Defying the Global Language

In an enriching and thought-provoking volume that brings into dialog seven essays, all thoroughly researched, convincing and well written. Its subtitle, Perspectives in Ethnic Studies, underscores its innovative nature and the dialogical dimension that emerge from these observations that fully complement each other. A first book-length discussion on the topic, it combines various areas in which global linguistic ensembles are being filled. Defying the Global Language thus inscribes itself in a defined area of multiethnic approaches beyond the field and the scope of traditional ethnic studies.”

— Metka Zupancic, Professor of French and Modern Languages, University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa

“...writing, we must make our diversity the new norm, a French cultural mosaic, much like Guillaume Apollinaire, Édouard Senghor, or Noureddine Aba did. I find all of these cultural aspects discussed in Defying the Global Language.”

— Patrice Aba, author of Approche de proches en croche (2011)
DEFYING THE
GLOBAL LANGUAGE

Perspectives in Ethnic Studies

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In summer 2010, the media’s coverage of two events crystalize what I view as a political problem and a meta-critical problem. Much ado was made about the proposed plan to build Park 51, an Islamic cultural center, in the old Burlington Coat Factory near Ground Zero. This proposed plan, incorrectly termed the “Ground Zero Mosque,” roused not only New Yorkers, but also politicians outside the Empire State and citizens of New England to comment on the supposedly disrespectful nature of having a mosque so close to the Ground Zero site. Despite the fact that Muslims have worshipped there since before 9/11, the proposed plan drew a spate of criticism. For those who claimed that the center would be disrespectful, their contention was that the pious Muslims and others who congregated therein would desecrate the memory of 9/11 victims and their families by their proximity. Much of the critique focused on grand claims about ideology, civilization, terrorism, and
respect; however, it strikes me that the primary reason for the deluge of commentary is the thought that a mass of Muslim bodies equals a terrorist threat. In August of the same summer, Michael Enright attacked Ahmed Sharif, a Muslim cab driver, while riding to the upper East Side. Enright was charged with the hate crime very soon thereafter. In the press, Enright was not excoriated, but instead described as a mentally ill young man or a vulnerable child. The press reported on his baby-faced appearance and his teenage dress (a tee shirt and cargo shorts) at his arraignment. Although this certainly is in keeping with the tendency of the press to make exceptions of or dismiss the criminal actions of white defendants and condemn ones of color, I found that the discussion of Enright focused on the youthful appearance of his body at the erasure of Sharif’s violated body.

Journalists have linked these two events as incidents of Islamophobia and proof of spreading discord among New Yorkers, between Muslims and non-Muslims. I link them for another reason. In both examples, the discussion torpedoed toward big picture ideas of the sort that helped determine midterm senate races and gubernatorial elections in 2010. However, the overlooked center of the debate is Ahmed Sharif’s embodied experience and the presence of a pious Muslim mass. That is, the possible future attendees at the cultural center were imbued with characteristics that made them terrorists and disrespectful toward 9/11. In addition, Sharif’s experience was eclipsed in favor of focusing attention on the motivation and sartorial choices of Michael Enright. The maelstrom surrounding these two incidents highlights a disjuncture between the objectification of bodies and the subjective understanding of being in a body. I should be clear that I do not intend “objective” here in the sense of unbiased, but rather in the sense of being turned into an object or imbued with non-human characteristics. When discussing the erroneously named Ground Zero Mosque, antagonists took for granted that Muslim in prayer equaled a terrorist in preparation; they ascribed objective characteristics to a subjective (and transcendental) experience. Moreover, the focus on Enright as a feeling, thinking subject obscured the feeling, thinking Sharif whose violated flesh precipitated Enright’s public exposure. There is an intimacy in stabbing that is typically represented cinematically and not in journalism: the stabber has to forcefully press a knife into another’s flesh, the physics of which guarantee that the flesh itself pushes back. In Sharif’s case, Enright’s blade was short, also requiring a certain degree of proximity between the two men. I take care to detail this part of the experience because the physicality of that experience cannot deny the resultant pain or eclipse the embodied experience that precipitates such pain. Nevertheless, the embodiment of piety and community as well as the pain of being a stabbing victim remained secondary to issues like Islamophobia, New Yorker morale, terrorism, and respect.

