significance within the contemporary moment. Therefore, it follows that the praxis of Monstrous Femininity will necessarily provoke responses that are not ‘productive’, but rather will recall the trauma of ‘Othering’. To deploy Monstrous Femininity as a refusal of the dichotomy between patriarchy and hegemonic feminism constitutes a negation of the confines of identity that each entail, as well as a failure to ‘move on’ from a troubled past. As Ussher (2006: 7-8) suggests, femininity is haunted by the genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine. However, the Monstrous itself is similarly haunted, as evidenced by Shildrick’s painstaking care to reposition it within a transformative system of ethics (2002: 8). Feminist accounts of the Monstrous Feminine (including my own) have so far attempted to simultaneously acknowledge and defer the misogyny, racism and ableism that necessarily accompany it: theorising future praxes and potentialities of the Monstrous that reject, rather than reinforce, phallogentric normativity. But why should this be a history that ought to be left behind or forgotten in favour of a more palatable system of praxis? Given that it is a history that is premised upon a complex, and uneven system of power and exclusion – the edifices of which remain today – it is a history that ought to be shown, recognised and acknowledged, even if the consequences of doing so do not sit comfortably with scholars like Ussher. As Cohen (1996: 20) promises, Monsters always return:

‘And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge *human* knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside’.

Following Cohen’s logic, a praxis of Monstrous Femininity is therefore one of a revenant genealogy – every time the Monstrous Feminine appears, it recalls the histories that have created it. Abject mothers, grotesque hags, snarling gorgons, bleeding wounds and toothed cunts: each of these incarnations of female Monstrosity is made significant by the misogynistic exclusion and violence that has brought them into being (Creed, 1993: 7). Regardless of their supposed potential for ethical reconfiguration or appropriation, a deployment of the Monstrous Feminine must acknowledge and negotiate the discursive and bodily boundaries that continually perpetuate

its marginalisation, because it is this acknowledgement that makes these histories evident. This is the portentous significance of the Monstrous Feminine: like Shelley's terrible, tragic creature, it always returns to remind us of the trauma of its birth, "Remember, that I am thy creature!" (2009 [1818]: 118)

Here emerges the point at which my work departs from that of Shildrick. While her work represents an important reworking of the Monstrous as a vulnerable process of becoming that seeks the dissolution of subjective boundaries, it is nonetheless one that imagines that Monster within largely optimistic systems of ethics that demands accountability. The praxis of Monstrous Femininity that this thesis explores is not one that seeks to be ethically 'sound', positive or progressive – because it cannot be made to be so. Nor does it seek to wholly depart from its pejorative origins, precisely because these origins represent unfinished business. Here, once more I turn to Kolářová (2014: 272):

'The rejection of the curative and always already deferred future opens up a space for developing a more complicated relationship with failed pasts. [...] To retrieve lives undone by ideologies of ableism, homophobia, racism and xenophobia, and practices of institutionalisation, forced sterilisation, ethnic segregation and on and on, we need backwards feelings'

An instance of this recollection of the traumatic history of the Monstrous Feminine may be observed in my second case study, Maria Cristerna. While her Medusa-gaze may function as an apotropaic response to phallogocentric objectification, her gorgoneion body also represents a material 'inscription'¹¹⁷ of her traumatic experiences onto her body through extensive and extreme forms of modification. While the capacity of such modification projects to reclaim the female body following patriarchal violence has been extensively explored by theorists like Pitts (2003: 56), her research also acknowledges that this process of bodily inscription may also be understood as a way of identifying the marked woman herself as a victim:

'We cannot read these practices only as expressions of agency exerted against forces of power but must also see them as having varied effects due to the many ways in which they are constituted by such forces' (Pitts, 2003: 83).

¹¹⁷ Margo de Mello's (2000: 10) description of tattooing as a form of subjective becoming may be understood as an interpretation of Butler's (1990: 177) description of culture's inscription onto the body as a form of biography: the experiences of an individual becoming literally written on the body.

Although Cristerna's status as the 'Vampire Woman' has allowed her to advocate for other victims of male-perpetrated violence, her modifications speak to her history of victimisation. Medusa was only granted her petrifying powers *after* being raped by Poseidon; (Leeming, 2013: 12) therefore her gaze is a simultaneous testament to her experience and her subsequent response to it. Cristerna's Monstrous Femininity is one that recalls a history of misogynistic violence: hers, and that of the Gorgon whose gaze her modifications replicate. In this way Cristerna's body modifications speak not only of reclamation, but of accusation: 'Look what you did to me!'

