

MORE LESSONS FROM A STARFISH: PREFIXIAL FLESH AND TRANSSPECIATED SELVES

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Mr. Muscle forcing bursting
Stingy thingy into little me, me, me
But just "ripple" said the cripple
As my jaw dropped to the ground
Smile smile

It's true I always wanted love to be
Hurtful
And it's true I always wanted love to be
Filled with pain
And bruises

Yes, so Cripple-Pig was happy
Screamed "I just completely love you!
And there's no rhyme or reason
I'm changing like the seasons
Watch! I'll even cut off my finger
It will grow back like a Starfish!
It will grow back like a Starfish!
It will grow back like a Starfish!"
Mr. Muscle, gazing boredly
And he checking time did punch me
And I sighed and bled like a windfall
Happy bleedy, happy bruisy

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I am very happy
 So please hit me
 I am very happy
 So please hurt me

I am very happy
 So please hit me
 I am very very happy
 So come on hurt me

I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish

I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish
 I'll grow back like a Starfish
 Like a Starfish . . .

(Antony and the Johnsons 2000)

I call this piece a critical enmeshment rather than a personal account. For I want this to be a doing and a knowing that I get knotted into—a kind of phenomenological telling that grapples with the mundane and sublime. I am not only describing and articulating, not merely charting the geography, but am pulled into the fleshy gerunds of what I write out. That is to say, I am not telling my story; rather I'm simply entangling myself within the stitches of ongoing processes. I am here not to confess, but to confect.

As such, the following sections or interludes are not some teleological account of transsexual/trans-species becoming, or a disclosure of my stakes. Instead, it is in the encountering of my body with Antony's song, in the interacting of the text/sound and myself, in the changing patterns of lifeways that this essay is sense making. "Critical enmeshment" is always a verb just as it is also always situated and historical. And for this essay, critical enmeshment is a phenomenological compounding or

enfolding in which language, music, and matter are lively (even bumptious) relations of what Donna Haraway calls, "others to each other" (2003).

A MOMENT OF SPECIES AND SEXES

I listen to the "The Cripple and the Starfish"; I find the layered tones of Antony's voice haunting and the lyrics startling: "I'll even cut off my finger"; "I'll grow back like a Starfish"; "Happy bloody, happy bruisy." My iTunes player calls the song "alternative," that ambiguous, overpopulated term. The music "ripples" through styles and textures. Antony's voice vibrates (*vibrato*), fluctuating and undulating with emotional expressiveness: sometimes soft and tender and ripe with satiety and fulfillment ("I am very happy/So please hit me") then shifting in cadence to declarative, even triumphant ("I'll grow back like a Starfish"). Following the rise and fall of the song, Antony's voice shifts between low and high, deep and bright. His/her voice creates a waving space, a singing sea—the pace and rhythm of his/her phrasing expresses frenetic and calm movements, the periodicity or the punctuated changes of things and events, as with something gone adrift in its passage through material-discursive space, as a bloom of jellyfish carried by riptides and doldrums may be rinsed out to sea or washed up onto sand or rocks. Could it be that Antony sings the tones of whales calling, the syncopation of pods, the transfiguring surf? This is to ask, nearby Gaston Bachelard's (1983) own wonderings about the literal matter of meaning, how do the tone and the wording of "The Cripple and the Starfish" put us in touch with specific senses, things, places, and relations that it mentions or hints at?

And I wonder, thinking about the transsexual *trans*-formations and the starfish *re*-generations that are suggested in the song, what is the transformative and re-relational power of prefixes like "trans-" or "re-"? I want to understand how "re-" (as in "re-turn" or "re-new") and "trans-" (as in "elsewhere") are differently embodied. Beyond my own identity as a transsexual woman, or the political formation of transgender/transsexual, I am not certain about the ontological processes of bodily transformation (my own or others).¹ How does *re*-assignment define transitioning for some trans-subjects? Moreover, I wonder if "starfish"—"I'll grow back like a Starfish"—or more properly "sea stars," might provide me (and maybe others) some prefixial lessons or guides through language, metaphor, and other tropological terrains. Do not some starfish regenerate themselves from injury? Is not the "cripple" of the song repairing him/

herself through the act of cutting? Is transsexual transformation also regenerative? Am I not in part a transsexual through the re-working and re-folding of my own body, my tissue, and my skin? In becoming transsexual, am I not also becoming “like a starfish” as the song suggests? When do metaphor and metonymy “ripple” into one another? Is the analogical device of “like-ness” (“like a starfish” or like a woman) too clumsy a rhetorical device for the kind of poetic and material enactments of trans-sexing/speciating?

These personal and scholarly questions are not maps for already chartered territories. In principle, this essay remains a work in progress. Tentatively and curiously, I am suggesting here that in some ways language, music, starfish, and myself encounter one another and share in the mutuality of our different materializations. By attending to the material nature of semiotic and embodied encounters, I hope to engage materialism at its most radical and come to recognize as precious the boundedness of *my flesh as part of the world*. This is to say, “we” (as in you and me) are ourselves specific parts of the world’s ongoing refiguring; “we” are part of the world in its (and our) dynamic structuration, its (and our) differential becoming. It is my hope that this essay plays some small part in making explicit the embodied premises that we live in a process of constant enfolding and that it encourages a deeper and more expansive regard for ways that life comes together.