Here, the political problem is that New Yorkers have to navigate the legal and social repercussions of these two events; yet, this political problem rests on the meta-critical problem that is my concern here. Namely, the pious Muslims and Ahmed Sharif were described in terms that undergird classic discourse: they are bodies rather than have bodies. In this distinction, the shadow of Descartes looms large in that the seat of rationality belongs to the thinking part of our sentence and the baser appetites to our feelings and desires. Within this framework, ethnic others consistently belong to the latter category—base, governed by desire, and incapable of thought. Given its influence, this discourse is global, manifesting itself in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and imperialism and colonialism in the Arab world. Though my work concentrates on the geographical space of the United States, this political and meta-critical problem is indeed a global one. As scholars like Frantz Fanon and Oyêrônké Oyèwùmi (among others) make very clear, the emphasis on the mind excludes those who the West has defined, understood, and acted upon as bodies. In short, the thought of ethnic others as simply bodies is the lingua franca in projects of global domination. Notable critics have defied this global language by debunking the idea that ethnic others can only be thought of in these terms. W.E.B. Du Bois and Edward Said both posited that the repercussion of the Enlightenment for blacks
and Arabs (or the so-called East, more generally) was an exclusion from the fundamental definition of liberal subjectivity. In Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois argues that the sorrow songs were proof positive of black cognitive and creative power, not spontaneous outbursts of feeling. Said’s Orientalism points out that the images of the putatively sensual East have been created, so the exclusion from liberal subjectivity serves a political and imperial purpose. What becomes clear is that to have a body is to be a subject—the very epitome of the Western liberal subject—and to be a body is to be an object.

The Problem of Flesh in Politics and Criticism

The fact remains that everyone has a body such that their cognitive functions permit them to inhabit corporeal space and everyone is a body such that their bodily functions influence or control the way they conceptualize their own corporeality. One consistently and simultaneously remains subjective object and objective subject. Nevertheless, critics continue to discuss the body as something that is and ought to be possessed by the mind. Discussing the body in this way pushes one into the same quagmire fomented by journalists during the summer of 2010: one erases embodied experience in favor of concepts that rely on the very experiences one has attempted to erase. That is not to say those concepts are not important, but rather that the discussion of them needs to include the bodily experiences upon which they rely. To do so requires criticism that emanates from embodied experience—criticism that privileges the body as a primary space of interpretation—because one’s simultaneity as subject and object demands it.

For ethnic others, a meditation on the body becomes particularly dicey territory because critics may run the risk of circumscribing the ethnic body back into racist or imperial discourse. In literary study, where discourse is the major weapon in a critic’s arsenal, to devote time to embodiment seems to imply one’s status as being a body and to privilege the body in ethnic literature seems to privilege the discourses that reify the ethnic other as solely a body by giving them credece. It is at this moment of difficulty that the meta-critical problem arises. One must ask why privileging the body is critically necessary and how such a critical endeavor can be undertaken. I will return to the “how” in a moment, but, as answer to the “why,” there are two reasons for such a discussion. First, there is a disjuncture between the way the body is understood by others as a subjective object and how it is experienced by the one who inhabits it as an objective subject. When one’s subjectivity remains constantly mediated by the awareness of one’s status as an object in the eyes of others, it becomes imperative to sort through one’s own understanding of one’s self, an understanding that rests on the experience of one’s own corporeality. In short, to unpack one’s embodied experience is to wrest it from the historical, social, and cultural discourses that encumber it. Second, writers have already begun to privilege the body as a space from which to draw critique. Their protagonists, minor characters or, in the case of autobiography, selves insist on bodily sentence in the face of objectification. Their discursive acts of privileging the body—particularly when they have been ontologically categorized as simply a body—constitute fierce self-possession, deliberate defiance, and outright rebellion.

Despite (and perhaps because of) the riskiness of examining these literatures with an eye toward embodied experience, I broach this subject because critics have been loath to do so. So far, we have tended to discuss the more cerebral acts and understandings of a piece of literature, endowing the character or his/her environment with social or political ideas and realities that mirror the world in which we live. Certainly, these endowments are accurate as the literary imaginary draws from the rich inspiration of this world. However, it seems to present a rather one-sided view of the human experience. That is, literary critics and even authors themselves (when discussing their own work, or the work of others) push forward in the endeavor to reclaim the right to have a body and refute the racist stereotypes associated with being a body.
me that critics and authors, perhaps in an attempt to counter these ideas, defend their inclusion among liberal subjects and ignore, or discuss with heavy academic language the implications of the use of their bodies. In both bodies of literature and criticism, the body is a tool to be manipulated rather than something that also has the power to manipulate the user. It is not my aim to suggest that one’s body operates without the will of its owner, but rather point out that there are very significant and controlling appetites that govern how one accommodates one’s body: emotive, sexual, and scatological appetites, for instance. It seems that for Arab Americans and African Americans whether to be or not to be a body is still the question.