As this thesis has consistently asserted, Monstrous Femininity may be deployed as a means of resistance to patriarchy, but that deployment is premised upon narratives of 'Otherness' that originate within oppression. As both Shildrick (2002: 3) and Halberstam (2011: 98) assert, the redeployment of the Monstrous through 'anomalous' bodies and subjectivities is possible, but these processes are nonetheless marked by their painful histories, as Halberstam (2011: 98) states:

'While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia'.

Halberstam's argument for the importance of dark histories, refusal and failure speaks to Shotwell's (2016: 4) assertion that 'the slate will never be clean'. While her work is positioned as a pragmatic strategy for the future, it also serves as a reminder that the histories of marginalised communities cannot be erased – but must subsequently be learned from: 'To be against purity is to start from an understanding of our implication in this complicated world, to recognise the quite vast injustices informing our everyday lives, and from that understanding to act on *our wish that it were not so* [original emphasis]' (Shotwell, 2016: 205). Therefore, to dwell on traumatic pasts, to adopt the aesthetics of rage and alterity, and to revel in the 'failure' of negativity is to ensure that these Monstrous genealogies are acknowledged, and to affirm the Monstrous and Monstrous Feminine as sites of disruption that signify where they have come from (Halberstam, 2011: 162; Cohen, 1996: 6). Ever signifying, the Monstrous Feminine not only 'shows' the source of its abjection, but angrily airs its dirty laundry for everyone to see.

The acknowledgement of dark histories is explored in Halberstam's third chapter (Also titled '*The Queer Art of Failure*'). Here, he explores darker, pessimistic portrayals of homosexual relationships and Queer identities; alluding to the (often inevitable) loneliness and exclusion that

have historically accompanied them. Halberstam uses case studies of vintage black and white photographs of lesbian couples as case studies; the melancholy that accompanies the ‘failure’ to replicate ideal gender stereotypes being communicated through shadowy darkness and the impression of masquerade (Halberstam, 2011: 98). Halberstam quotes Heather Love’s *Feeling Backwards*’ in describing how these images of Queer failure function to make the disparity between heteronormative ‘success’ all the more evident:

‘Backwards feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacies of queer narratives of progress’ (Love, 2009: 27).

Here Love strikes upon an important element of Queer failure that resonates with the Monstrous: the capacity for problematic, pessimistic and ‘backwards’ feelings and representations to not only speak back to a troubled history of oppression, but also to serve as a critique of the status-quo. Indeed, to refer to my argument back in my second chapter, the normalisation of Queer identities and the allure of neo-liberal ‘diversity’ that Lennard Davis (2009: 2-3) describes become impossible within Halberstam’s conceptualisation of failure and darkness as strategies for Queer resistance, strategies that are analogous to the un-representability of the Monstrous within normative patriarchy.

Here I return to Warner’s writing in *The Trouble with Normal*. His call for resistance to normalising forces within Queer scholarship and communities is reflected in Halberstam’s emphasis on the value of a subaltern praxes and ‘aesthetics of darkness’ (2011: 96-97) – signifiers of the Queer/’Othered’ subject who exemplifies resistance to capitalist heteronormativity through failing to thrive within in it. Within Halberstam’s redeployment of failure, and Warner’s rejection of ‘normality’; the clean-cut, respectable, white, cisnormative, monogamously married ‘suburban gays’ that have been ubiquitous within mainstream representations are nowhere to be found. Instead, both Halberstam and Warner emphasise Queer subjectivities, praxes and aesthetics that are outside the realm of heteronormative respectability. Furthermore, Warner (1999:135) advocates for the visibility of promiscuity, non-monogamy, anonymous sexual encounters, non-normative and non-binary identities, as well as a refusal of middle-class suburban aspiration. These expressions of non-normative gender, sexuality, pleasure and intimacy not only function as a means of ‘failing’ to conform to heteronormativity, but they also recall the evocations of libidinal ‘hidden’ pleasures that the Monstrous represents within normative systems of identity and experience.

The notion of pleasure as Monstrous is related to fear and abjection. As Cohen (1996: 16-17) asserts, the fear of the Monstrous is actually a form of desire. Just as the Monster signifies the boundaries of forbidden practices (Cohen, 1996: 13), it also provokes a simultaneous desire for that which is prohibited. This desire is observed by Kristeva (1982: 1) in her observations of the allure of the abject:

‘It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud holds onto it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned’.