SOME NOTES FROM AN ARTIST

During an interview with *Velle Magazine*, Antony, the founder of Antony and the Johnsons, discusses the emergence of the band:

The Johnsons’ name is a reference to a hero of mine named Marsha P. Johnson, who was a street activist from the mid 60’s all the way through to her death in the early 90’s. Marsha P. Johnson was a street prostitute and a very visible figure on Christopher Street through the 70’s and 80’s, very renowned for her kindness. You know, her nickname was Saint Marsha. She was a very gregarious sort of outsider street presence and she was rumored to have thrown the first bottle in the Stonewall Riot—I mean whether that was true or not was a bone of contention among several different queens (Uchill 2007, 49).

Marsha Johnson, or Saint Marsha, and Sylvia Rivera, an important figure in the nascent transgender civil rights movement, started a group in 1970 called STAR, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries.² In Antony's own words, a transgender legacy is written into the music group; she, an outsider, a queen of color, who threw the first bottle, who was murdered in 1992, structures the creative and political intent of the band. Johnson is Antony's hero, perhaps, and I say this only speculatively, an ego ideal.

About her/his creative process, Antony is clear to emphasize the collage quality of her/his music and sound.

I think my creative process has always been what I've described as accumulative. I collect a lot of different shards and pieces, and I create something that feels meaningful to me by finding relationships between them and putting them into a kind of a collage. . . . You know, for me, I'm really drawn to singers that are full of feeling and are seeking transformation. I like transformative singing, you know, singing that starts one place and ends in another place (Uchill 2007, 50).

Classification is evaded for something more "transformative," something "that starts one place and ends in another place." "Trans-," a prefix weighted with across, beyond, through (into another state or place—*elsewhere*), does the now familiar work of suggesting the unclassifiable. To be *trans-* is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions, whether empirical, rhetorical, or aesthetic. Antony speaks of the affective force of his/her transformation in songs and in singing. Transformations—not unlike transgenders—are produced through emotive forces. Shards and pieces (again, of something broken) are reworked into meaningful integrities, but not wholes.

In another interview, with the *Guardian* (Peschek 2007), Antony discusses her/his album *I Am a Bird Now*, which was included as an installation piece in the 2004 Whitney Biennial.³ The record is described by Antony as "A record of transformations and survival. Its characters move between states—life and death, male and female, human and animal—searching for sanctuary and fulfillment" (Peschek 2005). Antony proposes transformation as a trope for reworking the relationality of male and female, of human and animal. Perhaps I am the only one hearing it, but in the texture of Antony's voice, in the instrumental variations, and in the

lyrics themselves, boundaries of sexual and species differences, artificial and authentic orderings, and nature and culture are affectively and literally *trans-ed* in “The Cripple and the Starfish.”

“Trans-,” as articulated by Antony, is meant to disturb purification practices; the well defined is confounded at multiple material and semiotic levels. Psychical and corporeal experiences are blended. For example, gender and the embodiment of gender are contingencies that may hold for a moment then fall away into another set of relationships. Species exist in taxonomic differences (*Homo sapiens sapiens* is not the same as *Octopus vulgaris*), but species are also *always already* constitutive of each other through the spaces and places we cohabit—this of course includes language and other semiotic registers (Haraway 2003). Indeed, species are relationships between species—relationality is worldhood. We are not human alone—we are human with many. Matter is not immutable, suggests Antony, it is discursive, allowing sexes and species to practice trans-materialization. The meat and meaning for humans and starfish have no structuring lack, no primordial division, but are sensuously intertwined.

BECOMING WITH STARFISH

After listening to the song, I am plunged into the trans-species implications of primate digits = starfish rays. Starfish (as material/discursive objects) work as interesting figures to theorize re-embodiment with (but they are not only here to think with; they “are fleshy material-semiotic presences”) (Haraway 2003, 5). A few reminders: starfish (though not fish) are marine invertebrates that belong to kingdom *Animalia* and phylum *Echinodermata*, class *Asteroideae*. Starfish are capable of sexual and asexual reproduction. For sexually reproducing species, fertilization takes place externally with males and females releasing their gametes into the environment—broadcast spawning. The fertilized embryos form part of the zooplankton—the animal part of the pelagic. Some species of starfish also reproduce asexually by fission, often with part of a ray becoming detached and eventually developing into another individual. Fissioning has led to some notoriety.⁴ Most species must have the central part of the body intact to be able to regenerate, but a few can grow an entire starfish from a single ray.

Although many echinoderms do not have many well-defined sensory inputs, they are sensitive to touch, light, temperature, orientation, and the status of water around them. The tube feet, spines, and pedicellaria

found on starfish are sensitive to touch, while eyespots on the ends of the rays are light sensitive. In this way, Antony's starfish rays may not just be stand-ins for penis = finger, but interventions in phallus = vision. Indeed, if becoming transsexual is becoming with starfish then some of that work is done with *fingery-eyes*.⁵ No eyes, but their rays are full of luminous touch, of sensing, or rather of being literally *tact*, being touch; their rays respond to the surface effects, caressing. Their pedicellaria tremble and deform in the movements; gropes, manipulations, and reaches succeed one another. That is all to say, it is not that their sensing system is visually haptically embodied; rather their very *being* is a visual-haptic-sensory apparatus. The song might produce some notion of lack (some kind of castration), but more interestingly it also refigures the ocular-centrism needed for the recognizing self from other by becoming *with* starfish. Consequently, self and other are not easily ordered (as in speciation)—again, species of all sorts are constituted through encounters. Vision/touch/penis/phallus are at stake not simply through lack/castration, but also through speciation, through *fingery-eyes*. This kind of enfolding of gender/animality serves as shared zontology (Wolfe 2003).