Though these ideas bear implications for a great deal of ethnic literature, for the purposes of my discussion, I turn to Arab American and African American literature. As my mention of W.E.B. Du Bois and Edward Said would suggest, these are two traditions with which I am admittedly most familiar. Yet, my familiarity is not the only reason for examining these two literatures together. I find that African American letters has a history of attempting to reclaim the black body over and against racist discourse. Zora Neal Hurston’s anthropological work focused on black folklore, debunking the idea that black creative power had little intellectual thrust or cultural meaning. Writers in the Civil Rights movement like Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, and Nikki Giovanni pick up this train of thought by emphasizing the beauty and pride within black culture. Structuralist critics in the 1980s sought to define a particular Africanist aesthetic. Arab American letters follows the imperative “write or be written.” The literary tradition begins in 1908 with the work of Ameen Rihani, a figure who worked in his art and in politics to change global perception regarding Arabs. During the mid-twentieth century, Arab Americans wrote autobiographies and poetry to demonstrate their kinship with other Americans. In the 1980s and 1990s, Arab American writers begin to move outside of autobiography and poetry and use novels and short fiction to deliberately differentiate themselves from other Americans and claim a heritage that is distinctly Arab. They draw specifically on the body as a site of critique, mirroring the creative impulses of African American writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones who sought to fill in the gaps of what had not been written about slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Write or be written, indeed. In addition to the similar imperatives that govern literary production, the creative projects of Arab American and African American writers dovetail in that they work to give voice to the multiplicity within these groups. The two works I briefly examine here, Gayl Jones’s Corregidora (1975) and Rabih Alameddine’s KOOLAIDS: The Art of War (1998), focus on the subjectivity of those whose voices had (have) been absent from dominant discussions about black and Arab Americans: black women and queer Arab American men. I link KOOLAIDS and Corregidora not just because both novels confound literary critics with regard to their treatment of embodied experience (though, as a critic, I find this kind of confusion intellectually exciting), but also because this confusion has been provoked by Jones and Alameddine’s engagement with the body and another theme or subject with which critics are more familiar—black female subjectivity and the Lebanese civil war, respectively.

What I propose is another lens through which to look, one that does not give such primacy to the insistence on the mind, but rather privileges the body in understanding literature. Such a lens requires a return to the body itself and a discussion of embodied experience from the perspective of the sensory. The return to the body and the sensory—particularly in literary study—is limited by discourse and the impossibility of completely reducing the body within discourse, so this lens also requires a critical arsenal that takes for granted the body as a secund site of interpretation rather than a degraded one. The approaches I have just described are phenomenology and Disability Studies respectively, both of which require a bit of explanation. Allow me to briefly sketch these two approaches and address each point in turn. Phenomenology attempts the impossibility of describing bodily experience as unencumbered by discourse. Clearly, the expression of bodily experi-
ence is already curtailed by the voice, a nearly immediate mediation that mobilizes one's subjectivity to express the physiological concerns of the body. I use phenomenology, as envisioned by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which attempts the impossibility of describing bodily experience as unencumbered by discourse. Clearly, the expression of bodily experience is already curtailed by the voice, a nearly immediate intervention that harnesses one's mind and identity as a subject to express the physiological concerns of the body. So, I use a methodology called thick description from which one can access bodily experience, if only in part. I turn to Disability Studies because it fills in the gaps, if you will, and with it I can privilege the body as the primary site of inquiry, which affords me the opportunity to understand the implications of thick descriptions. In this investigation, I link Arab American and African American literature as a way to illuminate how the critical meditations on having a body would change were one to focus on being a body.

**THE JUMPING POINT OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE INTUITIVE LEAP OF DISABILITY STUDIES**

The clarion cry of phenomenologists is to get back to the "things themselves," referring to the essences of those things. One seeks to understand the world by reducing it to its most basic elements. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes up this idea of reduction, saying that one can only reduce one's perception as far as the limitations of the body allow. Merleau-Ponty posited that we understand our world based on the way our bodies interact with it. The corollary of his idea is that we understand our own sentence based on our bodies. I read this as an explicit push against Descartes. It is not "I think therefore I am," but rather the causal link is inverted "I am and so I think." In terms of understanding this interaction between the mind and the body, it is vitally important to view the two as entities that unite and separate constantly. In some of my readings, I focus on the moments in which this unification and separation take place. In others, I focus on the moments when the body is separated. As a result, I can wrestle the body away from psychologically driven readings, which consider the body an object or a tool to be manipulated. I read a character's experiences through the body, as it is the first point of access to the world. Rather than look toward existing frameworks to understand the body, my thick descriptions offer a moment for the body to speak. In these moments, it becomes clear that the body is not governed by the mind or one's subjectivity alone, but instead the individual is also governed by the body. In other words, one is constantly and simultaneously subject and object.

