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Disgust of the Body:
Feminist Theories through Indigenous Examples

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The visual representation of the female body in mainstream media and culture typically showcases idealized and beautified representations. While popular portrayals of women in various forms of media are widely discussed, analyzing the depiction of grotesque women can prove more challenging. Essentially, anything that is distorted or abnormal can be classified as grotesque. How did contemporary popular understandings of the normal and the grotesque come to be? How do prevailing notions of the grotesque influence depictions of women? How do depictions of indigenous women in the Americas specifically challenge these prevailing notions of grotesqueness? This paper explores academic research examining the Western and Christian origins of the grotesque, and how this concept continues to influence modern and contemporary visual culture. Gender dimensions and ableist dominant cultures show also play a role the representation of women's bodies. Most importantly, it examines historical and modern artwork and documentation from select indigenous groups in Latin America, which portrays the female body in a grotesque manner, as perceived through a Western lens, but which is shown with dignity from a Native American perspective. Photographs from Ralph Gibson and Imogen Cunningham, and *Shield Jaguar and Lady Xoc, Pendant in the form of a bat-faced man, Stele D portraying Ruler 13* and *Our lady of the Iguanas* by Graciela Iturbide are integral to my perspectives.

One of the most prevalent themes of the grotesque is body horror. The visual image of a mutilated or deformed human body resonates as a personal offense because the state and condition of the human body are not guaranteed to have ideal physics or functions. Religious texts (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian) document that disfigurement is commonly agreed to be a tragic outcome for any human, and some of the cruelest punishments a human can be put through. Some of the most examined and widespread texts studied are biblical writings, which hold gruesome punishments for those who live immorally. The book of *The Apocalypse of Peter* discloses how

bodies are tortured in hell according to each sin committed - blaspheming the way of righteousness, hanged from tongue and fire, murderers and their accessories tormented by reptiles and insects, infanticide, flesh-eating animals come forth from the mothers' rotten milk and torment the parents, the list goes on (Czachesz).¹ For each sin or crime committed, the body will face physical torment not with any fixed pattern or rule but punished nevertheless. The horrors of hell are then connected to life and the living body; in Czachesz's words, hell is "a grotesque and sensual synthesis of birth and death." This idea that life and death are connected can be related to beliefs of many Native American beliefs (as well as some modern Latin American culture) but I will explain this further on in my essay. While the fear of body punishment or the administration of it as punishment is not unique to Western and Christian beliefs, the idea that the body must and will face punishments for immoral behavior is heavily repeated. As a result, the performance of immorality allows for the identification of the grotesque body. One of the most important aspects of identifying the grotesque is establishing the "self" and "other," "right" and "wrong," and so on.² Even if a body does not show physical deformities, the sinful body is already condemned to bodily mutilation, thus losing integrity and worth. Even if this mutilation is experienced in an afterlife; it is enough to create a separation between types of bodies and results in the alienation of bodies. When mentioning other authors and written novels of grotesque novels, Edwards writes, "This perspective suggests that, like a number of other terms that can operate through binary logic (referencing immoral or distasteful traits such as lustful and being prone to violence), grotesquerie revolves around the categories of inclusion (the norm) and exclusion (the abnormal) in order to preserve marked distinctions between 'us' and 'them,' 'self and other'."³ While there is no body horror referenced,

¹ Czachesz, István. *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse.* (2012).

² Edwards, Justin, and Rune Graulund. *Grotesque.* Routledge, 2013.

³ Edwards, Justin, and Rune Graulund. *Grotesque.* Routledge, 2013

the sin or immorality and their correlation to bodily punishment are there. The self is not the sinner, so the body is not pure (or prone to disfigurement). The alienation and fear of sin is ultimately a fear of a mutilated body. While there are many examinations of sin and punishment on the body in the afterlife, there is one example of punishment that is dealt with in life, and that is childbirth.