TRANS-ABLING

In “The Cripple and the Starfish,” transformation is indeed a fusing of organisms, energies, and sexes. I am intrigued by the phrase “cut off my finger, it’ll grow back like a starfish.” Let us start with the cut—the “cripple” wants “Mr. Muscle” to “please hurt me,” and “cripple” will “even cut off my finger.” From what has been suggested by the song and Antony him/herself, I presume that “cripple” wants to transform through cutting (amputation or castration); the “cripple” can be heard as a transsexual/transgender MtF seeking transformation. At first, the cut finger leads me, and perhaps other listeners/readers, to think that the cut is an act of castration—the finger works as a substitute for the penis. “Cripple” wants to become a woman through the cutting off of her penis. Certainly, some transsexual women “cut off” their penises in order to have solidarity with females or become female themselves to name only some transsex formations.⁶

Perhaps some readers will worry that my reading the “Cripple” as a trans-subject will iterate the pathologization of trans-folks. For some transsexual/transgender subjects, originary gender assignments can feel disabling, even wounding. I’m speaking about this kind of traumatic

experience, not about transgressive exceptionalism (Halberstam 2005) in which gender/sex changes prompt revolutionary potential. I am simply returning to my own bodily knowledge—carnal logics—of pain and possibility, my own experience of becoming transsexual as a welcomed cut. And yet, I am concerned with how my own calculus of gender dis-phoria as dis-ability = yearned-for transformation codifies a naive understanding of disability (or dis-phoria) as intolerable. This troubles me. So, following Robert McRuer's (2006) vibrant work on queerness and disability, I want to suggest that disability theory has long refused, even relexified, the prefixial logics of "dis-." Indeed, McRuer recasts dis-ability as kinds of queer embodiments, initiating a resignification of cutting and amputation as forms of becoming that are not located in morbidity, fetishism, or wholeness. While I am not here by any means suggesting that on a foundational or formative level "trans" must always (or even frequently) embody disability, the song almost demands it. So although I might find my born-sex dis-abling, I also see my trans-sex as a cut-sex that "cripples" an imagined wholeness even while I find that position to be livable even desirable position rather than annexed or repudiated. This is to say, for me, I invite the cut that leaves sex-scars and other unfulfilled wishes so that I might live differently my gender dys-phoria, my dis-comforting born-sex. The "cripple" might yearn for transformation, to "diss" dys-phoria, but the corporeal act and affect of transformation (as in a cut, for example) does not cure but trans-figures embodiment. Risking an unsettling union, I propose that *trans-abling* allows cut-sex (or even other kinds of transitions) to be something other than curative.⁷

CUTTING PREFIXES

Does "cut" have an onomatopoeic quality? Do we acoustically/haptically experience the sharp-edged tool slice, sever, nick, slash? When I read Susan Stryker's (1994) "The Surgeon Haunts My Dreams"—"As He falls upon me I see the knife glinting in His hand, and I know this water will soon be turning red. When I lift my hips to meet Him as He enters me, He will surely see that nothing other than my desire brings Him here"—the words cause my own "cut-sex" to ache.

I am not interested in how the cut in the song is an absence (as in castration) but rather in how cutting is a generative enactment of "grow[ing] back" or healing. The cut enacts trans-embodiment—to cut is not necessarily about castration, but an attempt to recast the self through

the cut body. The whole (body) and the part (cut) are metonymically bound in an attempt to trans-form in toto. However successful or not, however uncomfortable for listeners/readers, however seemingly masochistic, “cut off my finger” and “please hit me” can be understood as wished-for metamorphosis by the “cripple.” To cut off the penis/finger is not to be an amputee, but to produce the conditions of physical and psychical regrowth. *The cut is possibility.* For some transsexual women, the cut is not so much an opening of the body, but a generative effort to *pull the body back through itself* in order to feel mending, to feel the growth of new margins. The cut is not just an action; the cut is part of the ongoing materialization by which a transsexual tentatively and mutably becomes. The cut cuts the meat (not primarily a visual operation for the embodied subject, but rather a proprioceptive one), and a space of psychical possibility is thereby created. From the first, a transsexual woman embodiment does not necessarily foreground a wish to look like or look more like a woman (namely, passing)—though for some transwomen this may indeed be a wish (fulfilled or not). The point of view of the looker (those who might read her) is not the most important feature of trans-subjectivity—the trans-woman wishes to be *of* her body, to speak from her body.