There are a few caveats to using phenomenology in literary study: namely, that perception is an act of the body alone. Perception does not fall into categories best described by other fields. It is not a moment of association, nor an act of memory, nor the act of paying attention, nor a moment of judgment. Instead, perception precedes these four. I point these out because most readings of African American and Arab American literature make use of the term "perception" differently. Association, then, is the result of one's desire to make sense of perceived objects, not perception itself. When Toni Morrison provides her reading of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she calls for readers to associate the young girl's rape with a warped understanding of beauty. Memory functions in much the same way in that it attempts to organize perception, but memory must be separated from perception because it detracts from the significance of the things perceived. In other words, memory clouds perception and foists another set of ideas onto the original perceived experience. Readings of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) discuss her experience of hiding out in the garret as psychologically painful as well as a deployment of particularly African American woman-centered narrative strategy. Though this is true, she does not actually perceive pain. She remembers perceiving pain. Paying attention is what one does after understanding that there is something to which one may pay attention. In Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead* (2005), the pedophilic neighbor pays attention to the protagonist before molesting her. Lastly, judgment is an intuitive leap beyond perception or based on
The mythical Scheherazade joins Fatima Abdullah in Alia Yunis’s *The Night Counter* (2009) to judge whether Fatima’s children are worthy of her home in Beirut. Another example would include the chapter “The Fractional Man” from Vance Bourjaily’s *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960) in which his perception of his Arab cousins is rendered in sensory terms because he lacks the cultural context to judge their actions. Once he knows they are his cousins (or guesses), he is able to make judgments about their behavior. In distinguishing these four—association, memory, attention, and judgment—from perception, one clarifies that perception remains in the senses and is a series of acts or moments based on sensory experience.

Given the emphasis on the sensory, there is little room for interpretation as part of perception. Indeed, this foregrounds the limitation of phenomenology in general. The philosophy has never pretended to be a mode of analysis, but rather a way of describing. After all, it cannot be mistaken that one’s perception of one’s own body remains intertwined with one’s understanding of the world. It is not the mandate of phenomenology to deal with interpretive understandings, but rather phenomenology encourages a return to the basics before interpretation. Certainly, including the idea of phenomenological reduction may seem strange for a critic concerned with literature because of the reduction’s impossibility and the way in which accessing it seems to foreclose the possibility of cultural critique. However, I take as my predecessors scholars like Vivian Sobchack, Sara Ahmed, and Charles Johnson who use phenomenology as a starting point for literary and cultural critique. Phenomenology may also seem especially strange for a scholar of ethnic American literature given that the field has been known to promulgate the idea of an “essence” steeped in Orientalism and racism. I distance my own readings from that line of thought as my focus is on embodied perception that by virtue of its individualized nature cannot be essentialized. My discussion of the body uses phenomenology because it offers an inroad to understanding the basics of how one perceives and an insight into what one understands from that perception. The second part of my approach rests on the tenets of Disability Studies.

Given that phenomenological description presents limitations to interpreting the material body, I turn to the framework of Disability Studies in order to explain my descriptions because the body is the primary site of interpretation. In discussing bodily experience, Disability Studies scholars, activists, and critics have been at the forefront, arguing quite rightly that dominant discourse about the body (defined in broad terms) effaces the experience of disability. They claim that it is in the recuperation of disability as a large category (to which all of us could belong) that one realizes that everyone is a body at some point, rather than simply has a body. Within this discipline, there is room for the body to take center stage in an analysis. I want to be clear in that I speak to a particular portion of scholarship within Disability Studies. Some scholars tend toward using a social model of disability that privileges the body, but still ignores bodily reality. Here, I align myself with those who move toward understanding embodiment as a focal point. For instance, Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson argue for a more complex notion of disability saying that the social model has become a “sacred cow” in activist and academic circles (5). Adhering to such orthodoxy downplays the influence of embodied experience as understood through impairment. In literary studies, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder make inroads toward a similar claim by examining the ways that the experience of disability shapes fiction. The sacred cow needs to be tipped because, in its current form, it works toward inclusion while excluding a central aspect of disability: the reality of the lived body or embodied experience. One concurs that the social model affords the disability rights movement some much-needed political traction, but risks appearing disingenuous when scholars or activists focus on disability at the expense of impairment.

To examine impairment opens up the possibility to read the body not as a symbol or set of symbols, but rather as a lived reality. Now, I move
away from thinking of disability solely in terms that are simply politically expedient. Similar to how I want readers to approach Arab American and African American literature, one can meditate on the concept of being a body and the experience thereof. I read Tobin Siebers’s critical volume, *Disability Theory*, as an attempt to sort out the ways in which one can understand both the social construction of disability and the reality of bodily impairment. Siebers coins the phrase, “ideology of ability,” a framework that is, simply put, the preference for able-bodiedness and, in radical form, defines humanity itself (8). In both cases, the ideology of ability governs the understanding of how impairment and disability operate together. Labeling it permits one to critically examine the nature of institutionalized ableism, but also to give credence to the bodily experiences of living with an impairment. So, one gives credence to the lived medical experience without medicalizing the experience and thereby turning the disabled into objects or bodies. In doing so, one understands disability and illness as un-stigmatized parts of human variation. I build on Siebers’s reclassification of impairment as part of human variance, by arguing that impairment is integral to understanding the lived body’s place in politics. For me, identifying and getting outside the confines of the ideology of ability makes permissible the possibility that the relationship between the objectified experience of disability and the subjective experience of impairment is part of a continuum as well as useful and appropriate for mooring political and social critiques.