Consequently, the pleasure of the Monstrous is tinged with revulsion; a meeting of oppositional feelings of attraction and disgust that provokes a curious, experience of liminality that drives us towards the boundary of the familiar. Cohen (1996: 17) asserts that this desire becomes horrifying when the boundaries that separate ‘Self’ from ‘Other’ are transgressed, a transgression that Marry Bleeds’ spectacular performance gleefully enacts. Marry is a sight that is at once Monstrous and pleasurable: an attractive, laughing young woman, naked and splayed for an audience of spectators to observe. Yet her body also provokes repulsion, the abjection of her bleeding body unnaturally suspended by grotesque hooks through her skin.

Marry’s spectacular Monstrous Femininity provokes libidinal responses that cannot be located within the same normative systems of sexuality and desire, that Warner (1999: 179-180) rallies against, including those from feminist theorists concerned about the inherent imbalance of gendered power that such a display would provoke from a male audience.¹¹⁸ Marry’s performance affects the simultaneous experience of sexual desire and abject revulsion, prompting the question ‘..is it OK to like this?’. Indeed, the ethics of experiencing pleasure from Marry’s performance are complex and imbued with the risk that is accompanied by the male gaze. As the footage shows, a large proportion of Marry’s audience are men, and the spinning gyroscope is set in motion by a team of men, who remain close and watchful throughout the performance (Marry Bleeds, 2014). Within Mulvey’s (1975: 840) analysis, Marry’s performance may appear to be a near-textbook example of the sadistic objectification of the male gaze: Marry is positioned (quite literally, with metal hooks!) as an object of viewing pleasure, a pleasure that is

¹¹⁸ Pitts (2003: 54) describes how radical feminists of the 1980’s responded to performances like Marry’s; for theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, the modification of women’s bodies for pleasure (including explicit feminist performance art and women’s praxes of BDSM) constituted a form of patriarchal violence – an instance of women’s internalisation of misogyny.

further problematised by her simulacrum of pain and the loss of control implied by her bodily confinement within the gyroscope. This narrative of sadistic pleasure and fantasies of control is present within feminist debates and critiques concerning pornography and (to a lesser extent) BDSM practices, representing a conflict between the need to reject coercion of female bodies, and the agency to explore ‘perverse’ bodily pleasures that have hitherto been marginalised by patriarchal heteronormativity (Pitts, 2003: 91). Here, Pitts’ use of the term ‘perverse’ recalls MacCormack’s discussion of the transformative potential of perversion, particularly its capacity to resist prescriptive categorisations of bodily experiences and pleasure within dominant social hierarchies:

‘Choosing to use the body differently not only welcomes the transformations of pleasure and perversion, but also acknowledges the instability of the integrity of the subject (MacCormack, 2004: 28).

Thus, Marry’s spectacular Monstrosity and the pleasures that it provokes cannot be said to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, neither ‘feminist’ nor ‘patriarchal’. The transgressive nature of her act exposes these categories to be arbitrary. As stated in my third chapter, Marry’s performance constitutes more than just an act of gruesome vulgarity, but recalls a perverse, *jouissance*: a gleeful evocation of pleasure and abjection that is impossible to locate within dominant narratives of feminism or heteronormativity. Marry’s deployment of the Monstrous Feminine as spectacle is significant because it affects perverse pleasures and responses that challenge notions of static subjectivity, and alluding to the possibility of newer, stranger experiences and sensations.

This is the value of the Monstrous Feminine as praxis. The capacity to provoke strange desires, abject rage and bodily *jouissance*; all affective deployments of ‘Otherness’ that facilitate processes of subjective terror and vulnerability. The Monstrous Feminine shows where the boundaries between Self and ‘Other’ are weakest and invites us to explore the liminal space between them. The purpose of the Monstrous Feminine isn’t to get things ‘right’, it is to make evident that which is taken for granted as ‘normal’, to affect new sensations, pleasures and experiences that speak to processes of liminal transformation, rather than binary categorization. It is within this observation of the Monster’s purpose that a ‘truce’ may be called between the Monstrous Feminine and intersectionality. Not because the two have been made commensurate, but rather because this theorisation of failure as a Queer/feminist tactic (rather than a system of wholly dismantling patriarchal heteronormativity) helps to position the Monstrous Feminine away from comparisons to intersectional feminism. Indeed, MacCormack (2004: 30) positions

the deployment of the 'Other' as a form of resistance that is not dependent upon oppositional intent, stating:

'Resistance does not need to oppose the dominant with one alternative. Perversion does not define itself, it simply resists the discursive power of the dominant to denigrate it'.