When I pay my surgeon to cut my penis into a neovagina, I am moving toward myself through myself. As the surgeon inserts the scalpel and cuts through the thickness of my tissue, my flesh immediately empurples. For weeks afterward, my groin remains discolored and swollen. Between the surgeon’s efforts and my body’s biomechanics, my cut spills blood and affect. My cut enacts a regeneration of my bodily boundaries—boundaries redrawn. Through my cut, I brush up against invocations and revelations; my cut is not passive—its very substance (materially and affectively) is generative and plays a significant role in my ongoing materialization. My cut is *of* my body, not the absence of parts of my body. The regenerative effort of my cut is discursive; my transfiguring cut is a material-discursive practice through which I am *of* my body and *of* my trans-self. My cut penis entails being and doing, materiality and affect, substance and form. My cut is generative within material limits but not with affective fixity; my tissues are mutable insofar as they are made of me and propel me to imagine an embodied elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, scholars, activists, students, and artists have questioned the meaning and significance of transsexual/transgender embodiment. Rather simplistically, it has been suggested that the pre-operative

transsexual feels constrained by the wrong body and desires a healed body, which is articulated as a male or a female form. According to this account, transsexual selfhood is entangled with images of bodily wholeness—what's more, there is an idea of inside and outside the body that are at odds (Prosser 1998). The body is a container—a body bag of nouns to keep the proper ones in order. The transsexual aspires to make the so-called defective body intact in order that it may be me. As Jay Prosser has suggested, it is undeniable that such agonizing experiences of disembodiment are true for some transsexuals; nor is it difficult to believe that transsexual alterations are not simply chosen, but rather are *the transformation of an unlivable, fragmented body into a livable whole* (Prosser 1998).

What I find troublesome about this articulation of transsexualism is not the trouble of containment; it is the limiting of the body to containment alone. To be comfortable in one's own body is not *only* to be restricted, limited, contained, or constrained as whole or complete. It is to be able to embody the body's multiplicities, its vicissitudes, its (our) ongoing process of materialization. The body (trans or not) is not a pure, coherent, and positive integrity. The important distinction is not the binary one between wrong body and right body, or between fragmentation and wholeness; it is instead a question of experiencing multiple and continually varying interactions between what can be defined indifferently as coherent transformation, decentered certainty, or limited possibility. Transsexuals do not transcend gender and sex. We create embodiment by not jumping *out* of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves. There is no absolute division, but continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my different historical bodies. Again, I am *of* my body in order that I might experience a subjective, energetic transformation.

A transsexual (myself, for example) is never discontinuous from different states of embodiment, or at least I am only generally distinguished from different historical states of my own beingness.⁸ If my subjective embodiment has always been transgender, then my material transformation is an attempt to congeal my differently trans-embodied experiences of body and mind. What I am suggesting when I say that embodiment is coherence is that I am always *of* my tissue even in its ongoing transformation. Whatever the transsexual grants to vision, subjective embodiment is always only partially visible.

Changeability is intrinsic to the transsexual body, at once its subject, its substance, and its limit. Our bodies are scarred, marked, and reworked into a livable gender trouble, sex trouble, or uneven epidermis. Transsexuals survive not because we become whole, but because we embody the reach and possibility of our layered experience—we have no choice. This is all to say, the transsexual body, my body, is a body created out of necessity, ingenuity, and survival—to carry the heft of my various social identities. I, like many transsexuals, may desire some mythic wholeness, but what is truly intact for me, what I live, what I must be part of, is a body pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, flesh, history, and bone.

RE-FORMING METAPHOR

What are the differences between refraction and reflection as contemplative activities? How might a refracted relationship to a text function differently from a reflected one? “Refractory” defines behaviors and materials that are obstinate, unresponsive, and resistant. Evoking these terms simultaneously refocuses matter’s stubborn, even blunt, capacity for demarcating externality and internality. In a cruder sense, “refraction” and “refractory” also share origins with “refractory period”—the period that follows effective stimulation, during which excitable tissue fails to respond to a stimulus of threshold intensity (Hayward 2005). Associated with sexual pleasure or “love life,” the refractory period as expiration suggests the inertia of the entropic and the return toward the inanimate. Stillness that falls after excitation carries the residue of sensate experience. Sense is carnal; senses are refractory.

“I’ll grow back like a starfish.” From the start, I notice two things: first, my finger has been substituted for “I”; second, we have moved from the metonymy of the cut to the metaphor of trans-speciation. The starfish seemingly appears as a stand-in for transsexual transformation—the animal appears only as a tool for thinking about beingness. Let us not forget, the metaphor is a displacement: a nominative term is displaced from its everyday context and placed elsewhere so as to illuminate some other context through its reconfiguration. Thus, the relationship is based on the relationship of ideas rather than objects—metaphor does not owe any allegiance to the literal object. The “cut,” in contrast, is structured by a metonymy of embodied correspondences and correlations. Metonymy is a topological enactment quite different from metaphor. Metonymy

brings together two objects, each of which constitutes a separate whole; “metonymy” refers to conditions of correspondence: cause to effect, instrument to purpose, container to content, “cut” to trans-body.