**Reading the Body in Corregidora and KoolAIDS: The Art of War**

I turn to Gayl Jones’s novel *Corregidora* (1975) as an example of how such critiques surface within African American literature. As I mentioned, Gayl Jones’s *oeuvre* works to give voice to the multiplicity and diversity within black communities. She is part of a cadre of black woman writers who have done so including Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, among others. I turn to Gayl Jones’s work here not only because of her emphasis on the body, but also because of the way her work was received. First, here is a brief summary. Ursa is pushed down a flight of stairs by her husband at the time, Mutt Thomas, forcing a hysterectomy. She has a rich matrilineal oral history tradition that admonishes her to “make generations” and tell the story of her foremothers’ rape at the hands of a Brazilian slave master, her namesake, Corregidora. As she heals from the surgery, she must reconceptualize her foremothers’ injunction, her career as a blues singer, and her understanding of her womanhood. After her surgery, she divorces her husband, Mutt, and stays with a different man who is attracted to her. Because of her physical discomfort, she moves across the street to stay with a female neighbor who also attempts to seduce her. Over the next two decades, Ursa takes a variety of jobs as a blues singer and has a few relationships with men in an effort to understand herself. She also speaks to her mother regarding the tradition of passing on the story of their foremothers’ enslavement. The novel ends with Ursa’s new understanding of herself and intimacy between men and women. After twenty-two years of being apart, Ursa decides that intimacy requires trust and imminent danger, and thus she decides to fellate her ex-husband in the final scene.

The criticism of *Corregidora* and Jones’s other early novel, *Eva’s Man*, highlights what I have called a meta-critical concern. Critics had difficulty understanding the explicit depiction of sex in both *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man*. Of those who did not react with disgust, they chose to concentrate on the politics of her prose. In two book-length studies of Jones’s work, critics focus on the creation of voice and her resistance of social mores. The scholars therein analyze her work by examining her language, her form and her challenge of myth, tradition and legend. *Corregidora*, especially, is described as visceral and full of voice. I would argue that the visceral quality of Jones’s work emanates from the text’s foundation in embodied experience. I do not intend to suggest that critics have missed the creative impulses behind Jones’s work, but rather that examining the body provides an alternative perspective. Jones herself
endorses some of these readings; her dissertation, "Toward an All-Inclusive Structure," justifies a critical interest in psychology. In it, she makes the case that her interest in psychology allows her to explore her creative interest in narrative, voice, and storytelling. This idea dovetails with the conception of the liberal subject: the voice and the ability to speak constitute the formation of one's ontology. It is not enough to be; one has to be articulate. Though Jones herself does not seek to politicize the voices she creates, the articulation of a black female voice in the 1970s was indeed a political act. Yet, in Corregidora, Jones's exploration of psychology, voice, and the political repercussions thereof remain contingent upon the embodied experience of the protagonist.

I want to take a look at the moments when Ursa's subjectivity and her body separate and unite. Ursa's struggle to articulate herself both reflexively and to others emanates from her physical pain and the use of her singing voice. Furthermore, Ursa's attempts to understand her figurative blues voice and her sexuality are mediated by two psychologically driven experiences: her hearing and feeling of her new, physical voice as well as her living inside her altered body. She constantly readjusts her understanding of sexuality and the blues based on her physical encounters, culminating in the final scene of the novel in which she fellates her husband. The final sex act, in which metaphorical and physical voice literally collide, demonstrates an interplay between embodied experience and figurative meaning.

In a general sense, this interplay occurs throughout the action of the text as it forms the structure for Ursa's psychological explorations within the novel. Specifically, the interplay between Ursa's being a subjective object and an objective subject grounds the discussion of sexuality. On one hand, Ursa's hysterectomy and her foremothers' sexual assaults and prostitution bring to bear the significance of the womb. Ursa's husband attributes the foremothers' obsession with telling the story of Corregidora to a kind of female narrative hysteria, connecting womb to its original Greek meaning. Mutt's comments also connect their storytelling to Freud's ideas about women's sexuality that would suggest an exclusive psychological link. Rather than rest on this moment of association or judgment which are not acts of perception, my brief thick description of Ursa's process moves toward an understanding of how Ursa's hysterectomy forces her to contemplate the functions of her uterus and vagina as distinct. As she rests, she wonders what would have happened had she thrown her husband down the stairs and done away with his "sex, or inspiration, or whatever the hell it is for a man," and she resolves, "At least a woman's still got the hole. Look, nigger, I still got my hole. Finger-pop it" (40–41). Here, Ursa begins to understand her sexual and reproductive self differently, as her vagina operates as a separate unit without her uterus. She begins to focus on her "hole" as she calls it as a way to understand her sexuality. In so doing, she separates the figurative meaning of womb and the literal purposes of her uterus and vagina. She understands her body as different from a man's and her uterus as divorced from the idea of inspiration. She points to her body as uniquely female when she says that a woman has a hole. Here, she separates her bodily experience from the figurative meanings attached to it and the psychological implications about it.