Accordingly, the Monstrous Feminine does not represent a binary 'Other' to intersectionality, but rather one of many potential marginal alternatives. Thus, rather than engaging in dualistic narratives that privilege one form of praxis over the another, the Monstrous Feminine may be understood as a feminism that, like Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, affects newer systems of experience, pleasure and disruption that are not possible within intersectionality. Consequently, although the praxes of intersectional feminism and the Monstrous cannot be made to conform to one another, when viewed as distinct and non-interchangeable praxes they imply a broader spectrum of forms resistance and critique because they produce different responses. It is not necessary to argue for the Monstrous Feminine as a preferable system of gendered and bodily resistance to intersectionality, because the stakes for both systems, and the work that they do is completely different. Intersectionality is presently positioned as the dominant system of discourse and praxis within feminist scholarship and activism; its popularity is premised upon its capacity to extend categories of womanhood to include a broader spectrum of identity and experience. The Monstrous Feminine, on the other hand is marginal, risky and inconsistent. To borrow Halberstam's (2011:124) terminology, if intersectionality is the illuminating mode of feminist inquiry, then the Monstrous Feminine is its shadow.

The three women that I have used as case studies in this thesis embody three significant aspects of the Monstrous Feminine. Sarah Birdgirl and her deliberate recollection of the ethically ambiguous history of the freak-show raises the notion of risk and representation. As a disability rights advocate and a self-identified 'natural born freak', Sarah's performances emphasise her 'extraordinary body' (Thomson, 1996: 3), and in so doing directly challenge her able-bodied audiences to reconsider their conceptions of what a 'normal' body ought to look like. Unlike the other two case studies, Sarah's 'freakishness' is not voluntary. Therefore, her performances constitute a greater 'leap of faith', the riskiness inherent in such a leap implying uncertainty and testing the uneasy divide between agency and exploitation. Sarah Birdgirl represents the intertwined histories of the freak and the Monstrous Feminine, and the capacity of both to disturb the 'taken for grantedness' of normative embodiment.

Maria Cristerna, the Mexican 'Vampire Woman' represents the coming-together of Monstrous, putative female rage and the maternal, a combination hitherto only accounted for within feminist

theory as exemplifying phallogentric misogyny (Creed, 1993: 12-13; Ussher, 2006: 7). Maria Cristerna's gorgoneion transformation disrupts and returns the objectifying male gaze; simultaneously recalling the putative glare of the Gorgon, as well as the apotropaic difference of a Monstrous motherhood that resists definition within phallogentrism and feminist notions of 'purity'. Cristerna's materially inscribed 'Otherness' is one that signifies a patriarchal genealogy of the Monstrous Feminine, a genealogy that progressive, 'positive' accounts of feminist discourse (like that of Ussher) would seek to separate from future feminist praxes. Cristerna represents a Monstrous Feminine that is akin to Halberstam's (2011: 98-99) *Queer Art of Failure* in its refusal to redeem or discard its genealogy; the abject rage of Medusa demanding acknowledgement. Cristerna's Monstrous Femininity speaks of the simultaneous trauma and transformation that is made evident by what Braunberger (2000: 3) refers to as 'Monster Beauty'.

Marry Bleeds represents jouissance; the experience of liminal, libidinal pleasure that manifests within a carnivalesque confusion of social hierarchies. Her performance exemplifies Mary Russo's positioning of the spectacle as a significant, 'speaking' site of discursive and bodily heterogeneity. Vulgar, public and gleeful, Marry's Monstrosity arises from her liminality – the muddled lines of feminine abjection and jouissance evoke prohibited pleasures and sympathetic communication. Her act blurs the boundaries between pain and pleasure, confusing Mulvey's notion of the sadistic gaze by presenting the simulacrum of tortured abjection as a communicative rather than objectifying experience for those that see her.

Each of these women represent a performance of Monstrous Femininity that has so far been perpetually on the periphery of normative discourse. They are certainly not the first women to evoke such grotesque, spectacular or abject signifiers: their performances are preceded by decades of feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, Orlan and Mary Kelly – all of whom have deployed an element of abject, liminal or spectacular 'Otherness' as a means of critique and expression. What makes these women – and my project – distinct is the diversity of their praxis. Schneemann, Sprinkle, Orlan and Kelly's praxes of art and performance were informed by the very things that Creed (1993) identifies as the distinguishing feature of the Monstrous Feminine; female reproduction and sexuality. Although their methodologies differ greatly, each of their praxes involves an interrogation of phallogentric 'Othering' of female fecundity, sexuality and embodiment: either through the manipulation of surface-level aesthetic signifiers of female beauty (Clarke, 1999), the blurry line between pornography and the erotic (Schneider, 1997: 53), the 'abjection' of maternal attachment (McCloskey, 2012: 6), and a critique of the boundaries between woman-as-artist and woman as viewed object (Schneider, 1997: 36). While I do not seek to establish any of my case studies as unique instances of the use of