I wonder if the starfish is more than metaphor (not that metaphor isn’t enough). Playing on the side of zoomorphism, I wonder if being starfish shares in the ontological imaginary of becoming trans-sexed. I don’t want to propose that transsexualism is the *same as* trans-speciation, but rather that both share in the materialization of the trans-figure described in “The Cripple and the Starfish.” Both the starfish and the transsexual “grow back,” differently but with similar phenomenological goals of bodily integrity and healing. Is it possible, and here I take a leap, that while the “cut” has a metonymic force in trans-embodiment, could not “like a starfish” also suggest a metonymy of trans-speciation? For example, literal animals are always part of figural animals; animals cannot be displaced by words; rather, words carry the nervous circuitries, the rhythms, the tempos of the literal. Animals are always constitutively formed in language—human and not, animal and not. Animals (though not necessarily animals alone—but that is for another series of essays) are bound in language such that language cuts into flesh but does not completely devour the body. The literal cut bleeds around the word “cut,” which is where the conditions of subjective transformation emerge. Likewise, the starfish, an echinoderm, a regenerating body, an invertebrate that can in some species reproduce new individuals through bodily divisions, exceeds the metaphoricity of likeness because starfish is only ever partially digested, defined, explained, used by language.

How might the “cripple” yearn for *regeneration* in order to *trans-form*? “I’ll even cut off my finger. It will grow back like a starfish.” To me, this is a literal instantiation of sea star biodynamic—s/he will *re-grow* her/his finger, but not necessarily *trans-form* her/his finger. In broader terms, s/he is also *re-sexed* body just as she/he also becomes subjectively trans-sexed. Although subtle, the work might be in how prefixes shape and reshape the prepositions of the discourse; *re-* is *of* the body, not *in* the body (as trans embodiment is often articulated—for example, “trapped in the wrong body”). “Re-” makes all enactments constitutive of the former (even if the form-er is an ongoing process of materialization). “Re-” might offer a more “rippling” approach to the limit and containment of the flesh. Regenerativity is a process that is enacted through and by containment (the body). In this way, regeneration is a re/iterative enactment

of not only growing *new* boundaries (rebodying), but also of imperiling static boundaries (subjective transformation). Regeneration can attend to desire, pathos, and trauma, but also to modes of corporeal intimacy, fleshy possibility, and most important, reembodiment.

Regeneration is something that both transsexuals and starfish do. Transsexuals and starfish do other kinds of prefixial relationships between inside/outside, subject/object, or predator/prey, but in “re-” they share a phenomenological experience of reshaping and reworking bodily boundaries. How might prefixes help us understand the ways that we (starfish, transsexuals, and others) autonomize and generate embodiment? Re-grow, re-differentiate, re-pattern, re-member, re-nucleate: our bodily structures, our biodynamics, are materially enacted through ongoing relationships with the world, as part of that world. Transsexuals and starfish challenge disembodied metaphors (such as like, resemblance, or simile), and propose how we are metonymically stitched to carnal substrates. *In other words, I’m not like a starfish; I am of a starfish. I am not trapped in my body; I am of my body.*

MEAT OF MEANING

I’m worried about how real starfish that roam clam beds literally matter here in my prose, in my enmeshment of the many actors and presences whose doings resemble a coralline reef. Generations of spineless marine organisms, with their light-sensitive spots and neural webs, release their eggs into open waters, followed by larval feeding, will settle, eat each other and passers-by, and generate their own hungry drifters. When I say “Starfish,” or describe their lifeways, how do these words retain the presences, properties, and behaviors of invertebrates undergoing metamorphosis? Perhaps it is a frivolous desire on my part, even ridiculous, to want to understand how words focus our attention, leading us to see/hear/feel interactions, requiring us to attend to a perpetual, worldly motion.

Here, thinking about Antony’s “Starfish,” I turn to mentors. Looking, listening, and living attentively in concert with “critters,” Donna Haraway teaches us, might just give humans new forms of relationship practice to use productively both among themselves and with a menagerie of emergent others. The kind of relating she calls for has prepositional import: *worlds are of relationships*. The ontology of interrelationality, according to Haraway, is ongoing, constitutive, metamorphosing, living, and material. She articulates her verb-heavy practice of ontogenesis with the biologically flavored word “metaplastm,” meaning “a change in a

word by adding, omitting, inverting, or transposing its letters, syllables, and sounds” (Haraway 2003, 20–21). The term is from the Greek *metaplasmos*, meaning remodeling or remolding. Metaplasms are a generic term for almost any kind of alteration in a word, intentional or unintentional. . . . Compare and contrast protoplasm, cytoplasm, neoplasm, and germplasm. There is a biological taste to metaplasms—just what I like in words about words. Flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds: these are joined in naturecultures. Metaplasms can signify a mistake, a stumbling, a troping that makes a fleshly difference. For example, a substitution in a string of bases in a nucleic acid can be a metaplasms, changing the meaning of a gene and altering the course of life.

Added to her fourth semiotic category of diffraction, set forth in *Modest Witness*, “metaplasms,” according to Haraway, means, “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remodeling the codes of life, in the history of companion species” (Haraway 2003, 20). Metaplasms: not as lofty or as graphic as diffraction, can cause the transformation of one type of differentiated tissue into another, such as granular inclusions within cytoplasm. Metaplasms entails the constitutive enactment of ontology and epistemology, materiality and intelligibility, substance and form, fungibility and sustainability. Metaplasms: sensual materiality enacted. Metaplasms is the intertwining and enmeshing of noumena and phenomena; that is, metaplasms is about materially activated—moving matter—ways of being, doing, and knowing. Metaplasms, says Haraway, gets its start from the interrelationship of human animals and nonhuman animals. Unlike diffraction, metaplasms begins in the sensual and carnal intercourse between and among species, constantly changing and reworking boundaries between subject and object, us and them, there and here, me and it. Intervening in the optic-driven epistemology engines of science studies and cultural theory, metaplasms gives Haraway’s diffraction a whiff of fecundity, a meaty taste, intimacy, pleasure, pain, and hunger.