“An eye for an eye” is one of the most common expressions that has existed in biblical texts in one way or another and that is used nowadays. There are other examples that I will not go into, but one of the most intriguing punishments is bestowed on women only. There are many versions of the story of Adam and Eve, all of which mention punishment for disobedience. As punishment for eating from the forbidden tree, they were banished from the Garden of Eden, and Adam’s body was to wither away as he worked hard labor for life. Eve was punished to suffer painful childbirth.⁴ These punishments were to be passed on to every human that came after them. The details of Eve’s punishments are debated; some scholars say that the pain was only increased, and others suggest that preparations and functions of childbirth were added to women, such as monthly menstruation. The treatment and view of the postpartum body is complex and a topic worthy of its own research, but I will not go into that. So, what does the correlation between sin and punishment on the human body say about the woman’s body? Referring to Edwards, there needs to be a distinction between “us” and “them,” and in this case, there is a separation between man and woman. Both Eve and Adam were punished; Adam’s body would now wither because of labor, and Eve would suffer painful childbirth. However, both bodies are affected by labor. Adam or the male body only suffers one punishment while Eve, the woman's body, is affected both by labor and childbirth. Childbirth and menstruation in theory justify their association with the

⁴ Kvam, Kristen E., Linda S. Scheearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999.

unclean. Barbara Creed writes about the grotesque representation of grotesque women in modern horror films. She writes about what the pure woman (body) should be and how the grotesque is immoral, unclean, unable to function, and twisted. Barbara Creed writes about the loss of "normal" body appearance and function in popular media using Kristeva's idea of the "debt to nature," writing, "most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity. The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature."⁵ Women are responsible for giving birth to a child and also responsible for human life. However, women are not allowed to fail at the task of raising a child or to be able to suffer deformities during childbirth or other aspects of their maternity.

Representations of women's bodies are often missing visual references to physical functions of the body. The normalization of their bodily functions is alienated in visual representation. It is common for women and their bodies to be compared to inanimate objects of nature, such as plants and landscapes, at least in my experience. Photographers like Ralph Gibson and Imogen Cunningham photograph naked bodies as elements of nature. Gibson's photographs, in particular, show women as a nature photographer would photograph a landscape, making a series titled *Day at Sea* (1974) [image 1]. The body is shown clean, cropped, and with high-contrast lights and shadows, abstracting and manipulating the body into something minimalist and beautifully presented. Like this and many other popular and common examples, the female body is shown as "beatified" with no reference to the nature of her body. The nature the body is related to is inanimate nature, which is something that rarely changes or blemishes. It is independent and free from obligation and human hardships, peaceful and without flaws. Cunningham's *Nude*

⁵ Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Psychology Press, 1993.

[image 2] photograph and many others are often praised as an innovation or alongside content and nature photographs, such as Ansel Adams. In contrast, the human body is tainted with both physical and behavioral grotesque elements that go hand in hand. The idea that the human body should not relate or be presented with animal qualities comes from a desire for control and self-perception of superiority. As a result, there is less acceptance of the human body and more drastically towards the women's body, which can be rejected and alienated in social spaces. This is more prominent when looking at ableist-dominant societies.

However, there are representations of women that do not show women's bodies in these ideal visuals in the west, though more frequently negative. When a woman's bodily functions are shown if it is not beautified it is seen as undignified. Jenifer McWeeny writes the realities of how women are perceived in society and that there is no dignity given to animals which in turn shows how the identity in flesh relates the person to a despised non-human animal. Her writing highlights the hardships of women of color and specifically brings up experiences of black slave women, however, she discusses examples in literature and feminist movements of women's bodies being related to animals. McWeeny brings her perceives of veganism and how the vegan lifestyle allows for non-human animals to not be seen as lesser than others. She relates the female human body to the non-human animal body. In short, she does not ignore the functions of the flesh and she does so without taking away the dignity of the woman. What makes the bodies of "colonized women" different from the white woman is that are interchangeable with the bodies of non-human animals. The bodies of women and especially those of women of color are shown to be exchangeable with the bodies of animals, and notably with domesticated animals. The use of topographical features for identification brings the human female body closer to those of nonhuman animals. The term "topography" in anatomy, refers to the physical arrangement or representation of the different parts