This focus on her body prompts her to question the significance of her loss in relation to her foremothers. As Ursa struggles to understand her sexuality anew, she considers how her foremothers' injunction relies on her having a functioning uterus as well as a receptive vagina. She queries whether she can fulfill her promise to them and works to reconcile the fact of her missing uterus with her ability to "make generations." In the end, she can only conceptualize her foremothers' idea as somewhat indulgent after she experiences the physical loss of the literal possibility. She begins to "make generations" by using her literal voice, her blues voice, to tell stories.21

Ursa's new conception of self not only emanates from her listening to her body, but also motivates her to connect her mind to her body differently and reclaim her body as an objective subject. Ursa asserts agency
over her body by fellating Mutt. Her actions and their dialogue in the final scene imply a direct causal link between sex acts and psychological agency. After they undress, she says:

In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: ‘I could kill you.’ (184)

This moment between Ursa and Mutt is certainly motivated by a desire for control and her psychological independence from that relationship. However, getting back to the things themselves—in this case, their bodies—the moment must be initiated by a specific positioning of their bodies, the contact between Ursa’s mouth and Mutt’s penis, and the press of teeth as the threat of castration. For Mutt, he understands her agency based on his ability to perceive Ursa—in Merleau-Ponty’s sense—as a source of pleasure and as a physical threat. He does not associate her with her foremothers, nor make judgments about her decision. Though he does pay attention and remembers that their relationship did not previously include this element, he remembers and pays attention only after he perceives Ursa as a pleasure and possible threat. For Ursa, given that she has re-conceptualized her sexuality, her clarity about her husband’s physical vulnerability and her oral power—in relation to her mouth and her figurative voice—foreground the integral role of her body in enacting and understanding herself as an objective subject. The positioning of her between his legs allows her to have the split second of knowing; after she perceives, she makes the association. In addition, her realization implies that her husband’s body and bodily experience are avenues through which he must begin to understand her as a subjective object and understand himself as well. The blues-like refrain of their final conversation underscores this point. The text reads:

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.

The call and response and the repetition create a kind of coda to the novel as it summarizes the interplay between embodied experience and psychological agency. Here, hurt not only indicates emotional hurt, but physical hurt as well. Their conversation recalls Mutt’s initial violent act of throwing Ursa down the stairs as well as Ursa’s final threat, “I could kill you.” It also points to the heartache they both experience while apart and while together. In this conversation, the multiple meanings indicate that physical and emotional hurt are intertwined, interdependent. In short, she and Mutt can only have bodies after they have been bodies.

The critical life of Rabih Alameddine’s KOOLAIDS: The Art of War mirrors that of Gayl Jones though the novel’s content is much different. In brief, KOOLAIDS traces the lives of several friends and their families over the course of the early HIV/AIDS crisis in San Francisco and the Lebanese Civil War. The two principal characters are arguably Mohammed and Samir, but the novel’s pastiche structure makes it difficult to discern who is speaking, when, and, sometimes, about whom. As the novel also switches genre, at times there are diary entries, Associated Press releases, emails, letters, religious exegesis, newspaper articles, vignettes and plays. In one scene of a play, Krsna, Krishnamurti, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jesus, and Tom Cruise discuss the meaning of life. Just as with Corregidora, critics and reviewers understood KOOLAIDS in Cartesian terms. The body with HIV/AIDS or the body in war is a contested site, but it is a vehicle for the cogita, always spoken for and never speaking. Several critics have more or less admitted that they are not quite certain how to understand the parts of the text that privilege the embodied expe-
riend. They have been confused by the fusion of the Lebanese civil war and the HIV/AIDS crisis in San Francisco. A few reviewers labeled the novel “uneven” and bemoan the pastiche structure that sutures Arab and American; Lebanon and the United States; and HIV/AIDS and the Lebanese civil war. Those that praised the novel focused on its philosophy and its politics (both social and electoral), including novelist Amy Tan whose glowing remarks are etched on the cover. These critics discussed with great aplomb the relationships between father and son as analogous to the relationship of the subject to his nation and the way the novel lambasts the Lebanese and American governments for their actions during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Whereas these readings are apt, much like critics of Gayl Jones, they overlook the way in which the novel’s stringent critique of these governments hinges on the characters’ embodied experience. In one scene, the Lebanese government intentionally opens a sewer to expel archeologists from a dig site. The main archeologist is searching for masks that covered the faces of the dead, in an effort to rescue what had been found or nearly destroyed by the war. This deluge of crap occurs at the exact moment that the archeologist has found the death mask artifact she was looking for. She and the death mask are whisked away in a river of excrement (56–57). This scene veers into the comically absurd especially when the emphasis is placed on the body: “They smelled the water before it hit them. The force of the shitty water pulled the death mask away. Within a minute, the team was floating among excrement” (57). Considering that the archeologist’s body is the thing itself, her body in motion is the objective subject of inquiry. Though this is not a first person narration, one can read this as a moment when the archeologist’s mind and body separate. Though she wants the death mask and intends to rescue it, her body has to obey the physics of the water. As a result, her body in motion makes possible the judgment of the relationship between her dig, the government, and the corporations that compel the government to act. The olfactory relationship to excrement also makes this judgment possible in that the odor gives an indication of how one ought to judge the physical motion that ensues. Furthermore, the physical motion of the archeologist’s pushed body inverts the natural relationship between the body and bowels, calling attention to what the text characterizes as a backwards relationship between the government and its citizenry.