It would be wrong to read metaplasms as utopian. Haraway is precise when she talks about the life-and-death stakes of getting it wrong. Metaplasms is an approach to ethics that does not hold out an end story, a teleological end point. Rather, metaplasms attends to the ways that enactors (enfolded actors: constitutive of each other while differentiated: doing and knowing while being) constitute themselves through assemblages composed from biological and phenomenological entanglements. Metaplasms is ripe with relational shit, yolks, and cancerous metaplastic

pyloric glands. Metaplasms are ossifications, transformations, and keratinizations of raw sensation—hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching become fibrous, heteromorphic, and unruly. Metaplasia is a kind of enactment with relationship as part of the relationship, a practice of enfolding relationships in their ongoing materializations. However, the risks are high; the sticks and stones of relational *matter* can disease the intestine with carcinoma and fill the bone with anemia and haematopoiesis. Metaplasia is a kind of trope that takes biology and semiotics very seriously—differences are material and discurive. It is ardent with consequence. Metaplasia is an enactment (as in enfolded action: diacritically invested and active in making sense and meaning *in and of the world*). It is this kind of iterative ontogenetic and epistemological entangling that Haraway calls for in “significant otherness,” a thickly mediated/mediating way of being HumanAnimal in the contemporary moment.⁹

In concert with Haraway’s call for fleshy difference and material semiotics, I turn to Akira Mizuta Lippit’s important discussion of “animetaphor” (a play on “antimetaphor” and “animal metaphor,” that is, animals exceed metaphoricity). Lippit writes, “The animetaphor is . . . never absorbed, sublimated, or introjected into the world but rather incorporated as a limit The animetaphoric figure is consumed literally rather than figuratively” (1998, 1115). The animetaphor (that which tries to speak for/about specific animals) is metonymic, foregrounding the ways that the lived being always already inhabits language, grammar, syntax, and metaphor. The animetaphor is about how animals *exist within* practices of signification—nonhuman animals are not merely subjected to primate language; nonhuman animals are always already reworking language. The real animal is constantly present in Adam’s Genesis. Animals, in their own ways, inhabit language. Language emerges from an ontology that is ecological, *anima*, the animal den, the wave, and the invertebrate.

Lippit suggests that the animetaphor foregrounds the complex ways that animal representations are always haunted, vexed, reworked, and enfolded by real animals. Animals expose the limits of representation. Lippit shows how animality, animal spirits, and organisms themselves reside as real within representations. He writes:

On the verge of words, the animal emits instead a stream of cries, affects, spirits, and magnetic fluids. What flows from the animal touches language without entering it, dissolving memory, like the

unconscious, into a timeless present. The animal is magnetic because it draws the world-building subject toward an impossible convergence with the limits of world, toward a metaphysics of metaphor. The magnetic animal erases the limits of the metaphor, affecting an economy of the figure that is metamorphic rather than metaphoric. It forces a transformation of the figure (1120).

Lippit posits that metaphors and representations create spaces where non-human animals can be pointed to without naming, subsumed without securing. That is to say, the animetaphor, the living metaphor, is always pointing to a space (even if it is always already in language) outside language, exposing the limits of language.¹⁰

Working with the “antimetaphor” figure of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (Abraham and Torok 1994), Lippit is suggesting here that animals in language are always transforming figure into flesh, always *disfiguring* representation. Animals are always troubling the language that attempts to name animals. In this way, nonhuman animals seem to put an oral void into language. Animals cannot be named without invoking the limits of the process of naming. This is not a tautology. Animals are *in and of* language and representation, but their lived bodies are always restoring words to beings. Lippit writes, “When the metaphoricity of the metaphor collapses, the concept becomes a metonymic thing that can be eaten” (1998, 1122). Because animality is often the measure by which humanity measures itself as such, animals in language rest at the edges of the mouth, my mouth; I taste the failure of language to describe animals and savor the presence of real animals flanking my sentences, my words. My language cannot digest the tissue and meat of nonhuman animals—a meal that cannot be digested.

Taking Lippit’s “animetaphor” and applying it to “The Cripple and the Starfish,” “starfish” points to the limits of representation, where “like a starfish” has corporeal meaning. The starfish referent is constantly touching me and devouring its representation. Antony’s starfish is fiercely present as a regenerating body in the song about it. Eating and hearing are collapsed as phenomenological modes of encounter within this starfish song. Antony’s starfish consumes me through the excess of its referentiality. The listening subject (myself, for example) is wholly or partially touched by the soma of the named starfish. The referent itself establishes itself as *that-which-is-reembodying-this*. As I listen to Antony’s song, rather

than anthropomorphizing the starfish through identification, I am simultaneously chewing on and being chewed on by an economy of excess, carnality, and materiality.