or characteristics on the surface or inside of an organ or organism. These features can be anything from the ability to lactate, the ability to birth, or the ability to teach newborns. “Topographical thinking [...] provides us with a way to identify groups of beings whose flesh is especially vulnerable in the context of existing social and material structures.”⁶ In other words, there is an erasure of subjectivity and hyper-focus on the flesh. The history of medicine in the USA and the use of black people for experiments or human test subjects is dark and is often missing in history books and class curriculums. Many groups of people of color, but especially women of color have been given vaccines and surgeries deceptively disguised as medical treatment or were done in secret and later hidden from the public. Today most medical experiments that cause public criticism and protests are related to animal testing. However, activism for change in (specifically women’s) medical treatment requires the activist to acknowledge the interchangeable use of people of color and animals for the advancement of medicine. But because it has been covered up and because black and other racial groups’ history is often excluded, most concerns are about the lack of research on women’s bodies in medical research and the use of cruel animal testing.

This is where the rise of ecofeminism can either help or hurt women’s activism. Ecofeminism combines both ecological and feminist concerns. It is in line with the motto “women belong in nature, not in patriarchy”, with patriarchy interchanged or used synonymously by some with religion. However, if the history of women of color continues to be left out, new movements and new members will have a vision that is not inclusive and will continue to benefit white women. The demand for animal rights and the need for bodily abjection can work with and against each other. Mcweeny is just one of many activists and artists who promote body abjectivity. She writes, “Despite this need for destabilizing the human/animal distinction, we must also recognize that in

⁶ McWeeny, Jennifer. “*Topographies of Flesh: Women, Nonhuman Animals, and the Embodiment of Connection and Difference.*” *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (2014): 269–86.

certain present-day contexts, the feminist who is more concerned with animal liberation than with women of color could also be affirming the structural asymmetry that centers white women's perspectives and makes women of color irrelevant and invisible."⁷ A common belief within animal activism is that animals are innocent thus they don't deserve to experience wrongdoing. And while I will not debate against nor for this, these beliefs do spread to ideals of women. To obtain purity in the flesh ideal conditions and luck are needed. Rituals and privileges are needed for the "ideal" female body. Looking at the postpartum body is often where women face the most stress to keep up with looks. The women who are praised are those who could afford assistance and take time off from work, without causing an inconvenience to those around them.

Mcweeny acknowledges that women of color may be disregarded for the sake of animal liberation. However, this can only be an issue if the animal and human are given the same acceptance. When looking at white women, there is no shame in maternity, and there is a pity when the body is faced with physical trauma, but unlike women of color, white women have not been heavily related to the animal body. Because the animal is not given pity for the work it does because its only purpose or use for humans is labor. Mcweeny analyzes the book "*Beloved*" (2004) where a black woman, Sethe, is attacked by the plantation owner's sons, and they forcefully drink the milk from her breasts. When she confronts the mother of the boys, she is only punished further. She is discredited just as any cattle would be, only being used for the needs of others.⁸ Overall, Mcweeny challenges the notions of the normal body through the connections between humans and non-human animals. I believe an ideal goal for ecofeminism is to promote objectivity for all

⁷ Mcweeny, Jennifer. "*Topographies of Flesh: Women, Nonhuman Animals, and the Embodiment of Connection and Difference.*"

⁸ Mcweeny, Jennifer. "*Topographies of Flesh: Women, Nonhuman Animals, and the Embodiment of Connection and Difference.*"

animals and to advocate for less social and moral pressure on human bodies, which is something that one has very little control over.

Nevertheless, there have been many cultures that do see humans and nonhumans as equal or even more powerful or spiritual beings. The shame of bodily function is also removed because there is no ideal beauty or pureness in their body. The human body and its functions are only natural. The body functions just as the nonhuman words function and human parts and liquids are often exchanged with earth matter such as rain. The artworks and literature I will be discussing are all from indigenous tribes of North and South America. What I discuss and analyze in this essay cannot apply to every tribe. Some of the content I will mention has lost much documentation and oral history as a result of colonization. My research will only serve as an observation that some of the feminist themes that come up in Western Eurocentric societies have already been present in indigenous beliefs and practices.