Monstrous Femininity, the difference between my case studies and the artists just mentioned is that these newer deployments are not solely grounded within discourses of feminism and femininity that relate to female sexuality and reproduction. Here, once again, the distinction between my project of Monstrous Femininity and Creed's becomes evident. For Creed, the Monstrous Feminine is a specific category of interpretation that investigates and critiques phallogentric 'Othering' of female sexuality. It is, to paraphrase Halberstam (1995: 24), an instance of the 'hegemonic installation of psychoanalytic interpretations of human subjectivity which understand subjectivity as sexual subjectivity and identity as sexual identity, and Monstrosity as sexual pathology'. While Creed's work establishes crucial links between the construction of the Monstrous Feminine and the proliferation of male anxieties, I agree with Halberstam that the Monstrous *and* the Monstrous Feminine ought not be confined within these disciplinary parameters. The key difference between my case studies and the performance artists whose preceding genealogies I have explored is that in a contemporary setting, the categorical boundaries of Monstrous Femininity have necessarily expanded to include other intersecting aspects of identity. Thus, a temporal distinction arises between myself and Creed - and between my case studies and the feminist artists of the second wave. Our projects are not the same, how could they be? The Monstrous Feminine will not stay put. The question that arises now is where (and how) it will emerge again?

The praxis of Monstrous Femininity represents an opportunity to deploy 'Otherness' in order to 'show' patriarchal culture to itself; to affect liminal, confused pleasures and provoke vulnerable responses through the transgression of gendered and bodily boundaries. The deployment of the Monstrous Feminine is therefore a process of acts, performances, adornments, stunts and spectacles that disrupt the safety of established boundaries of feminine subjectivity and embodiment prescribed by hegemonic systems of discourse and identity, and in so doing – expose them as arbitrary. Prior scholarship has simultaneously positioned the Monstrous Feminine as a product of, as well as a means of resistance to phallogentric norms; representing the abject excess that is necessarily excluded from normative, male-defined ideals of womanhood (Creed, 1993; Ussher, 2006; Braunberger, 2000). My project broadens the focus of this analysis by positioning the Monstrous Feminine as also functioning outside of an increasingly hegemonic institution of feminism that maintains its own borders of prohibition. Contemporary intersectional feminism has transformed significantly in the three decades that have passed since Crenshaw first proposed it. Like the Monstrous Feminine, it has adapted to the contemporary moment, but has also expanded to dominate grassroots and academic feminism. Consequently, it

has imposed strict boundaries governing the categorisation of power and identity (Puar, 2005: 128). 'My feminism will be intersectional, or it will be bullshit!' proclaims Dzodan's (2011) oft repeated mantra; simultaneously a rallying cry but also an implied threat of exclusion if these boundaries are breached, language becomes problematic, or if practices are deemed to be 'unsafe'.

It is this notion of 'safety' that the praxis of Monstrous Femininity speaks back to; the enclosure of bodies and identities within systems of discourse and norms to ensure protection from the terror of the unsafe outside. By transgressing these boundaries of enclosure, the praxis of Monstrous Femininity emerges into the present moment as a form of feminism that is deliberately unsafe: not inasmuch as it always or deliberately opts to perpetuate oppressive norms or offend sensibilities, but rather that is a deployment of subjective and bodily 'Otherness' that seeks to explore possibilities beyond prescriptive boundaries of disciplinary safety. Monstrous Femininity is therefore an inherently risky praxis; one that evokes danger, darkness and the trauma of a violent genealogy, but also represents the promise of new configurations and locations of identity and embodiment not yet dreamed of, and pleasures and sensations not yet understood or comprehended - the risk of the Monstrous Feminine is premised upon danger and possibility in equal measure (Motha, 2010: 300).

When I began this thesis in February of 2015, I was anxious to prove that the Monstrous Feminine could be rescued from her pejorative past. Delighted by Cixous' laughing Medusa, I clutched at this instance of feminine alterity that spoke to me of resilience and definition outside of patriarchal binaries, and eagerly sought to replicate it within contemporary discourse and praxes. My background as an intersectional feminist compelled me to imagine how it could be made accountable and accessible, how it could transcend its pejorative past and emerge triumphant and heterogeneous to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting patriarchy. What I wanted was for the Monstrous Feminine to represent my own system of ethics precisely. I wanted it to be 'safe'. Realising that this was not possible felt like a break-up, I had to entirely rethink the terms of my research, as well as my own identification with 'Otherness'. However, it was nonetheless transformative – by wriggling free of the scholarly confines that I had imposed upon it, the Monstrous Feminine showed me to myself.

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