The word “starfish” puts me in contact with starfish themselves—a kind of material imagination in which the word stems directly from matter. As Antony sings “starfish,” the literal starfish resounds in his/her voice. The word maps out the dense tissue of starfish lifeways. For me, Antony intensifies the encounter, the meeting, between the bodies of species. “Like a starfish” enacts an artistry on the starfish and the subject of the animetaphor. That “I will grow back like a starfish” solicits both “I” and the starfish to inhabit those words; with those words we move into life. “I” is a word that finds roots in oneself; “starfish” transposes a literal element into a figural one. Out of the murmuring sensations of “The Cripple and the Starfish” come words and the babble of others that are uttered into oneself, into one’s bone marrow, one’s anatomy, and one’s circadian rhythms. This *intra*-corporeality of starfish (material) and “starfish” (semiotic), of “I” and me, is a kind of loving, a kind of nearness that invokes a voluptuary of trans-speciation and imagines a *co*/passionate kind of presence. Language and music, then, enact a caressing, a sensuous immersing in the ardent materiality of worldhood.

RIPPLE

“Ripple”:

1. A slight cut, scratch, or mark. Verb: to scratch slightly; to graze or ruffle.
2. A piece of shallow water in a river where rocks or sand-bars cause an obstruction; a shoal.
3. A light ruffling of the surface of water, such as is caused by a slight breeze; a wavelet.
4. A wave on the surface of a fluid the restoring force for which is provided by surface tension rather than by gravity, and which consequently has a wavelength shorter than that corresponding to the minimum speed of propagation.
5. A sound as of rippling water.
6. To mark with or as with ripples; to cause to undulate slightly.
(Oxford English Dictionary)

“Ripple” creates the ruffling within the subject that allows “Happy bleedy, happy bruisy” to become the conditions for bodily regeneration, psychical transformation, and trans-speciation. “Ripple” tears and fiddles with the idea that language/representation is a cut between the phenomenal world and the knowing subject. “Ripple” with the “The Cripple and the Starfish” creates the carnal foundations for prefixial enactments that take meat and meaning seriously. The “cripple” and “like a starfish” provide an extreme collapse between the figural and the real. In other words, prefixes (“trans-” and “re-”) are kinds of relationships that ripple and rupture the field of representation. The starfish and the transsexual point beyond the limits of language, allowing both figures to exceed any kind of palliative function (like a woman or “like a starfish”).

The transsexual—again I speak of this experience not to the side of my body, but because of my body—energetically ripples the body, marks the meat, with *re*-form, *re*-grow, *re*-shape so that subjective transformation may occur: transition, transsex, *trans*-be; this is prefixial rippling. The prefix *re*- must take up the body in order that *trans*- might become. The starfish, depending on species, can *re*-grow a damaged ray. The lost ray, again in some species, may become another individual, rippling into another state of being. This is to say, the starfish changes its biogeometry in relationship to its environment—it is entangled and reshaped and trans-figured through encounters. Moreover, the metonymic qualities of embodiment always links semiotics to matter. “Starfish” is a representation with tube feet; transsexual is an identity that bleeds and is cut.

“Ripple” reminds me of starfish locomotion. Starfish have hydraulic water vascular systems that facilitate movement. Ocean water comes into the system via the madreporite (a small opening in the aboral surfaces of starfish). Salt water is then circulated from the stone canal to the ring canal and into the radial canals. The radial canals carry water to the ampullae and provide suction to the tube feet. The tube feet latch on to surfaces and move in a wave, with one body section attaching to the surfaces as another releases. “Ripple” defines the biomechanics of tube feet.

“Ripple,” on a somatic level, reminds me of my own physical vulnerability—my animate transsex flesh. Might I share this same somatic sensitivity with the starfish in the most basic sense of redressing harm: regeneration as an act of healing. Transsexing is an act of healing. This is some kind of mutuality—some kinds of shared ontology. Trans-morphic as zoomorphic—if we can understand the cut as an act of love, then can

we not imagine that “like a starfish” is an enactment of trans-speciating? We, transsexuals and starfish, are animate bodies; our bodies are experienced and come to be known through encounters with other animate bodies. These epistemological moves describe a shared phenomenological ontology. This is sensate intertwining-intercorporeal zones between these bodies in language and in experience. Starfish and transsexuals share worldhood both semiotic (as metonymic kinds) and phenomenological enactments—is this not some form of *intercorporeality*?

“It’s true I always wanted love to be hurtful,” says Antony in “The Cripple and the Starfish.” If, as I hope I’ve illustrated here, the literal and the figural—the *matter that means* and the *meaning that means*—emerge as interlocking and dynamic. “Hurt” is not a masochistic enactment (or, at least, not this alone), but signals a breach in language, and a tear in the traditional subject/object formation. The material, the literal matter, of being, surfaces and resurfaces as a constitutive force that cannot be digested in the acid fluids of anthropic concerns. Animetaphor and metonymy apply a figurative sense as a literal one, while yet retaining the look or feel of figurality. A phenomenology of the rippling subject having and making sense of the song reveals to us the intercorporeal function of lived bodies—as both carnal and conscious, sensible and sentient—and how it is we can apprehend the sense of the song both figurally and literally.