Bodily fluids are almost always seen as disturbing and unclean, but Mesoamerican literature documents the interchangeability of water and blood, and blood is called the "most precious water." When thinking of a use for blood in the U.S. the blood along with many other parts of an animal are often discarded. Instead, for example, many unused parts of an animal can be put back in the soil as fertilizer, and many cultures use blood in their cooking as well. Some of the most sensationalized events of indigenous groups are blood sacrifices. While human sacrifices existed in ancient tribes, modern tribes only participate in animal sacrifices or will only give a small amount of human blood to not harm the person. They were often made to gods in return for food or water, and blood would be seen in war rituals.⁹ Documented in *Shield Jaguar and Lady*

⁹ Andrist, Debra D. *The Body, Subject & Subjected: The Representation of the Body Itself, Illness, Injury, Treatment & Death in Spain and Indigenous and Hispanic American Art & Literature*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2016.

Xoc [image 3], the Mayan queen is seen threading a rope through her tongue, which would cover it in her blood as it completed its way through, symbolizing that victory would be seen at the end of the war. In return, Lady Xoc would be respected as she had used her precious blood to bless them in war. When looking at bleeding through menstruation instead of looking at menstruation as a curse like in Jewish and various Christian religions¹⁰ but when looking at a few indigenous cultures, menstruation has neutral or positive contributions to life. The Hoopa Valley Tribe located in the valleys around the area of Northern California celebrate a girl's first menstruation with a celebration called Ch'ılwa:l meaning "they beat time with sticks" where they play various instruments but most importantly drums for the girl and for every other cycle the women can spend days in the "menstruation hut" or Min'ch which translate to "a small, familiar house." where they would take time to rest and spend time with other women and where women would go to give birth or for a miscarriage.¹¹ Menstruation blood is seen as a blessing and a gift to the earth. If we look back at blood sacrifices, menstruation is the only time human blood can be given without inflicting wounds or sacrificing a life. Risling even writes that the "autonomy of women [is] part of the very foundation of culture and society."¹²

Additionally, the respect for and need for human life and the body is just as necessary as the ones of non-human animals. Animal and human morphs as well as being adorned with animals

¹⁰ Gottlieb, Alma. "Menstrual taboos: Moving beyond the curse." *The Palgrave handbook of critical menstruation studies* (2020): 143-162.

¹¹ Risling Baldy, Cutcha. "*mini-k'iw'h'e: n (For That Purpose—I Consider Things) (Re) writing and (Re) righting Indigenous Menstrual Practices to Intervene on Contemporary Menstrual Discourse and the Politics of Taboo.*" *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 21-29.

¹² Risling Baldy, Cutcha. "*mini-k'iw'h'e: n (For That Purpose—I Consider Things) (Re) writing and (Re) righting Indigenous Menstrual Practices to Intervene on Contemporary Menstrual Discourse and the Politics of Taboo.*" *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 21-29.

can be found in various depictions. There's the *Pendant in the form of a bat-faced man* [image 4] made of gold that was obtained in Colombia, but its origin tribe is unknown, and *Stele D portraying Ruler 13* [image 5], located in Honduras Copan from the Mayan tribe. While much information and documentation has been lost on these items, one can grasp the importance of animals as they show that there is sacredness and power to the figure that is shown. Animals such as the jaguar, eagle, and snake had important roles in religious and cultural beliefs in Mexico's Aztec civilization. The eagle was connected with the sun and the skies, while the jaguar was associated with strength and courage. The snake was held in high regard as a sign of wisdom and understanding. Domesticated animals such as llamas, alpacas, and vicuña were domesticated in South American Andean societies for their wool, meat, and transportation. These animals were likewise revered and were used in religious rites and rituals. The condor, a big bird of prey, was thought to be a messenger between the human and spirit worlds. Animals such as the jaguar and the serpent were identified with gods and goddesses in Central America's Mayan society. As shown in *Stele D portraying Ruler 13*, where the ruler is shown with snakes on his crown. The snake is related to rebirth and healing.