Elsewhere in the novel, the depictions of the body are not so easily metaphorized, but these depictions do form the base on which the scene and the subsequent critique rest. For instance, in the first and final scenes, Mohammed, one of the main protagonists, encounters the four horsemen of the apocalypse while in the hospital. Each of the five scenes concludes with Mohammed’s articulation of a bodily experience: back pain, throbbing in his eyes, sleeplessness, loss of feeling in his fingers, and death. The visitation of the four horsemen seems to be an element of the fantastic, but the articulation of pain joists it back to the space of the hospital and, in the first scene, the specific pain of the hospital bed. Not only does embodied experience ground these scenes in reality, they also trace Mohammed’s journey toward death. The descriptions of bodily reality, often sarcastically rendered, remove the fantastic element and locate the critique within the realistic world of the novel, a place where, plainly put, people are dying. Here, Mohammed gives primacy to his pain, throbbing, and the like, implying that these experiences are not ersatz for the sentimental depictions of HIV/AIDS patients in hospitals. His narration echoes other moments in the novel wherein Mohammed complains about movies like An Early Frost or Philadelphia because they sentimentalize HIV/AIDS to the detriment of HIV/AIDS patients. To my mind, Mohammed’s ideas dovetail with Siebers that Mohammad asserts his medical experience without medicalizing himself and objectifying himself. He is both subjective object, as one who is cared for and discussed, and objective subject, as one who understands himself as a dying patient.

It was my aim to address both the political problem of objectifying and, thereby, ignoring or dismissing ethnic bodies and the critical problem of discussing the body and embodied experience without reverting to or
reifying problematic discourses. Phenomenological descriptions license an exploration that begins with perception and sensory experience; disability centered readings bring these descriptions to maturity by privileging the body as the primary site of inquiry. In African American literature, Gayl Jones’s work demonstrates what can be gained by reading literature with an eye toward the imagined embodied experience. Corregidora’s promulgation of a black female subjectivity is made possible by the constant unification and separation of the main protagonist’s objective subject experience and her subjective object experience. As another example from the corpus of Arab American literature, KOOLAIDS: The Art of War delineates how a character’s experience of being a body changes his or her perception of having a body in a world that is hostile to it. Alameddine’s characters rely on embodied experience to understand or create critique. In both novels, the body makes permissible critiques regarding race, gender, disability, and nation. In short, these critiques rest on the imagined embodied experience and are dictated by it. When one returns to the things themselves, one finds the body waiting, not to be inscribed upon or made symbolic but acting as an agent of its own.

Notes

1. I extend my deepest gratitude to those who have helped make this publication possible. I thank Richard Yarborough and Helen Deutsch for their continued support. I am indebted to Cheryl Toman for her graciousness and her mentorship. I also appreciate the assiduous and detailed assistance from adroit colleagues and readers of my work: Erica Edwards, Hosam About-Ela and W. Laurence Hogue.

2. Major news outlets used these incidents to discuss larger issues. In “Anchor Babies, the Ground Zero Mosque and other scapegoats,” Matthew Yglesias argues that these issues are politically expedient for the times saying that xenophobia resonates with voters. The Wall Street Journal published “Who is Michael Enright?” exploring Enright as a public figure who promotes the ideology of Islamophobia. Little of the coverage ever concentrated on possible cultural center attendees or the perspective of Ahmed Sharif. See Yglesias and Taranto.