Correlatively, a phenomenology of the experience of this lived intercorporeality and differentiation in the song exposes to us—in the metonymic articulations of language—the reversible and oscillating structure of the lived body’s experience of language. To put it simply: in the act of making sense of the song, metonymy is to language as rippling is to lived bodies. Metonymy not only points to the gap between the figures of language and literal lived-bodies’ experiences but also intercorporeally, rippling, bridges and intertwines a sensate ontology. Thus, “The Cripple and the Starfish” mobilizes, differentiates, and yet entangles lived bodies and language and foregrounds the intercorporeality of sensible matter and sensual meaning. As zoomorphic, *re*-morphic, and *trans*-morphic subjects, then, we possess an embodied knowledge that opens us beyond our discrete capacity for listening to a song, opens the song far beyond its containment in iTunes’s “alternative,” and opens language to a metonymic and biodynamic knowledge of specific origins and limits.

This is what my being transsexual knows about being a starfish.

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I need to say a few things. First, I want to thank Susan Stryker for calling my attention to this song and suggesting that I write about it. Her guidance and editorial eye have been invaluable. Second, portions of this essay have appeared in a slightly different form in Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, ed., *Queering the Non/Human* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008) under the title “Lessons from a Starfish.” This current essay, “More Lessons from a Starfish,” attempts to evolve some of the nascent ideas that I put forward in the first essay. In particular, I hope new readers will welcome my discussions of disability (as “cripple” is uncompromisingly named in the song), trans-species somaticity (how through metaphor and metonym flesh and signifier are joined), and a continued effort in the animate approximation of my own prose style.

NOTES

1. I use “transgender” and “transsexual” interchangeably in this essay. I do so not to elide the significant differences between these identities, but to foreground the shared concerns and desires for embodiment. This is to say, being transgender does not exclude bodily change, nor does being transsexual mean you will have sex reassignment surgery.

2. Here are several links that offer biographical material on the late Marsha P. Johnson: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsha_P._Johnson; an obituary, <http://gender.org/remember/people/marshajohnson.html>; a poem by Qwo-Li Driskill, <http://www.lodestarquarterly.com/work/248/>.

For a bio on Sylvia Rivera, which sadly is also an obituary, go to <http://www.workers.org/ww/2002/sylvia0307.php>.

My suggestion that STAR was a “transgender” political organization is a bit ahistorical, considering that “transgender” as a social identity was still only emerging during these years. However, too often gender-variant communities, and their contributions to social change, get lost in more traditional gay/lesbian historiographies. So, I risk playing the part of a “bad historian” in the hopes of encouraging more inclusive historical projects.

3. Antony and the Johnsons collaborated with filmmaker Charles Atlas and thirteen transwomen from New York City on a concert/live video installation staged in

London, Rome, and Paris. During “turning,” Antony and the Johnsons present a concert while Charles Atlas creates live video portraits of each model. “turning” was first presented as a part of the 2004 Whitney Biennial in New York City.

4. A story of misunderstanding: starfish can be pests to fishers who make their living on the capture of mollusks, as starfish prey on these. The fishers would presumably kill starfish by chopping them up and disposing of them at sea, ultimately leading to their increased numbers. For more information, see Vicki Pearse, *Living Invertebrates* (Pacific Grove, CA.: Boxwood Press, 1987).

5. Elsewhere I have described “fingery-eyes” as making seeing analogous to touching; fingery-eyes, optical groping, or tactful eyes haptically and visually orient the sensual body across mediums. This kind of seeing through/across/with interfaces requires a perception that navigates by constantly referencing the medium of the environment. Fingery-eyes are about closeness, near proximities—visual distance is not an option here.

6. I use “solidarity” to suggest something other than identification. I’m not suggesting that transsexual women do not become female (some certainly do), but I want to hold out the possibility that the transsexual woman can also become a kind of woman *made of* her various ontologies. I want to value the experience of becoming transsexual as something particular to transsexuals, even as that experience is constitutive of other sexes and their constitutiveness—together all the way down. This line of reasoning is explored in Sandy Stone’s (1993) formative essay “The Empire Strikes Back.”

7. So much more needs to be said about the relationship between transgender/transsexual subjectivities and disability (and its subtending theories of). I hope the reader recognizes my brief reflections as an attempt to tenderly unpack this potentially volatile issue. I am currently working on an essay on “Trans-abling” in which I further explicate the “noncurative, but wished-for aims” of transitioning.

8. I am not suggesting that “male privilege” is carried into female embodiment—I am not making a sociocultural argument about authenticity. The debate that many MtFs continue to express a perspective on the world that derives from socialization as members of a privileged sex class remains molten. I encourage readers interested in this theme to consult Stryker and Whittle’s (2006) excellent anthology *The Transgender Reader*.

9. I do not know if this term, or collapse of terms, has been coined elsewhere (surely it has). I deploy this neologism (in the spirit of “technoscience” or “natureculture”) to foreground the constitutive nature of these terms as well as the different histories and institutions that form and reform their meanings. Moreover, I use the compound term to suggest that in an encounter between human and animal, both entities become enyolked in one another, become “fleshed out” (as Merleau-Ponty might say), become literally *of* one another.

10. Lippit is working from Jacques Derrida’s (2000, 1991) work on the limits of subjectivity.

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