The photograph *Our Lady of the Iguanas* [image 6] is a well-known Gelatin silver print made in 1979 by Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide. The image features Zobeida, a woman known as the "Iguana Lady" in Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico. Zobeida is photographed at a low angle, which makes the viewer look up at her with a bunch of iguanas perched on her head and shoulders, with a proud and royal smile on her face. *Our Lady of the Iguanas* has become an iconic picture of Mexican photography and is widely regarded as one of Iturbide's most famous works. Zobeida is from the Zapotec indigenous village in Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico. The Zapotecs are one of Mexico's biggest indigenous communities, having a rich cultural heritage dating back to pre-

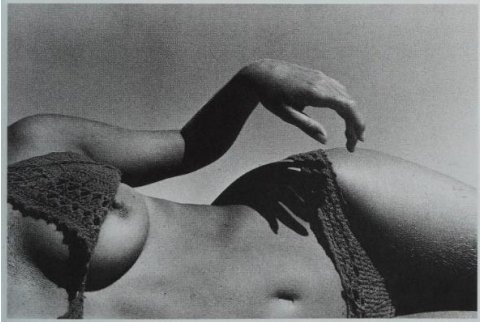
Columbian times. They speak their own language, Zapotec, and have kept many of their old rituals and practices alive to this day. Juchitán is noted for its strong matriarchal heritage, and women such as Zobeida are major figures in Zapotec culture. Iguanas are prevalent in the Juchitán area of Oaxaca, where the Zapotec people live. Iguanas are reptiles that may be found across Mexico and are a major food source in many areas. In the case of *Our Lady of the Iguanas*, it's probable that Zobeida utilized the iguanas to earn a livelihood or as part of a cultural tradition. It's also likely that the iguanas were just a natural part of the area in which Zobeida lived and worked. They are a key component of the Zapotec people's natural environment, and they may have had a role in the community's cultural customs over time. Most importantly, the iguanas play a role in the religious beliefs of the Zapotec people. They are representative and associated with the male genitalia. As well as the story of Adam and Eve, whereupon disobeying the command of God, they had the knowledge and desire for sex.¹³ In contrast to popular Western religion, sex was confined to strict rules and was kept secretive. But because the Zapotec people live by matriarchy, the presence of iguanas represents the denial of knowledge, especially for women. They go against machismo culture; in Mexican culture, women are often expected to be the self-sacrificing mother, who are praised if they are “drowned in tears.” In these images, animals are used both symbolically and religiously to show their own understanding of the world and their ideas of self-governing.

Regardless of sex, animals are important for both spirituality and governing philosophies. The idea that animals can function within the relation, which is exclusive to humans, adds relatability and dignity to their life. It is possible that there are no sacrifices, only exchanges between human and nonhuman life. Blood for water, animals for power, energy, or knowledge, and flesh for spirituality. One can look at the various animals masked, known as transformation

¹³ Foster, David William. *"Género y fotografía en Juchitán de las mujeres de Graciela Iturbide."* (2004).

masks, which can be found in various Native American cultures. Some famous masks include birds which can symbolize wisdom, while other predatory animals can be used to manifest or assert power.

The representation of grotesque women in media and culture challenges our ideas of normality and perfection. The concept of grotesqueness has its roots in Western and Christian beliefs, where bodily punishment and mutilation were viewed as the ultimate consequences of immoral behavior. This idea is still present in contemporary visual culture and influences the portrayal of women in media. However, the depiction of indigenous women in Latin America challenges these notions of grotesqueness by showcasing the female body in a dignified manner that differs from the Western perspective. While there is no single definition of the ideal female body or behavior, the portrayal of women in media and culture can have a significant impact on how women perceive and carry themselves. It is important to continue analyzing and questioning these representations to encourage a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty and femininity.



[Image 1] Ralph Gibson, *Untitled*, 1972.



[Image 2] Imogen Cunningham, *Nude*, 1931.



[image 3] *Shield Jaguar and Lady Xoc*, Lintel 24 of Temple 23, Yaxchilán, Mexico, Maya, 725 CE. Limestone.



[image 4] *Pendent in the form of a bat-faced man*, northern Colombia, Tairona. 1000 CE.



[image 5] *Stele D portraying Ruler 13*, Great Plaza, Copán, Honduras, Maya. 736 CE.



[image 6] Graciela Iturbide, *Our Lady of the Iguanas*, 1997.

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