3. Though the knife was never recovered, a pouch for a utility knife (1" wide and 3–4" long) was found.

4. In Body in Pain, Scarry says that to be in physical pain is to be certain, and to have knowledge of another’s physical pain is to be in doubt. Pain erases language, given that the language for pain is always approximate. The act of stabbing and the resulting wound takes for granted that pain has occurred. Moreover, I wish to bring to the fore Shari’s physical pain because that was also overlooked during the news coverage. For more information on this argument, see Scarry 3–23.

5. This scholarship is by no means limited to these two scholars; nonetheless, I choose to highlight them here as a starting point for further study. Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks makes clear the loss of subjectivity with regard to racialized subjects in colonial spaces. For further treatment of this issue, see Fanon. Oyèrôníé Oyèwúmí makes clear how this emphasis on what she terms “bio-logic” cannot operate within Yoruba and other cultures that privilege the sensory. See Oyèwúmí.

6. In “The Forethought,” he makes the case, briefly, that sorrow songs are American music. See Du Bois.

8. There are numerous examples of such scholarship, as I refer to a general tendency within Ethnic American literary criticism to view works along Cartesian lines. One could trace this tendency through Winston Napier’s edited *African American Literary Theory*, Steven Salaita’s readings in *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures and Politics* and Layla Al-Maleh’s *Arab Voices in the Diaspora*. See Napier, Salaita, and al-Maleh.

9. In an afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison guides her reader by explaining how she understands and wrote Cholly’s rape of his daughter Pecola as analogous to his own “male rape” at the hands of a white mob. In a *US News and World Report* article, Morrison explains Paradise saying that the novel takes place between the moment someone’s finger is on the trigger and the moment they decide to pull it. Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Origin* includes an interview with the author wherein she says that the characters suffer from the effects of a compromised earth, unlike her other books where food and the sensory is a source of pleasure. See Morrison 209–216; Mulrine; and Abu-Jaber 388–392.


11. Though this line of thinking surfaces in the work of Lisa Suhair Majaj and others, the phrase receives amplified treatment in Susan Muaddi Darraj’s *Scheherazade’s Legacy*. See Majaj and Darraj xi–xvi.

12. During this time period, Arab Americans stressed their kinship with other Americans through military service, kinship with the American landscape, and a desire to fit in. The most prominent of these authors are William Peter Blatty, Eugene Paul Nassar, and Vance Bourjaily. For a more thorough rendering of Arab American literary history, see Orfalea and Ludescher.

13. See Schrader.


15. For more information on literary criticism related to Harriet Jacobs, see Carby 20–61, in Kreiger, Walter, and Yellin.

16. In Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts*, she provides thick descriptions of a scene in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* as well as an explication of the difficulty in interpreting the Million Man March. Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* interrogates the idea of being oriented and explains how people inhabit or are not permitted to inhabit certain spaces. Johnson’s essay “Phenomenology of the Black Body” explicates the possible uses of phenomenology in black cultural criticism. See Sobchack 179–204; Ahmed 1–24; and Johnson.

17. See Husserl.

18. For more information on social models of disability, see Linton.

19. In their words, “impairment is a part of our daily personal experience and cannot be ignored in our social theory or political strategy” (11).

20. The two book length studies to which I refer are Casey Clabough’s *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* and Fiona Mills and Keith Mitchell’s edited collection entitled *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*. I point to the critical reception that Clabough finds problematic. Yet, Clabough’s own text does not take up the issue of Gayl Jones’s depictions of sex, choosing to focus on ‘conscious and specialized political lenses’ of his own. His book length study concentrates principally on Jones’s technique and language as assertions of freedom. *After the Pain* offers critical essays that deliberately begin their criticism at a moment that erases the body. It too considers her œuvre as Clabough does: as a corpus that resists social mores. See Mitchell and Mills and also Clabough.

21. Lindon Barrett takes up the question of the value of the singing voice, saying that the undulations thereof help to articulate the words and emotive content of the songs. See Barrett 55–93.

22. Steven Salaita and Syrine Hout have the most extensive meditations on *KOOALIDS*. See Salaita 51–86; Denneney and Hout.
WORKS CITED


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**Chapter 2**

**MARILYN CHIN’S DIALECTIC OF CHINESE AMERICANNESS**

*Anastasia Wright Turner*

In the corpus of literature treating the presence of China in modern American poetry and the American imagination at large, one important authorial group has been noticeably absent—Chinese Americans. Much like Euro American poetry, Chinese American poetry boasts a generative yet complicated relationship with the Chinese language. Yet, as critics like David Palumbo Liu, Timothy Yu, and Juliana Chang have investigated, Asian American textual production at large continues to be hindered by a widespread notion of the inherent ethnicity of its “hyphenated” authors. In our current post-multiculturalist world, texts authored by an ethnically marked name are often times first read for Otherness; only secondarily are these works read on the grounds of being “good literature.” Such a response reflects a common conflation of Asian Americans with Asians and the continuing perception of Asian Americans as